The Teaching Library

41 teachings in five groups

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Part 1

Foundational

The first things of the faith: the new birth, grace, the life God gives, and knowing Him.

Why Did Jesus Say We Must Be Born Again?
What Happens When a Person Is Born Again?
Why Do Christians Still Struggle After Being Born Again?
What Does It Mean to Know God?
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Why Is Love Greater Than Faith and Hope?

FOUNDATIONAL

Why Did Jesus Say We Must Be Born Again?

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He was a Pharisee and a ruler of the Jews, a man who knew the Scriptures (John 3:1). He began with a compliment: “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God” (John 3:2).

Jesus did not return the compliment. He answered with a sentence that seemed to have nothing to do with what Nicodemus had said: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Why would Jesus say this to a man who already had everything religion could give him?

Nicodemus had not asked a question, yet Jesus spoke to a need. Nicodemus had knowledge, position and respect. Jesus went beneath all of it.

A little later Jesus said something that must have stung: “Art thou a master of Israel, and knowest not these things?” (John 3:10). Nicodemus was a teacher. He did not lack facts. What he lacked could not be taught to him, because it was life.

Birth Is Not Something We Do

Nicodemus took the words in a natural way: “Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (John 3:4). Jesus answered, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6).

Think about what birth is. No one produces his own birth. Life is given to us. Jesus is saying that spiritual life works the same way, and John says it in his opening chapter: those who receive Christ were born “not

of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

So a person can change his habits, learn Christian words, attend church and keep a good name, and still have done nothing that gives him life. All of that is flesh working on flesh.

Why Religion Could Not Give It

Religion can teach us, correct us and shape the way we behave. It cannot give life. Jesus said this plainly to people who had spent years in the Scriptures: "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life" (John 5:39–40).

The Scriptures were never meant to replace the One they point to. A person can know them well and still not come to Him. Nicodemus stood in exactly that place.

Jesus named two things the new birth makes possible. Without it, a man cannot "see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3), and without it he cannot "enter into" it (John 3:5).

The kingdom of God is God's rule. Paul says believers have been "delivered… from the power of darkness, and… translated… into the kingdom of his dear Son" (Colossians 1:13). A person can admire the teaching of Jesus without being brought under His rule. Entering the kingdom is not done by agreeing with Christian values. It is done by receiving a life that comes from God.

How the New Birth Is Received

Nicodemus asked, "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). Jesus answered with a picture from Israel's own history: "And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:14–15).

Nicodemus knew the story. In Numbers 21, Israelites were dying from snakebite, and God told Moses to lift up a bronze serpent: “every one that is bitten, when he looketh upon it, shall live” (Numbers 21:8). Those who looked lived. They did not earn their healing, improve themselves or finish a programme. They looked to what God had provided.

Jesus is saying that new life is received in the same way, by looking to the Son lifted up on the cross. That is why the next verse follows: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16).

John does not tell us exactly when Nicodemus believed. But he shows us two later pictures. When the leaders wanted to condemn Jesus, Nicodemus asked, “Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him?” (John 7:51). And after the crucifixion, Nicodemus brought about a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to prepare the body of Jesus for burial (John 19:39).

The man who first came by night is found in the open at the cross. Whatever he knew that night, the words of Jesus did not leave him where they found him.

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What Happens When a Person Is Born Again?

The words “born again” are used so often that we can say them without thinking about what they describe. A child is born, and something has happened to the child himself. In the same way, the new birth is not just a decision to live differently or a new set of beliefs. Something has happened to the person.

So what has actually happened? Scripture answers in several ways, and each one shows a different side of the same work of God.

The first change is that the person is brought into a relationship with God. Paul says, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). A person who was far off is brought near.

Scripture then uses the language of family. “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Romans 8:15). Galatians adds, “Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son” (Galatians 4:7).

Many people think of salvation as escaping punishment. That is part of it. But God does more than cancel a debt. He brings sinners home, and the Christian life begins with belonging.

A New Heart

Long before Christ came, God promised through Ezekiel: “A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh” (Ezekiel 36:26).

Notice what God did not promise. He did not promise better instructions. Israel already had the law. The trouble was the heart that

could not keep it. So God promised to change the heart itself. Jeremiah heard the same promise: “I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts” (Jeremiah 31:33).

This is why the new birth goes deeper than a change of direction. A person may know what is right and still be unable to do it. God deals with that by working inside the person.

The Spirit Within

The next verse of Ezekiel tells us how God does it: “And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezekiel 36:27).

Jesus told His disciples that the Spirit “dwelleth with you, and shall be in you” (John 14:17). Paul writes that the believer’s body is “the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you” (1 Corinthians 6:19), and he states it plainly: “Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Romans 8:9).

The Spirit is not just an influence that helps a person behave better. He is the One through whom the new life is given, and He remains. A believer does not have to hold himself together by his own strength. He has a source to live from.

A New Creation

Paul sums up the change in one verse: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17).

He does not say that the person has turned over a new leaf. He uses the word creation. In another place he writes that believers have “put off the old man with his deeds” and “put on the new man, which is renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him” (Colossians 3:9–10).

This does not mean memories are erased or that every old pattern disappears in a moment. It means the person now belongs to a new order of life. He is in Christ.

A new heart and the Spirit within begin to change what a person wants. Paul names the result: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Galatians 5:22–23).

These are not a list of behaviours the believer has to force out of himself. They are fruit, which grows from a life. A tree does not strain to produce apples. The change may be slow, but the source has changed.

God has given life that the person could never produce. He has brought him into His family, given him a new heart, put His Spirit inside him and made him a new creation. John gathers it into one sentence: “And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life” (1 John 5:11–12).

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Why Do Christians Still Struggle After Being Born Again?

A man comes to Christ and means it. He loves God and he has received new life. Then he finds that he still becomes angry too quickly. He still battles thoughts he knows are wrong. He still returns to habits he sincerely wanted to leave behind.

Then a question arrives: if I have been born again, why am I still struggling? Some people begin to doubt that they were saved at all. Others decide that struggling is simply what being a Christian means. Scripture gives neither answer.

Paul once wrote to a church full of problems, and he did not tell them they were unsaved. He called them “babes in Christ”: “I… could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:1).

A newborn child is fully alive, but nobody expects him to walk, speak or carry responsibility. Peter uses the same picture: “As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby” (1 Peter 2:2). The writer of Hebrews says that those who have grown are those “who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14).

Life comes first, and growth follows. If new birth meant instant maturity, none of these words would make sense.

Why the Struggle Is Real

Becoming a believer does not wipe out the history of a person's life. A man who spent years responding to pressure with anger, fear or suspicion has trained those responses. Habits were formed. Ways of thinking became normal. New life enters a person who has been shaped by all of that.

Paul says there is a conflict. "For the flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (Galatians 5:17). He describes it from the inside: "For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: but I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind" (Romans 7:22–23). Then he cries out, "O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" and answers, "I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 7:24–25).

So the struggle is not strange, and it is not proof that the new birth failed. A person with no life has no conflict. The conflict exists because there is now something alive in him that wants what God wants.

Willpower Is Not the Answer

When we fail, the usual response is more determination. We promise never to do it again, try harder, and often fail again.

Scripture points somewhere else. "Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16). "If ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live" (Romans 8:13). Obedience is still required, but the strength comes from the Spirit and not from us.

Paul also tells us where to begin: "Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord… Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin" (Romans 6:11, 13). We act from the life we have already been given. We are not trying to earn it. This is what it

means to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4).

Many of our patterns are held in place by what we believe. If a man keeps telling himself, “This is just who I am,” he stops resisting. If he says, “I fell, so I have failed completely,” he gives in to despair and does not repent.

Paul says, “Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The mind learns, over time, to agree with the truth: that we are now God’s children, that sin is no longer our master (Romans 6:14), and that failure calls for repentance and not surrender.

Growth Through Obedience

Change usually looks small. A response that once came automatically is caught before it is acted on. A man who always defended himself learns to listen. Someone who returned offence for offence begins to forgive.

These small changes, repeated, form a different kind of life. A fair measure of growth is not whether temptation still comes, but whether it still rules. Quicker repentance, deeper dependence and obedience that costs something are all signs that God is at work.

John wrote for exactly this: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (1 John 5:13). The assurance does not rest on a perfect record. It rests on what God has said and done.

And Paul is sure of God’s faithfulness: “Being confident of this very thing, that he which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). He also says, “Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after” (Philippians 3:12).

So do not give up when you find a struggle you thought was gone. Bring it to God, refuse what must be refused, obey what He has made clear, and keep going. The work He began, He will finish.

FOUNDATIONAL

What Does It Mean to Know God?

Jesus gave eternal life a meaning that is more personal than we expect: “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (John 17:3).

Eternal life is not only a life that lasts forever. Its centre is knowing God. The gifts that come with it, such as forgiveness, peace and hope, are real. But Jesus points past the gifts to the Giver.

A person can learn many facts about someone he has never met. The Bible warns that this can happen with God. Paul writes about some who “profess that they know God; but in works they deny him” (Titus 1:16). And Jesus gives a sobering picture of people who did many religious things in His name and heard Him say, “I never knew you: depart from me” (Matthew 7:23).

God Himself says what He wants: “For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings” (Hosea 6:6). A person can bring the right offerings and still miss God.

None of this makes Bible knowledge unimportant. We cannot know God by ignoring what He has said. But Scripture is not given only to make us well-informed. It is given to bring us to the God who speaks through it.

Knowing Means Seeing Who He Is

Jeremiah tells us what is worth boasting about: “But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD” (Jeremiah 9:24).

To know God is to know what He is like: His kindness, His justice and His righteousness. This is why a person who knows Him cannot stay unmoved. John says it directly: “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for

God is love" (1 John 4:8). Knowing God and loving people cannot be separated.

Knowing Is Mutual

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27). Knowing here goes both ways. Paul puts it even more carefully: "But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God" (Galatians 4:9).

The order is humbling. Before we knew God, He knew us. We do not climb up to Him by our knowledge. He has taken hold of us. This means a believer's confidence rests on being known by God, not on how much he can explain.

John gives a simple test: "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar" (1 John 2:3–4). We trust the people we know to be trustworthy. We listen to a voice we recognise. In the same way, knowing God affects our trust, our worship and our decisions.

Daniel adds: "The people that do know their God shall be strong, and do exploits" (Daniel 11:32). Knowledge of God is not decoration. It produces strength.

Knowing Is Never Finished

Paul had followed Christ for years when he wrote, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings" (Philippians 3:10). He was not saying he had never known Christ. He was saying that knowing Him was a pursuit that continued.

This frees us from two mistakes. We do not know God fully, so we should never think we have finished. And we do know Him truly, because He has revealed Himself, so we should never think we know nothing. The desire to know Him more is not a sign that something is missing. It is a sign that the relationship is alive.

Hosea says it well: “Then shall we know, if we follow on to know the LORD” (Hosea 6:3).

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How Does God Make Himself Known?

If eternal life is knowing God, then a question follows. How can human beings know a God they did not make and cannot find by their own ability?

Scripture's answer begins with God, and not with us.

Jesus said, "Neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Knowing God is not something we achieve by studying enough, searching hard enough or becoming religious enough. God acts first. He speaks, reveals and calls, and we respond.

This matters because there are many ideas about God. People hold different pictures based on their experience, culture or imagination. When Paul stood before the philosophers in Athens, he said, "We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device" (Acts 17:29). The God we are called to know is not the one we invent. He is the One who has revealed Himself.

Creation Gives Witness

Scripture first points us to what God has made. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge" (Psalm 19:1–2). Paul says that God's "invisible things… from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead" (Romans 1:20).

This witness reaches everyone. It existed before any preacher spoke and before anyone opened a Bible. But creation has limits. The heavens can show God's glory. They cannot tell us what He has promised, what He commands or what He has done in Christ. For that He has spoken.

God spoke to Abraham, through Moses and through the prophets. He gave commandments and promises. He warned, corrected and called His people. And what He said was preserved in writing.

Psalm 19 moves from the sky to the Scripture at once: “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple” (Psalm 19:7). The sky shows His glory. The Word shows His will. We cannot say we know the God of the Bible while ignoring the book through which He gave His testimony.

God Has Spoken in His Son

The writer of Hebrews gives a striking contrast: “God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son” (Hebrews 1:1–2).

This does not mean that Jesus simply added more information. In Him God’s self-revelation reaches its centre. John says, “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (John 1:18). Paul calls Him “the image of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15).

When Philip asked Jesus to show them the Father, Jesus answered, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father” (John 14:9). Jesus did not say that He and the Father are the same person. He said that the Father is fully made known in the Son. His words show God’s truth. His works show God’s power and compassion. His death and rising show what God has done to save us.

This is why the Christian faith cannot stop at a general belief in God. The God we are called to know is the One revealed in Jesus Christ.

The Spirit Opens Our Eyes

Having access to revelation is not the same as receiving it. The disciples heard Jesus again and again and often did not understand Him. Paul explains what is needed: “But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God” (1 Corinthians 2:10). Jesus promised that the Spirit “will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

The Spirit does not give us permission to invent a private version of God. He brings us into the truth God has already made known. God reveals, and the Spirit enables us to receive.

Revelation brings responsibility. If God had stayed silent, people could say they did not know. But He has spoken through creation, through His Word and through His Son. Paul says that people who see the evidence and ignore it “are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

He also says that God did this on purpose: “That they should seek the Lord, if haply they might feel after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us” (Acts 17:27). God is not hiding. He made Himself known so that we would find Him.

Then comes the demand that follows: “And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained” (Acts 17:30–31).

The question is no longer whether God has made Himself known. It is what each of us will do with what He has said.

FOUNDATIONAL

What Does It Mean to Be Saved by Grace?

Many Christians say they are saved by grace. Fewer can say what that means, or what grace does after it saves. Scripture shows that grace is both a gift and a power.

Grace Is a Gift, Not a Wage

Paul puts it in one sentence: “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). Salvation is by grace. It comes through faith. It is not from ourselves. It is a gift.

Paul explains the difference between a wage and a gift: “Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt” (Romans 4:4). A wage is owed. A gift is not. Since salvation is grace, we receive it only because God is kind.

Abraham is the example. “For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness” (Romans 4:3). He did not earn righteousness. He believed what God said, and God counted it to him.

No one can earn it, because all stand in the same need. “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24). Free to us is not cheap to God. “Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold … But with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18–19).

Faith is not the price we pay. It is the hand that receives. “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we

stand” (Romans 5:1–2).

Grace Is More Than Forgiveness

Many stop at pardon. But grace does not only clear a record. It joins a person to Christ. “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Paul does not say the person is only forgiven. He says he is new.

Jesus said the same to Nicodemus: “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Salvation is a new birth, not a change of label.

Paul speaks for all who are joined to Christ: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me” (Galatians 2:20).

Some think that grace gives licence to sin. Paul answers at once: “What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Romans 6:1–2). Grace does not lower the standard of holiness. It creates the relationship from which holiness can grow.

“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world” (Titus 2:11–12). The same grace that forgives also teaches.

Grace Keeps Working

Salvation has a purpose. “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). God’s aim is not only to forgive us, but to make us like His Son.

He does not leave this to our strength. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12–13). We take part, but He begins the work and carries it on.

Paul describes the change in plain terms: “That ye put off concerning the former conversation the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts; And be renewed in the spirit of your mind; And that ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness” (Ephesians 4:22–24).

Grace is also power for weak people. When Paul pleaded with the Lord about his weakness, the answer was, “My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Even good works have their place. After saying that salvation is not of works, Paul adds, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). Works are not the root of salvation. They are its fruit.

So to be saved by grace is to be received freely, and then to be changed by the same grace.

FOUNDATIONAL

Why Is Love Greater Than Faith and Hope?

Paul says that faith, hope and love remain, and that the greatest of these is love. Scripture shows why, and why the three cannot be pulled apart.

What Remains

Paul ends his great chapter on love with these words: “And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity” (1 Corinthians 13:13). The old word charity means love. The key word is “abideth.” Paul is speaking about what remains.

He has just spoken about things that will not remain. “Charity never faileth: but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease; whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away” (1 Corinthians 13:8). These gifts serve a real purpose now. But they belong to the present age, and they are not the final thing.

Paul gives the reason in verse 12: “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.” This is what is coming. Our knowledge is partial, and one day it will be complete.

