

SPIRITUAL WISDOM

Some personal insights on how to discover God's spiritual wisdom for yourself



Colossians 1:9

We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. (ESV)

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(second edition)

By Bob Sheffler

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SPIRITUAL WISDOM

PREFACE:

What are your priorities in life? A priority is a goal, a purpose or value which you feel is important. Normally we have several priorities in our life. Some priorities are more important than others. One may be the most important in your life.

Priorities influence every decision we make. They determine what we do for a living, how we use our resources and what we plan for the future. They determine how we relate to our spouse, to our children, to family members, to friends, to enemies, to strangers and most importantly to God. Priorities can be worldly or they can be spiritual? Spiritual priorities are goals, values and purposes that please God.

How can we be sure our priorities please God? We may feel we are making godly decisions, but how can we be sure we are pleasing God? Even if we have the right priorities, how can we be sure we are following them in the decisions we make?

The purpose of this book is to help you sort through your priorities to be sure they are pleasing God. Also, we want you to be sure you are following your priorities? This requires spiritual wisdom.

I pray you will seek spiritual wisdom, find spiritual wisdom and use spiritual wisdom in every decision you make.

Here are questions you need to be sure you can answer: What is spiritual wisdom? Where do I find spiritual wisdom? How do I get spiritual wisdom? How do I know if I have spiritual wisdom? Am I being deceived by the world? Am I spiritually wise?

For His glory,
Bob Sheffler

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world--the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does--comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

1 John 2:15-17 (NIV)

PART ONE: SPIRITUAL WISDOM

Chapter One: WHERE DOES WISDOM BEGIN?

Proverbs 14:12

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death. (NIV)

We sometimes think we know the best way to do something. We base our decision on several things. We may think the ways of our culture are best. We may feel our traditions are good. We may be confident that the things we learned in primary school, secondary school and university are correct and should be followed without question.

We could consult someone who is an expert in the things we are concerned about. We could seek advice from successful people who have knowledge and experience. Should we blindly follow their advice, or should we dig deeper to be sure their advice is wise?

We may think our decisions are good because they feel right. We may believe our decisions are good because we have taken time to consider the experience and knowledge of experts and people who are successful. Our ways may seem right to us, but in the end they could lead to destruction or even death if they are not spiritually wise.

Proverbs 14:15

A simple [unwise] man believes anything, but a prudent [wise] man gives thought to his steps. (NIV)

A person who is not wise will make decisions based on his confidence in someone else. He will not question or doubt the information and advice given to him by others. He is naive. He takes the easy way. He does not go through the decision making process. Instead, he accepts what others tell him without doing his own thinking. He does not seek out all the facts. And, he will be the first to see destruction and death.

Wisdom is the ability to make the best decision. It is important to know as many facts as possible about the decision we are going to make. We must be sure we have the real facts, not half-truths or

deceptive ideas. But real facts are not enough. Wisdom goes beyond the facts. Wisdom is the ability to make the best use of the facts.

Proverbs 14:18

The simple inherit folly, but the prudent [wise] are crowned with knowledge. (NIV)

The unwise person will be rewarded with folly. Folly is action that is costly and useless. A foolish person will waste his resources and gain nothing but trouble. His ways will lead to destruction.

The wise person will seek the truth even when it goes against his emotions, his culture and those who claim to be experts. He will go to the best sources for truth and wisdom.

But, where do we find the best information? How do we know if something is true? How do we know if a decision or an action is wise? How do we get wisdom?

King Solomon asked God for a special gift of wisdom and his request was granted (2 Chronicles 1:10-12). Solomon wrote three books in the Bible - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Solomon. The first two books are filled with wise advice. Read below his purpose for writing the book of Proverbs.

Proverbs 1:1-6

The proverbs of Solomon son of David, king of Israel: for attaining wisdom and discipline; for understanding words of insight; for acquiring a disciplined and prudent life, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to the simple, knowledge and discretion to the young -- let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance -- for understanding proverbs and parables, the sayings and riddles of the wise. (NIV)

Proverbs is full of wise advice because Solomon had a special gift from God. The person who understands and follows this advice will gain wisdom and self-discipline (self-control). He will be just and fair. It will enable the wise to become wiser. It will give you true knowledge and real discretion. Discretion is the ability to know what is right and what is wrong, to know what is true and what is false.

