

# the forgotten gospel

a spiritual work by

Anthony Barnhart

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## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Way of Jesus: A New Community and a New Life*

#### I

#### An Unholy Conspiracy Unveiled

Stand up. Walk outside. Take a look around, meet eyes with the people moving past. Not extraordinary people; real people. Businessmen, students, house-wives, doctors and nurses, people with hopes and dreams. Find a stranger. Tug on his sleeve. Swing him around. Look him deep in the eyes, unapologetically, and ask – no, *plead* – for him to tell you why Jesus came to earth. Most likely he will shudder and run; most of us would. But a brave man would open his mouth and reply. What answer would he give? What is the most common perception of why Jesus Christ came to this earth? It cannot be refuted that He came; He is a historical figure, and the things He said and did send ripples into eternity. Maybe the man will tell you, “Jesus was not sent. He was just a human being like you and me, except He was a good preacher.” Okay. Change the line of questioning: “What did He preach?”

There is a conspiracy wrapped around the entire earth. It is not a conspiracy made of human hands, nor a conspiracy concocted through divine interaction. It is an evil conspiracy, forged by the Evil One, to deceive not only the lost and missing souls who have yet to discover the beauty and wonder of God, but also to deceive the ones who have been called out by God’s own voice. It is arrogant to assume the Evil One does not mess with our heads and our perceptions; indeed, He is active the world-over. His arena is not only temptation (trying to cave us in to lust and greed and gluttony...); he is cleverer than that. He also strikes at our hearts, feeds lying doctrines into our minds, and what comes out is stagnant, brackish faith. The Evil One does everything he can to prevent us from developing intimacy with God.

What is this conspiracy? It is most easily seen out on the street, in the hubbub of life, with people who do not share in Christian life. But it can also easily be seen in our own churches; one man leading a Bible Study once sat down with a group of students eager to witness, and He asked them, “Why did Jesus come?” They stupidly stared at one another, grasping for an answer. The man pondered in his head, painfully, “How good would these kids do sharing their faith when they don’t even know what they believe?” The Evil One tricks us into not knowing where we stand. It is a clever trick and disastrous when the fires come. But the Evil One also attacks more subtly. The story of our Bible Study friend continues.

A few kids started speaking up, answering – or attempting to answer – the man’s question: “Why did Jesus come to earth?” A student piped up, “To forgive us of our sins?” Yes! We chant. This is why! Here is the Evil One again; no, Jesus did not come *only* to forgive us of our sins. Forgiveness is awesome, don’t think it doesn’t have its place, but forgiveness was a stepping-stone to the real reasons Jesus came, which are... A girl speaks, mellow and hesitantly, “So we can go to Heaven?” Am I to believe that Jesus came and died so that I could just be happy that I would go to Heaven when I die? Am I really, truly just left here on my own to fight for air? Does Jesus have anything to say to me here and now, or is it just about my life after death? We *do* inherit eternal life in a kingdom of pleasure and paradise, but we are not abandoned now. In fact, the very basics of our eternal home *begin* the moment we become co-laborers with God, immersed in the Kingdom. Eternal life in Heaven is a beautiful benefit to the real reasons Jesus came, an extension to the real reasons.

What are these real reasons so cleverly hidden from our eyes by the Evil One? The Evil One hides these reasons, fearful we will discover them and live out of them; he poisons our minds with lies or half-truths, telling us some very good things but leaving the best of things out. The “best of things” is the dual reason Christ came to this earth, the reason He was willing to sacrifice His life. Discover these reasons. Think about these reasons. Pray over these reasons. Live from these reasons.

The first reason Jesus came is to create a new religion... Nope. Wrong. Christianity as an official religion did not begin until hundreds of years after Christ's death and resurrection. The New Testament was written long before Christianity became an official religion. If Jesus' goal was the creation of a new religious institution, why did it take Him so long to bring it about? In fact, if one were to read through all of the Gospels, he or she would find Jesus absolutely frustrated – and, in some cases, even angered! – by religion.

Okay, so Jesus didn't come to create a new religion. Christianity just sort of... happened. Then He came to revolutionize world culture, right? He came to change the way the world works? The religious leaders in Jesus' day believed this; they kept their eyes to the sky, crossing their fingers, awaiting a Messiah who would overthrow the Roman Empire and set up a Jewish Kingdom stretching all over the earth. Needless to say, when Christ showed up, the religious leaders balled their fists and steam poured from their nostrils. Jesus wasn't going about with swords and clubs, breaking down the gates of Rome. In fact, He seemed rather oblivious to it all; He treated the Romans as friends, said it was a godly duty to pay your taxes (even to invading nations), and later He admonished Paul to spread the Gospel to all the non-Jews, including the Romans (the book of Romans is one of Paul's letters to the people in Rome). Jesus did not come to raise political anarchy and downshift world superpowers. That time is coming, when Jesus Christ *will* do that, but for now, that's nothing for us to worry about.

The two reasons Jesus came are simple and easy to understand. They are so common sense and so able to be seen in the New Testament (and Old Testament) that one would do well to curse himself and wonder how he could've missed it. Don't forget the unholy conspiracy all around us.

The first reason Jesus came was to *create a new community*. Not a new religion, not a new institution. He came to create a new community, a new culture, a community founded in love and acceptance, joy and peace, generosity and care, compassion and mercy, forgiveness and grace.

The second reason Jesus came was to give us *real life, a new life*. Ever since sin inhabited our lives, the way we live has been corrupted; not only morally, but spiritually as well. When we say Jesus came to give us real life, new life, we are not saying He came to give us a new set of patterns to live by. Not at all. A new way of living on the outside will develop when our insides are tuned right; this can only happen when we are intimate with God. In the Garden of Eden, humans were intimate with God, linked with Him in a walking/talking intimacy. Jesus Christ, by way of forgiving us of our sins, opens up the door to intimacy, and we are able to run into the arms of God. The new life is not a new set of rules or regulations to abide by, but a life where we are intimate with God day-in-and-day-out, in the here-and-now, in the mundane and run-of-the-mill. Intimacy with God is the key, and Jesus was willing to die so we could experience it.

The girl in the Bible Study said, “Jesus came so we could go to Heaven.” What she did not understand is that Heaven is an extension of the real reasons Christ came. In Heaven we will experience genuine community as Christ calls us to, and we will experience it in a new heavens and new earth. We will also be able to live in a walking/talking intimacy with Christ the Creator. Heaven will be beautiful and wonderful with its waterfalls and canyons and stars, not to mention all the great food, great fun, and great people; but intimacy with God is the kicker. Imagine walking next to Jesus Christ along a shore in the newly-created heavens and earth, talking about life, smelling the ocean, hearing the gulls. This is what makes me smile. I want Christ to hold me, kiss my forehead, tell me everything will be okay. Intimacy with God; it's key.

## II

## “Get out of this sick and stupid culture!”

God’s call for us to engage in a new community is made clear in the story of Pentecost, found in Acts 2. Lots of people are gathered together, all of them believing Christ is the Messiah, and all have discovered intimacy with God through Him. They sit around, confused and bewildered, the days wasting away. Jesus has ascended into heaven and they feel empty of ideas. Christ had promised a Comforter (John 14) and they awaited His arrival. Some who did not share the intimacy with God crept into the place when the Comforter finally arrived; this Comforter entered riding in on a red carpet of furious wind ripping through the place. The Spirit makes Himself known, causing all those intimate with God to start speaking in foreign tongues. The people who are not intimate with God see this and start saying, “What’s going on? Are these guys drunk on too much wine?” One may wonder how someone drunk on wine could turn bilingual, but what with the fiery wind and the strange feeling descending on the place, *anything* was possible. A disciple of Christ, a man we know and adore by the name of Peter, takes the stand and speaks: “Change the way you live! Throw yourselves into the arms of God and become intimate with Him, every one of you, and do it in the name of Jesus Christ, so your sins will be forgiven. And accept this gift from God, the Comforter: receive the Holy Spirit!”

His words resonate: *Change the way you live! Throw yourselves into the arms of God and become intimate with Him...* His cry is easily heard: “Turn your back on this sick and stupid culture. Turn your face upwards to God, open your arms: a new community and new life wait!” Peter calls them to turn their backs on the community they knew (a community underscored by lust, greed, thirst for power, backstabbing and selfishness) and embrace a new community, a community of God, a community enriched with love and acceptance, comfort and compassion, forgiveness and generosity. Ears tune to His voice, the Spirit works, and what happens next is simply astounding.

Acts 2 records *three thousand* people becoming intimate with God that day and investing their lives into this new community. The next several verses detail this community, and one will do well to read and find that this new community is not so much a new way of doing things (as an example, it is not forsaking your job and becoming a monk in the deserts of Africa), but it is a new way of living life in the life you are already living. The new disciples of Christ – three thousand added in one day – did not uproot from Jerusalem and flock to the hillsides to create hovels of monks pouring candlelight over manuscripts and chanting vigils every night. No, they continued to work, continued to play, continued to school, except now their lives were marked by the ways of God, lives marked by love.

The appeal of this kind of community is and forever will be eternally young. It is written deep within us. All the strife and hardships, all the hate and bitterness, all the selfishness and pride that accumulate and make safe-haven in the corrupt culture of the world make us cringe and want to vomit. At night, we may toss and turn, wondering if life is not meant to be lived differently. Looking upon the rape and murder, the genocide and starvation, we cannot help but wonder if this is really the way God wants our world to be. It is not. In no way is the evil in our world connected with God. The Evil One has rule over the culture, and he is the author of everything bad.

When we look upon our world, we cannot help but feel overwhelmed, and we long for a place where we can love and be loved, be accepted and helped, not stepped on or taken advantage-of. All the ills of our culture are due to the Evil One and mankind’s sinful nature; in Christ’s community, redemption through intimacy with God delivers us from these bonds and opens up the way community was originally designed to be lived. In ancient Rome, at the offset of the early church, the conditions of the culture were not so different from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, and one Roman politician echoes the feelings we all have, the desire to depart a corrupt culture and enter into a different and better one:

This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden, under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see – brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas; in the amphitheaters men murdered to please applauding crowds; under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasures of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have overcome the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians – and I am one of them. - St. Cyprian

This new community, while certainly *within* the Roman world, was not a *part* of the Roman world. When people were fighting and bickering, yelling and hating one another, the disciples of Christ lived in wonderful harmony; when jealousy and selfishness took the reigns in the “sick and stupid” culture, the followers of Jesus held everything common, sharing what they had, selling everything they owned, and using the money to meet the needs of the less-fortunate. Those led by greed no doubt looked upon these Jesus-followers and wondered what in the world was happening in their heads. The early Christians did not forsake their intimacy with God, but developed into it, cultivating intimacy with God and with others through the most mundane details of everyday life. The community grew larger each day; three thousand was only the beginning. A new community spread its arms over Jerusalem and into the surrounding hills; people noticed something different, and tasting the bitter and brackish waters of the Roman culture, they eagerly gathered together, entered intimacy with God, and for the first time, really lived.

The story of Acts is the historical record of the events in the spawning of the early church. The early church’s community of faith, a community whose members were intimate with the Creator, expanded all over the Middle East, snaking into Asia, whispering sweet nothings into Africa, and the highways of the Roman Empire carried Christ’s Message – new life! – all the way through Europe and even to the barbarian tribes of Britannia, who, too, joined in this new life of intimacy with the King.

The letters of the New Testament were written to the communities of God; they are not written to churches as we know them today (brick-and-mortar buildings with addresses and steeples) but instead to groups of believers, many hidden underground to avoid persecution; these groups of believers called themselves churches, and met in homes, businesses, rented-out college classrooms. These letters were written to advise on the daily day-to-day life of the communities themselves. One cannot open up the New Testament and be oblivious to the truth that part of Jesus’ Message is heralding a new community. The New Testament is *saturated* with a call to a new, holy, godly community.

The furious growth of this new community demanded a name, and the name “Christian” was invented to describe those who claimed Jesus as their Master and followed Him. Jesus Christ Himself did not come up with the name, nor did any of the Christians. “Christian” was given to us by those who were persecuting us. The name stuck.

Unfortunately, much of the community did not. With the fires of persecution, only those serious about following Christ actually committed to discipleship; the risk was too great to bear if you *weren’t* serious; Christians were often fed to the lions, thrown in gladiatorial games, or even crucified and burned in Roman gardens to light the paths during social parties. When Rome eventually made Christianity legal and popular due to the conversion of an Emperor, suddenly it was the socially right thing to do; now, whether you were serious or not, you could call yourself a Christian. Ever since then, the purity and holiness of Christian communities has fallen, sled downhill.



Yet this does not mean that Christ's call to a better community is stagnant and worthless; it is still pulsating and very much alive, and especially now in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, *very* relevant. We must pursue this new community.

This community we see in the Book of Acts is hard to find in America, but in third-world developing countries, it is paramount; this is because persecution is rampant in those countries and only those serious about Christ commit to intimacy with God and new community. In America, we are not persecuted, and anyone can call themselves Christian, whether they are or not. These communities *can* be found in America, but it is difficult, for a host of reasons. First, because of the state of corruption in which our world exists, this community can *only* be achieved with God's guidance and help; hence it can happen only through Christ. Any attempt to fake this community or develop it outside God's touch is futile. Second, this new community does not exist because Christians do not understand the flip-side of Jesus' reasons for coming: intimacy with God. This community is impossible without intimacy with God; if we do not understand how we are to be intimate with God, this real community can never be achieved. Third, whenever this real community begins to surface, sin tears it up before it can grow into a beautiful organism.

### III

## She Knocks on the Back Door

If Christ knocks on the front door of the church, sin knocks on the back door. Jesus woos us to Him with His love; sin attacks us and thwarts our desires so we grab at stale lust, greed, and power. Christ's goal is to reunite us with God, to give us back intimacy with God; sin's goal is to tear us away from God, to break that intimacy. Any discussion on godly community and intimacy with God would be incomplete if sin did not find mention. If we were to discuss World War II but leave out the part about the Nazis, our picture would be stained and incomplete; the same holds true when talking about Christ: sin *must* be mentioned.

Sin is a touchy topic. The effect of sin (Hell and detachment from God forever) is touchier still. I would be very happy if there were no Hell, and I'd be happier still if there were no sin. Yet our world is drenched in sin and the effect of not clinging to intimacy with God is clear in the Gospels. Sometimes we manage to talk about sin too much in fire-and-brimstone theologies, where the bottom line is sin and Hell is your final destination; mention of intimacy with God is often not to be found. Or we manage to talk about sin not enough; we talk about intimacy with God and unity in our churches, but sin is the dirty little secret whispered but not openly talked about. We must find a bridge between the two. Jesus saw sin as a major problem, worthy of death and Hell, but was much more eager to talk about forgiveness and mercy and communion (connectivity) with God.

All the problems and evils of our lives find their root in sin. The lust deep within us, the greed that makes us hungry for money, the frantic grabs for power and authority, the taking-advantage of others, the hating and despising of others, the absence of genuine love in our lives is due to sin. Everyone has this sin nature and it can be seen in individual lives. On a worldview, sin makes a much larger case: rape, murder, genocide, infanticide, bitter feuds, and slaughtering of innocents to make some money. Sin harms the social fabric and makes the new community all but impossible. How can a community of God exist where there is division and strife?

Sin is not a black-and-white list of right-and-wrong, but is rather anything going against God's nature and character or harms the social fabric of the new community. God is love; hate goes against love and is sin. God is justice; injustice goes against justice and is sin. God is mercy and forgiveness; holding grudges and never forgiving anyone is against God's character and is therefore sin. Other sin is not so easily seen as going against God's character. There is no godly character in complete opposite of lust; yet we can see that God loves and honors everyone as His children, and lusting after them, turning them into sexual play toys for the imagination, is in defiance to the way God sees them. So lust is sin.

Sin harms the fabric of the new community, creating rifts and breaking community apart. Whatever sin you can think of, it is damaging to a godly community. The New Testament letters to the communities of disciples of Christ are littered with calls to get out of sin and return to God. The major sins mentioned are all sins that will harm a new community. There is a story of two kids who helped lead a church youth group. They started dating, and since they were both on the praise team, they would stay later than usual to help tear-down. Since the youth minister lived far away, he would have to leave early to go home to his wife, and the young couple would be left alone. Lust crept into the picture, that wily sin that captivates most of the world, and it wasn't long before they were fooling around, and one night they had sex in the back of the girl's car. The girl got pregnant. Their relationship shattered. The girl's good relationship with Mom and Dad crumbled; Mom turned silent and Dad became cold. The shocked youth group was turned off, wondering how their *leaders* could screw up so bad. The boyfriend left the church in shame and did not return. Lots of the kids who had looked up to the two young leaders were torn apart inside and wrestled with trials of faith. The youth minister tried to get everything under control, but for the life of him, was unable to do it. Kids just stopped coming, wondering, *What's the point? They're all a bunch of hypocrites*. That community snapped because of two kids' choice to give in to their lustful urgings.

We all mess up. We are not perfect. The Spirit Nature is taking over us by way of the Holy Spirit, but until the moment we enter paradise and are completely restored, the sin nature – human nature – still lives within us, still fights against us, igniting a civil war in our own individual lives. The Evil One, too, in his hatred for God and his hatred for God's children (us), wars against us, doing all he can to break our intimacy with God, lobbing lies and deceptions and temptation in our path. Yet if we claim to be intimate with God and sin's role in our life does not greatly diminish, it would be a good idea to check and see if that intimacy with God really *is* there.

Sin is so largely talked about throughout the Bible because of the horrible effect it has on the community. Our day-to-day actions in our communities will either repel or attract those who are not in an intimate marriage with God. A collection of sins (or even only *one* sin) can cause the bonds of a community to stretch and, ultimately, snap; due to sin, people turn against people, lovers become enemies, and the community's strength and unity and purpose disintegrate. Crises of faith ensue. Sin is dangerous not only because of the effect it has on the individual, but also because of the effect it has on the community.

The New Testament is filled to the brim with calls to get out of sin for the sake of not only our souls but also for the sake of the community. Many letters even give descriptions of sins that are present in those not intimate with God, sins that harm the fabric of God's community. One wonderful example is Galatians 5:19-21; in Paul's description of those not intimate with God, we see sins that, without needed explanation, are detrimental to a community of faith:

It is obvious what kind of life develops out of trying to get your own way all the time: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex, a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage, frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness, trinket gods, magic-show religion, paranoid loneliness, cutthroat competition, all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants, a brutal temper, an impotence to love or be loved, divided homes and divided lives, small-minded and lopsided pursuits, the vicious habit of depersonalizing everyone into a rival, uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions, ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

As disciples of Jesus Christ and as children of God, we must not let sin rule our lives. We must divorce ourselves from sin (with the Spirit's help). We should not spend all our lives ranting on and on about sin, but to ignore it isn't right, either. Sin is very deadly because it betrays the greatest commandment: love God and love others. Sin is also deadly because it destroys one of the key reasons Jesus came: the new community. Even more dangerous, sin aims to destroy the second and primary reason Jesus came to earth and died: intimacy with God.

## IV

### A New Life: Intimacy with God

“To live is Christ...” So sings Paul in his letter to the Philippians. Most churches agree that life is only to be found in Jesus Christ, but it is no small truth that there are many tired, duty-bound Christian workers who are finding that the promise of new life isn’t finding root in their own lives. In fact, it is no small stretch of the imagination to say that there are more weary and stressed Christians, so tired of Christianity and God and Jesus, Christians who just want a break from it all, than there are Christians eagerly alive and passionately and intimately connected with God. Where have we gone wrong? Jesus Christ says life is found only in Him, yet we sit in our pews at church, saying, “Life is Jesus, huh? Whatever. Not anymore.” Paul’s words, “To live is Christ,” may make fancy mottos and trendy slogans, but what good is a motto and slogan when we don’t really believe it?

Who is to blame for the lack of belief in Paul’s words? The root of the misunderstanding lies in a complete and total misunderstanding of the Gospel itself. Our skewed belief of what the Gospel is can be detected in how we answer the question, “Why did Jesus come to earth?” Remember the first answer, the most common answer, given to the question? “Jesus came so we can be forgiven of our sins.” It is part of the unholy conspiracy that we see the Gospel as one saying, “We are all horrible sinners condemned to die, but through Jesus, we’re pardoned. Now we have to avoid sin, keep pure, and give an account to God of all the times we screwed up.” There *is* some truth to this belief: we are all horrible sinners, we are all condemned to die, and through Christ, we are pardoned. We *are* called to live holy lives, and we *will* stand judgment before God. But this belief when seen as the entirety of the Gospel Message leaves no room for intimacy with God in the here and now. There is no room for real life. In this mindset, Paul’s words make us feel spiritually corrupt, and we feel guilty for not being at the high level of faith he’s at. We convince ourselves that if we had more prayer, maybe went to another Bible Study, or got an internet filter, we’d reach that pinnacle of faith. More prayer is good, more study is good, internet filters are excellent. But we will never be able to experience the intimacy Paul felt, the intimacy that drew him to joyfully pen, “To live is Christ,” right before his death, unless we understand that Jesus’ message is not one of just forgiveness and dealing with sin, but of an entirely new life where intimacy with God is an ongoing and daily reality.

It is shocking to some to discover that Jesus doesn’t regularly say, “I have come to forgive you of your sins.” Jesus is fond of using stories and parables to dish out eternal truths, and He hardly ever gives the facts straight-out. Yet there are moments when He hits on important truths and gives them out unapologetically; in John 10, He faces His audience and tells them directly, “I have come to give you real life, a better life than you’ve ever imagined.” Here it is, Jesus telling us one of the main reasons He came, a reason we often overlook: there is a better way to live, and that way is intimacy with God.

This is where forgiveness steps in as divine interaction. In the Old Testament, intimacy with God was hard to find, because the peoples’ sin kept them from God. Sacrifices had to be made every year, and only then could the people experience intimacy with God in the Holy Temple. Intimacy with God was not a daily reality; when it wasn’t the time of year for sacrifices in the Temple, the people were all but left to live life on their own. Jesus came and made a permanent sacrifice, and in doing this became our Temple; through Christ we can be intimate with God not only on Sundays or Wednesdays, but also in the mundane details of our lives. Because of Christ, forgiveness is ours and intimacy with God becomes something we live into and develop. Jesus is God’s doorway into eternal living in the here and now, living in intimacy with God not just when we die and enter Heaven, but starting now!

One may come to believe that intimacy with God means giving up things of the world, becoming a monk and living in a monastery. Actually, intimacy with God is not simply subtraction (sin leaving our lives), but mostly *addition* – the Holy Spirit living in us and us becoming like God. As our intimacy with God deepens and we become like God, it will only become second-nature for us to abandon our sin. We will touch the topic of life-change in later chapters, but this is an important aspect of intimacy with God. Yet to believe intimacy with God is *all* about giving up sin (yes, we are to forsake sin in our life) is missing the bigger picture: a walking, talking, breathing, conversational intimacy with the Creator.

Jesus gives what may be seen as a “mission statement” in Luke chapter 4:18,19, when He stands before the people of his hometown the first day of his three-year ministry and says, “God’s Spirit is on me; he’s chosen me to preach the Message of good news to the poor, sent me to announce pardon to prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to set the burdened and battered free, to announce, ‘This is God’s year to act!’”

Jesus comes to preach the Message of good news to those who need it (which is, let’s admit, every one of us): intimacy with God is now a reality! This intimacy with God pardons the prisoners; we are free from religious duty, free from hollow ritual, free from the power of sin over our lives. The door is opened to a world of freedom in an ongoing dance in God’s arms. Jesus recovers sight for the blind: we now see ourselves, see others, see life itself, and even see God the Creator in a new light, all bathed in the radiant glow of intimacy with the Creator of the Cosmos. Jesus sets the battered and burdened free: those of us rooted in run-of-the-mill lives, struggling with bills and depression and all the struggles of a world turned against the ways of God, are invited up into a life of intimacy with God, a life peppered with love and joy and peace, truly a new life! Jesus announces this is God’s year to act: the time for real life has dawned; no longer are we stuck in rote religion, but we are able to be intimate with the Creator, able to live in a new and better life in a new and better community. Jesus is our Hero. He is the warrior poet bringing freedom to the slaves, sight to the blind, hope to the lost, a life worth living. He is wonderful. He makes me smile.

This is the Gospel and Jesus’ life and message is simply *saturated* with it. Yet sometimes, against all the odds, instead of looking at the Gospels simply and purely and seeing this wonderful and life-changing truth, we instead look at it as a false Gospel dealing only with forgiveness and avoiding sin so as not to cross bad paths with God. It is possible that we, like the Pharisees, can get so involved with this idea that we miss the whole idea of intimacy with God. Our heads can be stuck in Bibles and dwelling through doctrine, all the while missing the Savior and Messiah, missing intimacy with God.

If we are weary and burdened in our Christian lives it is because we have not discovered intimacy with God; Jesus Christ says, “Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you’ll recover your life. I’ll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me – watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won’t lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.” (Matthew 11:29-30) Is it really so unreasonable to assume that the reason we do not experience what Christ *promises* us to experience is because we haven’t grasped the complete truth of His message?

God longs for those who are tired of religion, exhausted by the rigors of legalism. Jesus spent most of his time with those who didn’t want any part of religion, spent time with the prostitutes and foreigners and corrupt tax collectors working for foreign invaders. He spent much of his time yelling at the spiritual giants of the day. One pervasive look at the Gospel tells us loud and clear that Christ’s agenda is not religion, it is purely spiritual and radically intimate. His agenda is not rules and regulations, it is *life*. If we think Jesus is all about a new world religion or new world order known as Christianity, we are *wrong*. It is about intimacy with God and an organic community founded by those who have discovered and entered into that intimacy.

“Since this is the kind of life we have chosen, the life of the Spirit, let us make sure that we do not just hold it as an idea in our heads or a sentiment in our hearts, but work out its implications in every detail of our lives.” - Galatians 5:26

## CHAPTER TWO

### *The Creation of a New Community*

#### I

### The New Community is Not Modernism... Nor is it Postmodernism

The way Americans do church is constantly changing. New styles, new themes, new ideas all aimed at spreading Christ's message sprout all across the nation. We have become a country saturated with different ways of "doing" church; all across the board are swinging Gospel churches, quiet country churches, suburban coffee-shop churches, snake-handling churches, and all kinds of branches from the Catholic and Protestant lineages. The core message of Christ, however, remains the same, except in some unfortunate instances (Jehovah's Witnesses, the Mormon Church, Charles Manson and "hate-sinners" churches).

Most churches as we know them can be thrown into a "modern" church category. With the explosion of the Industrial Revolution in the late 1800s, the world was all but completely overcome with economics. Businesses flourished and became the highlight of the day. The same attention to economics given to the business world infiltrated the Christian church: the church took on the outline of a business, with the pastor being the CEO, the Board of Elders being a committee to make all the decisions, and the members being clients to whom the church staff was trying to sell their product, the product being, obviously, the Gospel. The rule-of-the-day became success in your spiritual life, success in your marriage and your friendships; the Gospel became a do-the-right-thing, say-the-right-thing, be-the-Good-American message; holy mysteries were reduced to slogans and doctrinal plans and three-point-formulas. While there isn't anything inherently *wrong* with this modernistic style, the culture that had been birthed in the Industrial Revolution has slowly changed from a modern culture into a postmodern culture. Suddenly, the modern church can't relate to the new, growing culture.

The postmodern culture arising in modern-day America is a culture who believes there is no absolute truth, no right and wrong. They are a do-what-you-think-is-right, do-what-feels-good, follow-your-feelings culture. Postmodern Christianity is a *reaction* to postmodern culture, not an infant of postmodern culture. When the postmodern culture says there is no absolute truth, the postmodern church says there *is* absolute truth; or rather, there is a Truth. When the postmodern culture says there is no right or wrong, the postmodern church says there *is* right and there *is* wrong, and the Truth reveals them to us. When the postmodern culture says to follow-your-feelings, post-modern Christianity says to follow-the-King.

Postmodern churches also take on an outline of the early church, and so the early church is experiencing a rebirth in modern-day America. Throughout this chapter (and the rest of this book), when we refer to the creation of a new community, we are not talking so much about a new way of "doing" church found only in postmodern churches. The new community is experienced all across the board, from Catholic to Protestant and everywhere in between. But in order to explore the creation of a new community, we must investigate the practices of the early church, the way they "did" church; in examining the practices, we discover eternal truths that tell us much about the new community.

A mistake one may very well make would be to assume that the new community is simply doing church the way the early church did it; this becomes legalism and is just another style paraded around as the "right" style. Only if the practices in the church are similar *at the core* to the early

church will one truly experience this real community. Therefore, throughout this book, when we refer to the creation of a new community, we are referring to a community whose life is underscored by true intimacy with God and true intimacy with others. This new community can be found all across the board, in postmodernism *and* modernism.

## II

### A Community of Love and Faith

We discover the early church through the writings of the New Testament. Most of the books found in the New Testament are actually ancient letters written to ancient Christian communities; within these letters, the writers reveal not only *how* the early church conducted their way of life (practices found in most postmodern or vintage-faith communities), but also revealed the hearts of those making up the new communities: hearts of love and acceptance, grace and forgiveness, mercy and compassion. Hearts molded to become indisputable children of God.

In the age of the New Testament, there were no mega-franchise churches like we see today. There was no Trinity-Broadcasting-Network, no giant Jesus statues in front of church buildings, no fog and lights as seen today. The Church was not understood to be a building, institution, or religion, as it is most commonly understood today, but was viewed (correctly) as an organic, living, pulsating and changing organism – the literal Body of Christ, made up of people of all shapes and sizes, all colors and nationalities, all worshipping one Name and experiencing real intimacy with one sole Creator.

The practices of the early church involved meeting in homes, reading from the scriptures, singing songs, communion. Everyone participated, as intimacy with God is not something we watch but something we engage ourselves in. How did everyone participate? Through singing hymns, a word of instruction, maybe giving a revelation or divine insight, a tongue or interpretation. All of this was done for the strengthening of the Church – strengthening not as a build-up of finances or popularity amongst the culture, but the strengthening of the street-bound individuals who make up the Body of Christ.

Christians spread throughout the Mediterranean world were intimately connected with God and with each other. The “way” they did church – their practices – cultivated and encouraged the intimacies to grow. We ought to practice the disciplines of the early church not because they are a cool new style for a cool and hip generation, but because these disciplines, when done in the spirit of a heart truly salivating for God, nurture the intimacy. Disciplines such as scripture-reading, worship, and prayer ought to take high providence in the life of one intimately connected with God, and ought to also find prominence in our gatherings.

We must realize, however, that if we simply carbon-copy the way the early church conducted their gatherings, it will not automatically make our church like the New Testament church. The core of the New Testament church as seen in the New Testament is a community of love and faith. If we have beautiful postmodern gatherings but lack the discipleship and life-change called by Christ, we are in no way like the New Testament church, as Christ’s call to discipleship and life-change was taken seriously and, consequently, lived out. There is always a danger that one will read this chapter and see a new way of doing church and altogether fail to see that the new community is one of love and pursuit of God, not so much a different style of worship.

## III

### Scriptures in the New Community

Something horrible happened to the scriptures with the wave of modernism. The mystery and holiness of the scriptures was replaced with an academic eye; suddenly the scriptures were not the Holy Words of God, but ancient texts to be picked apart and studied, analyzed and read as a

textbook. The Holy scriptures are not the words of a textbook; why should we read it as such, always searching for the right answers, trying to find doctrinal mission statements, spending our time learning to read the Bible correctly, as if only a trained scholar could do it? Honestly, does it make sense that the Creator-King who desperately loves us would give us His Word in a form we cannot understand? Modernism has also drawn us to a new level of disrespect for the scriptures; why read the Bible when you can read someone's words on the Bible? Why read the Bible when you can listen to a song that has Bible verses in it? How many Christians do you know who honestly and earnestly thirst to read the Word of God? They are becoming fewer and fewer as the years go on. We are losing our respect for the scriptures. We have forgotten...

We have forgotten that the scriptures are God's powerful Word, and they are "sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey." We have forgotten that "nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it – no matter what." (Hebrews 4:12-13) How could we have forgotten that the scriptures are "God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God's way." How could we think we can develop intimacy with God without the scriptures when "through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us"? (2 Timothy 3:16-17) How could we have forgotten that God exalts the scriptures ever beyond His own Name (Psalm 138:2)? How could we ever deny the command to meditate on God's Word day and night (Psalm 1:2)? We ought to meditate on the Word of God because it has the ability to change our lives (Romans 12:1-2). The Word of God is a shield, a hiding place, a light lighting our life-path; it brings us hope, strengthens faith, corrodes addictions, and is the harbinger of healing, guiding, teaching, life-giving, truth. We *have* forgotten; our laxity on the importance of the scriptures proves it.

So many books are coming out that try to bring out fresh truth or brighter understanding of the Bible, putting spins on ancient truths and trying to bring up fresh ideas. *Please*, no more "big" or "revolutionary" ideas. Do we really need more conventions of heretical spiritual gurus seeking out the latest trendy fashion? It really is tempting to add spins and new doctrine and fashionable ideas to scripture, but let's just stop wasting our time and admit that scripture on its own is relevant, not our words about God's Word. It is not our words that transform the heart of a person, but it is God and God alone, and the scriptures reveal that God's Spirit is fully active and alive in the Message of the Bible. As the scriptures are taught just as they are, change will happen for one reason: God's Word does not return void and empty-handed. By living out what is taught and told in the scriptures, a Christian can really experience intimacy with God and intimacy with others. The scriptures need no gimmick or pretense – just let them be as they are, simple and true.

Jesus Christ says we are to be in the world but not of it. One extreme we all know is being isolated from the world – cute little Christian communities isolated from everyone and everything else. There is another extreme. So often the American church is of the world and not in it. The Church, in her desire to be relevant, has become popular to the masses through concession and compromise. In order to be relevant, some of the American church has conceded that things such as repentance and self-sacrifice and submission and discipleship are not necessary for salvation and intimacy with God, and they have compromised, saying that we can remain living in sin and still be intimate with God because of Christ's forgiveness. The truth is, repentance, self-sacrifice, submission and discipleship are key to salvation and intimacy with God, and we cannot continue to willingly sin and experience intimacy with God; it is an impossibility.

In the concession and compromise, the Word of God has begun to be seen as archaic and boring. Instead of reading the Word of God, churches desiring relevance instead fill sermons with feel-good stories, fancy media and movie clips, and throw out cool analogies to draw in those crowds who don't usually show their face at church. The desire is genuine, but the result is a tragedy. One cannot help but wonder if the Evil One has not taken advantage of godly desires and used them to corrode the integrity of the American church. Churches are beginning to play dress-up, but instead of bringing out the old wardrobe and trying on clothes on themselves, they



instead dress up God, try to make Him attractive and lovely, because for some odd reason they think He is not attractive and lovely on His own. This is a sad state of much of the church; we lock ourselves in with the culture we want to reach, and Christ is left outside in the cold, banging on the door. One would do well to imagine that we sometimes make God sick with all of our selfishness, our self-sufficiency, our worldly ideas of how to be relevant while ignoring those ideas He set down. God's cause is simple, not complex; it is beautiful in its own merit, not ours. Maybe we need to step back from trying to control peoples' souls and let God and the Spirit do the work?

Let's keep biblical truths simple as they are and stop trying to put spins and twists on them. We need to read the Bible, meditate on its Words, pray for insight and ability, and go out and actually live them in our daily lives. Let's stop trying to come up with revolutionary theories and instead live faith biblically; biblical Christianity, not cultural Christianity, is the way we need to go. We must be careful not to assimilate into the world, and also be careful not to cut ourselves off from the world.

How, then, are we to approach the scriptures? We must understand that they are not a textbook to be studied but divine words to be lived. In this sense we can approach the scriptures humbly, and our reading of them will not be the act of a scholar but the passionate kissing of the King's feet. We must mull over it, chew on it, meditate on it, allow God to speak through His words. Ancient practices for reading the scriptures may come into play. The point is that we must open our hearts to God and allow Him to speak through His Word again. The scriptures must have importance in the lives of those intimate with God and intimate with others in the New Community. Participation in the scriptures is necessary.

The New Testament church absorbed the scriptures. In their gatherings they read through the Old Testament prophecies, relating them to Christ; they also committed themselves to the teachings of the apostles as found in the letters of the New Testament. Most importantly, they did not neglect the Gospels as archaic and boring, but swallowed them whole, understanding that the Gospel is radical and life-changing. A group of Christians cannot experience intimacy with God and intimacy with one another and at the same time shirk the very breath of God. God gave the scriptures to us, and we must inhale them day in and day out.

## IV

### Worship in the New Community

Worship is one of the greatest forms of communication and service to God; an expression of love and adoration; a physical, mental, emotional and spiritual outpouring of love to the King. Ancient words used to describe worship include descriptions of kissing toward God (*Proskuneo*), bowing down before God (*Hishahawa*), attributing worth to God (*Worthship*), and serving or ministering (*Latreau*). When most Christians hear the word "worship," they imagine reading from hymnals or raising their hands to the sound of guitar and drums. While both of those are different ways to worship, worship is so much more than simply singing or music. The last ancient word tells us worship also includes serving others or ministering to others; this shows us worship is not dead-set in the "praise and worship music" box we so often put it in. Worship can take on many forms, but simply raising our hands or practicing a form of worship does not necessarily make it true worship. To murder a cliché, "our hearts must be in it."

In John chapter 4, as Jesus is talking with the infamous woman at the well, He says, "It's who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That's the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly *themselves* before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration." (v. 23-24) If we are not intimate with God, our worship means nothing to Him. If we do not love Him and/or don't love others, our worship is meaningless. If we are living horrible and sinful lives, it does not matter how many acts of worship we commit: our lives aren't reflecting Him and so our

worship is hollow. Christ says that we must be real and honest in our worship; there is no room for pretense. If we cry out to God with our lips or our actions, “We love you!” but we really don’t (and whether or not we do can be seen by the way we live), does the worship make God smile? No. On the contrary, He hates it, passionately and vehemently. If our worship is a fake (and don’t be fooled: we can fool ourselves into thinking our worship is real when it is not!) then it will not please God; instead He will despise it. Our worship means something to God – our worship makes Him smile – only when we are intimate with Him, when our lives reflect His life breathed into us, and we are truly, with no pretense or farce, starving and hungry and salivating only for One Name: Jesus Christ.

When we approach worship, whether it be through singing and instruments, playing with children, examining nature, or spreading mulch for hard-pressed families, we must not approach them desiring feelings of joy or wondering what we will get out of it. Our worship must be 100% about worshipping God, not achieving special feelings or blessings. When we enter worship with the feelings and blessings in mind, we are not worshipping the Creator; we are worshipping those feelings and blessings. It becomes an act of idolatry. If our worship is 100% about worshipping God, it cannot be a nice little program for Sunday mornings right before the sermon and dismissal. Worship must be all about God; we enter worship, and worship becomes a staging ground or doorway, a meeting place between us and God, where we and God intimately connect and interact.

Worship is a two-way process. When our worship is authentic, we give our lives to Him; not just our voices or our time, but every inch and centimeter of our lives. When we do this, God delights in giving back to us. He may rain down blessings or give us feelings; these are two wonderful examples, but not promises. God may hold back blessings and feelings so that we learn not to rely on them in worship but to rely on Him.

Genuine worship can happen at home, at work, at church, during play, simply everywhere in so many different ways: Drawing, painting, sculpting, studying, designing, praying, singing, writing, walking, breathing, working, serving, smiling. The list is endless (of course, acts such as premarital sex or drunkenness cannot be methods of worship as they completely go against God’s nature and harm the social fabric). The New Testament church knew this, and so everything they did was done in a spirit of joyfulness, as if they were doing it for the King (and, to be honest, they were!). Soldiers marched a bit faster, butchers chopped meat a little bit quicker, children did not complain. All of this was worship, individual acts of worship finding themselves in a much larger act of worship: living life intimately with God.

Our worship must be only about God and Christ, because in the end, only God and Christ and following Him matter. We worship Christ because “God raised him from death and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but *forever*. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything.” Worshipping Christ is essential to the life-blood of the Church (the organic church, the people making up God’s community) because “Christ rules the church. The church, you see, is not peripheral [secondary] to the world; the world is peripheral to the church. The church is Christ’s body, in which he speaks and acts, by which he fills everything with his presence.” (Ephesians 1:20-23)

Christ Himself walks among the Church, the Body of Christ (Revelation 2:1). This is not figurative; in a way we cannot understand, a way invisible to us, Christ is walking amongst us as we gather, whether it is in homes, at work, on the playground or in a church building. He is with us as we work, sleep, eat, whether we are with friends, enemies, or alone. He sees everything we do: whether our worship is intimate or fake, He knows. Whether we love others, He knows. He has hot words to say to those who gather in His Name but do not live like it’s so (read Revelations 2 and 3). It is simply a comforting thought (or perhaps a scary one) that Christ walks among us as we worship *and* as we live our lives. There is no reason for me to doubt that Christ is beside me right now, for He promised me and all of His disciples, “I’ll be with you... day after day after day,

right up to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20) Perhaps Christ sits across the table from me, or is leaning over my shoulder, hand on my back, eyes watching the screen as I type, watching the words unfold. Christ walks among us; if our worship is fake, He will know.