Why Love Is the Greatest

Faith and hope are great. Without faith “it is impossible to please” God (Hebrews 11:6). Without hope we have no anchor in trouble. But both look toward something not yet in hand. “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7). And “hope that is seen is not hope” (Romans 8:24). Faith and hope belong to a life that is still waiting. When we see Him as He is, they will have reached their goal.

Love is different because it belongs to the very nature of God. “He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love” (1 John 4:8). Love was in God before there was anything to believe or to hope for. It will not end when faith becomes sight and hope is fulfilled, because God does not end. This is the reason Paul calls it the greatest.

It is also the reason love gives worth to everything else. Paul says that a man may speak with “the tongues of men and of angels,” and if he has not love, he is “as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). Gifts without love are noise.

The Three Cannot Be Separated

Paul does not set the three against each other. He often puts them together. He thanks God for the Colossians, “Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of the love which ye have to all the saints, for the hope which is laid up for you in heaven” (Colossians 1:4–5). To the Thessalonians he writes of their “work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope” (1 Thessalonians 1:3).

They depend on one another. Faith is not empty belief. It is “faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6). What we trust about God changes how we treat people. If we trust His grace, we do not need to prove our worth, and we can give freely. If we trust His justice, we can leave vengeance to Him.

Hope depends on love too. “Hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us” (Romans 5:5). We can wait with confidence because we know that the One who promised loves us.

Love Begins With God

Where does this love come from? We cannot produce it on our own. John says, “We love him, because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Love begins with what God has done for us in Christ, and it grows in us as His Spirit forms Christ’s character in us.

That is why Paul says to put on love above everything else: “And above all these things put on charity, which is the bond of perfectness” (Colossians 3:14). Love holds the whole Christian life together.

So the best measure of a life is not how impressive it looked, but whether God was trusted, His promise was held, and others were loved. These are the things that remain.

Part 2

Deeper Truth

Man, Christ, the Kingdom and the eternal purpose of God, taught from Scripture.

Eternity, Time and the Purpose of Man
Man, Christ and the Age to Come
The Ages and the Eternal Purpose of God
The Fullness of All Things in Christ
The Inheritance of the Sons
The Law of the Garment
What Was the Law For?
What Is the Kingdom of God?
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What Is Kingdom Righteousness?
Who Is the Lamb, and Why Does He Win?
What Was God Doing From Eden to the New Jerusalem?

DEEPER TRUTH

Eternity, Time and the Purpose of Man

We live inside time. We count our days, mark our birthdays and bury our dead. Yet something in us will not accept that the present is everything. We plan for years we may never see. We ask what our life is for. We feel that we were made for more than what we can measure.

Scripture explains this feeling, and it begins with a single verse.

“He hath made every thing beautiful in his time: also he hath set the world in their heart, so that no man can find out the work that God maketh from the beginning to the end” (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

Many translations read “eternity” where the KJV has “the world”. The meaning is the same: God has put into man a sense of something beyond the present order. We cannot see the whole of what God is doing, “from the beginning to the end”, but we cannot stop reaching for it.

This does not make man eternal as God is eternal. God has no beginning and no end. Man is a creature. He has a beginning, and every breath depends on God. But he was made for a purpose that his few years on earth cannot contain.

Made Within Time, Not for Time Alone

The Bible opens with time itself: “In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). Then come days, seasons, and lights “for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years” (Genesis 1:14). Man was placed inside this order. He is born at a certain moment, grows through seasons and passes away.

But living in time does not mean time is the limit of his purpose. The present age is real, and it is not the whole of what God is doing.

God did not make man as an afterthought. He spoke first, as though in counsel: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them

have dominion" (Genesis 1:26).

Two things were given to man together. He was made in God's image, and he was given a place of rule under God. He was not made only to exist. He was made to represent God and to share in His work in creation.

That is why Scripture will not reduce man to his body, his labour or his years. Behind man stands a purpose.

What Is Man?

Psalm 8 puts the question as a man standing under the night sky. "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" (Psalm 8:3–4).

The question comes from the contrast. The sky is vast, and man is small. Yet God is mindful of him. David goes on: "For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands" (Psalm 8:5–6).

Man is lower than the angels, yet crowned with glory and honour. He is weak, yet given dominion. He is mortal, yet made for a destiny larger than his life.

What We See Now

We should be honest about what we see. Sin has damaged man. Death works in him, and the world he was meant to rule is under corruption. The man we meet today is not the whole of what God intended, and he should not be praised as though he were.

But the fall must not become our only definition of man. Before it was a ruined creature, man was a creature crowned. God's purpose for him did not end when he fell.

Paul tells us where to fix our attention: “While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Corinthians 4:18). This does not make the present unimportant. Our choices, our bodies and our obedience matter. It means that the present is not the final measure of God’s work.

The psalm that began with a question ends with praise: “O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” (Psalm 8:9).

Man cannot explain himself by looking at himself. He finds his meaning in the God who made him, who is mindful of him, and who crowned him for a purpose.

Man, Christ and the Age to Come

Psalm 8 leaves a question hanging. Man is crowned with glory and honour, and yet all around us we see man dying, failing and ruled by what he was meant to rule. Where is the glory? Where is the dominion?

The writer of Hebrews takes up that question and answers it with a single sentence.

He first moves the psalm into the future. “For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak” (Hebrews 2:5). The dominion in Psalm 8 is not only a memory of Eden. It is tied to the world to come, which has not yet appeared.

He admits the problem openly: “But now we see not yet all things put under him” (Hebrews 2:8). Man’s rule is not yet seen. Then he continues.

We See Jesus

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (Hebrews 2:9).

The words are those of Psalm 8. Man was made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honour. Jesus was made a little lower than the angels and crowned with glory and honour. The writer is saying that the destiny in the psalm is being carried out in a Man, and that Man is Jesus.

The eternal Son entered our humanity. He knew hunger, tiredness, rejection and death. He did not become the Son by suffering, because He was always the Son. But His work as a man was brought to completion through suffering, and then came the crown. “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name”

(Philippians 2:9). He is “so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they” (Hebrews 1:4).

He Is Not Ashamed of Us

Hebrews does not leave Jesus alone in His glory. “For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings” (Hebrews 2:10).

The words “many sons” matter. The crowned Man has not left the rest of humanity behind. He is the captain, the one who leads the way, and others follow Him into the glory He has entered.

That is why the writer goes on: “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren” (Hebrews 2:11). And a little later: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same” (Hebrews 2:14). He became like us so that we could be brought to where He is. “In all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren” (Hebrews 2:17).

Becoming like Him does not mean we become God or that we repeat His atoning work. Only Christ died for sins, once and for all. It means that we are joined to Him, and share in His relationship with the Father and in His glory.

Shaped Into His Likeness

Paul says the same from the human side. Those whom God foreknew, He “did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:29).

God’s aim for His people is not merely a tidier version of the old self. He is making them like His Son. And this happens now, not only in the future: “But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

This also explains why the path of Jesus matters to us. He went by obedience, suffering and death, and then to glory. His people are called to follow Him along that road: to take up the cross and to suffer with Him, so that they may also be glorified with Him.

The glory of Jesus is not limited to the present age. Paul says He has been set “far above all principality, and power, and might, and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come” (Ephesians 1:21). Hebrews speaks of those who have tasted “the powers of the world to come” (Hebrews 6:5).

So the destiny of redeemed man reaches into the age to come. We are saved now and being changed now, but the full result lies ahead. The work God is doing in us now belongs to the same story as the glory He will give.

Psalm 8 asked, “What is man?” The answer is found in the Man who was crowned, and in the many sons He is bringing with Him.

DEEPER TRUTH

The Ages and the Eternal Purpose of God

God did not begin His work when man fell. Paul says that He “hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4). He says that grace “was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began” (2 Timothy 1:9). Behind history there was a purpose, and history is the way God has been making it known.

Scripture speaks of God’s dealings with men in terms of times and ages. God “hath determined the times before appointed” for the nations (Acts 17:26). Jesus spoke of “this world” and “the world to come” (Matthew 12:32).

We should not turn these words into a timetable that Scripture does not give. Neither should we treat them as empty phrases. They tell us that God’s work is larger than the part of history we occupy. We live inside a story that began before us and will go on after us.

A Mystery Kept, Then Opened

Paul calls God’s purpose a mystery. In the Bible a mystery is not something that can never be known. It is something kept hidden for a time and then made known by God.

He writes of “the mystery which hath been hid from ages and from generations, but now is made manifest to his saints” (Colossians 1:26). And again: “Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit” (Ephesians 3:5).

The purpose did not change when it was revealed. What changed was what God chose to make known. The prophets saw parts of it. Peter says they “searched diligently” about the salvation to come, and it was shown

to them that “not unto themselves, but unto us they did minister” (1 Peter 1:10, 12). The law, the sacrifices, the priesthood and the promises all carried something of what was to come.

Then Christ came, and the hidden thing was opened. The apostles did not bring a new idea into God’s plan. They announced what God had now revealed.

The Church in the Plan

The mystery included something that surprised the world: Gentiles are “fellowheirs, and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). Jew and Gentile are made one body.

Paul then adds a purpose that reaches beyond the earth: “To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (Ephesians 3:10).

So the Church is not merely waiting for God’s purpose to arrive. It is already part of the way He is showing it. The cross, where defeat became victory, and the people gathered through it, make known a wisdom that powers beyond the earth are watching.

Paul also looks forward. God has raised us with Christ and seated us with Him “that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

He does not describe those ages, and we should not invent details. But he says something large: God’s grace has a future. What we know of it now is not all of it. Salvation is not only an escape from judgment. It is the start of something God will go on showing for ages.

Part of a Larger Story

If the purpose is larger than our lifetime, then we are people in the middle of a story, and not at its end.

Hebrews says this of the faithful before us: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off” (Hebrews 11:13). It adds that God provided “some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:40). Their faith was not wasted because they did not see the outcome. They belonged to something larger than themselves, and so do we.

Paul gives the name of the centre: “According to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Ephesians 3:11). The mystery is revealed in Christ. The promises are fulfilled in Him. The Church is formed in Him. The ages are the frame in which that purpose is shown, and He is what is shown.

Paul ends his prayer for the Ephesians on this note: “Unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Ephesians 3:21).

DEEPER TRUTH

The Fullness of All Things in Christ

It is possible to know that God has a purpose and still picture it too small. We were lost, Christ saved us, and one day He will take us to be with Him. That is true. But Scripture shows a purpose larger than our rescue.

Paul states it in one sentence. God has made known “the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he hath purposed in himself: that in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth; even in him” (Ephesians 1:9–10).

The goal is not only that people will be saved. It is that all things will be gathered together in Christ.

The Bible begins with God’s purpose, not with man’s sin. Man was made in God’s image to know Him and rule under Him. Sin then broke that relationship, brought in death and put creation under corruption.

But God did not drop His purpose. He called Abraham, formed Israel, gave the law and promised a King. Then, “when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son” (Galatians 4:4). The Son did not come as a reply to something unexpected. He came at the time God had set.

The end of the story tells us what the beginning was for. What sin broke, God restores. What He promised, He fulfils. The Son is honoured, His people are glorified, creation is renewed, and God’s rule is seen everywhere.

Christ at the Centre

Paul says all this is “in Christ”. It is not gathered around man or around the Church.

“For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth... all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Colossians 1:16–17). Then the same Christ is the one through whom God will “reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven” (Colossians 1:20).

The cross is where this peace was made: “having made peace through the blood of his cross” (Colossians 1:20). The future cannot be understood without Him, because He is both its source and its goal.

The decisive work is already done. Christ “after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:12). He was raised and set “at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 1:20). The Spirit has been given and the gospel is going out.

Yet we do not see everything under Him. Death is still here. Suffering and sin are still here. The Christian life is lived between what is finished and what is revealed.

That is why waiting is not doubt. When Scripture speaks of what is still to come, it is not speaking of an uncertain outcome. It is speaking of the showing of what is already settled in Christ.

The Kingdom Made Open

Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). The King has come and reigns. The day is coming when His rule will be open for all to see.

John hears it announced: “The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). Paul says Christ “must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet” (1 Corinthians 15:25).

The hope of Scripture is not that we escape the earth. Peter writes, “Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a

new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (2 Peter 3:13). John sees "a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away" (Revelation 21:1).

We should not guess at details Scripture does not give. But the direction is plain. What was put under corruption will not stay there.

God With His People

The thread that runs to the end is God living with man. He walked with Adam. He dwelt among Israel in the tabernacle. Jesus "dwelt among us". His Spirit now lives in His people.

Then John hears: "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" (Revelation 21:3).

The greatest gift of the age to come is not the absence of trouble. It is God Himself.

And with Him, the last enemy goes. "The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). Isaiah saw it long before: "He will swallow up death in victory; and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from off all faces" (Isaiah 25:8).

Scripture gives us glimpses, not a map. We should not turn them into a system or fill every silence with imagination. When Paul considered the depth of God's plan, he did not draw a chart. He worshipped: "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!" (Romans 11:33).

DEEPER TRUTH

The Inheritance of the Sons

Many Christians describe their future in one word: heaven. That word is true, but Scripture uses a richer one. It speaks of an inheritance.

An inheritance belongs to a family. To understand what is promised to God's people, we must begin with the One who owns it.

Hebrews opens with the Son, "whom he hath appointed heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2). The inheritance is first of all His. It is not a pile of rewards handed to Christians. It is a share in what belongs to the Son.

Paul explains how others come to share it: "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together" (Romans 8:16–17).

The order is clear. Children first, then heirs. And no one becomes a child of God by effort or by natural birth: "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (John 1:12). The inheritance begins with receiving Christ.

Suffering with Him does not buy the inheritance. It is a gift. But those who share His life also share His road. As Hebrews says, He is "bringing many sons unto glory" (Hebrews 2:10).

Not Only a Place

The inheritance is also bigger than a location. Peter speaks of "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:4). Jesus says to those on His right hand, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

The Kingdom is inherited. And it was prepared from the foundation of the world, which takes us back to the eternal purpose. The inheritance includes the Kingdom, the resurrection, glory and a renewed creation. They belong together.

Paul says that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption” (1 Corinthians 15:50). The inheritance requires a change in the whole person.

That is why Paul says believers, who have “the firstfruits of the Spirit”, still groan, “waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Romans 8:23). The Spirit is given as “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession” (Ephesians 1:14). We have a first payment now, and the whole is still to come.

Creation Is Waiting

Romans 8 includes the whole creation in this. “For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (Romans 8:19). The creation “shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21).

What God does with His sons is not private. It touches the whole creation.

John gathers the present and the future into one verse: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). Sonship is a present fact. Its full appearance is ahead.

Preparing the Heirs

God is not only preparing an inheritance for His people. He is preparing His people for the inheritance.

Paul gives the picture: “the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all; but is under tutors and governors until the time appointed of the father” (Galatians 4:1–2). The heir has the position, but he is still being trained for it.

This explains why the New Testament speaks so often about holiness, endurance, love and faithfulness. They are not extras. God is shaping sons who can be trusted with what He has prepared, by conforming them to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29).

Scripture says that the saints will take part in the Kingdom: “Do ye not know that the saints shall judge the world?... Know ye not that we shall judge angels?” (1 Corinthians 6:2–3). Responsibility of that kind needs character. A person who is still ruled by sin cannot be given authority.

Not for Ambition

The inheritance must never feed ambition. The Son who is heir of all things humbled Himself, served and died. The road to His glory went through obedience, and His people are being shaped on the same road.

So the more clearly we see what God has prepared, the more we should be drawn to Christ and not to ourselves. The inheritance does not make us great. It shows the wisdom of God in bringing sinners into His purpose through His Son.

This changes how we weigh our lives. A believer may have little outwardly and still be deep in God’s purpose. Another may prosper and miss it entirely.

Paul puts it simply: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (Romans 8:18). He does not deny the suffering. He sets it beside the glory.

Jesus gives the same assurance in a few words to His small and fearful followers: “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

DEEPER TRUTH

The Law of the Garment

When Aaron's priestly garments were taken off him on Mount Hor, he died there. It was not a sudden sickness or an accident. God ordered it in this way. Why?

Aaron and Moses were both barred from the Promised Land for the same failure at Meribah (Numbers 20:12). Aaron died on Mount Hor in the fifth month of the fortieth year (Numbers 33:38). Moses died a few months later on Mount Nebo, where God showed him the land from afar (Deuteronomy 34:1–5). Moses died alone with God. Aaron's death was different, and the whole nation watched it.

