

New Foundations!

Building Life on the Rock of Truth

“Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.” – Matthew 7:24-27 NIV

Please don't miss the point!

This is why Jesus came, the most important point and goal of all God wants us to understand, in his own words:

John 10:10b: “My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life (NLT)/life...to the full (NIV)/life...abundantly (many others).”

That is the theme of the Bible. It's so easy to miss the point, even if one has attended church services regularly, and even if one has read the Bible cover to cover. Why is this? Is the Bible too hard to understand, as so many people claim? Why is there so much disagreement and division and thousands of different denominations of churches if the Bible is understandable?

By the end of reading this, I'm confident that you will have discovered that you *can* understand the important foundational truths upon which you can build the “rich and satisfying” life your Heavenly Father – the one who made you and who loves you so much – longs for you to experience.

Attending church with my family as a child was a common experience in America in the 1950s to 1970s. In high school, I discovered that the different churches my friends attended taught some different beliefs than my own church did. I also discovered that my church taught doctrines that I couldn't see for myself in the Bible. When I was leaving home to go to college, I told my mother that I didn't plan to continue attending the kind of church I grew up in, that I felt the need to look for a church that was teaching what I could see for myself in the Bible and agree with. So, in my first semester of college I visited different churches but within the limitations of finding transportation since I had no car.

It soon dawned on me that the process of looking for a “good church” – defined as one that was clearly teaching biblical truth I could see for myself – could take way too long because it was hard to discover the beliefs of a church from the snippets of Bible quoted in sermons and classes. Back then, there was no internet with a “What we believe” page on church websites as there is now, but even with that, looking for a church by going from one to another hoping to find whatever we're looking for is cumbersome and discouraging.

And what are we looking for, anyway? How does one who just wants to go by the Bible know what that would even look like? When a person is just starting a quest to learn about and understand the Bible, he or she doesn't know enough to discern whether any particular church is teaching it accurately. Most people don't look around; they either continue attending the church they grew up going to or they quit going altogether. If they didn't grow up going to church, they don't feel any enticement to start looking for one. Searching for a church that teaches what each person can agree is true because they can see it for themselves seems futile.

As I've spent the past fifty or so years searching for a church that seems to be following the Bible, I've been disappointed over and over to discover that churches I've been part of have missed the point in important ways. The Bible presents a clear vision of what to look for. Every bad experience and disappointment with a particular church has added to my tools of discernment because my perspective has always been to not give up, to move forward by searching the Scriptures to discover where a church departed from God's revealed truth. My hope is to find others who are hoping to experience what they also can see is God's perfect plan for imperfect people, to find

fellowship with likeminded seekers.

Over those years of varying church experiences, a pattern became clear. I realized that my quest was backward! Instead of looking for a good church, I needed to begin by asking the real question: What does the Bible say I should seek? What are the real spiritual questions? What are the big issues of life that the Bible provides answers for? When one has faith, as I did, in God's existence and faith in Jesus being who he claimed to be and that he died in our place to make forgiveness of our sins possible, then what?

A high school friend who grew up in the same church as I visited me in college and said she had learned about the need to be "born again" from her boyfriend. "New birth" was never mentioned in the church I grew up in, probably because children were "baptized" as infants and told as we grew up that we were already Christians, which we were expected to validate as teenagers by being "confirmed" in a special church ceremony. But when my friend talked about the "new birth," though I knew that was in the Bible, what was it? My quest for knowledge and understanding of God and his truth that began in high school homed in on that question, to the point that I tried twice in my journal to figure out how the concept of new birth applied to me. I had the question, but I didn't know how to find the answer. Going to different churches wasn't providing the answer, and I – like most people – didn't think that I could find the answer on my own in the Bible. I knew I wanted to be a Christian, but was I one?

One big question that needs to be asked and answered is, "How does a person become a Christian?" One can't *be* a Christian until one *becomes* a Christian. In my exposure to many different kinds of churches, one obvious area of disagreement was in how people were taught to become a Christian. So, I naturally wondered if the Bible is too unclear to find the answer. I felt confused and discouraged that such an important question didn't have an obvious answer, and I didn't understand why different churches taught differently about it.

There is a Bible verse that explains the opportunity to find the answer I received not long after my journal ponderings. This verse is the best starting point for anyone who is seeking or at least open to learning more about God:

Hebrews 11:6 NIV: *And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.*

I already had faith in God and believed that he exists (as most people do to some degree, at least) and I was seeking God as earnestly as I knew how to, yet I felt limited in what more I could do. Then the opportunity was provided to me to find the answer to my question about what it means to be born again. The man I fell in love with and eventually married wanted to show me what the Bible says about that very topic even though he didn't know I had already grappled with the question! I discovered that though I had assumed I was a Christian and certainly loved God and wanted to have a close relationship with him, I hadn't been born again after all as I could see for myself described in the many Bible verses he showed me. I discovered that the Bible answers clearly and understandably that foundational question! That very night I acted on what I learned and experienced my own new birth. My spiritual birthday is August 13, 1974. I'm so thankful that God rewarded my seeking! I can speak from experience that he will reward whatever steps of seeking him anybody takes, just as he promised.

Ever since that night, I have been aware that what I could see so clearly in the Bible about becoming a Christian, being born again and beginning the new life promised to those who are described in the Bible as "in Christ," is not seen or understood by many others who believe they are Christians and go to church regularly. My lifelong question has been, "Why not?" Why are biblical teachings that seem so clear to me not taught, preached, and believed by others?

Jesus told two parables back-to-back that describe the only two kinds of people who will ever understand and appreciate the point of everything God has revealed to us in the Bible:

Jesus said in Matthew 13:44-46 NIV: ***"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of***

heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it."

What are the lessons we can learn from these parables? I've seen borne out in my 48 years as a Christian that only those who are at least open and better yet seeking can appreciate the truth revealed to us by God. As in the first parable, many people stumble upon the opportunity to learn about God without proactively choosing to seek it, such as those who grow up being taken to church by their parents or those who happen to meet Christians who would like to talk about God and the Bible to whoever may be open to it. But if those who stumble upon that treasure aren't open to recognizing its great value, then they'll miss the point and miss out on what God is trying to offer them. Very few people are like the merchant in the second parable, actively seeking God. But those who do seek him are promised that they can and will find him. (See the booklet, ***New Treasure! Precious Promises*** for more awesome inspiration about the treasure that God promises over and over.)

What makes the difference between those who appreciate, understand, and want to have this treasure for themselves and those who reject it? The bottom line is that those who give in to the three cravings that lure all of us will miss the point about the great need for and value of seeking or at least responding with openness to the message from God to us in the Bible, unless or until they discover how unsatisfying those cravings are after all:

1 John 2:16 NLT: For the world offers only a craving for physical pleasure, a craving for everything we see, and pride in our achievements and possessions. These are not from the Father, but are from this world.

Why do some people get the point about how these cravings never fulfill us and others don't get it? What does it take for someone to become open or seeking? The difference seems to be described by another well-known parable, which is an illustrative story, told by Jesus. In Matthew 13:1-23 he tells of four different types of soil which represent the condition of hearts of those who are exposed to God's words. Here is Jesus' explanation of his parable of a farmer scattering seed:

Matthew 13:18-23 NLT: "Now listen to the explanation of the parable about the farmer planting seeds: The seed that fell on the footpath represents those who hear the message about the Kingdom and don't understand it. Then the evil one comes and snatches away the seed that was planted in their hearts. The seed on the rocky soil represents those who hear the message and immediately receive it with joy. But since they don't have deep roots, they don't last long. They fall away as soon as they have problems or are persecuted for believing God's word. The seed that fell among the thorns represents those who hear God's word, but all too quickly the message is crowded out by the worries of this life and the lure of wealth, so no fruit is produced. The seed that fell on good soil represents those who truly hear and understand God's word and produce a harvest of thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times as much as had been planted!"

Only one soil is fertile and fruitful, which represents hearts that are seeking or at least open to appreciating their need for a relationship with God, and they respond to the opportunity to know him with proactive and unwavering focus; they understand it because they want to understand it. Most people miss the point about life. Most people fulfill the prophecy Jesus quoted here after he told the parable and before he explained it. They don't ask and don't want to know what the point of life really is, at least not enough to really seek the answer:

Matthew 13:14-15 NIV, quoting Isaiah 6:9-10: "This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that says, 'When you hear what I say, you will not understand. When you see what I do, you will not comprehend. For the hearts of these people are hardened, and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes – so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.'"

The hardest thing for us humans to do is to be humble, teachable, willing to admit being wrong, and to change. That's understandable when we are trying to figure out life on our own. We muddle through life, and we all know how confusing life can be from all the experiences of mistakes and failure and violating our own morals and ethics with all the painful consequences we experience, not to mention the hurtful experiences others' bad choices and weaknesses and sins add to our own issues. When we have no source for answers about how life is designed to

work and no hope for changing either ourselves or our relationships with others, what motivation is there to be humble and self-examining? None! We naturally protect ourselves from facing the mess we're making of our lives, and we keep trying to beat the odds against us that are so obvious in all the object lessons around us in people we know, news we ingest, and movies and television and novels we escape to. But self-examination is so necessary for beginning to get the point that God has so patiently, persistently, and lovingly revealed to us in giving us the Bible.

2 Corinthians 13:5 NIV: *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you – unless, of course, you fail the test?*

This verse is written to those who believe they are Christians, so even if we believe we are, we need to be open to the possibility that we have more to learn. When I discovered that I hadn't been born again yet, I felt the temptation to reject what I saw in the Bible that I had never been exposed to in all my years of going to church. But I'm thankful that I had already developed the question about it, so when I saw the answer, it was more good news than bad news to me. It's hard to welcome answers to questions one isn't asking. Some people will never confess or even admit that they need God to provide truth about how he designed life to work. They will plug away at life, experiencing one painful lesson after another without stopping to ask God, "What do you, my Creator, have to say about life?" The sad tragedy is that God wants everyone to have a great, joyful, purposeful, meaningful life. The Bible is full of promises to us of what we can experience if we will be humble and self-examining. That's what it takes to begin to get the point of the great news the Bible reveals to anyone who is seeking or at least open.

In 2 Peter 1:3-4 NLT, we find this enticement: ***By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world's corruption caused by human desires.***

Self-examination is scary. Why do it if we have no hope of anything better? How depressing to know our lives are a mess with no answers obviously available! But wait! There's hope! That's the point of the Bible, but the good news it is full of has been undermined in many, many ways that result in most people not believing there's any reason to bother trying to understand it for themselves. If there is so much division and disagreement in the realm of what I call "Churchianity," why bother trying to figure out who or what is right and who or what is wrong? So many people I've talked to about God over the years have concluded that there is no knowable truth and that anyone claiming to know what is true must be arrogant or closed-minded or judgmental of those who disagree. But I have also experienced the thrill of watching people discover that they CAN read the Bible and understand it.

Those who don't think they can see or accept truth from the Bible have either not tried it, haven't known where to begin, or have not been willing to get their own preconceived beliefs out of the way. All of us have assumptions about God and about life that come from our own ideas, what the Bible calls "human wisdom" in contrast to the wisdom of God. But one of the major points of the Bible is that because we fail so miserably at figuring out how to make life work as we wish we could, we need to turn to God to tell us.

Isaiah 55:8-9 NLT: *"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."*

That is why we can be so thankful that God made the Bible available to us. If he wanted us to know his thoughts and his ways, then it's easy to trust that he worked in many ways throughout history to reveal his wisdom and that he inspired certain chosen humble and God-loving people to provide the written words of truth and wisdom that he wants us to learn and understand and live by. If we'll give our attention and effort to that, then we will be amazed at how it all makes sense. We'll get the point of life and start to experience why what God tells us is so wise and we'll see what a difference knowing his truth can make in our lives.

One of the evidences that convinces me that the Bible really is from God is that it is understandable to those who

want to understand it but misunderstood and the point is missed by those who don't want to believe it or submit to it. These three verses in John make the same point in different ways, that if we are open to or, better yet, seeking God's truth, we will be able to understand it:

John 7:17 NLT: ***"Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own."***

John 8:31-32 NLT: ***Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

John 18:37b NLT: ***"I was born and came into the world to testify to the truth. All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true."***

When we think we're wise, then we can't and won't "see" or "hear" truth that contradicts our human wisdom filters, though we may read or listen to it over and over:

1 Corinthians 3:18-20 NLT: ***Stop deceiving yourselves. If you think you are wise by this world's standards, you need to become a fool to be truly wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God. As the Scriptures say, "He traps the wise in the snare of their own cleverness." And again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise; he knows they are worthless."***

That's why I hope this booklet will meet a need that has become more and more clear over these years of my own experiences of seeking God. Many, many people go to church their whole lives, wanting to be Christians and assuming that they are, but they've never had the opportunity to learn the foundational truths that are the starting point for building the life God intended and designed for us to experience.

Hebrews 5:11-14 NIV: ***We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.***

It's not only possible to go to church for many years but never grow up spiritually, it's not possible to become mature unless we first start out as spiritual babies and take in the "milk." We must begin at the beginning to learn the foundational truths we need to know to prepare for making our choice to receive from God the solution to our sin and spiritual separation and death. That is the goal of this booklet.

1 Peter 2:2-3 NIV: ***Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.***

As in our physical lives, we must go through stages of development. First is the embryonic/fetal stage of development, then birth, then infancy and childhood, then adulthood. Spiritually, these stages are similar. We develop faith in God and in Jesus and learn what is involved in being "born from above," then if we choose to receive that birth from God in the way he describes, we start our new spiritual lives as infants, focusing on learning more and more ways that God's wisdom must replace the human, worldly wisdom that has failed us. As we learn and grow, we become more and more used to thinking and acting from God's spiritual, higher, divine nature which we receive from him when we are born again, and for the rest of our lives we can experience more and more how good and wise and loving God is.

Paul often wrote about the reality that false teachers and false teachings would sneak into the church, so we need to be watchful and discerning. But of course we need to have enough foundational knowledge to be able to spot it. He said this to a young minister who was eager to learn from Paul's example:

2 Timothy 4:2-4 NLT: ***Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently***

correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching. For a time is coming when people will no longer listen to sound and wholesome teaching. They will follow their own desires and will look for teachers who will tell them whatever their itching ears want to hear. They will reject the truth and chase after myths.

Many people assume they can trust their churches and ministers to guide them, so they continue to attend church as I did, hoping to pick up bits and snatches of knowledge from the Bible. But the time seems to have come that Paul was predicting; very few churches provide teaching about these basic topics to help people begin at the beginning, to learn how to become a Christian first and then to learn what God's vision is for us to be Christians in this world, in our relationships within our churches and with everyone we have the opportunity to know as we go about our daily lives. We need these foundations in order to discern whether any church we participate in is teaching truth and to spot if we personally or any church strays into human wisdom that merely tells us what our itching ears want to hear. That is why I believe so many people have missed the point that God reveals in the Bible.

The Bible is like a jigsaw puzzle, full of pieces of the big picture. The pieces don't make sense when they are viewed in isolation, a verse or passage of the Bible at a time in a sermon or even in our own reading bits of it now and then. But when we ask some important, big-picture questions, we can start to see how the pieces fit together to reveal God's vision of life. This booklet is part of a series of eight booklets that each focus on one big-picture question. They are listed at the end of this booklet. The others were written many years ago, and all of them were aimed at helping those who are already Christians re-think some assumptions common to many churches that miss the point of the Bible. It's easy to drift away from what the Bible says, and it's hard to maintain our personal sense of responsibility to know what we believe and why we believe it from our own personal knowledge of the Bible. As a naturally curious seeker and ponderer, and as one who has had many different experiences with churches and with people, my hope is that others will find these booklets helpful in their own quest to know God.

The state of what I call "Churchianity" – as opposed to Christianity – is such a mess of disunity and factions, unbiblical and nonbiblical teachings and practices, traditions based on human wisdom and rituals that become rote and mindless, that more and more people have lost any motivation to go to church or to look for a church to attend. I don't blame someone who has had a bad experience with a church who has rejected what they think is Christianity and Jesus! My own lifelong quest to experience "church" as God describes it has been full of disappointments. I've started over many times, but every experience has taught me lessons that have helped me grow spiritually. My plea here is to anyone who is tempted to write off what the Bible says to stay open to letting God reveal his amazing, awesome truth to you. Follow the example of the apostle Paul, who was one of the most religious of the Jews, who discovered he had missed the point and was so thankful he had been given the opportunity to learn the truth:

Philippians 3:5b-9a NLT: I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault. I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him.

Are you willing to throw out, as Paul did, any human thinking that you discover is not true according to what God reveals as you learn more from the Bible? Even if you have been a God-seeker up to now, could you view reading this as a possible opportunity to be exposed to teachings you've not learned yet? If not, I hope you'll at least continue to read on even if you're skeptical. If you know you may not know what the foundational truths of the Bible are, then be excited about the treasures you will discover!

What Is the Point?

Before we dig into Bible verses on the foundational topics, it may be helpful to get an overview of what the point of the Bible is. As you read through this, understand that we will be looking at many verses later, but just as most people look at the picture on the jigsaw puzzle box to know what the big picture is before they begin sorting and

assembling the individual pieces, let's try to summarize the big themes we need to learn about.

First, the bad news:

We can't figure out life! We need God to explain how he designed for us to live, how to experience the "rich and satisfying life" that Jesus says is possible.

We sin and separate ourselves from God by making the same mistake that Eve and then Adam did, by not believing what God says and not trusting that he says it because it's for our good.

We can't fix our relationship with God by being "good." The damage is already done. We are guilty and estranged from God because we didn't trust and obey him and we can't undo it. We've murdered our relationship with God, and like someone who murders another person, being sorry can't and won't undo the death. We are dead spiritually, at our own hands.

God knew before he created us that we would choose to disobey him. He created us with freedom to choose, and just as Eve and Adam chose to disbelieve and disobey the only rule God gave them, we choose over and over to not believe that God means what he says. We become addicted to sinning because we want the instant gratification of sin instead of the deeper joy of obeying God and finding out why what he says is wise and good for us. We think we're so wise, but we prove to be foolish along with every other person on earth! Just as "the serpent" tempted Adam and Eve, we learn in the Bible that there is an evil entity called Satan or the Devil whose goal is to tempt every person to likewise disbelieve and then disobey what God says.

Freedom to choose is inherently necessary to every loving relationship, and God created us as beings who can only truly love by choice, as we know from experience even without reading the Bible. We are loved by God and he desires our love in return; a relationship can only be mutual when both beings choose to give love. God loves us even if we don't love him in return, but there can be no loving relationship that benefits us as God intends nor mutual bond between us and God unless the guilt and spiritual deadness that is caused by our choices to sin are fixed somehow.

If we pay attention to the failure of the ways we've been trying to figure out life on our own and face the messes we experience from bad choices or the ways we don't live up to what we innately know is right – what the Bible explains and defines as sin – then we may become a seeker of God and his truth with hope that he will help us.

Now, the good news!

He *will* help us! He had a plan before he made the world for how to overcome the separation between us and him that our sin causes. He not only accomplished his plan, but he also provided a written account – the Bible – of what he has done and his design for and truth about how we are intended to live.