Worship, like the scriptures, is essential to intimacy with God, for intimacy with God can only occur after the reality of worship is realized. We cannot be intimate with God if we do not, with our lives, worship Him. Discipleship, submission, surrender, sacrifice and intimacy with God are *all* forms of divine worship.

## V

### Prayer in the New Community

Prayer is essential to the life of a disciple. Just as there is no developing intimacy without true worship, so there is no developing intimacy (really, no intimacy at all) without prayer. Prayer is, simply, talking to God. One may desire a more complex or witty definition, but the beauty of prayer is that it *is* so simple: no complex formulas or equations to work through. One cannot experience intimacy with God apart from prayer; imagine a husband and wife being intimate but having no conversation. It is impossible; they do not only refrain from speaking, but from communicating with facial expressions, writing, and emotions. *All* forms of communication are cut off and intimacy does not result. As we are the bride of Christ, so it holds true for our marriage as well: if there is no conversation, be it through conventional speaking prayer or in other ways, there will be no intimacy.

When most Christians imagine prayer, they think of laying bare our requests before God. A popular formula for prayer is ACTS, an acronym from *Admonish, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication*; in more common terms, telling God how great He is, confessing our sins, thanking God for the blessings, and telling God what we want. The problem with ACTS is that there is no room for listening to God. Prayer is not one-dimensional; it is a 2-way, conversational relationship. We speak to God (ACTS portrays this side of prayer) and God speaks to us (ACTS, unfortunately, misses this truth). God will speak to us through many different ways: our emotions, circumstances, a still small voice in the back of our heads, through others. God is ingenious; He speaks to us through books, magazines, music, and nature, even through our own words and thoughts! Through genuine prayer, our intimacy with God will strengthen and we will experience without doubt a growing and unfolding conversational relationship with Him.

Those who are intimate with God take prayer seriously. Many well-meaning Christians just go through the motions: pray upon awaking in the morning, pray before the meals, pray before sleep. None of this is bad, but it can become meaningless ritual. How many times have you seen a Christian scolded for not praying before dinner at McDonald's? It has happened to me many times. We must understand that prayer is not a set of rules to live by, or a formula to keep to-the-letter, but it is interacting with God, talking to Him through speech, thinking, drawing, writing, painting, reading, singing, crying. We need to understand that in prayer, we are talking to the Creator of the Universe, the spinner of galaxies, the author of molecules. He created the atomic table and fashioned spiders to build webs. How in the world can we treat prayer so flippantly? Prayer must be humbling, blood-chilling, even terrifying sometimes.

When we take prayer seriously, we pray from the heart. It is ridiculous to see a poor woman crying at the death of her son, frustrated with God, then when you tell her prayer is a wonderful idea, you see her turn all pious and use big words: “Please help me, Sovereign God, to understand Your wonderful ways.” This is *not* from the heart. *This* is from the heart: “Where the heck are You? What is wrong with You? You could’ve stopped it, but you didn’t: you just let him die! I don’t like you at all right now. You’re driving me crazy. You know I am mad at You and I’m not going to hide it. You act so dumb sometimes.” It’s filled with theological problems, and overcome with clouded emotions, but it is from the *heart*; it is not ritual, it is not empty, and thank God, it is not a theologically or politically correct prayer. We have far too many of those. David’s

prayers found in the Psalms are much “worse” than this, but yet God called him “a man after My own heart.” Jesus Christ, in Gethsemane, cried out to God, emotion coursing through Him until blood fell from his skin, asking God to stop what was about to happen: He feared being disconnected from God and did not hide it. He spoke from the heart. So should we.

Sometimes the words do not come when we try and speak from our heart. The emotions are too extreme to be discoursed through words. Our anger draws up no words, only screaming. Our sorrow draws up no words, only crying. It is in these moments that we just fall before God, laying us and our emotions down naked before Him, letting our screaming or crying just flow. In these times, the Holy Spirit comes in and finds the words we cannot, and He prays on our behalf. Those disciples already in Heaven pray for us as well. A whole host of beings prays for us constantly, even when we are sleeping.

Prayer is constant in the New Testament. Jesus was always in prayer, and one of Christ's followers calls us to pray unceasingly. Jesus Christ is our model of intimacy with God, and it pays to see how much He values prayer. It is undeniably *essential*; in the New Testament church, the vitality of prayer was recognized, and prayer as a mechanism to connect us to God was utilized. We, too, if we are serious about intimacy with God, need to recognize this and live out of this truth.

## VI

### The Goal of the New Testament Church

We can participate in scripture-reading, worship and prayer, and even dedicate our lives to them, but if the scripture-reading, worship and prayer is not focused on Christ, it is worthless. In the same way, church ought not to be about anything except Christ, and the New Testament church was all-out for Christ, not attendance or popularity or entertaining the masses. One Name filled their thoughts, guided their lives, and directed their gatherings: Christ. In our gatherings, therefore, it makes sense to take some time off from the busy world surrounding us, to slow down, to breathe, and listen for God's voice. The Name of Christ must be lifted in our gatherings through the various forms of scripture-reading, worship and prayer, and through any other rituals or practices.

With Christ at the center, we should return to the scriptures as the bulk of the sermons, not our words about the scriptures. The aim that drives us as ministers must not be entertaining those before us, but encouraging them to deeper intimacy, obedience and discipleship to God. We who participate in the gathering without being a minister or clergy must not go in with the goal being personal enjoyment, but rather encountering and pleasing God. Seeking enjoyment in church gatherings leaves out room for God's scolding, God's discipline, repentance and godly sorrow. We have had enough with book knowledge, spiritual clichés, mission statements, doctrine formulas, and self-help voodoo. All of those have their place, but we need to sacrifice those and aim our gatherings heavenward, to the Supreme Cherisher and Sustainer of the worlds. It makes sense to wonder if Jesus died so we could go to church on Sundays, learn the Ten Commandments, and fall asleep during dry Bible studies while picking through the Book of Lamentations.

The New Testament church found in the New Testament was not about entertaining the masses; if this were the goal, there would be a lot more shallow praise and a lot less scolding going on in the letters. The goal was not personal enjoyment; the followers denied themselves certain pleasures for the sake of Christ. The goal was not popularity, as thousands of Christians were being persecuted throughout the Roman Empire. The goal was not attendance, even though those claiming allegiance to Christ were growing in numbers every passing day. To open the scriptures and see any of these as the goal of the New Testament church is to be blindfolded and claim you can see.

The goal of the New Testament church was purely God: honoring God, pleasing God, worshipping God, intimacy with God. Somewhere along the line, many churches have missed this. A church can have as many postmodern and vintage-faith attributes as it can stomach, and it can even be a model postmodern/New Testament church, but if the goal is not Christ through-and-through, rest assured, it is *not* a New Testament community.

## VII A New Way of Living Life

The new community created by Christ is not a community that meets on Sunday mornings. Public, demonstrative worship is just one part of the new community. The new community we are called into is all about intimacy with God and intimacy with others. If we are not intimate with God, there is no way we can experience and live out of the new community. It is simply impossible. Likewise, if we *are* intimate with God and try to live out this community with people who aren't intimate with Him, it will not work. The community is made up of those intimate with God; strangers to God cannot, by way of God's divine power, be drawn into the community successfully. How come? Because the community of God rests upon intimacy with God. Intimacy with God is the pillars holding up the bridge, and the bridge is the new community. No pillars means no bridge.

If we think the new community is all about postmodernism, we have missed the point. As has been said, this new community can find home in a number of different styles and denominations of church institutions. This is how God designed it. The new community is not a new way of "doing" church, although it *will* affect the way "church" is "done." The new community is simply made up of godly people living in intimacy with God and living life intimately connected with one another. By saying those people live intimately together, we mean they exist in a close, personal and loving community. This intimacy is quite different from the intimacy to be experienced with God (that is another chapter).

In Acts 2:42-47, we are given a beautiful snapshot of genuine, godly community. If we pick into what is said, we can uncover truths about this new community, and begin to live them out in our own communities where they once were diminished or all but non-existent. Remember, one must first be intimate with God for the new community to be possible.

[The first Christians] committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles, the life together, the common meal, and the prayers. Everyone around was in awe – all those wonders and signs done through the apostles! And all the believers lived in a wonderful harmony, holding everything in common. They sold whatever they owned and pooled their resources so that each person's need was met. They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple followed by meals at home, every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as the praised God.  
- Acts 2:42-47

The New Testament church committed themselves to the teaching of the apostles. How many people do you know who are committed to the teaching of the apostles? The New Testament church did not shirk the Message of Christ, but saturated themselves in it, and seriously dedicated themselves to cultivating intimacy with God through the words of those more experienced. The new community is all about pursuing God, and this cannot be wholly done apart from the words of God. When we gather, we must invest time into the teachings of the apostles, but simply doing it once a week is *not* commitment. Commitment involves a daily lifestyle. The early Christians meditated on God's word day and night, let it overcome them in their daily lives, and lived it out as they walked the streets. Just as time is invested into the teachings when we gather corporately, so time also ought to be spent dedicated to the teachings when we simply gather with friends or are spending time alone. This is not a new rule to be followed; when we are truly intimate with God, we cannot *help* but thirst for God's Word or even the words of those who

are intimate with God. In a community of those intimate with God, it only makes sense for there to be a genuine and all-encompassing dedication to the teachings of the apostles.

The New Testament church committed themselves to the life together. A popular idea is that faith is a strictly personal thing. This idea has led many to abandon the flaws of corporate church to instead pursue faith on their own. What happens in most cases is not surprising: the person eventually loses touch with the faith and becomes agnostic; or the person begins to feel a slight discomfort around those in churches, sometimes even to the point of being bitter towards them. The reason that such degradation occurs is because the idea of faith being strictly personal and individual is flawed. Faith *is* personal; Jesus spent forty days alone in the wilderness and often pulled into solitude for one-on-one time with God. Faith is *also* social, and even more-so in many ways: Jesus spent most of his time around people, and even adopted twelve chosen men to follow Him along everywhere. Jesus died so *everyone* – not just you or me – could experience intimacy with God. Faith is an insanely social organism. Christ is not to be held *only* in our hearts, but also in our communities; we are called to live life together not just on Sundays or Wednesdays, but all the time; our community isn't just on the weekends or at Bible studies. It goes down deeper, even to the point of sharing in the common meal.

The New Testament church lived life together; what does this mean? They did not just share in the extraordinary or religious moments, like Temple worship or monastic retreats. They shared in the common meal; they shared life in everything common. From the mundane to the extreme, they lived life together, and lived alongside when God was not the “topic of the day.” Some churches hailed as a community fail in this crucial aspect: members shake hands, exchange smiles, swap stories, and talk about how much they love each other like brothers and sisters, then walk out the doors and don't talk to them again until next Sunday. A community lives life together: not just in church, but also in the fast food restaurants, the parks, the factories, the homes, the car dealerships. To think the new community is built upon church events is to ignore the fact Jesus Christ spent hardly any time inside the Temple, and His wittiest conversations took place at dinner tables, on the roadsides, while He was taking a drink from a common well. It is quite clear: Christ values the mundane, and if we are to experience His community, we must, too.

The fact that intimacy is so essential can be seen by the New Testament church committing themselves to prayer. This commitment is not a pray-before-special-times or pray-for-the-sick kind of commitment, although these prayers certainly found themselves encompassed in this commitment. The New Testament Christians were committed in the sense that prayer, for them, was a wonderful act of connectivity with God, and by themselves or with others, they entered into this connectivity with enthusiasm, dedication and constancy. The New Testament Christians did not shirk intimacy with God; rather, they experienced it and developed it. In modern day, it is easy to undermine our intimacy with God. How many people do you know who are so intimate with God so as to be in constant, unending communication with Him? This constant union was commonplace and expected by the New Testament Christians; the intimacy they valued and enriched made possible the sinews of the new community. It is of bedrock importance that those in the new community treasure intimacy with God more than intimacy with others and more than their own lives.

The New Testament church was intimate with the Creator, and this intimacy opened up doors to divine power. It is taboo in modern-times to believe that union with God can result in “super-human” abilities. This is because science has so indoctrinated us in a campaign against miracles, the unnatural, the abnormal, and even God Himself. Union with God does *not* give us super-human abilities such as flight, walking on water, invisibility, reading peoples' minds, walking through walls. Those abilities are best left to the comic-book heroes. The super-human abilities stem from God's hand in our lives, God interacting with us: miracle healing, movements of the Holy Spirit, miraculous deliveries, casting out demons all flow from intimacy with God, because intimacy with God allows us to *interact* with God not only in Heaven, but also *upon the earth*. The New Testament Christians knew miracles firsthand because they were so intimate with God; God's hand in their lives served as proof of their intimacy. It is not unreasonable to assume that

the reason not as many miracles (if any at all) are seen today is because the numbers of those truly intimate with God have gone down. Everyone can claim to be intimate with God, whether they are or not, and this muddles the miracle-pool.

Yet here we are touching a fine line. If we are not performing miracles, does it mean we are not intimate with God? No. If all of our prayers aren't being radically answered, does it mean we are not intimate with God? No. We need to remember that what we hold as important, God may not hold as important. We make a big deal about slavery, but God doesn't seem to care much about it; in His mind, perhaps He is saying, "You guys are making a big deal out of worldly slavery, but you're ignoring the eternal slavery: slavery to sin and death!" This bigger concern of God's is seen in Christ when He does not address the topic of slavery (prominent when He walked the earth in physical form) but instead always refers to spiritual slavery. God may not grant prayers or perform miracles through us because His concerns are not like ours. Yet in a sense, whether or not miracles show in our lives *can* be gauges of intimacy with God: proof of intimacy is seen in life-change, and it really is a miracle for a twisted, sickened person to become a loving, worshipful child of God. If we have not experienced life-change, we must question whether or not our intimacy with God is genuine.

The most commonly-held idea on why miracles are not so prominent in modern-day is because the miracles found in the Gospels and Acts were only meant for those time periods; in other words, to get the Early Church moving. When the balls were rolling, the miracles ended. This idea works fine, but a less-acknowledged but equally possible idea is that miracles are unpopular because of the modern-day unbelief. Christ the Messiah was unable to perform miracles in certain towns because their unbelief was so deep; science and modern-day thought has ruled out the possibility of miracles, and churches, too, have admitted that miracles are a thing of the past. There is a deep unbelief for the possibility of miracles, and so if things are just as they were two thousand years ago, miracles are simply impossible *because* of unbelief. If belief in miracles rose, would miracles be possible? It is not crazy to believe so. Whatever the state of miracles in modern-day society, the New Testament church knew miracles first-hand because of their intimacy with God and belief in the possibility of miracles.

Harmony within church communities is difficult to find. More often than not, love is forgotten for the much-easier and much-more-compatible hatred, strife, and discord. We all know gossip runs amuck at many churches, and many people passionate for God have turned their backs to the church-institution out of disgust. Who can blame them? Sadly, the state of many churches today, much-devoid of love and overcome with gossip, is something Christ is sickened with. We may be able to imagine Christ's words as He walks among those churches; the words would probably be close to His words found in the first few chapters of Revelation. The new community found in the New Testament was not run with a lack-of-affection, hostility, gossip or backstabbing. They were a community of love who found harmony with one another. Genuine, godly community was experienced because the Christians experienced genuine, godly life, intimacy with God.

The new community held everything in common. Just as they shared in the common meal, so they shared in all the other mundane *and* extraordinary events in life. They were as connected during the normal weeks following Pentecost as they had been *at* Pentecost. A lot of church communities are built up only on Sundays and Wednesdays and therefore miss this beautiful truth; strong community is found through intimate Christians living intimate lives *together*.

They pooled resources so everyone's need was met. The early Christians truly loved, cared for, and helped out one another. So often today loving others and caring for the sick becomes a political agenda, a way to look good religiously or score points with others and even God. These Christians did it out of the wells of their hearts: with the fiber of their being they loved, cared for, and helped out others. They did not do it for recognition, they did not even do it to draw others to Christ; they did not do it for salvation, but they did it because of salvation. God so completely consumed them in His intimacy with them that they could not *help* but be compassionate towards others. No room is found for selfishness or "Me, Me, Me." Much of our Christian activities are

done for selfish reasons. Not so here. The early Christians modeled Christ when Christ washed their feet and said, “As I have done for you, you do also.” Their lives were filled to the brim with compassion for others; it was a trademark of their new community.

They followed a daily discipline of worship in the Temple – public demonstration of their love for God was key. Some use the New Testament church as a means to avoid Sunday-morning church, but they fail to see that the early Christians did not forsake meeting in the church building (Temple), but actually went everyday and worshipped corporately! When we meet on Sundays and Wednesdays, we meet for public demonstration as well, through worship and prayer and messages, through the sharing of stories, the passing of the offering basket, and the taking of the communion bread and juice. It shouldn’t stop there, though. It needs to infiltrate the rest of our meals. The early Christians believed this, as after the Temple services they didn’t disband, but remained together – they ate!

Every meal a celebration, exuberant and joyful, as they praised God – the early Christians understood that being thankful, experiencing God, and praising God doesn’t just happen in the confines of ‘church.’ It doesn’t just happen at religious festival and parties and celebrations. Thanksgiving, praise, experiencing God is a daily thing found in the mundane. The sharing of a meal, the laughter with friends, a walk through the woods, watching the sunrise on your way to work or school, sinking your teeth into a barbecued pork-chop. We can worship God with the same intensity in both singing worship and enjoying food.

Early Christians lived their lives together, at school, at work, in their free time. They lived it in the mundane, the normal, the average. They didn’t just keep their faith to themselves, but shared it with others; and they lived a life of love and sharing and hospitality. They shared deep conversations as well as those littered with jokes and laughter and every-day talk. While they weren’t absent of issues and problems, harmony was found through working out those conflicts. And most of all, they got together, lived with each other, lived with God, and enjoyed life.

## VIII

### The Core of the New Community

The new community is not postmodernism nor modernism; it is not Baptist, Lutheran, Episcopalian or Catholic. The new community can exist within all denominations of Christianity. The new community is simply people intimate with God bonding together in intimate relationships. When this happens, it is inevitable that a community of love, acceptance, generosity, forgiveness, grace, and the enjoyment of the common life together arises. This is the community founded in the grace, love, and intimacy of the Creator of the Cosmos. It is His design for living life on earth, and on the New Earth in the near (or far) future, this community will be common as day and night and there will be no exceptions. Why wait until Heaven to live out God’s community?

Why is this new community so hard to find, even in churches? Because many of us as Christians have come to believe in a false Gospel, where intimacy with God is forgotten. It only makes sense that we now explore the true Gospel, a Gospel of reunion and intimacy with God, because only in intimacy with God can a godly community thrive and thrive undying.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Intimacy with the Creator*

“Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.” - 2 Peter 1:3-4

#### I

### Our Sole Pursuit

What is it that we as Christians pursue in our relationship with God? What is it that drives us to attempt (or, if we're lucky, accomplish) spiritual maturity? What is the driving force behind our decision to label ourselves Christians? Historically, we have named ourselves Christians for many reasons. Perhaps it was the faith we were born into, and we're simply continuing the family line. Maybe we want to be accepted and so we join a church community. Maybe we're running after God's blessings, claiming allegiance to Him so we will be blessed (the ideology of "health and wealth" comes into play here). These reasons for running after God are all faulty and do not encourage genuine faith. What about more noble reasons for being a Christian? Show compassion to the hopeless, right social wrongs, cure evil with active righteousness. Our focus need not be above ourselves; perhaps we are looking for the power to overcome a painful and ensnaring addiction, hoping that in being a Christian and reading our Bibles, the formula to escaping these addictions will become apparent. Perhaps we realize how terrible a people we really are, so we bank on Christ to get us through. No doubt about it, these are all very noble reasons for pursuing God, but they all fall short of the real reason we are called *by God to pursue God*, the reason God delights in and blesses.

When we pursue God for the wrong reasons, we will be locked down in guilt and shame and feel hopelessly lost. We will not be able to overcome our addictions, we will not be able to get over our own pitfalls and hang-ups, and as we realize how we aren't changing on the inside, we begin to become depressed because any chance of affecting the social fabric with our "Christian righteousness" hits rock-bottom. We will not be experiencing the joy and peace of God, and this will wear us down to where we either become emotionless legalists, radical hypocrites, or it will haunt us to the point of booting us from the Christian faith altogether. How can we tell whether or not we are pursuing God for the wrong reasons? The answer is simple: are we experiencing the joy and peace of God, are we being changed on the inside by the work of the Holy Spirit, has our life – not just what we do or don't do, but who we are as individuals – changed at all? If we do not know the joy and peace of God, if we've made no progress since the day we "accepted Jesus Christ into our hearts," if we've not changed our way of life completely – then it is time to question whether or not we are really pursuing God for the right reasons.

So now we know what we'll look like if we pursue God for the *right* reason: we *will* know the peace and joy of God, we *will* be in the process of being changed inside *and* out by the Holy Spirit, and our life will take on a different quality: we will be filled with compassion and mercy, love and forgiveness, patience and joy. Does this mean that we will be free of sin? No, we'll still mess up (though not as much!); but we won't be jumping into the arms of sin, and we will really detest sin. Does this mean our lives will be perfect, free from trouble? No; in fact, our trials will actually *increase*, because Satan is against us and wants to harm our relationship with God as much as possible; and our sinful natures (human nature) will conflict with the Spirit nature (nature the Holy

Spirit puts within us), erupting a civil war within us. We will, however, face these trials with joy and acceptance, and our faith and trust in God will grow deeper through them. Does pursuing God for the right reason mean our life will fall into place and be perfect? No; the world around us is not conformed to God's will, but is instead playing to Satan's songs, resulting in a world where what is deserved isn't always received and what is right doesn't always happen. Yet we will understand that the condition of our physical and worldly existence is not in any way a factor of God's love for us or how much God truly favors us and blesses us (His blessings aren't usually what we expect, either). What we will experience most, however, when we pursue God for the right reasons, is simply receiving what we desire: intimacy with Him.

This is why we must pursue Him. We must pursue God for God; we must pursue Him because we really love Him. When we pursue Him to receive His blessings, or to find a little security, or as fire insurance, we'll have a hollow and, dare I say it, nonexistent faith. We end up worshipping the blessings, the security, the promise of Heaven, instead of worshipping, adoring, reveling in God. God is passionately hungry for those who worship Him because they love Him, not because they're supposed to. Just as God is hungry for those who love Him, we are passionately hungry for Him – not for His blessings or Heaven or whatever, though these are nice gifts – and this innate hunger will drive us to pursue Him so we can experience intimacy with Him. The one reason many Christians do not experience intimacy with God, even if they do desire it, is because they are pursuing Him for the wrong reasons.

The entire message of Christ and the Cross itself all revolve around this goal: intimacy with God. Really, that is why Jesus came. We say Christ came so that we can be forgiven, but that's only a half-truth. Christ *did* forgive us through the Cross; but His reason for forgiving us is so that we could experience intimacy with God! Sin keeps us from that intimacy, and His forgiveness cleansed us of the sin that hinders intimacy. We still screw up, but we are forgiven and our intimacy isn't shattered. Only we can bring about an end to the intimacy with God, by turning our backs on God. Because of the Cross, sin can no longer do that. Because of Christ and the sacrifice He made upon the Cross, we are not only forgiven, but the door to intimacy with God has been opened. Here is the New Covenant, the New Testament: we small and insignificant humans can experience intimacy with an unfathomable big and great God in our daily, boring lives. The Old Testament points to this amazing development, and Christ affirms it when He calls Himself the Door. Yes, Jesus Christ is the Door to intimacy with the Creator of our universe.

All Scripture, past and present, hinges on this core truth: God desiring intimacy with us, and us responding with a truthful desire to be intimate with Him. All the biblical greats shared a common thread: desiring intimacy with God. David is called "a man after God's own heart," which means He was literally pursuing *God* and not anything or anyone else. David's life wasn't a picnic; he was terrified most of the time, he was hated by more people than we can imagine, and for a period of his life, his skin would've found prize on the tip of a spear. He did not live the perfect life, either; nowadays he would be called a rapist and murderer. But God forgave David because David sincerely wanted intimacy with God, and God wanted it with David even more-so. As much as we can want intimacy with God, God wants intimacy with us even more. All the promises of the Scriptures – just open up a "God's Promises and Answers" book – are aimed at those who pursue God for the right reason; if we bank on those promises while running after God for wrong reasons, we're just going to run-aground and feel abandoned; it's not unlike signing our names on someone else's check. It isn't going to be cashed and we'll feel forsaken.

What does intimacy with God look like? The Scriptures show us how one who is intimate with God looks to the world. Christ's Sermon on the Mount, for instance, is not a legal-pad of what-to-do and what-not-to-do, but is really Christ's way of telling us what happens to us when we are intimate with God and God is intimate with us. The embodiment of the Sermon on the Mount is inevitable; we cannot be intimate with God and *not* conform to Christ! The Fruit of the Spirit is another great example; if you try to "live out" the Fruit, you'll fail; if you let it grow onto you through intimacy with God, you will find the Fruit is yours to own and not an effort at all! We will also begin to feel His presence just as we feel the presence of our spouse, children, best friend or

girl/boyfriend. Our hearts will be overjoyed at the mere thought of Him, just as we are naturally overjoyed at the thought of someone we love. Intimacy with God is not to be forged in the silence; a conversational relationship will develop, where we will speak to God, He will speak to us, and real, honest-to-God conversation will take place. All the benchmarks of intimacy with others can be seen in intimacy with God.

What happens if we don't pursue God for the right reason, namely to know Him in a personal and intimate way? The Gospel message of salvation is connected to intimacy with God; there is no salvation apart from divine intimacy. Many people will slave about in their Christian lives, doing their Christian things, but when all is said and done, their intimacy with God is zip. There will come a day – and this day is on the way – when these people will stand before Christ and cry out, “What do You mean, You never knew me? I worshipped You! I read the Bible! I prayed one hundred times a day!” But Christ, with tears in His eyes, will say, “Depart from Me, I never knew you.” Depart from Me, for you never truly and intimately knew Me.

## II

### The Key to Spiritual Transformation

Enter any Christian bookstore in mainstream America and look at the titles leaping out at you. What are the titles saying, what are the books advocating? Hundreds upon hundreds of books all claiming to be the doorway to obeying God, the key to a life of spiritual change, the hidden secret in spiritual transformation. These books are written for two reasons: one, they speak to volumes of modern-day, American-civilization Christians. Christians recognize that they are not living up to Jesus' message, and are recognizing how they must beg forgiveness every day for the same old things. They realize they are not going anywhere in their spiritual lives, and believe this book, or the next, or the one after that will hold the secret they've been missing, the hidden gospel to a life of genuine, godly living. These books are written for a second reason as well: the books sell. Why did *The Purpose-Driven Life* fare so well? It did so well – and *continues* to do so well – because people have not grasped the reality of Christ's message, have not understood what the “Christian life” is all about, and are seeking answers. Without intimacy with God, no matter how much you know the Bible, you will either be an exhausted Christian “failure” or an emotionless legalist who finds no joy in God anymore.

The lack of spiritual transformation is huge but so often ignored. How many times have we read Paul's writings in Galatians 5:19-21 and felt a little uncomfortable, somewhat disheartened, and even fearful when Paul finishes off the expose with, “If you use your freedom this way, you will not inherit God's kingdom.” We recognize that, while we label ourselves “Christian”, say all the prayers, raise our hands in worship, and love everyone even if it means gritting our teeth, it all means nothing if our lives haven't changed. Paul later says, “Circumcision and uncircumcision don't mean anything. What really counts is the creation of a new nature.” (6:15, *NIV*) Many of us have not experienced the creation of a new nature, and desperate to cling to salvation, we hunt out the latest and trendiest books in vain hope to be told that we need more willpower, need more care about our spiritual lives, or we're just plain lazy; all of these being easily-fixable problems and commonplace in modern-day books. The truth of the matter is, when the creation of the Spirit nature is not present in our lives, we have not grasped and lived out the reality of redemption: intimacy with the Creator. Yes, apathy and laziness and lack-of-willpower can contribute to the lack of spiritual transformation, but the underlying cause is *always* an empty intimacy with God. We know the reality of intimacy with God has not been grasped by most American Christians because, sadly, most American Christians do not live godly lifestyles.

All the great Christ-followers share something in common: intimacy with God. Whether you be a construction worker, a monk, an accountant, a diplomat, a soldier or a student, the invitation to intimacy with God is open and available, and God whispers, “Come to Me.” Christ invites us into intimacy. Vast numbers of people *have* understood Christ's message for what it truly is, and have modeled lives not unlike those of the Early Christians. Children, students, the unemployed, the

underemployed, the blue-collar, white-collar, pink-collar and elderly have members who have experienced intimacy with God, and that intimacy is seen in their lives. When one is intimate with God, locked in a genuine life of intimacy with God, it is seen in their lives, in the creation of the new nature. This is why there really is something different about that plumber, something weird about that Brain in Algebra II, something strange and mysterious about that overly-happy car salesman. They have grasped the reality of intimacy, entered into, discovered, explored, and experienced (and continue to discover, explore, and experience) the intimacy and it is seen in the lives they live.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ tells us that His true followers will be salt and light. Many of us have heard this term and strove after being salt and light, ignorant of the fact that salt and light is what happens to us when we are intimate with God, an inevitable occurrence. If you stand too long in the sun, you are tanned or sunburned; if you bathe in the Son, you begin to radiate the Son, and Christ used figurative language to tell us this. Salt and light is not something we do, but something we are. We can't make ourselves salt and light; we must pursue intimacy with God, and this intimacy alone will result in us being salt and light. The entire Sermon on the Mount has often been read wrong, as a textbook or guide-post to good, moral living; rather, it is Christ telling us how to spot a true disciple. A true disciple is intimate with God and will begin to show God in his or her life – what happens, naturally, is the Sermon on the Mount personified in our lives.

This personification is difficult to find nowadays as the number of genuine Christ-followers continues to dwindle. So many of us cling to false gospels: gospels of 'health-and-wealth,' gospels of 'forgiven-sins-and-just-live-better,' and gospels of "claim-the-blessings-and-promises-of-God," to name a few. The result is that we are not really Christ-followers; we are not true Christians as the original meaning goes. As we are clinging to false gospels, we are not clinging to Christ. False teachers fill many pulpits throughout America and even use ancient prophecies against themselves without even knowing it. If you do not believe me, look at the number of so-called Christians living lives completely opposite of Christ's life, lives not smoothly rooted in His ways and His teachings. An extreme example is homosexual churches in California; the homosexuals are taught that their way of life is okay, and this is a false gospel. It is not the Message of the New Covenant. Acceptance of sin is not the Gospel of Christ, and therefore those who continue in their sin are not true disciples of Christ, and are not fixed to inherit the New Heavens and New Earth through intimacy with God. The homosexual church is an extreme example; Christians who really aren't fill our pews throughout America.

Because we are so withered from sin, so engraved into our human (sinful) natures, only God can enable us to change into creatures of His design, and this is done only when we are intimate with Him. It goes to say that if *lack* of life-change is a sign of lacking intimacy with God, so a life *of* life-change is a sign of true intimacy with God.

### III

## Experiencing Life-Change Happens *Only* In Intimacy

When we are truly intimate with someone, we begin to become like them, whether we want to or not. We begin to like their music, enjoy the television shows they watch, laugh at the same jokes, and even finish each others' sentences. Intimacy does not leave our inner selves untouched. Why would it be any different in intimacy with God? When we are intimate with God, it does something to us. Namely, through intimacy, it changes us. We become different persons, all the while retaining our uniqueness and individuality. While intimacy is *not* the change, change happens. We begin to embody the Gospel and reflect Christ's teachings as a reality in our own life; we begin to model the Sermon on the Mount and Paul's expositions in Galatians 5; we begin to know 1 Corinthians 13 in a personal way. Christ's commands don't only become easy to follow, but hard *not* to follow; while in the beginning we had to make ourselves obey, now it is instinct, natural, and we realize the insanity and thoughtlessness of not living godly lives.

Is it pursuing God that changes us? No; nothing we *do* changes us. That is why the Law does not work for life-change; it is powerless. Only God can change us, and this is why true life-change can only be forged within intimacy: only in intimacy are we truly connected, in a real and undeniable way, to God. The question is not, “*What* changes us,” but rather, “*Who* changes us,” and we already know the answer. When we live a life of intimacy with God, we are constantly and knowingly bathed in His presence; Christ’s promise, “I will be with you always,” becomes real in a new way to us as we realize He is literally walking beside us, and not only beside us, but all around us, when we are sleeping, eating, bathing, working and going to church. Life-change happens in intimacy because we are connected to God and bathed in His presence.

One may look for the principles and points to be found in this truth, perhaps seeking a formula as to why genuinely bathing in God equals true life-change. No formula is to be found. The Creator is not a machine; He is an emotional Being with a beautiful personality, Who has a knack for creativity, and simply molds us to be His own when we are intimate with Him. No formulas are to be found, so if you are searching for one, just stop. It’s a holy mystery, don’t reduce it to a “witty” slogan – let God be God and let Him change you.

Knowing that only bathing in God can bring about true life-change, many ancient Christ-followers developed practices that would bring the heart, mind and soul solely on the Creator and allow the Creator to work on them. These practices have become known as the spiritual disciplines, and they include prayer, fasting, study, meditation, service and even celebration. If we practice spiritual disciplines in the hope that doing them will result in life-change, we will be greatly disappointed; thinking this way is legalism and it is a dead-end. The disciplines do not work; God works. When we use the disciplines correctly, we use them as an avenue or window in which we and God can intimately interact and He can change us. Ancient and modern-day monks are fascinating and admirable; understanding this truth, they have dedicated their lives to practicing the disciplines and developing intimacy with God.

Is this to say that we must practice the spiritual disciplines to develop intimacy with God, resulting in life-change? They certainly help. Is this to say that without spiritual disciplines, we cannot achieve intimacy and life-change? Absolutely not! The disciplines are not set-in-stone, they are simply ways we can enter into the presence of God. Our intimacy can develop outside the touch of the disciplines, simply as we revolve our life around God and intimacy with Him. The intimacy can develop in our own homes, with friends and family and enemies, in school and at work. The disciplines are just practices that open up a specific window where we can interact with God outside the busyness of daily life.

The secret to spiritual transformation – the key, to say – is intimacy with God. Yet if we pursue God just so we can be changed, it will not work out; intimacy only comes when we truly desire God for God, when we primarily love Him and not what he does to or for us.

A mistake that can easily be made when stating how intimacy leads to life-change and the personification of the Message is to think that the heart of intimacy is transformation, to think that intimacy with God is *all* about easy obedience and conformation to Christ. This is not true; obedience and transformation are a result of intimacy, but not the core of it. The core of intimacy is an intimate, interactive union with God, from which flows obedience and conformation, as well as a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. In other words, intimacy with God makes life beautiful and fun; we will enjoy life much more and our experience with God in our daily lives is something amazing.

## IV

### God Wants Intimacy With Us More Than We Want Intimacy With Him

The fact that you are reading this book is evidence that God is pursuing you. Whenever we desire intimacy with God, God is pursuing us. Whenever we feel a desire to get in spiritual shape, God is calling our names. Whenever our hearts leap within when we see a beautiful sunrise or sunset, God is, at that very moment, wooing us to Him. God is constantly calling our names, trying to woo us to Him; some ignore His call and call it hocus-pocus, others try to block His voice completely; some answer the call, but in wrong ways, pursuing false gods: sex, idols, money, wrong religions; yet there are some who recognize the call and tell God, "Yes, I am here, and I want you!" This is the doorstep to intimacy with God. Yet in all of this, before we even considered intimacy with God, God had us in His mind and heart, in the very fiber of His Being, and He called out and continues to call out. If you desire intimacy with God, He desires intimacy with you even more. If you desire a "stronger Christian walk," He desires it with you even more. If we desire to reach Him through the spiritual disciplines, He is determined to touch us. It would be His pleasure; for in His heart, mind and soul, there is a part of Him that can only be filled with us, and He is empty without us; and when we come to Him, we fill the hole in His heart and He fills the hole in ours by pouring Himself – completely – into us.

The Creator has desired intimacy with us for a long time. Not only since we became Christians, but before that. Not only since the day we were born, but far before that as well. Before God created the universe out of absolutely nothing, before He invented mathematics and physics, stars and galaxies, hummingbirds and alligators, His heart passionately thirsted for us.

Many wonder, "Why did God create the universe? Did he have to?" He did not have to; He created it because He wanted us so bad! He went ahead with creation because He could not stand being apart from us. Look up at the beautiful stars inlaid in the sky, or look through a telescope at the fifty billion known galaxies, each filled with around forty billion stars. God spun the galaxies and stars so that we would look up and feel drawn to Him. The stars in the night sky have your name written on them; this wonderful creation was created for *you* because God insanely and passionately desires you! Paul makes this clear,

Long before [God] laid down earth's foundations, he had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of his love, to be made whole and holy by his love. Long, long ago he decided to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. (What pleasure he took in planning this!) He wanted us to enter into the celebration of his lavish gift-giving by the hand of his beloved Son. – Ephesians 1:3-6

How long have you wanted intimacy with God? A few days? A few months? A decade? God has desired intimacy with you even before the creation of atoms and molecules and the Animal Kingdom. All of creation points to God *and* to His desire of being intimate with you. All of creation is a message: enjoy Me! Be intimate with Me! God didn't stop the wooing once He created the Heavens and the Earth, by the way. While creation certainly is enough to make us desire intimacy with God, God's passion for us is too strong to lay off. All through the Old Testament we see, even through the thick layers of around 660 laws, God's hunger for intimacy with the people of Israel.

Just explore the Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Malachi. God's message is clear; it is a message of sadness, hope, excitement, then sadness again. God desires intimacy with the people, but they keep turning away. He promises to forgive them of their sin if they just return to Him. They follow for a little while, and God loves it. But they turn away again, pursuing alien gods and sex-and-religion games. God is horrified and saddened; yet instead of just murdering every one of them as the Law declared should be done, He promised to forgive them again and again, but they always turned away, and He was back at square one with them. The prophet of Malachi goes silent and then there is nothing for four hundred years.

Has God abandoned us? Has He said, "It's no use – I can never be intimate with them. I am just going to give up now." No. Hundreds of years later, a man comes out of Galilee, sinless and preaching a message of a new life of intimacy with God and a new community made up of those

who are intimate with God. He breaks the barrier of sin and allows everyone, if they truly desire it, to become intimate with God in a real and satiable way. Christ opens the door to intimacy and God is smiling; even Christ is joyful as He is tortured and killed, because He knows that as He takes on the sins of everyone, the door to intimacy is ripped off the hinges and now you and I can experience intimacy with the Triune God. Christ's message to intimacy is clear when He declares, "The first commandments is to love God with all you are." It is not a call to service but to passionate, unbridled, insane love; and the Cross makes that love possible.

God is not satisfied with senseless obedience; He wants intimacy and will settle *only* for intimacy. When we read the scriptures and see them as a do-the-right-thing, say-the-right-thing declaration, we are blinded and miss the full truth and revelation given to us by God. It is a revelation of a seeming impossibility becoming real and possible: the Creator of the Universe hungry to be intimate with us! Any reading that divorces this intimacy divorces the truth of the Gospel and becomes a false religion all on its own. God is not satisfied with us just going to church, reading our Bibles, and raising our hands in worship: He wants all of us, for only with all of us – all our hearts, minds, strengths and souls – can intimacy be found, and intimacy is what He is after. Nothing else we do makes Him sing songs of joy over us.

I can't stand your religious meetings. I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions. I want nothing to do with your religious projects, your pretentious slogans and goals. I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes, your public demonstrations and image making. I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music. When was the last time you sang to *me*? - Amos 5:21-23

Quit your worship charades. I can't stand your trivial religious games. Monthly conferences, weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more! Meetings for this, meetings for that. I hate them! You've worn me out! I'm sick of your religion, religion, religion, while you go right on sinning. When you put on your next prayer-performance, I'll be looking the other way. No matter how long or loud or often you pray, I'll not be listening. - Isaiah 1:13-14

These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their hearts aren't in it. They act like they're worshipping me, but they don't mean it. They just use me as a cover for teaching whatever suits their fancy. - Matthew 15:8-9

## V

### The Beauty of the Cross

If we continue to believe that the Cross happened *only* for the forgiveness of sin, we are still deceived. Did Christ's sacrifice on the Cross forgive us of our sins? Absolutely yes! But the Cross finds itself a key player in a bigger and much more awe-inspiring drama, a drama many of us have turned our eyes from or not known about. When we look at the story of the Cross in its full light we discover quite a different and much more amazing story than many of us have been taught!