The Mystery on Mount Hor

God did not send Aaron a sickness. He gave Moses a plain instruction: "Take Aaron and Eleazar his son, and bring them up unto mount Hor: and strip Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son: and Aaron shall be gathered unto his people, and shall die there" (Numbers 20:25–26). They went up "in the sight of all the congregation" (Numbers 20:27).

Moses obeyed. "And Moses stripped Aaron of his garments, and put them upon Eleazar his son; and Aaron died there in the top of the mount" (Numbers 20:28). The order matters. The garments were taken off Aaron and put on his son, and Aaron died there.

Why was it done this way? The garments were not a charm, and priests who held the office still died. Eli died from a fall (1 Samuel 4:18), under a judgment God had already spoken against his house (1 Samuel 3:13). Ahimelech was killed by Saul's sword, though he was innocent of what Saul charged him with (1 Samuel 22:15–18). So the cloth itself could not keep a man alive.

But the law had already joined the priest's clothing to his life. The bells on his robe were to be heard when he went in and when he came out, "that he die not" (Exodus 28:35). The garments were to be on Aaron and his sons when they came near the altar, "that they bear not iniquity, and die" (Exodus 28:43). The garments marked an office, and a priest who served in that office served under God's protection.

So when God ended Aaron's life, the office was first taken from him and given to his son. The man was separated from the office. The office went on. Aaron did not.

A Priesthood That Cannot Pass to Another

Here is the weakness of the Aaronic order. The office had to be passed from one dying man to another. "And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death" (Hebrews 7:23). The garment outlived the man, and death interrupted the priesthood again and again.

Hebrews says that Jesus is a different kind of priest. He was made priest "not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life" (Hebrews 7:16). He did not receive His priesthood from a family line or from a garment woven by human hands. "But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood" (Hebrews 7:24). The word "unchangeable" means a priesthood that does not pass from one person to another.

Jesus will never climb a mountain to be stripped of His office. No son will receive His garments. The life that keeps this Priest is not in the robe. It is in the Priest Himself. "Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Our way to God is secure because our Priest cannot be taken away.

This does not stop with Christ. Peter calls believers "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). And Paul writes, "For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (Galatians 3:27). To "put on" is

the language of clothing. Aaron was clothed by Moses with the garments of an office. The believer has been clothed with Christ Himself. We do not stand before God in our own weakness. We stand clothed in the Son, and our life “is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3).

Preserved Until the Assignment Is Done

This brings real comfort, and it must be understood rightly. God’s servants are not at the mercy of chance or of their enemies. Their days are in His hand. Jesus Himself showed this. When men tried to seize Him, “no man laid hands on him, because his hour was not yet come” (John 7:30). When His hour came, He said, “No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself” (John 10:18).

Paul shows the same pattern. He met shipwreck, stoning and plots against his life. In the storm an angel told him, “Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar” (Acts 27:24). He lived until his work was done. Near the end he wrote, “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:6–7).

But we must also be honest about what Scripture records. Stephen was stoned for his witness (Acts 7:59–60). In Acts 12, Herod killed James with the sword, and the same Herod put Peter in prison, from which an angel set him free (Acts 12:2–11). One apostle was delivered and the other died. God was present in both. Neither death caught heaven by surprise.

So this truth is not a promise that a believer will always live long, or that he will never suffer harm. It means that no believer’s life lies outside God’s order. “Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints” (Psalm 116:15). When a faithful believer dies, we must not say that he stepped out from under God’s shelter. We do not know the length of any man’s assignment. God does.

You do not serve God to earn protection. You serve as one who is already clothed in the One who has conquered death. Your days are in

His hand, your life is hidden in Christ, and not even death can separate you from Him: “For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, … shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39).

DEEPER TRUTH

What Was the Law For?

If we are saved by grace and not by the law, why did God give the law at all? Scripture gives a clear answer. The law is good, but it was never given to make us righteous.

The Law Is Holy, Just and Good

Paul does not treat the law as a mistake. “Wherefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy, and just, and good” (Romans 7:12). The problem is not with the law. It is with what we expect the law to do.

At Sinai, Israel said, “All that the LORD hath spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8). They meant it. Yet before long they made a golden calf (Exodus 32). The law showed what God required. It also showed that people could not keep it by their own strength.

A mirror shows the face, but it cannot wash it. The law is like that. “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). The law shows what we are. It cannot make us clean.

Paul adds, “But sin, taking occasion by the commandment, wrought in me all manner of concupiscence” (Romans 7:8). A command can show sin, and sin can use even a good command to stir itself up. The fault lay in the sinner, not in the law.

The Righteousness the Law Pointed To

“But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (Romans 3:21–22). The law is not thrown away. It bears witness to a righteousness that comes from God.

Paul says, “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Galatians 3:24). And “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth” (Romans 10:4).

Many in Israel went wrong by trying to build their own righteousness. “For they being ignorant of God’s righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3).

Jesus told of two men who went up to pray. The Pharisee trusted in his own record. The tax collector said, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (Luke 18:13). Jesus said this man “went down to his house justified rather than the other” (Luke 18:14).

Isaiah says, “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). Paul wanted to be found in Christ, “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9). “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Written on the Heart

God had promised something deeper than stone tablets. “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33).

The law shows the standard. The new covenant gives a new heart to live by it. Nicodemus was “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1), and he knew the law. Yet Jesus said to him, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Think of root and fruit. Fruit does not make a tree alive. Life in the root produces the fruit. Obedience is the fruit, and the root is life in Christ. “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me” (Galatians 2:20).

Grace does not lower God’s standard. It fulfils it. The law that once stood outside and accused us is now written within, “not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshy tables of the heart” (2 Corinthians 3:3).

So what was the law for? It showed us what God requires, and it showed us that we cannot meet it by ourselves. It witnessed to the righteousness of God. And it leaves us at the door of Christ, who gives what the law demands.

DEEPER TRUTH

What Is the Kingdom of God?

Jesus spoke about the Kingdom of God more than almost any other subject. Yet many believers cannot say clearly what it is. Scripture gives a plain answer: the Kingdom is the reign of a King.

A King Before a Place

Mark records how Jesus began: “Now after that John was put in prison, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:14–15). The first thing He preached was the Kingdom.

A kingdom is not first a place. It is a rule. It is where the king’s will is done. That is why Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). The Kingdom comes where God’s will is done.

Matthew sums up His work: “And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of sickness and all manner of disease among the people” (Matthew 4:23). Where the King came, His rule showed itself in truth and in mercy.

The Kingdom is not marked by outward show. Paul says, “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17). It is a life under God’s rule.

This rule does not end. “Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations” (Psalm 145:13). Nothing shakes the throne of the King we serve.

Forgiveness is a great part of the good news. It is not the whole of it. The good news is also that a King reigns, and that we may live under Him.

How We Enter

Jesus told Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). A little later He said, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). The Kingdom is entered by new birth. Effort and religion cannot open the door.

Paul describes what happens when a person is saved. God “hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son” (Colossians 1:13).

Think of a citizen who moves to another country. His papers change. His ruler changes. His laws change. Salvation is more than being forgiven. It is a move from one rule to another. We were under the power of darkness. Now we are under the reign of Christ.

This is why “repent ye” (Mark 1:15) is the first word of the gospel of the Kingdom. It means more than feeling sorry. It is a change of government. A person turns from his own rule, and from the rule of darkness, and bows to the King.

Those who enter are given a place. “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). And they may come near: “Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16). The King is not far away.

Living Under the King

If the Kingdom is a rule, it must be lived. Jesus said, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). To seek the Kingdom first is to put God’s rule ahead of our own plans, and to let His righteousness decide what we do.

He also gave a warning every believer should hear. “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven” (Matthew 7:21). And He asked, “And why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46).

These words do not take away grace. They show what grace was given for. A person can receive Jesus as Saviour and never bow to Him as King. The Kingdom asks for both. Is Christ only received, or is He also enthroned?

The Kingdom also has power. “For the kingdom of God is not in word, but in power” (1 Corinthians 4:20). Those who live under the King are not left to do it in their own strength. The Holy Spirit who brought them in is the One who enables them to live as people of the Kingdom.

So the question is not only, “Am I forgiven?” It is also, “Who reigns in my life?”

What Is the Mark of the Beast?

Few questions about Revelation are asked more often than this one. People look for a chip, a card or a number. Revelation asks a weightier question: whose image is a person becoming?

The Mark Shows Whose Image You Bear

Revelation 13 says the beast "causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name" (Revelation 13:16–17).

Notice the two places: the hand and the forehead. The law had already used them. God's words were to be bound "for a sign upon thine hand," and they were to be "as frontlets between thine eyes" (Deuteronomy 6:8). The forehead speaks of what a person thinks. The hand speaks of what he does. God's people were to carry His words in both. The beast offers a copy.

Scripture also shows that people become like what they worship. Of idols it says, "They that make them are like unto them; so is every one that trusteth in them" (Psalm 115:8). Paul shows the same truth the other way round: "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

What a person worships shapes what he becomes. What he becomes shows in his mind and in his work. The mark fits that pattern.

Revelation says whom the beast's followers worship. "And they worshipped the dragon which gave power unto the beast: and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? who is able to make war with him?" (Revelation 13:4). Worship comes first. The mark

follows.

The Number of a Man and the Name of the Father

Revelation does not show the mark alone. In the next chapter it shows its opposite. “And I looked, and, lo, a Lamb stood on the mount Sion, and with him an hundred forty and four thousand, having his Father’s name written in their foreheads” (Revelation 14:1). At the end of the book the promise is wider: “And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads” (Revelation 22:4).

Two companies stand side by side. One bears the mark of the beast. The other bears the Father’s name. In Scripture a name often stands for the nature of the one who bears it. Each company carries the likeness of the one it worships.

Now look at the number. “Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is Six hundred threescore and six” (Revelation 13:18). Scripture does not ask us to work out a name. It says plainly that this is “the number of a man.”

Six stops one short of seven, the number Scripture often uses for completeness. That fits the picture. A man who lifts himself up may look great, but he still falls short of God. The beast is a human power set against God. It is not equal to Him.

The Lamb’s People Overcome

Not every danger looks like a beast. John also saw “another beast coming up out of the earth; and he had two horns like a lamb, and he spake as a dragon” (Revelation 13:11). It looked gentle. It spoke with the dragon’s voice.

This is a warning to test what is spoken, and not only how it looks. A system can sound religious and still serve another master.

Scripture tells us how people overcame. “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death” (Revelation 12:11). They trusted the Lamb’s sacrifice. They held to the truth. They did not hold their own lives too tightly.

Daniel 3 shows the same. A king set up an image and commanded everyone to worship it. Three men said that God was able to deliver them, “But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods, nor worship the golden image which thou hast set up” (Daniel 3:18). They knew whom they served.

The call is to faithfulness. “Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12). We are not called to calculate dates. Jesus said, “But of that day and hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels of heaven, but my Father only” (Matthew 24:36).

Long before any mark is placed on a hand, a person can be shaped by a world that does not know the Father. Paul warns, “And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). The Lamb forms a people in His own likeness. The better question is not, “Have I seen the mark?” It is, “Whose image am I becoming?”

DEEPER TRUTH

What Is Kingdom Righteousness?

Jesus told us to seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. Many people picture a list of rules. Scripture shows something deeper: the character of the King, given to us and lived out in us.

The Character of the King

Jesus said, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33). The Kingdom and righteousness are joined in one sentence. We are not told to seek one and leave the other.

The reason is simple. A kingdom takes on the character of its king. Hebrews says of the Son, “Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom” (Hebrews 1:8). The King rules righteously, so the Kingdom is righteous. Where He reigns, His own character becomes the standard of life.

Paul sums up the Kingdom in the same way: “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost” (Romans 14:17). Righteousness comes first in his list. It is the ground on which the other two stand.

More Than Keeping Rules

The people of Jesus’ day knew a great deal about rules. Yet He said to them, “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). The scribes and Pharisees were careful about what could be seen. Jesus asks for what goes deeper.

He then shows what He means. “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill... But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Matthew 5:21–22). A man may never lift his hand against

another and still carry murder in his heart. In the same chapter Jesus says that “whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The standard moves from the hand to the heart.

Isaiah’s word, which Jesus quoted, shows the danger: “This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me” (Matthew 15:8). Righteousness that lives only in outward behaviour is not the righteousness of the Kingdom. “For the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

Given Before It Is Lived

If the standard is the heart, who can meet it? Paul answers that the righteousness we need is not our own. He wanted to be found in Christ, “not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Philippians 3:9). It is “the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe” (Romans 3:22).

This is the order that matters. We do not obey in order to be accepted. We are accepted in Christ, and then we obey. Righteousness is first a gift and then a way of life.

The gift does not end in words. Paul says that Christ came “that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit” (Romans 8:4). The same Spirit who joins us to Christ forms Christ’s character in us. Paul says that those whom grace has set free “became the servants of righteousness” (Romans 6:18). Grace does not excuse unrighteousness. It sets us free to serve what is right.

Hunger for What Is Right

How do we know that this righteousness is at work in us? Jesus gives one sign: “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled” (Matthew 5:6). A person under the King does not treat sin lightly. He grieves over it, and he wants what is right in his thoughts, his words, his dealings and his hidden choices.

This hunger does not make a person proud. A man who knows that he stands by grace has no ground to look down on others. His righteousness is a gift, so it makes him humble.

Keeping rules is not the final measure. The measure is whether the character of the King is being formed in us. That is the righteousness of the Kingdom, and it is the first thing Jesus tells us to seek.

DEEPER TRUTH

Who Is the Lamb, and Why Does He Win?

John was told to look for a Lion. He saw a Lamb. Revelation shows how Christ wins, and why the way He wins is the opposite of the way the beast wins.

John Hears a Lion and Sees a Lamb

In Revelation 5, John sees a scroll in the right hand of Him who sits on the throne. A strong angel asks, “Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seals thereof?” (Revelation 5:2). No one in heaven, on earth or under the earth can do it. John says, “And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book” (Revelation 5:4).

Then an elder says to him, “Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof” (Revelation 5:5). The Lion is the promised king of Judah. Jacob said of Judah, “The sceptre shall not depart from Judah” (Genesis 49:10).

John turns to look at the Lion. This is what he sees: “And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne... stood a Lamb as it had been slain” (Revelation 5:6). He heard a Lion and he saw a Lamb. The two are not rivals. The Lion who has prevailed is the Lamb who was slain.

Why the Lamb Is Worthy

The Lamb is not worthy because He is strong in the way kings of the earth are strong. The song in heaven says why: “Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Revelation 5:9).

His worthiness comes from what He has done. John the Baptist had pointed to Him at the Jordan: “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Isaiah had seen Him long before: “he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). The One who paid the debt is the One who is given the future.

Then all heaven says, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honour, and glory, and blessing” (Revelation 5:12). The Lamb still bears the marks of His death, and He stands alive in the midst of the throne.

Two Ways of Winning

The same book shows another power. A beast rises, and “it was given unto him to make war with the saints, and to overcome them” (Revelation 13:7). The beast wins, for a time, by force, fear and control. He compels people to give him allegiance, and he shows what he is by how he wins.

The Lamb wins differently. “When he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:23). His victory came through the cross. Paul says, “the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Corinthians 1:25). What looked like defeat on Calvary was the defeat of sin and death.

That is why Revelation can say of the final war, “These shall make war with the Lamb, and the Lamb shall overcome them: for he is Lord of lords, and King of kings: and they that are with him are called, and chosen, and faithful” (Revelation 17:14). The outcome was settled before the battle began.

How His People Overcome

The people of the Lamb do not win by copying the beast. Revelation 12:11 says of them, “And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.” They overcome by trusting what Christ has done, by speaking the truth about Him, and by remaining faithful even when it costs them.

Of those who stand with Him on Mount Sion, John writes, “These are they which follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth” (Revelation 14:4). To follow the Lamb means to take His road. It is the road of truth, humility, patience and sacrifice, and it does not use the weapons of the beast.

The question Revelation puts to every believer is whose image we are taking on: the beast’s or the Lamb’s. For more on that, read What Is the Mark of the Beast? The Lamb has won. The only question left is whom we follow.

DEEPER TRUTH

What Was God Doing From Eden to the New Jerusalem?

The Bible begins with God walking with man in a garden and ends with God dwelling with His people in a city. Between the two, one purpose runs through the whole story.