The first step toward finding God's help to fix our relationship with him is to decide to be humble and self-examining, to be honest about how much we've sinned and what a mess we've made of our lives. We need to take responsibility for our choices and our messes. Before we even learn about God's plan for giving us a way to get back into a relationship with him after we've broken it by rebelling against him, we need to understand how serious and permanent the damage we've done is, with no minimizing it or presuming that God will simply overlook it or fix it. We can't fix it; God did make a way to fix it, but it was a very serious and costly solution that we need to understand and appreciate. We can't receive the solution unless we do understand and appreciate what it cost God to provide it.

When we're ready to submit to God's revealed truth and wisdom, then when we read the Bible, we'll be able to understand it and we'll experience the transforming effect that truth will have on our lives. Only when we are ready to see and hear what it says with trust that the Bible is from God and for our good will we be able to understand how true it is. Then, when we understand it, we are given the opportunity and responsibility to be God's fellow workers as long as we remain in this world, with the hope that God will use us to find others who are

seeking or at least open to receiving the same great news of this new life that we have been blessed to learn of and experience! As the apostles were told when an angel broke them out of the prison they were in for teaching about Jesus, we'll want to share it with others, too!

Acts 5:20 NLT: ***“Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people all about this new life.”***

The rest of this booklet will focus on those foundations that must be laid as one begins his or her relationship with God. Then the rest of the booklets can make sense and can help one build on these foundations. My preference has always been to study through the topics covered here in-person, where those who are seeking God or are at least open to learning more about him would have the opportunity to see for themselves that they can understand and then respond to these truths. The need to write out these topics in this format that anyone can study through on their own arose when I discovered that the other booklets weren't easily understandable to those who have never started with these foundational questions and answers. So, though each booklet stands alone, my suggestion is to read this one first, or perhaps second if the ***New Treasure! Precious Promises*** booklet may provide the enticement and encouragement that will spark even more interest in studying these topics.

These are the foundational topics and the questions they will answer:

1. Know God – Why would/should I want to be a Christian?

Jesus' death on the cross made it possible to become God's child and have a relationship with him that is my closest and dearest. A grateful heart responds unconditionally and trustingly to his love.

2. Know God's Will – What does God say is the way He designed for us to live?

Be a learner/follower/disciple of Jesus. Determine if I am really his disciple by examining myself according to Jesus' definitions. If I'm claiming it, does it show? If I'm not claiming to be a disciple now, decide if I'm going to be one.

3. Know Myself – Why do I need help from God?

What keeps me from being close to God? What barriers do I put up by giving in to my desires and going against his will? What is my sinful nature? What does it mean to repent?

4. Know God's Gift of New Birth – How do I begin a relationship with God?

God offers me a new start – forgiveness and power and a relationship with him – by participating in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, to live a new life following the Spirit and not the sinful nature!

5. Know God's People – Why do I need to be part of the church? What is Jesus' church like?

God showers me with love in a tangible way through my relationships with his other children; he meets my every need not only by his Word and his Spirit in me individually, but also by working through others. He puts me in a new family where other members love and need me, and I love and need them.

How This Bible Study Will Be Done

When I study the Bible with someone in person, my main goal is to avoid telling the person what the verses we're reading mean. My confidence is that if God wants us to learn his truth and put his wise will into practice, then he would have made the message understandable that he reveals to us through the authors of the Bible. I believe, from what the Bible says as well as from experience, that anyone who wants to understand it, can and will understand it. Jesus often talked about eyes that don't see and ears that don't hear. The choice is every person's whether to see and hear what is true, to get the point of life as God created us to live it.

In writing out what was originally meant as an outline for discussion, with the person I'm studying with being the one who discovers for herself (I've focused previously on women but hope any seeking man will be open to learning from these Scriptures, too) that she can understand what God wants us to know, this booklet had to be done differently. But though my understanding of the verses must be stated, please take time when you read the Bible quotes to ask yourself what you understand the meaning to be before going on to read my take on them. If you want to see more of the context of any quoted verses, then take the time to look them up for yourself in your

own Bible. The format will be to work through many Scriptures topically, building faith in God and personal convictions by seeing for yourself that you can understand the truths and how they fit together.

Please follow the example of the Bereans when you read my explanations:

Acts 17:11 NIV: *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*

Eagerly examining every day, wanting to have “eyes that see” and “ears that hear” will ensure that any person can learn and understand the Bible’s truths provided for us by God. The challenge is to look for and remove the filters of human wisdom through which we naturally interpret what we read in the Bible. We are tempted in the same way as were Adam and Eve whenever we react to what God says with the thought, “Did God say [fill in the blank]? He surely doesn’t mean that!” That’s why humility and self-examination are so important. “God is God and I am not God,” is the starting point for opening our minds and hearts to the possibility of understanding spiritual truth.

When we enter into a relationship with God, we begin a process of transformation that continues throughout the rest of our lives. We begin with a human, worldly mindset and gradually become more and more able to understand not only what God’s will is, but why it is so wise and why it produces the freedom that Jesus promised to anyone who will put it into practice.

Romans 12:2 NLT: *Don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know God’s will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect.*

As you read on, I hope and pray that you will feel the same thrill that two disciples felt when they were privileged to talk at length to the risen Jesus. They didn’t know it was him until the very end of the conversation, but they felt the thrill of a huge “Aha!” moment when they realized who they’d been with for several hours! May your and my spiritual eyes be opened more and more as were theirs:

Luke 24:31-32 NLT: *Suddenly, their eyes were opened, and they recognized him. And at that moment he disappeared! They said to each other, “Didn’t our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?”*

There is great power in reading Scriptures. They are not mere words; they are the mind and heart of God expressed in words that we can understand if we are at least open and even more so if we are earnestly seeking him. These promises are what we can hope to experience:

Romans 10:17 NLT: *So faith comes from hearing, that is, hearing the Good News about Christ.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NIV: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

Hebrews 4:12-13 NLT: *For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable.*

As a suggestion, it may be helpful to focus on one foundational topic at a time. Read through or listen to your smartphone artificial intelligence reader (download the PDF version to your Books or files app) all the way through before going back through one passage of Scripture at a time. Then please read each Scripture quote, look it up in your own Bible and read some context if you need to so you can understand it for yourself. Go at your own pace, because the most important thing is to get the point, not just to get through it. Ask God to help you see and understand the truth of it.

If you focus on making some progress every day, whether a little or a lot doesn’t matter as much as how much you

comprehend and are impacted by it. Direction is more important than speed. Albert Einstein supposedly said, and it seems like good advice, especially when applied to learning about God, “Anyone can be a genius, if they pick just one specific subject and study it diligently just 15 minutes each day.” So, let’s begin!

Foundation 1. Know God – “Why should or would I want to be a Christian?”

Jesus’ death on the cross made it possible to become God’s child and have a relationship with Him that is my closest and dearest. A grateful heart responds unconditionally and trustingly to His love.

All of us have an innate faith that life doesn’t end when we die physically, or at least an innate hope that there is life beyond our mortal life. We’ll assume that anyone bothering to read this already accepts that premise. So the first verse in the foundation we need for building the life God created us to live is Jesus’ own definition of the meaning of life – and by life I mean eternal life that begins now and continues after the end of time:

John 17:3 NIV: ***Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.***

Jesus said this at the end of his life in a prayer to his Father right before he was arrested and crucified. He was with his twelve disciples whom he had designated to become his apostles (eleven after the betrayal by Judas), the ones who would be responsible for carrying on his work on earth after his death, resurrection, and return to heaven. The last few chapters of John go into details of what Jesus told them during what we call the Last Supper. So many important teachings are packed into those chapters, several others of which we’ll look at later. But as we begin to study the Bible together, this verse is like bedrock upon which to build. Everyone who has had any exposure to Christianity has heard the phrase “eternal life” over and over, but have you ever asked or heard anyone try to answer the question of what eternal life is? What is Christianity all about? Is it about getting our ticket to heaven, avoiding hell, being good, not being bad, or what? This is one of those verses that should stop us in our tracks and give us a huge “Aha!” moment (the first of many to come, I hope)!

What is “IT” all about? What is the point of life? What is the reason Jesus came to earth to live among people? As he was near the end of his time here and going to his arrest that very night to be killed the next day, he’s telling his disciples/apostles – and us – what the point of his life among them meant. His goal was to give us the opportunity to **KNOW GOD!!** There’s no way to adequately describe the awesome, amazing, unexpected great news of this one sentence. The truth of it needs to hit us in our hearts, not only in our heads. God wants us to know him! He wants us to be in a relationship with him! Jesus came to make that possible and to reveal God to us so we could know him.

Before you read on, I’d like to ask you to take some time to meditate quietly and privately about this verse, this promise, this definition of eternal life. If you will do that, until you feel the “Aha!” amazement at the point of Jesus’ promise, then you will be ready to move on to look at the rest of the Bible verses. The goal of this Bible study is to lay solid foundations that you can build on for the rest of your life. A good discerning tool for determining how humble and open we are to getting the point of the Bible is to ask ourselves how amazed and awed we are by the verses we’ll be reading. Please don’t rush through reading them; take time to meditate on them because though they are understandable to anyone who wants to understand them, they are such a contrast to how we’re used to thinking so we need to ponder them until we get the point God is trying to tell us as the pieces of the puzzle start to fall in place.

Speaking from my own experience growing up going to church and trusting that the Bible is from God, it’s easy to know what the Bible says in my head without letting it hit my heart. Anyone who has believed in God and in Jesus for a long time can miss the point without realizing it. If you think you already know the point of the Scriptures in this study, you’ll be tempted to feel pride in your knowledge, your faith, your goodness, and it will be difficult to let the verses hit you afresh. Self-examination is so necessary, even to the point of being open to the possibility that you may not yet be in a relationship with God as he describes, as I had to grapple with when I discovered that I

hadn't yet been born again though I loved God, went to church and participated in every possible opportunity to learn more about God throughout my teen years.

Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV: *He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.*

This verse affirms what each of us knows already, that God created us with what I call a God-size hole in our heart that can only be filled by being in relationship with God. All of us, in our humanly limited efforts to figure out how life works, try to fill that hole with everything but God. Some people never pay enough attention to how those things fall short of satisfying their deepest need and miss the point their whole lives, then die never having turned to God for his wisdom. Others do pay attention to what's not working but don't know how to find God's wisdom on their own. God has always used people to share his truth and his wisdom with other people. When someone has had the opportunity to learn the truths we will see here, the natural desire is to want to share the great news with whoever will be open to hearing it. But nowadays there is so much confusion and disunity in Christendom that most people assume it's impossible to be certain of what is true and they are at least skeptical and at most fearful of anyone who claims to know what is true. That's probably what anyone reading this feels.

Who do I think I am to claim I know truth? What I hope you'll feel when you reach the end of this booklet is the same gratitude to God that I feel for making these important foundational truths clear and understandable. Then I hope you'll want to share them with others, because everyone needs the opportunity to see them for themselves. We can know what we believe and why we believe it. God wants us to know these truths, so he didn't make them confusing or complicated. It is possible to experience what Jesus prayed for in the same prayer as when he described eternal life the night he was arrested:

John 17:20-21 NIV: *My prayer is not for them [his apostles] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*

Jesus prayed for you and for me, that we would all be united with God but also united with each other. If Jesus prayed for oneness among those who believe in him, is it possible? Let's find out!

Early in Jesus' public ministry, he taught what is known as the "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew 5 through 7. He boldly preached about many, many ways most people miss the point spiritually. In one part of it he talked about how shocked many people will be to discover that they have missed the point about what being right with God is all about.

Matthew 7:21-23 NIV: *Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?" Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!"*

What is the point those religious people missed? Jesus said, "I never knew you." They were doing many amazing-seeming religious activities that one would think confirm they had the power of God and therefore a relationship with him. They were prophesying and even performing miracles! God apparently was working through them to accomplish impressive things, yet they weren't known by him! The warning we must take from what Jesus said is that God may use someone to accomplish good things, but those experiences and accomplishments are not proof of being right with God! The point is that we need to be sure God knows us rather than relying on what we think is our own admirable good work for God. Knowing God begins with God knowing us. The Bible tells us how to become known by God, how to begin a new, restored relationship with him by being born from above, which we'll study later.

Galatians 4:9 NLT: *So now that you know God (or should I say, now that God knows you), why do you want to go back again and become slaves once more to the weak and useless spiritual principles of this world?*

Here again we see the point being whether or not God knows us. I can't know God unless God knows me. Even when we have begun a relationship with God, we can miss the point as these Christians did who were reverting back to following the ways of the world instead of God's ways. The relationship with God was in danger of not being mutual any longer. They were not focusing on the relationship with him, which is the point of life.

1 John 2:3-6 NIV: *We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whoever says, "I know him," but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.*

Knowing God naturally produces in us trust that what he tells us to do is for our good. So if we claim to know him, we'll want to obey him. Our motivation is not from an "ought to" mentality, but from a "want to" desire of our hearts. After all, when we understand that God reveals his spiritual truth that we so desperately need, why would we not put it into practice?

Many people will be shocked to hear Jesus' words, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" But because God loves us enough to warn us, we can get the point and instead look forward to being welcomed into heaven to enjoy knowing God and being known by him forever!

John 3:16 NLT: *For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.*

This verse is well known for a reason. It is one of the most concise statements of the point of the Bible. So much could be said, but the important point here is to let the amazing truth of it sink in to our heads and our hearts. Knowing God loves us, if we really grasp that reality, is the motivation each of us needs for trusting everything he tells us in the Bible. We will not only believe in him, but we will also believe him – even when we don't understand why he says what he does, we'll trust that everything he says is best for us.

Now we need to turn our focus to how amazing God's love for us is, in light of how unlovable we are. Before we can appreciate how much God loves us, we must understand how much we need his love! We'll look at more detail about sin in another section, but our focus here will be on the depth of God's love for us and all he did for us even before we realized our need for him.

Romans 5:6-11 NIV: *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.*

The contrast between us and God is so clear here. We see how much we need his love as we are "powerless ... ungodly ... sinners ... enemies," compared to what God in Christ did for us: "die for ... love ... justify ... reconcile ... save." When we truly grasp how desperate our condition is, that we are so lost, so dead spiritually and that we deserve God's wrath, then what we refer to as "the gospel" – the message of good news of what God has done on our behalf – will be appreciated deeply and our response to God will be from the heart. God's plan was fulfilled when Jesus proved he is Lord and Messiah/Christ through the life he lived, the death he died, and his resurrection and victory over death. The impact of this great news on the lives of those who respond to it was also in God's plan from the beginning, described as the New Covenant. The basis of the New Covenant, which is the only way being in relationship with God can work, is motivation from within, serving God from the heart and from love and gratitude for what he has already done for us rather than from an external pressure to follow rules or to earn God's love or favor. (The booklet ***New Life! The New Covenant Paradigm*** describes this in more depth.)

Acts 2:22-24, 36-37 NLT: ***“People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip.” ... “So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!” Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?”***

These verses are the conclusion of the very first sermon after Jesus was resurrected and gone back to heaven. Peter was the speaker who had the great privilege of using the “keys of the Kingdom of Heaven” that Jesus had promised to give him in Matthew 16:19, and for the first time the door was opened to the way back into a relationship with God. We’ll come back to discover Peter’s answer to the question, “What should we do,” later, but the important point of these verses is that the news that Jesus was proven to be Lord and Messiah (Savior) by his miracles and ultimately by his being raised back to life after his horrific death must pierce our hearts in the same way it affected these first hearers of that great news.

We must be deeply convicted of our personal responsibility for the death of Jesus. Just as no one in Peter’s audience personally pounded a nail into Jesus’ wrists and feet yet they were told “you nailed him to a cross and killed him,” every person’s sin required his death to make the way back to God possible! We must each say, “I crucified Jesus, my only hope! Is my heart pierced?” The NIV translation describes it as being “cut to the heart,” as though a knife has stabbed me. We do need to feel the pain of what we personally have done that required God’s great love and sacrifice that opened the way back to God, not for the world, but for you and me and every other individual in the world.

When we do feel the pain of the consequences of our personal sinfulness and rebellion against God, then we’ll be eager to repent, which we’ll look at more later. Repentance is rarely preached or taught nowadays, yet it is one of the most obvious points the Bible repeats over and over that must not be missed.

Next, let’s spend some time working our way through the account of the end of Jesus’ life in Matthew 26-28, from his last meal with his apostles through his arrest, crucifixion, and finally resurrection. We need to grasp what Jesus went through for us. As we read, please try to put yourself in his place, imagining what it must have been like to be completely innocent yet judged and condemned. As we just read in Romans 5, none of us would volunteer to be killed in someone else’s place, but in order to appreciate how amazing it is that Jesus did just that, we need to take our time to let these events cut us to the heart. Then perhaps we’ll be motivated and eager to learn the answer to the question, “What must I do?”

Please stop here and read in your own Bible Matthew 26, 27, and 28 in one sitting. (If you don’t already have a Bible, then use BibleGateway.com or Bible.com websites or their smartphone apps.) If you want to read all the crucifixion accounts, see also Mark 14-16, Luke 22-24, and John 18-20. Ask God to help you not only learn the facts of what Jesus went through for you, but ask also that the truth of it will move from your head to your heart. After you do that and come back here, we will look together at the significant events. We’ll see that there was much physical and emotional pain in what he suffered even before the agonizing and torturous execution that crucifixion inflicted on Jesus. All of the mentions of what Jesus suffered for our sakes are highlighted in all capital letters in the Scripture quotes below, and passages we’ll focus on are underlined.

There are accounts available that describe the physical tortures of crucifixion. One good one is by D. Truman Davis, MD (<https://docslib.org/doc/2164214/the-crucifixion-medical-account> - contact me for a PDF copy if you want a printed copy and can’t figure out how to do it). But though it’s helpful to understand how much Jesus suffered physically and emotionally in dying for us, we can miss the point if we focus on the physical more than the spiritual agony. Many other people experienced the horror of crucifixion, which was a common method of execution by the Romans in the time of Jesus, but because we don’t witness or fear that kind of death nowadays, we may feel thankful that he was willing to go through it while missing the spiritual substitution for each of us. His physical pain

and anguish were awful, and the physical shedding of his blood is central to God's plan of substitutionary sacrifice as instituted in the Old Testament, foreshadowing the sacrifice of the Messiah to come as we'll see later. I remind myself often that the spiritual death and separation from his Father in heaven that I deserve and would have experienced forever if he hadn't been willing to go through it for me was the most horrific torture for him who had never experienced even a moment of estrangement and separation from the Father.

Please remember as we work our way through these chapters in Matthew that if we think those experiences were bad, they really are meant to help us understand how serious our sin and our spiritual death is and that the only solution for it was for God to suffer for us in every way – physically, emotionally, and most of all spiritually – to make it possible for us to be reborn spiritually and come back into relationship with him.

Matthew 26:1-5 NIV: *When Jesus had finished saying all these things, he said to his disciples, "As you know, Passover begins in two days, and THE SON OF MAN WILL BE HANDED OVER TO BE CRUCIFIED." At that same time the leading priests and elders were meeting at the residence of Caiaphas, the high priest, plotting how to capture Jesus secretly and kill him. "But not during the Passover celebration," they agreed, "or the people may riot."*

The events begin two days before the Jewish celebration of Passover. What strikes me from the perspective of knowing the whole story as it unfolded is that I'm surprised at how clear and honest Jesus was with his disciples about the fate awaiting him, yet it seems that his disciples were unable to understand it. Throughout the events of the next few days, they certainly missed the point of what happened and why it happened. I'm amazed that Jesus was able to resist the temptation to give up hope that those men could carry on God's work after his return to heaven! Eventually we'll see the transformation they underwent, from reliance on their own human wisdom to being able to understand the wisdom of God. Their example is encouraging and reminds me of the saying, "Please have patience with me, God is not finished with me yet!"