Solomon began his teaching in Proverbs with the most important truth:

Proverbs 1:7

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline. (NIV)

I like the way the New Century Version translates this verse:

Proverbs 1:7

Knowledge begins with respect for the LORD, but fools hate wisdom and self-control. (NCV)

Solomon is not telling us to be afraid of God. God is not going to be unkind, unfair or evil to us. Solomon is telling us to respect God. God is the creator of everything. His knowledge and understanding are far above ours. After all, he created everything.

God is holy. This means he is kind, fair and just. God loves us, but he is also fair and just. His love and his justice are fair and balanced.

God is also merciful and forgiving. His mercy and his forgiveness are based upon our love for him. If we love him, we will respect him. We will obey him. We will not do any thing that is against his will. We will not be proud. Instead, we will humbly admit that we sometimes fail to follow his ways. We will ask for forgiveness.

The unwise, foolish person does not respect what God has said. He does not want to know the truth. Instead, he wants to live a life of folly that brings temporary pleasure which in the end brings destruction and death. He does not want to struggle with self-discipline. He wants the easy life. He wants to follow his sinful nature.

It is easy to follow our emotions and our sinful nature. It is work to study God's word in order to discover God's truth. It is easy to sin, it is difficult to resist temptation. Self-discipline requires a lot of effort. Our sinful nature deceives us into thinking sin is the way to happiness. However, sin is the way to destruction, failure and unhappiness. The only way we can find true happiness and success is to respect God's will and make every effort to discover it. True knowledge, true wisdom and true happiness come from following God's teachings. We begin our search for wisdom by seeking to know God's will for our life.

Yes, we can consult experts. We can seek knowledge from this world. We can ask for advice from those who are successful and experienced. We can consider our culture and our traditions when we make decisions. However, we must begin with God.

Everywhere and in every way we must first seek God's will for our life. We must understand what he has told us through his word, the Bible. We will practice discernment by choosing God's way when God's way is different from the advice of men. This is respect for God. This is the beginning of wisdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

(covering information in preface and chapter one)

1. What is a priority?
2. What is the difference between a worldly priority and a spiritual priority?
3. Name some sources we go to for help when we make a decision?
4. What is wisdom?
5. What attitude must we have before we can begin to discover wisdom? (Proverbs 1:7)
6. Where does wisdom begin?
7. What is discernment?
8. How do we use discernment to make a wise decision?

Chapter Two: SPIRITUAL WISDOM:

There is *worldly wisdom* and there is *Spiritual Wisdom*.

1 Corinthians 3:18-21a

Do not fool yourselves. If you think you are wise in this world, you should become a fool so that you can become truly wise, because the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. It is written in the Scriptures, "He catches those who are wise in their own clever traps." It is also written in the Scriptures, "The Lord knows what wise people think. He knows their thoughts are just a puff of wind." So you should not brag about human leaders. (NCV)

The wisdom of men is foolishness to God. Men think they are wise because of their creative ideas, their success in this life, their philosophies of life and their technologies. One definition in a Webster dictionary says wisdom is "scholarly knowledge or learning." The truth is that men are only discovering some of what God already knows. God knows everything. Men have discovered only a very small part of what God knows. They will never discover all that God knows. Knowledge about this world does not make a person spiritually wise.

The wise men of this world are fools when they say there is no God - Psalm 14:1. They are fools when they say they do not need God. Some feel Christians are naive for believing in God. They say a Christian is foolish for following the teachings in the Bible. The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 3:18, if we want to become wise, we have to become a fool in the eyes of men. The wise men of this world think they have all the answers to man's problems. But, if you really want to know the answers to man's problems, consider yourself to be a fool before men. Seek knowledge and wisdom from God and he will truly make you wise. Let us become a fool in the eyes of men so that we may gain wisdom from the holy creator of this universe.