A Presence Lost

The story begins with God and man together. “And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8). Nothing stood between the Creator and the people made in His image.

Then sin entered, and the same verse tells what changed: Adam and his wife “hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.” The people who once walked with God now hid from Him. At the end of the chapter, God “placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24). The loss was more than guilt. Fellowship was broken, and death came into the story.

That is why the rest of Scripture matters. Every step that follows is God working to bring His people home to Himself.

A Tent in the Wilderness

When God rescued Israel from Egypt, He did not send them into the wilderness to live without Him. He said, “And let them make me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them” (Exodus 25:8). Redemption was moving toward a place where God would live among His people.

The promise was plain. “And I will set my tabernacle among you: and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Leviticus 26:11–12). The

tabernacle was real, but it was not the end. When Solomon built the temple, he asked, “But will God indeed dwell on the earth? behold, the heaven and heaven of heavens cannot contain thee; how much less this house that I have builded?” (1 Kings 8:27). The building was a sign of God’s presence, not a box that held Him.

God Among Us in Christ

The next step is the greatest. “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). The word “dwelt” points to the tabernacle. God did not only send a message. He came and lived among men. Matthew gives the name: “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matthew 1:23).

Jesus also spoke of His own body as the temple. “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19), and John explains, “he spake of the temple of his body” (John 2:21). The place where God meets man is no longer a building. It is a person.

God in His People by the Spirit

The dwelling then moves from a person to a people. Paul writes, “What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own?” (1 Corinthians 6:19). To the Corinthians as a church he says, “ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (2 Corinthians 6:16).

The promise made in the wilderness is quoted as now being fulfilled. And Paul pictures the whole church, Jew and Gentile together, as one building: “In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). God no longer waits for His people to come to a tent. He lives in them.

The Dwelling Made Complete

Yet the present experience points forward. The book of Revelation shows where the story ends. “And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 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” (Revelation 21:2–3).

Notice the direction: the city comes down. God’s people are not rescued from creation to float somewhere else. God makes His home with them. There is no separate temple in that city, for “the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it” (Revelation 21:22). What Eden began and the tabernacle pictured is finished. The river and the tree of life that were shut away in Genesis appear again, and “there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face” (Revelation 22:3–4).

What This Means Now

If this is what God has been doing all along, then the end of the age is not first a puzzle about dates. It is the completion of a promise: God with His people forever. That gives the believer something to hold today. God is not far away, because He dwells in His people by the Spirit now. And the future is not something to fear, because it ends with the presence of God and the wiping away of every tear. “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death” (Revelation 21:4).

Part 3

Searchers

Honest questions about life, meaning and God, answered from the Bible.

Can Being a Good Person Make You Right With God?
Why Does God Allow So Much Suffering?
Why Is It So Hard to Be Satisfied?
What Are You Depending On for Your Future?
Why Do We Care So Much What Other People Think?
Why Is It So Hard to Forgive?

Can Being a Good Person Make You Right With God?

Ask almost anyone whether they are a good person, and they will say yes. We point to what we have done. We have kept promises, helped others, worked hard, and tried to do what is right. When we look around, we can always find someone who has done worse. So it seems reasonable to believe that God, who sees all this, will accept us.

It is a fair question to ask: can being good be enough? The Bible gives a clear answer, and it begins with a man who asked almost the same thing.

In Mark 10, a young man ran to Jesus and knelt down. He asked, “Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” (Mark 10:17). Jesus answered, “Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God” (10:18).

Then Jesus pointed him to the commandments. The man replied, “All these have I observed from my youth” (10:20). He was not boasting falsely. By any human measure, he was a good man. And Mark tells us, “Jesus beholding him loved him.”

Yet Jesus said, “One thing thou lackest.” The young man had kept the rules but had never given God his whole heart, and when Jesus asked for it, “he was sad at that saying, and went away grieved” (10:21–22).

This is the first thing we see: a person can be good in the eyes of others and still not be right with God. And the standard Jesus used was not other people. It was God Himself.

Two Men at the Temple

Luke 18 gives us another picture. Two men went up to pray. The Pharisee stood and said, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers… I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess” (Luke 18:11–12). Everything he said was probably true.

The other man, a tax collector, would not even lift his eyes. He beat his chest and said, “God be merciful to me a sinner” (18:13).

Jesus said, “This man went down to his house justified rather than the other” (18:14). The man with the better record went home without being right with God. The man with nothing to offer but his need went home forgiven.

The difference was not that one was good and one was bad. The Pharisee was trusting what he had done. The tax collector was trusting what God could do.

Paul had the best record of anyone. He was circumcised on the eighth day, a Hebrew of the Hebrews, a Pharisee, and, “touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:5–6). Yet he wrote that he counted all of it as loss, “that I may win Christ, and be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ” (Philippians 3:8–9).

Why? Because the law was never meant to make us right with God. It was meant to show us where we stand. “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). A thermometer can show a fever. It cannot cure it.

Isaiah says it more sharply: “We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags” (Isaiah 64:6). This does not mean kindness and honesty are worthless between people. It means they cannot pay what we owe to God.

And the standard is not outward behaviour alone. Jesus said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). Then He showed that anger in the heart is a kind of murder, and a lustful look is a kind of adultery (5:21–28). God looks not only at what we have done, but at what we are.

“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The word “all” includes the best of us.

What God Has Done

If that were the end of the story, there would be no hope. But Paul continues, “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:24).

The word “freely” matters. It means as a gift, with nothing paid. God did not lower His standard to let us in. He met it Himself, in Christ. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Christ took what we owed, and we receive what He earned.

Titus 3:5 says it directly: “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us.” And Ephesians 2:8–9 adds, “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.”

Boasting is ruled out. If we could earn our way, we would have something to be proud of. Because it is a gift, all we can do is thank Him.

Does this mean it does not matter how we live? No. The very next verse says, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Good works are not the way into God's favour. They are what grows from it. Paul tells Titus that "they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works" (Titus 3:8). The order is: first God's mercy, then a changed life.

You Need Jesus

Let us say it plainly. You cannot make yourself right with God, and this includes you if you are a good person. You need Jesus Christ.

Peter said, "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6). He is not one way among many. He is the only way, because He is the only one who paid for sin.

His first message was, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). To repent means to turn. You stop trusting your own goodness, you admit that you have sinned against God, and you turn to Christ. To believe means to rest your whole hope on Him: on His death for your sin and His rising from the dead. "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved" (Romans 10:9).

Do not wait until you feel bad enough, and do not wait until you have improved. The young man in Mark 10 went away grieved because he would not let go of what he trusted. Do not do the same. Tell God today, in your own words, that you have sinned, that you cannot save yourself, and that you are trusting Jesus Christ. "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 10:13).

"Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Corinthians 6:2).

Why Does God Allow So Much Suffering?

When life is going well, we ask easy questions. When someone we love is dying, or a child is lost, or an honest person is crushed while a cruel one prospers, one question becomes hard to avoid: if God is good and has power, why does He allow this?

It is not a question to be ashamed of. The Bible itself asks it, loudly, and it does not hurry to answer.

The psalmist cries, “How long wilt thou forget me, O LORD? for ever? how long wilt thou hide thy face from me?” (Psalm 13:1). And Psalm 22 begins, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” Jesus Himself spoke those words from the cross (Matthew 27:46).

So we are not asked to pretend. God has put these cries in His own book, which tells us that bringing our pain honestly to Him is not unbelief.

Did God Make It This Way?

No. At the beginning, “God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Suffering and death are not part of the original design. They entered through humanity’s rebellion (Genesis 3). Paul says that the creature “was made subject to vanity” (Romans 8:20), and that the whole creation “groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now” (Romans 8:22).

So the world we see is not the world as God made it. That does not mean we can trace each person’s pain to a specific cause. Some suffering comes from human cruelty, some from a damaged world, and some from causes we cannot see.

And Jesus warns us not to guess. When His disciples saw a man born blind, they asked whose sin caused it. Jesus answered, “Neither hath this

man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of God should be made manifest in him" (John 9:3). When a tower fell and killed eighteen people, He asked, "Think ye that they were sinners above all men?" and answered, "I tell you, Nay" (Luke 13:4–5). Suffering is not a measure of how guilty a person is.

The book of Job is the Bible's long answer to this question, and its answer surprises us. Job was "perfect and upright" (Job 1:1), and he lost everything. His friends insisted that he must have sinned. Job asked God for an explanation.

God did come. But He did not give an explanation. He asked Job questions: "Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?" (Job 38:4). He showed Job how much lay beyond his understanding. And Job's answer was, "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear: but now mine eye seeth thee" (Job 42:5).

Two things stand out. First, God never told Job that his suffering was punishment; He later said that Job's friends, who had claimed it was, "have not spoken of me the thing that is right" (42:7). Second, what Job received was not an answer to his question but a meeting with God. We may never be told why a particular thing happened. But we can know whom we are dealing with.

What God Has Done About It

If suffering means God does not care, we should see it in His actions. We see the opposite.

At the tomb of Lazarus, Jesus knew He would raise him in a few minutes. Yet when He saw Mary weeping, He wept as well. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). He did not call grief a lack of faith.

Isaiah describes the Messiah as "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53:3). He was betrayed, falsely accused, beaten, and killed. The writer of Hebrews says, "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities" (Hebrews

4:15).

The cross does not explain every pain. But it shows that God did not stay at a distance. He entered the worst of human suffering Himself, and He did it to deal with sin and death.

Suffering Is Not the Last Word

Jesus rose from the dead. Paul says that Christ “hath abolished death, and hath brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Timothy 1:10). The promise is that “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” (Revelation 21:4).

This does not make present pain small. Paul, who suffered more than most, says, “For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory” (2 Corinthians 4:17). He can say this because he is weighing his pain against something greater, not because it is light.

Because God is “the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4), those who have received comfort can pass it on. And John writes, “Whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?” (1 John 3:17).

A person in pain may need prayer, but may also need food, a visit, or someone willing to sit and say nothing. Compassion that only speaks is not enough.

If You Are Hurting Now

You do not have to settle every question before turning to God. You can bring your grief, even your anger, as the psalmists did. Jesus says, “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28).

But there is something even more important than an answer to your question, and it must be said clearly. Beneath all suffering lies a deeper problem: sin has separated us from God, and no one can fix that for himself. You may never get the answer you want in this life. But you can be forgiven, made new, and brought into God's family, and that is what Jesus came to do.

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). When a jailer asked Paul and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" they answered, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved" (Acts 16:30–31). That is the whole message. Turn from your own way, admit your sin before God, and trust Christ alone.

Do not wait until life becomes easier, or until you understand everything. "Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). Come to Him now.

Why Is It So Hard to Be Satisfied?

Most of life is built around pursuit. We study for a better future. We work for provision. We seek a marriage, a home, a name, some security against what might go wrong. None of these things is wrong. Many are good and needed.

But a strange thing happens. We reach the thing we wanted, enjoy it for a while, and then find ourselves wanting the next. Why is it so hard to be satisfied?

A more useful question than “What do I want?” is “What am I expecting it to do for me?”

A man may want money to provide for his family, and that is right. But if money becomes the thing that makes him feel safe, valued and in control, he is asking it to carry more than it can. A woman may long for marriage, which is good. But if her whole worth depends on it, she has put a weight on another person that no person can hold. A man may pursue success to use his gifts well, and then find that failure makes him feel worthless.

In each case the thing itself is not the problem. The problem is what we have made it mean.

What the Preacher Found

Ecclesiastes belongs to a man who had tried these things. He had wisdom, wealth, pleasure and work, and he still wrote, “Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity” (Ecclesiastes 1:2).

He was not saying that nothing in life has value. He was showing what life “under the sun” cannot do on its own. He also saw how desire works: “He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he

that loveth abundance with increase" (Ecclesiastes 5:10). More does not end the wanting. It only moves it.

Jesus said the same thing in plain words: "Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth" (Luke 12:15).

The Bible begins with a statement that changes the question: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth" (Genesis 1:1).

If we made ourselves, we could decide what our life is for. But we did not. We were given life, and anything that is made is best understood by the purpose of the one who made it. So the question "What will make my life meaningful?" becomes "Why did God give me life?"

Two Evils

God, speaking through Jeremiah, describes what has gone wrong: "For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13).

There are two charges in that verse. People have left the fountain, which is God Himself. And they have dug their own cisterns to take His place. The cisterns are our pursuits, and they leak.

This is why a person can change his job, his city and his circumstances and find the same restlessness following him. The trouble is deeper than circumstances. We were made for God and have turned away from Him, and we keep trying to fill that space with something else.

If we only needed the right possession, relationship or career, the answer would be to keep searching until we found it. But what if nothing has been enough because we have been asking created things to meet a need that only the Creator can meet?

God Himself asks the question: "Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labour for that which satisfieth not?"

(Isaiah 55:2). The same chapter invites: “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters” (Isaiah 55:1).

This does not mean the believer stops enjoying good things. He receives them with thanks, without asking them to be God. Work becomes work and not identity. People are loved and not leaned on for what only God can give. “For he satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness” (Psalm 107:9).

Jesus Offers Living Water

God has not left us to search in the dark. He has come to us in Jesus Christ, who said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (John 6:35).

He said it in public and to anyone: “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37). Jesus does not offer another way of managing life. He offers Himself, and through Him, the forgiveness of sins and life from God.

You may feel you have too many questions, or that you have been disappointed by Christianity before. Come with them anyway. Read the Gospels and listen to Jesus. He has already answered those who come: “him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6:37).

Your restlessness may not be a sign that you need more. It may be God calling you to Himself. Come to Jesus.

What Are You Depending On for Your Future?

Much of what we do today is for a future we cannot see. We study because we will need it. We work, save, build relationships and make plans, hoping our lives will go somewhere.

There is wisdom in this. A man who never thinks of tomorrow makes trouble for himself, and Scripture does not teach carelessness. But underneath our planning is something more. We are not only preparing for the future. We are trying to secure it. So the question is worth asking plainly: what are you depending on for your future?

We trust what we can see. Money can be counted, a house can be seen, a qualification can be displayed. These feel safe because they are solid.

But money disappears, businesses fail, careers change, and plans meet circumstances no one expected. We say, “If I earn enough, I will be secure,” or “If I find the right person, I will be complete,” or “If I stay healthy, I will be fine.” Each hope is understandable. None can promise what we ask of it.

What We Cannot Control

James speaks to this: “Go to now, ye that say, To day or to morrow we will go into such a city, and continue there a year, and buy and sell, and get gain: whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapour, that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away” (James 4:13–14).

The plans were not wrong. The confidence was. These men spoke of a year ahead as if it belonged to them. James adds what they should have said: “If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that” (James 4:15).

We want certainty, and life does not offer it. We can plan, prepare and be wise, but we cannot know what is coming.

When we cannot control something, we often worry. Worry feels like doing something, but it does nothing. Jesus asked, “Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature?” (Matthew 6:27).

He then said, “Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself” (Matthew 6:34). He was not telling us to stop planning. He was telling us to stop demanding of ourselves what only God can carry. Today has its own work. Tomorrow will come when it comes.

Trust Without the Map

Faith is not knowing what will happen. It is trusting God when we do not know.

“By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went” (Hebrews 11:8). Abraham did not have an account of the years ahead. He had a word from God, and that was enough to begin.

We want the whole road before the first step. Abraham knew the One who called him. One kind of confidence comes from knowing what will happen. Another comes from knowing whom you trust. Scripture calls the second one faith.

We do not know the future, but God does. He is the One “declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand” (Isaiah 46:10). And He gives the instruction: “Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths” (Proverbs 3:5–6).

The Future Beyond This Life

There is a deeper reason the future troubles us. We know our own lives end.

Jesus told of a rich man whose land produced so much that he planned bigger barns and a long, easy life. God said to him, “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?” (Luke 12:20). The man had prepared well for a future he never reached.

No bank account can answer what happens after death. No career can secure it, and no relationship can carry us through it. The Bible says death is tied to a deeper problem: “For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Our greatest need is not a safe tomorrow. It is to be reconciled to God.

Jesus does not merely give advice about the future. He went into the very thing we fear and came out of it. He said to Martha, “I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (John 11:25–26).

That is a different kind of security. It does not promise that nothing hard will happen. Paul was persuaded that neither “things present, nor things to come... shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Whatever comes, Christ remains.

So plan, work, save and love people well, but do not ask any of these to carry your future. Jesus asks you the same question He asked Martha: “Believest thou this?” Put your trust in Him.