"Heads up! The days are coming when I'll set up a new plan for dealing with Israel and Judah. I'll throw out the old plan I set up with their ancestors when I led them by the hand out of Egypt. They didn't keep their part of the bargain, so I looked away and let it go. This new plan I'm making with Israel isn't going to be written on paper, isn't going to be chiseled in stone; this time I'm writing out the plans *in* them, carving it on the lining of their hearts. I'll be their God, they'll be *m* people. They won't go to school to learn about me, or buy a book called *God in Five Easy Lessons*. They'll all get to know me firsthand, the little and the big, the small and the great. They'll get to know me by being kindly forgiven, with the

slate of their sins forever wiped clean.” By coming up with a new plan, the new covenant between God and his people, God put the old plan on the shelf. And there it stays, gathering dust. – Hebrews 8-13

Christ ushered in a New Covenant, and His sacrifice sealed it for all eternity. As a blood offering is needed for the forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22), in the Old Testament intimacy with God was not something to be realized by many. Only a few came to know God on a personal and intimate level, and we know these people by the names of Noah, Moses, Solomon and David. Were these guys perfect? No – when David sinned, God turned His back on him until David pleaded forgiveness. Why was intimacy so hard to find in the Old Testament? It all has to do with the sin-barrier. The poorest people could only make one sacrifice a year to forgive them of their sins, and if they sinned after that sacrifice, they were pretty much unable to be intimate with God until the sacrifice next year, unless God personally initiated the intimacy with them. With nearly 660 Old Testament laws, including ones that could happen at any given moment (laws against lust and greed, for instance), it was impossible to keep intimate with God after the sacrifices.

Sin’s effect on intimacy with God is huge; “Look! Listen! God’s arm is not amputated – he can still save. God’s ears are not stopped up – he can still hear. There’s nothing wrong with God; the wrong is in *you*. Your wrongheaded lives caused the split between you and God. Your sins got between you so that he doesn’t hear.” (Isaiah 59:1-2) When there is sin in our lives, we cannot be intimate with God. The punishment for sin, after all, is spiritual death: no intimate connection with God. This is what God really wants, intimacy with us, so He decides His Son will make it happen.

Christ says in John 14, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one gets to the Father except through Me.” Jesus is saying, “Intimacy with God can only happen through me. I am the Way to intimacy with God, I am the absolute Truth, and the only way to really live life – intimacy with God! – is found in me!” How can Christ make such an insane statement? The answer is the Cross.

Throughout the New Testament, Christ is called the Temple. In Old Testament times, priests could only be intimate with God when they stepped into the Temple, for it was holy ground. Only then could they lay themselves bare before God and pour out their heart to Him, and only then would God come down and walk amongst them (as a general rule). When they left the Temple, it was back into a world full of pain and suffering. Christ’s death brought on a new era, signified by the Temple veil being ripped in two when he died. Not only could anyone go into the Temple, but the holy ground of the Temple spread all over the earth! Now we can be intimate with God wherever we are, in whatever circumstances we are in, and have full confidence that God is walking amongst us, crying when we cry, laughing when we laugh, enjoying life alongside us.

The Cross did not simply enable the forgiveness of sins; it also broke the rules of the Old Testament Temple. When we could not be intimate with God because of our sins, now, despite screw-ups and hang-ups, Christ forgives us, and we can be intimate with God when we are dressed in godly sorrow for our sins. When we could only experience intimacy with God within the Temple, we are in a new Temple, the Temple of Christ, and because of Him, intimacy can be experienced everywhere and anytime. The Cross is not simply a fire-insurance plan, but a doorway to genuine intimacy with God. It’s simply beautiful.

## VI Experiencing Intimacy With God

The original attaining intimacy with God is not difficult; it is developing the intimacy through spiritual disciplines, bathing in God, discipleship (Chapter Five), and trials and tribulations that is often tough. To truly develop intimacy takes time and effort, both on your side and God’s side, but the initial step, the first time we say, “Okay, God, I want to be intimate with You,” and when we first begin to taste the immaculate sweetness of intimacy with Him, is easy. God has made it easy



so that no one can have the excuse, “It’s too hard.” He desperately wants us and isn’t going to make things hard for us.

One of modernity’s drawbacks is turning everything into a formula for success. In this section, for lack of a better word, attaining intimacy with God will be considered a process. I hesitate to use this word because it may be read as a quick-fix formula for intimacy with God, or a cheap way to buy a ticket to Heaven. We can go through all of the motions of attaining intimacy with God, but if our hearts – if the fiber of our beings – are detached, we will not experience intimacy with God. The heart is the center of intimacy: God’s heart and our heart intertwining. When God’s heart longs, and our heart replies with longing, we can attain intimacy by entering the route God has laid out for us.

This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son.  
And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone  
can have a whole and lasting life. – John 3:16

This is not a theological love. It is not a grit-your-teeth-and-deal-with-your-creation love. It is not a I’m-God-so-I-have-to-love-you-because-it’s-the-rules love. This is a passionate, romantic, eternal love, a beautiful love, a song on the lips of the Creator. Our names make His heart quicken, our laughter sends shivers of joy down His spine. He delights in us to the point of singing songs of joy over us. Christ came so that those who love God in the same passionate, romantic and eternal way can experience true belief in Christ. Belief as it is most often used in the New Testament is not a head-knowledge belief, such as knowing  $3+7=10$  or the capitol of the United States is Washington, D.C. This belief is a personal belief, but much more, an intimate belief. Christ is saying that all those who passionately, romantically and eternally love God are delivered from destruction and delivered to life through intimate connection with God. But how do we take the ‘first steps’ to this intimacy?

We have to passionately, romantically and eternally love God. If we serve God out of anything other than love, it is empty and meaningless. If we do it out of obligation, or because it’s the career we’ve chosen, or simply because we find it interesting or think it’s a happy and nice philosophy, it doesn’t count for jack-squat in God’s eyes. What counts in God’s eyes is whether or not we truly, authentically, genuinely love Him for Him – not for His blessings or eternal life or security, but because we know He is beautiful and real and we love Him for being who He is. We cannot attain intimacy if we do not love God; intimacy between friends and spouses develops because of a *love* for each other. It’s no different with God.

Distress that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.  
– 2 Corinthians 7:10

The way things are, however, rules out simply loving God as the route to intimacy. If I love a girl across the street, or think I love a girl across the street, but I never approach her or “bump into” her, I will never be able to experience intimacy with her. We must meet God as well. Before we are intimate with God, not only must we love God, but we also must experience godly sorrow. We have godly sorrow when we are truly sorry for the sin we’ve done, for the wickedness we committed. Everyone is sorry about some things when caught, but how many are sorry when no one but he or she and God knows? Godly sorrow means we are sorry for what we’ve done even if no other mortal knows about it. Godly sorrow leads us to life, for it leads us to repentance. The sorrow existing only when caught is ephemeral; the act will no doubt repeat, with no sorrow experienced again until caught once more; it is a vicious cycle.

Repentance is an uneasy concept and we have nowhere near enough room in this book to touch on it. Repentance is simply turning away from our sins, putting our back to them and walking away. Is it easy? No. We’ll have a rough time doing it, and will probably mess up a few times. The

beginning is always the hardest, but if we can fight for a few months and win, the battles tend to get easier and God's grace helps us out more and more.

Some people have the crooked idea that repentance is simply a feeling in the heart and not an action in life; this thinking is flawed because if repentance is real inside the heart, the life will reveal it. This popular line is a cover-up for Christians who do not want to give up their sin or, for the life of them, are unable to. Repentance is essential in attaining intimacy with God and in developing intimacy with God; we can practice all the spiritual disciplines we want and try to bathe in God, but if we have sin in our life we haven't forsaken and abandoned, it results in nothing. Yet if we love God and repent, but don't really mean it, it is worthless, too.

Say the welcoming word to God—"Jesus is my Master!"—embracing, body and soul, God's work of doing in us what he did in raising Jesus from the dead. That's it. You're not "doing" anything; you're calling out to God, trusting him to do it for you. That's salvation. With your whole being you embrace God setting things right, and then you say it, right and loud, "God has set everything right between him and me!" - Romans 10:9

Not only is belief and repentance emphasized, but confession that Christ is Master and Savior is emphasized as well. The word of faith that is being preached is Christ; in this letter, St. Paul is saying that when Christ is near to us, even in our mouth and in our heart, then salvation is at hand. Salvation, therefore, isn't something we do, but something Christ does for us. We believe unto righteousness; this says that the righteousness that grants us eternal life comes not from our own actions but from Christ's righteousness. But that does not mean we are to remain stagnant and apathetic; no, when Christ is near us, so we must act. When we confess that Christ is Master and Savior, it means much more than we imagine it to mean; nowadays anyone can and will confess themselves as Christians and pledge allegiance to Christ, even if they don't really mean it. At the time when St. Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, for the Jews to actually confess Christ as Lord and Savior was to commit yourself to Christ and almost throw away your Jewish life; it was a huge deal, greatly emphasized by the fact that Jewish families of Jews who became Christians would often have funerals for the convert, acting as if he or she were dead. To be a Christian was, in many ways, an emotional death sentence; at the least, it meant you were ready to live a very uncomfortable life; becoming a Christian divided families and friendships and spilt lots of tears; many believe St. Paul lost his wife over his dedication to Christ. In ancient times, no one would confess (or be baptized) if they were not serious, so we must be serious. Confession doesn't simply mean running our mouth in tune to five syllables; it is making a serious statement that you are dedicated to Christ no matter what may happen. It is us saying, "Yes, I am a lifelong disciple of Christ, and I really mean it."

That is what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it's like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we're going in our new grace-sovereign country. - Romans 6:3-5

Baptism is a symbol of our new and intimate union with God and we are commanded to be baptized by Christ. Unfortunately, many Christians are divided on this issue; some say it is essential to salvation and some say it is not. I have many great friends on either side who are intimate with God. I will not take any side on this issue, but will instead lay bare the facts: throughout the New Testament, baptism is associated with salvation. Christ commands all who are intimate with Him to be baptized. Regardless of whether or not one believes that baptism is essential to salvation, there is no reason for him or her to refuse to be baptized.

Intimacy with God is attained through sincerely and really loving Him for Him, repenting of our sins, and being serious about developing intimacy with Him. This is the "process" of attaining intimacy with God; developing the intimacy takes a lifetime, and at first may look impossible; but

rest assured, it *is* possible. Now we will explore what a life of cultivated intimacy with God really looks like.

## VII What Cultivated Intimacy Looks Like

No one abuses his own body, does he? No, he feeds and pampers it. That's how Christ treats us, the church, since we are part of his body. And this is why a man leaves father and mother and cherishes his wife. No longer two, they become "one flesh". This is a huge mystery, and I don't pretend to understand it all. What is clearest to me is the way Christ treats the church. And this provides a good picture of how each husband is to treat his wife, loving himself in loving her, and how each wife is to honor her husband. – Ephesians 5:29-33

God has given us a beautiful picture of what intimacy with Him is like, and it is to be found in marriage. Unfortunately, marriage is not as noble as it once was; anyone can get married on a dime to whomever they please, and many marriages end up in broken families and bruised hearts. A lot of the treasure of marriage has been lost with the modern-times. However, there are still many excellent pictures of how marriage should exist, and when we look at these marriages and those in the marriage, we see something different; a sparkle in their eyes, a jump in their step, a little bit more laughter and joy. Sometimes we as Christians forget the whole marriage aspect of our union with God and turn it into duty or plain service; the way to tell whether or not one has experienced genuine intimacy is, as we've stated, by a changed life, *and* by the way one live – does he or she live in constant, unbroken touch with love for God, others and creation, and live in a joy that is almost unearthly?

When we explore marriage on human terms, we catch glimpses of marriage with God – we are enabled to see what cultivated intimacy with the Creator looks like in daily life. The core that we've been preaching, the core Christ preached, is love. An intimate marriage cannot exist without love; if there is no love, affairs and divorces become commonplace. The same holds true with our intimacy with God; if we do not have honest-to-God love and passion for God, we will end up as spiritual sluts running to and fro in a swamp of sin, or we will get a divorce and break away from God completely. Love is essential; intimacy with God simply cannot exist without it!

In marriage, husbands and wives spend time together. This is where the spiritual disciplines such as worship and prayer and study come into play. A husband and wife spend time together by going out to spaghetti restaurants, grilling out, reading books by a fire, cuddling up on the couch. In the past years, spending time with God has taken a tragic plunge; we view it in the wrong light. We've begun to see it as a chore, a duty, simply a stepping stone to spiritual formation, when it is not. God created the avenues of spiritual disciplines so he can interact with us, not because He had to. This tells us that He genuinely wants to spend time with us more than we want to spend time with Him! God is knocking at our door, and hearing no answer, slipping a letter under the door. We open the letter and find a stenciled heart painted in with crayon and He's asking us to worship Him, talk to Him, study His words. Is it not clear? Husbands and wives who are intimate with one another love and adore dates and go on them often; God is asking us on a date, and every time we spend time with Him, it is not a chore but God holding a flower out to us and us taking it in our hands.

Intimate husbands and wives do not put veils over their emotions; instead they lay them bare. If we are intimate with God, we will understand that God is not some overly-powerful zealot with a sword in His hand ready to strike down anyone who says the wrong word. We understand that while He *is* immeasurably powerful and while He *does* carry a sword, He is our Lover, and He loves us to death. We are His children; only an evil Lover and Father would slay His own children. God is not evil; He is the supreme good, the supreme holiness, and He treats His beloved children with love, compassion, grace, mercy and understanding. It is okay for us to lay bare our

emotions; we need to tell God how we feel and talk to Him out of our emotions. If we are angry, we ought to express that; sad, express that. Happy, express that, too. God, too, expresses His emotions to us and invites us into His emotions as we invite Him into ours. Christ often pulled friends together and expressed His emotions, inviting them into His and entering into theirs. God laughs with us, dances with us, cries with us, yells with us, and we laugh with Him, share in His joy, and weep with Him. God comforts us, and we comfort Him.

Intimacy with God will consume us. Marriage is not a casual, flippant, I-guess-we-can decision; it becomes the focus of life, it becomes something that is meant to exist for the rest of the husband and wife's life. Marriage involves dedication to the point of changing the course of the rest your natural life. Once more, why would it be any different from intimacy with God? We cannot box up our God-focused intimacy, we can't compartmentalize it, we can't try to put it on the sidelines or only visit it a few days a week or even a few times a day. If our intimacy is authentic, we will understand that it is not a formula or set of principles to abide by, but an interactive and dynamic interaction and connection with the King of the Galaxies; knowing the sheer immensity of intimacy with the Creator, how in the world can we think that 10 per cent of our lives will "cut the check?" Dedication accompanies intimacy, but it is not a grudging dedication, but one founded in love and excitement; our life will change not because we feel we have to make it change, but for the life of us, we want it to change and see no other way. This is what intimacy does to us.

How can intimacy exist without communication? It cannot. Phones ring, mouths run, e-mails and voice messages run haywire. Couples who are intimately devoted to one another cannot *stand* even a day away. Our own emotions and spiritual disciplines serve as our communication with God; as couples communicate and interact, so God invites us up into a conversational intimacy with Him, where we speak and He listens, and He speaks and we listen. This does not happen only in prayer, nor only in the spiritual disciplines, but can happen anywhere and in an almost unstoppable myriad of ways. God does not confine His voice to the Bible or spiritual disciplines. A conversational relationship will develop in the life of one intimate with God. As husbands and wives get anxious when away from each other, so we, too, if unable to participate in one-on-one dates with God, will begin to get itchy feet and a staggering heartbeat. Communication, more so than the other spiritual disciplines, is essential to intimacy.

You would be served a grand injustice if this section ended here with no mention of humanity's favorite three-letter-word. Certainly it has been abused, twisted, screwed up, and even shamed. The downward spiral of morality in our culture has promised that things are only going to get worse, and God echoes this prophecy in the Old and New Testaments. Sex is an enigma and it always has been. For centuries, sex has been worshipped, deified, and even today it is an idol, gathering worshippers who make sacrifices to it through pornography, masturbation, sleeping around, and prostitution. Even the natural way of doing sex – the straight way – has been thrown on the rocks as gay and lesbian sex rises. What is it that arouses us? Is it the sight of the human body naked and bare? Yes, this is nice. But there is so much more to sex; in High School Health they teach you, "Sex is more emotional than physical," and the teenagers scoff and say, "Yeah, right," but when we have girlfriends or boyfriends or husbands and wives, we discover that the sex really *is* a lot better and we struggle to find out why.

Sex was designed for married couples; to participate in sex outside marriage is to profane God's gift by twisting it to wicked desires. No way around that. The Health teacher is right *and* wrong: it is more *something*, but not emotional. The word she is looking for is *spiritual*, but you can't say that in High School. Sex is a spiritual gift given to us by a wonderful Creator; what makes sex so wonderful for those intimate with one another is that we can explore each other, discover each other, ravish on one another, get inside one another, become one, and enjoy one another in ways you can't in regular, walk-the-Mall and ride-the-bus life. And sex, once again, is but a mirror of our intimacy with God.

God is romantic. He desires us to explore Him, discover Him, ravish on Him, get inside Him in a very real way, become one with Him, and enjoy Him in the daily life. He shows this to us through

sex. This does not mean that we masturbate over a Bible. Sex is a *symbol* of something greater, something really quite wonderful, and if we experience it with God, it will not be sex as we know it. In our intimacy with God, God calls us to explore Him, to discover Him in intimate ways, to ravish on Him, enter into Him, become one with Him in the sense that while we are still separate, a part of us fills the hole in His existence that only we can fill, and He conforms us to His will and desire and allows us to truly, believe it or not, *live*. But it's not just *us* playing the active role; even though He is omniscient, God still desires to explore our lives, to discover us at the core of our beings, to ravish on us, enter into us, become one with us. This can happen on an individual or social level. Because God is all-knowing, does it know that He cannot explore and discover us and enjoy it at the same time? No; a husband may know very well what his wife's taste like, but he is always eager to explore them and discover them again.

Do not be fooled; we will not always experience the joy of intimacy with God. This happens because of many reasons. We are still sinful, we still mess up, and that sin, while not creating a barrier against God, will push God away; we push God away as we sin. We live in a crooked, wicked, fallen world where intimacy with God is not given a second-thought; the world will not help us in our quest for developing intimacy, but rather, it will do its best to keep our mind off it and keep us away from it. Also, if we begin relying on the joy or blessings instead of relying on God, God will often take away the joy and blessings; not because He is mean, but because He is jealous that we are flirting with His gifts instead of with Him. It is the frustrated wife taking the sports car away from her husband so that he will return to her, or it may even be the wife not calling her husband one night to see if he really loves her, or if it's just a show. Sometimes God will step back to test our real love; the way we come out of these dark moments of the soul reflects whether or not we are truly intimate with God.

All husbands and wives go through troubled times and troubled waters. We will never completely understand God's will, we'll probably think He's being too crazy or wild half the time, and we will often be frustrated with God or even mad at Him. At times we may even feel abandoned or forsaken and no amount of Bible verses helps to remove that feeling; only His gentle whisper and quiet touch will soothe us. We must let these emotions not pull us away from Him, but draw us deeper. We must let these dark moments of the soul lead us to deeper intimacy with Him. Just because we are not experiencing the intimacy for a time does not mean the intimacy isn't there; in fact, it could very well be growing stronger.

## VIII

### The Effect Of Sin On Intimacy With God

Because of the cross, sin is no longer a barrier to intimacy with God. This does *not* mean that intimacy can be great while we sin as we please. Some people try to use the Cross this way, but in their misunderstanding, they miss out on the beauty of intimacy. When we say there is no longer a barrier because of sin, we mean that even when we are wading in sin, God still hears us, still longs for us, and still promises to save us if we call out His name with passion and desire. The Cross means that the avenue to intimacy with God is open and our sins are forgiven; but if this means that sin continued in our lives has no impact on our intimacy with God, why is repentance so important? A theology of "cheap grace" – you're forgiven and God loves you so much, just sin as you please and He'll take care of the bill – is filled with holes, one of them being the absence of repentance. Christ's own preaching of repentance – "Go and sin no more!" – shows that sin itself does *something* to intimacy, even if it doesn't completely rule it out (in most cases); but what is this "something"?

When we sin, we push God away. Our intimacy weakens. When we sin, we are pulling at the old way of life, a life disconnected from God, and therefore God gives us space. Let's be honest here – none of us will ever be completely free of sin. We will always mess up, make mistakes, do dumb things, and hurt others. God is giving us a Spirit Nature, but the Sinful/Human Nature still exists. When driven by godly sorrow we confess our sins to God and He forgives us. God knows

that as we are molded into creatures of His liking, we will still sin and fall short of the way life is really meant to be lived. But this is no excuse to keep on sinning; we should be adamant about avoiding sin and be serious about repentance. Notice I have referred to sinning as messing up and making mistakes; if we sin on purpose, it is not a mistake. When we are intimate with God, we genuinely desire to lead a life of intimacy, a life of conformity and obedience. But we *will* mess up. And God is quick to save.

There arises the question of iniquity. Iniquity as a biblical term is set apart from the sins we “fall into.” Iniquity sins are sins we struggle with and fight against on a daily basis. As a general rule, everyone has them. Weak spots in our spiritual fabric where it takes all our muscles to fight battles. In Christians, iniquity is often dealt as a secret sin and discussed in accountability groups. When we fight iniquity we are showing that we pursue intimacy, and when intimacy with God is the driving point of the battles, the power of the King rests on our side. Iniquity sins make up the lifestyle sins, as described in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the Kingdom of God. – New King James Version

The sins Paul lists are lifestyle sins; we know drunkards as alcoholics, and fornicators as those who let sexual urges run their life. Thieves, obviously, live a lifestyle of stealing, and the same holds true with extortioners. Paul is saying that those who have lifestyles of sin have no part in intimacy with God. Does this mean that if we become drunk one day that we’re banned from intimacy? No. If we have premarital sex once or have an affair once, does this mean intimacy is completely stripped away from us? No. Sure, intimacy will be hurt by our sin, but it will not be killed. However, if we have a lifestyle of drunkenness, if we have a lifestyle of premarital sex or masturbation, then intimacy is not a reality for us. We all struggle with different sins that are trying to take over as a lifestyle; we must fight with all we are and cry out to God for His help.

Living in sin as a lifestyle prohibits intimacy with God, and spontaneous sin, or mess-ups as we’ve been referring to them as, all injure and hurt our intimacy with God. Many great men and women intimate with God have experienced the brutal tears intimacy experiences with sin, and the effect these tears have on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual life. David is a prime example: he lived in an intimate relationship with God, then he dove into rape and murder; the intimacy did not utterly break apart, because he had not become a rapist or murderer. However, the intimacy *did* take a blow, and God punished David for his disobedience. It took a while for the intimacy to build back up, during which David experienced more than enough godly sorrow and a lot of God’s wrath.

## IX Walking the Narrow Way

Don’t look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don’t fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life – to God! – is vigorous and requires total attention. – Matthew 7:13-14

Enter by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it. – Matthew 7:13-14, New King James Version

Of all those claiming religious affiliation, half claims to be Christian. In the world of mathematics, half means the majority. This vividly clashes with Christ’s words in Matthew 7, where he says very

few actually *find* the road to life. We are left with two clear and distinct options: either Jesus is wrong, or most of those claiming themselves as Christians, for lack of a better word, aren't. So which is it? Jesus Christ is the most brilliant human being who ever walked the earth, so I think we should give Him the benefit of the doubt.

*The Message* translation of this verse, while losing some of the blatancy found in the New King James Version, shows us where the tide of this epidemic stems from. A simple drive through America will reveal thousands of churches preaching surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time (to quote Eugene Peterson). America has become victim to a sway of false teachings, false doctrines, that turn the gospel into sin management, remove the truth of repentance, and even erase the whole part about lifelong discipleship to God. Many people think they are saved because they simply believe in God, but the demons believe in God, too, even more-so than many of us, so where does just believing He exists help us?

We must look at the entirety of the American church – and even the world church – and ask ourselves, honestly, “How many of us are displaying the trademarks of intimacy with God? How many of us have repented or are genuinely repenting? How many of us are conforming to Christ? How many of us are really loving God and loving others?” The answer is horrific and shoved under the red carpet at most churches: “Not many. In fact, hardly any at all!” Oh, they’re out there. But they’re outnumbered by those who just put on the Christian name, think God is on their side, and live lives of unawareness, totally ignorant of their true condition. They’re outnumbered by those who live lives of duty and service to God, rooted in legalism or apathy to God, thinking they love God when, really, they don’t – and they blind themselves to the hole they’re in!

No surprise; the most brilliant guy to ever inhabit creation, remember, prophesied this. It’s as if He saw our condition, all the false gospels and false doctrines, and was telling us that things would not always be as they were going to be in the Early Church. He very well could’ve; after all, He was God, and He *did* prophesy many things that came true, such as Jerusalem falling to the Romans in 70 A.D. He gives us another prophesy as well, a prophesy telling us what will happen when those who think they’re “in” with God when they really aren’t stand before God on Judgment Day. We find those who were never intimate with God, even though they may have desired it, wondering why God is tossing them out when they did all the right stuff, went to church every Sunday, and tithed. God gives His answer at the end and it is eerily prophetic.

Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, “Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?” And then I [Christ] will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.”

- Matthew 7:21-23, New King James Version

This is not a theological statement as much as it is a historical truth; a day is coming when *this* day, Judgment Day, will *be* history, and all who’ve ever walked the earth will find themselves in one of two places: the New Heavens and New Earth, or Hell. This day will come, and when it happens, many will be denied entrance to the New Heavens and New Earth; they will be shocked, saying to Christ, “Are you crazy? Look at how spiritual I was! Look at all I did for you!” But Christ, perhaps with a tear in His eye or a sword in His hand (probably the latter), will say, “In all your life, you never understood. It was about *Me*. Intimacy with *Me*. That’s the bottom line. Now get away from Me, for you and I were never personally intimate with one another.” The cost of not being intimate with God is huge; it is Hell. God’s will is that we be intimate with Him – if we do not do His will, as Christ said, we cannot expect to live eternally in paradise.

## X

### Death For Those Intimate With God

All scripture in this section is New King James Version unless otherwise noted

Death has been on the mantelpiece of society for what seems forever. Every religion addresses death in a familiar way, trying to suave the fear of its impending arrival. Television shows and movies attack the question of death constantly. Books have been written on this very subject. The fascination with death did not escape Shakespeare, who in his play *Hamlet* expounded on the mystery of what lies on the 'other side'; Shakespeare says it is this mystery that holds so many grounded in their lives despite the worst situations. Every child fears death, and it is erroneous to assume this fear vanishes as we get older. Perhaps it fades or finds a little place in the back of our minds to rest, but it will inevitably come crashing back to the forefront of our minds with the death of a loved one or the violent passing of a close friend. All illusions about our separation from death became smashed on the rocks when we stand beside open – or closed – caskets. We are fearful of what death will be like, and what – if anything – rests on the other side.

The early Christians who flourished when the letters of the New Testament were being written did not display the same hesitant fear that we display today. In fact, the early Christians seemed to be flippant about death! When one reads through almost any letter, while we may grimace at the acts of persecution the author writes about, we cannot help but feel uneasy by the fact that the early Christians simply did not seem to care about death at all! Early Christians would readily go to martyrdom at the stake or cross, even kissing the instrument they would die upon; in the Roman arenas, Christians would smile as they were killed by gladiators or by loosed lions. If we really stop to think, the accounts of their deaths do not truly bother us as much as the way they are so carefree about it. It bothers us because we secretly fear death, we are afraid we will lose out on life or are afraid it will hurt. We see death as the end, and society's portrayal of it has not helped the situation. We are bothered by the early Christians' laxness about death because it is nearly opposite the way we feel about death.

Paul the Apostle writes in Philippians, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." (Phil. 1:21) Many have tried to 'theologize' his words, turning them into principles for happiness instead of really seeing what Paul was saying, and that is that Paul was eager to physically die. Any opponents to this truth will be left dumbfounded when, a few verses later, Paul says, "I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better." (v. 23) Paul was certainly more than eager to simply 'pass on' into the 'next life.' The fact that Philippians is one of Paul's more joyous letters complicates the situation; how can someone be so joyful and talk about death in such a way, as Philippians is his last letter right before he was executed? It is because Paul, as well as the early Christians, really understood the truths about death. We have lost some of the true meaning to Jesus Christ's words over the ages due to the process of translating, but the early Christians had *heard him speak* and knew full well what he said regarding death.

The Christ says, "Most assuredly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he shall never see death... If anyone keeps My word he shall never taste death." (John 8:51,52) A more literal translation of this verse reads, "I assure you, most solemnly I tell you, if anyone observes My teaching [lives in accordance with My message, keeps My word], he will by no means ever see and experience death... If a man keeps My word, he will never taste of death into all eternity." (Amplified Bible) Christ says elsewhere in the Gospel of John, "Whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." (11:26) Jesus Christ is clearly saying, "All who believe in Me will never see – I promise you, they won't even get a *taste* – of death. They will never experience death." Here is the point that the early Christians knew so well: death is not an issue with those intimate with Christ and God. We will never die. What we know as death (the ending of our existence, brutally fast or painfully slow) will never happen to us. God simply won't allow us to go through that; we will never cease to exist and not even death can alter that.

In another letter, Paul describes Jesus Christ as being the One who "has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel." (2 Tim 1:10) Death has been completely abolished; it has been eliminated, closed down, eradicated, gotten rid of – at least for those who



believe! Death as an agent that ends our earthly existence and begins our heavenly existence is no more, and in a sense, may never have been. The life we now have as the persons we now are will continue and continue uninterrupted in the universe in which we now exist. Death is not a barrier to the flow of our lives; really, it simply brings to a 'higher level' of existence, heralds us into a newer and truer reality. The early Christians understood this and they understood it well; only with such promises tied around their belt could they do so well, so bravely, so courageously in front of the jaws of death. They knew they had nothing to fear at all, and neither do we.

Yet what will death be like? Forget all those silly ideas you have about the world growing dark and color fading into black-and-white. Death as we see it in the New Testament is quite different. Our greatest insight into what death is like can be seen in the martyrdom of Stephen found in Acts chapter 7, verses 54 through 60. Stephen has been accused of blasphemy and has been brought before the high priest to defend himself. Stephen only digs his hole deeper, but he doesn't care. He knows what will happen to him, and no doubt he is not surprised when he is condemned to be stoned. Right before his death, Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing in the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!'" (v. 55-56) Stephen was not being given a last-minute revelation; instead, as his death quickly approached, he saw the world come alive with a newer and truer reality. Things he had not noticed before became apparent. There is no abrupt ending of one life and a sudden beginning of another; as the time of our passages nears completion, we see and taste and smell and experience things we normally don't experience, and these experiences are the underscores of a deeper reality. As we are immersed in this truer truth we have gone from a clouded death to a vibrant, brilliant life! Stephen's time of passage was beginning, and slowly and slowly he was drawn deeper and deeper into it until he would be fully passed. He would not die as we know it, but simply pass through one life into another without ever losing who he was. His train of thought and conscious would not have abandoned him or have been lost. He did not feel pain as we know it but probably felt pleasure, *intense* pleasure, as he was immersed in this truer reality.

We see more of this truer reality throughout the Bible, such as when Moses' face glowed with fire, and when the faces of New Testament characters glowed as well. On the Mount of Transfiguration we see Jesus Christ, radiant with glory, communicating with Moses and Elijah; Moses and Elijah did not just drop out of heaven, but the three disciples with Christ had their eyes opened to a newer and truer reality, one that was existing alongside them but until that moment they had been unable to see. When Elijah prays for Elisha's eyes to be opened, Elisha sees a multitude of angelic chariots and horses protecting them from the enemy; the chariots and horses were nothing new, had been there all along, but Elisha had not had the sense to notice. The fact that the 'dead' are literally among us is a biblical truth, brought into full light in Hebrews 12:1, when the author mentions that "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." Those who have put their faith and trust in Christ have not died and been laid in the ground; they have taken up new bodies and are truly moving about around us, just like the angels!

This idea of 'passage' instead of a sudden ending and beginning not only stands firm in scripture, but is upheld by many instances of near-death experiences. Those who 'suffer' near-death experiences talk about bright light surrounding them and seeing things they didn't think could possibly be real. Dying men and women who have truly believed in Jesus Christ have spoken to those around them at their time of passage and spoken of angels surrounding them; a relative of mine reached up to her husband with an empty palm and said, "Here, it's a piece of an angel!" She was not fantasizing or hallucinating; the 'piece of an angel' truly rested in her hand. Her senses were being revamped to include the new surroundings of a newer life, a newer and truer reality. Her husband did not see the piece of the angel nor the angel itself because he was not passing, and therefore his senses were not being tuned into this truer reality. The moment she drew her last breath, she had completely integrated into the realer reality.

Christ promises that He will return and draw us into Heaven when our time comes. Once again, we often try to theologize what this means, but the meaning is explicitly clear. When those of us

who are intimate with Him are passing for sure, Christ comes to us, and we see Him, and He fills us with peace and joy, takes our hand, and draws us into Paradise.

As you may remember, two questions regarding death haunt us: what is it like and what lies on the 'other side'? We have already discovered what death might be like, but what are we to expect on the other side? A general fear is that heaven will be a constant church-service, and this is feared because church services have a tendency to be boring. We don't have to worry, though, because heaven won't be boring. Jesus calls heaven a paradise as he is hanging on the cross. (Luke 23:43) In heaven there will be no depression, no sadness, no boredom; it will be exciting, relaxing, enjoyable. We will experience joy and laughter and good times. Heaven will be fun and we will be happy. It isn't going to be in the clouds, either. The perfected heaven is a completely new universe: new stars and planets, new galaxies and black holes; new plants and animals, new waterfalls and oceans and jungles and rivers. Heaven really will be exciting.

A final issue to dredge up is, "What about those people who don't believe in Christ?" Death as we've seen it – a passage into a brighter and truer life – is not what unbelievers will experience. Death to them will probably be much as we fear it, and that is sudden. It will pounce upon them, brutally and savagely, or waste them away, sucking their life from them. They probably won't 'pass,' but will 'fall asleep'. They will exist in a 'dormant' state until they are resurrected from the dead to be condemned. Their final destination is not like heaven at all. It is the epicenter of all heartache and heartbreak, the wellspring of sorrow and depression; there will be no drunken or wild parties in Hell; Hell is solitary confinement for eternity. It isn't a joyous party, and it certainly is *not* better than spending eternity swimming in the sunshine with dolphins or cruising the galaxies with the angels.

We who believe in Christ must not fear death. All by itself, fear of death will put a damper on our enjoyment of life as it is now. It will confine us to be risk-free creatures who spend our better days trying not to fall off a ladder. We will be fearful of what tomorrow might bring and will find it hard to really trust God to keep us 'safe'; and let's remember, God may take us *out of the world* as a reward! It's hard for us to understand with the way we've been programmed to regard death, but death itself is a gift. No wonder Paul longed for it as if it were some delicious prize, and no wonder Jesus was excited about His 'returning to the Father' throughout most of His ministry. When Jesus weeps in John 11, He is not weeping because His friend is gone, but because no one understands what death truly is: a gift! Every time Christ raised people from the dead, a great revival started. So why wouldn't He just raise people from the dead everywhere? It is because He understood that for those who put their trust in God, death is not a punishment, but a gift! He probably felt bad stealing those people away from paradise; perhaps those people He rescued spent the rest of their human lives in depression because they had been taken away from such a beautiful and wonderful destination! Just as Christ saw that death was not something to be feared but to be embraced (when the time for death naturally came, mind you; no room for suicide), we, too, must see that death is not the enemy, but the rite of passage into our true homes. And what a wonderful homecoming celebration it will be for all of us!

## XI

### The Conclusion Of Intimacy With God

Intimacy with God does not leave when we die. God refuses to let those who are intimate with Him to cease to exist. We will never die as we know death to be. Most of us imagine Heaven to be an eternal church service in the clouds, with angels strumming harps and us wearing white gowns, holding gold-paged hymn booklets and singing forever and ever. Nothing is wrong with hymns or golden booklets, but let's be honest: most of us cringe at this idea of Heaven. The result is that we don't really *want* Heaven, and we feel shameful about it, because it is what God is giving to us. The conclusion of intimacy with God is *more* intimacy with God; we will be able to walk and talk with Christ in Heaven, and do it in a real, physical way. We need to look at what Heaven will really be like for those who are intimate with God.

God invites us to intimacy with Him and intimacy with others. Heaven is the culmination of this intimacy. Finally we will have the most full and real intimacy with God, the kind of intimacy Christ and God share. We will also be totally intimate with other people. When we refer to intimacy with others, we do not mean giant orgies. Intimacy is not sex. Sex is a special intimacy for marriage and marriage alone. Intimacy with others is marked with personal love towards each other, a genuine interest in others' lives, and a simple joy of living life together. All those awkward moments experienced on earth between two people will be the past; we will be able to connect in deeper ways than ever before. We will also be intimate with creation.

Imagining the eternal Heaven as a never-ending church service forgets that God has promised to create a new heavens and a new earth. Our universe will be burnt away; whether this is through fire or through natural disasters or another way, it *will* happen. Our universe will fall apart and the earth will be virtually eaten through. It won't be too happy for anyone living in that time period. But God is going to do something amazing. He is going to re-spin and re-create the heavens and the earth, making them more beautiful than we've ever dreamed. This world we live in is but a decrepit shadow of the life to come for those who are intimate with God. To put this truth into words is hard; I always imagine that as we look into the sky now, all we see are stars and the moon, but on the new earth, perhaps we will look up and see all the planets, see swirling galaxies and nebula clouds. Everything will be brighter, better, and filled with joy. No more death or sorrow or crying or pain. Heaven will be where you – and I – are standing. Except it will be totally, immeasurably different than earth is now.

In this new creation, with the rivers and mountains, forests and wildflowers, galaxies and planets and burning stars, with all the ancient and modern animals, we miss out on the most beautiful part of the New Heavens and New Earth. We will live in this wonderful place in intimate relationships with the Creator and our brothers and sisters. We will be able to swim with the dolphins with Christ at our side, paddle a canoe down the Amazon with Jesus leading the way, or explore the universe with Christ giving out pointers as to where to look for the most amazing a breath-taking discoveries. We will know intimacy with God in a way that is hard to imagine. We will also be intimate with others: bonfires with great friends, playing guitar in the wilderness under a blanket of stars, banquets and feasts and laughter that cannot be held back.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *A Serious Call to a Holy Life*

The command "Be ye perfect" is not idealistic gas. Nor is it a command to do the impossible. He is going to make us into creatures that can obey that command.

- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

#### I

### The Apparent Failure of Life Change

As a small group leader and teacher, I realize that I've spent a lot of time talking about having to get over the lust and porn (a big deal if you're a guy) or jealousy or gossip (if you're a girl). But how many times have I just sat down with everyone, and said, "Look. We're never going to get anywhere with this if we don't go beneath the skin." Not a lot. How many times have I asked them, "Whatever happened to loving others? Whatever happened to not being judgmental and condemning? Whatever happened to forgiveness and mercy and grace? Whatever happened to selflessness and sacrifice? Whatever happened to repentance?" I think we'd all just look at one another. Because every one of us, as a general rule, has a tendency to be mean and selfish, judgmental and hypocritical, back-biting and vengeful. We treat others like scum and make fun of them and reject them or despise them, we are judgmental and condemning, we hold grudges and exact revenge and don't know what grace is all about. We're all ME, ME, ME and hoard everything we own. It is really sad.

This ought to be a major concern for everyone claiming allegiance to Christ, because we aren't really going anywhere. We're not making much progress. Who we were at baptism is who we are now, for the most part: we haven't grown up! We still yell at people we don't like, we still hate others, we're still mean and we still back-stab. It is really sad. One kid at a student Bible Study made a good point of this when, at a small group, after reading Galatians 5:19-21, he eloquently noted, "That's every one of us in this room."

Why can't we get anywhere? Why haven't we changed? How come we are just forced to look at one another with stupid gazes when reading such ancient texts as Galatians 5:22-6:10 or 1 Corinthians 13? I just want to know how to express this to people to make them care as much as I do. The desire to change is in every one of us, at least to some degree, but this desire in and of itself is not enough to bring the change about. We are stranded on a rock in the middle of a lake, staring at our reflection in the water, wanting to swim to the far shore, but not knowing how.

The old saying is not too farfetched: "You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink." As an author I cannot convince anyone of the need for life change. I cannot make them feel such deep concern as I over the lack of change in mainstream Christianity. Only God can do that. Most people reach a period of life-examination sometime in their life, but the catalysts and causes for it are unknown till it is upon them. One can only hope and pray that God will work in that period and reveal the deep need for life change when one calls himself or herself a Christian.

#### II

### Why Change is so Lacking

One might wonder – and does well to – "Why aren't Christians changing?" Why isn't the radical life-change that Jesus commands taking root in our ordinary lives? There are many ideas

circulating as to why change is lacking: perhaps we do not desire it, but yet there are many who *do* desire the change but are unable to grasp it; perhaps we do not know how to go about the change, and certainly this is an admirable reason, not unlike being stuck in the ocean beside a raft with no idea how to get on. These play a part, no doubt, but it can be said that if we desire it strongly enough and we are determined enough, we can discover the 'how' behind it all, and eventually will climb into the raft. It is not my belief that the reason we do not change is because we do not desire nor because we do not know how; not primarily, at least. I believe the key reason behind the failure for the majority of Christians to be so 'unlike Christ' lies in our intent.