Read this prayer of the Apostle Paul for the Christians at Ephesus:

Ephesians 1:16-19

I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know

what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints. (ESV)

My prayer for you is that you will have the Spirit of wisdom. This gift will enable you to understand the things God has revealed to us in the Bible. This gift enables you to know the hope we have through Jesus Christ. It will help you to have confidence that the eternal inheritance promised to us through Jesus Christ is richer and more glorious than anything this world offers.

The source of this wisdom is the Holy Spirit working through the Word of God, the Bible. The Holy Spirit will enable you to understand what God has written. You must take the time to read the Bible, study it and then apply it's teachings to your life.

Romans 12:2

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will. (NIV)

We do not want to live like an ordinary person in this world. We want to be transformed into a child of God. The only way to be transformed is to renew our mind. We must remove from it the ways of the world and replace them with the ways of God. We begin by studying and understanding the will of God revealed in the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit.

It is a process. We test God's will by doing things his way instead of the way of the world. Through this process we will discover the value of God's good, pleasing and perfect ways. We will please God and he will bless us (1 Peter 2:1-5).

This will make our faith strong. As we follow God's ways we will see him blessing us. This will encourage us to seek more ways to be obedient to God's will. This will encourage us to boldly step out on faith and obey God while men are telling us to forget God and follow their advice. Men will mock us for obeying God, but we will not be discouraged. We have discovered the blessings of following God. We have discovered spiritual wisdom.

Every decision we make, great or small, should agree with God's way of thinking. Every decision we make should bring honor to God

and to Jesus. This requires spiritual wisdom. Do you have spiritual wisdom?

James 1:5-8

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. (NIV)

If we want spiritual wisdom, God will give it to us generously. Spiritual wisdom will draw us closer to him and make us more obedient to his will. God will not withhold wisdom because of our past bad deeds or foolish ways. God is happy to give us wisdom.

However, we must sincerely want spiritual wisdom. We must exercise our faith and trust God when his ways go against the advice of men and the ways of our culture. If we doubt that God's ways are best, then we are double minded. Sometimes we trust God and other times we turn our back on God and trust men. God will not bless us if we do not fully trust him. We may not understand why God's ways are best. But, we must exercise our faith and trust him. We must be convinced in our mind that if we follow his ways we will be successful. I am not talking about worldly success; I am talking about spiritual success. I am talking about success for eternity, eternal life with God and eternal rewards.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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 man? Where is the scholar? 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 miraculous 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 man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. (NIV)

Men of the world think our message of eternal salvation through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is foolishness. But we know there is an evil force in the world led by Satan who is trying to destroy our relationship with the holy creator of the universe. We know that the sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead are the power of God over evil, sin and Satan. We know that we have the indwelling Holy Spirit to help us fight the battle against Satan.

Men with worldly wisdom will not humble themselves to ask God for mercy and forgiveness. Philosophers and scholars of the world will not humble themselves to consider that the Bible is God speaking to them. Men with worldly wisdom will be frustrated when they trust their intelligence to solve social problems. They will be constantly seeking solutions, but they will never find the right answers because they refuse to turn to God for help.

Some religious people (like the Jews in the New Testament) demand a miracle to prove that you are really following God – Matthew 12:38-39; 16:1-4. They will never be given a miracle by God. Religious people can never discover God's ways through miracles. Their desire for miracles gives Satan an opportunity to deceive them. Satan is a fallen angel who turned against God. He pretends to be an angel of light. He has limited power to do limited miracles. He goes around deceiving religious people into following his ways (2 Corinthians 4:3-6, 2 Corinthians 11:13-15). If we do not know the truth in the Bible through the help of the Holy Spirit, we can easily be deceived by Satan.

The philosophers of this world (like the Greeks in the time of Jesus) depend on human reasoning to discover the best way. Their human reasoning will never agree with God's ways. They can never discover God's holy ways through science and analytical research. They will never discover spiritual wisdom through human reasoning.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (NIV)

Brothers, 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. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify [to make useless] 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 him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Those who think they are wise in this world seldom find the wisdom of God. Those who are truly wise will humble themselves before God, trust him, obey him under all circumstances and ask for his mercy and grace through Jesus Christ. A Christian does not boast about himself, his accomplishments or his intelligence. A Christian boasts about his redemption through Jesus Christ. We boast about God who has shown mercy to us through Jesus Christ. We praise our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We do not praise ourselves.