Why Do We Care So Much What Other People Think?

There are choices we would make differently if no one else would know. We might change careers, say what we really think, admit something is not working or leave a relationship. But the moment we picture what people will say, our confidence changes.

Most of us would say that other people's opinions do not control us. Our lives often say otherwise. We want to be respected and accepted. That is partly natural, because we were made for each other. The trouble begins when their opinion becomes so important that it decides how we live.

A man may know what is right and not do it, because he fears what people will say. Another may stay in something harmful because leaving would disappoint others. A third may keep up a picture of success that no longer matches his life. We can become so busy managing how we are seen that we lose sight of who we are.

Being seen can be managed. We decide what people see, what we tell them, and what we hide. Being known is different. It means someone sees past the show and understands what is really there.

That is why approval can be so strong and so empty. People may admire our confidence while we are insecure, or think we are successful while we feel like failures. We get better at making people think well of us, and the danger is that managing their view becomes more important than being honest about who we are. Social media has made this easier to see, but it is older than any platform. The platforms have changed; the heart has not.

A Weight It Cannot Carry

Why does approval matter so much? Underneath, we want to know that we matter, that we are acceptable and that something about us is worth loving. Those are not foolish wants.

But we ask people to answer a question they cannot fully answer. They can encourage, love and correct us, but no one knows us completely, and no one has the authority to settle our worth. The person who praises us today may criticise us tomorrow. The crowd that celebrates one man moves on to the next. If our sense of worth rests on human approval, we will always be at the mercy of the next opinion.

Jesus even warns: “Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you!” (Luke 6:26).

“The fear of man bringeth a snare” (Proverbs 29:25). A snare does not look like a trap at first. It may begin with wanting to be accepted. Slowly the wish to be accepted starts to decide for us, until we are afraid to act without first asking how people will take it.

So a man refuses to apologise to avoid looking weak, or keeps defending a wrong because admitting it would cost him his good name.

John records a sad example: “Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God” (John 12:42–43).

God Sees the Heart

When Samuel looked at Jesse’s sons, he judged by appearance. God said, “Look not on his countenance, or on the height of his stature... for the LORD seeth not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

A reputation is not character. A good name does not show what is in the heart. So the deepest truth about us cannot be settled by public opinion.

David knew what it is to be completely known: “O LORD, thou hast searched me, and known me. Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off” (Psalm 139:1–2). He also knew there is no hiding: “Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?” (Psalm 139:7).

That can sound frightening if we have worked hard to manage our image. But it is also hopeful. God does not love an image of us. He knows the person behind the image.

Living for Another Audience

The life of Jesus shows what it means to live from a different centre. The crowds welcomed Him and then rejected Him, praised Him and then demanded His death. His direction did not change, because His life was governed by the Father. He said, “I receive not honour from men” (John 5:41).

This did not make Him cold toward people. He had compassion on the sick, welcomed the rejected and wept with the grieving. He loved people without living for their approval. Paul followed the same line: “For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ” (Galatians 1:10).

We can listen to correction without being ruled by criticism. We can receive encouragement without making praise our identity.

But the problem is deeper than insecurity. We could tell people to believe in themselves, and some of that might help, but it does not reach the root. The question under the question is whether we are right with God, who sees everything. Being fully known and not fully clean is a frightening place to stand.

Here is the good news: the God who knows us completely has come toward us. “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). He did not wait for us to improve our image. He died for the person behind the image.

And Scripture says of all who trust Him: “he that believeth on him shall not be confounded” (1 Peter 2:6). They will not be put to shame.

You have spent years trying to be accepted by people. Come instead to the One who already sees you and has already acted. You do not need to pretend before Him. Come honestly, believe in Jesus, and be known by God.

Why Is It So Hard to Forgive?

Some things people do to us we do not simply remember. We carry them. A betrayal changes how we trust. A harsh word stays for years. An injustice becomes part of the story we tell about someone else and sometimes about ourselves.

That is why forgiveness is hard. When someone has truly hurt us, forgiving can feel like letting them off, as if we were saying that what they did did not matter. Scripture does not ask us to pretend. It asks us to answer wrong without letting the wrong rule our hearts.

Sometimes the event is over, but it lives on in us. We replay the conversation. We remember the betrayal. We imagine what we would say if we had another chance. We become more guarded, more suspicious, more bitter.

The person may have moved on, yet we still carry the weight. This does not mean the pain was imagined. Some wounds are deep, and some wrongs have consequences that cannot be erased. But there comes a point when we must ask whether what happened is gaining more power over us than it should.

There is something in us that wants wrong put right, and that is not wrong. God is just. But we can start by wanting justice and end by wanting the other person to suffer because we did. We may want them to feel what they made us feel, or to fail so that we are proved right. Sometimes a person builds his whole identity on being the one who was hurt.

At that point the wound is shaping what is happening inside us.

Forgiveness Is Not Pretending

Forgiveness is not denial. It does not call wrong right, and it does not wipe out consequences. It does not mean that a relationship returns at once to the way it was. Forgiveness and trust are related, but they are not the same thing. There are times when wisdom needs distance, boundaries or accountability.

What forgiveness does mean is that we will not let revenge rule our response. We leave the justice with God, and we stop carrying the job of making the other person pay.

Ask honestly what this wound has produced in you. Has it made you more merciful or more suspicious? More dependent on God, or more controlled by anger? Has it taught you about human weakness, or made you decide never to trust anyone?

We cannot always control what is done to us. We can decide what we let it grow in us. Another person's sin should not become the author of your character.

We Also Need Mercy

There is another reason forgiveness is hard. We are not only people who have been wronged. We have wronged others, and we have wronged God.

David, after his great sin, prayed to God, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:4). The weight of any sin comes finally to God. And Jesus teaches us to pray, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors" (Matthew 6:12).

This does not make every wrong equal, and it does not shrink what was done to you. It changes where we stand. We do not stand above the other person as if we needed no mercy. Both of us stand in need of it. The man who understands his own need becomes less ready to hold another under condemnation for ever.

Speaking of a woman who had been forgiven much, Jesus said, “to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little” (Luke 7:47). Those who know how much they have been forgiven find it easier to forgive.

Forgiveness is not cheap. At the cross God did not pretend that sin did not matter. The seriousness of sin is seen in what Christ did about it. “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Peter 3:18).

The cross says two things together. Sin is serious, and God’s mercy is greater. God did not forgive by acting as if nothing had happened. Christ carried the cost.

That gives forgiveness a different foundation. We do not forgive because the wrong did not matter. We forgive because we have met a God who deals with sin without letting sin have the last word. David knew this: “If thou, LORD, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee” (Psalm 130:3–4).

More Than an Instruction

It is possible to hear “You must forgive” and still not know how to become free. Christianity is not a list of instructions for better people. At the centre is a Person.

We do not need only advice about forgiveness. We need to be reconciled to God, to have our hearts brought under Christ, and to receive grace for what we cannot fix by willpower. The answer is not “Try harder to forgive.” It is Christ.

Sometimes the question is not “Who do I need to forgive?” but “Who do I need to ask to forgive me?” We can become so aware of what others did to us that we miss what we did to them. We may have spoken harshly, betrayed trust or neglected someone who needed us. There is humility in facing it.

Forgiveness does not change the past. What happened happened. But it changes what the past is allowed to do to your future. You do not have to

keep carrying the same debt every day, or rehearse the same offence to prove that it mattered. You can place the matter in God's hands.

This may not happen overnight. Often it is a surrender repeated again and again. But each time we refuse to feed bitterness, the offence loses its hold.

Receive What You Need First

In the end, what matters most is not how badly you were hurt, but where the hurt is taking you: toward God, or away from Him.

Whatever you carry, you need forgiveness yourself, and God offers it. "In whom we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Paul preached, "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things" (Acts 13:38–39).

Believe in Jesus, receive His forgiveness for your own sins, and ask Him to teach you to forgive. The one who has been forgiven by God can finally let go of what others owe.

Part 4

Character Formation

How God shapes the heart: honesty, humility, and freedom from bitterness, envy and pride.

What Kind of Person Are You Becoming?
Why Is It So Difficult to Admit When We Are Wrong?
How Bitterness Changes the Way We See People
Why Do We Struggle With Envy When Others Succeed?
When Does Correcting Someone Become Gossip?
Why Do Some People Always Need to Win an Argument?

CHARACTER FORMATION

What Kind of Person Are You Becoming?

Most of us spend a lot of time asking what we want from life: the education, the career, the money, the home, the relationships. These are fair questions. But under all of them sits another that is easier to miss. What am I becoming while I chase these things?

A person can reach what he wanted and find that the chase changed him. He can become successful and impatient, rich and selfish, learned and proud, respected and impossible to correct. Achievement shows what a man has done. It does not show what it has done to him.

Jesus asked a question that goes to the same place: “For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36).

No one stays the same. Our decisions, relationships and habits are all making us into someone.

Paul puts it as sowing and reaping: “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting” (Galatians 6:7–8).

A man who keeps choosing honesty becomes at home with the truth. A man who keeps lying finds deceit easier. Anger given in to becomes easier to give in to. One choice looks small. Repeated choices become a pattern, and a pattern becomes a person.

So about any habit we should ask more than “Is this wrong?” We should ask, “What is this making of me?”

Looking Good and Being Good

The person others see is not always the person we are becoming. We learn to seem confident when afraid, generous when selfish, calm when angry.

Jesus spoke sharply about this: “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity” (Matthew 23:27–28).

Someone can be kind in public and cruel at home. Someone can give only when watched. Someone can know exactly what everyone else should do and never examine himself. After a while we stop asking what is really happening inside us.

Jesus told us where evil comes from: “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness: all these evil things come from within, and defile the man” (Mark 7:21–23).

He was not making a list of bad behaviour. He was naming the source. Changing only the surface seldom works. A man can stop saying certain things and go on thinking them. He can change his surroundings and keep his heart. He can learn to hide a fault and never overcome it.

Jeremiah says the same: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9). And Solomon gives the instruction: “Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life” (Proverbs 4:23).

Knowing and Not Doing

Most people know more than they practise. We know honesty is better, that anger destroys, that some habits are harming us. Yet knowing does not give the power to do.

James puts it bluntly: “Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin” (James 4:17). Advice such as try harder, think positively and be disciplined helps for a time. Then we meet the places where determination is not enough.

So what is wrong with us?

Scripture does not say that our problem is lack of information. It says: “As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one” (Romans 3:10).

That includes the obviously failed and the carefully respectable, the religious and the irreligious. It does not say we have all done the same wrongs. It says every one of us has fallen short of God and needs His mercy.

Sin is deeper than a list of mistakes. It is a condition in which man has turned from God to live on his own terms. That is why education, discipline, success or religion cannot solve it. A man can become more respectable and remain apart from God.

The Person Who Needs to Change

Most advice begins with “Here is what you must do.” Scripture goes further and says the one who needs to change is you.

That is hard, because we see other people’s pride more easily than our own and we explain our own compromises. Real change begins when we stop using others’ failures to avoid looking at ourselves. This is not a call to endless self-condemnation. It is a call to be honest enough to admit we need help beyond ourselves.

Test yourself with plain questions. What keeps getting the better of you? What do you do when no one is watching? How do you treat people who can do nothing for you? What happens to you when you have power, money or freedom?

Jesus says what He came to do: “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick... for I am not come to call the righteous,

but sinners to repentance" (Matthew 9:12–13).

You do not need to repair yourself first. You come as you are, admit your need, and turn to Him. Peter said, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

Every person is being shaped by something: by desire, by company, by choices, by disappointments. You are changing. What is shaping you, and where is it taking you? Make sure it is Christ.

CHARACTER FORMATION

Why Is It So Difficult to Admit When We Are Wrong?

Most of us can explain a mistake far better than we can admit one.

Someone points out what we did wrong, and within seconds our reasons are ready. We were tired. We were misunderstood. We had no choice. We remember what the other person did last month. Somewhere beneath all of this we may know the correction is true, yet the words “I was wrong” refuse to come out.

The difficulty is rarely the mistake itself. It is what we believe the mistake says about us.

We want to be seen as sensible, fair, and good, and we want to see ourselves that way. A mistake that is exposed seems to threaten that picture. So instead of asking, “Is this true?” we ask, “How do I keep my image?” These two questions lead to very different conversations.

Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.” The fool here is not the person who makes mistakes, because everyone does. He is the person whose own judgment is the final court. Nothing outside himself is allowed to weigh in, so nothing can correct him.

Wisdom begins when we accept that our judgment can be wrong, and that someone else may see what we cannot. Proverbs 9:8–9 says to rebuke a wise man and “he will love thee,” and to instruct him and he will be “yet wiser.” The wise person treats correction as a gift. The proud person treats it as an attack.

When Explanations Become Excuses

There is a place for explanation. Sometimes a person has misunderstood us, and the truth needs to be made clear. But we can test ourselves by asking what our explanation is doing. Is it helping the other person understand, or is it helping us avoid saying one sentence?

An honest explanation comes after the admission, not instead of it. “I was wrong, and this is what led me there” is very different from “Here is why it was not really my fault.”

The same is true of the quiet counter-attack: “You do the same thing.” It may be true. It may even be fair. But another person’s fault does not shrink ours. Two people can be wrong in the same conversation, and each is answerable for his own part.

Second Samuel 12 shows how far this blindness can go. David had taken Bathsheba and arranged the death of her husband, Uriah. For months he carried on as king. Then the prophet Nathan told him a story about a rich man who took a poor man’s only lamb.

David was furious. He declared that the man deserved to die. He had a sharp sense of justice, and it worked perfectly, as long as it pointed at someone else. Nathan said, “Thou art the man” (2 Samuel 12:7).

David’s problem was not a lack of moral sense. It was that his moral sense pointed only outward. Most of us are the same. We see pride, dishonesty, and selfishness clearly in other people because we have nothing to protect when we judge them. When the matter becomes ours, a different set of rules suddenly seems to apply.

David’s answer was short: “I have sinned against the LORD” (2 Samuel 12:13). He did not argue about his position or hide behind his reasons. His confession did not remove the consequences, which were severe and lasting. But it ended the hiding.

Psalm 32 describes what the hiding had cost him: “When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long.” Then he

describes what followed confession: “I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid… and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin” (Psalm 32:3, 5). The refusal to admit does not make the wrong disappear. It makes us carry it alone.

Why Humility Is Not Weakness

Many people resist admitting a mistake because they think it will make them look weak. They fear losing respect, authority, or standing.

The opposite is usually true. A person who can say, “I was wrong,” is someone whose word can be trusted when he says, “I am right.” A leader who cannot admit error will lead others into it. A husband or wife who will never concede a mistake turns small disagreements into long wars. A friend who cannot apologise for a hurtful word may lose, over pride, a friendship that one honest sentence could have saved.

Proverbs 15:32 says, “He that refuseth instruction despiseth his own soul: but he that heareth reproof getteth understanding.” The person who refuses correction is not protecting himself. He is harming himself. Every correction he rejects is a lesson he does not learn.

Why do we find this so hard? Often because we have tied our worth to being right. When that is true, every correction feels like a verdict on our whole person, and we defend ourselves as though our lives depended on it.

The gospel removes that pressure. First John 1:8 says, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” The very next verse gives the way out: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Paul adds that “there is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1). A person whose standing before God rests on Christ’s work, and not on a spotless record, can afford to be wrong. He can look at his failure honestly without being crushed by it,

because the failure does not define him.

This is why admitting a mistake is easier for the person who knows he is forgiven. He has nothing left to prove.

Saying It Plainly

When you know you have done wrong, say it plainly. Do not begin with "but." Do not say, "I'm sorry if you were hurt," which questions the other person's feelings instead of owning your action. Do not say, "I'm sorry, but you made me angry," which hands your wrong to someone else. Name what you did: "I spoke harshly to you, and it was wrong. Please forgive me."

Then, where you can, make it right. If your words or actions caused loss, repair what you can. A confession that costs nothing and changes nothing is only words.

You will not always handle correction well. Even a wise person needs people who will tell him the truth. In Acts 18:24–26, Apollos was a gifted and eloquent teacher, yet Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and explained the way of God more accurately. He did not need to be defended or protected from them. He was able to grow because he was willing to be taught.

"He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy" (Proverbs 28:13).

CHARACTER FORMATION

How Bitterness Changes the Way We See People

A hurt does not end when the person who caused it walks away. It can stay inside us and slowly change the way we look at everything.