William Law writes, "...If you will here stop and ask yourselves why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it... [T]he reason why you see no real mortification or self-denial, no eminent charity, no profound humility, no heavenly affection, no true contempt of the world, no Christian meekness, no sincere zeal, no eminent piety in the common lives of Christians, is this: because they do not so much as intend to be exact and exemplary in these virtues."

I have sat around with Christian friends and we have discussed what it means to be a 'new creation.' We have talked about 'putting on the character of Christ' and 'loving one another as we love God.' And after giving a discourse and enjoying discussion on what it means to 'love thy neighbor,' we have stood, and I have beheld with a dropping heart and immense sorrow those who were so adamant and involved in the discourse and discussion, cutting others down and mocking one another in malicious intent. I have seen many such things, such hypocrisy to the nth degree, and I do not believe I must go on to convince you that it is in the *lack of intent* that the reason for true change occurs. Even if we know all the right answers and we know what it means to change, if we do not intend for that to be a reality in our own lives, nothing will happen. It is God's gift of free will.

### III An Unholy Conspiracy

It is common word around lots of [Christian] circles that if we don't shape into people who are like Christ, there may not be anything to worry about. After all, we're all sinners just saved by grace, we're all on a journey together, it's human nature to mess up. All those things Jesus said, all those things the New Testament authors said, about not getting involved in sin, about changing who we are, none of that really matters, because we've been saved by God's grace. If a church is full of people with sins they don't want to get rid of, or full of people who don't want to become like Christ, that's okay, because the church is a hospital of sinners. You know what, if you don't change, that's okay; you don't have to change. Sure, change would be great. But Jesus loves you just as you are and you don't have to go that extra mile if you don't want to!

These are things said - and worse yet, believed - by many Christians. Not surprising, many of these Christians are Christians who have *not* changed, Christians who have not put on the character of Christ, Christians who have pretty much disregarded the parts of the Bible commanding life change. I have opened up the Bible, and I just can't rest in the belief that it's "okay" to sit Jesus on the back-burner. It is obvious Jesus did not think this way. He says, "Give me all or give me nothing." I think it is some unholy conspiracy to believe that there's nothing wrong at all for a Christian to refuse to change, or a Christian to not care about change. I have seen it a lot, and it really hurts me deep inside, because I know life-change is essential to the Message. After all, didn't Jesus come to usher in a new way of life - union with God in our ordinary lives (Kingdom)? - and to bring about new communities comprised of those who are living out that union with God?

Let me ask you this: if someone says they're a Christian, but who they are doesn't change after their reunion with God through Jesus' sacrifice, are they really Christians? If they say they are

Christians but do not show any signs of change (none of us will ever be perfect; in the same breath, we won't be stagnant in our maturity, either) - are they really Christians? Because the *meaning* behind Christian is "Christ-like" or "like-Christ", are we really Christians if we aren't, God forbid, anything *like* Jesus?

## IV

### Contrasting the Good Tree and the Bad Tree

It is when our hearts are bent into submission to the sinful nature that our lives reap bad fruit, the fruit of death. You can tell whether or not a tree is bad by looking at the fruit it produces – Jesus told us this. Why have we begun to imagine anything differently? It makes sense, doesn't it, that if our lives are full of back-stabbing and vengeance, meanness and hostility, selfishness and jealousy, we are a bad tree? Does it not make sense that if the lives we live are underscored with sex on the brain, wasting hours on the latest craze to seduce us, if we're hateful and argumentative and angry all the time, then we are bad trees? Is it unreasonable that if we're drunks and perverts, ultra-competitive, driven by divide-and-conquer, dying inside every time someone else makes it – is it unreasonable, then, to assume that the tree is bad? Simply look at the fruit and you can see – if the fruit is rotten, the tree is bad. If you don't believe me, read Galatians 5:19-21 for yourself. It is sad to say, but the majority of the Christians have not changed; the majority of us model what has been said above. It is as Gandhi said: "I love your Christ. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

What, then, does a good tree look like? A good tree models the Sermon on the Mount – not an exposition on new laws to be added to our lives, but what someone who lives in the Kingdom of God really looks like, without effort. Good trees give off good fruit; they are loving and alive, sparkling and radiant, calm and not pushy, generous with money, time and people, always ready to help. It hurts to see someone else hurting and it is unbearable to hurt another – physically, mentally, emotionally or spiritually. Good trees do not double-cross others, do not lose their cool, aren't in trouble with the governmental authority.

None of this comes because you force it into your life; any application of this as laws will undoubtedly fail. A good tree is only good because its roots are anchored right – anchored in the Son. Then they will draw nourishment from God and the tree will naturally grow into a good tree, feeding off the Spirit. Here lies one of the greatest errors in our thinking regarding spiritual transformation: we think we have to force ourselves to transform, when really the attributes of the Good Tree will invade our lives and become second-nature to us; but only if our roots are anchored correctly. In the same breath, if our roots are not anchored right – and no matter what we may say or think can alter where we have truly placed the roots – then it will be seen: our roots will draw up brackish water and our lives will be dark cesspools whose fruits are radiant only of evil, and we are not in any way like Christ, even if we stamp the name *Christian* onto our cars and sleeves.

## V

### The Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees

So many of us [Christians] are subscribers to the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees without even knowing it. We hear that phrase, "Righteousness of the Scribes and Pharisees," and we imagine the bottom-line being hypocrisy. But at this time, Jesus wasn't too big on the hypocrisy: that didn't come until later. And can we really believe that all Pharisees and scribes were corrupt and hypocritical? No, of course not! That's like assuming that all priests are child-molesters just because a tiny few are (and a sad thing, too). So what *is* the righteousness of the scribe and Pharisee, if it isn't hypocrisy?

The scribes and Pharisees, even the most devout and holy, made following God all about

keeping the law, not about becoming the kind of person whose deeds naturally conform to the law. A lot of times, in our Christian circles and in our churches, at our prayer meetings and our small groups, we surf the wave that says, "Keep the law and you are righteous." No, no, no! The law won't make us righteous! Instead we need to be saying, "Become the kind of people God wants - to be like Christ, to be new creations (this is what matters) - and then following the Law will come naturally. We are made righteous in Christ."

If we get away from the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, and really understand- and pursue - this new reality of not so much 'doing stuff for God,' but 'being someone for God,' is it unreasonable to assume that our lives on a whole will be changed? Is it unreasonable to assume that keeping the law will become second-nature to us? Is it unreasonable that, in pursuing and attaining this righteousness of Christ, we will find that we are obeying the Law without too much effort? Is it unreasonable to believe that we will become the kind of people the Bible talks about when describing the children of God? Is it unreasonable that we will become the kind of person who is patient, kind, free of jealousy, and so on if we pursue intimacy with Christ instead of just keeping the Law to the letter?

## VI The Creation of a New Nature

Paul tells us that it is neither circumcision nor uncircumcision that matters, but the creation of the new nature. It is essential that we explore the meaning behind what he said. When we refer to what someone will automatically do, we call it his or her nature. Selfishness, they say, is basic human nature. In other New Testament passages, the authors go into detail on the nature of sinful man: we have the bad fruit of the bad tree coming to light in such passages. In other passages, the Spirit Nature, or New Nature, is given a detailed description, and this is the good fruit of the good tree. By using the word nature, we acknowledge that it is not something we so much *choose to do*, but something we *automatically are* in our daily lives. So whenever someone is selfish, we say, "He couldn't help it – it's human nature." When we are locked in the sinful nature, we cannot help it but to live lives highlighted by bad fruit. When we become new creations – when we become owners of a new nature – we cannot help but to live life in the Kingdom as God would desire us to live – and how God originally fashioned us to live.

Paul brings the reality of the sinful nature and the spirit nature to par in his letter to the Romans. Chapter Seven finds the pen striking a remorseful tone as he dwells on the sinful nature within him and the sin that resides there. He speaks of how he wants to do what is right, but cannot, and how he wishes *not* to do what is wrong, but feels powerless not to. I have oft returned to these words in moments of frailty after succumbing to sin, looking to identify with one of the greatest followers of Christ in written history; yet whenever I continued down his laments, I was startled by the break in the sorrow and the exuberance with which he penned: "Who shall deliver me [from my sinful nature]? Thanks be to Jesus Christ our Lord – He is the answer!" The answer to deliverance from the sinful nature is found in Jesus Christ. I stumbled over this verse for so long, wondering how Jesus was the answer, wondering what I was missing (remember, these words became rote for me whenever I caved in to sin), wondering why the Answer wasn't so evident in my life. Now I understand what Paul is saying: The answer that Jesus Christ gives is simply a changing of our nature, a changing of our instincts; we will be conformed to the instincts and nature of Christ and the sinful nature, inevitably, will lose its power over our lives.

What counts, then, is whether or not our natures have been changed by Jesus Christ. In the sinful nature, what came naturally was, obviously, sin and its counterparts and the attributes of a life lived apart from God. In the new nature – the new creation fashioned after the nature of Christ, fashioned as how God originally intended life to be lived – we find that instead of sin and its counterparts coming naturally to us, the holy life – the life built upon God and interaction with God in our daily lives (for this is Kingdom) – comes naturally to us. Where before we had to work to be good, in the new nature we will have to work to be bad. Where we had to work to do good deeds,

we will have to work to commit sin. As holiness is, in many ways, alien and foreign to us now, so evil and all its subdivisions will be alien and foreign to us when our natures are changed.

It is when our nature is changed that our lives are changed – Jesus' words make sense and we look at the Sermon on the Mount and exclaim, perhaps with surprise, "Hey, that's me!" It is the same for all the other great texts exemplifying the attributes of a new character: we will say, "Look! He's writing about me!" And when our eyes lay upon those texts detailing the sinful nature, we will wonder how anyone could act that way or be that way, and find it completely unbelievable that anyone could live life apart from intimacy and interaction with God.

## VII The James Enigma

St. Paul tells us in his letter to Christ's disciples in Ephesus:

"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast." – Ephesians 2:8-9 (KJV)

It is evident what Paul is telling the Ephesians. Through their faith, God's grace—nothing they deserve, as it is a gift from God—saves them. Grace brings salvation. Works, Paul is saying, does not merit salvation, and works has no role in the saving of a person. If works *did* have a role, we would be able to walk around, strutting our stuff, showing others that we're saved by the things we do and the things we've done. Paul tells us, "No. That's not the way it works." But, later on in the New Testament, the blood-brother of Christ, James, writes:

"Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone." – James 2:17 (KJV)

So now we have a disagreement on our hands. It looks like these two scriptures are in conflict with each other, so either Paul is right (it is through faith we are saved by grace) or James is right (it is through works we are saved). At least, that's how it looks upon first glance. Actually, these two men are showing us two *different* aspects of salvation. Paul is telling us that we are saved by grace through faith and that works doesn't make salvation ours. James is saying that our salvation is *shown* by our works, not that we are saved by them. To make it clearer, let's look at these verses in a more modern translation:

"Now God has shown us where he wants us, with all the time in this world and the next to shower grace and kindness upon us in Christ Jesus. Saving is all his idea, and all his work. All we do is trust him enough to let him do it. It's God's gift from start to finish! We don't play the major role. If we did, we'd probably go around bragging that we'd done the whole thing! No, we neither make nor save ourselves. God does both the making and saving. He creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing." – Ephesians 2:7-20 (the Message)

"Dear friends, do you think you'll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, 'Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!' and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soap—where does that get you? Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?" – James 2:14-17 (the Message)

"You can no more show me your works apart from your faith than I can show you my faith apart from my works. Faith and works, works and faith, fit together hand in glove." – James 2:18 (the Message)



“Do I hear you professing to believe in the one and only God, but then observe you complacently sitting back as if you had done something wonderful? That’s just great. Demons do that, but what good does it do them? Use your heads! Do you suppose for a minute that you can cut faith and works in two and not end up with a corpse on your hands?” – James 2:19-20 (the Message)

How do we fit all of this together? How do we (accurately) mesh James and Paul’s words to give us a grand masterpiece-view of how salvation and works fit together? Digging through these texts, we discover several important things. First, we are not saved by works. Only Christ saves us by His grace. Second, we cannot be saved if we do not have works. Third, God redeems us so we can join Him in the work He does.

Works plays absolutely *no* roles in our actually being reunited with God. When we refer to works, we refer to good deeds and such. Our good deeds are made hollow by our rotten sinfulness and the sinful deeds we commit everyday. We have no way of being reunited with God because we are so totally filthy with sin. If God made perfection an avenue to salvation, two things would happen. First, no one would be saved. Perfection is impossible on human terms. Second, if anyone defied impossibility and was perfect on his or her accord, they would certainly boast to others, “Look what I did that God had to save me.” Of course, that situation can never occur because of how deeply sinful we all are. So God knows works can never do anything for us. He knows us inside-and-out. As we know, salvation comes from putting our faith—our trust—in Christ and Christ alone. When we first trust Christ—*really* trust Him—Christ saves us by His grace. We are saved by grace, we are saved by Christ. Nothing we *did* made it happen for us. *God* did everything.

But does that mean we can go on sinning? No. Works comes into play. Think of it like a reverse equation. In Kindergarten we learn that  $2+2=4$ . Now, consider that 4 is salvation. The 2 involves, for the sake of clarity, our obedience to Christ and our crucifying of sin. So salvation equals our repentance (the combination of obeying Christ and crucifying sin because we have a change in heart towards sin), and in repentance good works flows. So it is *because* of our salvation that we do the good works we do. It is *because* of salvation that we are made able to obey Christ, and even want to obey Christ; it is *because* of salvation that we are driven to crucify the sinful nature and parade the Spirit-nature. We don’t do it *for* salvation. It’s *because* of salvation.

When James says, “God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense,” he is criticizing all those people who say that we don’t have to follow Christ to be saved. He is criticizing them because they take a biblical truth (works does not equal salvation) and twist it around to mean something it doesn’t (works has no role in the life of salvation; works don’t initiate salvation, but if the salvation is real, works will follow). These people say repentance doesn’t matter because grace covers the bill; what they don’t understand is that repentance is a natural side-effect of genuine salvation. Our salvation is shown to be authentic or fake by whether or not we have repentant hearts that lead to repentant lives. Works don’t save us; but, and Christ agrees, works are a good gauge of our intimacy with God (and an excellent gauge of whether we’re redeemed or not!).

In fact, Paul was referring to works when he said, “[God] creates each of us by Christ Jesus to join him in the work he does, the good work he has gotten ready for us to do, work we had better be doing.” In other words, it is in God’s plan that we who are redeemed will follow Christ (discipleship) and become the people who can be accurately called the Children of God, people who easily and joyfully perform the “good works” God designed for us to do.

## VIII The Children of God

The creation of a new nature does not come from our own determination. True, we *must* be determined to change – for if determination is absent, then intention is absent. Without intention, no one will get anywhere. It can be said – and accurately so – that one reason many of those who profess fellowship with Christ do not exhibit the extremity and depth of discipleship and life change that Jesus advocates is simply because they do not intend on that change becoming a reality in their own lives. They would much rather have Christ on the outside, but keep Him from the inside. But even the most hard-edged and determined soul will get nowhere – except caught in the bonds of legalism – if God is not involved in a pursuit of life-change. For we cannot change ourselves; it is an unfortunate side-effect of our own rebellion against God. Coming from the womb we are indebted to the sinful nature, and we cannot escape that sinful nature without God's divine touch and guidance. God will often perform the removal of our sinful nature and the replacement of the godly nature by means of spiritual disciplines – meditation, study, fasting, worship, etc.

Just as your outer appearance is the result of genetics between your mother and father (hence you are a son of man), so the creation of a new nature is the result of divine genetics from our Triune God. We are called the children of God not because they are pretty words (for they have deep meaning), but because the new *us* – ourselves as found overcome with a new nature – comes from the divine genetics of God. As I am a child to my biological parents, so I am a child to God; as my parents passed on some of them to me, so God breathes His life into me. The truth is simple to grasp: we who have been changed are called children of God because God Himself has imparted Himself upon us. He has worked in the deepest corners of our beings, even in the regions of our existence that we cannot reach, and he has changed, rewired, and completely redone us. It is a process, to be sure, but we come to realize that it is not something we did (though we intended and desired it), but it is something *God* did. So we stake our claim as children of God and it means something concrete and real.

When we call ourselves *Children of God*, we are acknowledging that *who we are* has changed; who God is has become part of who we are. We are not God, but we belong to God in an intimate and connected way. Knowing this, we can look at the scriptural expositions on the make-up of the children of God (examples we've been referring to are the Sermon on the Mount, 1 Corinthians 13, and Galatians 5:22-6:10) and understand that the attitudes, personalities, and attributes that become second-nature in the new creation are precisely the ways that God is on the inside! We begin to understand that God is loving and patient and kind, and as God breathes Himself into us, so we begin to find ourselves divorcing the sinful nature for a nature whose outsourcing involves loving and patience and kindness. In becoming new creations with new natures, we are not simply just picking up on a new way of living, but we are living life as God would live it (and has and does live it) in our day-to-day lives. The Sermon on the Mount, 1 Corinthians 13, and Galatians 5:22-6:10 are windows into the being of God, and as God imparts a new creation onto us, we step into the window beside God, and we can say with certainty we are like Christ. We are truly *Christians*.

## IX

### The Heart of the Children

A fear shared by many regarding life-change is the unspoken, "If I change, won't life be [gulp] *boring*?" This fear is present because we have a skewed idea of life-change; remember, it is not so much giving up the pleasures of life, but instead accepting the true pleasures of life found only in intimacy with God. We do not realize that by living life the way God designed life to be lived, we are living life to the fullest. We imagine how this can be true: how can a life without premarital sex, drug highs, euphoric drunkenness or pornography be life lived to the fullest? We are blinded to the inner complexes of sin: paranoia, depression, emptiness, sorrow, worry. This is a ploy of the Evil One: magnify the little pleasures of sin, make them look huge and monstrous, and blind us to the horrible effects of sin on one's own soul. The Evil One also tries to convince us (and, to some degree, succeeds) that life lived God's way is no life at all. But when we live life the way

God designed it to be lived, we find that the short burst of pleasure found in sex, drugs, drunkenness and masturbation are an easy price to pay for real joy in life, actual peace and security, and finally *enjoying* life, finally being clean, and knowing that not only does God love you and protect you, but that He is also “on your side,” He favors you, He will let no great harm come to you.

When we discover intimacy with God and live out of that, we discover the heart of the Father – a heart of joy and happiness, enjoyment and vivacity, a heart of *life*. The heart of the Father consumes us and we will birth a habit of living a life of continual praise. Any idea that the heart of a true disciple is one of strictness, ever-present gravity, and unforgiving pleasure-denying, is an idea that has no founding whatsoever in the abundant, rich and flavorful heart of God.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Discipleship: Becoming Christ's Apprentices*

"Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly." - Jesus the Christ, Matthew 11:29-30

#### I

### A Great Misunderstanding

Some things Jesus said always bothered me, and I made mental highlights to try and find out how his words worked out with the theology I'd been taught, a theology of 'cheap grace.' A theology that says Jesus' message is simply one of, *Accept Me as your Personal Savior and you will be fine*. A theology that, ultimately, is flawed. I wonder how, looking back, I could have ever believed such a thing; how I could have believed that all Jesus desired of me was to say a few words, be dunked in water, and wait for Heaven. The plain and simple truth is that, were you to set aside everything you know about the Christian faith, and just pour yourself into the Gospels, you would not find a message of 'personal acceptance of a personal Savior.' If you skip over every other verse in the letters of the New Testaments, you *might* get something close to 'cheap grace' – do whatever you want, it's okay, Jesus paid the bill at Calvary. Two days ago, during church gathering, a woman stood up and said, "No matter how much we sin, no matter what we do, God continually forgives us." I shook my head. She may be right in many aspects, but the *message sent* is everything but true: the message sent is one saying, Christianity is accepting Christ so you can be forgiven of all the crap in your life that you did, are doing, and plan to do; and if you feel a little grateful, maybe you can visit a homeless shelter or two. Jesus never says anything of the sort. His message is vividly different.

Jesus' words often stir up our hearts in ways that are uncomfortable; His words are offensive, and we find ourselves offended because it is as if the Christ is personally assaulting us. He makes many statements that do not flow well with the whole 'accept the Savior and everything is golden' theology: *Why do you call me, "Lord, Lord" and don't do what I say?* and *However you judge others, in that way you will be judged* and *If you do not forgive your brother, your Heavenly Father will not forgive you*. Jesus' message of salvation is completely different: *Follow Me*. And then, *Take up your Cross and follow me, Give up all you have and follow me, and Drop all you have and follow me*. Nothing about passive belief, nothing about taking a day or two out of the week to go to church. Jesus looks us in the eyes, amidst our world of school and work and family and friends, and His message is clear: *Abandon everything and follow me*.

The great misunderstanding is that we don't think discipleship is a big deal. As far as disciples go, we can name off the Famous 12. However, the 12 were simply the beginning. Jesus calls you and me to discipleship – and He means it when He says it's the only way to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, now and into eternity. Passive obedience, casual belief, flippant morality won't get us anywhere. It is hardcore discipleship that is the key, the answer, and it is the message of Christ. It is sad and unfortunate that so few are disciples; it is a terrible thing that many think themselves to be disciples when they really aren't, and some think they aren't disciples when they truly are. We must make the truth be known: the truth that Jesus' call is one for discipleship and through discipleship, intimacy with the Triune God, and if we do not answer

the call, we are far from the realm of the Kingdom of God. It is offensive, to be sure, but if you thoroughly search the Gospels, you find it is true.

There are many who would challenge this idea of discipleship being Jesus' message for salvation, not simply saying a prayer and accepting Christ into your life. As evidence they would point to many individuals who hold to the cheap grace doctrine, individuals who are obviously living in the Kingdom. Let us not forget that while one may hold false doctrines, he or she can still be a disciple – even if he or she doesn't know that he or she is! Even though one may see discipleship as a 'step above' or even something for the 'super-Christian', that does not exclude him or her from discipleship. And if you look at those who believe in cheap grace and yet are living in the Kingdom, you see that they are disciples, even while not contending with cheap grace theology, and so the Kingdom is alive and well within them.

In the words of Dallas Willard in *The Divine Conspiracy*, "Non-discipleship is the elephant in the church." It is walking around, huge and unavoidable, but we turn our eyes from it. We ignore it, sleight it, accept it – and God forbid, color it up to be something good! "It is a fundamental negative reality," Willard continues, "that most Christians are failing to be disciples of Jesus." It is even wrongly understood that one does not need to be a life disciple of Jesus in order to be a Christian. Yet in the midst of this confusion and misunderstanding, if you open the leafed pages of the Gospels, Jesus' words are crisp: *Follow Me; be My disciples; be My students; be My apprentices*. Jesus never says, "Simply think that I'm a good person and you'll be fine." He never says, "As long as you say you love Me, you don't have to follow Me – My grace covers it." He says all who believe in Him will be saved – and authentic belief *always* leads to authentic discipleship. One cannot avoid Jesus' message in the Gospels; He says nothing that would lead us to believe that it is okay to avoid discipleship. His message is quite the opposite: *Drop all you have and follow Me*. We cannot avoid His calling. We must say "Yes" or "No" – we have no other grounds. We are not even Christians if we are not disciples; the word Christian was invented to describe the *disciples* of Christ!

## II

### The Presence of the Christ

The key to discipleship is presence with the Christ. Without being present with Christ throughout our lives, life discipleship is impossible. When Jesus calls us to be disciples, He is telling us to become His students and apprentices. For effective learning, a student must be present with the teacher. So we must be present with Christ. A student in a school is apprenticing under the teacher for merely a short time every day, and in that short time the teacher is present; if we are to become life disciples as Jesus calls us to be, we must get beyond the idea that we 'meet' Jesus on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights. As a student is in the presence of his or her teacher throughout the learning, so we must be present with Christ throughout our apprenticeship – which will last a lifetime. Within Christ's presence, we can directly learn from Him how to do all that we do in the manner that He did all that He did.

Unfortunately, Christ is not present with us as He was present with the first disciples. We are not able to walk the hallways with Him, eat at the table with Him, go fishing with Him, and go sailing with Him, as the first disciples were able to. We cannot do any of this – not physically, anyway. But Christ promises He will always be with us. He left the disciples only once, and that was when He was crucified and laid into the earth. He rejoined them shortly after, and before He physically left them, He gave them this promise: *I am with you always, even unto the end of the age!* Yet we cannot see Him; when we wake, we do not see Him sitting in the chair beside our beds, we do not find Him fixing bacon and eggs upstairs, we do not hear the water running as He showers. This can be disheartening; after all, He promised to be with us always, and He is not here. Actually, He is. Just not physically. He is with us in Spirit; we cannot see Him, but He is here, and He is with me as I type this, and if you are reading this as His disciple, He is with you as well.

Christ is present with us through the Holy Spirit, whose names also include *Comforter* and *Strengtheners*. Christ promised His first disciples that a Strengtheners would come when He physically left; this Comforter, the Holy Spirit, is joined with God the Father and Christ the Son in a holy Trinity. Christ promised that all of those who became His disciples would be gifted the Holy Spirit, and this Spirit of Truth is not simply with us, but is *within* us as well. He is the One who will conform us to Christ as our discipleship deepens. He is the One with whom we wake and sleep, we eat and laugh, and we cry and yawn.

We must understand – it is crucial to the rest of discipleship – that Christ's presence through the Holy Spirit is not something to be enjoyed and interacted-with only during Sunday school and Mass. It used to be that way before Christ broke the bond between God and humanity; because of Christ's sacrifice, now we and God can creatively interact with each other in our world, and our world does not consist only of white steeples and Bible studies. In fact, churches as we know them today did not emerge until hundreds of years after Christ. We must understand that Christ is present with us not only in our overly religious activities and zealously religious moments, but also in the mundane: our eating and sleeping and going-to-work life. For in the mundane is where discipleship mostly occurs, as our life is mostly made up of the mundane. And so it makes sense that Christ is present with us in the ordinary ebbs and flows of life. Christ is with us even now – and He is ready to teach us, conform us, and mold us into children of God.

### III

## Discipleship in the Mundane

If we are truly someone's lifetime disciple, then we must be around them for a lifetime. That is why the life-time discipleship Jesus commands is not fulfilled in simply going to church on Sundays or reading our Bibles on Tuesday nights. If we commit a few hours a week to Him, is it discipleship? In no way at all. The discipleship that Christ calls us to is, as has been said, is a life-time discipleship. It takes place 24/7. As it is, most of our lives aren't the most exciting. We work, eat, sleep, pay bills, love our spouses and children, eat ice cream and watch television. One might be at a loss as to how discipleship can possibly occur in such ways; one might be drawn in despair to conclude that the only possible means of being a disciple is to resort to living in a monastic community (nothing is wrong with monastic communities; their zeal and passion is admired and their way of life a treasure). But we misunderstand that it is precisely *in* such mundane details of mundane lives that discipleship mostly occurs. How come it mostly occurs in the mundane? Because our *lives* are mostly mundane.

As disciples, we must ask from sunrise to sunset, from awakening to lying down to sleep, and in between, "How would Christ live my life if he were me?" As we eat our pork chops, drive through downtown, kiss our wives, read the newspaper, type on the computer and sit in university desks, the question must be forefront, driven by a passion for Christ: "How would Jesus live my life if he were me?" How would he drive my car? How would he eat my food? How would he read the newspaper? How would he sit at the university desk? It all seems very foolish upon first glance, but it is this constant way of life – this never-ending mode of learning – that will define who we are. The original 12 disciples weren't only present with Christ at the transfiguration, the crucifixion, the resurrection (the big-deal events), but also in the small-deal events: walking the roads, sleeping in the wilderness, dealing with finances, fishing for a day's meal. It was usually in the mundane, please note, that Christ delivered His most poignant messages to His followers.

When we ask, "How would Jesus live my life if He were me," we must be careful to differentiate from the popular, "What Would Jesus Do?" While its origins are humble and authentic, the *W.W.J.D.* movement has become a dangerous idea that many well-meaning Christians cling to. It focuses on what Jesus would do in certain situations in our lives; it relates to the extraordinary and spectacular events and how Jesus Christ would respond. It leaves out the ordinary. Instead of, "What Would Jesus Do," a better question – yet at the same time, perhaps inadequate – would be, "Who Would Jesus Be?" Who would Jesus be if He were in my position, living my life,

throughout my entire day and entire life? If we are able to become disciples of Christ in the mundane, we will become disciples who simply *are* like Christ, and the *doing* will follow. Discipleship is Christ working in us, through our ordinary days and lives, to transform us into the people He wants us to be – people who are like Him, ultimately His brothers and sisters, and the children of His Father. We must constantly ask, “How can my work, school, church – how can my life? – be a part of the Kingdom [Kingdom is God interacting with human beings in the here and now]?”

## IV The Beauty of Discipleship

Discipleship is beautiful. When flowing from a heart whose goal is God and God alone, it is the highest expression of divine worship. Jesus compares the beauty of discipleship to pearls and treasure in a pair of parables found in Matthew chapter 13.

God’s kingdom is like a treasure hidden in a field for years and then accidentally found by a trespasser. The finder is ecstatic – what a find! – and proceeds to sell everything he owns to raise money and buy that field. (v. 44)

God’s kingdom is like a jewel merchant on the hunt for excellent pearls. Finding one that is flawless, he immediately sells everything he owns and buys it. (v. 45-46)

Each parable expounds on how those who become true disciples realize the great opportunity they’ve discovered in discipleship, how they are overcome with love for Christ and are excited and joyful over their union and discipleship with Christ. They don’t worry about what it will cost them to pursue the One whom they love. In discipleship, intimacy with God is realized, and that intimacy is the road to Kingdom: interacting with God in our daily, mundane lives.

In Luke chapter 9, the Christ reveals the flippant, careless attitude we develop when we become disciples towards those things that don’t matter. When we really understand the opportunity of becoming a disciple, nothing will hold us back – not family, not friends, nothing this world can offer. Everything pales in comparison to embracing heart, mind and soul the Creator of the Cosmos in the undeniably passionate expression of worship known as discipleship.

On the road, someone asked [Jesus] if he could go along. “I’ll go with you, wherever,” he said.

Jesus was curt: “Are you ready to rough it? We’re not staying in the best inns, you know.”

Jesus said to another, “Follow me.”

He said, “Certainly, but first excuse me for a couple of days, please. I have to make arrangements for my father’s funeral.”

Jesus refused. “First things first. Your business is life, not death. And life is urgent: Announce God’s kingdom!”

Then another said, “I’m ready to follow you, Master, but first excuse me while I get things straightened out at home.”

Jesus said, “No procrastination. No backward looks. You can’t put God’s kingdom off till tomorrow. Seize the day.” (v. 57-62)

When we become disciples, we will become fully aware of how beautiful and lovely discipleship truly is. This newfound awareness will permeate our entire being, saturating us completely. It will be true of us what Peter said in his first letter: *Without having seen Him, you love Him; though you do not even now see Him, you believe in Him and exult and thrill with inexpressible, glorious, triumphant and heavenly joy.* We who realize the beauty of discipleship cannot hold back that joy – it will reveal itself in our smiles, our warm countenances, the way we act towards those we love and those we don’t, and the way we treat God’s masterpiece, creation.

## V

## Sin and the Disciple

One thing that has been a stumbling point for many who decide to walk the road of discipleship is the sin in their life. Many lament that they are sinning *more* than before they made the decision! While this may be the case, as those Evil angels set against God will assault us with a new intensity, most of the time it is *not*. God is simply revealing to us the deep-rooted problems in our own life; most acts of sin are offspring from these roots. For instance, masturbation and lust can be seen as an off-shoot for the desire of intimacy gone haywire. So as God reveals to us our sin, we feel we are sinning more, as we are seeing sin in our lives that we never knew existed. We must ask forgiveness and strive hand-in-hand with God to forsake the sin.

When we *do* sin, as disciples we are not to let it kill us. We must persevere. The last chapter of John comes to mind: Peter has betrayed Christ three times, and he is wallowing in his shame; Christ draws him to the side and asks, "Do you love me?" Peter says yes. Three times this happens. But this is not what gets me. At the end of their discussion, Christ blatantly tells Peter, even after he screwed up three times in a row, "Follow me." We, too, must get over our mistakes and further our discipleship.

In John's first letter, he makes it clear that we will never be free from sin, at least not here on a sin-driven earth. He does not excuse sin, but advocates the confession of it. A disciple confesses his sins to God, repentantly and remorsefully, from the heart, thanks Christ for forgiving him and not bashing intimacy on the rocks, and the disciple continues on, doing all he can to avoid sin and do what is right. The next time he sins, he confesses all over again and continues on. Christ's forgiveness cleanses us of our sins and our intimacy continues to deepen (though it does not deepen as quickly as it would were we to avoid sin altogether; sin *does* slow down developing intimacy, and if we harbor sin in our lives without repentance, we will never be able to experience great intimacy with God).

In the same breath, we must acknowledge that sin is not a way of life for the disciple. One cannot bank on forgiveness as a token for sin and claim to be a disciple. We cannot claim to be intimate with Christ if our lives are not revealing it. Indeed, the more and more we are strengthening and deepening in our discipleship, the more and more sin will look ugly and distasteful. So the less and less will we commit sins. If our patterns of sin do not change, or God forbid, even become worse, we need to reexamine our lives and plead for God to reveal to us our faults and give us His graces to overcome the sin. Christ's command, *Be ye perfect*, is not an impossible command or impractical theology: it is a reality for those who are disciples of Him. The more and more we bathe ourselves in God through discipleship, the more and more we come to hate sin and love the good. Being and doing good will become instinctive, for it will become our new way of life. It is not legalism, but Christ working in us to transform us into creatures who can obey His commands. More and more time spent in the presence of the Christ in discipleship, the more and more doing and being good will become to us like driving a car: as we drive, we brake, hit the gas pedal, turn on the blinker and the lights, instinctively, without thought. So those who are disciples of the King will be good and do good instinctively and without thought.

## VI

## Becoming Christ's Apprentices

If we are truly passionate about the Christ and are serious about becoming His lifelong disciples, the next step is simply a question: "How do we do it?"

First, we must *ask*. We must ask God to allow us to see Jesus as he lived and lives, both inside and outside the theological lens. It is not just a pretty idea that Jesus is alive and among us;



whenever we gather together, truly in His Name, He literally walks among us. The first step is, as it should be, a prayer: *Father, show me how Jesus lived and how He lives to this day, so that I may model Him as He is my Master.*

Second, we must center our life upon the Kingdom; everything we do is saturated in Kingdom! We must realize that Jesus' message is not one of simply eternal life in the hereafter, but eternal life starting *now*; as we walk and talk and breathe and laugh and play and work upon this planet, we are pulled into an interactive, dynamic, intimate relationship with God: this is Kingdom! We must bank on this truth – everything we do, in the extraordinary and mundane, is not exempt from Kingdom.

Third, we must get serious about pursuing, studying and conforming to Christ. A lot of Christians pledge discipleship to Jesus Christ but don't even read the Gospels. This is a tragedy and it must be corrected. Perhaps one will initiate this step by spending several hours of prayer before God, or mark it by intense studying of the Gospels. This step is so gravely serious; Christ says that if we are not serious about following Him, we'll never be able to. If we think anyone or anything is more valuable than fellowship with God [except, of course, for God Himself], we cannot possibly be a disciple.

Fourth, we must *decide* to be His student – discipleship is not something we drift into! It begins with a conscious decision to be one.

Fifth, we must *intend* to be Christ's disciple. We can do all of these other steps and even decide to be a disciple, but if we do not truly intend it, we have gotten nowhere. William Law, in *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, says that the reason many Christians have gotten nowhere in their Christian lives is because they've never thoroughly intended to: "If you will stop here and ask yourself why you are not as pious as the primitive Christians were, your own heart will tell you that it is neither through ignorance nor inability, but purely because you never thoroughly intended it."

## VII The Evolution of Discipleship

It is an error to believe that the moment we decide and are intent on becoming disciples, we will be the perfect disciples. It is an error to believe that the intimacy of the greatest disciples will be constantly experienced the first day of discipleship. It is an error to believe that this intimacy will fall into our laps. Indeed, it takes time. Lots of time. A life-time. So now I want to expound on the evolution of discipleship in a disciple's life. In other words, I want to completely flesh-out what life will be modeled after for most who decide to become disciples of the Christ.

Before we even decide to become disciples, before the very idea of discipleship even becomes real to us, we must come to believe in Christ and love God. It is through both this head knowledge and heart knowledge that God will draw us to discipleship, and we will desire to become disciples, and we will pursue discipleship. The moment we decide to become disciples, if we are truly honest in our decision, without any faking or pretending, outer obedience will develop – though it will take much effort at first on our parts – and soon inner conformity to Christ will follow suit. When our inner works are conformed to Christ, our outer works – the good and righteous things we do – will be an expression of what is on the inside, not a grit-your-teeth-and-bear-it obedience. We will now be able to 'do the works of God' – our connectedness, intimacy, and interaction with God will be so real to us that we can call Jesus 'friend' without it being just another pretty word.

As you can see, discipleship is a process. It takes a lot of time and a lot of patience. Even though we will strive to be perfect, we will trip up. We will make mistakes. We will sin. We must pick ourselves up, repent and confess, and continue with our discipleship. The original 12 disciples

were constantly making mistakes; Christ never banished them to Hell; instead He scolded them – lovingly and gently – and urged them to continue on the Narrow Way. We must also realize that our intimacy with God will not just spring into existence one day. It will take time to enrich. As a flower grows from the earth, so does our intimacy – first a small seedling, then it grows roots, and a stalk shoots from the soil; and eventually the flower bursts open in a myriad of aroma and color. Such is the way our intimacy with Christ develops. A disciple must have patience and understanding in these matters.

## VIII The Heart of the Disciple

Friedrich Bonhoeffer wrote in his *The Cost of Discipleship*:

When a man really gives up trying to make something out of himself—a saint, or a converted sinner, ...a righteous or unrighteous man... when in the fullness of tasks, questions, success or ill-hap, experiences and perplexities, a man throws himself into the arms of God... then he wakes with Christ in Gethsemane.

A critical error to be avoided, to be addressed at the end of this chapter, is the idea that discipleship is about discipleship. Discipleship is about Christ and Christ alone. It is a response to Christ, an act of worship to the One True God. When we ‘pursue’ as our utmost goal discipleship or righteousness or sainthood, we are missing the treasure and instead gripping onto the chest, not the treasure *inside* the chest. The aim in discipleship is not to be a ‘good disciple’ – that will happen automatically if our aim is a serious and heart-felt union with God. To aim at being a good disciple is legalism; discipleship is founded in the fires forged by a heart passionate about One and One alone: the Creator.

The disciple is not boring or dull. Instead, ignited by God’s Spirit, he or she is active, alive, flamboyant and joyous, acting foolishly (in the world’s terms) at times, no doubt being labeled weird or odd because of the joy he or she contains. The joy of the disciple is so abundant so as to make him or her look odd or weird or strange, and no doubt many questions will be asked. Indeed, this is the way it ought to be! We must always be ready to give an answer for the joy that is within us: Christ the Liberator! To close off, I draw you to a wonderful scripture, 1 Peter 1:8: “You never saw him, yet you love him. You still don’t see him, yet you trust him—with laughter and singing.”

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Spiritual Transformation: Becoming Like Christ*

#### I

#### A Desire for Change

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of—throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

- C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

There was a time in my life when I would open the Bible and read passages where, for instance, Christ commands life change, and instead of feeling compelled, my spirit found itself assuaged with grief, shame, depression, and mostly helplessness. Helplessness because I so desired to change, I really wanted to depart from the way I was judgmental, mean and self-serving, but I didn't know how. I'd read all the self-help books, and their formulas just didn't work: read your Bible every morning, pray for ten minutes each day, fast on Wednesdays, attend church, and your life will fall into shape. It didn't. I never doubted the radical, spiritual transformation Christ called for was possible. Jesus wouldn't lie, wouldn't feed us crocks to make us lose sleep after good sermons that made us weep over our own problems. He isn't like that. So I never imagined spiritual transformation to be impossible; it was a reality, but I felt like I was stumbling in the darkness, groping at walls, blind to everything. In my journal I wrote, "I feel like I am at the edge of the ocean, just dipping my toes in the cold water, wanting to jump in, but not knowing how to move my legs."

A few months ago, several of my friends and I sat down together and were talking about how followers of Christ are called to become *like Christ*. One of the passages happened to be Galatians 5:19-21 (*the Word on the Street*), where Paul is giving the tell-tale signs of those who don't have any link with Christ:

"If your dark side's in charge, this is you: you're a twisted, filthy old leech, with only sex on the brain. You waste hours on the latest craze to have seduced you, sometimes just worthless, sometimes full-on demonic. You're hateful, argumentative, jealous, angry. You're a drunk, a pervert, all 'me, me, me'. You're an ultra-competitive backstabber, a stirrer, a divide-and-conquer control freak who dies inside every time someone else makes it. Enough? I told you before, people like this aren't part of God's set-up."