Jesus gave a special gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles whom he personally chose - the twelve plus the Apostle Paul (Acts 9:15-16, 1 Corinthians 15:7-11). One purpose of that special gift was to enable the Apostles to teach us everything we need to know – John 14:25-26; 16:12-15. Read below what the Apostle Paul wrote about this gift and his message to us.

1 Corinthians 2:6-10a

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 speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom 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: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"-- but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit. (NIV)

The things that the chosen Apostles teach us were revealed to them through a special gift of the Holy Spirit. Their writings contain the wisdom of God. Their message is for those who are mature in

their faith – those who trust Jesus under all circumstances. Jesus said, if we love him, if we trust him, we will keep his commandments – John 14:15-24. His commands are revealed in the books of the New Testament written by the Apostles and the first leaders of the Church. Those men were guided by a special gift of the Holy Spirit which enabled them to know the mind of Christ – 2 Peter 1:20-21.

1 Corinthians 2:10b-13

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, 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, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. (NIV)

Only the Holy Spirit of God knows the mind of God. Only the Holy Spirit of God can reveal to man the true will and wisdom of God. The Apostles chosen by Jesus were given this special spirit so they could reveal to us God's valuable truth and wisdom. They wrote to us spiritual truths in words that only those who have the indwelling Holy Spirit can understand. The teachings of the Apostles are spiritual wisdom from God.

1 Corinthians 2:14-16

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (NIV)

Those who do not seek spiritual wisdom, will never understand the value of the teachings in the Bible. Those who do not have the indwelling Holy Spirit given to them at baptism (Acts 2:38), will think that the teachings of the Apostles are foolishness. Only those who are seeking spiritual truth and have the indwelling help of the Holy Spirit will discover the mind of Christ and gain spiritual wisdom

by studying the Bible. The man who makes decisions based on the teachings of the Apostles cannot be judged (condemned) by men. No man can rightly condemn the will of God when it is put into action by someone who understands the mind of Christ. The challenge we have is to truly know the mind (will) of Christ for our life. This is the reason we must study the Bible well.

Read these words written to Timothy by the Apostle Paul:

2 Timothy 3:14-17

But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work. (ESV)

The Bible tells us everything we need to know about living the righteous life. The Bible tells us everything we need to know to be complete and fully equipped to serve God. Do not listen to someone who claims they have a new revelation from God. Do not listen to someone who says they know a better way to follow God. Trust what God has revealed to us in the Bible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Name two types of wisdom.
2. What is the difference between the two types of wisdom?
3. Which type of wisdom is best and why is it the best?
4. What is the source of spiritual wisdom?
5. What is the relationship between faith and wisdom?
6. What has God given us to help us discover spiritual wisdom?
7. What is the relationship between spiritual wisdom, the Holy Spirit and the Bible?

8. Can we discover spiritual wisdom through miracles? Why not?
Read Matthew 12:38-39 and 16:1-4, also 2 Corinthians 4:3-6
and 2 Corinthians 11:13-15
9. Can we discover spiritual wisdom through human reasoning?
Why not?
10. What is the relationship between spiritual wisdom and
humility?
11. How did the Apostles of Jesus receive Spiritual wisdom?
Read John 14:25-26; 16:12-15, also 2 Peter 1:20-21.
12. Why is it profitable to study the Bible? 2 Timothy 3:14-17

Chapter Three: SPIRITUAL MATURITY

Spiritual wisdom leads to spiritual maturity. We have spiritual maturity when we understand the mind of Christ and put it into action. If we have the mind of Christ, we will not live as the world lives. People of the world walk in darkness. They are full of foolishness. They stumble and fall and fail. Some are full of evil. They may achieve worldly goals, but they miss out on the blessings of eternal life with God the Father – 1 John 1:6. Those who walk in the light will understand God’s ways and they will follow God’s wisdom. They have assurance of a blessed eternal relationship with God - 1 John 1:7. Those who understand the mind of Christ live as Jesus lived – 1 John 2:6.