At first it seems small. We remember what was said. We replay the moment. Then, without noticing, we begin to read other people through it. A pause in a conversation feels like an insult. A kind word sounds false. A person who has done us no harm starts to look like someone who might.

That is how bitterness works. It does not only keep a painful memory alive. It changes our eyes.

Hebrews 12:15 warns us to look carefully “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.” The picture is a root, and a root grows where no one can see it. A person can serve, smile, and carry on with life while bitterness grows quietly below the surface.

The last words matter: “thereby many be defiled.” Bitterness does not stay with the one who feels it. A husband who was wronged years ago becomes harsh with his children. A woman who was betrayed once cannot trust anyone who loves her. The people who pay are often people who never did the wrong.

Proverbs 14:10 says, “The heart knoweth his own bitterness.” No one else sees it as we do. That is exactly why it is dangerous. It can grow for years with nobody asking about it.

Two Years of Silence

Second Samuel 13 shows how far this can go. Amnon wronged his half-sister Tamar terribly. Her brother Absalom had every reason to be angry. But look at what he did next: “Absalom spake unto his brother Amnon neither good nor bad: for Absalom hated Amnon” (2 Samuel 13:22).

He said nothing. For two full years he said nothing, and then the hatred that had been growing in silence ended in murder (2 Samuel 13:23–29).

The story does not say Absalom’s anger was without cause. The wrong done to Tamar was real. But the anger was allowed to settle and grow, and it finally destroyed Amnon, and in the end Absalom himself and many others. A real wrong does not make bitterness safe.

When the Hurt Becomes the Way We Read Everything

Bitterness also changes how we see God. When Naomi lost her husband and her sons, she returned to Bethlehem and said, “Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” (Ruth 1:20). Mara means bitter. Her pain was real. But she read her whole life through it, and she could not see that God had already brought Ruth to her side. By the end of the book, the same women said to her, “Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman” (Ruth 4:14).

The same thing happens with people. Once we have decided what kind of person someone is, we notice only what agrees with it. If a colleague once took credit for our work, every question they ask later sounds like another scheme. We may be right to be careful. But being careful about one person is different from being suspicious of everyone, and bitterness slowly blurs the two.

Jesus asks why we look at “the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye” (Matthew 7:3). When bitterness is in charge, we become very good at seeing the other person’s

faults. We become very poor at seeing what the hurt is doing to us.

Taking the Hurt to God

The Bible does not tell us to pretend. Asaph, a man who served in God's house, looked at wicked people doing well while he suffered, and he confessed what happened inside him: "Thus my heart was grieved, and I was pricked in my reins. So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (Psalm 73:21–22).

He did not hide it. He told God the truth. And the turning point came when he "went into the sanctuary of God; then understood I their end" (Psalm 73:17). He did not get a new explanation of the wicked. He got a new view, because he stood in God's presence instead of in his own thoughts.

This is where bitterness begins to loosen: when we stop carrying it as a private case against someone and bring it into the light of God. Where there is ongoing harm, we also need wise help and proper protection. But the inner work cannot be done by anyone else. It has to be handed over.

Paul writes, "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice: and be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you" (Ephesians 4:31–32).

The command has two parts: put something away, and put something in its place. It is not enough to stop feeling angry. Kindness and tenderheartedness must take that room, or the old bitterness will find its way back.

So each of us must ask not only, "What did they do to me?" but also, "What is this doing to me?" If the answer is that we have become hard, suspicious, or unable to rejoice with others, the injury is still ruling us, even after the person who caused it is gone.

CHARACTER FORMATION

Why Do We Struggle With Envy When Others Succeed?

A friend gets the promotion we wanted. A relative buys a house while we are still renting. Someone we thought was our equal begins to receive the opportunities we have been praying for.

We say, “Congratulations.” We may even mean it. But something in us tightens, and later we find ourselves counting what we do not have.

Most of us feel this at some point, and most of us hate to admit it. But the Bible does not look away from envy. It treats it as serious, because it is.

“A sound heart is the life of the flesh: but envy the rottenness of the bones” (Proverbs 14:30). Envy does not stay on the surface. It eats from the inside.

Solomon says, “Wrath is cruel, and anger is outrageous; but who is able to stand before envy?” (Proverbs 27:4). Anger passes. Envy can last for years, because the person we envy keeps doing well and keeps reminding us.

Where It Leads

The first recorded murder began with envy. God accepted Abel’s offering and not Cain’s, and “Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell” (Genesis 4:5). God asked him, “If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door” (4:7). The door was still open for Cain to do well, but he chose to turn on his brother.

Saul’s envy began with a song. The women sang, “Saul hath slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands.” Then the Bible says, “Saul eyed David from that day and forward” (1 Samuel 18:7–9). From that

day he could not look at David without seeing a threat, and it ended in years of pursuit.

Joseph's brothers "envied him" (Genesis 37:11), and the same envy brought them to sell him into slavery. In each case, the envy began as a feeling and ended as an action.

Envy grows out of comparison. We look at what someone else has and begin to measure ourselves against it. Solomon observes that much of what drives people is exactly this: "for this a man is envied of his neighbour" (Ecclesiastes 4:4). Rivalry, as well as need, pushes us to work.

James tells us what envy produces: "If ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth… For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work" (James 3:14, 16). Envy does not stay private. It affects how we speak about people, how we treat them, and whether we are willing to help them.

The deeper trouble is that comparison never ends. There is always someone with more. If our peace depends on being ahead, we will never rest.

What Jesus Said to Peter

After the resurrection, Jesus told Peter how Peter's life would end. Peter turned, saw John, and asked, "Lord, and what shall this man do?" Jesus answered, "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? follow thou me" (John 21:21–22).

Jesus did not answer the question. He brought Peter back to his own calling. Each of us has been given something to do, and what God gives another person does not change what He asks of us.

Paul says the same thing: "Let every man prove his own work, and then shall he have rejoicing in himself alone, and not in another" (Galatians 6:4). We measure our work, not our neighbour's.

In Matthew 20, a landowner hired workers at different hours of the day and paid them all the same wage. Those who worked longest complained. The landowner answered, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” (Matthew 20:15).

The complaint was not that they had been cheated. They had received exactly what was agreed. It was that someone else had been treated generously. Envy cannot bear another person’s blessing, even when it takes nothing from us.

Two Who Could Rejoice

Jonathan was the king’s son and the heir to the throne. David was a shepherd boy who would take that throne. Yet Jonathan “stripped himself of the robe that was upon him, and gave it to David” (1 Samuel 18:4). He gave up his own claim and loved the man who would replace him.

Barnabas is another example. When he arrived in Antioch and saw how God was working among the new believers, he “was glad” (Acts 11:23). He had no need to take credit for what he had seen.

This is the meaning of Paul’s command: “Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep” (Romans 12:15). Weeping with the sad is often easier. Rejoicing with someone who has what we want requires us to stop treating their good as our loss.

Paul wrote from prison, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content” (Philippians 4:11). He says he learned it, so it was not natural to him. And he tells Timothy that “godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6).

Contentment is not pretending we have no needs. It is the settled belief that God has not forgotten us, and that what He has given someone else is not taken from us.

When envy rises, we can say plainly to God, “I am jealous,” and ask Him to change us. Then we can do something that goes against the feeling: send a message of thanks, speak well of the person, and give them honest encouragement. Each time we do that, envy loses some of its grip.

CHARACTER FORMATION

When Does Correcting Someone Become Gossip?

“I am not gossiping. I am telling you because I want him to change.”

Many of us have heard this sentence, and many of us have said something like it. Sometimes it is true. But it is also one of the easiest ways to make gossip sound respectable. We can use the language of correction to cover conversations that help no one.

The difference is not found in whether what we say is true. Scripture shows us that a true report can still do great harm.

In 1 Samuel 22, Doeg the Edomite was at the tabernacle when David came to Ahimelech the priest. Later, when Saul was complaining that no one had told him where David was, Doeg spoke up. He said, “I saw the son of Jesse coming to Nob, to Ahimelech the son of Ahitub. And he enquired of the LORD for him, and gave him victuals, and gave him the sword of Goliath” (1 Samuel 22:9–10).

Every word was true. Ahimelech had helped David. But Ahimelech did not know David was running from the king (22:15), and Doeg, who had been there, left that out. Doeg told the facts in a way that led Saul to order the death of the priests, and when no one else would do it, Doeg struck down eighty-five of them himself (22:18).

This is the first lesson: a true statement is not always an innocent one. We have to ask what it will do and why we are saying it.

Gossip Is About Purpose and Direction

Gossip is the carrying of a person’s faults to people who cannot help and do not need to know. Correction goes to the person who can change, or to the people who can protect others.

Proverbs describes the damage. “A talebearer revealeth secrets: but he that is of a faithful spirit concealeth the matter” (Proverbs 11:13). “He that covereth a transgression seeketh love; but he that repeateth a matter separateth very friends” (Proverbs 17:9). And “The words of a talebearer are as wounds, and they go down into the innermost parts of the belly” (Proverbs 18:8).

None of these verses says the talebearer lies. The problem is the repeating. Where no one repeats the matter, many quarrels simply die: “Where no wood is, there the fire goeth out: so where there is no talebearer, the strife ceaseth” (Proverbs 26:20).

What Is Really Driving the Conversation?

Jesus said, “Of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaketh” (Luke 6:45). So before we speak about someone, we should look at what is in the heart. We may be troubled by their conduct. Or we may dislike them and enjoy discussing their failures. We may want others to agree that we were wronged. We may simply enjoy knowing something others do not.

These motives can all wear respectable names. Resentment is called concern. Exposing someone is called accountability. Sharing a private matter is called “a prayer request.” That last one deserves a word. We can ask people to pray for a family going through trouble without explaining every private detail. If the details are not needed for prayer, they are not prayer; they are news. Paul describes people who go from house to house as “tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not” (1 Timothy 5:13).

The test Paul gives is simple: “Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is good to the use of edifying, that it may minister grace unto the hearers” (Ephesians 4:29). Will this conversation build someone up, or only tear someone down?

Jesus gives the pattern for dealing with a real fault: “Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother”

(Matthew 18:15).

The order matters. He does not begin with a friend, a group, or the whole church. He begins with the person. Only if that fails does He bring in one or two others, and only after that does the matter go to the church (Matthew 18:16–17).

Paul gives the spirit in which this is to be done: “Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Galatians 6:1). The goal is to restore, not to expose. And the last words are a warning to the one who corrects: you could fall too.

When Others Do Need to Know

This does not mean we must be silent about everything. Leviticus 19:16 puts two commands side by side: “Thou shalt not go up and down as a talebearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour.” We must not spread stories. And we must not stay silent when someone’s safety is at risk.

Matthew 18 is a pattern for ordinary offences between believers. It is not meant for abuse, crime, or danger to others. In those cases the right step is to tell the people who can act: a responsible leader, a guardian, or the proper authority. No one should be told to confront a dangerous person alone, or to keep quiet in the name of privacy.

Even then, a responsible report sticks to what is known. It does not guess, insult, or add unrelated details. Its aim is to stop harm, not to punish.

It helps to ask a few plain questions before talking about someone’s fault. Does this person need to know? Can they actually help, or protect someone? Am I sure of what I am saying, or am I repeating what I heard? Would I say the same thing if I were not angry with this person? Have I spoken to the person himself?

Ephesians 4:15 describes the standard: “speaking the truth in love.” Truth without love becomes a weapon. Love without truth becomes silence. The believer needs both, and he must remember that he too will need someone to treat his own failures with care.

CHARACTER FORMATION

Why Do Some People Always Need to Win an Argument?

An argument can begin over money, a decision, or a verse of Scripture, and end with two people who cannot remember what they were trying to settle. Somewhere along the way, the question stopped being “What is true?” and became “Who will give in?”

Most of us have met the person who must always have the last word. Most of us, if we are honest, have been that person on certain days. And the trouble is that the desire to win feels, from the inside, exactly like the desire to defend the truth.

Wanting to know what is true and wanting to win are two different things, though they can look alike for a while.

When we want the truth, we listen. We ask questions. We are willing to be shown a better way of seeing the matter. When we want to win, something changes. We listen for weak spots instead of meaning. We interrupt. We repeat our point louder. We bring up old failures. We change the subject when we are losing, and we keep going long after the discussion has stopped helping anyone.

Behind this there is often a fear of being seen as wrong. That fear deserves its own attention. Here the question is simpler: what does the contest itself do to us, and to the people we argue with?

The Bible speaks plainly about this. Proverbs 17:14 says, “The beginning of strife is as when one letteth out water: therefore leave off contention, before it be meddled with.” A quarrel is like a small crack in a dam. It is far easier to stop at the beginning than after the water is flowing.

Proverbs 20:3 adds, “It is an honour for a man to cease from strife: but every fool will be meddling.” We usually think we lose face by stepping back. Scripture says there is honour in it.

Paul gives Timothy a sober instruction: “The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient, in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth” (2 Timothy 2:24–25).

The servant of the Lord is “apt to teach,” so he is not silent. But he is also gentle and patient, and his aim is not that he wins. His aim is that the other person may come “to the acknowledging of the truth.” If the point is made but the person is driven further away, the purpose has been missed. Paul also warns Titus to avoid “contentions, and strivings,” because they are “unprofitable and vain” (Titus 3:9).

Conviction and Stubbornness

Some will say, “But I am defending the truth.” Sometimes that is exactly what is happening. There are matters on which we must not move. When certain teachers tried to bring believers under bondage, Paul wrote, “To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you” (Galatians 2:5). Firmness about the gospel is not stubbornness.

But many of our arguments are not about the gospel. They are about our interpretation of a passage, a preference, a method, or a decision. Paul distinguishes these. “Him that is weak in the faith receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations” (Romans 14:1). A person can be fully loyal to Scripture and still hold a view that needs adjusting.

Here is a useful difference. Conviction stays under the authority of Scripture. Stubbornness stays under the authority of “I have already said it.” The Bereans were commended because they “received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so” (Acts 17:11). They did not simply accept whatever they

heard, and they did not simply defend whatever they believed. They tested everything by the Word.

When we hold a view, we should be able to say why from Scripture. And when someone shows us a better reading of the same Scripture, we should be able to change.

Many arguments continue because neither person has actually heard the other. We hear a few words, decide what the person means, and begin preparing our reply.

Proverbs 18:13 says, “He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him.” James gives the same instruction in practical form: “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath: for the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God” (James 1:19–20). It is worth pausing on the last part. Anger, even when we feel it is on the side of truth, does not produce God’s righteousness.

A simple test will often prevent a quarrel. Before you answer, say back what the other person said, and ask, “Is that what you mean?” If you cannot do this accurately, you are probably about to argue with something they did not say. And when you can do it, you will often discover that the real disagreement is smaller than it seemed, or different from what you assumed.

A gentle answer also matters. “A soft answer turneth away wrath: but grievous words stir up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). Soft words will not make a false claim true, and they will not always calm an unreasonable person. But harsh words almost always make an honest hearing harder.

Jesus and Herod

Jesus faced more hostile questioning than any of us will. Yet He did not answer everyone in the same way.

Sometimes He answered at length, as when the Sadducees came with a question about the resurrection (Matthew 22:23–33). Sometimes He answered with a question of His own. And in Luke 23:8–9, when Herod

“questioned with him in many words,” Jesus “answered him nothing.”

Herod was not looking for truth. He wanted entertainment, a sign to satisfy his curiosity. Jesus knew the difference, and He did not owe Herod an answer.

This is why Proverbs puts two sayings side by side: “Answer not a fool according to his folly” and “Answer a fool according to his folly” (Proverbs 26:4–5). The verses seem to contradict each other until we see that wisdom is knowing which situation we are in. Some people need a clear answer. Others are only looking for a fight, and the wise response is to stop.

Stepping away from such a conversation does not mean we have lost. It may mean we have understood what the conversation really was.

What Winning Costs

Think of two people who love each other and disagree over something that matters, perhaps a husband and wife, a parent and a grown child, or two close friends. If both become determined to win, the argument stops being about the issue. They interrupt each other and dig up old failures. They exaggerate what was said. At the end, one of them may have won the point, and the other may have decided never to raise the subject again.

Proverbs 18:19 describes it exactly: “A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.” You can win the argument and lose the person, and it is much harder to recover a person than to win a point.