An indescribable silence overcame the room, and we all just kind of looked at each other with mopey stares. Finally one of us voiced the millions of broken thoughts running through disjointed minds: "That's everyone in this room." Needless to say, the situation became extremely awkward, and much time passed before we were able to diffuse the discomfort.

While his words weren't the most charming, my friend hit on something with those piercing words: statistics show the majority of Christians' lives are no different than the lives of those who do not cling to the Christian faith. We have been called judgmental, bigoted and brain-washing for good reason: most of us are. Some well-meaning Christians go out, trying with all their might to fix this 'sick, twisted view' of Christianity, but their efforts only dig themselves a deeper, watery grave. Someone I know remarked off-the-cuff, "Christians are mean." We are accused of being the world's class-A hypocrites, because many of us attach our names to the King of love, joy, peace and kindness, and live lives of hatred, judgment, condemnation, and flat-out meanness.

There is a story of a girl who would always approach a Christian class-mate when given the chance, and the two would sit down and talk about life during free time in class. Eventually, the Christian asked her, "I really like you and all, and we're good friends, but I just want to know: how come you always made a point to talk to me?"

The girl, whose nicknames included *slut* and *whore*, said, "Because you're the only Christian I've known who hasn't told me that I'm going to hell because I get around."

He asked, "Christians told you that you're going to hell because of what you're doing?" He knew that we did not go to Hell for what we have done so much as for who-we-are, fallen creatures drenched in the sinful nature. He knew the girl was sinning, but it was not His place to rain judgment upon her.

She said, "How could I ever let myself get into their stuff when they treat me like this? But I heard you were a Christian, and you didn't flat-out condemn me when I told you about my choice lifestyle, and I wanted to get to know you."

The Christian's eyes flared and he said, "I'm so sorry for how people have treated you. It's horrible. They probably think they're doing something great for God, something great for Jesus, but they're only showing how much they don't know about Jesus. Why do I follow Jesus? Because I *love* Him. Why do I love Him? Because He's God? That's the theological answer, but it doesn't work for me. I love Him because of something so much more. I love Him because He stands for *love*, and *compassion*, and *grace* and *forgiveness*. I love Him because he is beautiful in every aspect. I love Him because of who He is. He would never just tell you that you're going to hell. That's not Jesus at all. He would've sat down with you and asked if you wanted real life, His life. A life that is beautiful and wonderful."

He saw the girl's ears tuning in, seriously interested, and he continued: "The disciple John tells a story of a woman who was caught sleeping around, and the *religious* people brought her to Jesus and said, 'Here she is. You know the law. We have to stone her. You okay with that?' Jesus isn't okay with it. He looks them all in the eye and says, 'Fine. Stone her... But let he who hasn't sinned throw the first stone.' And He knelt down in the dirt, writing in it with His finger. I wonder what he wrote. Maybe he wrote, *It's okay*, to the woman. Or He wrote out all the different sins of the religious leaders. Or maybe He drew a cross, a prophecy of His sacrifice. Or maybe He was just scribbling, showing how nonchalant He was about it all. Who knows? But what I do know is that the religious people left the scene. Jesus looks up to the woman and asks, 'Where are your accusers?' She answers Him, 'They're gone.' Jesus didn't accuse her, didn't judge her, didn't condemn her. He gently tells her, perhaps touching her face, stroking beaten cheeks, 'They didn't condemn you, and neither do I. I forgive you. Now go, and sin no more.'" The story comes from John 8:1-11.

The girl was smiling at the story. The boy said, "You see, Jesus is loving and gracious and forgiving. It's really sad how so many Christians think they're God's greatest gift to mankind, when, really, they're living in a way that isn't even in the *shadow* of Christ's life. Gandhi said, 'I like your Christ, but I don't like your Christians. Your Christians are nothing like your Christ.' He's right."

This story shows how an ‘outsider’ might look on the inside and see nothing but garbage. How an ‘outsider’ will seek the love of Christ, and find the condemnation of Christians. Look around in most churches and you will find modern-day Pharisees filling the pews, laughing it up, singing the songs and drinking their coffee, oblivious to the dark path they’re walking:

“You’re hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You keep meticulous account books, tithing on every nickel and dime you get, but on the meat of God’s Law, things like fairness and compassion and commitment—the absolute basics!—you carelessly take it or leave it. Careful bookkeeping is commendable, but the basics are required. Do you have any idea how silly you look, writing a life story that’s wrong from start to finish, nitpicking over commas and semicolons?” – Matthew 23:23-24

Perhaps we ought to spend less time talking about how horrible it is to smoke pot and get drunk and have premarital sex (though these are wrong), and spend more time just loving everyone even if they’re high, even if they’re drunk, even if we catch them screwing three door’s down. Maybe we should stop throwing out the titles *sluts* and *whores* and *criminals* and instead see them as the lost children of God, sheep without a shepherd, and instead of flat-out condemning them, we tell them about their Father who desperately loves them, we have mercy and compassion, have grace on them and show forgiveness. After all, doesn’t Christ say, “If you don’t forgive, you won’t be forgiven?”

Having been met with the fall-out of discipleship, a consensus rings the stadium: *we want to change*. The desire to really change, to become people who are radiant with God’s love, who are distinct in this world in a tangible way to human eyes, is deep inside us, in the core of our beings, for those who eagerly pursue God. A friend told me as we sipped coffee in a local bookstore, “I want to be a good Christian. I really do. But it’s really hard. I just don’t know what to do.”

When asked, “How do you want to change?”, most of us simply don’t know the answer. We don’t know how to really change, to change on the inside of the cup, so that the outside will naturally sparkle. We don’t really know what happens in spiritual transformation, and we don’t even know what is being transformed. This is the first bridge we must cross on our way to a full understanding of (and living out of) true spiritual change through the Spirit of God in our lives.

## II

### What About Us Needs To Change?

What must change about us? Everything. It is an error to think that change means simply doing our life differently. Becoming like Christ does not involve just doing what Christ does. It isn’t just changing the way we move about in our world. It’s so much deeper than that. Becoming like Christ isn’t about avoiding drugs and alcohol and sex, the big High School no-no’s, it’s not about going to church more often, tithing a little bit more, or holding open the door for women at restaurants. As we emerge from the womb, we are infested with a sinful nature. The sinful nature has dominance in our lives until we turn to Christ and follow Him; then the sinful nature is replaced by a Spirit nature. In becoming like Christ, we mean crucifying the old, sinful nature and living and growing out of the new, Spirit nature. He calls us, in other words, not to change what we do, but who we are. If we just change what we do, we have not changed as Christ calls us to change. The Pharisees only changed their outsides and Christ condemned them for their hypocrisy:

“You’re hopeless, you religion scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You burnish the surface of your cups and bowls so they sparkle in the sun, while the insides are maggoty with your greed and gluttony. Stupid Pharisee! Scour the insides, and

then the gleaming surface will mean something.” – Matthew 23:25-26, *the Message*

And then again,

“You’re hopeless, you religious scholars and Pharisees! Frauds! You’re like manicured grave plots, grass clipped and the flowers bright, but six feet down it’s all rotting bones and worm-eaten flesh. People look at you and think you’re saints, but beneath the skin you’re total frauds.” – Matthew 23:27-28, *the Message*

Christ is condemning the Pharisees for their hypocrisy, but it is not the hypocrisy most of us are familiar with. When we hear hypocrisy, we think of saying one thing and doing another. While the Pharisees certainly did this, at the moment Christ is condemning them for a different kind of hypocrisy, a kind of hypocrisy that is seen only by the individual hypocrite and by God. This hypocrisy is making oneself look righteous on the outside (and maybe even doing it with good intent), but not changing the inside. If we go about loving others on the outside but hating them on the inside, we haven’t changed; if we gently have compassion and grace upon society’s most notorious sinners but on the inside condemn them, we have not changed; if we yell at people for having premarital sex but burn for it within, we have not changed. Christ calls us to change the inside; the outside will follow suit once the inside changes, and then the outside change—the change people actually see—will mean something (so we see that Christ calls us to change who we are). This truth of changing the inside, and the outside following in authenticity, is validated by Christ in verse 26: “Scour the insides, and then the gleaming surface will mean something.”

Many of us have cried out to God, “What do you want me to do? Where do you want me to go?” While these are honorable questions to a Father who desperately loves us, we need to understand that He actually desires something *more* than just doing things or going places in His name. He wants us to *change* in His name; He wants us to become like His Son. Perhaps we should stop asking, “What do you want me to do? Where do you want me to go?” and instead ask, “Who do you want me to be?” The answer drenches the pages of the New Testament: He wants us to become like His Son. We are already His children; now let’s act like it. He commands us to become disciples of Christ, longs for us to develop our intimacy with Him. We must understand, too, that discipleship, intimacy with God, becoming like Christ is not what saves us; Christ alone saves us. Discipleship, intimacy with God, becoming like Christ are responses to what He has done.

Becoming like Christ is not something that happens all at-once. We don’t make the decision to pursue spiritual transformation and then—poof!—have our insides turned right. It takes work on our part and on the part of the Spirit of God. It takes work for us because we must give room and allow the Spirit to change us. The fact that it does not happen in a second is visible from the very word ‘*becoming* like Christ.’

So when we talk about spiritual transformation, we are not talking about doing life differently, but being somebody different. How will we be different? When spiritual transformation takes place, there are six realms of the human self that are revamped. These are, in brief, our body, our soul, our thoughts and feelings, our will (spirit and heart) and our social relations.

I could give technical explanations of those parts of the human self experiencing change, but instead we will look at what a person *with* such changes actually *looks* like. The following expositions are composed following the guidance of an eclectic lot of scriptures; a few of the major ones are 1 Corinthians 13, Romans 12:1-21, Galatians 5:22-6:10, and Colossians 3:1-4:6. I encourage you to read through these if you have the time. Now let’s take a detailed look at what the life of a spiritually changed – a spiritually transformed – person looks like:

*Thought Life:* Men, women and children who are spiritually transformed naturally think about God—He is never out of the mind! They love to dwell upon God and his character: His power, His love, His mercy, His grace, His wonder, etc.; they adore God in nature, in history, in His Son and in the church. Those transformed by God are “God-intoxicated” (Acts 2:13, Ephesians 5:18); no one has a stronger sense of reality and practicality than they do, and their minds are filled with biblical expressions of God’s nature, God’s actions, and God’s plans for them in His world. Those who are transformed by the Spirit naturally do not dwell on evil; it’s not a big thing in their thoughts, and they are sure of its defeat. Since their minds are transformed by God, they instinctively embody Philippians 4:8; they are positive, realistically so, based upon the nature of God as they know it.

“Summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse.” – Philippians 4:8

*Feelings:* These people are full of insanely deep love, love lots of good thing and they love people, love their life, love who they are, and are thankful for their life—even though it may contain many difficulties, persecution, even martyrdom. They receive life and all it contains as God’s gift, or at least as His allowance, where they will know His goodness and greatness and go on to live with Him forever in paradise. Joy and peace ride shotgun even in the hardest of times—even when suffering unjustly. They are confident and hopeful and do not indulge thoughts of rejection, failure, and hopelessness because, simply, *they know better*. When they do fall into sin, they don’t wallow in guilt forever, but rather take on the joy of their salvation, confessing their sins and gratefully taking the forgiveness of Christ (John 1:9).

*Will (spirit, heart):* They really *are* devoted to doing what is good and right; their spirit and heart are habitually attuned to doing good, just as the mind and emotions are honed in to God. They are paying special attention to rightness, to kindness, to goodwill, and they are purposefully knowledgeable about life, about what people need, about how to do what is right and good in appropriate ways. Wisdom sleeps in their bed. They do not think of themselves first, do not focus on what they want, and actually they care very little about getting their own way. Servant hood, self-surrender, crucifying the sinful nature and radiating the Spirit nature, and neighborly love are natural for them. Abandoned to God’s will, they do not struggle and deliberate as to whether they will do what they know to be wrong; really, they do not hesitate to do what they know is right. Doing right becomes so natural to them that they do it instinctively and even without *knowing* they’re doing it; now sin looks horrible and unappetizing and it is something they honestly try to avoid out of hatred for it. It is harder for them to sin than it is for them to practice righteousness.

*Body:* They are poised to do good without thinking, do not automatically move into what is wrong, even if doing good is contrary to resolves and intentions, before they can think to *not* do it; it is no longer true that their “spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41); they know this statement of Jesus is not an irreversible condition of humanity, but a sickness to be healed. They do not allow themselves to be imprisoned by the memories of their past life, are not trapped by their past actions, and they avoid paths of temptation. The bodies of these people even *look* different: there is a freshness about them, a kind of quiet strength, a transparency. They are rested and playful in a bodily strength that is from God. Yes, the Spirit has brought them to life in more ways than one.

*Social relations:* Those transformed by God are socially transparent; because they walk in goodness, they have no use for darkness, and achieve real contact or fellowship with others, especially other apprentices of Jesus. They do not conceal their thoughts and feelings (nor do they impose them on everyone), and do not try to manipulate and manage others. They do not go on the attack or on the hunt, intending to use or hurt others; they are completely noncondemning, while at the same time they do not participate in evil—patient and joyful nonparticipation. They do not reject or distance themselves from the people who may be involved in evil situations; they

know how to “love the sinner and hate the sin” gracefully and effectively. As Christ spent time with the people, that is how they spend time with the people.

*Soul:* As one comes to know these people—though those who know only the human powers of the flesh will *never* be able to understand them (1 Corinthians 2:14)—you see that all of the above is not just at the surface: it is deep and it is effortless, it *flows*. They do not *try* to have a renovated being, they *are* a renovated being. This is the outcome of spiritual formation in Christlikeness—not perfection, but a person whose soul is whole: a person who, through the integrity of the law of God and the direction of the Gospel and the Spirit, has a restored soul; every aspect of his or her being will function as God originally intended. That is the keynote of spiritual transformation.

We were not designed to be fallen creatures who know suffering, depression, heartache and hatred, as well as a whole myriad of sin’s effects. We were created to be beautiful, wonderful creations, men and women made perfect in the image of God. Because of sin, the original design for the function of the mind, body, feelings, will and social relations are decrepit. Our mind is trapped in the sinful nature, focuses on the pleasures of the flesh, has its eyes on the fruit of the sinful nature, and sometimes is so fallen to try and deny the existence of God altogether. We naturally use our body as a tool for wickedness, making it sick with drugs and alcohol and sexually transmitted diseases. Our feelings include depression, loneliness, hatred, selfishness. We don’t will to do righteousness, but will to sin. We manipulate, use and abuse others, are backstabbers and gossipers. Our social relations have gone haywire. Spiritual transformation is the Spirit changing us into who we were originally intended to be, restoring us to the way we were meant to live life, a way that is so much more enjoyable.

We will not, however, be restored to the perfection of the original design for human life until we are glorified in Heaven. No matter how much the Spirit changes us, we will still struggle with sin and still sin. Temptation is known to every man and woman and sin is a reality we all must face no matter how ‘good’ a disciple we are, no matter how intimate with God we may be, no matter how much the Spirit has transformed us.

### III

## The Process of Spiritual Transformation

We have seen the *call*—and the *desire*—for change; and we have seen *what* needs to change. The issue at this point and time is, *how*? Really, that’s what this entire chapter is written for: so we will know how to go about a true and rewarding life change, the kind of transformation the Creator calls for. Yet, as I have said before, groundwork needs to be laid; a basis needs to be constructed; a foundation needs to be built. We have seen many of the pillars of this great monument: the *call*, *desire*, and specs on what needs to change. Finally comes the fourth pillar, on which we can build the great temple of spiritual life transformation. This pillar is the *process* of spiritual transformation.

Our insides must change before our outsides change. It does not work the other way. Those who believe that the outside must change before the inside changes are those who are always stumbling, falling, and who harp on only two aspects of God: love and forgiveness. Thankfully, their own misunderstanding is not costing them their very salvation. When we try to change the inside by changing the outside first, we unknowingly drift into deadly legalism: do the right thing, say the right thing, everything will be golden and delicious. That’s not the way it works.

Spiritual transformation is about changing the *inside*. As we’ve said before, only by changing the inside can the outside really conform to God. Only by changing those parts of our beings found not in fingers and toes can we discover the kind of change that reveals itself through our fingers and toes. The process of spiritual transformation is one where we rely on God to change the inside and patiently allow the outside to mold into God’s own designs.



Let me ask you this: what is the most widely-believed self-help quick-jump to spiritual stamina and success? The answers include Bible studies, going to church, Sunday morning worship, etc. I can look on my shelf and find plenty of books telling me that if I have a thirty-minute prayer session before breakfast and a little bit of the Gospel with a bagel, then my spiritual life will be on the roll. The only thing is, at least for me, it's never worked that way. I have spent inexhaustible hours pouring through biblical texts, and many times the conclusion is a weighted brain and a weary heart. I go to church all the time; admittedly, sometimes I don't want to go; I'd rather just stay in bed, watch movies, and sleep; sometimes I go home from church emptier than when I went in. Sunday morning worship is a biggie in my life, but the times are numerous when the words have come out of my mouth, but my heart has been simmering in a coma just below the skin. I've fallen asleep during thirty-minute morning prayers, and the bagel holds my attention more than Leviticus.

Perhaps you are wondering where this is going. I am going to be your friendly heretic and say: "Bible studies are worthless. Going to church is worthless. Sunday morning worship is worthless... All of it is worthless... *except when seen as avenues to fellowship with God.*"

Friends, the core of spiritual transformation does not culminate in more Bible studies and longer prayer times. It is all about immersing ourselves in God, bathing in His presence, and letting the soap and shampoo of His Spirit wash over us, cleanse us of our filth and add a little spit-and-shine to our homely skin. True spiritual transformation, true spiritual change—the kind that God calls for, the kind Jesus advocated—is a change that is deeper than changing what we do, it is a change where we allow *God* to change *who we are*. There's the core of it: bathe in the Spirit. This is why those 'fruits' of change are called 'fruits of the Spirit': they come through being watered and nourished by the Spirit, not by our own frail human efforts (those frail human efforts, by the way, have a nice name: *legalism*).

"Wow," we say. "This is cool. I let God do the transforming. Sounds easy. Okay, God, lay it on us..." Moments pass, and we cross your arms. "Hmm. Nothing's happening..." Is it true that God can change us through any way He pleases? Yes! Is it true that He can speak to us through any circumstance? Yes! Is it true that He can invade us with his Spirit and bring about spiritual transformation in any way He desires? Yes! Is it *also* possible that, while He can do all of this in any way He pleases, He has set down specific ways in which we can approach Him and experience Him? Is it possible that, while all avenues can be used to bathe in God's Spirit, God has designated a handful strictly for this purpose? Yes, it is possible, and I believe with all my heart that there are avenues into the very heart of God, highways into the world of spiritual transformation, and God has laid them out before us and said, "Here you go. Now come!" Why would He elect a certain number of routes and not just pour change upon us? I don't know. But it's the way He's done it.

These avenues have been coined through the ages as *spiritual disciplines*. There isn't a shred of validity to any of these disciplines when they stand alone; only when approached and lived out as a means to bathe in God's Spirit does God really begin to work through them and transform us. Just using the disciplines as a tool to make us change is legalism; the heart of the disciplines is the Spirit. So we have seen the call, desire, and what is being changed, not to mention the process of spiritual transformation (God is at the helm!). So now we move on to the bulk of our exploration: what are these spiritual disciplines, and how can we integrate them into our 21<sup>st</sup> Century lives?

## IV

### An Introduction to the Spiritual Disciplines

The point of spiritual disciplines is to bring us into the throne room of God, where He can actively and realistically mold us, shape us, conform us to His will and give us the divine power to

cooperatively interact with Him inside *and* outside church building doors. We must keep it at the forefront of our minds that if we use the disciplines as a quick-fix tool for spiritual stamina, *they won't help us at all*. We must approach them with the mindset of meeting God in them, and then letting *Him* change *us*, not *us* changing *ourselves*. We are powerless to change ourselves; only the Triune God has the power to change us. If we try to change ourselves, we become legalists, and in the end, we become failures.

Through spiritual disciplines we can come to really understand and experience what Jesus is talking about when he says, "Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light." (Matthew 11:29-30) As God transforms us and we are drawn more and more into His story, we will find that Jesus' words are not poetic hopefuls, but realities that can only become realized through the mysterious workings of God.

When you and I are redeemed through the Cross of Christ, at that first moment we are closer to God than we have ever been before. But after a few days, the excitement and inertia wears off. Doubt sets in. One wonders, "What happened? Am I not saved?" Meeting someone can be great. But if you just exchange names, how exciting will it be in three days? "Hi, Bob." "Hi, George." Over and over and over. That's how some of us are with God, and we complain that it isn't getting deeper. Of course not. George really wants to talk, but he's going to let us start the first conversation. It's His nature. In the same way, God will meet us, but we must make a move to get to know him more.

Building a relationship takes work; we can't expect our relationship with God to blossom with no effort on our part, nor can we expect it to take flight when we're simply content to be spoon-fed spirituality in church or house groups. We need, first of all, to take time to get to know God better. God is a person, not a machine – we need to treat Him for who He is. A lot of us do this through devotionals or prayers or morning quiet times.

But what most of us don't realize is that when you want to get to know someone really well, you don't just have them over to *your* house, you go over to *their* house also. In this same way, we need to take up the habits of God—we need to step into Jesus' house—so that our relationship can become so loving, so intimate, so real and foundational that it surprise us how many people live in dullness and think it normal and are content to remain that way. We will become like Christ if we run after Him from our heart, mind and soul, and we will experience the spiritual transformation many of us find so lacking.

We will now explore the 'habits' of God, the spiritual disciplines, that God has laid out before us and said, "I will meet you through these, you just have to come." Most people don't practice all of them (I don't), because it isn't a formula. Some will practice one or two, and experience God more and experience that life change more than those who run the entire gauntlet. We must contemplate where God is leading us with these spiritual disciplines and take the initiative to heed His call and meet Him there.

## V

### The Spiritual Disciplines

There are a host of spiritual disciplines and we're going to be chewing through each and every one of them. The disciplines are: solitude and meditation, silence and fasting, frugality and simplicity, secrecy and sacrifice, fellowship and confession, submission and study, worship and celebration, service and prayer. It is recommended that you not read through all these disciplines in one sitting, but take time to read, contemplate, meditate and pray.

#### SOLITUDE

Solitude isn't just about being alone. It is purposefully abstaining from interaction with other people. We close ourselves away; we go to the ocean, the desert, the wilderness, or to the anonymity of the urban crowd. Solitude is choosing to be completely *alone*, and dwelling on our experience of isolation from other human beings.

Why is this a spiritual discipline? The normal course of our day-to-day busy lives and interactions with other people locks us into patterns of feeling, thought, and action that are geared to a world set against God. We've all experienced it: spend too much time with people, and we become cranky, irritable, tired and, at times, downright mean. Nothing but solitude can allow the development of a freedom from the ingrained behaviors that hinder our intimacy with God. It is true: we will submerge and die with culture if we don't find time for solitude.

Solitude enables us to see the things that trap, oppress and worry us. God can use this time to show us our faults and tell us, "Here is where you need to change..." When our interactions with other people are severed, our hardwired soul cries out for companionship, and so we turn to God—and, by necessity, draw closer to Him. Very importantly, we really can be still, alone, and really know that *Jehovah* is God (Psalm 46:10). In aloneness our focus draws to be completely transfixed on the Trinity.

"That is the only reason why I desire solitude—to be lost to all created things, to die to them and to the knowledge of them, for they remind me of my distance from [God]: that [God is] far from them, even though [He is] in them. [He has] made them and [His presence] sustains their being and they hide [Him] from me. And I would live alone, and out of them." - Thomas Merton

"The great holy men, where they might, fled men's fellowship and chose to live to God in secret places. One said: As oftentimes as I was among men I came back less a man, that is to say less holy... If in the beginning of thy conversation thou keep thy cell and dwell well therein it shall be to thee afterwards as a dear and well beloved friend and most pleasant solace. In silence and quiet the devout soul profiteth and learneth the secrets of the scriptures... Leave vain things to the vain... Shut thy door upon thee and call to thee Jesu thy love: dwell with him in thy cell for thou shalt not find elsewhere so great peace." - Thomas a Kempis

"We go more constantly and desperately to the post office, [but] the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while... read not the Times, read the Eternities!"

- Henry David Thoreau

## MEDITATION

Thomas Watson wrote long ago:

The first fruit of love is *the musing of the mind upon God*. He who is in love, his thoughts are ever upon the object. He who loves God is ravished and transported with the contemplation of God. "*When I awake, I am still with thee*" (Ps. 139:18). The thoughts are as travelers in the mind. David's thoughts kept heaven-road, "I am still with Thee." God is the treasure, and where the treasure is, there is the heart. By this we may test our love to God. What are our thoughts upon? Can we say we are ravished with delight when we think on God? Have our thoughts got wings? Are they fled aloft? Do we contemplate Christ and glory? Oh, how far are they from being lovers of God, who scarcely ever think of God! "*God is not in all his thoughts*": (Ps. 10:4). A sinner crowds God out of his thoughts. He never thinks of God, unless with horror, as the prisoner thinks of the judge.

- *All Things for Good*, 1663

Meditation is bringing the mind to dwell intelligently upon God as He is presented in His Word, and this will have the effect of God bathing us in His Spirit, and we will come to love God more passionately; this love, in turn, will bring us to think of God steadily.

There are two different kinds of meditation: I call them 'full-time' and 'part-time.' Full-time is dwelling on God throughout the day, thinking on Him, relishing Him, examining and exploring and discovering Him as we eat, sleep, play, work and learn. Part-time is setting aside a specific time for deeper, more intimate meditation: focusing intently on God, ridding the mind of all other thoughts; often the one meditating will focus on an idea or object, or on their breathing; in this spirit of meditation and contemplation, God will reach into us and speak to us.

Meditation can also take the form of memorizing scripture, or memorizing biblical concepts (often, memorizing individual verses is not as sustaining as understanding the biblical concepts, such as faith, love, wisdom and suffering). In Joshua 1:8 and Psalm 1 we are shown the precious blessing of knowing God's Word. We will come to know peace, and when deflections in life come, our minds will automatically re-center on God just as the needle of a compass returns north.

In the revelation, we are given a glimpse at the inner workings of a heart fully renovated by God, a heart that is transformed through spiritual disciplines, including meditation:

The slain Lamb is worthy!  
Take the power, the wealth, the wisdom, the strength!  
Take the honor, the glory, the blessing...  
To the One on the Throne! To the Lamb!  
The blessing, the honor, the glory, the strength,  
For age after age after age.  
- Revelation 5:12-13, *the Message*

The one who meditates on God will come to know in a very real and unique way the worth, the power, the wisdom, strength, glory and blessing of God, and his or her heart will sing out in a loud voice, wherever and whenever they are, a hymn and psalm: "All glory, all honor, all strength to you, O Lord!"

SILENCE

"Be still, and know that I am God..." - Psalm 46:10

"For thus says the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel: "In returning and rest you shall be saved; In quietness and confidence shall be your strength." - Isaiah 30:15

How few of us live with a quiet, inner peace. The world weighs down all around us, and we feel it choking us, suffocating us to the point of fatal exhaustion. When we wake in the morning, demands are shoved down our throat. We toss and turn at night, heads filled with knowledge that tomorrow's harvest is no better; minds laden with the mistakes of the day, the problems and circumstances to be fixed and avoided. So little of us have this quiet, inner peace; peace is a foreign word with vague meaning. Yet we know we *desire* it. This peace, this comfort, this calmness is in our grasp; it can be touched; the grace of God sustains us, fills us with joy and peace, and the door is often the discipline of silence. The harvest will turn colors once we step through that door, and we will be able to direct others to the entryway. We can find confidence, reassurance, approval, *peace*.

Silence is when we close off our souls, our very being, from the 'noise' that surrounds us on a constant day-to-day basis—the noise of music, words, sounds, the street, friends and even

family. Today this is very hard—true silence is extremely rare. There are people who have *never* ‘heard’ true silence, and don’t even really know what true silence is!

Silence is frightening because it strips us as nothing else does, throwing us upon the grim realities of our life. A great fear is that in this so-called quiet time, what happens if there seems to be very little of “just us and God”? What does it say about the inward emptiness of our lives if we must *always* turn on the tape player or radio or must *always* ‘feel’ or ‘experience’ God to make sure something is happening in our world?

Sound has an interesting trademark—it always strikes deep and brooding in our souls. So for the sake of our souls, we must seek times to leave our television, radio, tape players, and telephones turned off. We need to seek time to close off street noises as much as possible, try to find *how* quiet we can make our world by our own hands.

Silence is no different from all the other disciplines in one aspect—it must be approached prayerfully and experimentally. Have confidence: God has its right uses for us. Silence is a powerful and essential discipline, because it is silence alone that will allow us life-transforming concentration on the Creator of the Cosmos. It is in the silence where we can hear his voice.

“The more I practice this discipline, the more I appreciate the strength of silence. The less I become skeptical and judgmental, the more I learn to accept the things I don’t like about others, the more I accept them as uniquely created in the image of God. The less I talk, the fuller are words spoken at an appropriate time. The more I value others, the more I serve them in small ways, the more I enjoy and celebrate my life. The more I celebrate, the more I realize that God has been giving me wonderful things in my life, the less I worry about my future. I will accept and enjoy what God is continuously giving to me. I think I am beginning to really enjoy God.” – author unknown

Another aspect of silence that is hardly considered is speaking up when you selfishly want to be quiet, and not saying anything when you selfishly want to speak up.

#### FASTING

“It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.” - Jesus, Matthew 4:4

Fasting is no more than abstaining from food and maybe drink. It teaches us a lot about ourselves pretty quickly, and can prove humiliating to us, as it reveals to us how much our peace depends upon the pleasures of eating. It will show us how we use eating to assuage the discomforts in our bodies and minds often caused by unwise and faithless living and attitudes. Fasting brings out our true colors: our despairs, hurts, angers, heartaches, fears and sin. It will break idolatry. Fasting teaches temperance and self-control, therefore also throwing at us moderation and restraint with regard to *all* our fundamental drives. Fasting is a practice of self-denial that ought to be practiced by *all* Christians; for those who take this bull by the horns, theirs is a clear and present source of the love and resourcefulness of God.

How does one go about fasting? After all, there isn’t one dead-set way. The desert fathers such as St. Antony often went long periods of time on just bread and water. Daniel and his friends would not eat the King’s meat or drink his wine; they had vegetables and water only. So we see that fasting can take on many forms. Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Spirit, fasting till the day temptation came at dawn.

Fasting confirms our utter dependence upon God by finding in him a source of sustenance beyond food. This is the bottom line of fasting: we taste the real Bread of Life and drink the Living Water. Through fasting we come to terms with the fact that God’s word to us is a life sustenance

and that it is not food alone that gives life; the words that proceed from the mouth of God nourish us as well. We discover this real meat we have, this meat the world doesn't know about—fasting becomes a feast; a feast on Christ and doing His will!

For so long I thought that Jesus' reference to outside appearances in the following Scripture, Matthew 6:16-18, meant that fasting was a horrible and painful thing, and to reap the glory and rewards, we had to keep it a secret. What do you think it *really* means?

"And when you fast, don't make it obvious, as the hypocrites do, who try to look pale and disheveled so people will admire them for their fasting. I assure you, that is the only reward they will ever get. But when you fast, comb your hair and wash your face. Then no one will suspect you are fasting, except your Father, who knows what you do in secret. And your Father, who knows all secrets, will reward you." - Matthew 6:16-18

No, he is *not* telling us to mislead those around us while we fast. He is instead explaining how we will feel—we won't be sad! After all, aren't we discovering that life is so much better than meat? Our belly is not our god, as others find it to be; we are not enslaved by our appetites and insatiable passion, but are chained to the cross of Christ. Our belly becomes a joyful servant of us and of God:

"You say, 'Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.' This is true, though someday God will do away with both of them. But our bodies were not made for sexual immorality. They were made for the Lord, and the Lord cares about our bodies." - 1 Corinthians 6:13

The Christian poet Edna St. Vincent Millay writes:

"I drank every vine.  
     The last was like the first.  
 I came upon no wine  
     So wonderful as thirst.  
 I gnawed at every root.  
     I ate of every plant.  
 I came upon no fruit  
     So wonderful as want.  
 Feed the grape and the beam  
     To the vintner and the monger;  
 I will lie down lead  
     With my thirst and my hunger."

#### FRUGALITY

Frugality just means abstaining from using money or goods at our disposal in ways that merely gratify our desires or our hunger for status, glamour, or luxury. We stay within the bounds of what general good judgment would designate as necessary for the kind of life to which God has led us. So how does one go about frugality?

"And a final word to you arrogant rich: Take some lessons in lament. You'll need buckets for the tears when the crash comes upon you. Your money is corrupt and your fine clothes stink. Your greedy luxuries are a cancer in your gut, destroying your life from within. You thought you were piling up wealth. What you've piled up is judgment. All the workers you've exploited and cheated cry out for judgment. The groans of the workers you used and abused are a roar in the ears of the Master Avenger. You've looted the earth and lived it up. But all you'll have to show for it is a fatter than usual corpse." - James 5:1-5, *the Message*

"I say it again—it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God!" - Matthew 19:24

These warnings against the rich aren't stereotypical; if you're rich, you're not automatically condemned to Hell. If you're wealthy because of the lottery, or if you're a successful business partner who's moved up in the cash flow, you're not cut off from God. The warning is against the rich who have hoarded their money, neglecting those in need, being selfish and greedy, frivolous to the point of their own destruction. Frivolous consumption corrupts the soul away from trusting, worshipping, and service to God, and affects our 'neighbors'—humans throughout the world—as well.

If all the really wealthy people in the world were not as greedy and selfish as they are (what is one of the largest problems with the world? Humanity's selfishness and greed), we could feed the millions who are starving throughout the world. Yet we would rather enjoy steaks and expensive cars, have huge mansions and fountains, forgetting the 20,000 children that die each week of starvation

"It is an injury to society as well as an offense against God when men pamper their bodies with rich and dainty foods and seriously diminish their physical and mental powers by excessive use of intoxicants... Luxury in every form is economically bad, it is provocative to the poor who see it flaunted before them, and it is morally degrading to those who indulge in it. The Christian who has the ability to live luxuriously, but fasts from all extravagance, and practices simplicity in his dress, his home, and his whole manner of life, is, therefore, rendering good service to society." - O. Hardman

Frugality frees us from concern and involvement with a multitude of desires that would make it impossible for us "to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." (Micah 6:8). It makes it possible for us to concentrate only one that 'one thing worth being concerned about', and that is Christ alone:

"As Jesus and the disciples continued on their way to Jerusalem, they came to a village where a woman named Martha welcomed them into her home. Her sister, Mary, sat at the Lord's feet, listening to what he taught. But Martha was worrying over the big dinner she was preparing. She came to Jesus and said, "Lord, doesn't it seem unfair to you that my sister just sits here while I do all the work? Tell her to come and help me." But the Lord said to her, "My dear Martha, you are so upset over all these details! There is really only one thing worth being concerned about. Mary has discovered it--and I won't take it away from her." "

- Luke 10:38-42

Martha was too worried about dinner, as some are so worried about their lives, that she missed *who* life revolved around! Mary forgot everything and fell down before Jesus and was just *consumed* by Him. Frugality opens up a narrow avenue that leads us to experience and know God better and more fully than we ever have before.

Frugality is also freedom from the spiritual burden of financial debt! How many of us so often buy things that are not necessary? The effect of doing this is a diminishing of our apparent self-worth, dims our hope for the future, and most of all eliminates our sensitivity to the needs of others. Frugality gives us freedom from this spiritual bondage, as it frees up our finances and our costs of living and opens windows to mercy and compassion on those in need. When all is said and done, there is only debt we have to pay, and that is a debt of love:

"Owe nothing to anyone except to love one another..." - Romans 13:8

John Joseph Surin was once asked why, when so many people seem to wish to be great in God's eyes, there are so few who are truly great. "The chief reason," he replied, "is that they give too big a place in life to indifferent things." The bottom line is this: we need to stop wasting money on drugs and alcohol and food and toys, and start tithing, start giving back to God by giving to others. We need to live *generously*.

"Tell those who are rich in this world not to be proud and not to trust in their money, which will soon be gone. But their trust should be in the living God, who richly gives us all we need for our enjoyment. Tell them to use their money to do good. They should be rich in good works and should give generously to those in need, always being ready to share with others whatever God has given them."

- 1 Timothy 6:17,18

"You must each make up your own mind as to how much you should give. Don't give reluctantly or in response to pressure. For God loves the person who gives cheerfully. And God will generously provide all you need. Then you will always have everything you need and plenty left over to share with others."

- 2 Corinthians 9:7,8, *NLT*

Frugality as a settled style of life frees us from indifferent things. *Simplicity* (the arrangement of life around a few consistent purposes, explicitly excluding what is unnecessary to life), and *poverty* (the rejection of all possessions) are all branches off frugality, and are in turn *part* of frugality. The monks of the Middle Ages took simplicity to the next level, living only with a bed, desk and Bible at times. Yet these were some of the happiest men and women on the planet; why? Because they discovered what life was all about—Christ—and didn't worry about the foggy details that will be wisped away with the morning sun.

#### SIMPLICITY

Simplicity is a movement against our consumerist culture. Americans work hard to make lots of money to buy lots of stuff to experience happiness, peace and contentment. It is not surprising that only very few succeed. The answer lies in the fundamental, biblical truth that Jesus expounded on when he said, "What good is it a man to gain the whole world, but to forfeit his soul?"

In simplicity we understand that the real treasures in this life—happiness, joy, peace and contentment—are not to be found in wealth, money, or 'things.' Simplicity acknowledges that this 'real life' is found in the essential: God. God is the center of simplicity. How so? Because simplicity is simply *focusing on the essentials*: those essentials being God, family, friends, others, nature and ourselves.

Simplicity itself contains two dimensions: *inner* simplicity and *outer* simplicity.

Inner simplicity is submitting to Christ rather than to our own inclinations (we fool ourselves if we think this kind of communion with God will simply fall into our laps; we must desire it and work for it, and we will gradually grow closer to God). The transformation of the entire person through the breath of God will reap a harvest of wonderful *inner* simplicity: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control (sound familiar?).

Outer simplicity will not come through the spiritual disciplines; it involves changing our lifestyles. There are varying degrees of simplicity and different kinds of simplicity. There is the Amish or Quaker simplicity – going to the very elemental. There is the 'cabin in the woods' simplicity of *Walden*. Or you can look at the simplicity of the monks—sometimes only owning a bed, desk and a Bible and spending all their time developing intimacy with God and each other. There is the simplicity of not eating many foods and not eating exotic foods in respect to the people of foreign



countries who are starving; this simplicity banks on Gandhi's words, "Live simply so that others may simply live."

However deep we wish to take our outer simplicity is up to us. It is important to note, though, that our outer simplicity can have an effect on our inner simplicity. Whichever way you go with outward simplicity, there are a few 'ground rules' that run through almost all the different types of simplicity. Here are just a few trademarks of simplicity, the very basics:

Enjoy the rhythms of nature, the turning of the seasons, the world outside; relish in nature once again.

Enjoy life, from the company of friends to the laughter of children to good meals.

Be careful with your money. Buying lots of stuff will harm simplicity because it gives in to the consumerist culture.

Take care of our bodies physically, mentally, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually.

Do not fill your life with things, but aim for serving God, helping others, and entertaining good and holy experiences throughout life.

Let your affairs be as one, two or three. Too many things on your mind and too many things to do destroys simplicity.

Undue luxury often creates a false sense of superiority, causes unnecessary burdens on ourselves and others, and leads to the neglect of the spiritual life. By observing and encouraging simple tastes in apparel, furniture, buildings, and manner of living, we can help do away with unwholesome rivalry. Remember: true simplicity consists not in the use of particular forms, but rather not caving in to over-indulgence, in maintaining humility and respect of spirit, and in keeping our material surroundings pointed to a necessary ends, even though these surroundings may have grace, symmetry and beauty. And at the center is Christ.

#### SECRECY

"Thou are not the holier though thou be praised nor the more vile though thou be blamed or dispraised. What thou art, that thou art; that God knoweth thee to be and thou canst be said to be no greater... For a man ever to do well and to think little of himself is token of a meek soul. For a man not to wish to be comforted by any creature is a token of great purity and inward trust. He that seeketh no outward witness for himself, is appeareth openly that he hath committed himself all wholly to God." - Thomas a Kempis

One of the greatest fallacies of our faith, and actually one of the greatest acts of unbelief, is the thought that our spiritual acts and virtues need to be advertised to be known. We see the frantic and hot-hearted efforts of religious organizations and spiritual groups advertising and certifying themselves, all the while foregoing true, God-fearing, rich spirituality.