Matthew 26:6-13 NIV: *While Jesus was in Bethany in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came to him with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, which she poured on his head as he was reclining at the table. When the disciples saw this, they were indignant. "Why this waste?" they asked. "This perfume could have been sold at a high price and the money given to the poor." Aware of this, Jesus said to them, "Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me. When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. Truly I tell you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her."*

The disciples missed the point yet again, which provides a lesson to us as well. Jesus knew his death was near, and he continued to patiently correct and admonish them knowing someday they'd understand what he meant even though they couldn't imagine how God was working out his plan.

Matthew 26:14-16 NIV: *Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, "What are you willing to give me if I deliver him over to you?" So they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. On the first day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread, the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Where do you want us to make preparations for you to eat the Passover?" He replied, "Go into the city to a certain man and tell him, 'The Teacher says: My appointed time is near. I am going to celebrate the Passover with my disciples at your house.'" So the disciples did as Jesus had directed them and prepared the Passover. When evening came, Jesus was reclining at the table with the Twelve. And while they were eating, he said, "TRULY I TELL YOU, ONE OF YOU WILL BETRAY ME." They were very sad and began to say to him one after the other, "Surely you don't mean me, Lord?" Jesus replied, "The one who has dipped his hand into the bowl with me will betray me. The Son of Man will go just as it is written about him. But woe to that man who betrays the Son of Man! It would be better for him if he had not been born." Then Judas, the one who would betray him, said, "Surely you don't mean me, Rabbi?" Jesus answered, "You have said so."*

The disciple who missed the point the most was Judas. He was with Jesus and the other disciples for three years, yet he apparently never really believed that Jesus was who he said he was, never grasped his divinity though he

witnessed so many miracles and heard all of his teachings, and he finally became the patsy of the religious leaders who wanted to kill Jesus. We know from other places in Scripture where Judas is mentioned that he was the treasurer of the disciples and stole money for himself, so apparently he had a secret self-serving nature that even his fellow disciples weren't aware of since they didn't know he was the guilty one who would betray Jesus.

There are two lessons we can take from this passage. The first is that if Judas could fool everyone, seeming to be a sincere follower of Jesus to the point that he left his old life behind and participated in all the work of ministry with Jesus that the other disciples/apostles did, then we need to watch out for and resist the same temptation to put on a public persona that doesn't match what is really in our hearts. I've been humbled, and in hindsight thankful, when I've given in to that temptation to let people think I'm more godly than I really am and then had my weaknesses and sins exposed. It's not good for us to get away with hypocrisy, because it gradually hardens our hearts and we become less and less self-examining and repentant. The irony is that when we are real and honest about our temptations and sins, usually others are impressed and encouraged rather than disgusted as we think they'll be. Judas could have repented, but he didn't, and he missed out on the opportunity that we'll see Peter experienced in contrast later.

The other lesson is that Jesus knew all along that Judas would betray him, yet he treated him like all the others. I can't imagine being as loving and patient to someone I know is my enemy day in and day out. We can rationalize that because Jesus knew the betrayal would fulfill prophecy and that it was part of God's plan, it wasn't as painful, but we need to always remember that Jesus was fully human and felt the same temptations and emotional struggles we do. Jesus loved the one who betrayed him. The question for us: "Could I love a betrayer?" Jesus endured that for our sakes.

Matthew 26:26-30 NIV: *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. **THIS IS MY BLOOD OF THE COVENANT, WHICH IS POURED OUT FOR MANY FOR THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS.** I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." When they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives.*

Though the disciples didn't understand the significance of this until after Jesus' death and resurrection, Jesus was again open with them about his impending death and the blood he would shed to make forgiveness of sins possible.

Matthew 26:31-35 NIV: *Then Jesus told them, "**THIS VERY NIGHT YOU WILL ALL FALL AWAY ON ACCOUNT OF ME, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered."** But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "**Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.**" "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "**THIS VERY NIGHT, BEFORE THE ROOSTER CROWS, YOU WILL DISOWN ME THREE TIMES.**" But Peter declared, "**Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.**" And all the other disciples said the same.*

The confidence of the disciples that they would never wimp out and desert Jesus was sincere, but they had no real idea what was about to happen. Events were carrying them along, and they seemed to still have wrong assumptions about what the Messiah would accomplish. They believed – in theory – that Jesus was the Messiah promised and foretold, but the Jews had so missed the point about the Messiah being a spiritual rather than earthly conqueror that they simply couldn't imagine that Jesus would be killed because that would seem to be the end of their hopes.

The lesson for us is to realize how much we also go on our assumptions about what it means to be a Christian, what God's will is, what church is all about, and many other beliefs that we easily accept from our own religious experiences. We know the disciples missed the point even after three years with Jesus. We can empathize with them since they couldn't have imagined yet what the results of Jesus' death and resurrection would bring about. If we have accepted the status quo of Christendom/Churchianity and haven't asked these foundational questions for

ourselves, we are just as vulnerable to missing the point as they were!

Matthew 26:36-46 NIV: Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "MY SOUL IS OVERWHELMED WITH SORROW TO THE POINT OF DEATH. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "MY FATHER, IF IT IS POSSIBLE, MAY THIS CUP BE TAKEN FROM ME. YET NOT AS I WILL, BUT AS YOU WILL." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "COULDN'T YOU MEN KEEP WATCH WITH ME FOR ONE HOUR?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away A SECOND TIME AND PRAYED, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and PRAYED THE THIRD TIME, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!"

Jesus was alone in time of great need of emotional support. His disciples were so clueless about how they could have given of themselves that they fell asleep! That's worse than being alone, when instead of receiving support, one has to give it. I remember when my first husband was dying of a cerebral hemorrhage, instead of feeling supported, I felt like some people who thought they were trying to console me were actually seeking reassurance that they were doing a good job of that. I could understand that they didn't know what to say in the circumstances so I overlooked it, but it was an interesting lesson in how self-focused people can be even when they think they're trying to be giving.

Jesus' disciples were unable to give of themselves, being physically exhausted, apparently, and I can certainly empathize with them as I have fallen asleep while praying many times and felt bad about it. But the important focus for us here is to try to deepen our appreciation for this one more thing Jesus had to endure alone out of his love for us. I suspect the disciples' memories of that night may have cut them to the heart and increased their motivation to push beyond physical weaknesses and temptations in their ministry after Jesus returned to life and then went back to heaven, as we see was true in the book of Acts.

Matthew 26:47-56 NIV: While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "THE ONE I KISS IS THE MAN; ARREST HIM." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend." THEN THE MEN STEPPED FORWARD, SEIZED JESUS AND ARRESTED HIM. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." THEN ALL THE DISCIPLES DESERTED HIM AND FLED.

Betrayed by a kiss – how cruel! We have the benefit of hindsight and know how all the events unfolded, but the disciples couldn't see any reason to hope for Jesus to come through victorious. We know they eventually did get the point, but what impresses me here is that Jesus was so resolved to endure what he knew was the plan of God from the beginning – a plan he made with the Father and the Spirit, the three-in-one God that is challenging to understand, in what theologians describe as the Trinity but which Jesus described as simply being "one ... just as you are in me and I am in you" as we saw earlier in John 17:21.

As Jesus knew that he was soon to experience the pain of separation, the break in that oneness, he did agonize and

have to face and overcome the temptation to not go through with it. We saw that he prayed three times about it while his disciples slept, and here we see that he was ready, resolved to submit to the plan no matter what his disciples or anyone else did. From this point on, he went through the events completely alone. And he did this out of love for you and for me!

Matthew 26:57-68 NIV: Those who had arrested Jesus took him to Caiaphas the high priest, where the teachers of the law and the elders had assembled. But Peter followed him at a distance, right up to the courtyard of the high priest. He entered and sat down with the guards to see the outcome. The chief priests and the whole Sanhedrin were looking for false evidence against Jesus so that they could put him to death. But they did not find any, though many false witnesses came forward. Finally two came forward and declared, "This fellow said, 'I am able to destroy the temple of God and rebuild it in three days.'" Then the high priest stood up and said to Jesus, "Are you not going to answer? What is this testimony that these men are bringing against you?" But Jesus remained silent. The high priest said to him, "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God." "You have said so," Jesus replied. "But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, "He has spoken blasphemy! Why do we need any more witnesses? Look, now you have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?" "He is worthy of death," they answered. Then THEY SPIT IN HIS FACE AND STRUCK HIM WITH THEIR FISTS. OTHERS SLAPPED HIM and said, "Prophecy to us, Messiah. Who hit you?"

Jesus suffered humiliation, abuse, taunting, and being completely misunderstood, being judged to be guilty when he was innocent. He knew the religious leaders were missing the point they should have understood, that they should have believed he was the Messiah they claimed to be waiting for. He endured it for you and for me!

Matthew 26:69-75 NIV: Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. "You also were with Jesus of Galilee," she said. But HE DENIED IT BEFORE THEM ALL. "I don't know what you're talking about," he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, "This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth." HE DENIED IT AGAIN, with an oath: "I don't know the man!" After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." Then he began to call down curses, and HE SWORE TO THEM, "I DON'T KNOW THE MAN!" Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: "Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." And he went outside and wept bitterly.

Poor Peter, who gave in to the pressure to avoid the suffering that standing up for Jesus would have caused, just as Jesus predicted he would. He had such good intentions, such brave talk, until the reality of the danger came true. Jesus was disappointed by his closest friends, yet he endured, for our sakes.

Peter's bitter weeping is evidence of his humble, deep sorrow and repentance, confirmed later by the changes he made, when he became the bold and brave apostle, the messenger of the good news of what Jesus made possible for all who would likewise repent and turn back to God. He was a good example of self-examination and realness, in contrast to Judas as we'll see next.

Matthew 27:1-10 NIV: Early in the morning, all the chief priests and the elders of the people made their plans how to have Jesus executed. So they bound him, led him away and handed him over to Pilate the governor. When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, he was seized with remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders. "I have sinned," he said, "for I have betrayed innocent blood." "What is that to us?" they replied. "That's your responsibility." So Judas threw the money into the temple and left. Then he went away and hanged himself. The chief priests picked up the coins and said, "It is against the law to put this into the treasury, since it is blood money." So they decided to use the money to buy the potter's field as a burial place for foreigners. That is why it has been called the Field of Blood to this day. Then what was spoken by Jeremiah the prophet was fulfilled: "They took the thirty pieces of silver, the price set on him by the people of Israel, and they used them to buy the potter's field, as the Lord commanded me."

Judas had worldly sorrow, remorse without full repentance, which is sad because it was the final proof that he missed the point completely about who Jesus was and the mercy he would have extended to Judas had he repented.

Matthew 27:11-26 NIV: *Meanwhile Jesus stood before the governor, and the governor asked him, “Are you the king of the Jews?” “You have said so,” Jesus replied. When he was accused by the chief priests and the elders, he gave no answer. Then Pilate asked him, “Don’t you hear the testimony they are bringing against you?” But Jesus made no reply, not even to a single charge—to the great amazement of the governor. Now it was the governor’s custom at the festival to release a prisoner chosen by the crowd. At that time they had a well-known prisoner whose name was Jesus Barabbas. So when the crowd had gathered, Pilate asked them, “Which one do you want me to release to you: Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah?” For he knew it was out of self-interest that they had handed Jesus over to him. While Pilate was sitting on the judge’s seat, his wife sent him this message: “Don’t have anything to do with that innocent man, for I have suffered a great deal today in a dream because of him.” But the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowd to ask for Barabbas and to have Jesus executed. “Which of the two do you want me to release to you?” asked the governor. “Barabbas,” they answered. “What shall I do, then, with Jesus who is called the Messiah?” Pilate asked. They all answered, “Crucify him!” “Why? What crime has he committed?” asked Pilate. But they shouted all the louder, “Crucify him!” When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting, he took water and washed his hands in front of the crowd. “I am innocent of this man’s blood,” he said. “It is your responsibility!” All the people answered, “His blood is on us and on our children!” Then he released Barabbas to them. But **HE HAD JESUS FLOGGED, AND HANDED HIM OVER TO BE CRUCIFIED.***

Jesus’ trial was a mockery. The Jews were trying to use the Romans who occupied Israel to do their dirty work. Pilate was a wimp who wouldn’t stand up to them, and his lame gesture of washing his hands didn’t really relieve him of his responsibility for condemning Jesus to death by crucifixion, even though the Jews claimed their own responsibility so brazenly.

Here is one more physical torture – flogging – that he endured for us. Flogging alone could have killed him as it shredded the skin and muscles on his back. So when he was finally hung on the cross, his back rubbing against it when he had to raise and lower himself to breathe, as described in the medical account of the crucifixion referenced above, his pain was multiplied.

Matthew 27:27-31 NIV: *Then the governor’s soldiers took Jesus into the Praetorium and gathered the whole company of soldiers around him. **THEY STRIPPED HIM AND PUT A SCARLET ROBE ON HIM, AND THEN TWISTED TOGETHER A CROWN OF THORNS AND SET IT ON HIS HEAD.** They put a staff in his right hand. **THEN THEY KNELT IN FRONT OF HIM AND MOCKED HIM.** “Hail, king of the Jews!” they said. **THEY SPIT ON HIM, AND TOOK THE STAFF AND STRUCK HIM ON THE HEAD AGAIN AND AGAIN.** After they had mocked him, **THEY TOOK OFF THE ROBE AND PUT HIS OWN CLOTHES ON HIM. THEN THEY LED HIM AWAY TO CRUCIFY HIM.***

Jesus suffered so much pain and humiliation, silently enduring each new excruciating torture before he was nailed to the cross. There’s nothing one can say that can make that sink in to anyone else. My recommendation is to take some time to ponder it, to imagine going through it, to grasp how amazing it is that he willingly endured these sufferings for you and for me. Jesus would have been weak and dehydrated and exhausted by this point, and the new raw wounds on his back would have started to stick to the robe they put on him and then ripped off, opening the wounds afresh. The crown of thorns was bad enough, but then they beat it into his scalp deeper and deeper. Thank you, Jesus, for going through this for me!

Matthew 27:32-44 NIV: *As they were going out, they met a man from Cyrene, named Simon, and they forced him to carry the cross. They came to a place called Golgotha (which means “the place of the skull”). There they offered Jesus wine to drink, mixed with gall; but after tasting it, he refused to drink it. **When they had crucified him, they divided up his clothes by casting lots.** And sitting down, they kept watch over him there. Above his head they placed the written charge against him: **THIS IS JESUS, THE KING OF THE JEWS.** Two rebels were*

crucified with him, one on his right and one on his left. THOSE WHO PASSED BY HURLED INSULTS AT HIM, shaking their heads and saying, “You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!” IN THE SAME WAY THE CHIEF PRIESTS, THE TEACHERS OF THE LAW AND THE ELDERS MOCKED HIM. “He saved others,” they said, “but he can’t save himself! He’s the king of Israel! Let him come down now from the cross, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God. Let God rescue him now if he wants him, for he said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” IN THE SAME WAY THE REBELS WHO WERE CRUCIFIED WITH HIM ALSO HEAPED INSULTS ON HIM.

It's surprising to me that after all the details leading up to the actual crucifixion, there are no details given about the act itself. The medical account linked to earlier is helpful for that. Matthew didn't need to describe it because his readers would have been familiar with it, but it's helpful to learn how it was done and the ways it was designed as a particularly cruel and painful and long death. Talk about kicking a man when he's down! Jesus was mocked and insulted by everyone who missed the point of who he really was; even others being crucified beside him found some glee in thinking they were better than him!

Matthew 27:45-56 NIV: From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” (which means “MY GOD, MY GOD, WHY HAVE YOU FORSAKEN ME?”). When some of those standing there heard this, they said, “He’s calling Elijah.” Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a staff, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, “Now leave him alone. Let’s see if Elijah comes to save him.” And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook, the rocks split and the tombs broke open. The bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs after Jesus’ resurrection and went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified, and exclaimed, “Surely he was the Son of God!” Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee’s sons.

Rarely have I heard Jesus' cry of anguish, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me," focused on, yet to me, this is really the culmination of all Jesus went through for us. He is God, he came to live among mankind as a man, for the whole ultimate purpose of enduring all the struggles and temptations of life without sinning, becoming the only solution for bringing us back to God as he took on our guilt and experienced the death and separation from God that is our sad state. Jesus meant these words – he was experiencing what he had never experienced before and it was the torture that was greater than every other physical and emotional suffering we've read about in these chapters. Please take some time to ponder this and let it cut you to the heart.

Matthew 27:57-61 NIV: As evening approached, there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph, who had himself become a disciple of Jesus. Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus’ body, and Pilate ordered that it be given to him. Joseph took the body, wrapped it in a clean linen cloth, and placed it in his own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. He rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary were sitting there opposite the tomb.

Thank you, Joseph of Arimathea, for lovingly serving God in this way!

Matthew 27:62-66 NIV: The next day, the one after Preparation Day, the chief priests and the Pharisees went to Pilate. “Sir,” they said, “we remember that while he was still alive that deceiver said, ‘After three days I will rise again.’ So give the order for the tomb to be made secure until the third day. Otherwise, his disciples may come and steal the body and tell the people that he has been raised from the dead. This last deception will be worse than the first.” “Take a guard,” Pilate answered. “Go, make the tomb as secure as you know how.” So they went and made the tomb secure by putting a seal on the stone and posting the guard.

And so the world waited for the third day to arrive. Where was Jesus? We aren't told, but my assumption is that Jesus was in that state of separation from God – in hell – continuing to experience in our place what we would all

experience without his willingness to die in our place. Some people get sidetracked by the desire to figure out the metaphysics of this, which misses the point and can tempt them to rely on human wisdom. What God knows we should know, he tells us. What he doesn't tell us, perhaps someday we'll be able to understand more when we leave the limitations of time/space/matter. For now, it's enough to focus on what God does tell us.

Matthew 28:1-10 NIV: *After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb. There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."*

The great news has arrived! Jesus meant what he said about dying and being raised on the third day! And so a new age begins, the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is happening. The Kingdom that Jesus said was "near" will be revealed as "here," as we'll see more later.

Matthew 28:11-15 NIV: *While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, telling them, "You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.' If this report gets to the governor, we will satisfy him and keep you out of trouble." So the soldiers took the money and did as they were instructed. And this story has been widely circulated among the Jews to this very day.*

Fake news and propaganda are nothing new! And gullible people who believe it are not new, either!

Matthew 28:16-20 NIV: *Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Matthew's account of Jesus' death and resurrection concludes with his charge to his eleven disciples who were chosen to be special messengers – apostles – who suddenly got the point! These ordinary men who so often seemed to miss the point and not believe what Jesus was saying were given the task of carrying on Jesus' work, with the whole world as their new responsibility. It's hard for us to put ourselves in their place because we can read about how God worked and guided and brought them through the transition to the establishment of the church and the spread of the "gospel," which means "good news." Jesus said he would be with them always, and we can see their faith in him and the boldness and purpose with which they lived and worked going forward. They were transformed by the reality of knowing Jesus and experiencing the truth of all he said.