Paul gives this standard: “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). The phrase “if it be possible” admits that peace will not always depend on us. “As much as lieth in you” says that our part is to make sure we are not the reason it fails.

So the next time a disagreement begins to heat up, ask what you are really trying to accomplish. If the aim is that someone sees more clearly,

that can often happen without a victory. And if it happens, it hardly matters whose lips said it first.

Part 5

Practical Christianity

Living what we believe in forgiveness, conflict, prayer, fear and everyday relationships.

How Do You Begin to Forgive When It Still Hurts?
How Should a Christian Respond When Someone Treats Them Unfairly?
What Does It Really Mean to Love Your Enemies?
How Do You Respond When Someone Apologises but Keeps Hurting You?
How Should Christians Handle Conflict Without Creating More Division?
How Do You Practise What You Believe When It Is Difficult?
Why Pray If God Already Knows What We Need?
How Do You Overcome Fear?
Why Does Peace Not Depend on Circumstances?
What Are Spiritual Gifts, and Why Does God Give Them?

How Do You Begin to Forgive When It Still Hurts?

Forgiving is hard because the wrong was real. Someone lied, broke a promise, or hurt us, and a part of us believes that if we let it go, we are saying it did not matter.

That is the fear behind most unforgiveness. We hold on because we think letting go means giving in.

The Bible shows us something different. Forgiveness does not say, “It was nothing.” It says, “It was wrong, and I will not carry it as my own case.” To see why we can say this, we have to learn what forgiveness is and what it is not.

Paul writes, “Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

This verse does not say wrong is unimportant. It says justice has a rightful owner, and that owner is God. When we hold on to unforgiveness, we are trying to do God’s work. We stay angry so the offender will not escape. But we cannot punish him by being bitter, and we cannot repay him fairly. We can only wear ourselves out.

Joseph understood this. After their father died, his brothers feared he would finally pay them back for selling him. Joseph wept, and then he said, “Fear not: for am I in the place of God?” (Genesis 50:19). He did not call their sin small. He said to them, “Ye thought evil against me; but God meant it unto good” (Genesis 50:20). He could forgive because he knew who the Judge was, and it was not him.

The Debt We Cannot Repay

Peter once asked Jesus how many times he should forgive. Jesus answered with a story (Matthew 18:21–35). A servant owed his master ten thousand talents, a sum he could never repay, and the master cancelled it. That same servant then seized a fellow servant who owed him a hundred pence and threw him into prison.

The story is not about how little the second debt was. It was real money. The point is the difference between the two debts, and the way the first servant forgot what he had been forgiven. Jesus ends with a warning: “So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses” (Matthew 18:35).

Paul makes the same appeal in plain words: “Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye” (Colossians 3:13). We do not forgive because the wrong was small. We forgive because we have been forgiven something much larger.

What Forgiveness Is Not

Forgiveness is not pretending nothing happened, and it is not the same as reconciliation.

Forgiveness is what we do with the wrong: we stop trying to repay it, and we stop wishing harm on the person. Reconciliation is the repair of the relationship, and it takes two people. Jesus taught both. “If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him” (Luke 17:3). The rebuke comes first, so wrongdoing is named. And when repentance follows, forgiveness is given even if the failure is repeated: “And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him” (Luke 17:4).

Joseph again gives us the clearest picture. He forgave his brothers fully. But before he revealed himself to them, he tested them over a long time to see whether they had changed (Genesis 42–44). The forgiveness in his heart was complete. The restoration of the relationship waited until he had good reason to believe in it.

So you can forgive someone and still decline to put yourself back where you can be hurt again. Forgiving is not the same as trusting. Trust is rebuilt slowly, by what a person does over time.

What If the Person Never Says Sorry?

This is where many people stop. They say, “I will forgive when they apologise.” But the person may never apologise, and may even deny the wrong.

Jesus Himself forgave from the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Nobody had come to Him with an apology. And when Stephen was being stoned, he prayed, “Lord, lay not this sin to their charge” (Acts 7:60). The offenders had not repented, and Stephen forgave them anyway.

Forgiving someone who has not asked for it does not mean the relationship is restored. It means we refuse to be held by it. We can pray for their repentance and hope for their change, but our freedom does not have to wait for theirs.

Jesus says, “And when ye stand praying, forgive, if ye have ought against any” (Mark 11:25). He does not say, “when you feel ready.”

Forgiveness is a decision before it is a feeling. We decide that we will not take revenge, we will not rehearse the wrong, and we will not wish the person ill. Then we bring the matter to God again each time it comes back, and we leave the judging to Him.

The memory may return many times. That does not mean the forgiveness failed. It means we are returning the same weight to the same hands.

How Should a Christian Respond When Someone Treats Them Unfairly?

Some people try to do right and are repaid with wrong. They tell the truth and are called liars. They work hard and watch someone else get the credit. They are kind and are treated as weak.

For a Christian, the question goes beyond “How do I feel?” to “What does faithfulness look like here?” Scripture does not give one answer for every case, but it gives clear lines inside which we can act.

Peter writes about this for people who were suffering injustice. He points to Christ: “Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Peter 2:23).

The last phrase is the key. Christ did not retaliate, but He did not pretend there was no judge. He handed the matter to the One who judges rightly. This is what lets a person stay calm under unfair treatment. We are not abandoning justice; we are trusting it to Someone who will not fail.

Paul gives the same principle in a different way: “Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men” (Romans 12:17).

Meekness Is Not Silence

Some believers think that being gentle means saying nothing. But Jesus did not say nothing. When an officer struck Him during His questioning, He answered, “If I have spoken evil, bear witness of the evil: but if well, why smitest thou me?” (John 18:23). He did not strike back, and He did not let the wrong pass without a word.

This shapes how we read His teaching: “Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matthew

5:39). He is speaking against personal revenge, a fight to repay insult with insult. He is not telling us never to speak, never to defend ourselves, and never to seek protection.

Paul shows how this works in practice. When he and Silas were beaten and jailed in Philippi without a trial, and the magistrates later sent word to release them quietly, Paul would not leave. “They have beaten us openly uncondemned, being Romans, and have cast us into prison; and now do they thrust us out privily? nay verily; but let them come themselves and fetch us out” (Acts 16:37). He used his lawful rights to expose a wrong. Later, when a trial was heading toward injustice, he said, “I appeal unto Caesar” (Acts 25:11).

A Christian may therefore correct a false report, ask for what is owed, use a proper complaint process, and appeal to a higher authority. What a Christian does not do is lie, slander, or take revenge in the process.

Do Not Accept False Blame to Look Humble

Humility is not the same as agreeing with every accusation. When someone accuses us unjustly, we are not asked to confess to what we did not do. Paul’s own defence before Felix and Festus shows him stating plainly that the charges were false (Acts 24:10–13; 25:8).

But we should first ask whether there is something true in what is said. If there is, we own it. If there is not, we say so without insult and without exaggeration. And if the other side will not listen, there is a point where we stop explaining. We cannot control what everyone believes about us.

Some of the hardest cases are the ones where the person who treats us unfairly holds power over us, like an employer, a leader, or an official. The Bible calls for respect toward authority, but it does not teach that everything an authority does is right.

When the council ordered the apostles to stop preaching, Peter answered, “We ought to obey God rather than men” (Acts 5:29). Daniel kept praying even after the king’s decree made it a crime (Daniel 6:10).

These men respected the offices but would not break God's command for any office.

We should be careful here. A decision we dislike is not always an unjust one, and we may be missing facts. But where real wrong has been done, someone's position does not make it right.

When You Need to Get to Safety

There are times when the wise response is to leave. Jesus told His disciples, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matthew 10:16). A few verses later He said, "When they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another" (Matthew 10:23).

Paul did this. When there was a plot to kill him in Damascus, the believers let him down over the wall in a basket at night (Acts 9:23–25). When his nephew discovered a conspiracy against him in Jerusalem, Paul sent the boy to the commander, who then took steps to protect him (Acts 23:16–24).

This matters. Where there is abuse, threat, or danger, escaping, reporting, and seeking help from the right authority is not a failure to be gentle. It is wisdom. No one should use the teaching on patience to keep someone in harm's way.

Sometimes the wrong is never corrected. At Paul's first defence in Rome, he wrote, "No man stood with me, but all men forsook me: I pray God that it may not be laid to their charge" (2 Timothy 4:16). He had been left alone, and nobody gave him the support he deserved. Then he added, "Notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me" (2 Timothy 4:17).

Paul could not make the people who left him stand with him. But he could be sure of the One who did. This does not remove the injustice, but it does mean that we are never as unprotected as we feel. We do what is right, we use fair means, and we trust the rest to the One who

judges rightly.

What Does It Really Mean to Love Your Enemies?

“Love your enemies” may be the hardest sentence Jesus ever spoke. We can understand it, and we may even agree with it, but when someone has actually set themselves against us, our hearts push back.

“Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you” (Matthew 5:43–44).

Jesus does not leave this as a feeling. He gives it three actions, and then He gives it a reason.

Bless those who curse you. When we are spoken against, we want to answer in the same way. Jesus asks us to choose different words. We may still correct a false statement, but we do it without trying to humiliate the person.

Do good to those who hate you. Another person’s hatred does not cancel our duty to do right. Paul puts it simply: “If thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink… Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:20–21).

Pray for those who mistreat you. Prayer changes where we stand. When we ask God to bless a person, it is very hard to go on planning their harm.

None of these requires us to feel warm towards someone. They are things we can do while our feelings are still catching up.

The Reason Jesus Gives

Jesus says we should do this "that ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45).

God's kindness does not wait for people to deserve it. Luke records the same teaching and adds that "he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil" (Luke 6:35). Then Luke ends with the line that explains Matthew's "Be ye therefore perfect" (5:48): "Be ye therefore merciful, as your Father also is merciful" (Luke 6:36). The word "perfect" in this passage points to being complete in love, a love that reaches as far as the Father's does and does not stop at the people who are easy to love.

Paul says the same about what God did for us: "For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life" (Romans 5:10). We were once the enemies. We are asked to show others the mercy that was shown to us.

A Picture From the Life of Elisha

Second Kings 6 gives a picture of what this can look like. The king of Syria sent soldiers to capture Elisha. God struck them with blindness, and Elisha led them into the middle of Samaria, into the hands of the king of Israel. The king asked, "My father, shall I smite them?" (2 Kings 6:21).

Elisha answered, "Thou shalt not smite them… set bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master" (2 Kings 6:22). The king prepared a great feast, and the soldiers returned home. "So the bands of Syria came no more into the land of Israel" (2 Kings 6:23).

Elisha did not pretend the soldiers were harmless. He did not let them take him. But when they were helpless, he did them good instead of harm.

Does Loving an Enemy Mean Trusting Them?

No. The same Jesus who commands love also “did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men” (John 2:24). He loved everyone and trusted wisely.

We can seek a person’s good and still refuse to give them access to what they have abused. We can pray for someone and still report a crime. Love decides the spirit in which we act. Wisdom decides what we do.

Elisha’s kindness stopped the raiding bands, but 2 Kings 6:24 shows that Ben-hadad later gathered his whole army and besieged Samaria. The enemy did not become a friend. Love did not fail, but it did not buy peace for ever either.

This matters because many of us quietly expect that if we are good enough, our enemy will change. Sometimes that happens. Often it does not. Jesus does not make our love depend on the result. We are asked to do good because that is what the Father is like, and because Christ has done it for us, not because it will always work.

When we cannot change how others behave, we can still decide what we will become. We do not need to be the kind of people who are glad when others suffer, even when their suffering is deserved.

How Do You Respond When Someone Apologises but Keeps Hurting You?

Hearing “I’m sorry” and seeing a changed life are not the same thing. When the same hurt returns after each apology, we begin to ask what the apology meant.

This is one of the most confusing situations in relationships. We are told to forgive, and we want to. But we are also tired. We wonder whether another chance is mercy or foolishness.

The Bible helps us by separating the words of repentance from the fruit of it.

Pharaoh is a clear example. After the plague of hail he said, “I have sinned this time: the LORD is righteous, and I and my people are wicked” (Exodus 9:27). It sounded like a confession. But when the hail stopped, “he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart” (Exodus 9:34). His words were real words, but nothing in him had changed.

Saul did the same. He said to David, “I have sinned: return, my son David: for I will no more do thee harm” (1 Samuel 26:21). It was not the first time Saul had spoken like this (1 Samuel 24:16–19). And David’s reply shows what a wise person does: he sent back the king’s spear and went on his way (26:22–25). He did not go back to the court. Later he said in his heart, “I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul” (1 Samuel 27:1). David had forgiven Saul, but he did not trust him.

What Real Repentance Looks Like

Paul describes the difference between two kinds of sorrow: “For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death” (2 Corinthians 7:10). Worldly sorrow is sorrow over being caught or over the cost. Godly sorrow turns a person around.

Paul then lists what it produced in the Corinthians: “what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what clearing of yourselves” (2 Corinthians 7:11). Genuine repentance makes a person careful. He takes the wrong seriously, accepts the consequences, and works to prevent it happening again.

John the Baptist told the crowds, “Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance” (Matthew 3:8), and Paul preached that people should “do works meet for repentance” (Acts 26:20).

Zacchaeus shows what this looks like. He did not just say sorry. He said, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold” (Luke 19:8).

A Man Who Changed

The best picture of real change is in the life of Judah. In Genesis 37, it was Judah who suggested selling his brother Joseph for silver (37:26–27). Years later, when Benjamin was about to be taken as a slave, Judah stepped forward and said, “Let thy servant abide instead of the lad a bondman to my lord” (Genesis 44:33). He offered himself for the brother of the one he had once sold.

That is what changed behaviour looks like. It was not a speech. It was a different choice at the same kind of crossroads, and it was proved over time. This is why Joseph, who tested his brothers, was finally able to embrace them.

Here we must separate two things. Forgiveness is a decision about the wrong: we release it to God. Trust is a judgment about the person: we decide how far we can rely on them. We can give forgiveness at once. Trust has to be earned.

“The simple believeth every word: but the prudent man looketh well to his going” (Proverbs 14:15). The wise person is not cold or unloving. He simply watches what happens after the words.

You may therefore forgive someone who keeps breaking your confidence, and still stop telling them private things. You can wish good for someone who keeps misusing what you give them, and still not give them more. None of this is punishment. It is honesty about what has been shown.

What Signs Show Change Is Happening?

Look for four things. First, the person names what they did without blaming you or the situation. Second, they accept the consequences, including the fact that trust will take time. Third, they take practical steps, such as getting help or changing their habits, and do not rely only on promising. Fourth, they stay consistent over a long period.

A few good weeks are not enough. Judah’s change was proved by what he did when the same test came again.

Speak plainly about the pattern. Do not treat each incident as a separate event. You might say, “This has happened several times, and I need to see real change.” Be specific about what must be different. Set limits that protect you, not to punish the person but to act wisely. If there is intimidation or any danger, put your safety first and ask for help from people who can give it.

And we must ask ourselves the same questions. If we have apologised for the same thing again and again, we need to ask what we are doing to stop it. A repeated sorry with no change can become another way of hurting people.

Mercy does not mean there is no end to being hurt. It means we keep the door of forgiveness open, while we let the evidence decide how far the door of trust opens.

How Should Christians Handle Conflict Without Creating More Division?

Conflict among believers is not a sign that something strange has happened. It happened among the apostles. What matters is what we do with it, because a disagreement handled badly can divide a family, a friendship, or a whole church.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9). A peacemaker is not a person who avoids hard conversations. He is a person who works to make peace real.

Genesis 13 shows what this looks like. Abram and his nephew Lot had grown so rich that their herdsmen began quarrelling over land. Abram was the older man, and the promise of the land had been given to him. He had every right to choose first.

Instead he said, “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee… for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right” (Genesis 13:8–9).

He gave Lot the first choice. He did not do it because he was weak or because he thought his claim was small. He did it because the relationship mattered more than winning the point. There are times when peace asks us to give up something we are entitled to keep.

When Two Good People Disagree

Not every conflict has a villain. In Acts 15:36–39, Paul and Barnabas disagreed over whether to take John Mark on their next journey. “The contention was so sharp between them, that they departed asunder one from the other.” They separated and went to different places.

Scripture does not tell us who was right, and it does not hide the pain. But it does show something else: years later, Paul wrote, “Take Mark, and bring him with thee: for he is profitable to me for the ministry” (2 Timothy 4:11). The relationship was restored in time. Peace does not always arrive in the same conversation, but a sharp disagreement need not be the last word.