The discipline of secrecy isn't keeping secrets from other people. The secrecy mentioned here is keeping from causing our good deeds and good qualities to be known. We may even take steps to prevent them from being known, though to go into the realm of deceit is never a good idea. Secrecy helps us to lose or tame the hunger for fame, justification, attention of others. This discipline more-so than others will often require a greater need for grace. But as we practice this discipline, we find that we *adore* being unknown and we *love* the misunderstanding about us and our deeds, and love it with peace, joy and purpose. In secrecy we experience a continuing relationship with God independent of the opinions of others.

Secrecy forces us to place our public relations department entirely in the hands of God, who lit our candles so we could be the light of the world, not so we could hide under a bushel:

“Let me tell you why you are here. You're here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You've lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. Here's another way to put it: You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.” - Matthew 5:13-16, *the Message*

Some might argue that Jesus is telling us to show our good works to everyone. No! We must allow *God* to decide when our deeds will be known, and where our light will be noticed. We must not force or shove our good deeds down other peoples' throats. We must let God decide where people will taste the salt that we are; the saltshaker is in His hands, as well as the button of the flashlight that is our lives. We must allow *Him* to decide; we will find that when we live in secrecy, God will expound our influence, bless us, and let our deeds have greater affects on those around us, because *He* is in charge of deciding who notices and who doesn't.

Secrecy teaches us to love and be humble before God and others. In turn, that love and humility encourages us to see our neighbors in the best possible light, even to the point of our hoping they will do better and appear better than us! Via secrecy we find that it is possible for us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves,” as Philippians 2:3 says. And if you want to experience the flow of love as never before, the next time you are in a competitive situation, pray that the others around you will be more outstanding, more praised, and more used of God than yourself. Really pull for them and rejoice for their successes. What do you think would happen if Christians would universally pray this for each other? The earth, I believe, would be filled with the knowledge of God's beauty! Secrecy can lead us into this kind of wonderful experience.

Also, the needs that arise in our efforts to serve God can often be handled by looking to God only, not telling others that there is a need, but counting on God to tell them. This is another aspect of the realm of secrecy. When we ask God alone for help instead of asking others, it reveals to God a deeper trust. And when we see our needs met because we have asked God alone, our faith in God's presence and care will be greatly increased. But if we always tell others of the need, we will have little faith in God, and our entire spiritual life will suffer because of it.

And in all we do in the arena of secrecy, let's never forget the words of Jesus:

“God doesn't require attention-getting devices. He won't overlook what you are doing; he'll reward you well.” - Matthew 6:18, *the Message*

God sees our secret works—our good deeds and prayers and acts of charity. When we keep it secret, we say to God, “Okay, here you go. This is done for you and only you. No one else knows, and it will stay that way.” And God, from whom we can hide nothing, who sees and knows all things, will reward us openly. That's a promise straight from Christ's mouth.

#### SACRIFICE

Sacrifice is where we abstain from the possession or enjoyment of what is necessary for our living—not, as in frugality, where we abstain from those things that are *unnecessary*. We forsake the security of meeting our needs with what is in our hands. It is total abandonment to God, a

stepping into the darkened abyss in the faith and hope that God will hold us up. Such a move would be disastrous if our faith were nothing but a lie, but because it is founded in the truth of God, because God is not only loving, but also all-powerful and able to meet our needs, sacrifice is a clear message to God: *I trust You*.

"And [Jesus] looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury. And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins. And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on." - Luke 21:1-4, NASB

The poor widow gave all she had, abandoned herself to God's care, as she gave sacrificially. Ironically, in some strange mathematical equation that would make an accountant shiver, she gave more with her two pennies than all the rich gentlemen writing out their large, tax deductible checks around her.

How nourishing to our faith are the tokens of God's care in response to our sacrifice! The cautious faith that *never* saws off the limb on which it is sitting never learns that unattached limbs may find strange, unaccountable ways of not falling.

A couple years ago I went to a Sr. High youth convention in Milligan, Tennessee. During the conference, God filled me with compassion and I gave all my money to a charity, knowing I'd be starving on the way home. I prayed, "God, please provide me a meal." The group I was with entered a restaurant, and I was broke with no money for food and nothing to put in my stomach. Yet I left stuffed with food, lots of leftovers, and \$1.50 in my pocket. My story is just one of thousands you could hear from those who sacrifice themselves for God. It is still difficult for me to abandon, but this just means that I ought to do it more often. With the discipline of sacrifice, we practice a different dimension of faith, and often we are surprised at the outcome!

#### FELLOWSHIP

It is in fellowship that we engage in common activities of worship, study, prayer, celebration, and service with other disciples. In doing this we may assemble in large groups, or with only a few. Personalities united can contain more of God and sustain the force of His greater presence much better than scattered individuals.

Fellowship is simply the believers coming together to practice the disciplines.

We individually are the bride of Christ, yes; but so is the Church. Not the man-made church, but the God-indwelt and God-worshipping and God-fearing and God-loving Church—the "Big C"! The real Church—the one we're talking about—is made up of flesh and blood, its arms and legs and eyes and ears comprised of the men and women and children who are passionate and zealous for God, saved by God's redeeming Son. It is in fellowship that the Church unites and makes a presence in the world. The Church functions much better as a whole than Christians do running around independently. Why is this so? Because it is *designed* this way. We are relational creatures to the core. Also, each of us, in fellowship, has a spiritual gift that we bestow on other believers. The Phillips translation of 1 Corinthians 12:7-11 puts it well:

"Each man is given his gift by the Spirit that he may use it for the common good. One man's gift by the Spirit is to speak with wisdom, another's to speak with knowledge. The same Spirit gives to another man faith, to another the ability to heal, to another the power to do great deeds. The same Spirit gives to another man the gift of preaching the word of God, to another the ability to discriminate in spiritual matters, to another speech in different tongues and to yet another the power to interpret the tongues. Behind all these gifts is the operation of the same Spirit, who distributes to each individual as he wills."

Fellowship leads us into the last two disciplines of engagement: confession and submission.

#### CONFESSION

Confession is an attribute of fellowship; it functions only *within* true fellowship. In confession we let trusted others know our deepest weaknesses and failures. This nourishes our faith in God's provision for our needs through his people, increases our sense of being loved, and brings out our humility before our brothers and sisters. We let close friends know who we really are, not holding back anything important, but, ideally, allowing complete transparency. We lay down the burden of hiding and pretending, the burden of throwing up 'fake masks' that hide the real who-we-are. Pretending, too, takes up a lot more energy than just being real. We engage in and are engaged by others in the great discipline of confession.

"Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much."  
- James 5:16

We must accept the fact that unconfessed sin is a special kind of burden or obstruction in the psychological as well as the physical realities of the believer's life. The discipline of confession removes that heavy burden. Confession also helps us to *avoid* sin:

He who conceals his transgressions will not prosper, But he who confesses and forsakes them will find compassion. – Proverbs 28:13

Persisting in sin within a close community—not to mention the fellowship of a transparent Body of Christ—is unsupportable unless it is hidden. It is said that confession is good for the soul but bad for the reputation, and a bad reputation makes life more difficult in relation to those close to us. But closeness and confession force out evildoing. Nothing is more supportive of right behavior than open truth.

Confession enables friends to pray for specific problems and to do those things that may be most helpful and redemptive to the one confessing. Confession alone makes *deep* fellowship possible, and the lack of it explains much of the superficial and shallow quality of relationships so commonly found in our churches today.

Restitution—or amends or reimbursement—can be thought of as a discipline all on its own! It is difficult not to remedy wrongdoing once it is confessed and known widely. Now we know not *all* sin calls for repayment, but it is unthinkable that one would confess to stealing clothes from J.C. Penny, and never return them. It is unthinkable that someone would confess to harming another person's reputation, and then not do anything to help that person's reputation. Our in-borne integrity, a force within our God-given personality, *requires* restitution. It's not a pleasant experience, but it strengthens our will to do what is right, and can be a very powerful discipline.

Careful: confession can be easily abused, and for its effective use it requires considerable experience and maturity. How many stale, watered-down, immature confessions have turned to gossip and back-stabbing and black-mailing? From my personal experience, far too many. We need to be extremely careful, honest and trustworthy when dealing with confession.

#### SUBMISSION

This is the highest level of fellowship, involving humility, complete honesty, transparency, at times confession and restitution. In submission we engage the experience of those in our fellowship who are qualified to direct our efforts in growth and who then add the weight of their wise authority on the side of our willing spirit to help us do the things we should and not do the things

we ought not do. They oversee the godly order in our souls as well as in our fellowship and in the surrounding body of the body of Christ.

Those wise ones we look to ought not see themselves as 'leaders'. Their being examples we submit to is just one aspect of their *own* submission to servant hood, as we will see in the section on service. Theirs must be the genuine case of true leadership, not the *driver-ship* that so often prevails in our modern and secular society.

Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. – Hebrews 13:7

In 1 Peter those older in The Way are told to take the oversight of the flock of God, not by being forced to do so and not as lords over God's heritage, but as examples to the flock (5:2,3). The younger are then told to submit themselves to this gentle oversight by the elders; all are caught up together as a community of mutual servants in mutual submission.

Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders. Yes, all of you be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for "God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble." – 1 Peter 5:5

This submission is not a matter of an iron hierarchy in which unwilling souls are crushed and driven. Instead, it functions in the power of truth and mercy inhabiting mature personalities, being the expression of a kingdom not of this world (John 18:36), but a kingdom that is real and powerful. It is sad how some churches have fallen from this correct view of submission into a hierarchal government, resembling human monarchies and American businesses, where the pastor is made CEO and the elders are the Board of Review: such a tragedy. We see this all the time happening in misguided attempts at Christian community.

#### STUDY

"I will delight in your principles and not forget your word. Be good to your servant, that I may live and obey your word. Open my eyes to see the wonderful truths in your law." - Psalm 119:16-18

Study is when we engage ourselves, above all, with the written and spoken Word of God. Our early experience of falling into the grace of God may be so full that we neglect study. But intimacy with God, as with any person, soon requires a contribution from us, which will largely consist of study. Calvin Miller remarks, "Mystics without study are spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort."

"As I spent time chewing over the endless assurances and promises to be found in the Bible, so my faith in the living God grew stronger and held me safe in his hands. God's word to us, especially his word spoken by his Spirit through the Bible, is the very ingredient that feeds our faith. If we feed our souls regularly on God's word, several times each day, we should become robust spiritually just as we feed on ordinary food several times each day, and become robust physically. Nothing is more important than hearing and obeying the word of God."

- David Watson

We must strive to see the Word of God at work in the lives of others, in the church, in history, and in nature. We not only read and hear and inquire, but we *meditate* on what comes before us: that is, we withdraw into silence where we prayerfully and steadily focus upon it. We must see the Bible for what it really is: not a list of do's and don'ts, but a cosmic, unfolding story, a story of creation, calamity, heroism and sacrifice, a war and revolution: and we have a role to play! The Bible is not just a book of commandments: while there are commandments throughout, it is more-so a message to dethroned monarchs (for that is what we are, dethroned because of sin, to be

placed on thrones in Heaven); it is also a song, a poem of love; and a *revelation*: this is how the world works! This is how God moves! This is truth: can you stomach it? We must not forget that the Bible, in being the Word of God, is not just ink-on-paper, but it is *alive* and *breathing* and *organic* with the Spirit of God indwelling within it:

“For the word of God is full of living power. It is sharper than the sharpest knife, cutting deep into our innermost thoughts and desires. It exposes us for what we really are.” - Hebrews 4:12

God works in the depths of our heart, mind, and soul. We devote long periods of time to this. Reading and studying the Word of God must not be an off-hand project or a slap-on-the-wrist discipline: it needs to be *bedrock*, *foundation* to our spirituality! We *must* study the Word of God, we must meditate and pray that God will meet with us when we listen and read his Word, and pray that He will speak specifically to us, for ultimately the Word of God is God speaking! When we read the Bible, we are reading the Word of God *spoken to us*!

We should also make every effort to sit regularly under the ministry of gifted teachers who can lead us deeply into the Word and make us increasingly capable of fruitful study on our own. This discipline is one that must be touched and honed each and every day if we wish our intimacy with God to expand like we've never been capable to imagine.

Study can also take place *outside* the Bible, in the texts of those who are well-experienced in The Way. Really, the Scriptures are often memoirs of those who have gone before us in ancient times; in the same way, God will pull us closer to him as we wade through the waters of genuinely trustworthy Christian literature, whether it be from ancient Rome or Medieval Europe or the campuses of modern universities. My own spiritual life has been greatly enriched by the wonderful works of deceased Thomas a' Kempis, romantic John Eldredge, and theologian Dallas Willard. These writings, when coupled with the Bible (let us always keep the Bible at the forefront, the most supreme text and Word of them all) can offer us a smorgasbord of spiritual cuisine.

#### WORSHIP

“Content with beholding His face,  
 My all to His pleasure resigned;  
 No changes of season or place  
 Would make any change in my mind;  
 While blessed with a sense of his love,  
 A palace a toy would appear;  
 And prison would palaces prove,  
 If Jesus would dwell with me there.”  
 - John Newton, converted slave trader

In worship we engage ourselves with, dwell upon, and express the greatness, beauty, and goodness of God through thought and the use of words, rituals, music and symbols. We do this alone as well as in union with God's people. To worship is to see God as *worthy*, to ascribe great worth to Him, to bow down before Him and to kiss His face.

If in worship we are met by God himself, our thoughts and words turn to perception and experience of God, who is then really *present to us* in some degree of His greatness, beauty, and goodness. This will make for an immediate, dramatic change in our lives. However, this direct divine encounter is not essential to true worship, as so many believe. This direct encounter may happen *outside* worship, as it did with Elijah, Ezekiel, and Paul. *Worship is our part*, even though it is divinely assisted, and therefore it can be a discipline for the spiritual life. How can a Christian who seeks to live like Jesus lived ever do it without worship? Simply, it can't be done.

Worship must be centered upon Jesus Christ, going through him to God. We fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of His earthly life, His trial and death on the cross, His resurrection reality, His work as ascended intercessor, and His work as he has given us life back. Worship does not just happen through song and dance, but through living our lives in full devotion and obedience to God. A more detailed discourse on worship can be found in chapter two.

## CELEBRATION

Here we find one of the most important disciplines of engagement, yet it is so often overlooked and misunderstood. When I first heard of celebration, the only thought I had was of church, where we celebrate God and all He has done. Yet while this can certainly be a part of celebration, it falls more under worship; engagement, then, is *enjoying ourselves*. Some would scoff and balk; some believe to enjoy ourselves is wickedness. As we'll see, that is not true at all. We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, *in conjunction with* our faith and confidence in God's greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on *our* life and world as God's work and as God's gift to us.

We can celebrate together with other believers, eating and drinking, singing and dancing, relating stories. Yet we can also celebrate alone. Take a walk in the park. Eat out at a nice restaurant. Go see a movie. Play with the dog. Enjoy ice cream. *Enjoy life*. Find a hobby. Hang out with a friend. Enjoy life with your spouse—a romantic dinner and sex. The list never ends. Holy delight and joy is the great antidote to despair and is a wellspring of genuine gratitude.

The unabashedly sensual and earthly character of celebration or jubilee is nowhere more clearly portrayed than in the instructions contained in Deuteronomy 14:24-26:

“But if the place God, your God, designates for worship is too far away and you can't carry your tithe that far, God, your God, will still bless you: exchange your tithe for money and take the money to the place God, your God, has chosen to be worshipped. Use the money to buy anything you want: cattle, sheep, wine, or beer—anything that looks good to you. You and your family can then feast in the Presence of God, your God, and have a good time.” (the Message)

God says, “Buy what you want,” and *feast in the Presence of God*. We are called *by God* to enjoy ourselves, and when we do this, we enjoy ourselves *in the Presence of God*. In celebration we don't just enjoy ourselves, we enjoy ourselves *in God's presence*! Why does God throw out this command?

“...You will learn to live in deep reverence before God, your God, as long as you live.” - Deuteronomy 14:23 (the Message)

“Even so, I have noticed one thing, at least, that is good. It is good for people to eat well, drink a good glass of wine, and enjoy their work—whatever they do under the sun—for however long God lets them live. And it is a good thing to receive wealth from God and the good health to enjoy it. To enjoy your work and accept your lot in life—that is indeed a gift from God. People who do this rarely look with sorrow on the past, for God has given them reasons for joy.”

- Ecclesiastes 5:18-20, *NLT*

“So I decided there is nothing better than to enjoy food and drink and to find satisfaction in work. Then I realized that this pleasure is from the hand of God.”

- Ecclesiastes 2:24, *NLT*

“So I concluded that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to enjoy themselves as long as they can. And people should eat and drink and enjoy the fruits of their labor, for these are gifts from God.”

- Ecclesiastes 3:12,13, *NLT*

“So I saw that there is nothing better for people than to be happy in their work. That is why they are here! No one will bring them back from death to enjoy life in the future.” - Ecclesiastes 3:22, *NLT*

The idea of celebration will seem far too hedonistic to many of us. But we dishonor God as much by fearing and avoiding pleasure as we do by dependence upon it or living for it. How do you feel when you spend time and effort on a wonderful gift, give it to someone, and they don't even touch it, but just say, “Thank you, thank you...” without enjoying it? We want them to enjoy the gift! We want to say, “Go play!” When God gives us these gifts of pleasure, He says, “Go play,” and we worship Him as we enjoy life! Let's not forget that pleasure is *God's* invention, not Satan's! Satan has nothing to *do* with happiness and joy and fun! The idea that we can have real enjoyment and happiness through sin is a great trick Satan is pulling the world over.

Celebration can become a delirious joy coursing through our bodily being, when we really begin to see how great and lovely God is and how good He has been to *us*. Feasting, dancing, singing, oration become insuppressible. We can't put a lid on our excitement and happiness, our exuberance and playfulness. Even the hills must sing and the trees break out in applause for God (Isaiah 55:12), and every created thing must praise the Lord (Psalms 148-150).

Celebration, when done from the heart, makes our deprivations and troubles and problems and pains and sorrows seem small and insignificant, and we find in it great strength to do the will of our God because His goodness becomes so *real* to us.

“Even though the fig trees have no blossoms, and there are no grapes on the vine; even though the olive crop fails, and the fields lie empty and barren; even though the flocks die in the fields and the cattle barns are empty, yet I will rejoice in the Lord! I will be joyful in the God of my salvation. The Sovereign Lord is my strength! He will make me as surefooted as a deer and bring me safely over the mountains.” - Habakkuk 3:17-19, *NLT*

#### SERVICE

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.” - Colossians 3:22-24, *NIV*

In service we engage our goods and strength in the active promotion of the good of others and the causes of God in our world. We serve one another to train ourselves away from arrogance, possessiveness, greed, resentment, materialism. Service is very useful for the Christians who find themselves—as most of us by necessity must—in the “lower” positions in society, at work, and in the church. Service can train us in habits of loving service to others and free us from bitterness, enabling us in faith to enjoy our position and work because of its exalted meaning before God. In God's eyes, the work we do for friends, our church, even at work and for our family, is done *to and for Him*, and the way God sees the world, that is how it is! We do our work for our Lover and Father and King.

Can this be applied by the mother of six who must leave her little children uncared for in a dilapidated neighborhood to support them by scrubbing office floors at night? Can it be applied to the refugee from Central America who pushes his ice cream cart around the neighborhood,



ringing his bell as he goes? Yes, it can, if they have heard and received from the heart the gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Yet this command is far more important for those in positions of leadership. It is far more important to those in positions of influence and power and prestige.

“But Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that in this world kings are tyrants, and officials lord it over the people beneath them. But among you it should be quite different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must become your slave. For even I, the Son of Man, came here not to be served but to serve others, and to give my life as a ransom for many.’” - Matthew 20:25-28, *NLT*

It is easy to misunderstand these as instructions on how to *be* great. Instead Jesus is giving a statement on what those who *are* great look like! To be “great” and to live as a servant is one of the most difficult of spiritual achievements. Nevertheless, it is also the pattern of life for which this bruised and aching world waits and without which it will never manage even a decent existence. It is so difficult to be powerful without corrupting the soul—but it is what Jesus calls us to; it is the example the King of the Earth has lain down for us.

(John 13:14 KJV) If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet.

#### PRAYER

(Mat 26:41 KJV) Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.

Prayer is one of God's most precious gifts to us. Prayer is conversing, communicating with God. We talk to God, aloud or within our thoughts, and allow God to speak back to us (sometimes we may be so busy praying that we start praying *past* God, not *to* him, not stopping to listen for His own voice). Prayer involves other disciplines and spiritual activities if it is to go well, especially study, meditation, worship, and often solitude and fasting as well. It would be a low-voltage spiritual life in which prayer was chiefly undertaken as a discipline, rather than as a way of co-laboring with God to accomplish good things and advance His Kingdom. Yet prayer *can* be a discipline.

A lot of times the direct and indirect effects of prayer are taken as the *point* of prayer. But the effect of conversing with God cannot fail to have a pervasive and spiritually strengthening effect on *all* aspects of our personality. Just think about it: we are talking to the *King of the Universe*, *conversing with the Creator of the Cosmos!* Conversation with God, when it is truly a conversation (we talk to God, He listens; God talks to us, we listen) makes a tremendous impact on our minds, and our consciousness of him remains vivid as we go our way.

“Continuing instant in prayer after the conclusion of each period of definite communion with God, [the one immersed in prayer] will set himself to undertake every legitimate risk, to do the right without fear of consequences, and to embrace in loving purpose those who are opposed to him no less than those who are in agreement with him, in the attempt to realize the vision and to exercise the sympathy with which prayer has endowed him. The many groups into which his fellows are divided will be seen by him in the light of the whole, and he will ever strive to bridge gulfs and so assist in the realization of that living unity which is experienced by him in anticipation when, in his moments of intensest prayer, he is caught up to God and filled with the sense of union. Economic, social, political, national, and racial antagonisms are waiting for this sole solution of the deadlock which they present. There is no other way.” - O. Hardman

Prayer is an avenue of union with God, and ties into all aspects of our lives: economic, social, political, national, racial; as O. Hardman mentioned. And the more we pray, the more we think to pray, and as we see the results of prayer—the responses of our Father in speaking to us in return—so our confidence in God’s power spills over into other areas of our life.

(Phil 4:6,7 NIV) Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

(1 Th 5:17 NIV) Pray continually...

We can train ourselves to invoke God’s presence in every action we perform. It is an experiential fact that has been proven in the lives of many disciples of Jesus, ancient and modern. God will meet us in love, and love will keep our minds directed toward Him. Habit will be confirmed in gracious interaction, and our entire lives will be bathed in the intoxicating presence of God. Constant prayer will only “burden” us as wings burden a bird in flight.

In many Protestant churches prayer and Bible study are held up as *the* activities that will make us spiritually rich. But very few people actually succeed in attaining spiritual richness through them and indeed often find them to be intolerably burdensome. The “open secret” of many “Bible-believing” churches is that a vanishing small percentage of those talking about prayer and Bible reading are actually doing what they are talking about. They have not been shown how to change their life as a whole, permeating it with appropriate disciplines, so that prayer and Bible reading will be spiritually successful.

“If we take... no times to be apart and listen for the Voice, [only] give God some directives and pointers and call it prayer, and do none of the things that the faithful who traveled this road before us would remind us to do, then we are likely to talk to God and never hear a response.” – Robert Benson

## VI

### Are These Disciplines Adequate?

There are many other activities that could, for the right person and upon the right occasion, be counted as spiritual disciplines. The above is not a complete ‘authorized’ list. It is just a guide—a guide that will hopefully not only inspire you to act, but inspire you to *think*. God is a very creative being—just look outside! The first scriptures of the Gospel of John reveal to us that Jesus is the very word that breathed the cosmos into existence; to become like Christ, we, too, must be creative. A relationship with Jesus is a relationship that not only leaves room for creativity, but *calls* it, *beckons* it, is *thrilled* with it. We must be creative and experiential and find new ways to challenge ourselves to grow more intimate with God, and to become more like Jesus of Nazareth.

Why is it that we feel pumped after a spiritual retreat? We’ve been bathing in the disciplines of prayer, study, worship, and meditation and can feel its effects on our lives. How come we feel so much closer to God after a mission’s trip? The discipline of service to others is a window through which God reaches us. God desires our lives to be spiritual retreats and mission journeys; He wants us to pursue Him through the disciplines He laid out.

Which disciplines must be central to our lives will be determined by the chief sins and struggles of our life. Arrogance, envy, wrath, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lasciviousness—the “seven deadly sins” of theological and literary history—along with many other real sins and struggles are not phantoms or jokes, but hard-bitten realities whose dreadful effects can be seen by looking out

your front window. They call for an incomparably hard-nosed, tough response on our part, supported by infinite grace.

To answer the question above, the activities mentioned—when we engage in them conscientiously and creatively and adapt them to our individual needs, times, and place—will be more than adequate to help us receive the full Christ-life and become the kind of person that should emerge in following Him. Once more, these disciplines are not set-in-stone, but are foundational; if we take discipline in our life seriously, the disciplines will help guide us right no matter *what* disciplines we may add.

“Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light.” – Jesus, Matthew 11:29,30, *NLT*

Yet we are fooling ourselves if we think the disciplines in and of themselves will change us. God is the one who reaches inside the disciplines and transforms us. We must enter the disciplines not with change as the primary intent, but making the primary focus simply meeting with God and loving on God. It is then that God will reach in and change us—and the effects of the change will begin to take shape in our lives.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Gift of Christ: A Real and Better Life*

#### I

#### Why Do We Need Salvation?

No spiritual work by any author would be complete without a chapter on salvation. We have touched on the topic of salvation throughout nearly every chapter of this book, but it is a good idea to take a few pages to just go through why we need salvation, how we accept the salvation Christ offers, and what salvation means to us not only now but for all eternity. The logical place to start in this cosmic drama of God redeeming His people would be with the question, “Why do I need to be saved?”

“...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” – Romans 3:23

When we think of sin, we tend to think of certain acts, be it drunkenness or premarital sex, lying or stealing, slander or lust. And when we hear “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” we imagine it’s saying that because everyone has sinned once or twice in their life, they’re screwed. We have to understand that sin isn’t only one, two, or even a handful of acts. Sin isn’t just doing wrong things or not doing right things; it goes deeper, drilling into the people we are: sinners drenched in a sinful nature. We also know this sinful nature as the human nature. We say, “He’s greedy or lustful or selfish because it’s human nature... Go easy on him!” That human nature is the sinful nature; we’ve domesticated it and made it acceptable. But just because it’s acceptable to us doesn’t mean it’s acceptable to God. He hates it, loathes it, despises it.

Someone may say, “I’m exempt from this. I don’t have the sinful nature. You’re crazy.” To prove this person wrong, look at his or her life. No doubt there will be *acts* of sin committed from the *root* sinful nature. The presence of sin shows they have a sinful nature, just as the presence of a grape shows the presence of the vine. Romans 3:23 is making sure we understand that we have the sinful nature, and none of us can claim exemption, because it’s evident in our lives. From birth we’ve been soaked in this sinful nature, and it’s saturated us and become part of us; the result of this assimilation of sin and ourselves is spiritual death.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” – Romans 6:23

Our sinful nature brings us death in two different ways. The first death is physical death. Sin doesn’t just corrupt us spiritually, it corrupts us physically. It is because of sin that death is such a reality for us to face. The second death, however, is spiritual. Spiritual death simply means that we are separated from God. We cannot experience intimacy with God, connection with God, union with God, interaction with God when sin is in the picture. God cannot be in the presence of sin, so He cannot be intimate with us because we are sin to the very core. Why can’t God be intimate with us with sin in the picture? Because sin goes against the very character and truth of God. And left here, we are hopelessly lost, destitute and depraved, empty of any hope of a bright future.

“But God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies

we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.” – Romans 5:8-10

Christ came to earth and lived a perfect life only to die a horrible death, but His death was not in vain. He desired to die, even though, for brief moments, He was fearful. He kept his eyes upon us as the nails went through His hands and it was our smiles and laughter that moved Him forward and made him able to silently endure the taunts and jeers and the bloody lashes. His death upon the Cross forgave us of our sinful nature, and continues to forgive us as our sinful nature reaps past, present and future sin. Yes, as Christ takes over us, our sinful nature loses its power, but we still sin, and Christ still forgives us. No wonder they say the Cross is beautiful. But the Cross didn't just forgive us of our sin; it allowed us to have a personal relationship with God. When we say, “personal relationship with God,” we are talking about an intimate, connected, interactive communion with God. The Cross brought the Kingdom of Heaven or the Kingdom of God to bear on our lives; the Kingdom of God is not a place or an idea, but it is the embodiment of an intimate union with the Triune God.

## II

### What Is Salvation?

What happens when God gets a hold of us and plays a salvation miracle upon us? Many people simply assume salvation is about going to Heaven instead of Hell and that's it. This illusion is played upon by television and radio, as well as those bullhorn guys on the corners of Hollywood screaming repent or go to Hell. Let's not skip around the subject, there *is* such a thing as Heaven and Hell, but there's also so much more. Even as thorough as we may go in discussing what happens in salvation, we probably don't have a clue as to what salvation in its entirety means, and to be honest, we may never really *understand* it. That is why we must have faith and accept God at His word.

In salvation, we are justified. This simply means that our past, present and future sins are not held against us. We are blameless because Christ is blameless (Romans 5:1, 4:7).

We are sanctified. This means we are righteous because Christ is righteous (John 17:19). Yet while sanctification is made complete at the moment of conversion, it is also an ongoing process as we crucify the sinful nature and begin living out of the Spirit nature. It is important to note that our sanctification is not based on how well we crucify the sinful nature or how well we live out of the Spirit, but is actually based on Christ and His pure righteousness. We are called God's distinct people, and I imagine when God looks upon us, He does not see our sin and iniquity, but He sees Christ's righteousness clothing us.

We are promised a new destination after we die: paradise (Heaven), not Hell. The concepts of Heaven and Hell are explored in Chapter Eight. (John 3:16)

We become connected to Christ and are united with Christ (Romans 1:6). This is not just a theological idea or philosophical jargon; we really are connected to Christ, and we really are united with Christ in our daily lives. This is not something we must wait for Heaven to experience. It is through this connection to Christ that we are with our Teacher in discipleship.

We are born again, given a new heart, a new spirit, and a new love for God (Ezekiel 36:25-27). All those who earnestly become Christians and are baptized into Christ can actually *feel* something different about them, something in the inner core of their being. Sin looks unappetizing, or at the least doesn't carry the same appeal it always has. Our new spirit draws us towards righteousness, and our new love for God overflows. How many times have new Christians gone off the deep-end in reaching out to others in Christ's name, or digging through the Bible word-hungry? This is the new love for God radiating in their actions. It is sad that the world will sometimes weigh down our love for God or try to stuff it away in a box.

Christ told us constantly, and John the Baptist echoed His words, “The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand!” As we’ve said elsewhere in this book, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Heaven is not a place or an idea, but a state of existence. When we say, “We’re spreading Kingdom,” or, “We’re living for the Kingdom,” we are referring (whether we know it or not), to our new gift of being able to interact with God in our daily, mundane lives (2 Peter 1:4). This is an amazing gift we cannot fathom and can’t *begin* to understand.

Before Christ—Old Testament times—most of the interaction and involvement with God took place in the Temple; while God was *present* everywhere, He made himself *available* only in the Temple. Jesus tore this system up from the roots; right after His death, the curtain of the Temple was torn in two, a symbol of the finality of the new Kingdom. Because of Jesus, we are able to experience interaction and involvement with God in our daily, run-of-the-mill, ordinary lives. We do not have to go the Temple—or the church—for God to be manifestly present to us. The God who spoke with Moses in the tent in the desert is available for us in our homes and schools and workplaces. Kingdom is mankind living interactively with God in a world drenched by God.

In this Kingdom, God is available day and night, rain or shine; at work, school, home or play; in grave-yards and chapels, city and country; in grocery stores, apartment buildings, business complexes; He is available when we’re happy and when we’re sad, when we’re cheery and when we’re bitter; no matter if we are awake or asleep, fasting or eating; seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year. Paul’s words on Mars Hill—“...in God we live and move and exist...”—is not metaphorical religious talk, but a reality that is pressing on everyone everywhere, whether they are aware of it or not. Kingdom. “God is with us.” Christ gives all His followers the beautiful gift of experiencing the Kingdom that is already there. Without the gift of Christ, experiencing the Kingdom would be impossible.

We are made for Kingdom, designed for Kingdom. Only in Kingdom can we truly be healthy. The growing ‘sickness’ of the world, its ever-escalating and rampant mudslide into moral depravity and sin and blissful evil, is the result of the majority of our human race being cut off from Kingdom for longer and longer. As those who follow Christ, who cling to his message and reunite with God, Kingdom saturates our entire lives: it is closer and thicker than the air around us. It is in Kingdom where those who have been saved exist. A friend of mine said, and I quote him now: “Think Kingdom. Act Kingdom. Live Kingdom. *Be* Kingdom.”

Salvation also raises us to walk in the newness of life (Colossians 2:13-14). We are not slaves to our old way of life, the sin-life, but we are now slaves to righteousness.

We are freed from the dominant power of sin over our lives (Romans 8:19-23). This does not mean we are free *of* sin; it means we are free from the *power* of sin. We are no longer under the control of the sinful nature, but are given a Spirit nature that will develop as our intimacy with God matures.

We are no longer enemies of God, but friends of God. Even better, we are now the children of God! We have God’s last name and He is looking out for our best interests with Fatherly love. Yet it keeps getting better. Not only are we friends to God, not only are we God’s children, but we are also God’s beloved, the one He fights for, the one He died for, the one He loves with an indescribable and unquenchable love. This is amazing and we can’t even begin to imagine the intense, desiring love God has for humanity.

### III

## The Cross of Christ and His Resurrection

Gather a group of High School students and ask them, “What is salvation all about?” As I’ve discovered through experience, you will receive answers such as, “We’re forgiven of our sins,”

and the most famous one of them all, “We get to go to Heaven.” Are they wrong? Absolutely not! I am psyched about forgiveness, and as you’ll discover in the next chapter, Heaven *is* worth waiting for. But these High School students miss something *huge* in salvation. They are so focused outwards, focused to beyond this life, that they fail to see the implications for the here-and-now involved in salvation. Are they to blame? I think the blame rests on them *and* the way many Christians teach the whole salvation message. The High School kids could easily pick up a Bible and see that salvation has meaning for today, and many church leaders teach a fire-insurance theology: “Salvation is getting us out of Hell and into Heaven.” A casual glance at most, if not all, modern televangelism shows will convince us of that truth.

The beautiful thing about salvation is that, thrown on top of all the essentials of salvation we mentioned in the previous section, salvation opens us up to something wonderful in this life and the life to come. Christ was not joking when He told us, “I have come that my disciples may have real life, a life more better and beautiful than they could ever imagine.” (John 10:10, paraphrase) He was not just talking about eternity in paradise, He was *also* talking about life *today*. His sacrifice opens the door to something wonderful for us to experience now.

The cross of Christ forgave us of our sins. Christ took the punishment we so richly deserved for the horrible, sin-laden people we are. Whatever blame, humiliation, disgrace and torture we deserve, Christ took it so that it wouldn’t have to fall upon us. In those morning and afternoon hours over two thousand years ago, God completely abandoned Christ, and all His wrath poured upon His Son. Christ experienced all the horrid spiritual, emotional, physical, psychological and mental garbage we deserve. And why? So we could be forgiven of our sins, to open Heaven’s gate to us. Remember Christ’s words to the criminal on the cross beside him? “Today, you will be with Me in paradise.” His death sealed the whole Heaven deal.

When we stop here, we miss something huge. Christ didn’t remain dead. Two nights and one day later (three days on the Jewish calendar), angels rolled away the tomb and Christ stepped out, more beautiful than ever, shining before the world to see. That day Christ was resurrected; His power could not be denied and He told us something awesome with His resurrection: “Not only is Heaven reality now, but so is a new life here on earth.” As the cross sealed the Heaven deal, so Christ’s resurrection opened us up to the Kingdom of God. No longer, as John the Baptist and Christ proclaimed, was “Heaven near” or “at hand.” Christ rose from the grave. Now the Kingdom of God was “everywhere and for everyone.”

The Kingdom of God, as we’ve mentioned, is not Heaven nor is it something we have to wait for. It is not a mere ideal or fancy words to describe salvation. The Kingdom of God is the Creator entering into our lives; it is a dynamic, interacting, co-working relationship with God in our every day lives. Intimacy with God becomes a reality, and our discipleship strengthens and the Kingdom of God becomes more and more real to us. Christ’s resurrection opened the door to the Kingdom of God: now you and I can live in a dynamic, conversational, co-working, interactive intimacy with God in our daily, boring, mundane lives. Peter said it so well:

“Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.”

– 2 Peter 1:3-4 (the Message)

Salvation is *not* just about Heaven. Because Christ has saved us, we can get to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. And through personally and intimately getting to know Christ, we also personally and intimately get to know God. Peter understands this incredible offer when he writes, “The best invitation we ever received!” Not only is there intimacy—and let us not forget discipleship—but we have the great promises of the Kingdom of God: participation in the life of God.

Yet Heaven is still a beautiful reality. Peter understands that salvation means life now *and* life later. Look at his words in his first letter:

“What a God we have! And how fortunate we are to have him, this Father of our Master Jesus! Because Jesus was raised from the dead, we’ve been given a brand-new life and have everything to live for, including a future in heaven—and the future starts now! God is keeping careful watch over us and the future. The Day is coming when you’ll have it all—life healed and whole.” – 1 Peter 1:3-5 (the Message)

## IV A Theology of Salvation

Christ’s death on the cross paid the full penalty for our sinful nature and through the forgiveness of Christ we inherit eternal salvation. Christ’s sacrifice allows God to justify us (our sins are not held against us) without His own holy righteousness being tainted (Romans 3:24-26). Christ’s resurrection from the dead declares His victory over sin and death (1 Corinthians 15:54-57) and opens the doorway to the Kingdom of God. Salvation is by Christ’s grace through a real faith in Him—nothing we could or ever will do can merit us salvation; it is only found through the graces of Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). Sinners can never earn salvation or favor with God (Romans 8:8). No beforehand works or prerequisite self-improvement is needed for our immediate salvation (Romans 10:13, 1 Timothy 1:15). Eternal life and all it includes is a *gift* from God (Romans 6:23). We are saved and fully justified *before* our faith ever produces a single righteous work (Ephesians 2:10). Disciples of Christ can and do sin (1 John 1:8, 10). Even the strongest disciples wage a constant and intense struggle against sin in the flesh (Romans 7:15-24). Authentic disciples sometimes commit horrible sins, just as David did in 2 Samuel 11.

The gospel of Christ beckons sinners to reunite with Christ through faith with repentance (Acts 2:38, 17:30, 20:21, 2 Peter 3:9). Repentance is turning away from sin (Acts 3:19, Luke 24:47). Repentance is not a work but a divinely bestowed grace (Acts 11:18, 2 Timothy 2:25). While repentance *is* a change of heart, genuine repentance—genuine change in the heart—will result in an actual change of behavior (Luke 3:8, Acts 26:18-20).

Salvation is what God does to and for us. We have no role in it. Those who experience salvation are saved completely apart from any of their own effort (Titus 3:5). Even faith itself is a gift from God, not something a man makes for himself (Ephesians 2:1-5:8). Real faith, then, is not defective or half-hearted, but it reigns eternally (Philippians 1:6, Hebrews 11).

The very object of faith is Christ Himself, not just a creed or a doctrine (John 3:16). Faith, then, involves personal commitment—discipleship—to Christ (2 Corinthians 5:15). In simpler and more blunt words, all true Christians are disciples of Christ; they follow Jesus (John 10:27-28).

Real faith, as we’ve said, inevitably produces a changed life (2 Corinthians 5:17). Salvation *includes* a transformation of the heart of a person, and the new heart of the person—the Spirit-nature heart—will reap Spirit-fruit (a changed life) (Galatians 2:20). The very nature of the disciple is different, wholly new; this new nature is the Spirit-nature and it is more powerful and victorious over the sinful-nature (Romans 6:6). The unbroken struggles and collapses into in and hostility with God will be put to death when we are born again (given a new nature, new spirit, new heart) (1 John 3:9-10).

The “gift of God,” which is eternal life (Romans 6:23), pertains to life and godliness, not *only* Heaven (2 Peter 1:3, Romans 8:23).



Jesus Christ is King of the universe, and the faith He demands from His disciples involves unconditional surrender and abandonment to Him (Romans 6:17-18, 10:9-10). He does not grant eternal life to those whose hearts aren't authentically turned toward Him (James 4:6).

Those who have the true faith Christ calls for really love Christ (1 Peter 1:8-9). It is only natural, then, for them to long to obey Him (John 14:15,23).

Behavior does not grant us salvation, but it is a test of salvation. Obedience in itself is evidence that one's faith and salvation is real (1 John 2:3). It does not grant us salvation but shows that salvation exists in one's life. The person who remains unwilling to obey Christ, no matter what he or she may say or believe about God, Christ, and his or her personal salvation, that person has no evidence of salvation (1 John 2:4).

Genuine believers will stumble and fall, but they will always press on in the faith no matter the obstacles (1 Corinthians 1:8). Those who completely turn away from God for whatever reason show that they were never really born again (1 John 2:19).