As we conclude this experience of reading through and pondering about the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, there are a couple of other passages that help us understand the perspective God wants us to have:

1 Peter 2:21-24 NLT: *For God called you to do good, even if it means suffering, just as Christ suffered for you. He is your example, and you must follow in his steps. He never sinned, nor ever deceived anyone. He did not retaliate when he was insulted, nor threaten revenge when he suffered. He left his case in the hands of God, who always judges fairly. He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.*

This passage explains God's plan from the beginning to substitute his own life for ours. When he died on the cross, it was our sins that he was suffering for in all the ways we've read about. He loved his betrayer, was alone in his time of need in the garden of Gethsemane and again in his trial, stayed silent during humiliation, injustice, and torture from religious leaders, and then he endured the abuse, beating, flogging, crown of thorns, and then the slow and agonizing hours of hanging on a cross until he died and paid the ultimate price of spiritual death and separation from God, his Father. We are healed by his sufferings!

1 Corinthians 15:17-22 NLT: *And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life.*

The good news is that Jesus Christ has been raised, and he had to go through all he went through or else we would not have any hope of having a relationship with God. There was no other way, and there is no other way. Christianity is not just a good moral or ethical system that makes this life better. If we try to "be good" but we don't know or aren't known by God, then we should be pitied for missing the point and wasting our lives on a lie. But because Jesus did rise from the dead, we have a reason to hope and a reason to live as God reveals is how we're created to experience the "rich and satisfying life" Jesus promised is possible.

How does this experience of focusing on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ make me feel about God? How has God's love affected me up to now in my life? How do I want to be affected by it from now on? These are the questions each of us need to ask ourselves.

Isaiah 53:11 NLT: *When he sees all that is accomplished by his anguish, he will be satisfied. And because of his experience, my righteous servant will make it possible for many to be counted righteous, for he will bear all their sins.*

Will Jesus feel like what he did for me was worth it? That question is the take-away, the challenge, the motivation we need. To think that we could give him the pleasure of satisfaction that going through all he did had the impact on my life that he hoped for and that his death and resurrection made possible helps us personalize our relationship with him. Sometimes we think Jesus went through his life here like he was just following a script without emotion or struggle, but that's not true.

Hebrews 2:17-18 NLT: *Therefore, it was necessary for him to be made in every respect like us, his brothers and sisters, so that he could be our merciful and faithful High Priest before God. Then he could offer a sacrifice that would take away the sins of the people. Since he himself has gone through suffering and testing, he is able to help us when we are being tested.*

Jesus is our brother who cares about us so much that he was willing to leave heaven, come to earth to live among us as a man, go through the same temptations we go through yet without giving in to any of them, and make the way for us to come back to God. That is the good news.

2 Corinthians 5:14-21 NLT: *Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive his new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them. So we have stopped evaluating others from a human point of view. At one time we thought of Christ merely from a human point of view. How differently we know him now! This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! And all of this is a gift from God, who brought us back to himself through Christ. And God has given us this task of reconciling people to him. For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation. So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead,*

“Come back to God!” For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.

Will you live for him, after all he’s done? He died for you so you could live the life God intended you to experience.

Mark 12:30 NIV: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.

How will my love for God show in every area of my life? That is the question that takes a lifetime to answer, but first we must decide to begin. I use this verse as a springboard for self-examination, pondering whether my love for God has truly motivated me to give him my whole heart, all of me spiritually, whether I’m using the mind he gave me to serve him, and how proactive I am to do what he’s asked me to do. Jesus’ love for us is the motivation that will draw from us love for God in return. If we feel a lack of love for God, then reminding ourselves of what he went through for us can get us motivated for the first time or again if we’ve lost it.

As you have read this far, I hope you have had at least one “Aha!” moment that will entice you to continue reading as we ask the next question.

Foundation 2. Know God’s Will – “What does God say is the way he designed for us to live?”

Be a learner/follower/disciple of Jesus. Determine if I am really his disciple by examining myself according to Jesus’ definitions. If I’m claiming it, does it show? If I’m not claiming to be a disciple now, decide if I’m going to be one.

2 Peter 1:3-4 NIV: His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

Whatever we need for living as God knows is best for us is provided by him. This is the theme verse for the Precious Promises series of booklets, this being the first in the series. There are so many mind-blowing truths here. Each phrase is worthy of pondering and praying for understanding of how amazing God is, how loving and generous, how much he wants us to know what only he can reveal to us, what a completely different plane of life he offers us. He actually wants us to “participate in the divine nature,” which we’ll see more about later (and which is covered in more depth in the booklet ***New Spirit! Sharing in the Divine Nature***).

The word “through” is important to focus on. It is *through* our knowledge of him that we learn what he tells us is his design and plan and will for our lives. It is *through* God’s glory and goodness that we are given promises that are so precious when we understand them. And it is *through* those promises that we can experience the very nature of God and live above the base worldly nature that we know from experience is so corrupted and falls so far short of what God intended for us when he created us.

Jesus came to make God’s will known, so we must learn what he revealed about how to live a godly life. “Godly” isn’t a word heard much nowadays, so it can go right by us without registering either the meaning or why anyone would aspire to that. Godliness is simply living as God says is right in attitudes and actions, not as a list of rules but because we know that God’s will is for our good. We want to be like God, and God makes it possible to become more and more like him. It’s a lifelong process that must start at the beginning as we’re doing here, getting the point that we need God’s help to figure out life as he created us to live, that we can’t figure it out on our own, and that we can understand the truth that he has revealed in the Bible that will, as Jesus said, “set us free,” not always from circumstances that we wish were different, but free from the guilt, confusion, worry, stress, loneliness, and fear that living apart from God’s love and wisdom is filled with. We can always find guidance in the Bible for how to face any circumstance, whether our attitudes our actions – usually both – need to be transformed from what has failed in our lives before coming to know God.

John 1:1-18 NIV: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was

with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John testified concerning him. He cried out, saying, "This is the one I spoke about when I said, 'He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.'") Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.

Jesus came to reveal God to us! This passage is so clear about the fact that Jesus is God, he became a man in order to make God known, and he offers to anyone who believes in him the right to become a child of God. Later we'll learn about how that right is exercised so a person can actually become a child of God, through a new birth given by God. But the focus in this passage is on God's plan being made a reality, that God revealed his nature, his will, and his love for us in the very tangible, physical form of the Son of God becoming like us, teaching both verbally and through his actions. We must know Jesus to know God.

John 17:13-19 NLT: "Now I am coming to you. I told them many things while I was with them in this world so they would be filled with my joy. I have given them your word. And the world hates them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I'm not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one. They do not belong to this world any more than I do. Make them holy by your truth; teach them your word, which is truth. Just as you sent me into the world, I am sending them into the world. And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth."

Jesus accomplished what he came for. He provided the way to live above the worldly plane of life, to be in the world but not of the world. He was at the end of his earthly life and would go to the cross the next day. He is praying here for those he appointed to be apostles – special messengers – because this was during his last meal with them, known as the Last Supper. As we saw when we were reading the account in Matthew earlier, those men didn't inspire confidence that they would be able to carry out the work of God that they were being sent by Jesus to do. But he knew that they would be transformed into bold and courageous and spiritually empowered men by the time he was raised to life and then returned to heaven forty days later.

What is the lesson for us here? We're not apostles, we didn't get to be with Jesus as they did. Their mission was unique, being sent out by Jesus himself to accomplish the huge goal of sharing the truth they had received with whoever would prove to be open to it. He described being filled with joy even though he was preparing to endure being betrayed, arrested, a trial that was rigged, denied by one of his closest friends, beaten, taunted, spit upon, and killed by the most torturous means of execution the Roman government in power there could devise. He talked about them having his joy even though they would be hated by the world. How could that be? There is simply nothing that can compare with the experience of being in a loving, guilt-free, truth-filled relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus showed them and us what is possible when no sin separates one from being a precious child of the one who made us. No matter what our circumstances or struggles may be in this world, we can still experience the kind of joy that Jesus had and that he promises we can have.

When Jesus talks about being "holy," what does he mean? That is a religious jargon word that can easily go over our heads. Holy means "set apart," specifically to stay separate from sin and evil. Jesus was motivated to stay away

from sin because he wanted to be able to do for us what we couldn't do for ourselves. We can't fix the relationship with God that we have destroyed by our choices to distrust and disobey him over and over. Jesus wanted to sacrifice himself so that these men and then everyone else who learned from them – including us – could experience being made holy and feeling the same kind of joy that Jesus felt. Knowing the truth about God and knowing God and being known by God are what Jesus came to earth to make possible for us, and he did accomplish his goal.

Next, we will look at four teachings of Jesus in the book of John that describe characteristics of anyone who is a disciple (follower/learner/apprentice) of him. Each quality has an effect on others because of the transformation from failed human wisdom to the true spiritual wisdom of God experienced by disciples. The changes knowing God produces in the lives of disciples of Jesus will naturally have a drawing, enticing impact on others if they are open to or seeking God. These passages are so profound and reveal the powerful yet simple plan of God for changing the world, one person at a time. Most churches miss this point. If we would catch the vision of God's uncomplicated plan, then we would experience such awe and amazement at how wise and loving our Father in heaven is.

1. John 8:31-32 NLT: ***Jesus said to the people who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."***

This first teaching is a profound if/then/then statement. If we follow the teachings of Jesus, then we'll understand that what he says is true not only in theory but also in experience. And if we follow his teachings and experience the truth and wisdom of what he says, then the amazing effect we'll experience is of being set free. What are we set free from? As we've seen in other Scriptures already, the point of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is to free us from sin and death, and not only from the guilt and punishment for our sin, but from the destructive consequences to ourselves and those whose lives we touch as well. We will focus on this more in the next topic.

Why would we want to and need to simply trust and obey God? Because God is God, and you and I are not God! That's the most basic reason, the theme of the whole Bible. We can't figure out how to live without messing up our lives and the lives of others. This is why we can be so thankful that God has revealed his truth to us:

Isaiah 55:8-9 NLT: ***"My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts," says the Lord. "And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts."***

We don't have to understand why God says what he does before we obey him, because many times we can't understand the wisdom of what he says until we obey him. We are often so arrogant, which is revealed by how we respond to what God says. Whenever we feel or even give in to the temptation to disagree with something that is clearly stated in the Bible, we are proving how prideful we are. We're doing the same thing that the serpent tempted Eve and Adam with, questioning whether God really means what he says and trying to find a way to twist it and rationalize disobeying him by using our own human wisdom to conclude that what he says couldn't be true.

The most glaring example of this human rejection of God's wisdom in our culture and time is regarding his restriction of sexual activity to marriage, and marriage of one man and one woman. We'll see more in the next topic how clear and repeated God's condemnation of sexual immorality is. This topic deserves much more focused attention than most people, and even most churches, give to it. God gave us a great gift of freely expressed sexuality within the safe, secure, committed, romantic love of marriage. As is true of all his plans to bless us with the "rich and satisfying life" that Jesus talked about, we miss the point when we think we know better than he does. Most people don't even bother to find out what he says but instead live on the worldly level of doing what everyone else is doing or doing what feels good at the moment without regard to future consequences. Until we learn of and follow his teachings, we don't know how much we're missing out of experiencing what is indescribably best.

Rather than a negative approach, such as focusing on sex outside of marriage being wrong, we can understand the wisdom of God better by focusing on what is right. After my husband died, I took three years to face and learn from

the reality that my marriage wasn't what God intended and to learn what he meant for me to experience. I had to admit to myself how unhappy, disappointed, and even emotionally abused I had been, which was difficult to face but so necessary for healing and becoming ready to move forward with hope that I might experience someday what I knew I had missed out on. I sought, for the first time in my life, God's teachings about marriage. I was so surprised at how concise yet clear his intentions are for marriage to be happy and romantic for a lifetime, which I have never heard taught in all my years of going to church. Marriage and sexuality in our culture have become huge failures because God's wisdom is not believed or even sought by most people, which results in their experience being the opposite of what God intended and they miss out on what is possible.

The point of touching on this topic of marriage and sexuality here is as a prime example how much higher God's ways are than our ways. We settle for so much less than he created us to experience! If you would like to focus on this subject more, then contact me to request a short piece called "Christian Marriage" that summarizes what the Bible reveals is God's wisdom and intention for marriage as his gift to us.

There are many examples of God's higher ways in contrast to our human way of thinking and acting. There are three good examples in Jesus' teachings that help us see this contrast:

Matthew 6:31-33 NLT: *"So don't worry about these things, saying, 'What will we eat? What will we drink? What will we wear?' These things dominate the thoughts of unbelievers, but your heavenly Father already knows all your needs. Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need."*

This first example shows the contrast between our priorities and what God knows are higher and better priorities. No matter what struggles we go through, financially or in relationships or in any other part of life, when we put seeking God's wisdom for how to go through it, taking one day at a time and not giving in to worry will bring us through every time. Learning this takes time and experiences of God providing in ways we couldn't have imagined, but after so many times in my own life of lessons learned and faith deepened after making it through a time of stress and struggle, I'm thankful that God has promised that putting him first is how life works best.

Matthew 18:15-17 NLT: *"If another believer sins against you, go privately and point out the offense. If the other person listens and confesses it, you have won that person back. But if you are unsuccessful, take one or two others with you and go back again, so that everything you say may be confirmed by two or three witnesses. If the person still refuses to listen, take your case to the church. Then if he or she won't accept the church's decision, treat that person as a pagan or a corrupt tax collector."*

This second example deals with how we naturally react when we have a problem in a relationship in contrast to steps we can and should take within a church fellowship to resolve them and be reconciled if both people are willing to be humble and take responsibility for their part in the rift. Our human thinking is to cut off the relationship or to badmouth the person to others. God's way is to not avoid the conflict but rather face it and work toward resolution and reconciliation. Though the other person may be unwilling to do their part, at least you've tried!

Luke 9:23-26 NLT: *Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels."*

This third example seems paradoxical to our human way of thinking. We see most people grasping for more and more of what this world seems to offer, but no matter how much money, things, prestige, or power they gain, their God-size hole in their lives remains empty. Following Jesus means being a giver rather than a taker, as he was. That doesn't mean we let others use or abuse us or take what isn't wise or best to give to them, because enabling others to indulge in their sinful, taking nature isn't really loving them. Having a giving mindset takes effort and

thoughtfulness, but it is much more fulfilling than having a self-centered, taking focus.

What is the effect of holding to Jesus teachings? It is freedom that is only possible when we know the truth that is revealed by God to us in the Bible. Imagine the impact of that first in our own lives and then in the lives of those we have relationships with. It would be world-changing, one life at a time. If we – and everyone who wants to be a Christian or who claims to be one – were to put even these three teachings of Jesus into practice, imagine how attractive the freedom we’d experience would be to others who may have been turned off to Christianity by bad experiences in their pasts! The Bible is full of practical teachings and examples of the attitudes and actions that God knows are the best way to live, that we can’t figure out on our own. Thank you, God, for revealing how you made a “rich and satisfying life” possible!

2. John 13:34-35 NLT: ***“So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples.”***

In this second teaching, Jesus tells his disciples then and us now to love one another in a godly rather than human way. Jesus gave his disciples the experience of being loved perfectly. He set the example that they could remember and imitate after he was gone back to heaven. And he emphasized that it wouldn’t just be a good thing to do, it would be critical to their mission of teaching the good news to the world. How many people have had bad experiences of being in churches where they didn’t see or feel love among the members and been turned off to what they thought was Christianity? Love for one another has to be obvious and real. Visitors to a church won’t want to participate in fellowship with those who are claiming to be Christians but aren’t loving, and understandably so!

Jesus elaborated more about loving each other a little later in this last time with them:

John 15:9-13 NLT: ***“I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”***

This passage is so encouraging, because in our human thinking, the idea of giving, giving, giving, putting others’ interests before our own seems like it would make us miserable, yet Jesus promises here that the result is being filled with joy to overflowing! This way of living doesn’t come naturally, but whenever we follow his example, we’ll prove by experience that his way is truly best.

What is the effect of loving one another this way? When we’re experiencing relationships with fellow believers that are full of love that can be seen by others, they will be drawn to God by wanting to experience that love, too, and by the credibility that love gives to the message about Jesus.

3. John 15:4-8 NIV: ***“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”***

In this third teaching, Jesus promises that we can experience our lives having a great effect on others. What does Jesus mean when he says to “remain” in him? Other translations say “abide in me,” “dwell in me,” “stay united with me,” “stay joined to me,” “live in me,” which paint a picture of staying inside of and always aware of the presence of God as we go about our lives. As we read earlier, when we are in a relationship with God, we “participate in the divine nature,” which implies more than a relationship; the very nature of our being is transformed from merely human – with all of our weaknesses and inability to understand spiritual truths – into

beings who can think and feel and act like God does because his nature literally flows into us, just as life flows through a vine into the branches through their connection to and dependence on the vine.

What does he mean when he says those who remain in him will bear fruit? There are several verses that help us understand what he must have meant.

Philippians 1:21-22 NLT: ***For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better.***

Paul said this, explaining that his motivation was to spread the good news about what Jesus has done for us. He wanted his efforts to be successful, of course, which is one form of bearing fruit, being “fruitful.”

Mark 1:16-18 NLT: ***One day as Jesus was walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew throwing a net into the water, for they fished for a living. Jesus called out to them, “Come, follow me, and I will show you how to fish for people!” And they left their nets at once and followed him.***

Jesus is just beginning his public ministry here as he invited Simon (who Jesus nicknamed Peter later) and his brother Andrew to become his disciples, leave their fishing nets behind, to do a new kind of fishing, for people to be brought into a relationship with God. Just as an apple tree produces apples, so do Christians produce other Christians. God has invited us to be his fellow workers in this world, a great privilege and responsibility. (For more about this subject, see the booklet *New Purpose! Christ's Ambassadors*.)

Galatians 5:22-23 NLT: ***But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things!***

Another way disciples of Jesus bear fruit is in character qualities that are like God. An amazing promise made to those who believe in Jesus and are reborn spiritually is that God himself, the Holy Spirit, will come to live in us, which is how we “participate in the divine nature.” We experience being transformed more and more as we continue to learn about God and put what we learn into practice, with a mindset of prayerful dependence on God to help us. As we become more and more like God by experiencing the fruit of the Spirit being produced in our lives, we will want to share the good news about this new life with whoever may be open to understanding their own need for what God promises to all people.

This kind of fruit produces fruitful work for Christ. When people can see godly qualities in us, they may be more open to learning how they can experience them, too. And as others are brought into a relationship with God by the work of disciples, even more open or seeking people will be attracted to want to learn about Jesus' life and teachings, too.

What is the effect of bearing fruit? God will draw others to himself through our lives, which produces an indescribable joy that God wants every child of his to experience!

4. John 17:20-23 NLT: ***“I am praying not only for these disciples but also for all who will ever believe in me through their message. I pray that they will all be one, just as you and I are one—as you are in me, Father, and I am in you. And may they be in us so that the world will believe you sent me. I have given them the glory you gave me, so they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me. May they experience such perfect unity that the world will know that you sent me and that you love them as much as you love me.”***

This fourth teaching of Jesus is so challenging! It is the most explained-away passage in modern Christendom, which is so disunified and the opposite of oneness. The question is, did Jesus' prayer fail? Is unity impossible? Most people assume so. But that can't be! Jesus prayed for it, and it's so necessary to proving to the world that Jesus was sent by the Father and that we are loved by him. Obviously most people claiming to be Christians don't believe this Scripture to be possible. That is one of Satan's most important goals, to undermine the hope of oneness and unity among believers in Jesus. He would seem to be very successful, and many people are turned off to Christianity because of that. But my perspective is that any who can be tempted to give up on this obvious goal of

Jesus and of the Father are revealing their own lack of humility and submission to God. They have chosen to disbelieve Jesus and they will miss out on what Jesus offers to those who believe in him and who believe him.