In Acts 15:1–29, a serious question divided the church: whether Gentile believers had to keep the law of Moses. There was “much disputing” (15:7). But look at what they did. They came together “to consider of this matter” (15:6). Peter, Barnabas, Paul, and James each spoke. They compared what they had seen God do with what the Scriptures said. Then they sent a clear letter, saying, “It seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us” (15:28).

They did not hide the disagreement, and they did not let it turn into a war. They brought it into the open, tested it by Scripture, and reached a decision they could state plainly.

Do Not Let Anger Settle In

Proverbs 15:18 says, “A wrathful man stirreth up strife: but he that is slow to anger appeaseth strife.” Anger is not always sin, but it often leads there. Paul says, “Be ye angry, and sin not: let not the sun go down upon your wrath: neither give place to the devil” (Ephesians 4:26–27).

When a conversation has grown too hot, it can be wise to stop and return to it later. That is not running away; it is making sure the next conversation can be a better one. What we must not do is let the matter sit unaddressed for months. Unspoken resentment is still resentment.

Jesus even interrupts worship for this. “If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift” (Matthew 5:23–24).

He says “thy brother hath ought against thee.” The responsibility to start is on the one who knows there is a problem, whether or not he feels he is the one at fault. It may take only a sentence: “I know things are not right between us. Can we talk?”

When we speak, the rule Jesus gives is simple: “All things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them” (Matthew 7:12). Most of us want to be heard fairly, to be spoken to without insult, and to be given the chance to explain. We should give the same.

When Peace Needs Others

Some conflicts need more than two people. Paul wrote to two women in the Philippian church, “I beseech Euodias, and beseech Syntyche, that they be of the same mind in the Lord. And I intreat thee also, true yokefellow, help those women which laboured with me in the gospel” (Philippians 4:2–3). He did not take a side. He asked a trusted friend to help them reconcile.

In Corinth, believers were taking one another to court in front of unbelievers. Paul rebuked them: “Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you? no, not one that shall be able to judge between his brethren?” (1 Corinthians 6:5). The church should have wise people who can help settle matters among believers. Where there is serious wrongdoing or danger, the proper authority should also be involved, but the first aim is to resolve what can be resolved within the body.

We cannot make anyone reconcile. Some people will refuse. Paul says, “Let us therefore follow after the things which make for peace, and things wherewith one may edify another” (Romans 14:19). We follow after peace; we cannot always catch it.

When someone will not respond, we have still done our part if we have owned what was ours, spoken truthfully, and left the door open. The result is not ours to control. “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14).

How Do You Practise What You Believe When It Is Difficult?

Knowing what is right is one thing. Doing it when it costs us something is another.

We read that we should forgive, speak the truth, and trust God. Then the moment comes, and what seemed clear on the page becomes heavy in the hand. Jesus knew this gap well, and He did not leave it alone.

Jesus ended the Sermon on the Mount with a story. “Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: and the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock” (Matthew 7:24–25).

The foolish man also heard the same words. The difference was that he did not do them, and his house fell (7:26–27). Both houses faced the same storm. Obedience does not keep the storm away. It decides whether the house is still standing afterwards.

James says it plainly: “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves” (James 1:22). A person who only hears can feel that he has obeyed, because agreeing with the truth feels so much like doing it. That is the deception.

Why It Is So Hard

Paul does not hide his own struggle. “To will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. For the good that I would I do not: but the evil which I would not, that I do” (Romans 7:18–19). If the apostle felt this way, then feeling it does not prove we are not real believers.

Part of the difficulty is that obedience often means giving something up: the wish for revenge, a comfortable lie, our own way, or the opinion of others. Jesus asks, “Why call ye me, Lord, Lord, and do not the things which I say?” (Luke 6:46). Calling Him Lord means that His words, and not our feelings, decide.

We Are Not Left to Do It Alone

Paul writes, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12–13). The two halves belong together. We are told to work, and we are told that God is working in us at the same time. He supplies both the wanting and the doing.

And he says, “If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit” (Galatians 5:25). Obedience is not a matter of gritting our teeth alone. It is a way of walking with Someone who gives the strength.

Paul knew where his own labour came from: “But by the grace of God I am what I am: and his grace which was bestowed upon me was not in vain; but I laboured more abundantly than they all: yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:10). Grace does not cancel obedience. It works through it.

Large obedience is built from small choices. “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much” (Luke 16:10). We may not know how a long-standing problem will be solved. But we can decide today not to repeat what we said, not to hide the truth, or not to put off the conversation we know we must have.

The psalmist describes the moment of decision: “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments” (Psalm 119:59–60). The order matters. He thought, he turned, and he did not delay. Postponing obedience until it feels easier is how many people never obey.

When We Fail

We will not always succeed. Peter swore he would never deny Jesus, and then he did, three times. Yet after the resurrection Jesus asked him three times, “Lovest thou me?” and each time gave him work to do: “Feed my lambs… feed my sheep” (John 21:15–17). Peter’s failure did not end his calling. It taught him how much he needed grace, and he went on to feed the flock.

“For a just man falleth seven times, and riseth up again” (Proverbs 24:16). The just man is not the one who never falls. He is the one who gets up. When we have failed, we should own it plainly, make right what we can, and take the next step. We should not settle down in the failure, and we should not give up because of it.

Jesus said, “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (John 13:17). He did not say happy are those who know. The blessing is in the doing.

So the real test is not how much of His teaching we understand, but whether we have done the next thing He has shown us.

Why Pray If God Already Knows What We Need?

Jesus said that our Father knows what we need before we ask Him. So why ask at all? The answer shows what prayer was meant to be.

God Knows, and Still He Invites

The question is an honest one, and Jesus Himself raised the fact behind it. “Be not ye therefore like unto them: for your Father knoweth what things ye have need of, before ye ask him” (Matthew 6:8).

Notice where He said it. He did not say, “So do not pray.” He said it in the middle of His teaching on prayer, right after a warning: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking” (Matthew 6:7). The fact that God knows is meant to change how we pray. It was never meant to stop us.

Prayer is not a way of giving God information. “For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether” (Psalm 139:4). Nor is it a way of persuading a reluctant God. The One we pray to is a Father who knows our need and cares about it.

Why, then, does He invite us to ask? One reason is that asking is how we admit our need. A person who prays says, “Father, I need You.” He steps out of self-reliance. Paul wrote, “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God” (Philippians 4:6).

Prayer Is Communion

Scripture shows a God who comes to meet with man. In the garden, Adam and his wife “heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day” (Genesis 3:8). Sin made them hide, but fellowship was what God had made them for.

Jesus used the picture of a father and his children. “If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?” (Matthew 7:11). A child who never speaks to his father is distant from him, even if the father keeps providing. Asking, thanking and telling are how a child lives with his father.

Look at the prayer life of Jesus. The Son knew the Father perfectly. Yet “he went out into a mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God” (Luke 6:12). If prayer were only for those who lack knowledge, He would not have needed it. He prayed because prayer is the way the Son lives in communion with the Father.

He also taught us how to remain with Him. “Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me” (John 15:4). Prayer is one of the ways we abide. It is not a visit to ask for things. It is the life of a branch in the vine.

Hannah shows prayer at its most honest. She said, “I am a woman of a sorrowful spirit: … but have poured out my soul before the LORD” (1 Samuel 1:15). She held nothing back. In communion we do not need polished words.

Prayer Changes the One Who Prays

David asked God to look into his own heart. “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Psalm 139:23–24). God already knew David’s heart. David prayed so that David would see it, and be led.

Gethsemane shows the same. Jesus prayed, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (Luke 22:42). The cup was not removed. Yet prayer brought Him into agreement with the Father’s will.

Paul prayed about his thorn. “For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:8–9). The thorn stayed. The grace came. Scripture does not explain every prayer that is answered differently from how we asked. But in each of these cases, the one who prayed was held by God.

Prayer should not be measured only by what it produces. Jesus spoke of seed cast into the ground, which springs and grows, “he knoweth not how” (Mark 4:27). Much that God does may be hidden for a time. We should not claim more than we are told. But we may rest in the God who works.

So why pray, if God already knows? Because He wants more than our requests. He wants us. Prayer is where we learn to live with the One who knows us fully and loves us still. In the end, prayer teaches us to ask not only, “Was my prayer answered?” but, “Is He enough?”

How Do You Overcome Fear?

Fear is not a sign that a person has no faith. The Bible shows afraid people, and it shows what God does for them. Again and again, He does not first remove the threat. He gives Himself.

Fear Shows What We Lean On

God said to Abram, “Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (Genesis 15:1). Notice that God answers fear with Himself. He does not begin by listing what Abram’s enemies cannot do. He says, “I am thy shield.”

Fear often shows what we think our safety depends on: our health, our money, our people, our plans. When these shake, fear rises. The psalmist found another centre. “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (Psalm 73:25–26).

He does not say his heart never failed. He says, “My flesh and my heart faileth.” His weakness was real. But God was still his strength.

Habakkuk shows the same. “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation” (Habakkuk 3:17–18). Everything he leaned on was gone. God remained.

God With Us in the Valley

God does not promise that the thing we fear will never come. He promises to be with us in it. “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). The valley is real. The Shepherd is there.

Three men in Daniel 3 faced the furnace. They said, “If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of thine hand, O king. But if not, be it known unto thee, O king, that we will not serve thy gods” (Daniel 3:17–18). Their faith did not depend on the outcome. It rested on who God is.

Paul stood in a storm at sea and heard, “Fear not, Paul; thou must be brought before Caesar: and, lo, God hath given thee all them that sail with thee” (Acts 27:24). He answered, “Wherefore, sirs, be of good cheer: for I believe God, that it shall be even as it was told me” (Acts 27:25). The storm did not stop at once. The word of God held him in it.

Elijah shows the other side. After a great victory he ran from Jezebel and sat under a juniper tree, asking to die (1 Kings 19:3–4). God did not scold him. He sent food and rest (1 Kings 19:5–8). Fear does not cancel a person’s place with God.

Hope Anchored in a God Who Cannot Fail

Fear looks at the threat. Hope looks at the One who promised. “God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?” (Numbers 23:19). Nothing is too hard for Him: “Is any thing too hard for the LORD?” (Genesis 18:14).

Hebrews calls this hope “an anchor of the soul.” “That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both

sure and stedfast" (Hebrews 6:18–19). An anchor does not stop the storm. It keeps the ship from drifting.

Jeremiah wrote from a ruined city: "This I recall to my mind, therefore have I hope" (Lamentations 3:21). Then he went on: "It is of the LORD'S mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not. They are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22–23).

Paul asks, "What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?" (Romans 8:31). The deepest cure for fear is a surer knowledge of how God loves us. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment" (1 John 4:18). "We love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).

So what do we do today? Say honestly what we are afraid of, as David did: "What time I am afraid, I will trust in thee" (Psalm 56:3). Then look to the God who is with us, and hold the anchor.

Why Does Peace Not Depend on Circumstances?

Most of us believe we will have peace when things settle down. Jesus promised a peace that does not wait for that. Scripture shows where it comes from and how it guards the heart.

The Peace the World Cannot Give

On the night before the cross, Jesus said to His disciples, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid” (John 14:27). He was about to be betrayed, arrested and killed. Yet He spoke of peace.

That tells us what kind of peace He meant. The world gives peace when conditions are good: when the bills are paid, the sickness has gone, and the enemy is quiet. When conditions change, that peace goes with them. The peace of Christ is a gift. It does not rest on what is happening around us.

He said the same again before He left them: “These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Notice the two halves. Trouble is certain. Peace is also certain, and it is found “in me.”

Peace With God First

Peace of heart begins with peace with God. Sin made us His enemies. Paul says, “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1). The quarrel is over for everyone who is in Christ. Of Him Paul says, “For he is our peace” (Ephesians 2:14).

This is why peace cannot be built from the outside in. A person may arrange every part of his life well and still have no rest, because the deepest problem is not in his circumstances. It is between him and God. When that is settled by faith in Christ, a peace begins that circumstances did not give and cannot take away.

The Storm and the Sleeping Lord

Mark tells of a night on the lake when a great storm arose and the waves beat into the boat, “so that it was now full” (Mark 4:37). Jesus was in the stern, asleep on a pillow. The disciples woke Him and asked whether He cared that they were perishing. “And he arose, and rebuked the wind, and said unto the sea, Peace, be still. And the wind ceased, and there was a great calm” (Mark 4:39).

Then He asked them, “Why are ye so fearful? how is it that ye have no faith?” (Mark 4:40). The storm was real. What He asked about was where their trust was resting. His own rest in the boat was not the rest of a man who did not see the waves. It was the rest of a Son who trusted His Father.

How Peace Is Kept

Scripture does not leave us to produce peace by effort. Isaiah says, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee” (Isaiah 26:3). God is the One who keeps. Our part is to keep the mind fixed on Him.

Paul gives a practical way to do this: “Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6–7). We bring the matter to God instead of carrying it alone. Then His peace stands guard over the heart. It does not always explain the trouble. It guards us in it.

Peace Between People

This peace does not stay inside. Paul writes, “And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful” (Colossians 3:15). Where His peace rules, we live differently with others: “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Romans 12:18). Jesus says, “Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God” (Matthew 5:9).

So peace does not wait for the storm to end. It begins with peace with God, it is kept by trusting Him, and it reaches into our dealings with other people. The Prince of Peace gives it, and the circumstances of the day do not decide whether we have it.

What Are Spiritual Gifts, and Why Does God Give Them?

Many believers want spiritual gifts, and many fear them. Scripture explains where the gifts come from, who receives them, and what they are for.

Gifts From One Spirit

Paul begins his teaching on the subject with a plain statement: “Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I would not have you ignorant” (1 Corinthians 12:1). God does not want His people to be uninformed about the gifts. The Corinthians had them in plenty, and they were misusing them. So Paul explains.

The first thing he says is that the gifts have one source. “Now there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all” (1 Corinthians 12:4–6). Spirit, Lord and God are all named. The gifts are not merely human talents, and they are not rewards for holiness. They are given by God.

He then lists some of them: “For to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another the gifts of healing by the same Spirit; to another the working of miracles; to another prophecy; to another discerning of spirits; to another divers kinds of tongues; to another the interpretation of tongues” (1 Corinthians 12:8–10). The list shows how many different ways the Spirit works. It is not the only list. Paul names others in Romans 12:6–8, including teaching, giving, ruling and showing mercy, and the person who serves quietly or gives with simplicity is also living by the grace of God.

Who decides who receives what? Paul answers, “But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will” (1 Corinthians 12:11). The Spirit decides. No one earns a gift, and no one should boast about one.

Given for the Good of Others

Why does the Spirit give gifts? Paul says, “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal” (1 Corinthians 12:7). The gift is for profit, which means for the good of others. Peter says the same: “As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10). A steward is given something that belongs to his master, for the benefit of the household.

That is why Paul uses the picture of a body. “For as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ” (1 Corinthians 12:12). “And the eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee” (1 Corinthians 12:21). No one has every gift, and no one is without a place. “Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular” (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The same purpose runs through Ephesians 4. Christ gave His servants “for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). In the assembly Paul says, “Even so ye, forasmuch as ye are zealous of spiritual gifts, seek that ye may excel to the edifying of the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). The test of a gift is whether it builds up the people of God.

Gifts Are Not a Sign of Maturity

The church at Corinth shows that a person can have gifts and still lack character. They did not lack any gift (1 Corinthians 1:7), yet Paul had to write to them about quarrels, pride and disorder. A gift can be present while Christ’s character is still being formed.

So Paul places love at the centre of the discussion. He says, “covet earnestly the best gifts: and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31). Then he writes, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Corinthians 13:1). Without love, even the greatest gift is empty. With love, it becomes a blessing.

Receive, Test and Use

How should a believer respond? First, receive what God gives, and do not despise it. “Quench not the Spirit. Despise not prophesyings. Prove all things; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). We neither close the door on the Spirit’s work nor accept everything without testing.

Second, use the gift in an orderly way. “Let all things be done unto edifying” (1 Corinthians 14:26). Third, keep in mind who the Giver is. God Himself bore witness to the gospel “with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will” (Hebrews 2:4). The gifts point to Him and not to the person through whom they work.

So the more important question is not “Which gift do I have?” but “How can I serve the body of Christ with what the Spirit has given?” The gifts belong to the Spirit. They are given for others and are governed by love.