## V

### Twisted Salvation Theologies

There are several false gospels swirling around in mainstream America. The twisting of theology was happening in New Testament times, too, and the writers of the New Testament warned against listening and believing these heresies:

"Dear friends, I've dropped everything to write you about this life of salvation that we have in common. I have to write insisting—begging!—that you fight with everything you have in you for this faith entrusted to us as a gift to guard and cherish. What has happened is that some people have infiltrated our ranks (our Scriptures warned us this would happen), who beneath their pious skin are shameless scoundrels. Their design is to replace the sheer grace of our God with sheer license—which means doing away with Jesus Christ, our one and only Master." – Jude 1:3-4 (the Message)

"There will be lying religious teachers among you. They'll smuggle in destructive divisions, pitting you against each other—biting the hand of the One who gave them a chance to have their lives back! They've put themselves on a fast downhill slide to destruction, but not before they recruit a crowd of mixed-up followers who can't tell right from wrong. They give the way of truth a bad name. They're only out for themselves. They'll say anything, *anything*, that sounds good to exploit you." – 2 Peter 2:1-2 (the Message)

"There are a lot of rebels out there, full of loose, confusing and deceiving talk. Those who were brought up religious and ought to know better are the worst. They've got to be shut up. They're disrupting entire families with their teaching, and all for the sake of a fast buck." – Titus 1:10-11 (the Message)

"The Spirit makes it clear that as time goes on, some are going to give up on the faith and chase after demonic illusions put forth by professional liars. These liars have lied so well and for so long that they've lost their capacity for truth. They will tell you not to get married. They'll tell you not to eat this or that food—perfectly good food God created to be eaten heartily and with thanksgiving by Christians!"

- 1 Timothy 4:1-4 (the Message)

"I can't believe your fickleness—how easily you have turned traitor to him who called you by the grace of Christ by embracing a variant message! It is not a

minor variation, you know; it is completely other, an alien message, a no-message, a lie about God. Those who are provoking this agitation among you are turning the Message of Christ on its head. Let me be blunt: If one of us—even if an angel from heaven!—were to preach something other than what we preached originally, let him be cursed. I said it once, I'll say it again: If anyone, regardless of reputations or credentials, preaches something other than what you received originally, let him be cursed.” – Galatians 1:6-9 (the Message)

It is an awful big deal when people spin the truths of the gospels to create fancy theologies of their own making. These writers of the New Testament share in Christ's anger towards those who do this; Christ railed on the Pharisees because they did this very same thing. The practice of taking the scriptures and molding personal theologies, even without biblical backing, has not died. It is happening all over the place! Jude teaches us about legalists, people who believe that we need to *do* something to inherit salvation (they're liars!). Both Peter and Titus teach us to stay away from those who use elegant preaching and style to scam people of their hearts and money; it happens every week in mega-churches where gospels of 'health and wealth if you give me a quarter for God's grace' is preached. These are just a few examples. Another example can be seen in nearly every town; it is called cheap grace theology. Cheap grace teaches a simple-faith gospel: no repentance, no surrender, no commitment, no changed life. It is probably the most widely-known and widely-believed false gospel in not only America but also the world today.

One of the reasons cheap grace theology is so prominent is because many of its major tenants are correct: Christ's death purchased salvation, the saved are justified by Christ alone, sinners cannot earn favor with the Triune God, God requires no preparatory works or pre-salvation transformation, eternal life is a gift from God, believers are saved before any righteous works are produced, and Christians sin, a lot of times horribly. Things go wrong, though, in the details of this cheap grace theology; the advocates of cheap grace theology firmly (and wrongly) believe:

Repentance is a change of mind about Christ. Repentance is another word for faith. We don't really have to turn from sin for salvation.

All of salvation, including faith, is a gift from God. But faith may not last. A true Christian can completely cease believing and still be saved. God has guaranteed that He will not disown those who abandon the faith. If anyone ever believes even once, they are forever guaranteed salvation, no matter if they turn away from Christ.

Saving faith is no more than being convinced that the gospel is true. It is confidence that Christ can remove all of our guilt and give us eternal life. Committing our life to Him doesn't matter.

A little spiritual fruit is inevitable in every Christian. The fruit, though, might not be able to be seen by others. Christians can even become barren of good fruit and be okay in God's eyes.

Only justification, adoption into God's family, Christ's blanketing us in His righteousness, and sanctification because Christ is righteous, is guaranteed to believers. The actual practice of sanctification and growth in Christ is for super-Christians.

We do not have to be disciples of Christ to be saved. We do not need to follow Christ at all in order to be saved. Dedication, or even *willingness* to dedicate to Christ, is necessary for salvation. The news that we're forgiven of our sin and guaranteed Heaven is the *complete* gospel. Nothing else can be believed about salvation.

Christians may fall into a state of living thoroughly sinful lives. There are lots of born-again Christians who live like pagans and atheists, but it doesn't matter. God's grace still covers them.

Disobedience and sin that is not dealt with is no reason to doubt the reality of our salvation.

Many mainstream Christians believe this, and will use it as an excuse for sin and as an excuse for not following Christ. Grace is considered cheap because all a person really needs to be saved by God is a simple belief that Christ died for their sins, and all they need to do is accept Christ's forgiveness for their sins and go about life. They don't even believe the right things for the right faith Christ calls for! They completely disregard repentance and commitment to Christ. Many advocates of cheap grace even go more extreme:

Repentance isn't essential to salvation; in fact, it is not even related to the gospel message.

Faith is a human act, not a gift from God. It happens once but may not continue. Real faith can be subverted, overthrown, collapse, or even turn into disbelief.

All we need to believe is the fact of the gospel. Trusting Christ means believing the facts about Him. Those who add any idea of commitment to Christ are teaching a false gospel.

Spiritual fruit is not guaranteed to any Christians. Some Christians spend their lives in a trash-dump of defeat, confusion, and every kind of evil; there's nothing wrong with that.

Heaven is guaranteed to all believers, but Christian victory is not. The saved still need salvation. Christ offers a whole range of post-conversion deliverance experiences to supply what Christians need. All these experiences require human works such as obedience, submission, and confession of Jesus as Lord. So God, in a little way, is dependant upon human effort in deliverance from sin.

Submission is not in any sense a condition for eternal life. "Calling on Christ" is about appealing to Him, *not* submitting to Him.

There's no guarantee that a real Christian will even love God. Salvation doesn't always put a sinner in a right relationship of intimacy—fellowship—with God.

If people are sure that they believe, their faith must be genuine. All who claim Christ as Savior—even those involved in serious or prolonged sin—can be assured that they belong to God. It is dangerous, destructive and mean to question the salvation of professing Christians. The writers of the New Testament *never* questioned the salvation of their readers.

It is very possible to have a moment of faith that guarantees heaven for eternity, then to turn away permanently and live a life depraved of any spiritual fruit and love for God. Real believers who are saved may even cease to name the name of Christ or even confess Christianity.

It is important that we know what the scriptures teach us, important that we don't follow after false gospels from lying teachers. One of the major arguments against a gospel proclaiming intimacy with God and discipleship with Christ is the cheap grace theology. We have to understand that cheap grace is twisted theology and deserves no place in the lives of Christians. Christ's call to discipleship and the truths of salvation are evident in the scriptures and cheap grace is wrong on so many points. Cheap grace is a cheap doctrine; it's filled with holes.

## VI

### How Do We Accept Christ's Offer?

We do not deserve salvation. We do not deserve happiness, contentment, joy. We do not deserve any of the blessings God chooses to pour upon His children. We don't even deserve a good life. We deserve Hell on earth and Hell for eternity because the seed of our ancestors rebelled against God, and so we, too, partake in that rebellion with the sinful nature infesting us. Yet God loves us way too much to just make us absolutely miserable for eternity. Truthfully, despite the fact that we are rotten to the core and completely set against God by nature, God doesn't want any of us to perish, and He desires *everyone* to come to Him and embrace the salvation offered only by Christ. It is only by Christ that we are saved. Nothing we could ever think or do can redeem us; only Christ can do that.

Yet not everyone will partake in the wonderful gift. There are some who do not want it, or think they don't need it. There are others who simply hate God, and still some who believe God is just a myth of the human psyche. The offer is for everyone, no matter ethnicity or race, no matter the sex of a person or their history. Some Christians believe everyone is forgiven even if they don't believe in Christ, but Christ speaks of those who will not enter Heaven *because* they didn't accept Him. It is easy to see that not everyone is going to accept the gift, but everyone is *able* to accept the gift.

The gift is completely free. It is available anytime, anywhere. Here's an analogy to explain what happens when we accept the gift: imagine that salvation is in a safe-deposit box at the bank. You're told (by God) that there is a million dollars and it's free. He hands you a key, and you get in your car, drive down to the bank, ask the teller for the lock-box, then open it with the key. The gift is right there and you take it, open it, and there's a million dollars. Did you actually *do* anything so that you'd be rewarded a million dollars? No. God just gave it to you. Now, He does the same thing with a gift that makes a million dollars look like broken pennies. You have not earned it, nor do you have to *do* anything to receive it. You just have to trust God that it's there and follow His instructions to receive it. The gift we do not deserve is waiting for us, we just need to follow God's instructions so we can receive it.

The instructions God gives us are found in the scriptures. They tell us what roads to take, what bank to go to, and what key to use so we can accept the free gift of salvation. Here are His instructions:

“...For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” – John 3:16

Before we can experience the beautiful taste of salvation, we must believe. Belief by itself does not save us, just as belief in body armor won't protect us from a bullet fired from a gun (we have to actually be wearing the armor, right?). But if we do not believe that body armor will protect us, we will not wear the armor, and the bullet will kill us. In the end, belief is either the beginning to life or the beginning to death. In the arena of salvation, when we say we must believe in Christ, we are saying we must believe that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and as such He is the only way to God (John 14:6). We also must believe God raised Christ from the dead (Romans 10:9). This isn't just a head-knowledge either; if we just get the facts right on an exam, it doesn't mean we actually *believe* it. Dozens of Christians can tell you who Darwin is and spell out evolution perfectly on an exam, but yet they really believe the six-day creation story. Our belief in Christ is not one of head-knowledge, but heart-knowledge; in other words, it is a belief that saturates all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and even all our physical existence. Yet on its own, belief is not enough to experience—really *experience*—salvation. If we just drive to the bank, it doesn't mean we have the lock-box; we're just sitting outside the front door.

“...’*The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart*’ (that is, the word of faith that we preach): that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.” – Romans 10:8-10

Not only is belief emphasized, but confession that Christ is Master and Savior is emphasized as well. The word of faith that is being preached is Christ; in this letter, St. Paul is saying that when Christ is near to us, even in our mouth and in our heart, then salvation is at hand. Salvation, therefore, isn't something we do, but something Christ does for us. We believe unto righteousness; this says that the righteousness that grants us eternal life comes not from our own actions but from Christ's righteousness. But that does not mean we are to remain stagnant and apathetic; no, when Christ is near us, so we must act. When we confess that Christ is Master and Savior, it means much more than we imagine it to mean; nowadays anyone can and will confess themselves as Christians and pledge allegiance to Christ, even if they don't really mean it. At the time when St. Paul wrote the letter to the Romans, for the Jews to actually confess Christ as Lord and Savior was to commit yourself to Christ and almost throw away your Jewish life; it was a huge deal, greatly emphasized by the fact that Jewish families of Jews who became Christians would often have funerals for the convert, acting as if he or she were dead. To be a Christian was, in many ways, an emotional death sentence; at the least, it meant you were ready to live a very uncomfortable life; becoming a Christian divided families and friendships and spilt lots of tears; many believe St. Paul lost his wife over his dedication to Christ. In ancient times, no one would confess (or be baptized) if they were not serious, so we must be serious. Confession doesn't simply mean running our mouth in tune to five syllables; it is making a serious statement that you are dedicated to Christ no matter what may happen. It is us saying, “Yes, I am a lifelong disciple of Christ, and I really mean it.”

“Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” – Acts 2:38

Baptism is yet another public demonstration of making Christ your own Lord, Master and Savior. Like confession, it reveals the seriousness of convictions and decisions, and in ancient times could be the predecessor to a difficult life and even death. When we are submerged under the water, it is symbolic of us dying with Christ, and when we raise up from the water, it is symbolic of our new life of forgiveness and living in-synch with the Triune God. Many people believe that baptism is not essential to salvation, while others believe that it is. There is no need for us to get into this argument; the plain fact is, Christ commands *all* of His followers to be baptized in His Name, and many salvation accounts include baptism as part of the process. Baptism may be essential to salvation, and yet it may *not* be essential to salvation. Nonetheless, Christ commands it and if we are truly His followers, we ought not to have second thoughts. Unfortunately, sometimes so much attention is paid to the baptism controversy that the last part of accepting the gift of salvation is often slighted or, much worse, completely forgotten.

“There were present at that season some who told [Christ] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, ‘Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’” – Luke 13:1-4

People in Jerusalem are mourning the deaths of several Jews and Christ uses the opportunity to teach about spiritual death, or separation from God. As usual, we are more concerned about physical death than we are spiritual death; we are ignorant of the consequences of spiritual death and do not understand its implications. Christ is not ignorant, and He speaks about real life—union with God—and real death—separation from God—as much as possible. Here He is saying that if we do not repent, we will never escape from spiritual death, and our physical death will seal

the deal for an eternity apart from God. In many circles of the Christian faith, repentance has lost its importance and, sadly, has even been forgotten in many cases. Many people believe a false gospel of cheap grace: you're forgiven, so do whatever you want, repentance is for the Old Testament people. This is wrong. Christ emphasizes repentance and it is essential to salvation: "...But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Repentance is simply throwing off the life of sin for a life of living with and for God; throwing the sin-life in the trash and picking up the God-life; turning our backs on sin and obeying God. Repentance does not equal absolute perfection; we are still fallen creatures and we must constantly confess our sins and ask forgiveness, but God is more eager to grant forgiveness than we are eager to receive it! In repentance we make a real effort to obey God and avoid sin, a real effort in pursuing life-change, but because we are still drenched in the sinful nature, we will still sin. Yet there is really good news: God offers us the opportunity to live completely transformed lives, where obedience becomes instinct and sin is seen as it really is: awful and disgusting and horrible. When Christ speaks of people being able to be recognized as good or bad by their lives as a tree is recognized as good or bad by its fruit, we need to understand that repentance is the first "fruit" of a good tree. It may not be big at first, but it is there. In time, the fruit of repentance will flourish amongst the fruits of conforming to Christ. If there is no repentance, there isn't able to be any good fruit at all, and the tree will be covered in bad fruit.

If we have an authentic faith in Christ (believe), we see the beauty of discipleship and commit to it (confession). Because our faith is genuine, and as disciples of Christ, we see no other possible action than to repent. We do not even consider not repenting. Repentance is joyful and exciting, it isn't hard for us to set ourselves on the path of repentance (though, at times, it can be very rough). It is important to note that the repentance God calls for is a change in heart regarding good and bad, and that leads to a change in the way we are and the way we live. So repentance is more than just changing the way we live life; it is changing who we are (our hearts). As disciples of Christ, we follow His example and, as Christ was baptized by John the Baptist, so we, too, are baptized in the name of the Triune God.

Believe. Confess. Be baptized. Repent. Eternal truths are woven into all of these and reveal the seriousness of dedication to Christ. God has not made receiving salvation impossible; He hasn't even made it hard. It is not His desire that any should be separated from Him, but that all should come to Him for real life. He does not force us to come to Him, however; it is purely free will. How can love be forged apart from free will? It cannot! It is our decision to pursue God or not. But for those who set their hearts upon the King and pursue Him, God offers a wonderful gift: salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.

When we truly believe, when we are serious about that belief, when we turn from a sin-life, embracing a God-life, and when we are baptized in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as Christ commands, we have been, without a *doubt*, saved. We have received salvation. At this point in the Christian's life, the Christian can rest assured that he or she is definitely saved and have no doubts about it. Of course it is human nature to have doubts, but if we truly believe, if we are serious, if we repent and pursue God and are baptized, the doubts are ill-placed. We would do well to reiterate, however, that not believe, nor confession, nor baptism nor repentance saves us. They lead to the lock-box, but it is God who gave us the key, and the one giving us the gift in the lock-box is Christ. Not because we deserve it, but because He wants us. We do not earn it; He gives it to us. Nothing and no one saves us but Jesus Christ alone.

## VII

### Discipleship, Intimacy with God, and Salvation

Do we have to be a disciple of Christ to be saved? Yes and no. Yes, because if our faith is genuine it will lead to confession (telling others that you've made Christ your Master) and repentance (the beginning of discipleship). The rest of the Christian life—the growing maturity of

the Christian—happens through discipleship. So, in a sense, it is essential to salvation, for discipleship is the heart of the Christian. It's what the Christian is pursuing because he loves God and knows Christ as King. Yet at the same time, we have to acknowledge that it is not discipleship that saves us, but Christ alone. Discipleship is a response to our salvation. So we can tell whether or not we have been saved by whether or not we are a disciple.

Fear may be running through you as you ask yourself, "Am I a disciple?" There are disciples who don't even know they're disciples, and there are people who believe they are disciples when they really aren't. How can we tell if we're a disciple? Looking at the basics, a disciple keeps God at the forefront of his or her mind, because he or she is in love with God. A disciple pursues keeping Christ's commands and through the Spirit is changing inside-out. A disciple does not see the whole Christian faith as a part-time hobby but a lifetime commitment. A disciple makes an honest effort of following Christ every day, and a disciple honestly pursues and loves God. A disciple is serious about his or her faith in Christ. All of this flows from the joy of being saved; it flows from the fact that Christ has already saved us. Once again, in my attempt to make sure my meaning is clear, here it is:

*Christ alone saves us. Discipleship does not. Discipleship is a response to our salvation.*

In the same breath,

*We can tell whether or not we are saved by whether or not we are a disciple.*

If your car's engine is fine, it will start. If it's engine is broken, it won't start. The car starting or just sitting there quiet shows whether or not the engine is fine. Discipleship or no discipleship shows whether we have been saved by God's grace. It is like a mathematical equation: as  $2+2=4$ , so Christ+Cross=salvation which yields to discipleship.

Is it intimacy with God that saves us? Again, yes and no. Yes, because in salvation we become friends of God and are able to pursue an even deeper intimacy with Him, an intimacy that can even reach the intimacy as seen in the echoes of marriage. And no, because intimacy with God, once again, is something that happens because of that which saves us: Christ and the Cross. We are unable to experience any kind of intimacy with God outside of the Messiah's sacrifice; an attempt to "become one with God" outside of the Cross gets nowhere, for without the Cross we are hardened enemies of the God who really lives.

*Intimacy with God happens because Christ has saved us.*

*Outside of the Cross, intimacy with Christ is an impossibility.*

Salvation is ours to receive because of what Christ has done for us on the Cross. He paid the debt of our sinful nature not because He had to, not because it was the politically-correct thing to do, but because He deeply, insanely, jealously loves us. He calls everyone to His love and invites everyone up into an eternal dance with God. If we believe with all that we are that Christ is the Son of God, that He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, we will be drawn so deeply by the Spirit that we will have to work *not* to fall in love with God; this is God calling us by our names, choosing us out from the world. We will dedicate ourselves to Christ and commit to being His disciple and growing our intimacy with God. Our discipleship will begin, and at the heart of the discipleship is repentance: throwing the sin-life into the sea and walking along the golden shores of the Spirit-led-life. We will be baptized with Christ out of love for Him and the Spirit will enter into us, enabling us to be changed, strengthening our intimacy with God, and guiding our discipleship and conformity to Christ throughout our lives. A blood-soaked twin-beam of lumber holds the key to our becoming children of God. Who would've thought Christ would offer so much?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Contemplating Heaven: An Eternal Paradise*

#### I

#### Why Contemplate Heaven?

The late preacher Jonathan Edwards said something that has stopped many people dead in their tracks: “This life ought to be spent by us only as a journey towards Heaven.” This flies in the face of much modern understanding, as scientists say Heaven and Hell do not exist. It also goes against the grain for many Christians who are told that they should probably not think about Heaven because they need to focus, rather, on the here-and-now. But Jonathan Edwards had a different approach to Heaven, calling us to think about it and to view life as a race where Heaven is the ultimate reward when we reach the finishing line.

To understand what Heaven is, we have to understand where we came from. We are meant for Paradise. Our souls – the *who we are* – are designed for Paradise. Since we got kicked out of that Paradise, however, we walk around carrying holes in our souls, gaps that cannot be filled with anything of this world. We also carry unique desires that sometimes get made fun of, or longings that seem ‘other-worldly.’ These desires, these longings, these holes sprout from the world we are made for – they make up *who we are*, but we’re not home, and so they are currently unfulfilled. Jesus came to bring us home; in becoming Christ’s disciples and developing intimacy with God, Heaven is a reality we can begin to taste and experience today. But being saved is not *just* being delivered of the punishment for sin; it is *not* just forgiveness. Being saved is a fancy two-word duo that means *getting the life back*. Jesus said,

“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.” – John 10:10

Jesus came to give us tastes of this life *here and now*. So many people make the mistake of thinking that Jesus means we’re getting *all* the life we lost back *now*. No – we’re just getting glimpses. Jesus doesn’t want to spoil it (though, as we’ll see, how can you spoil something so good?). Jesus says, “Live by faith.” Live by faith that the *life* Jesus came for is the *life* we will receive. In all our hardships and pains and troubles, we are often tempted to give up: “This isn’t the life Jesus meant – is it?” No. It’s not. We *do* find life in this world, more life than those who don’t have Jesus, and our holes are filled semi-deep, but we won’t be made complete until we return home – to the Paradise we lost, to complete and unfettered communion with God, to the beauty and adventure and intimacy we thirst for. Christ’s message is two-fold: “Intimacy with God now *and* intimacy with God forever in paradise!”

The Apostle Paul, in a letter to the believers in Corinth, speaks of a man who actually got to see Heaven with his own eyes. (2 Corinthians 12:1-4) “For instance, I know a man who, fourteen years ago, was seized by Christ and swept in ecstasy to the heights of Heaven. I really don’t know if this took place in the body or out of it; only God knows. I also know that this man was hijacked into paradise--again, whether in or out of the body, I don’t know; God knows. There he heard the unspeakable spoken, but was forbidden to tell what he heard.” This ‘man’ (read verse 1) is actually Paul; Paul adds to the depth of this statement in another letter when he pens, “The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better.” (Philippians 1:23) Why do you think Paul was so eager to go and be with Christ in



paradise? I've no doubt that after the vision of paradise, he looked about and the world was cold, boring, dry, and just spiritually *painful*. What he'd thought was fun had been revealed for the grimy monotone it really was, when it was bathed in Heaven's light. What he'd thought were brilliant colors were revealed as black-and-white in Heaven's rainbow. So he ached so hard to return to paradise.

Christ calls Heaven, paradise, only once. Throughout His entire ministry, we find Christ referring to Heaven as paradise only once. We will see why in a moment, but it's important to note that not only Jonathan Edwards and not only St. Paul looked forward to Heaven; Christ did as well:

"Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed – that exhilarating finish in and with God – he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he's *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!" – Hebrews 12:2,3, *The Message*

When the time came for Him to be betrayed by a friend, to be abandoned by those He loved; when the time came when He stood exposed before the world, mocked and ashamed; when the time came when the clothes were torn off His back and He was punished for innocence; when He was so tired and so worn that He couldn't even carry a piece of limber; when the nails were driven into His hands and feet, and when He was raised up, naked (people were crucified naked in Roman times) before the earth, beaten and bloodied, laughed at by those whom He loved, He *remembered*. He'd been to Heaven before; that's where He *came* from. He hadn't called Heaven Paradise yet, but now, as He is about to die, when all strength left Him, when the temptation to jump off that cross and heal His body that instant came on, He held off by *remembering*.

A guilty criminal said, "Remember me in your Kingdom." (Luke 23:42) We can imagine Jesus' eyes lit up, and the pain seemed to falter a bit, and He knew where He was going; His own words went through His soul, and He hung on a bit longer, telling the criminal, tears crawling down his face, "Today, you will be with me in Paradise." (Luke 23:43) When life gets tough for us, when we're tired and worn out and the road doesn't seem to end; when we're sick and want to vomit because of how bad we have it – don't let people tell you we Christians have it good, because the way it looks to the naked eye, we don't – then we need to *remember*. Jesus remembered, and he ached for it with all His heart. We must remember.

We are *called* to remember Heaven. Jesus stressed it so much because we *need* to keep an eye on it. We need to know where we're going. To say, "If you think about Heaven all the time, you're ungodly," is an oxymoron. In 1 John chapter 2, John – who is known as the disciple Jesus loved most intimately – says, "If we claim communion with God, we need to live like Jesus." Jesus kept Heaven at the front of His mind all the time.

When the criminal spoke, Jesus didn't say, "Today you will find the love of God," or "today you will receive mercy and grace." He didn't even say, "Today your sins will be forgiven." Sure, all that happened, but here's the question: *what was on Jesus' mind?*

"Today you will be with me in Paradise!"

## II

### A False Conception of Heaven

"[God] has planted eternity in the human heart." – Ecclesiastes 3:11

We are all dying to know what Heaven will be like. It is written in all of us. A sad truth is that 'Heaven has been turned into an oxymoron – we are told we will be worshipping God by singing hymn after hymn, one after the other, forever and ever, amen. We are told Heaven is a place of baby angels with halos and harps, sitting on white clouds. We are told it will be a never-ending church service. That's what most of us imagine it as being. We say, "Yay! Heaven! I can't wait!" but deep down we're saying, "That doesn't sound so exciting. That sounds *boring*." It doesn't just sound boring—it sounds like Hell. No wonder, in the words of Thoreau, we live lives of quiet desperation, void of hope—we are in the mindset that this fallen, crooked world is *all there is*. If for all practical purposes we believe that this life is our best shot at happiness, if this is as good as it gets, we will live as desperate, demanding, and eventually despairing men and women. And most people are stuck in this mindset, and so Thoreau's remark—sadly—hits the bulls-eye.

We speak of Heaven so seldom and when we do, the images are sickly: fat babies fluttering around with tiny wings, bored saints lazing on shapeless clouds, strumming harps and wondering what's happening back on earth where all the action is. Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft wrote:

"Our pictures of Heaven simply do not move us; they are not moving pictures. It is this aesthetic failure rather than intellectual or moral failures in our pictures of Heaven and of God that threatens faith most potently today. Our pictures of Heaven are dull, platitudinous and syrupy; therefore, so is our faith, our hope, and our love for Heaven. It doesn't matter whether it's a dull lie or a dull truth. Dullness, not doubt, is the strongest enemy of faith, just as indifference, not hate, is the strongest enemy of love." (*Everything you wanted to know about Heaven*)

Are we to believe that an eternal church service is better than going swimming at the beach, eating gourmet food, white-water rafting, hanging out with friends, going rock-climbing and caving and rappelling, hiking the Appalachian Trail, even stepping on the moon? Have we dreamed better dreams than God can dream? Have we written better endings to stories than even God can write? Here's some good news – an eternal church service is *not* Heaven.

Yet most Christians do not have the faintest notion of what Heaven will be like. One of the "grand essentials" of human happiness is having something to do, and most of us think that we'll just be sitting or standing around in Heaven; it an unspoken fear, one that we don't let out too much, and because we don't seem as excited as Paul does, or as excited as all the others in our church (who, by the way, might just be throwing on the show of excitement as many do) we feel dirty and cheap and spiritually unclean. After all, the never-ending sing-along in the sky isn't exactly breath-taking!

*The Message* says, "God isn't the God of dead men, but of the living. To him all are alive." (Luke 20:38) Jesus meant that those who love and are loved by God are not allowed to cease to exist, because they are God's treasures. He delights in them and intends to hold onto them. He has even prepared for them an individualized work in His vast universe. God will not allow us to ever *cease from existence*; the moment we die, we are standing before God, at the gates of paradise. We will see the semi slide into our lane – and then, though last we know it were a cold and dreary winter, we will hear song birds, and laughter, and a warm sun, a gentle breeze, and smell brilliant flowers blooming upon the mountainsides! No wonder it is written, "Death, where is your sting?" (1 Corinthians 15:55) No wonder Paul said, "To live is Christ, *and to die is gain*." (Philippians 1:21) Paul *knew* what Heaven is like! And when you finish reading this, you will, too.

If you want to know what a painting is like, look at the painter. To get a glimpse of what Heaven will look like, without reaching into the Bible, we need to look at the painter God. How do we begin to describe Him? *Artistic. Powerful. Awesome. Majestic. Intricate. Delicate. Whimsical. Creative. Wild.* The universe is beautiful, and deep inside every one of us, we long to find our place in it, we long to care and develop it; it is for this that we were made. The only story worth living in is the story of us returning Home; the road goes out before us, and our destination awaits.

### III

## A Series of Heavens

Many of us think there is only one Heaven and only one Hell. This is far from the truth. In the span of human history, that which is written and that which will be written, there are two Heavens and two Hells.

The first Heaven exists now, and will exist until the return of Christ for His bride and the judgment of earth and all its people. The second Heaven is the New Heavens and New Earth; after the return of Christ and the judgment is finished, Christ will remake the universe and we who are His disciples, we who are God's children and intimate with Him, will reign for all eternity.

Likewise, there are two Hells. The current Hell, existing now and until the return of Christ and the judgment of earth and all the people who have ever lived, is a horrible place words cannot even begin to describe (though we will take a shot at describing Hell later in this chapter). After Christ returns, the judgment concludes, and the New Heavens and New Earth are being forged, the new Hell will emerge, this one even worse than before. While in the current Hell there is only people, as Satan and the evil angels are in the world, and Satan is called the Prince of the Earth, so in the new Hell the evil angels and Satan will be destroyed and cast down into the Lake of Fire; as there is going to be a New Heavens and New Earth, so shall there be a Lake of Fire.

I have no doubt that you're aching now to know what the eternal Heaven and eternal Hell look like for those who will be spending time there. But first we must look at the intermediate Heaven, and then look at the return of Christ as well as the judgment of Christ. Only after we cover these sections and unearth long-forgotten truths are we fully-ready to move on and enjoy the prophesy of what we will one day experience.

The intermediate Heaven is not, so far as we know, on this earth as we see it. Scripture seems to portray it as being in another dimension or even located somewhere else in the universe that science cannot reach. With forty-billion stars in our galaxy and a known 50-billion galaxies, it would not surprise me if Heaven were in another galaxy somewhere. The other-dimension idea is supported by the new string-theory of physics. In the intermediate Heaven, we who are Christ's disciples and developing intimacy with God are glorified in the sense that our sinful nature is completely stripped of us; we become the children of God by nature, not by grace, but because of grace; this is a gift from God to us. We have unfettered access to God, we can see God, and we are worshipping God, talking to God, and living with one another in a paradise where we can still see what is going on with earth and those we left behind. We have memories of our life and still have love for those on earth, love for our parents or children, love for our friends. If I were to die today, as Christ has not yet returned for His bride, I would be in the intermediate Heaven with all of those who have gone before me.

The intermediate Hell is not so lovely. It is a place of loneliness, heartbreak, depression, anger, resentment, regret. It's basically the worst possible place, situation, and state-of-existence possibly imaginable. All the riches, all the prestige, all the power, all the fun the wicked have with parties, drunken orgies and getting high off drugs has a reward that's no par of excellence. The wrath of God takes on a completely new meaning.

But things will get shaken up when Christ returns to earth. The first time He came looking all meek-and-mild to the untrained eye (though He certainly displayed anger and wrath and judgment many times). This second coming won't be marked with mercy and grace. As soon as His holy angels gather the elect—His disciples—from the earth, He is going to make the world a living Hell for everyone living. As they die, they will be forced to show themselves before God for judgment.

## IV The Return of Christ

“Then if anyone says to you, 'Look! Here is the Messiah!' or 'There he is!'—do not believe it. For false messiahs and false prophets will appear and produce great signs and omens, to lead astray, if possible, even the elect. Take note, I have told you beforehand. So, if they say to you, 'Look! He is in the wilderness,' do not go out. If they say, 'Look! He is in the inner rooms,' do not believe it. For as the lightning comes from the east and flashes as far as the west, so will be the coming of the Son of Man.” – Matthew 24:23-27

Imagine this. You wake up, brush your teeth, maybe have a bowl of cereal. It's too cold out, so you don't go get the paper. You warm up the car and slide into the seat. The drive to the stadium is long and tedious, and you listen to the same skipping CD over and over. Finally you get there, and you get chosen for the strip search, and *then* someone takes your seat! Fuming, you call over security, get in a bitter fight, and are humiliated to discover you're reading your ticket backwards! So you sulk to your seat – somewhere in the atmosphere, it's hard to breathe – and you just watch the people next to you as they view the game through binoculars. The football game starts, the ball flies around. Everything is nice. The light oxygen is making you sleepy, and—a great blast of air hits you, and suddenly a brilliant light falls on everything across the earth. You cover your eyes, feeling as if your eyes are being sucked out of their sockets. You hear shouts and screams and cries and when you bear the pain to open your eyes, you see a brilliant white horse, surrounded by fire, coming down from the sky. His very *presence* fills you with terror; He is coming for one reason and you know that reason; it terrifies you: He is coming to kill. Out of the Heavens, as if from a portal, come millions and millions of horses with white riders, an entire Army, stretching across the ends of the earth. You fall down in your seat as the white horse bears down upon you; suddenly the other horses are flying past you, around you; people are crying and yelling; the football players are running for their lives. You hear the crashing of cars outside and sirens but most of all you shake in horror. One of the men on horses swoops past, grabs you, and you feel his steely cold grip. Suddenly the earth drops away, and the stadium dwindles. The man holds you tough; you look out across the city and see thousands of people being carried into the sky. Volcanoes are exploding, storms are raging, earthquakes are sucking people into the earth, the sun is exploding and engulfing the earth in fire, meteors fall from the sky. You think this is some kind of alien invasion; you're wrong. But it *is* the end of the world.

Sound too sci-fi to be true? Well, it's *not* too sci-fi to be true. It doesn't even come *close* to how amazing the return of our King will be. What you just imagined was one man's view of the second coming – Jesus riding down with the Angel-Armies of Heaven and steeling away His elected (His disciples and those intimate with God). This is just an example of what it *may* be like when Christ returns. We can speculate about what it will be like, but the truth is, He's coming.

Much of the hype about the End Times revolves around the bestselling book series called *Left Behind*. They are wonderful books of fiction, but they operate off a faulty base for the End Times. The authors mostly go off prophecies from the ancient prophets and they pull scripture from John's Revelation. As it happens to be, the prophecies from the Old Testament speak about Christ and the rise and fall of worldly empires, not so much about the End Times. John's Revelation, too, is not so much about the End Times (though there are a *few* references to the End Times inside it) but about the siege and fall of Jerusalem, as well as some new ways to look at historical events such as the birth of Christ. If we want to know what the second coming is going to be like, we need to look at what Christ said it would be like. Although He said He doesn't know the exact date of His coming, He knows exactly what it will be like.

When Jesus returns, as we saw in the scriptures selected for the beginning of this section, we won't miss it. In Jesus' day, people were hungry for a Messiah. They were *starving*. Lots of

people had come through in Jesus' day, claiming to be the Messiah sent from God. So we find God giving evidence for Jesus being the Messiah, evidence not only through the Old Testament scriptures (such as prophecies), but also through the miracles and purity of Jesus, and most of all, His resurrection. But what about the second coming? God has also laid forth a blueprint that we find in Jesus' words. Just as it was difficult to see the whole picture of Jesus' first coming if you lived before His days on earth, so it is difficult for us to really see what the second coming will really be like. And just as we look back now and say, "Oh, *that's* what God meant in Isaiah 53!", in the future after the second coming, it isn't unreasonable to believe we'll look back and say, "*That's* what Jesus was talking about!" So dealing with Jesus' second coming is no exact science; but it is real, it will happen, and it will be amazing.

Jesus tells us, "You'll know when I return – no one can miss it." Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, you'll see Jesus when He returns. His Glory and Power and Holiness will stretch across the face of the earth, and all creation will bow down before Him. For just as lightning flashes and all can see, from the east and west, so it will be with Christ's return—all will bear witness! None will miss out! I do believe it will be a terrifying ordeal—even for the strongest believers.

"Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in Heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see 'the Son of Man coming on the clouds of Heaven' with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of Heaven to the other." – Matthew 24:30,31

Christ's return will be so *powerful* that *everyone on the face of the planet* will mourn. Even the strongest, the most emotionless, the one who says, 'Nothing ever affects me,' will fall apart in mourning. Those who brag to their friends about never crying will fall flat on their face and cry their eyes out. Why? Who knows? Maybe the fright will be so deep-down that it tears us apart inside-out. Maybe when He returns, we will get a glimpse of how very wicked we really are; but it seems to me that we will simply mourn because we get a glimpse of how amazing Jesus is—we see His power and great glory. This is just one of those things we'll look back on and say, "Yeah, I cried, and *that's* why," whatever the reason is. And when Christ returns, He will send out His angels to collect His elect from all the corners of the globe.. What happens from there is both amazing, awe-inspiring, and scary.

As Christ's disciples are delivered up to God, the wrath of Christ descends. In Revelation 19 we have an amazing depiction of Christ and His return:

"Then I saw Heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Faithful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war. His eyes are like a flame of fire, and on his head are many diadems; and he has a name inscribed that no one knows but himself. He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is called The Word of God. And the armies of Heaven, wearing fine linen, white and pure, were following him on white horses. From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has a name inscribed, "King of kings and Lord of lords." Then I saw an angel standing in the sun, and with a loud voice he called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, "Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders--flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great." – Revelation 19:11-16

Christ goes from the meek-and-mild preacher-boy to the most terrifying and ruthless warrior the earth has ever seen. All soldiers, from every war, from every great tragedy and mythology, cannot equal the ferocity of Christ as He descends upon the earth and upon all who rejected the Holy

Spirit and intimacy with God. Throughout the Gospels, we are told what Christ will do. The earth will be covered with fire, everything and everyone burnt up. Stars will fall from the Heavens, and the people will be utterly destroyed. Earthquakes will swallow people up and the universe itself will break apart. The situation will be so catastrophic and so horrible as Christ treads the “wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty” that people will literally cry out for death to take over them. As Japanese villagers dove off the cliffs of the Pacific islands during World War II to avoid the invading American soldiers, so shall everyone try to commit suicide when the return comes. Christ will not let them succeed. They must wait and feel the full blow of His anger.

The disciples of Christ are safe in the intermediate Heaven, gleefully watching as their enemies are destroyed. They will watch as the entire earth is consumed in fire and the universe breaks apart, all the laws of physics crumbling under God’s command. All the wicked of the earth will perish, and then righteous and wicked together will stand before God for judgment.

## V

### The Judgment of All People

As the earth is smoldering from the effects of Christ’s coming, Christ returns to His Father’s side and all the people of the earth, from every nation, every tribe, every ethnicity and every time period, from the beginning of creation to now, stand before the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. All of creation holds its breath as the judging begins. God calls the people out for judgment and Christ folds His arms to watch.

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left.” – Matthew 25:31-46

Here comes the judging. Remember all those times the scriptures warn us that we will be judged for everything we do? Behold, here it is. Jesus will sit on the Throne, surrounded by His glory, that glory Peter and his pals only *glimpsed* during Jesus’ transfiguration. And here, not only will the elect be before Him, but also all the other peoples of the world. Everyone is present on this Day of Judgment.

How does the judgment only take a day? Maybe Day of Judgment is metaphorical, such as the ‘Day of Abraham’ or the ‘Day of the Dinosaur.’ Not any set time, even a long period of time. Jesus even makes mentions to the ‘last days.’ Regardless, it is in these ‘last days’ that the judging takes place. This is amazing, because everyone is gathered before God; it is awe-inspiring, because we will actually *see Jesus*; but it is scary, because no doubt we will see the separated before us. Those who were Christ’s disciples and intimate with God are given entrance to paradise on the right of the throne. But those who remained in rebellion against God will be placed on the left. As we walk towards the front, what will go through our minds? Know that anxiety before a big football game, or big speech, or awards ceremony? Multiply it by a billion, and there’s what we will feel as we step up to home plate before the King.

“For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.” – Matthew 16:27

We won’t *only* be separated as sheep and goats. We will also be repaid for what we’ve done. Think about this. All those times you wanted vengeance, and wondered when God would give it, here it comes. Vengeance is dealt out. Remember when you did that good deed without anyone looking, or fasted without telling anyone, or stored up ‘spiritual treasures’? You will be rewarded. Or remember that hypocrisy you always hid, that sin you refused to give up? You will be punished. We can’t fathom how great is the wrath of God. It is something we as the Body of

Christ often overlook. Our God is loving, yes, but he is also a God of wrath. The punishment He has for those who rebel against Him cannot be imagined. But flip the coin – the rewards for His disciples cannot be fathomed, either. Any good reward, gift, or treasure you can imagine, shoot it down – it doesn't even scratch the surface. *That's* how amazing both God's love for His disciples really is. Now, we know those who are put on God's right hand will be rewarded and allowed to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But what about these 'goats'?