We are, fortunately, told what kind of attitude, effort, and truths will make unity possible:

Ephesians 4:1-6 NIV: *As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*

Why is there not unity and oneness among believers? The blame doesn't belong to God, it falls on anyone who doesn't follow the clear and wise words of God. I want to be part of the solution and not part of the problem. I hope to find others who also long to experience what God says is possible if we humbly follow his teachings and put them into practice. It's not really complicated or confusing. If we begin at the beginning with learning these foundational truths and then continue to grow and transform as God promises to help us do, we can experience the answer to Jesus' prayer.

What is the effect of unity and oneness with other believers? It will prove to the world that Jesus is the Son of God and that God loves him and loves us, and that he loves and wants a relationship with everyone else, too.

All four of these lessons were taught to Jesus' apostles in his last hours with them. They were the specially-appointed disciples who would be the authoritative teachers and leaders of the believers after Jesus returned to his Father in heaven. The timing is very significant. All he had taught them and shown them in his three years with them is brought into focus and is a summary of the vision he needed to impart to them so they could carry on his work with clarity, and even with simplicity. If churches were to keep these four lessons in focus, there wouldn't be a need for artificial programs and complicated plans and structures. Those things are conspicuously absent from the Bible, and surely that was true for a reason.

After learning more about who Jesus is and about these characteristics of being a disciple of his that had such a huge impact on the world back then, as we'll see more about later, we need to first of all decide if we want to become a disciple of Jesus also! So, let's get practical and see how to pursue either beginning or continuing in God's will.

Acts 17:11-12 NIV: *Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. As a result, many of them believed, as did also a number of prominent Greek women and many Greek men.*

The context of these verses is that Paul (who was an apostle by special appointment by God after Jesus had returned to heaven) had been attacked in Thessalonica by Jews who were unwilling to believe that Jesus really is the Messiah. He left there and went to Berea and found more humble, teachable, open-minded people. They are a great example to us of the needed balance between hoping the message is true but at the same time being responsible for being sure our beliefs and convictions are the truth God has revealed and not the human wisdom of teachers who aren't really serving God. Their example is of what I think of as the "three E's" – eagerness, examine, every day. They had a "trust but verify" approach to what Paul was teaching and believed because they could see for themselves that Jesus was the Messiah foretold in their Scriptures (our Old Testament) as Paul would have taught them.

We have the further advantage now of having the New Testament Scriptures that record the life and teachings of Jesus and the establishment and growth of Jesus' church, and we have convenient access to them with many smart phone apps and websites that enable us to keep the Bible with us wherever we go. Study helps such as many different translations with easy comparison tools, Bible reading plans, audio narration, and Bible reference tools make learning God's revealed will so much easier nowadays. So, the first step in seeking to know God and be

known by God is to learn his will directly from our own reading and studying of the Bible. Obviously I hope my writings will be helpful to people, but my great hope is that readers will follow the example of these Bereans and will eagerly examine the Scriptures every day to see if what I've stated is true, because even if it is true, each person must have his or her own confidence that it is believed because of what they see for themselves in his word. That is the path to the unity Jesus prayed for, too, that when we all go directly to the Bible instead of believing human teachers who may lead us astray, we can experience the indescribable sense of fellowship only possible among those who get their own ideas and prideful human ways of thinking out of the way.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 NLT: *All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.*

Along with reading and studying the Bible proactively and consistently, the point of doing that is to learn what God's will and wisdom is about how life was designed to work. In everything we go through, more and more we will develop the habit of asking, "What does God say about this?" What guidance does the Bible give for my attitudes and actions, what is right, to be pursued, and wrong, to be avoided? Over time, it's easier and easier to discern God's wiser and better practical ways of living. There is a lot to learn, a lot of correcting and teaching and equipping needed. But if we keep our focus not on how far we have yet to go to become like God but instead on how far we've come as we keep moving forward toward God, every stage of life can be encouraging and even exciting. Even when I'm going through hard times, I remind myself of how much I'll be able to see I've learned and grown when I get through it. I want to be the "good soil" that Jesus taught about, in it for the long haul and fruitful in my love and service for God.

Matthew 7:24-27 NIV: *"Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash."*

The point of listening to Jesus' words is to know how to build a life that will weather all the storms of life and not get destroyed by them. Building always starts with laying a solid foundation, and that is the aim of this booklet. So many people go to church their whole lives yet have never sought the answers to these foundational questions in the Bible. I hope you are feeling the thrill of starting to see how the pieces of the Bible puzzle fit together, how interrelated every book of the Bible is and how unified the minds and hearts of the first Christians were as they were taught and shepherded by the apostles who laid the foundations of truth for all time.

Ephesians 2:19-20 NLT: *You are citizens along with all of God's holy people. You are members of God's family. Together, we are his house, built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets. And the cornerstone is Christ Jesus himself.*

Paul here was writing to believers who were not Jews, encouraging them to appreciate how great it is to be in God's family, and he reminds them and us of the role of the apostles in laying the foundations of truth that we can have confidence in. God used those men to provide the Bible for us, and we can build our lives on that foundation.

John 4:23-24 NLT: *"But the time is coming—indeed it's here now—when true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. The Father is looking for those who will worship him that way. For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth."*

Jesus here provides the balanced perspective we need to have. Some people focus on learning the truths in the Bible but it seems to stay in their heads without changing their hearts. Others approach the Bible with a focus on the heart, on being sincere and on feelings about God. I'm thankful Jesus helps us understand that worshiping God involves both our heads – our minds and intellect – and our hearts – our emotions and motivations of love for God and others. Head knowledge alone leads to making the Bible a list of rules to follow, but the lesson of the Old

Testament is that we can't succeed in doing that. And sincerity and emotional tenderness without the truth God tells us so clearly can lead to being deceived into thinking we're right with God when we're not. We can be sincere but wrong, just as we can be right but cold and heartless. Neither is true worship.

1 Timothy 4:16 NLT: *Keep a close watch on how you live and on your teaching. Stay true to what is right for the sake of your own salvation and the salvation of those who hear you.*

This verse sums up and is a good conclusion to this second foundation of knowing God's will. The point of learning it is to do it and to experience life as God has so graciously revealed his instructions, his heart, his love, his longing for us to be in a relationship with him. And when we live as he reveals is best, it affects not only our own lives but the lives of everyone within the sphere of our lives. And that is truly "a rich and satisfying life!"

Foundation 3. Know Myself – "Why do I need help from God?"

What keeps me from being close to God? What barriers do I put up by giving in to my desires and going against his will? What is my sinful nature? What does it mean to repent?

God is holy and perfect and cannot be united with sin. That truth is the starting point for understanding why we needed Jesus to sacrifice his life for ours, to substitute his perfect life for our sinful, imperfect lives. If this isn't understood, then we'll never understand, much less appreciate, how amazing God's plan is for bringing us back into a relationship with him.

Isaiah 59:1-2 NLT: *Listen! The Lord's arm is not too weak to save you, nor is his ear too deaf to hear you call. It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore.*

Sin is the problem, the barrier between us and God. We separate ourselves from God. God knew we'd choose to disobey him and not even live up to our own human morals and he planned the way for us to be forgiven and be able to come back into a relationship with him.

1 John 1:5-6 NLT: *This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth.*

This description of God as light helps us understand the impossibility of sinful people having any relationship with him. Just as darkness can't exist in the presence of light, it's illogical and impossible to think that when we are ignoring, disregarding, or outright disobeying God's true nature and will that we could still relate to him. In human relationships we all understand the concept of compatibility or incompatibility. When two people have nothing in common, share no interests, have opposite beliefs or opinions about important aspects of life, then there can be no real relationship. That analogy falls short, though, because with other people we may be able to limit our interactions to the areas we may agree on and keep the rest off-limits. But with God, we can't have that kind of limited relationship. We're either all in or all out. That theme is repeated over and over in most if not all books of the Bible.

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

What "payment" do we receive from the sin we indulge in? Is it happiness and a great life? No, it is death. The contrast with eternal life makes it clear that the death is spiritual, not physical though we all do eventually die physically, of course. We may become open to facing our spiritually dead state if our sins produce consequences that are painful or obvious, but many people – in fact most people – go through life either oblivious to their spiritual deadness or they avoid the self-examination and humility that would enable them to face the true state of their spirit. Sin kills. When we sin, we murder our relationship with God, and we have no power to bring it back to life. It's permanent. That's why the news that God offers to give us new life thanks to what Jesus did for us is so

great!

We must understand the bad news to be able to appreciate the good news. So many people wrongly presume that because God loves us, he will just overlook our sin or tell us, “That’s OK, don’t worry about it,” like we sometimes do when someone sins against us. We know we have our own sins and it feels wrong to expect more of others than we can live up to. But God is sinless and perfect, and his holiness can’t be compromised. If we minimize the seriousness of sin, we end up cheapening the cost of Jesus’ life that was the only solution to the separation we cause between us and God.

James 1:13-15 NLT: ***And remember, when you are being tempted, do not say, “God is tempting me.” God is never tempted to do wrong, and he never tempts anyone else. Temptation comes from our own desires, which entice us and drag us away. These desires give birth to sinful actions. And when sin is allowed to grow, it gives birth to death.***

Temptation isn’t talked about much nowadays, but the great challenge of life is to spot when we’re experiencing temptation so we can resist giving in to it. We tend to just give in without a fight when we feel any temptation, then we rationalize away any guilt we may feel with the trite excuse that we’re only human, after all. We can’t even imagine being focused on consistently spotting and resisting temptation! The point of these verses is that we need to take responsibility for why we sin, that our own desires to feel the thrill of getting whatever we want at the moment are the source of temptation. My temptations come from *my* desires, *I* choose to follow them, and *I* am responsible for my choices. Until each of us face and accept that responsibility, we’ll miss out on the better life that God wants us to experience.

Hebrews 2:18 NIV: ***Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.***

Jesus was tempted just as we are, and he resisted giving in every time, which is why he was qualified to take on the punishment we deserve; he had no sin of his own to be punished for, yet he was willing to take our guilt on himself, because he loves us and wants us to experience the closeness with God that he has always – except when he died for us – experienced.

Paul stated something that has been a conscious goal in my own life for a long time:

2 Corinthians 10:5 NLT: ***We use God’s mighty weapons, not worldly weapons, to knock down the strongholds of human reasoning and to destroy false arguments. We destroy every proud obstacle that keeps people from knowing God. We capture their rebellious thoughts and teach them to obey Christ.***

Paul was one of the apostles Jesus chose to be his special messengers to establish his church with the truth revealed to them by God directly. Here he is describing the big job he had in trying to help people overcome their human filters and be able to see and understand that truth. NIV says, in verse 5b: ***We take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.*** This translation seems to make a more general statement of the need to capture our thoughts so we can resist temptation and obey God. Before we can hope to help others learn to obey Christ, we have to do it ourselves! Paul was a great example of proactively practicing what he preached.

Galatians 5:17,19-21 NLT: ***The sinful nature wants to do evil, which is just the opposite of what the Spirit wants. And the Spirit gives us desires that are the opposite of what the sinful nature desires. These two forces are constantly fighting each other, so you are not free to carry out your good intentions. ... When you follow the desires of your sinful nature, the results are very clear: sexual immorality, impurity, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, drunkenness, wild parties, and other sins like these. Let me tell you again, as I have before, that anyone living that sort of life will not inherit the Kingdom of God.***

This passage describes what happens when we don't resist temptation. All the sinful acts listed are symptoms of giving in to the desires we all have. Even when we have the good intentions to not do these things, we are simply too weak to resist them every time. We may do some and not others, and may even feel superior to others who commit different sins than we do, but we're really all in the same predicament. We all want to feel the immediate gratification of these desires, so we give in. Then we are guilty of distrusting and disobeying God. We prove that we think we know better than him or that we don't care what he says. There is no relationship with him when we prove how incompatible we are with him.

Every temptation arises from some twisting of what is true, just as we've repeatedly pointed out in the example of Adam and Eve believing the serpent that God didn't really mean they'd die, they'd actually become **"like God, knowing good and evil"** (Genesis 3:4-5). We have a rationalization for every sin we commit as we decide to give in to each temptation. We'll see later the good news of hope and victory God offers, but let's look first at more specifics about sin. Our sin and God's solution to it is the point of the Bible, so we need to do very specific and personal self-examination. Each of us has a sinful human nature, but we each are more vulnerable to some temptations than others. We need to know our own weaknesses so we can be more aware of when and how we're tempted.

In addition to the specific list of sins in Galatians 5 above, there are three other passages that spell out what giving into the desires of our sinful natures looks like:

Romans 1:18-32 NLT: ***But God shows his anger from heaven against all sinful, wicked people who suppress the truth by their wickedness. They know the truth about God because he has made it obvious to them. For ever since the world was created, people have seen the earth and sky. Through everything God made, they can clearly see his invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature. So they have no excuse for not knowing God.***

Yes, they knew God, but they wouldn't worship him as God or even give him thanks. And they began to think up foolish ideas of what God was like. As a result, their minds became dark and confused. Claiming to be wise, they instead became utter fools. And instead of worshiping the glorious, ever-living God, they worshiped idols made to look like mere people and birds and animals and reptiles.

So God abandoned them to do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. They traded the truth about God for a lie. So they worshiped and served the things God created instead of the Creator himself, who is worthy of eternal praise! Amen. That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other. And the men, instead of having normal sexual relations with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men, and as a result of this sin, they suffered within themselves the penalty they deserved.

Since they thought it foolish to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their foolish thinking and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.

This is a bold and challenging passage, one that is often explained away by supporters of homosexuality being normalized, as is true in our culture now to the point of accepting and even encouraging homosexuals marrying one another. We need to not miss the main point here, which is that everyone really knows that God is real, that the world proves his existence because it's obvious that a Creator designed and made everything so perfectly and intricately, and the denial of the reality of God arises from rebellious refusal to submit to him because of indulgence in sin. We can see so much of what is described here in our culture, to the point of brazenly and proudly "claiming to be wise." God has made us with the freedom to choose whether to submit to him and reap the benefits of living as he created us to live, the "rich and satisfying life" Jesus came to make possible, or to reject God's truth and follow our own human wisdom, doomed to fail in this life and spiritually dead forever.

We need to focus on homosexuality briefly. It is a sin, no different from any other sin we see listed here and in the other verses we'll read. God created male and female as his perfect design for marital union. Temptation to indulge in sexual activities with someone of the same sex is a good example of how we so often confuse the temptation with the sin. We assume that someone who feels sexual attraction to someone of the same sex is therefore homosexual. But that temptation is no different from the temptation to indulge in sexual activity outside of marriage with someone of the opposite sex. Sexual desire is a natural part of how we're created, and God reveals to us in the Bible how to express that desire in either the right and good boundaries of marriage or the wrong and sinful way outside of those boundaries. In neither homosexual nor heterosexual temptation does our human logic that it's perfectly fine to do sexual things make it right or not sinful. But in order to understand the "why" of God's instructions about sexual union being reserved for marriage of a man and a woman, one must have a humble, teachable openness to accepting and obeying what God says even if the reason he says it isn't understood at first. So, one's response to the various verses about homosexuality being wrong is often a revealing discerning tool that exposes one's underlying attitude toward God and toward the truth he has revealed in the Bible.

How a Christian treats someone who has indulged in homosexual sin needs to be the same as how one treats someone who indulges in heterosexual sin. Neither is more sinful or harmful to our relationship with God than the other, and both need to be repented of and forgiven so they can experience sexual fulfillment as God intended for our happiness and pleasure within marriage to one of the opposite sex. And in both cases, until the person becomes seeking of or at least open to learning and following God's truths, he or she won't be willing or able to understand the wisdom of God's way. The starting point for helping them must be as with anyone else, showing love and care and extending invitations to join in opportunities for Bible study and gatherings of Christians where they can experience the drawing effect of the qualities of discipleship that Jesus said would have God's intended impact on them and on the world.

We can see so many of the sins listed here and in the rest of the verses below in our age of social media and 24/7 news from many, many sources. The internet has enabled endless possibilities to "invent new ways of sinning." Who hasn't experienced phishing, scams, identity theft, cyber-crime, spam calls, dating app fake profiles, fake news, propaganda, and most recently the FTX crypto currency fraud? The list could go on and on. The internet has also given more power to the few over the many, where a few tech billionaires can censor or control what is allowed to be communicated on their platforms, and where government elites can collude with business elites to the point of shutting down freedoms and mandating medical actions. We have experienced unprecedented "inventing of evil" in just the past couple of years. My hope and prayer is that more people may become alert to their need to turn to God for the truth and answers that this world so obviously can't provide.

Colossians 3:5-9 NLT: So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual immorality, impurity, lust, and evil desires. Don't be greedy, for a greedy person is an idolater, worshiping the things of this world. Because of these sins, the anger of God is coming. You used to do these things when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behavior, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old sinful nature and all its wicked deeds.

God makes clear to us what is wrong, and these sins arouse his anger, as we saw also in Romans 1:18 above. Our human wisdom tempts us to focus on God's love, as we've seen in Jesus dying for us, and ignore or explain away his anger. Most other translations use the word "wrath," which may be easier to distinguish from our human concept of unjustified or self-centered anger that we may experience when we react to someone or something with a flash of rage. God's wrath is just as real as his love, and seems to me to flow from that love. Who hasn't felt righteous anger at seeing someone maliciously hurt someone else or even an animal? We can feel on some scale what God does, who made us in his image with the ability to think as he thinks, feel as he feels, act as he acts and love as he loves, all with the guidance of his revealed will in the Bible and the help of his Spirit, as we'll learn later.

These verses were written to admonish Christians, who have already repented and turned to God, who have been born again and need to repent of any sin not yet repented of. The encouraging part of this passage is that Paul, the

writer, appeals to what surely must be a sincere desire in every disciple of Jesus to quit sinning and experience the amazing opportunity to think and act more and more as Jesus showed us about the mind and heart of God.

2 Timothy 3:1-5 NLT: *You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly. Stay away from people like that!*

This sounds like so many people in our culture and world nowadays! Are we in the “last days,” then? In the sense that we live in the last age or dispensation revealed by God, since the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the establishment of his church until the day of judgment at the end of and destruction of the world foretold, yes. Some people think the last days means the actual end of the world, but we aren’t told when that day will come, only to be ready for it. So please don’t miss the point of this passage, that the more people who reject God and his wisdom, the more sin and suffering will be rampant in the world. As our culture has become less religious and more secular, it’s not surprising that the selfishness and pride and blatant choices to sin would hurt many people.