"Again, the kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."  
– Matthew 13:47-50

Christ refers to the Second Coming like a fisherman who drags in his net and separates the good catch and the bad catch. When the Messiah returns, the angels will draw up the fish, and they will be separated. The good fish will be put in baskets, and the bad thrown out. God will keep the 'good'—the sheep—but will throw out the 'bad'—the goats. He will throw them in the 'furnace of fire,' where there will be 'weeping and gnashing of teeth.' A place we know as Hell.

Hell is not a place where the devil runs around in control, with a forked tail and a pitch-fork, and we slave in brutal fire all day and all night without sleep. Nor does it come close to what Dante envisioned in his *The Divine Comedy*. How do we know this? Because Hell is out of the reach of the human mind. Hell is simply a place where God is not. God pulls away His Spirit from Hell; he refuses to be there. The devil is not in control; no, he is not the absolute ruler, but rather he is on the bottom of the ladder, suffering the most and the most miserable. Hell was actually designed—yes, Hell was *created by God*—for Satan and his demons after their rebellion; but if we decide to follow Satan (by choosing *not* to follow Christ), we're given the same punishment the evil angels are given. Hell is simply a place where God will not exist; this is difficult to understand with God's omni-presence, and the state of existing apart from God (as of now, God is everywhere, where I am now typing and where you are reading). But it is a nasty, horrible place, and that's where the goats will be sent – banished with Satan and his fallen angels.

"He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of Heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. When the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?' He answered, 'An enemy has done this.' The slaves said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he replied, 'No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" " – Matthew 13:24-30, NRSV

God is not a big fan of hypocrites. He is not a fan of those who 'worship' God Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights by their lips and raising their hands and praying and saying, "Jesus is so cool!" but refuse to acknowledge Jesus, refuse to worship God with their *lives*, the rest of the time. In other words, Jesus despises the spiritual fakes, the spiritual posers, the ones who make themselves look like disciples but really aren't. Such posers can infiltrate our lives from anyplace anywhere. There are posers leading worship, posers who stand behind a podium pounding a Bible, posers who fill our pews and watch our children in the nursery. Jesus calls these posers, fakes and hypocrites weeds. Weeds in the wheat. The fakes are weeds, and those really running after God are wheat. Maybe you know people who are such 'weeds'—or maybe some of us here *are* weeds. Some would think it would be better to 'pull them out' now, erase them from the

Church and banish them from the chapel – but God says, “No. I’ll remove them later.” In the Day of Judgment, the weeds won’t be treading after the sheep! I am afraid many “Christians” will be sorely surprised.

“Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives. Truly I tell you, he will put that one in charge of all his possessions. But if that wicked slave says to himself, ‘My master is delayed,’ and he begins to beat his fellow slaves, and eats and drinks with drunkards, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour that he does not know. He will cut him in pieces and put him with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” – Matthew 24:48-51

Those posers will be thrown with the hypocrites. Who are hypocrites? Those who worship God with their lips and hands and songs but don’t worship Him with their lives. Those who scream to stop sin, but keep in their own sin. Those who profess Christ’s name but deny Him with their lifestyles. Those who make themselves look righteous on the outside but are dirty and filthy on the inside. Such is the skin—the very flesh and bone—of a hypocrite. The poser and hypocrite will be thrown into Hell. There’s no way around that truth. We can’t just ignore it forever. Why did Jesus say this over and over? If you have a garden, you know weeds are common. So they are today. It is Jesus’ wish that weeds will hear His message, become His disciples and grow in intimacy with God.

None of us know when this will happen. Most Christians agree it will happen. Some think very soon. Yet there are others who believe we are still in what will be known as the era of the “Early Church.” Christ is growing more and more popular, and more and more people are diving into His message and clinging to His offer. The number of people freshly coming to Christ is on the rise. Those who hold onto this claim say that Jesus won’t come back until *all hope* for peoples’ salvation is lost—God is very patient and doesn’t want anyone to perish. Others say that Jesus’ return will be soon—today, tomorrow, a week from now, but get ready. Regardless, we all need to be ready (as we’ll see in just a moment), but one thing we can know *for sure* is that Christ *is* coming and judgment *will* happen. The universe will collapse. It is spinning towards its destruction. The sun is dying—it will grow and grow until it takes over the earth and nothing on it could live. Where you sit now will be engulfed with the sun, in due time. Perhaps this is the Day of Judgment? Who knows? But Jesus *will* come back; people waited for Him to come back once, they waited and waited, it’d seem as if He’d never show, then “There He is!” We’re waiting and waiting, it seems as if He’ll never show, but then “Here He is!” we’ll cry one day.

“For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming.”  
Matthew 24:38-42, *NRSV*

Scripture tells us that people will be mocking Jesus’ coming. They will be making fun of those who make such claims. Then their mockery will be cut short because Jesus will come. People made fun of Noah as he built the ark – they thought he was a fool, an idiot, didn’t have any grip on reality. Christians are accused of the same things nowadays. But the Flood came and killed them all. People will be mocking those who proclaim Christ’s coming, but the ‘Flood’ of Christ will come, and wash them away. People will be taken from wherever they are – no waiting list, no warning, no due date. So keep watch – we’ve no idea when the Messiah is coming! Could be today, could be tomorrow – could be when I finish this sentence. Keep on guard.

Those who have lived in the intermediate Heaven are brought to judgment, and those who lived in the intermediate Hell are brought forth for judgment. Those from Hell are forced to watch as



God reads the accusations against them, listing every sin, every deep and dirty secret, to the whole world. Families will be ashamed, friends will be torn apart. The disciples of Christ will step up, but before God can read off the accusations, Christ steps in, says, “He’s with Me,” to God, and to us breathes relief as He says, “Come, enter into My happiness.” And we are taken back into Heaven where we will be able to watch the creation of a new Heavens and new earth and partake in it.

A famous analogy of Judgment Day revolves around God having a big-screen that shows everyone’s sins before the entire world. The wicked will be completely exposed for who and what they really are. Yet when the righteous take the place for judging, all that shows up on the screen is the sacrifice of Christ. This shows that all our sins are removed from us completely by Christ and it is because of who Christ is and what He’s done that we can spend eternity in intimacy with God, intimacy with others, and intimacy with creation.

Those taken into Heaven are given the beautiful gift of not only seeing Christ create a perfect masterpiece out of a broken and smoldering universe, but we are also given the command by Christ to “go have fun!” and the new Heavens and new earth is opened up to us. It is a world where our dreams come true, where it is blissful vacation everyday, and we can pursue our passions in a way never before possible. It really *is* an awe-inspiring award. The wicked don’t have it so well: they are tossed into the Lake of Fire, a place of eternal, unending torment.

## VI

### The New Heavens and New Earth

While Heaven cannot be fathomed, imagined, or touched to the extremity of how amazing it will really be, God has given us some clues, some foretastes, that when you dig into them, make you think—and make you smile. Jesus speaks of the ‘new creation,’ a great wedding feast, paradise. Jesus told the criminal on the cross, “Today you will be with me in *paradise*.” In Heaven, we will find intimate communion with the Trinity. Some think the human souls’ passion for beauty and adventure is something dirty and unclean, and that when we get to Heaven, these ‘corrupt’ passions will be stripped away. No! They will be even *more* intense, because the passion for beauty and adventure is *from God*! We are *designed* that way. The idea that our passions and desires are sinful is not biblical. It flows out of the beliefs of stoicism, which states that the “pure” way of life is one of indifference to pleasure or pain; children of God are not called to indifference to pleasure, nor indifference to pain. We will find beauty all around us in a new restored creation—a new Heavens and a new earth. Here we will be able to live out the *beauty* and the *adventure*.

“Behold, I will create new Heavens and a new earth.” – Isaiah 65:17

A desire for beauty is within us all. The things that attract us the most are things—or persons—of beauty. One man said that his wife was so beautiful, so mesmerizing, it was just beyond comprehension to imagine how beautiful the *creator* of such beauty is! All beauty stems from the hand of God. Yellowstone Park, the rainbows after a spring rain, the turning colors of leaves, dew on the grass, the Grand Canyon, music—all this beauty comes from God. And so, when we float down the Amazon, travel through the deserts of Australia, marvel at the waves against the shore, sometimes we feel aches—aches because we know the beauty we see now will not last; aches because *we were meant for eternal beauty*. Heaven is a place of eternal beauty. All the beautiful spots you’ve ever known—for me, the green-backed Tennessee mountains, the ocean, and sunlight coming through the trees—are just foretastes of what is to come. The Himalayas, Congo jungle, all the luxurious vacationing spots you can imagine—all are shadows of the realities to come. Maui and the Florida Keys and Cancun will look like garbage dumps compared to what the new creation will look like!

However, we just don't want to see beauty. We want to be *part* of beauty. We *thirst* to be beautiful. In Heaven, we will be immersed in beauty and will be beautiful ourselves. This longing for beauty beyond the eyes cannot be put into words—we want to be *united* with the beauty we see, we want to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become a part of it. In the new Heavens and new earth, we shall. We shall all find this beauty in the restoration, and part of the adventure will be discovering and enjoying the wonder of a new creation.

Restoration means that what is old will be made new. What is dark will be made light. What is dirty will be made clean. Peter writes in 2 Peter 2:11-13 (*the Message*):

“Since everything here might be gone tomorrow, do you see how essential it is to live a holy life? Daily expect the Day of God, eager for its arrival. The galaxies will burn up and the elements will melt that day – but *we'll* hardly notice. We'll be looking the other way, ready for the promised new Heavens and the promised new earth, all landscaped with righteousness.”

Think of how beautiful the Germanic Forest and the Alaskan glaciers and the Caribbean are now, corrupted and ruined by sin; imagine how they will be fully restored, brought back to how they were before sin entered the picture! Our world is in a state of winter—cold, dry, bleak, the trees are bare, the air is cold, the sky is gray. Heaven is spring—warmth, cool rains, bright sun, leaves on the trees, flowers budding, life! All the beauties and glory of the original creation will return.

The universe and all in it will be restored: oceans free from oil, skies empty of pollution, sharks that cuddle, and lions that play with children. Look at how the prophet Isaiah put it in Isaiah 11:6-9 (*the Message*):

“The wolf will romp with the lamb,  
the leopard will sleep with the kind.  
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,  
And a little child will tend them.  
Cow and bear graze the same pasture,  
their calves and cubs grow up together,  
and the lion eats straw like the ox.  
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,  
The toddler sticks his hand down the hole of a serpent.  
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill...”

Animals will not be able to hurt us! Sin and fear will not keep us revolted at spiders or snakes or scorpions! All of God's creation will be radiating from His glory. We will be able to lay down with the tigers, swim with the sharks, play with the spiders, roam with the rhinoceros. All the extinct animals will be there, too, such as the dinosaurs and the woolly mammoth. *All* of creation is restored to absolute perfection.

Not only will we be able to enjoy this new creation—swimming with dolphins, running with elephants, flying with eagles, reunion parties on Pluto—but we will be made *Lords* and *Masters* over it. The new Heavens and new earth are our inheritance (Matthew 25:31-34). Those who are intimate with God and are Christ's disciples will be put in charge over God's possessions—possessions of a new Heavens and a new earth (Matthew 24:45-47).. In Revelation 22:5, the point is made ever clearer when it says, “And they will *reign* for ever and ever.” (Emphasis added). We will be called to rule over cities, to rule over angels, maybe even to rule over the giraffes or antelopes. Maybe disciples of Christ who love physics will be under leadership by God to discover all the intricate secrets of His new universe. Maybe those disciples who adore astronomy will rule over the billions and billions of galaxies in the new universe.

The One who created you and set all those loves and gifts in your heart, the One who has shaped all your life experiences (including the ones that seem to make no sense), this God has

prepared a place for you that is more than a perfect fit for all your gifts and quirks and personality traits, even those you didn't know you had. Jesus Christ is not joking when He says that we will inherit the Kingdom and take up positions of control, to reign *creatively* and with *power*. We will not sit around looking at one another or at God for eternity but will join the eternal Logos, "reign with him," in the endlessly ongoing creative work of God. It is for this that we were each individually intended, as both kings and priests (Exodus 19:6, Revelation 5:10). A place in God's creative order has been reserved for each one of us from since before the beginnings of cosmic existence. His plan is for us to develop, as apprentices to Christ (the One who brought all creation into existence [John 1:1-4]), to the point where we can take our place in the ongoing creativity of the universe. While our desires and our gifts aren't being used to the fullest in this life, while our talents are ignored and some of our dreams mocked, Christ promises that we shall be actively fulfilling our total design in the adventures of the new kingdom. Right now, in this life we live, we are being shaped, molded, groomed for a part in the grand drama that is coming. C.S. Lewis said:

"If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world."

This other world is the new Heavens and new earth, and each of our souls has a unique shape to fit God. We are not all the same, but unique creations each one of us. Often our 'calling' calls us to things that we can't touch in this life. We are lost, fatigued, weary. We think, "Why has God put this on my heart if I cannot live it out?" How many of us have ever considered that this is how we were *meant* to be, but because we got kicked out of Eden, we aren't? How many of us have thought that when we enter the second Eden—the Heaven-Paradise—we will be living it out more than we could ever have imagined? How wonderful it will be to have our souls released to their true destiny, in a world no longer stained by sin or under the curse! To throw ourselves into some wonderful enterprise, unhindered by our own weaknesses or the frustrations typical of a broken world will be simply awesome. Gardeners dream of a spot of ground with rich soil and not a weed or sow bug to be found. They shall have it. Architects dream of the day when they shall build their own designs and not just carry out the plans of others. They shall. Those who desire to cultivate, nourish, watch over and study ancient creatures will. Like little children eager to show off precious creations, we shall bring them to our Father in the New Jerusalem, for glory and praise.

The "glorious freedom" of the children of God is not just freedom from sin. It is *freedom to live*. It's a freedom of being all we are meant to be. We won't be held back by anything anymore; no, we will have finally hit our stride. We can pursue our passions without the hindrances of lack of time, or money, or whatever it may be. Those who always wanted to start a rock band will be able to build one greater than ever, and play any style of music they want—jazz, bluegrass, Scream-O, classical. Those who always dreamt of sailing across the ocean in a sailboat will be able to; there will be no danger of death, no danger of failure! The miracles that have already happened are, of course, as the Scripture often says, the first fruits of that cosmic summer which is presently coming on. Christ has risen, and so we shall rise. St. Peter for a few seconds walked on the water, and the day will come when there will be a remade universe, infinitely obedient to the will of glorified and obedient disciples of Christ, when we can do all things, when we shall be those gods that we are described as being in Scripture.

Throughout our lives, each one of us lives with a constant nagging that we never quite fit in, we never truly belonged. We've all had enough experiences to teach us that we will never be allowed into the "sacred circle," the place of intimacy. We desire so strongly for that intimacy, that belonging—this is why it feels good when you are popular, when people talk good about you, when you're at the top of the *best friendships* lists. However, in this world, most of us never find that intimacy, and those who do, usually can never keep it. In the fourteenth chapter of John, chapter 2, Jesus says, "I am going... to prepare a place for you." We'll be welcomed into Heaven by our Lover Himself, the King of the Universe. He will give us a home in Heaven. What will this home be like? One translation says that we will have "mansions in Heaven." Perhaps you will live in Alaska, against the ocean; or in Florida, or Maui, or the Serengeti? That dream house you never could afford? It is a cardboard shack compared to the amazing mansion prepared for us in

the new Heavens and new earth! Perhaps this is where the dreaming architects have a field day. The deepest longing of our heart—our longing to be part of the sacred circle, to be on the inside—reveals to us the greatest of the treasures Heaven has in store. For we were made in and for the most sacred circle of all. It will no longer just be *Father, Son, Holy Spirit* – but *Father, Son, Holy Spirit, fellow Christians, and you!*

We will have a place in Heaven, and we will be in communion with God—we will finally find that intimacy we ache for, and we will be given our real names, the names of our souls, *who we are*, on white tablets of stone given to us personally by God (Revelation 2:17). Of this name, George MacDonald writes:

“It is the man’s own symbol—his soul’s picture, in a word—the sign which belongs to him and to no one else. Who can give a man this, his own name? God alone... Such a name cannot be given until the man *is* the name [we will be our true selves finally in Heaven]... that being whom He had in His thought when He began to make the child, and whom He kept His thought through the long process of creation that went to realize the idea. To tell the name is to seal the success—to say, “In thee also I am well pleased.” (*Unspoken Sermons*)

We will enter this unbelievable new creation not how we are now. We will keep our gender; we will keep our personality; we will keep our memories of earth, and of friendships. We will remember when we read about this place, and we’ll laugh and say, “We had *no idea!*” We may carry personalities and memories to Heaven with us, but what we won’t carry is our *current* physical form. See what Paul says in Philippians 3:20,21 (*the Message*):

“But there’s far more to life for us. We’re citizens of high Heaven! We’re waiting the arrival of the Savior, the Master, Jesus Christ, who will transform our earthy bodies into glorious bodies like his own. He’ll make us beautiful and whole with the same powerful skill by which he is putting everything as it should be, under and around him.”

Those who were blind will be able to see the beauty of the universe. The deaf will hear the laughter of friends and family, and hear the surf and the wind of the new creation. The lame will jump and dance and run around the new Heavens and new earth. Those whose brains were tempered with disabilities will understand, see, \ be full and alive. Those who wished to be brave, will be brave. Those who always longed to be beautiful, will be beautiful. Those who wished to be leaders, will be leaders. What we once yearned to be, we will be! We will be *beautiful* and *whole!* The elderly will be young again, and the babies will be mature through the power of God.

Of course, we won’t have physical bodies in Heaven. We’re just going to be mystical spirits fluttering around... We have yet another Heaven folklore. We will keep our gender; we will keep our personalities; we will keep our memories of earth and memories of friendship and memories of our troubles. We will carry personalities and memories with us, and we’ll also have new *physical* bodies. We will have bodies like Jesus—remember, won’t you, that He was able to get from one place to another without walking (Luke 24:31-36)? Yes, we will be able to eat (Luke 24:42-43)! Jesus was able to pass through walls, and yet He was not just a spirit, He had a physical body (Luke 24:39). We, too, will have a physical body, and we, too, will be able to walk through walls (John 20:19-20,26). We will not be restricted by gravity and friction and everything we learn about in physics class. Christ was able to walk on water (John 6:19), and we will be able to, too. Look at what Isaiah prophesies:

“But those who wait upon GOD get fresh strength. They spread their wings and soar like eagles, they run and don’t get tired, they walk and don’t lag behind.”  
- Isaiah 40:31, *the Message*

This scripture has been translated as being metaphorical and literal; if literal, it has huge implications for our state of being awaiting in Heaven: we will be able to fly like eagles, run through the canyons and not get tired, walk with our friends and reminisce without our legs cramping up. We will be able to discover new cosmos in the greatest reaches of a new universe, and swim in the deep with marvelous fish without the fear of drowning.

In Revelation 9:7-9 a command spreads through Heaven, the kick-off when all those who trusted in Jesus finally gather together, complete, in the new Kingdom: “Let us celebrate, let us rejoice, let us give [Christ] the glory! The Marriage of the Lamb has come; his Wife has made herself ready. She was given a bridal gown of bring and shining linen. The linen is the righteousness of the saints. The Angel said to me, ‘Write this: “Blessed are those invited to the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.”’ He added, ‘These are the true words of God!’”

This wedding party is going to be something else. We will meet up with friends and family who decided to put their faith in God. We will see once more our brothers and sisters, our parents and grandparents, sons and daughters, friends. Everyone who ever decided to live for God will meet back together—reunions with tears of joy, happiness that bubbles over, screams of excitement! And God smiling over it all! Some say that we will not be able to remember one another in the Kingdom; this is blasphemy! The universe is based off of a relationship between the Trinity; we are creations designed for community. The question is not *if* we’ll know each other’s names or recognize each other, but *when* will that day come? In Heaven we will be fully exposed, but it will not be embarrassing or shameful—it will be for our total delight. We will be perfect; each of us will be the individual soul God had in mind all along. Whatever memory of the past we will have in Heaven, this we know: in one way or another, it will contribute to our joy.

We will worship God, but not only through music. My friend asked, “What kind of worship music would Jesus play?” After a few moments of thought, he said, “I guess whatever kind that sounded good to His ears!” The variation in worship is *amazing*, and the variation isn’t just found in styles of music. Creation worships God, and we worship God when we enjoy creation! When we enjoy the new creation, we will be worshipping God—don’t you know how you feel when you give someone a gift and they love it so much they cry and won’t ever let go? This worship will be like nothing we’ve ever experienced or ever will till the day we stand in the restoration. We will adore Him. Heaven is the return of the beauty, the intimacy, the adventure we were created to enjoy, and have yearned for every day of our lives. And it is *immortal*.

Some might say that I’m off the mark here, that it *is* all just vocal and musical worship. That is unbiblical, but instead of touting some Scriptures, let’s look at an analogy: if you give someone a gift, you don’t give it to them so they can just say, “Thank you, thank you, thank you!” all night long. You get a bigger smile from seeing them rip open the box and playing with the toy than you do just hearing their polite little, “Thank yous.” It will be the same in creation – some of us will choose to enjoy the new creation through vocal/musical worship, of course, but most of us, I imagine, will take a look, gasp, and run and *have fun*! After all, not all of us are blessed with the gift of a good voice or musical talent; those who are blessed this way seem to look forward to singing in Heaven and sometimes look down upon those who do not, failing to realize that God has not created everyone to enjoy this form of worship as much as others. I personally am looking forward to just enjoying the paradise with friends and Christ. However we worship in Heaven, God will undoubtedly be smiling over it all!

Jesus says we will inherit the Kingdom; this isn’t metaphorical! All the cosmos will be before us! No longer will we be bound by our bodies and physical limitations – we will be given the task of ruling over, with power and creativity, the kingdom of God! Remember in judgment when God repays everyone for what they’ve done? He will repay us for our faithfulness, obedience and discipleship in Heaven by dishing us out wonderful jobs and responsibilities that fit our personality- and character-design perfectly. The more faithful, obedient and how good a disciple we have been on earth has bearing on our reward in Heaven (though, remember, it is not faithfulness, obedience, or discipleship that saves us, it is Christ alone).

Imagine the greatest days of your life, combine them into one, multiply it by an eternity, and repeat it over and over for eternity. *There* is Heaven! It cannot be lost; it cannot be taken. As we were created to reign over the earth—to explore and discover and create and do all those things we long to do—that is our destiny. Those deep desires God has planted in us—maybe desires to be musicians, or paleontologists, or teachers, or desires to go places, see things, experience things—will become reality in Heaven.

“And I heard a great voice out of Heaven saying, ‘Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.’”

- Revelation 21:3-4

There will be no more death. No more sorrow, no more pain. No more depression or anxiety or worry or fear. No more stress. No more dashed hopes. No more being grumpy about having to go to work. No more having to wake early for school. No more having to deal with rude bosses or funerals. All of that will be gone—it is all the waste of a sinful, corrupted world. But now we will be spending eternity laughing, loving, playing, having fun! Death, crying, pain, these are symptoms of homesickness.

Jesus says, “There are many rooms in my Father’s home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so, I would tell you plainly. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.” (Luke 14:2-3) At this very moment, as you hear this, Jesus is alive and working: He is ruling, He is drawing others near him, and He is wearing a carpenter’s belt with hammer and nails: He is building homes for us! Christ says, *When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.* Here we have another way to look at physical death: *going home*. When that semi slams into your little Buick, guess what? It might sound sickening, but God’s celebrating; don’t worry, you’ll be in the celebrating mood shortly: it’s homecoming! What is one reason death exists? It’s a window that allows us to step into our true homes: paradise. Where, death, is your sting? We need to see that death is a beautiful gift to those disciples of Christ, to those intimate with God; to others, of course, it is horrific judgment, a seal of their fates in eternal Hell.

What is the greatest day of your life, real or imaginary? Throw all your greatest days together, combining them into one, multiply it by an eternity, and repeat it over and over for eternity. *There* is Heaven! How long is an eternity? Empty the Pacific Ocean completely of water and pile it with sand. Train a bird to pick up a grain of sand once every million years. When that bird has picked up the last grain of sand, you have just spent your first second in eternity. Every human being will spend an eternity somewhere, in Heaven or in Hell.

Yet we must remember, throughout our entire discourse on life in the new Heavens and new earth, the core of the new creation—the essence of Heaven—is intimacy. We will have unfettered intimacy with God. We will be intimate with others, just as we are intimate with our friends. No more awkward silences or anxiety over meeting someone new. We will meet and greet, I imagine, but everyone will want to know everyone, because we will be so perfect and wonderful because of what the Trinity has done. We will also experience intimacy with the new creation, with everything from the tiniest atomic particles to the fish in the sea, the animals of the land, the birds of the air, all the natural elements, and even with our cosmic universe. We will experience the joy God has for creation, a joy for creation more radiant than we will ever feel on this earth.

Heaven is not something we deserve; it is a free gift of God that we accept. If we do not accept the gift of Christ, we *are* going where we deserve to go.

## VII The Torture of Hell

“The man wakes from the final struggle of death, in absolute loneliness – such a loneliness as in the most miserable moment of deserted childhood he never knew. Not a hint, not a shadow of anything outside his consciousness reaches him. All is dark, dark and dumb; no motion—not the breath of a wind! Never a dream of change! Not a scent from a far-off field! No sign of God anywhere. God has so far withdrawn from the man... he is in God’s prison, his own separated self.” - George MacDonald, *The Last Farthing*

Hell is not a popular subject. We’d prefer it not be part of God’s creation (yes, God created it), but we’re not calling the shots, and God has said there is a place where those who reject Him will be housed forever. But Hell needs to be talked about; it is no small wonder John the Baptist warned, “Flee from the wrath to come.”

In Hell there is no death, no time when the conscience is at ease. Hell is a place of desolation and great pain. It is a place where those who choose to be separate from God will get their eternal wish—separation from God *forever*.

Hell was not created for man – it was created for Satan and his angels; if we refuse to follow God, we are rebels with Satan, whether we know it or not, and will join him there. Hell is for those who betray God, not vice versa. As real life is only found in God, so they will suffer the most extreme and real of deaths: a death that never ends.

Revelation says that those in Hell will be “tormented day and night forever and ever,” in the “Lake of Fire.” Some people don’t like the idea of Hell, so they say, “I don’t believe that.” What does that change? Hell is paying a bill for your rejection of God, a bill that can never be paid; since it can never be paid, the bill just keeps coming around, the payments never stop. But do you know what the worst part of Hell is? The eternal torment of remembering that on such-and-such a day, that person sat in church, heard the Good News of Christ, and didn’t do anything about it. Hell is knowing that you could have but never did address the issue of your eternal destiny. You didn’t take seriously the wrath of God.

People in Hell remain fully conscious, have memories, conscience, and all physical senses intact, but it’s all agony! The memories are painful, your body is racked in pain, and you are all alone, in the darkness; think of the worst depression, and multiply it by a million. That’s Hell. The moment you step in, you’ll want to commit suicide; you won’t be able to. Christ was on the ball when He said, “There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Some think Hell will be a big party, not realizing that Hell is solitary confinement. We were created as social creatures; we will be banished from one another, lost in our thoughts, our pain, our memories for eternity-upon-eternity-upon-eternity. There is no fellowship in Hell; no get-togethers, no parties, no reunions, no buffets. Hell *does* have varying degrees of punishment; those who knew more but rejected it will be punished far more than those who knew less and made the same decision. Those who committed evil acts against God’s people will suffer even more, and the hypocrites will be even worse-off as well as those who spread false gospels. The one who will suffer the most, however, is Satan. Hell, after all, was designed because of what *he* did and for those who joined up with him (those who did not follow Christ and the angels who rebelled alongside him).

No matter what you read, we’ll never be able to really understand—even catch a *glimpse* of—the tortures of Hell. And it will go on for eternity. God doesn’t just come out of nowhere and boom on unsuspecting people who had no chance to do anything about their eternal destiny. God endures

us with “much patience,” and is eager for us to turn from our sin and turn to Him for *real* life. God is patient, giving everyone space and time to change; but the decision is still theirs to make!

Every one of us is a heartbeat from eternity—Christ-followers are a heartbeat from Heaven, and unbelievers a heartbeat from Hell. One heartbeat, one act of violence, one accident away from the judgment of God. God’s fury could blow the universe apart at any moment; the End could come at any second. Hell is not a place of jokes, because no one will be laughing. Hell is not a place for partying, because there will be no one to part with—just you and your pain. The Nile-infested slums of Africa become paradise when compared to what is to be experienced in Hell.

## VIII Living in Light of Heaven

The world, the evil ones who slave against us, and our own double-mindedness are all set against us. Just try coming alive, try living from your heart for the Kingdom to come, and watch how the world responds. They will say we are idealists, they will condemn us, say we’re off from the truth. They will call us *obsessed* and *immature* and even *ungodly*. We will be branded heretics and liars. They will hate us and will do everything in their power to get us to fall back into the comfort of the way things were. Our passion for Heaven will disrupt many Christians, because it sides with what they really want, and what they’ve tried so hard to extinguish. If they can’t convince us to abandon our ‘heretical’ ideas, to betray our inner heart, if they can’t convince us to live life the way they want us to, to live from the safer havens they’ve chosen, they will try intimidation: “If you believe that, then you’re distorting the Truth.” “If you try to spread your lies, you will go to Hell.” “You’re backstabbing God when you say Heaven is like that!” Remember, everything we’ve said about Heaven is *biblical*. I recommend reading the works of Dallas Willard, John Eldredge and Randy Alcorn who spend much more time on the subject and include scriptures every three sentences. If intimidation fails, they will try to kill us (didn’t they kill Christ?). If they can’t kill us literally, they will try to kill us in the most sacred place: our hearts, the real us.

We must not be forceful in our belief of Heaven. It is not a sin to have different ideas of what Heaven is like, even if they are not supported by scripture. Our theories of Heaven should not divide the people of God. If someone accepts the truth of the new heavens and new earth, wonderful; if not, no harm done. We ought to be gentle and loving when we talk about Heaven, knowing how many toes we will step on. We also ought to be humble, for there is always the chance that we are wrong and they are right.

Bearing this reality of a world we are going Home to can be tough. Only a few have really accepted it, and they are living wildly for God like never before. Satan’s attack is to get us to betray what we believe—that there is something better out there, something worth fighting for. We have been called ‘confused,’ ‘idealistic,’ and been told by those we love, “That’s the stupidest and dumbest thing I’ve ever heard.” Don’t let them fool you; see the evidence for yourself. If we are so wrong, then how come those who know and *believe* this Truth are moving through the world, ablaze with God, for God, and drawing a wake of miracles? If we are wrong, how come the scriptures of Heaven seem to scream we are right? Satan hates the new creation—Heaven—as much as a fallen dictator hates a new and better country; Satan hates it because it is a smack in his face, Christ saying, “I conquered you and look what’s happened,” and he hates it because he will never be able to experience it (and he knows, had he not rebelled out of greed, he *would* be there worshipping and celebrating God alongside us!); so Satan tries to convince us there is no such thing as a new creation, and he pours these lies of a boring Heaven into our ears, and many people know no different and simply believe the lie.

Some will say, “No one knows what Heaven will be like.” They will most likely pull out 1 Corinthians 2:9: “No one’s ever seen or heard anything like this, Never so much as imagined anything quite like it—What God has arranged for those who love him.” (*the Message*) They will say it rules out anything we have written or said because we simply cannot understand or even



imagine what the eternal Heaven is. Tell them to read the next verse: “But *you’ve* seen and heard it because God by his Spirit has brought it all out into the open before you.” How has the Spirit brought it out into the open before us? We have desires that cannot be filled, a thirst for the paradise the new creation shall be, and we have the living Word of God, the pages of the Bible, whose words tell us that the new creation is real and it will *really, honestly be* an eternal paradise.

It is tough living in light of Heaven, living with the knowledge of what awaits as we go about a drudgery life. We will be sorrowfully impatient (at least I am at times). Sometimes we’ll just scream to God, “Why did you let me know this? Why did you put this knowledge of what is coming—this beauty, intimacy, adventure—in my heart? And since I’ve seen, how can I choose but to follow? All it’s brought me is the fury of friends, family, the community, the church! This is even worse—I can’t get away from it! This desire, this passion is so welded into me that I can’t walk away from it! I can’t ignore it! I’m trapped by this desire! It hurts me and makes me alive at the same time!” The prophet Jeremiah echoed the very same words to God:

“O LORD, you deceived me, and I was deceived ; you overpowered me and prevailed. I am ridiculed all day long; everyone mocks me. Whenever I speak, I cry out proclaiming violence and destruction. So the word of the LORD has brought me insult and reproach all day long. But if I say, “I will not mention him or speak any more in his name,” his word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.” – Jeremiah 20:7-9, *NIV*

Perhaps we feel ashamed of *wanting*. Aren’t we to be *content*? St. Augustine said, “The whole life of the good Christian is a holy longing.” We aren’t supposed to *long*! We aren’t supposed to *desire*! We are supposed to be *content*. That’s what most Christians say. No! We are hardwired for desire! We are called to long! Jesus longed for his Father, longed for the world to find life, longed for Paradise. So should we! A lot of us have made the mistake of being led to feel that if we are really godly, then we should want *less*, not *more*. We have a sense that we should beg forgiveness for our longings, kill our desires—all for the sake of *contentment*. Contentment is never wanting *less*; that’s the foolish way out. Anybody can look holy if they’ve killed their heart; the real test is to have your heart burning within you and have the patience to enjoy what there is to enjoy now, while waiting with eager anticipation for the feast to come. This is real contentment.

“Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom. For if you already have something, you don’t need to hope for it... But if we look forward to something we don’t have yet, we must wait patiently and confidently.”

- Romans 8:24-25, *NLT*

We are saved and we eagerly look forward to the freedom of Paradise. We don’t have it now. If we did, we wouldn’t need to Hope—long, desire—for it. We only look forward to something we don’t have. We are *supposed to want*! We are *supposed to long*! St. Augustine knew what he was talking about! Those who hate pleasure are not godly; the redeemed are the ones who hunger and thirst the most for the Paradise on the brink. Yet we have to wait patiently and confidently for what is coming. It *will* come. Don’t kill your soul, your desires, what you know to be truth just because the road is hard and people will hate you for it. Jesus didn’t stop. Now where is he? Ruling from Paradise! And we will be in Paradise, too.

There are those, unfortunately, who have murdered their true selves by eliminating desire from their hearts. They have taken contentment to a low never intended. Some people just make it so where they don’t want so much; isn’t it safer that way, more comfortable? Sure, you’re a walking shell, but you won’t experience the painful longing and rejection from others! Guess what? Walking that way is not righteousness, it’s godlessness. That’s stoicism, not Christianity. That’s paganism, not Jesus. Sanctification is an awakening, the rousing of our souls from the dead sleep of sin into the fullness of their capacity for life. Killing the desires of the heart is not sanctification, it’s wickedness.

This world is tough. We who long, we who desire, are closest to God. And for that reason, we suffer the most. God will never be welcome in this fallen world. Jesus was crucified, not given a banquet and a hallelujah feast. So we, who are closer to God, will suffer as we walk and live *with* God. We can be sullen, bitter, grave, harsh, angry because of the mental, physical, emotional and sometimes spiritual pain—or we can let it be a reminder. A reminder that a day is coming when we will all live in perfect love. We can let the ache draw us deeper into our souls, closer to God, and serve as a painful reminder of a wonderful Paradise God has in store for all who love him!

How did Jesus sustain his passionate heart in the face of brutal opposition? *He never lost sight of where he was headed.* He had a vision for the future that He knew was real, knew was true, and knew He would experience again. In the story of the Last Supper, we are told that Jesus knew “he had come from God and was returning to God,” and lived his life of selfless love to the end. He remembered both where he had come from and where he was going. So should we.

For a moment let us return to the words of Jonathan Edwards that started off this chapter: “This life ought be spent by us only as a journey towards Heaven.” We need to take his stance and live our lives in light of Heaven. As we learn to live as Christ lived, as our intimacy with God strengthens, as we exist in this fallen world, we need to keep Heaven at the forefront of our mind. We need to see it as the goal: intimacy with God, intimacy with others, intimacy with creation. It is wonderful in so many ways. We need to run this race of faith, endure all the trials and problems, and fight against Satan and his wars against the disciples of Christ. We need to remember Heaven in everything we say, everything we do, in every circumstance and situation we find ourselves faced with or knee-deep in. Yet even more than we focus on Heaven, we focus on Christ, the One who made Heaven a reality for us; and not just Heaven when we physically die, but Heaven in the here-and-now. For even now we can experience intimacy with God (wow, they don’t teach us that in Sunday School), intimacy with others (the Church, the Bride of Christ, the multitude of Saints, you and me), and even intimacy with a degenerate creation.

“Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all the veterans cheering us on? It means we’d better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who both began and finished this race we’re in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—the exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: cross, shame, whatever. And now he’s *there*, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. *That* will shoot adrenaline into your souls!” – Hebrews 12:1-3, *the Message*

## IX

### The Road That is Long and Tough

Christ knew what was coming. He is the One who created the universe, He is the One who created paradise, He is the one who came to earth, knowing completely what He was leaving behind for thirty-three years, and He is the One who, despite the innate longing and suffocating desire within Him to return to paradise, let the desire for us and for eternity with us in Heaven enable Him to bear with the cross, the whip, the nails, the shame and humiliation and hatred. We need to let our desire for eternity with God, with one another, and with a new creation drive us to better live godly lives in this ungodly world; lead us to become full-out disciples of Christ; show us the way through enduring the ephemeral trance temptation is.

Sometimes we wonder if we will make it. The road is tough. The road is hard. But the day will come—the first day in eternity, a day so good we’ll wish it never toe, and know that it never will! Laugh much. Play hard. Live for God. Christ tells us, “I’m going to Heaven, and I’m preparing a place for you. And I’ll come back for you.” He’s coming back for us. Maybe today. Maybe

tomorrow. Maybe seventy years from now. One day He's coming back for me, one day He's coming back for you. Did you know we will never taste death? The transition from life here on earth to forever-life in Heaven will be instantaneous. We see the semi sliding into our lane and the next thing we know we're bathing in a joyous paradise. The death for a believer shouldn't be a day of mourning – because there's no way they're mourning where they are! They're probably pulling strings with God to get you there sooner! *That's* how amazing it will be! Our journey today brings us one step closer to being home – really home with God. All that has hurt us so deeply will be swept away.

The greatest miracles Christ performed, we can all agree, were the ones where He raised the dead to life; why didn't He raise more than those He did? I believe it is because He knew where they were and knew they'd rather be *there* than return to the dreary and cold state of earth. Why did Christ weep at Lazarus' tomb before He raised Lazarus to life? Was it because He was sad His friend died? No. Christ purposefully let Lazarus die and Christ displayed no tears until the moment He commanded, "Lazarus, come out!" I believe He wept because Lazarus was such a good friend, and perhaps Christ felt sorry for the fellow because He was ripping him away from the paradise of Heaven.

No wonder Jesus spoke of Heaven so much. He didn't want us to miss out on this truth! No wonder Paul said, "I just want to die and go join Jesus in Heaven." It is sad we have white-washed, tamed and indoctrinated Heaven; it will be wild, wonderful, an adventure of excitement and thrills that never ends! And best of all, this is no fairy tale; it is real.

So my question to you is this: what will you do? We think about amusement parks—what will we do first? Which ride? Which restaurant? In Heaven, what will you do first? Paddle a canoe down the Amazon? Soar above the earth with the eagles? Dive into the greatest depths with the sea creatures that coming from God's hand? Will you learn to play an instrument? Eat out with those you were separated from here on earth? Walk through the Himalayas with Christ? Or will you dare to explore the Universe—from the planets to the sun, all the stars and distant galaxies? Will you hurl through space with asteroids? You'll have plenty of time for all of that—an eternity! The cosmos will be ours! And best of all, this is no fairy tale; it's real.

Never forget, however, that we do not deserve Heaven. We deserve all the pain of Hell. It is only because of who Christ is and what He has done for us that we get to enjoy Heaven here-and-now, as well as after we die. The gift of Christ is intimacy with God; the gift gets even better in Heaven.

They found themselves walking together—and a great, bright procession it was—up towards mountains higher than you could see in this world even if they were there to be seen. But there was no snow on those mountains. There were forests and green slopes and sweet orchards and flashing waterfalls, one above the other, going up forever.

The light ahead was growing stronger. Lucy saw that a great series of many-colored cliffs led up in front of them like a giant's staircase. And then she forgot everything else, because Aslan himself was coming, leaping from cliff to cliff like a living cataract of power and beauty.

Aslan turned to them and said:

"You do not look so happy as I mean you to be."

Lucy said, "We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan... You have sent us back to our own world so often."

"No fear of that," said Aslan. "Have you not guessed?"

Their hearts leapt and a wild hope rose within them.

"There was a real railway accident," said Aslan softly. "Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to say – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream has ended: this is the morning."...

And as he spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and so beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story, which no one on earth has read: which goes on for ever and ever: in which every chapter is better than the one before.

- *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Last Battle*, C.S. Lewis