What makes me sad is that it’s not surprising that so many people reject what they see claimed to be Christianity that is powerless to produce godliness. Why is it powerless? So much religion is based on human wisdom or human effort and not truly the powerful experience of being born again and being transformed from the inside as is God’s true plan for his church and his people. What I describe as Churchianity seems to be based on the common motto of “Go to the church of your choice” rather than “Be a part of the church of God’s design.” With thousands of different denominations now, there are religious organizations to appeal to whatever people are looking for, even if they’re not really looking for what the Bible describes. In fact, as has been said earlier, it’s hard to know how to go about looking for a church that is truly trying to follow the teachings of the Bible. If foundational teachings such as we’re learning about here are not taught, then there may be many people who have never even become a Christian, who go to church and assume they are one but have never been born again as the Bible clearly instructs, that we’ll learn about in the next topic. Being religious without being given new birth by God is powerless.

As we’ve learned of specific sinful acts in these lists, the important and needed step each person must take is to use these lists as tools for very specific and honest self-examination. The next verses we’ll look at answer the question of what repentance is and why it’s so important and necessary. Before we move on to that, though, please take some time to re-read these passages about sin and be honest with yourself and God. Repentance needs to be specific to our own sinful nature and weaknesses we’ve given into.

Also, please ponder if you’ve had any of these sin-related experiences: Abortion, abuse (abuser or abused), divorce, eating disorders, grudges, incest or rape, substance abuse, or anything else you may wonder about. Many people struggle with feeling worthy of God’s love and forgiveness or they feel trapped in a cycle of giving in to temptations that they wish they could break but feel hopeless that it’s possible. Whether you have been a victim or a perpetrator of any of these related experiences, please be encouraged and hopeful that with the help of God through his word, the Bible, and his Spirit who lives in every person who is born again, as well as with the encouragement and love of other Christians, victory over sin and shame and addiction is possible!

Now, on to some good news! Repentance doesn’t seem like it would be good news, but it is!

Acts 3:19 NIV: *Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord.*

Repentance is good news because it makes possible the “refreshing” from God that we all need. God has done his part, and our response to what he has done begins with our repentance from our sinful patterns of life. What does

repentance look like? Paul helps us understand the difference of heart that will make us sorry in the right way:

2 Corinthians 7:8-11 NLT: ***I am not sorry that I sent that severe letter to you, though I was sorry at first, for I know it was painful to you for a little while. Now I am glad I sent it, not because it hurt you, but because the pain caused you to repent and change your ways. It was the kind of sorrow God wants his people to have, so you were not harmed by us in any way. For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death. Just see what this godly sorrow produced in you! Such earnestness, such concern to clear yourselves, such indignation, such alarm, such longing to see me, such zeal, and such a readiness to punish wrong. You showed that you have done everything necessary to make things right.***

Godly sorrow shows in attitude and action. Paul had written a letter to the Corinthian Christians to rebuke them for tolerating a specific sin in their midst that they shouldn't have. His praise for their response to his letter literally goes to the heart of the matter. They felt godly sorrow for what they had done – the “cut to the heart” facing of their guilt. Godly sorrow leads to repentance, which is a turning away from sin, going in the opposite direction. The word “repent” means to change one's mind, to think differently about something, which will naturally lead to a change in one's actions. In this example, their humble and sincere desire to do God's will helped them to be open to the correction of Paul's letter, and Paul could see the evidence of their godly sorrow in their response. Worldly sorrow lacks repentance, he says, and the reason for that is the lack of self-examination and acceptance of guilt. The difference can be described as admitting wrong with worldly sorrow vs. confessing wrong with godly sorrow. That's why self-examination that is honest and humble is so necessary to beginning and continuing a relationship with God. Worldly sorrow is self-protective, often blaming others or circumstances, and it's the usual reaction to being caught doing something wrong. None of us enjoy having our sin exposed, which is why so much evil is done in secret, often with deliberate efforts to hide our actions.

There are many seeming paradoxes in the Bible where what God says doesn't make sense to our human way of thinking. There is a paradox here, that openly confessing we've sinned is better than hiding what we've done. When we've been caught doing something wrong or hurtful, our natural reaction is to minimize it, blame someone else, or even try to deny it. But God tells us that feeling sorrow over our sin and repenting of it is good for us. If you've ever been caught hiding a sin, you may be able to understand the relief of not having to pretend you're better than you are. Even if you've been punished as a result, that's better than feeling dishonest and secretive. So the great benefit of being sorrowful about our sin, honest with God and with people who love God about it, and repenting of it is that it leads to forgiveness and the “times of refreshing” rather than the punishment we had feared. We all have faced the truth about ourselves in some way, big or small, in relationships with other people. Sometimes that may have led to a break in the relationship when the other couldn't forgive us. But when someone has been willing to forgive us, we're so relieved and thankful. So, on a small scale, most of us have some experience with being forgiven. The challenge is to understand how our repeated sin against God has destroyed our relationship with him, that we have no way to fix it, and then to grasp how amazing it is that God himself made the way to be forgiven through the sacrifice Jesus made for us to have our relationship with him restored. Godly sorrow is so necessary and so good because it will produce the repentance from the heart that must happen as the first proactive step in turning to God for his times of refreshing.

Please take some time to focus again on the sins and weaknesses you identified earlier. Do you feel the godly sorrow Paul described that will lead to repentance? Do you feel alarm, earnestness, determination to not hide or minimize it or blame others? A good test of humility and godly sorrow is whether you are willing to be open and honest with one or more Christians who you know care for you and want to help you in your relationship with God. Please contact me if you would like to talk to me or get help finding someone near you to talk to. I'd love to offer whatever help may be possible.

Ephesians 4:22-24 NIV: ***You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new***

self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.

Repentance is a lifelong process, not a one-time event. It's a process of replacing old habits of doing what feels good at the time that may be sinful according to God's definitions with new habits that we want to do as we learn and understand the wisdom of God's way of living. The only way to make real and permanent changes is to change how we think about life, motivated from within from our heart's desire to be like God and making choices that seem to be best according to biblical instructions and examples. Jesus' death and resurrection put an end to the Old Covenant external way of trying to follow the law given through Moses in the Old Testament and the New Covenant way of serving God from the heart began. We won't go into that here, but later I hope you will read the booklet about it, called ***New Life! The New Covenant Paradigm***, which is an important but rarely taught truth that should shape our perspective on living the new life God offers to give us.

Titus 2:11-14 NIV: For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.

These verses show us the right attitude to have about sin when we have made our decision to repent and turn to God. When we appreciate the mercy and forgiveness that he graciously gives to us, we naturally want to say "No" to the sins we participated in before learning about Jesus Christ dying for us to "redeem" us. What does that mean? He paid the price to buy us back for God, to put it in humanly understandable terms. As we read earlier, "the wages of sin is death." Jesus took on himself that death and he gave up his life to buy us back. He accepted the payment of our dreadful wages so we wouldn't have to. It's hard to describe the substitution of Jesus' life for ours in human terms because we often reduce it to a transaction that seems to minimize how costly it was. But if we truly appreciate what Jesus did for us, we'll have the motivation to become more and more godly – like God – and "eager to do what is good." We'll understand that what God tells us to do is always good, and as we do it, then we'll experience why it's good and we'll also experience the freedom Jesus promised to those who hold to his teachings.

Acts 2:36-37 NIV: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah." When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?"

Being cut to the heart leads us to ask, as did these people in response to Peter's first message after Jesus returned to heaven, "What shall I do?" They were desperate for a solution, and at this point they had no reason to hope that there was one. They had been told they missed the point completely about who Jesus was, to the point of killing him instead of worshipping him. We all have likewise missed the point about who Jesus is and how much we need what he did for us. But we've heard over and over that Jesus died for us, so it's easy to take it for granted and hard to feel cut to the heart personally for our own sin and our need for what he did. The question that must be answered with a sincere and humble "Yes!" before we go on to the next foundational topic is, "Am I cut to the heart about my own sin and grateful for the price Jesus paid to redeem me?" Then the promise that we can be born again and start fresh spiritually will be great news!

Foundation 4. Know God's Gift of New Birth – "How do I begin a relationship with God?"

God offers me a new start—forgiveness and power and a relationship with Him—by participating in Jesus' death, burial and resurrection, to live a new life following the Spirit and not the sinful nature!

Before we look at the Scriptures on this subject, please prepare yourself for being open to whatever you may learn that you've never been exposed to before. Most churches don't ask and therefore don't answer this question of

how to begin a relationship with God. Some have their own traditions that bring infants into church membership, so as those children grow up they are led to believe that they are already Christians and they don't see the need to ask and find biblical answers. Other churches simply assume that anyone who is attending church services regularly and wants to be a Christian is one and they don't raise the question to members about when and how they believe they became a Christian. Other churches teach that confessing faith in Jesus is how to become a Christian or that saying a prayer is when one's relationship with God begins. When I was a teenager and had the opportunity to be exposed to many different kinds of churches, these different teachings about how to become a Christian were confusing but I'm thankful that at that young age I realized that I had to be responsible to know what I believe and why I believe it from what I could see for myself in the Bible. After over fifty years of being on my personal quest to learn God's revealed truth, I'm thankful for every opportunity to learn more. There is a balance between being confident of what one already knows is true and yet open to learning more as opportunities arise.

The question we need to ask ourselves is, "Where am I now in my relationship with God?" There is no gray area, no room for uncertainty or wishful thinking or hope that one is a Christian. The Bible speaks so clearly about this, and it's so necessary to be sure we have become a Christian according to what God tells us about it. One can't *be* a Christian until and unless one has *become* a Christian. Have you become a Christian? If so, how did that take place? Are you open to the possibility that what you believed about it may not be the biblical way to be born again?

1 Peter 2:9-10 NIV: *But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.*

There is no gray area in our relationship with God. We're either in spiritual darkness or spiritual light. These verses emphasize that contrast, and we need to face the seriousness of the bad news of being in darkness/not a people/not received mercy before we can truly appreciate being in his wonderful light/the people of God/received mercy. We already looked at Romans 5:6-11 about how in our sinful state we are powerless enemies of God. We need to become reconciled to God. When and how does that happen?

An idea that may be helpful, before we go on to look at the Scriptures that answer that question, is to draw a timeline and write on it, from your understanding right now, the significant spiritual events of your life so far. It can be helpful to see what you've been taught and experienced about having a relationship with God. Then later you can compare it with what you see in the Bible. Examples of what may be noted on the timeline are when you began to believe in Jesus, when you believe you became a Christian if you do already believe that, and any church rituals such as baptism, confirmation, placing membership in a church. As you do this, stop to ask yourself what your understanding was about any teaching you remember from the Bible at the time.

Birth-----Now

As we saw in the verse above, there is a point in time when we go from "darkness" to "his wonderful light," from "not a people" to "the people of God" and from "not received mercy" to "have received mercy." Jesus talked in terms of being born again or born from above, an event that would be memorable and a turning point for our lives.

John 1:10-13 NLT: *He came into the very world he created, but the world didn't recognize him. He came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God.*

The apostle John stated up front here that the point of Jesus coming into the world was to make it possible for whoever would believe in him to be given the right to receive the spiritual birth that only God can give. These verses are often misunderstood because they are read through filters of what some churches teach incorrectly or what we assume or want to be true. What did Jesus give to those who believed and accepted him? He gave "the

right to become children of God.” So, believing in him is not the new birth in itself, it grants the believer the right to be born again. Do you believe in Jesus? Then you have the right to be born again! That is good news, but it’s not the whole story. This Scripture doesn’t tell us how or when that new birth is experienced.

John 3:3-7 NLT: *Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God.” “What do you mean?” exclaimed Nicodemus. “How can an old man go back into his mother’s womb and be born again?” Jesus replied, “I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. So don’t be surprised when I say, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it wants. Just as you can hear the wind but can’t tell where it comes from or where it is going, so you can’t explain how people are born of the Spirit.”*

Here again early in the Book of John and early in Jesus’ public ministry, he teaches Nicodemus, and us, the necessity of being born from God, but he doesn’t tell us yet how that is done. Keep in mind that Jesus was laying foundations here for the message that would be preached after he was crucified and raised to life and went back to heaven. The question of when and how one is born again will be answered then.

Matthew 26:28 NLT: *“...for this is my blood, which confirms the covenant between God and his people. It is poured out as a sacrifice to forgive the sins of many.*

At the last supper that we’ve looked at before, Jesus taught his disciples a new ritual that they were to practice and which we continue to practice, which we call “Communion” or “the Lord’s Supper” or “the Eucharist.” As he passed a cup of wine to them, he explained the meaning they were to ascribe to it, that it represents and should remind them of his blood that he was hours away from shedding on the cross. Jesus’ blood was the physical sacrifice that was a necessary part of God’s requirements.

Hebrews 9:12 NIV: *He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.*

Hebrews 9 goes into greater depth, reminding the Jews it was written to about the Old Covenant sacrifices of animals that they understood to be foreshadowing the Messiah to come who would shed his own blood. The whole chapter is meaningful but the transition from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is a topic you can study in more depth in the booklet ***New Life! The New Covenant Paradigm*** that has been mentioned earlier.

Colossians 1:19-22 NLT: *For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.*

Again Jesus’ blood is stated to be the means of reconciliation with God. There was no other way for us, God’s enemies, to be at peace with God, for the separation from him caused by our sin to be forgiven. These verses raise an important question: If Jesus died for everyone, to make “peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross,” is everyone reconciled to God? When does the blood he shed for everyone apply to a specific person? When does someone benefit personally from Jesus dying for him or her? Let’s go back to the first sermon, preached by Peter to whom Jesus had given the “keys of the kingdom of heaven,” to where we left off as some who heard it were so deeply convicted of how they had missed the point of who Jesus was and why he had died.

Acts 2:36-41 NLT: *“So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!” Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, “Brothers, what should we do?” Peter replied, “Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be*

baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.” Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, “Save yourselves from this crooked generation!” Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all.

There are important questions to ask ourselves at this point:

Am I pierced to the heart about my own sins that in reality required Jesus’ death on the cross, just as Peter told these people they were responsible for?

Is Jesus *my* Lord (master/ruler)? Will he be both Lord and Messiah/Savior to *me*?

“*What shall I do?*” Am I ready to exercise the right to become a child of God granted to me because of my faith in Jesus and receive new birth from God? Will I be willing to do whatever the Bible tells me to do to receive it?

What is the answer announced by Peter to this question? ***“Repent ... and be baptized ... for the forgiveness of your sins ... Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”*** That day was an amazing milestone, the first ones to become children of God through the instructions of Jesus’ apostles were born again as Jesus taught was necessary in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3. They were ***“born of water and the Spirit.”*** So now we know that new birth is experienced by those who believe in Jesus when they repent and are baptized, which simply means immersion in water. No one disputes that baptism in the time of Jesus and of the apostles was done by immersion in water or that the act had spiritual meaning. Baptism is the Anglicized transliteration of the Greek word *baptisma* which simply means immersion, so whenever you read the word baptism, try substituting immersion to deepen your understanding. Baptism is a meaningless word in and of itself in Churchianity because many churches put their own meaning on it that the members may not know is an inaccurate translation.

Romans 6:1-8 NLT: ***Well then, should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of his wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined him in his death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised to life as he was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with him.***

Baptism is described here as the experience of being spiritually dead, being buried in the water as a spiritual grave, being joined with Christ Jesus in the water where his death applies personally to us at that point in time, and being raised up from that watery grave as spiritually reborn and adopted into God’s family as his dear child. When I was immersed into Christ, Jesus took my sin and guilt and gave me his righteousness! God’s amazing plan of substitution came true for me. I’m so thankful for that historical experience on Tuesday, August 13th, 1974, that I can think back on to remind myself and be reassured of when my right to be born again which my faith in Jesus Christ gave to me was exercised and I was given new birth by God.

The important question about how to become a Christian centers on when and how the free gift of eternal life offered by God is received by us. Every gift that is extended is received by something we do, but what we do to receive a gift from someone is passive and doesn’t alter the nature of what is being received; nothing we do implies that we are deserving of or earning the right to be given the gift because that would be a contradiction of terms. That is important to understand about the teaching and instructions about baptism into Christ. It is a passive yielding, something done to us, not something we do. Someone puts us under the water; we’re dead and are buried and brought back up alive because of what *God* does, that he promised to do when we trust and obey his

instructions. Baptism is such a deeply meaningful and wise experience when we believe what God says about it and when we do it with the faith and repentance that prepares us for it.

1 Peter 2:24 NLT: *He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.*

This is the substitutionary plan that God worked throughout history to bring to fulfillment. The whole chapter of Isaiah 53 is an obvious description of what the Messiah would have to endure for us, so please read it on your own sometime. This verse expresses the point of it concisely:

Isaiah 53:5 NIV: *But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

The Jews knew all the promises of the Old Testament about the Messiah. Their hope for and anticipation of the coming of the one promised defined them to a great extent. Yet most of them missed the point that Jesus was the one they had been waiting for because they didn't think spiritually but rather hoped the Messiah would be a powerful conquering leader, especially in Jesus' time because they were ruled by the Romans and longed to be free of them. Even his own closest disciples, the ones he appointed to be apostles to carry on his work, missed the point as we saw earlier when they deserted him when he was arrested, tried, and crucified. But after his resurrection and then his return to heaven, anyone who was open to understanding what God had been doing had a huge "Aha!" moment, as we saw in Acts 2 that over three thousand people experienced on the first day of new birth and new life being announced by Peter and the other apostles. Peter explained from the only Scripture they had, the Old Testament, how Jesus fulfilled the prophecies.

The next passage we'll read is packed with meaningful lessons. The whole account is found in Acts 8:26-40, where a seeker of God was rewarded by him in a dramatic way. Philip was supernaturally told to go where he would encounter this man, and when he found him, he was reading Isaiah 53 that we just touched on above and couldn't figure out what it meant. He was a humble and eager and open learner, thrilled that someone who could guide him came along because he knew he needed help to understand it, an example of God's design that those who have already had the opportunity to learn the truth would pass it along to others.

Acts 8:35-38 NIV: *Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." The eunuch answered, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.*

This passage has several good examples for us of a real-life experience of someone learning about and responding to the news about who Jesus was and what he did for us. It is another example of someone experiencing an "Aha!" moment when he got the point about Jesus. The man Philip was teaching had an important position as the treasurer for a queen in Africa. He was apparently a believer in and convert to Judaism who was returning home from a journey to Jerusalem to worship. This is a great example of God rewarding someone who believed that he exists and was earnestly seeking him as in Hebrews 11:6 that we read earlier!

This is also a good example of one of the principles of Bible interpretation. In addition to truths that are obvious because they are stated outright as commands, and in addition to the principles we can glean from examples of how the early disciples lived out their faith, there are also logically deduced necessary inferences as we see here. We're only told that Philip told him the good news about Jesus, so if he asked to be baptized, we can infer that what he was taught had to include the news about baptism as the way to obtain the forgiveness and new life that Jesus made possible. Baptism was part of the good news, as it obviously was understood to be by this man.

This is also another example of the significance of the meaning of the word “baptism” being “to immerse.” How interesting it is that while traveling on a desert road, just when the man had learned about Jesus and obviously believed in him, enough water for him to be immersed was available. Not only did God send someone to teach him what he was so intently seeking to learn, he provided the way for him to be baptized right away. That’s a good lesson, too, along with every other example of people coming to faith in Jesus and acting on it immediately, which sometimes isn’t the norm in some churches now. There’s always a way to find enough water to immerse someone who wants to be baptized, and when someone believes with all his or her heart, they will repent and be eager to be born again right then.

And last, it is an example of the passive posture of someone being baptized, as Philip did the immersing and the man yielded to being immersed and raised up again. We don’t bury ourselves, either in our physical death or our spiritual death. Being baptized isn’t something we do that we can take any pride in, it’s something done to us because we know we’re dead and we’re so thankful God has provided this meaningful experience of going into a watery grave – a tomb – and coming out of it reborn – a womb. The mixed metaphor of tomb to womb is God’s meaningful plan.

Galatians 3:26-27 NIV: ***So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.***

These verses clarify another meaningful quality of baptism. As we see all the way through the New Testament, faith in Jesus is what God works through to transform our lives. Without faith, we won’t understand or want to be in a relationship with him, and we certainly won’t repent or do what he tells us to do. How can being immersed in water result in being “clothed with Christ?” God is the one who clothes us and makes us his children, if we have faith that he will do that as he promises will happen when we’re baptized.

There’s a parable Jesus told about the importance of being clothed appropriately that seems to tie in to this concept. The whole story of a wedding feast of which this is the conclusion is Matthew 22:1-14; please read it sometime for the context:

Matthew 22:11-13 NIV: ***“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, ‘How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?’ The man was speechless. “Then the king told the attendants, ‘Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’”***

Jesus is telling a parable about how even though all are invited to come to God’s “feast,” it is not a “come as you are” event. What are the wedding clothes? When we see that baptism is how we clothe ourselves with Christ, then in a spiritual sense, Jesus Christ is our wedding garment! We must be wearing Jesus’ spotless righteousness in the heavenly banquet.

Colossians 2:12-13 NLT: ***For you were buried with Christ when you were baptized. And with him you were raised to new life because you trusted the mighty power of God, who raised Christ from the dead. You were dead because of your sins and because your sinful nature was not yet cut away. Then God made you alive with Christ, for he forgave all our sins.***

Baptism brings together God’s powerful work on our behalf in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and our response to his unimaginable gift of forgiveness and new life. We go into the water spiritually dead and come out of the water spiritually alive – born anew – because we trust in his power to work as he promises to do. This is how he tells us to receive that great gift, and we can have confidence in our relationship with him from that point forward because we can easily understand what he told us to do and we did it, not as a mechanical ritual but as a deeply meaningful spiritual experience. It is a very real cosmic meeting of God and that person, when this verse says we are buried with Christ. Don’t try to figure out the metaphysics of it, just accept it and experience it! Have

you been ***“buried with Christ”*** and ***“raised to new life,”*** as these verses describe is what happens in baptism?

1 Peter 3:18-21 NLT: ***Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God. He suffered physical death, but he was raised to life in the Spirit. So he went and preached to the spirits in prison—those who disobeyed God long ago when God waited patiently while Noah was building his boat. Only eight people were saved from drowning in that terrible flood. And that water is a picture of baptism, which now saves you, not by removing dirt from your body, but as an appeal to God for a clean conscience. It is effective because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.***

In these verses, please don't focus on the part about Jesus preaching to the “spirits in prison” from the time of the flood, because we're not told much about it; my assumption is that he did this during the time between his death and his resurrection, whatever purpose he was accomplishing. This part is a good example of the principle that if we're not told enough to understand something, then we must not need to understand it, at least for now. All will be known eventually is my assumption, so I focus on what I can know and try to live up to that much.

The water of the flood is described in different translations as a picture, an antitype, that it prefigures, signifies, corresponds to, is like, or symbolizes the water involved in baptism. God used the flood waters – which the ark floated on – to cleanse the world of the rampant sinfulness and to save Noah and his family from it. God uses water again to save us, not to physically clean us but to clean our consciences by forgiving our sins because Jesus suffered and died for us. Being immersed in the water as we're taught by God to do is when and how we appeal to him to grant to us personally what Jesus' death and resurrection made possible for all who are baptized. Baptism saves us now, just as the flood saved Noah and his family.

Just as Noah had to build the ark in order to be saved through the water, we must do what God tells us is our part. We must have sincere faith in Jesus as our Savior and Lord, we must repent of our sin, and we must be immersed in water as God instructs. But, as the flood exemplifies, we don't save ourselves. We are saved by the one who can and will do so in the way he says he will. God gives us the choice whether to be saved or not, and we appeal to him to save us by submitting humbly to his instructions. Baptism does save us because God says it will. When the deep and rich purpose of it is understood, it is the most meaningful moment that transforms the rest of one's life!

Titus 3:4-7 NLT: ***When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.***

Here again is the theme of being born of water and the Spirit that Jesus promised in John 3. We are washed by God spiritually when we are under the water. I'm so thankful God gives us a tangible, physical experience through which we form an indelible memory of the place and time of our new birth. I think God, who made us, knows how needed and helpful that would be to us. When we go through struggles and times of weak faith, it does give us confidence to cling to.

Ephesians 5:25-27 NIV: ***Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.***

This is another reference to the spiritual cleansing that takes place in the washing with water, which couldn't be anything other than baptism. All in Jesus' church have been cleansed by his loving sacrifice when we were baptized.

Matthew 28:18-20 NLT: ***Jesus came and told his disciples, “I have been given all authority in heaven and on earth. Therefore, go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach these new disciples to obey all the commands I have given you. And be sure of this: I am with***

you always, even to the end of the age.”

Mark 16:15-16 NLT: *And then he told them, “Go into all the world and preach the Good News to everyone. Anyone who believes and is baptized will be saved. But anyone who refuses to believe will be condemned.*

These are two versions of what is known as the Great Commission, Jesus’ last words to his apostles before he went back to heaven, God’s plan accomplished. The time had arrived to preach and teach the great news to everyone! Jesus acknowledges the reality that we have freedom to choose whether to believe in him and to believe his teachings to the point of obeying them. Our choice determines our fate. We can believe and be baptized, or we can refuse to believe and be condemned to remain in our state of separation from God forever. Can one believe and not be baptized and be saved? You may feel the temptation to rationalize a way for that to be true because he doesn’t include baptism in the condemnation of those who don’t believe, as some I’ve talked to try to do; I hope you can see how illogical and unnecessary it is to mention there because of course those who don’t believe are also not baptized.

Baptism is how we act on our belief in Jesus, and it is only powerful and effective because of our faith that God will do what he promises to do when and how we do what he has commanded us to do. Have you been baptized in the way and for the reason the Bible teaches? Are you open to the possibility that you may need to re-examine your relationship with God? I hope so.

The book of Acts is a historical account of the establishment, growth, and spread of the church. There are many good examples in it for us to follow of people who heard the teaching about Jesus and responded eagerly and immediately to the instructions to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins as we saw earlier in Acts 2 and again in the account of the Ethiopian eunuch taught by Philip. We won’t look at all of the other conversion accounts here but as you read it in your own personal Bible reading, you will notice them and see how matter of fact baptism was as the instruction to those who believed in Jesus and wanted to be forgiven. (The booklet ***New Birth! Known by God*** goes into more depth on this subject and includes more of those examples.)

One conversion that we will look at is of Saul, a man who thought he was doing God’s work by persecuting believers, who was given the opportunity by Jesus literally stopping him in his tracks to learn how wrong he was. His conversion is written of in Acts 9, which we won’t include here but would be good to read on your own. Then in Acts 22:1-16, Saul (his Hebrew name), who used his Roman citizen Latin name Paul here and in his work ministering to Gentiles (non-Jews), retells his conversion experience from his own perspective to a crowd of people. This is his testimony of being on his way to arrest believers when Jesus miraculously stopped him:

Acts 22:6-16 NIV: *About noon as I came near Damascus, suddenly a bright light from heaven flashed around me. I fell to the ground and heard a voice say to me, “Saul! Saul! Why do you persecute me?” “Who are you, Lord?” I asked. “I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. My companions saw the light, but they did not understand the voice of him who was speaking to me. “What shall I do, Lord?” I asked. “Get up,” the Lord said, “and go into Damascus. There you will be told all that you have been assigned to do.” My companions led me by the hand into Damascus, because the brilliance of the light had blinded me. A man named Ananias came to see me. He was a devout observer of the law and highly respected by all the Jews living there. He stood beside me and said, “Brother Saul, receive your sight!” And at that very moment I was able to see him. Then he said: “The God of our ancestors has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth. You will be his witness to all people of what you have seen and heard. And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name.”*

The lesson we can infer from this account is that Paul believed in Jesus when he appeared to Paul, as seen in his response asking Jesus what he should do and addressing him as Lord. Because Paul believed in Jesus, he believed him and did what he was told to do. When was Paul given new birth? When were his sins forgiven? We see in the last verse that he was told to be baptized and wash his sins away, calling on the name of Jesus, the Righteous One.

In baptism, we are calling on God to forgive us, and we are washing our sins away. Do we cleanse ourselves from sin? Of course not, but we do what the Bible tells us does wash our sins away, which is the blood of Jesus that applies to us when we are immersed into Christ's death for us. Just as Peter told the first converts in Acts 2 to save themselves from the corruption of their world, we know that we don't do the saving, but we must submit to what God tells us to do so he can save us; in the sense that the responsibility belongs to each person to choose to obey God or not, we do have a very real part in the process of our own salvation.

One more example of someone who had the humility and openness to learning that he had been wrong about something he believed and was happy to be corrected was Apollos.

Acts 18:24-26 NLT: *Meanwhile, a Jew named Apollos, an eloquent speaker who knew the Scriptures well, had arrived in Ephesus from Alexandria in Egypt. He had been taught the way of the Lord, and he taught others about Jesus with an enthusiastic spirit and with accuracy. However, he knew only about John's baptism. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him preaching boldly in the synagogue, they took him aside and explained the way of God even more accurately.*

John the Baptist was a prophet who was given the role by God of preparing the Jews for the coming of the Messiah. He preached to them to repent and be baptized:

Mark 1:4 NIV: *And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*

Though that baptism required repentance and was for forgiveness, it was replaced by baptism into Christ from Peter's sermon in Acts 2 forward, where not only forgiveness but also the giving of the Holy Spirit became its meaning and purpose. Apollos apparently hadn't had the opportunity to learn that, so he wasn't baptizing people in the name of Jesus and they weren't, therefore, given the Holy Spirit.

After Priscilla and Aquila took Apollos aside and corrected his understanding of baptism, he continued to preach – accurately – and he left Ephesus where he had been teaching inaccurately, moving on to Corinth. Then Paul arrived in Ephesus and met some disciples, where an interesting conversation revealed some further corrections were needed.

Acts 19:1-5 NIV: *While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus. There he found some disciples and asked them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" They answered, "No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit." So Paul asked, "Then what baptism did you receive?" "John's baptism," they replied. Paul said, "John's baptism was a baptism of repentance. He told the people to believe in the one coming after him, that is, in Jesus." On hearing this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.*

These people probably had been immersed by Apollos with John's baptism. They also show us a good example of humble openness to being corrected in their understanding about how to become a Christian, and they were immersed into Christ – "baptized in the name of Jesus" – when they would have received the Holy Spirit promised to all believers when they are immersed with faith and repentance.

Because so many churches don't teach what the Bible says about baptism correctly, there is a need to re-examine our own understanding of how to become a Christian and many people need to be baptized correctly. It's really not a re-baptism if what one experienced was not really biblical baptism, so I hope any readers who discover that you haven't previously heard of what the Bible teaches as we've been looking at here will be eager to be truly "immersed into Christ" for the forgiveness of your sins and so God can give you his Holy Spirit to live in you at last!

Now it's time to draw conclusions. We've asked and learned the answers from the Bible that God has revealed, that anyone who wants to come back to God needs to apply to himself or herself. Please ask these questions and

then apply the answers to your own life:

What makes us separated from God? Sin!

What removes sin? Jesus' blood!

Where and when does this happen? In baptism, which is immersion into Christ!

"What does this mean for me?" Look again at your time line and compare.

"How do I feel about this, regarding my life?" Whether you've ever thought you became a Christian or not, are you "cut to the heart" and thankful for the opportunity to learn what God so kindly and clearly instructs about how to come back into a relationship with him?

"How do I feel about others I know who don't know this?" Do you see the need for more people to see these Scriptures for themselves? Would you like to have a way to share what you've learned with them?

"What actions does this make me want to take?" Do you need to be baptized (immersed) into Christ? Is there anything that would hold you back from making that decision? If you feel a need to study this topic further, you may find the booklet ***New Birth! Known by God*** to be helpful. It goes into more depth about what many churches teach and it covers more of the examples of conversion in the book of Acts. I'm also happy to help you in any way needed as you come to conclusions and a decision about what you may need to do if you have never been baptized biblically.

Every person needs to come to baptism with faith in Jesus as the Son of God, with repentance that results from godly sorrow, with awareness of our spiritual deadness and our need for the forgiveness and new birth that Jesus' sacrificial death in our place made possible, with faith that God will forgive us as he promised when we are buried in and raised from the water and that he will come to live in us through the presence of his Holy Spirit. Though our understanding and appreciation of our baptism deepens as we learn and grow spiritually, we must experience it as it is described in the Bible, rejecting any teaching by any church that leaves out any part of the full meaning and purpose of true immersion into Christ. And if someone has participated in what a church has told them is baptism but wasn't done in the biblical way or for the biblical purpose, then please learn God's way more accurately; follow the good example of Apollos and be thankful to be corrected so you can experience true new birth!

When we come up out of the water of baptism, the grand adventure begins for the rest of our lives and for eternity, where we have a relationship with our Father in heaven, our Lord and brother Jesus Christ, and the transforming power to become more and more like God through the Holy Spirit living in us. We are so used to thinking with a human, worldly focus, going through life day to day dealing with the urgent that can distract us from the important and the true spiritual reality of life that God created and designed us to experience. After baptism, the rest of our lives here will become a process of replacement and transformation, and then when we die we will be welcomed into heaven to be with God forever!

When we are baptized, we begin a new life and are part of a new family of all those to whom God has given new birth in their own baptisms. The last foundational topic is important to learn about as part of making our decision to become a Christian because living out our lives as a child of God is done in a new family that God puts us in so it's good to know what to look forward to and be prepared for.

Foundation 5. Know God's People – "Why do I need to be part of the church?" What is Jesus' church like?
God showers me with love in a tangible way through my relationships with His other children; He meets my every need not only by His Word and His Spirit in me individually, but also by working through others. He puts me in a new family where other members love and need me, and I love and need them.

For this topic, the book of Ephesians is a great concise overview. After laying some foundations for us as individuals, it goes on to describe what the church is, then the effect of the church if it's truly following God's pattern, then how the church works. We'll see how some other Scriptures flesh out some of the concepts in this book. Before continuing with this topic, please take time to read through or listen to Ephesians in one sitting.

In the church, God's design is that we can experience a safe place to be real and honest about our weaknesses and struggles. We should be able to trust fellow believers to be encouraging and understanding, because we all know how much we need that so we would want to give that to others. If someone seeks help and support from others in a struggle against sin and doesn't receive that, something is wrong and needs to be corrected by the leaders.

I prefer to think of church as the *ekklesia*, the Greek word that means an assembly of any kind but that in those early days had special meaning to the believers as they enjoyed gathering for worship and fellowship – *koinonia*, another Greek word that had a deeply spiritual meaning to them. See ***New Family! Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ*** for a more in-depth look at this topic.

Ephesians 1:5,7,13-14,16b-17 NLT: ***God decided in advance to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. This is what he wanted to do, and it gave him great pleasure. ... He is so rich in kindness and grace that he purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins. ... And now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you. And when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised and that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would praise and glorify him. ... I pray for you constantly, asking God, the glorious Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to give you spiritual wisdom and insight so that you might grow in your knowledge of God.***

These verses speak of our individual foundations in our relationship with God. We must begin at the beginning, believing in Christ, receiving the Spirit in baptism as promised, and from then forward we are able to gain more and more knowledge of God that isn't dry, cognitive facts but rather is the result of the spiritual wisdom and insight that the Spirit of God in us helps us understand. Paul, who wrote Ephesians, also exemplifies the prayerfulness and dependence on God we need to imitate. Then, once we have begun our relationship with God, we become part of what we know as the church.

What is the church?

Ephesians 1:22-23 NLT: ***God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things for the benefit of the church. And the church is his body; it is made full and complete by Christ, who fills all things everywhere with himself.***

It is the body of Christ, his hands, his feet, his mouth, continuing to do his work here on earth. He is the head of the body, the true leader of the church to whom all believers must submit and follow. There is no other earthly leader who legitimately has any authority to change anything that God has already laid out in the Bible. I've seen so many violations of this principle in the many churches I've been a part of. We'll see later how God has designed earthly church leadership to work. The important point here is that all members of the body of Christ are subservient to the headship of Jesus Christ. He is the ruler, the king, the Lord.

Ephesians 2:19-22,3:4-5 NIV: ***Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.... In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to people in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets.***

This passage describes the church, God's people, as his house and a temple. The foundation it is built on is the

message of the “holy apostles and prophets.” Holy, as we looked at previously, means “set apart;” God selected certain men through whom he spoke, who were given direct inspiration by the Spirit of God. Much of their message was of course oral to the people of their times as we know they preached and taught groups of believers, but the written messages were recognized and viewed as authoritative from the time they were written. By the time any “official” designation of the books of the New Testament was made, it was really a recognition of what was already agreed upon as the widely accepted inspired Scriptures. The foundational truths such as those we’ve studied here were commonly understood. The challenge throughout the years since the apostles lived has been to hold to those truths and not let any false teachings creep in, which was warned against many times. Here is an example of the need for watchfulness about this:

Jude 3-4 NIV: *Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt compelled to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to God’s holy people. For certain individuals whose condemnation was written about long ago have secretly slipped in among you. They are ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into a license for immorality and deny Jesus Christ our only Sovereign and Lord.*

As we’ve seen even in these few verses so far, there are many metaphors and analogies in the Bible that help us understand truths by showing us different perspectives of the same thing. The church is God’s handiwork, he is the architect, the builder, and the source of the truth for how this temple made up of those who have been reconciled to him is to work. The church is not only God’s house, but also his family and the physical and spiritual body of Jesus Christ on earth.

Next, let’s discover in this same book of Ephesians several intended effects of the church when it is submitting to the headship of Christ.

Ephesians 3:9-11 NLT: *I was chosen to explain to everyone this mysterious plan that God, the Creator of all things, had kept secret from the beginning. God’s purpose in all this was to use the church to display his wisdom in its rich variety to all the unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was his eternal plan, which he carried out through Christ Jesus our Lord.*

The church is intended to be an amazing witness and proof of the wisdom of God’s plan. Who are the “unseen rulers and authorities in the heavenly places?” I’m not sure, but he must mean angels, perhaps both the angels who rebelled and followed Satan who were banished from heaven and the angels who remained with God to do as he assigned them in service to his crowning creation, mankind. There is a very real unseen world of angelic and demonic spirits created by God. If you haven’t noticed how matter of fact the Bible is about this, you probably will from now on! So, my assumption is that angels and demons as well as the “ruler of this world,” Satan (John 12:31), will see God’s wisdom to whatever degree a body of believers lives out his simple plan that we’ll see soon.

Ephesians 3:20-21 NIV: *Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.*

The church brings glory to God when it is following his plan. God deserves all the glory – all the credit and praise – for all that he does in us and for us. Christians, individually and as a body, have the indescribable experience of the power of God living in us, as we’ve seen the Holy Spirit is given to everyone who is baptized into Christ. When one lives by following God’s plan for our lives and for the church, the potential for great and awesome works of God through us is beyond what we can even try to imagine. These verses are such an enticement to stretch our thinking, to rise above our human wisdom limits and eagerly pursue the truths God has revealed to us in the Bible. Over time, if we keep our focus on spiritual truth, both learning more and more and experiencing more and more the wisdom of it as we live by it, then our imaginations of what God could do in our individual lives and in the church will become more and more bold and confident.

Ephesians 4:1-6 NLT: *Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for*

you have been called by God. Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.

As we looked at this passage earlier in relation to John 17:20-23 where Jesus prayed that his apostles and all who would ever hear their message and believe would be perfectly united, here again let's be reminded of God's call to us to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. How can we hope to find oneness and unity with other believers when Christendom is so splintered, more so now than ever? What causes disunity? Here we learn the three causes: pride rather than being humble and gentle, laziness rather than making every effort, and human thinking rather than simply believing the Bible's clear teachings, especially about the basic truths of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father. Conversely, if ever a church were to take these verses to heart, the effect would be as Jesus prayed, others would know that the Son of God came down from heaven and revealed God's truth and his love to the world. Unity draws others to God. Sadly, there's so little of it, and we can see the destructive effect of the rampant disunity that many people use as an excuse to not make any effort to seek God.

Ephesians 4: 16 NIV: From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

Another effect of God's church is that it helps members mature and become strong. I love this imagery of the church as a body, with different parts that work together, with connecting ligaments holding it together. I don't know what the supporting ligaments are for sure, but whatever holds the spiritual body together just as a ligament holds a physical body together would be important, such as the Spirit of God in each person and the love for one another that produces patience and persistence and care and involvement with one another. The Bible is full of "one another" commands that require togetherness and intentionality. When all are giving, then all are receiving, and that love for one another will attract others who are seeking or open to want what they see in the close-knit fellowship. This is the *koinonia* (loving fellowship) in the *ekklesia* (the assembly/congregation) of Christ that is to me personally a more meaningful way to describe God's plan because the word "church" has lost much of its power. So many people have had bad experiences or at least not attractive experiences in churches that have turned them off to church and even to God, so if we could get back to the biblical meaning and connotation of the *ekklesia*, perhaps we could think of it with the perspective God intended.

We've seen four effects God intended to result from his body, his family, his temple built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. It will prove his wisdom, bring him glory, draw others through the unity they see, and it will help the members grow up to become more and more mature and like Jesus.

The last big theme in the book of Ephesians is how the church, the body, is designed to work. The vision described is so simple, so organic and synergistic, yet it requires of the members that they humbly submit to following the plan, which they can't do if they don't know what it is. In this arena of what God intended our experience of being in his church to be, most churches miss the point. We won't go into a lot of depth here, but once someone has become a Christian, then the booklet ***New Family! Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ*** would be helpful to read sometime.

Ephesians 4:11-16 NLT: Now these are the gifts Christ gave to the church: the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers. Their responsibility is to equip God's people to do his work and build up the church, the body of Christ. This will continue until we all come to such unity in our faith and knowledge of God's Son that we will be mature in the Lord, measuring up to the full and complete standard of Christ. Then we will no longer be immature like children. We won't be tossed and blown about by every wind of new teaching. We will not be influenced when people try to trick us with lies so clever they sound like the truth. Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church.

He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

This brief description is God's simple plan for how his family, the body of Christ, is meant to work. First he describes leadership roles. As we've already mentioned, the apostles were chosen personally by Jesus to fulfill a foundation-laying, truth-revealing role that was unique to that time and they filled a once-for-all-time role. God himself verified the credibility and authority of the apostles.

Hebrews 2:3-4 NLT: ***So what makes us think we can escape if we ignore this great salvation that was first announced by the Lord Jesus himself and then delivered to us by those who heard him speak? And God confirmed the message by giving signs and wonders and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit whenever he chose.***

The apostles were the ones who heard Jesus personally. They were given a miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit that no one else had or ever will have. They also had the power to confer a limited miraculous measure of the Holy Spirit to others, some of whom were given the ability to receive truth from God that was meant to be shared with the rest of the disciples; these were the prophets who were not apostles but had a role in the message from God being disseminated; "prophet" means "inspired speaker." Others received other miraculous abilities from the Holy Spirit through the laying on of the apostles' hands. None but apostles could confer the miraculous abilities to anyone else. For the purpose of establishing the church and the true message from God for all time, God confirmed the message of the apostles and those who received various gifts of the Holy Spirit in this way, according to God's wisdom and plan and purpose. God was clearly the head of the church. The growth and spread of the church was obviously led by God himself.

How does this work in practical terms? The roles of apostles and prophets passed as they died, and those roles were no longer needed once the message had been put into writing to form the New Testament books and letters that became all that was needed for succeeding generations. As 2 Peter 1:3-4 NLT that we read earlier says, now we have ***"everything we need for living a godly life ... he has given us his great and precious promises."*** So, first, we simply learn and follow the teachings of the apostles and prophets that God provides to us through the written words of the Bible.

The other leadership roles listed are "evangelists, pastors and teachers." Those roles aren't unique to the early church days, they continued on and will always be needed in congregations of God's family. Evangelists are men who preach the good news to others, the ones who usually give the sermons in worship services as well as who lead the congregation in outreach efforts to draw new people to God. Teachers will always be needed, those who can help others learn the truths of the Bible, with great care because, ***"We who teach will be judged more strictly,"*** as James 3:1 NIV says.

"Pastors" is another word for "shepherds," a role that is also described as "elders" and "overseers," as we see all together in one conversation between Paul and those who filled this role in Ephesus:

Acts 10:17,28 NIV: ***From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. ... "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood."***

We won't say any more about roles of church leadership here, but someday you can read more about the topic in ***New Family! Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ***. The main point about leadership roles that most people miss is that their responsibility is not to do all the work themselves, but rather to equip the rest of the disciples to do God's work. There is no clergy in the Bible! These leadership descriptions are not positions, they are roles.

Hebrews 13:7,17 NLT: ***Remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Think of all the good that has come from their lives, and follow the example of their faith. ... Obey your spiritual leaders, and do what they say. Their work is to watch over your souls, and they are accountable to God. Give them reason to do this with joy and not with sorrow. That would certainly not be for your benefit.***

Leaders in the church are recognized because of their example that is worthy of following. Even the admonition to obey church leaders is aimed at the members to have a humble, teachable heart that appreciates their example and the care they give. I experienced a church where leaders wrongly used this verse aimed at members as a club to demand submission to them, but Jesus forbade “lording over” others and Peter reiterated this in his admonition to elders:

1 Peter 5:3 NLT: ***Don’t lord it over the people assigned to your care, but lead them by your own good example.***

Leaders are very important because they determine how equipped those they lead will be to live out their own faith effectively and fruitfully. The great dilemma is that if there hasn’t been mature and wise leadership available, then there will be none or few who have the experience and example to turn around and equip others. One can’t lead where one has never been. So, the need is for a few who will determine to be part of the solution, go to the Bible directly to learn foundational truths such as we’re studying here, and put them into practice in one’s own life so eventually they’ll be an example worthy of being followed.

2 Thessalonians 1:11 NIV: ***With this in mind, we constantly pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may bring to fruition your every desire for goodness and your every deed prompted by faith.***

Then the challenge is to be willing to share what one has learned from experience and equip others to benefit from those lessons learned, often the hard way and with simply being proactive in some way – any way – that will give God steps of faith to bless and make fruitful.

In my own experiences with many different church congregations, the main weakness that has held the whole body back has been lack of this kind of leadership. If leaders don’t have their own example of wise, fruitful, effective, proactive service to God to draw from in equipping others, then everyone remains immature spiritually, and the great drawing effect God intends for his church to be to the world won’t happen. This is the sad state of many congregations. More people, particularly more men – who are created to be the leaders in the church and in the home – are needed who will be willing to figure out how to lead even though they haven’t benefitted from the equipping and example of others.

Next, we will look at several practical Scriptures about the mindset every disciple needs to have as we live out daily life in relationships with others in the family of God. This really is the point of all God has done throughout history, culminating in Jesus’ coming to earth to bring all who will believe in him back into a relationship with God. We need to lay all of the foundations we’ve learned about so we can build on them the life that God created us to experience. These principles will give us the “rich and satisfying life” Jesus said was his purpose in coming to earth!

First, we need to remember that our most important relationship is with God, who becomes our Father and even our loving Daddy when we are baptized into Christ.

Romans 8:15 NLT: ***So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, “Abba, Father.”***

For most people, taking the time to spend getting to know God, listening to him by reading the Bible, his Word, and talking to him, prayer, is a difficult habit to develop. Many barriers seem to get in the way, including demands of our busy lives, bad habits in how we use our time, and psychological blocks such as bad experiences with father/child relationships that we’ve never worked through. I’ve had to face and overcome many blocks such as these, as we all do. It’s hard to find the balance in developing new habits of reading the Bible and praying to do them for the right reason and not just because we know we ought to. I collect quotes that are often shared on social media and came across one that I wish I had known early in my own relationship with God: “The sweetest time of the day is when you pray, because you are talking to the one who loves you the most.” Please take time to face and overcome any obstacles in your own life and bask in the amazing closeness with the perfect Daddy who loves you more than any human father ever could. Find a way to let yourself enjoy feeling the oneness with him

that Jesus prayed for. There are many suggestions and even gimmicks that others may advise you of, from when you ought to schedule time with God to how you ought to pray, but they can interfere instead of help, so find what helps you personally feel close to God.

The next highest priority biblically is our physical family, the people who are dearest to our hearts and who need our love and care the most. I mention this briefly but want to be sure this point is not missed, because we all probably know people who claimed to love God and were very busy with church work whose families were neglected, which is hurtful to the family and to the example of the person whose priorities are misplaced. We won't look at admonitions about how to treat spouses and children here, but please notice them in your own Bible reading.

After God and family, the next priority the Bible gives us is the church, and the New Testament is full of lessons to help us learn how to love and remain unified with one another. The point is that God created us to crave interdependency and involvement with one another that is possible in the family of God but that we don't experience outside of it. It's rare to find others even in churches with whom we can experience what God intended, but whoever is willing to seek what he tells us is possible may find others who are also seeking that. The point is to not give up, to keep hoping to find others who also see what is possible and want to experience it, too.

Romans 12:4-5 NIV: *For just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.*

The description of those who are in Christ as parts of one body is a helpful reminder of the interdependency of needing each other. Thinking of the church as a body instead of as an institution is a needed paradigm shift from what most people have experienced.

1 Corinthians 12:12-27 NLT: *The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. But we have all been baptized into one body by one Spirit, and we all share the same Spirit. Yes, the body has many different parts, not just one part. If the foot says, "I am not a part of the body because I am not a hand," that does not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, "I am not part of the body because I am not an eye," would that make it any less a part of the body? If the whole body were an eye, how would you hear? Or if your whole body were an ear, how would you smell anything? But our bodies have many parts, and God has put each part just where he wants it. How strange a body would be if it had only one part! Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.*

This passage puts the analogy of the body into practical terms that can help us develop more thoughtful care and consideration of how we may be more proactive in our own involvement with other parts of the body. It also helps us realize that whatever any person's talents and interests and personality may be, they can feel needed and useful to the good of the whole body.

This "body" paradigm is a natural – God-designed – organizing principle for how the church functions. Interdependence and involvement give everyone the experience of having their needs met. As everyone gives, everyone also receives. There are many, many "one another" admonishments that will help us as we grow in our knowledge of the Bible, but a few verses we'll look at are helpful to start with.

Hebrews 10:24-25 NLT: *Let us think of ways to motivate one another to acts of love and good works. And let us*

not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

The point of meeting together is to give encouragement and inspiration to one another. This is often easier said than done in the way “church” is done nowadays. Someday you may find the booklet already mentioned, ***New Family! Koinonia in the Ekklesia of Christ***, helpful in rethinking why God may have intended the way the first century church met together to be a more natural way of experiencing the body paradigm. But whenever we are together with fellow believers, we can try to cultivate deeper connections with a few people and find ways to give some encouragement. The point is not to legalistically check going to church off the schedule, but to use the time to enjoy more and more connectedness and to experience the loving relationships that are possible in the body of Christ.

Hebrews 3:12-13 NIV: See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.

Again the focus is on encouraging one another, which all of us need! These verses help us see the need to develop relationships with however many we can, whether only one or more, where we can know each other well enough to watch out for each other. Sin creeps in easily when relationships aren’t close-knit. We all need others to help us guard against being hardened, but only by being mutually real and open and honest would another feel safe to speak up if they have a concern. If we have this mindset from the start about wanting close relationships with other Christians, then being open and not self-protective will be easier.

1 Peter 1:22-23 NLT: You were cleansed from your sins when you obeyed the truth, so now you must show sincere love to each other as brothers and sisters. Love each other deeply with all your heart. For you have been born again, but not to a life that will quickly end. Your new life will last forever because it comes from the eternal, living word of God.

Love from the heart is what brothers and sisters in Christ have the great privilege to experience that is only possible because we have become completely different from the selfish, sinful, self-protective, takers of our old selves. There is no experience that compares to the heart-to-heart bond with someone who shares the same love for God and with whom one can be unified as is possible with other believers. (See the booklet ***New Love! Focus on Phileo*** for a more in-depth study about this promise.)

Philippians 1:27 NLT: Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News.

1 Peter 3:8 NLT: Finally, all of you should be of one mind. Sympathize with each other. Love each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude.

“***Above all***” and “***finally***” – what great and precious promises, that we can share one spirit and one purpose and be of one mind with others who love God and who want to trust and obey him just as we do. If a gathering of Christians would agree to put these verses into practice together, then Jesus’ prayer for unity and for the impact on the world to draw others to God would be answered. May we all be eager to be part of the answer to his prayer!

Conclusion – “What am I going to do with what I know?”

Now you know what the point of the Bible is! It is that you can know God and experience the rich and satisfying life he intended you to live. You can receive the gift of new life that Jesus’ dying in your place made possible, by being born again when you repent of the sins you have indulged in and are baptized, immersed in water with faith that God will work then and there as he promises he will to forgive you and to give his Spirit to you. If you do follow his

instructions for how to be born again, you will become part of his family, the body of Christ, the church as described in the Bible, where you can experience relationships unlike any in the world that will help you grow up spiritually to become more and more like God in how you think and act. And you will have something to share with others who need to come out of the world and into a relationship with God, too.

1 John 5:13 NIV: *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.*

We *can* know for sure if we have the eternal life God gives. We *can* know God and be known by God, which is Jesus' definition of eternal life. We *can* understand these foundational truths about knowing God, knowing his will, knowing ourselves, knowing his gift of new birth, and knowing his people. Now that you have learned these truths, the point is to hold to these teachings, to put them into practice, so you can experience breaking free of sin and death that has separated you from God.

We haven't focused on the choice to reject God's truth and continue down the path to eternal separation from him here, in the hope that anyone who will read this already knows from experience the need for rescue and rebirth. This passage describes the contrast between the choice to reject vs. to accept God's rescue:

2 Thessalonians 1:6-10 NIV: *God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might on the day he comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. This includes you, because you believed our testimony to you.*

Do you want to be among those who marvel at the return of Jesus when the end of God's revealed plan for this world arrives? Are you ready to participate in the divine nature, to see with new, spiritual sight and listen to truth that God longs for you to not only hear, but understand and put into practice? If so, then please weigh out what Jesus said is the cost that must be counted.

Luke 9:23-26,57-62 NLT: *Then he said to the crowd, "If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to hang on to your life, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake, you will save it. And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but are yourself lost or destroyed? If anyone is ashamed of me and my message, the Son of Man will be ashamed of that person when he returns in his glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels."*

As they were walking along, someone said to Jesus, "I will follow you wherever you go." But Jesus replied, "Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place even to lay his head." He said to another person, "Come, follow me." The man agreed, but he said, "Lord, first let me return home and bury my father." But Jesus told him, "Let the spiritually dead bury their own dead! Your duty is to go and preach about the Kingdom of God." Another said, "Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family." But Jesus told him, "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God."

Is it worth the cost? The Apostle Paul was certain it is!

Philippians 3:7-14 NLT: *I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God's way of making us right with himself depends on faith. I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!*

I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I

press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

What is the point? Paul stated it in one sentence:

Acts 20:21 NLT: I have had one message for Jews and Greeks alike—the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus.

Are you ready to repent from your sin and turn to God with faith in our Lord Jesus? Are you eager to be baptized and wash away your sins, calling on his name? I hope so much that you are ready and eager to be born anew and begin your relationship with your heavenly Father as his dear child, the eternal life that begins at the moment he meets you in the water, lays your sin on Jesus on the cross, gives you his righteousness and holiness, and gives you his own Spirit to empower and transform you.

Once you begin your new life in Christ, you will read the Bible with spiritual insight and awe that can't be understood or appreciated by anyone who reads it from a human mindset. We will end with two passages of Scripture that are so enticing to those who get the point. May your heart burn within you as you read them because you want to experience what they promise:

Romans 8 NLT: So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death. The law of Moses was unable to save us because of the weakness of our sinful nature. So God did what the law could not do. He sent his own Son in a body like the bodies we sinners have. And in that body God declared an end to sin's control over us by giving his Son as a sacrifice for our sins. He did this so that the just requirement of the law would be fully satisfied for us, who no longer follow our sinful nature but instead follow the Spirit.

Those who are dominated by the sinful nature think about sinful things, but those who are controlled by the Holy Spirit think about things that please the Spirit. So letting your sinful nature control your mind leads to death. But letting the Spirit control your mind leads to life and peace. For the sinful nature is always hostile to God. It never did obey God's laws, and it never will. That's why those who are still under the control of their sinful nature can never please God.

But you are not controlled by your sinful nature. You are controlled by the Spirit if you have the Spirit of God living in you. (And remember that those who do not have the Spirit of Christ living in them do not belong to him at all.) And Christ lives within you, so even though your body will die because of sin, the Spirit gives you life because you have been made right with God. The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as God raised Christ Jesus from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you.

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, you have no obligation to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you live by its dictates, you will die. But if through the power of the Spirit you put to death the deeds of your sinful nature, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.

So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when he adopted you as his own children. Now we call him, "Abba, Father." For his Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we are his heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God's glory. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Yet what we suffer now is nothing compared to the glory he will reveal to us later. For all creation is waiting eagerly for that future day when God will reveal who his children really are. Against its will, all creation was subjected to God's curse. But with eager hope, the creation looks forward to the day when it will join God's children in glorious freedom from death and decay. For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. And we believers also groan, even though we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we

don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will. And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And having chosen them, he called them to come to him. And having called them, he gave them right standing with himself. And having given them right standing, he gave them his glory.

What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? (As the Scriptures say, "For your sake we are killed every day; we are being slaughtered like sheep.") No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16 NIV: For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written:

"What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived"—the things God has prepared for those who love him—these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for, "Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Are you enticed? Are you ready and eager to begin a new life in a relationship with God, experiencing the truths he has revealed that are understandable and awesome to his dear children?



Please contact me if you need help finding some Christians to help you be baptized and to then be a part of a body of Christ so you can experience the love and encouragement God's plan provides for your spiritual growth and joy.

If you have any questions about something said here that you don't understand or see for yourself in the Bible, or if you need more Bible references to any assumptions made here, please contact me via email or mail, text or phone.

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