James 3:17-18

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness. (NIV)

If we have spiritual wisdom, we will be pure (holy) in the way we live. We will be peace-loving. We will be considerate of others by putting their needs equal to or above ours. We will submit first to God and then to those in authority in the church and then to the authorities in government. We will have mercy on those who suffer and on those who offend us. We will not show favoritism, but will treat all people equally. We will not be liars or hypocrites. We will be known for our integrity and our good deeds. We will be known for our sincerity. We will be peacemakers who live a righteous life – Philippians 2:1-5.

This way of life can only come to those who take their Christian walk seriously. Those who do not seek spiritual maturity may lose their salvation.

Hebrews 5:12-14

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. (NIV)

Some Christians do not take their relationship with Jesus seriously. They are happy to accept forgiveness from God and salvation through Jesus Christ. They are happy to accept blessings from God. However they do not pursue spiritual maturity. They never learn to discern what is good and what is sinful. They never become spiritually mature. They never become servants of God. Many are still following their sinful habits. This is very unwise - foolish. Over time they forget the basic truths of Christianity. They are like infants that never learned to eat solid food. They need a refresher course in what it means to be a Christian. They need to move forward into spiritual maturity before they backslide and lose their salvation.

Hebrews 6:1-6

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so. It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (NIV)

Many who experienced the saving grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit in their life have lost their salvation because they failed to pursue spiritual maturity. They fell back into old sinful habits or they failed to put to death their sinful nature with the help of the Holy Spirit. They willingly returned to a sinful way of life and they abandoned their pursuit of the Christian way of life. They lost their salvation. Such people may find it impossible to return to God a second time. These people are asking Jesus to die for them a second time. They are bringing disgrace on Jesus because unbelievers call

Christians hypocrites when they see *backsliders* living a sinful life and claiming to be Christian.

Hebrews 6:7-12

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case--things that accompany salvation. God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. (NIV)

Christians who fail to mature because of laziness, fall back into sinful habits and end up being cursed by God on the Judgment Day. Being a Christian is not a one-time event that is completed when we accept Jesus and are baptized. Christianity is a way of life that develops into spiritual maturity and service to God. We must be serious about following Jesus.

Matthew 28:19-20

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." (NIV)

Jesus commanded us to do two things as we take the Good News (Gospel) to the world. We first convince them to follow (to be a disciple) of Jesus and confirm their commitment to him through their repentance and baptism (Acts 2:38). Then we teach them to obey the commands of Jesus. Those who refuse to obey the commands of Jesus never mature spiritually and they eventually lose their salvation. The Gospel is more than forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ. It is also a message about a new way of life that must be lived.

Romans 6:3-14

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin--because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness. For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. (NIV)

We cannot claim to be a Christian if we have not changed the way we live. A Christian is transformed into a new person. That transformation makes him a child of God. The evidence of that transformation is the way that he or she lives. A Christian matures so that his way of life no longer conforms to the sinful ways of the world.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. There are people who say they are Christians but do not seek spiritual wisdom and do not seek to follow the teachings of Jesus. What blessings are they missing? Read 1 John 1:6-7.
2. What is the relationship between spiritual wisdom and righteousness? Read James 3:17-18, also Philippians 2:1-5.
3. What is the danger of not pursuing spiritual maturity?

(more discussion questions on next page)

4. What damage is done to the Christian witness by Christians who do not pursue spiritual maturity?
5. What is the danger to Christians who do not pursue Christian maturity? Read Hebrews 6:7-9.
6. Which is more important, bringing people to repentance so they will accept Jesus as their Saviour or training believers to obey everything Jesus and the Apostles taught? Read Matthew 28:19-20.
7. What is the relationship between salvation and obedience to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles?
8. What are the blessings of being obedient to the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles? Name both blessings now and eternal blessings?

Chapter Four: SPIRITUAL LIVING

A mature Christian lives in such a way that people of the world take notice.

1 Peter 2:12

Live such good lives among the pagans [unbelievers] that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (NIV)

Those who want to criticize Christians will find ways to accuse us of doing something wrong. They may say we have turned our backs on our culture or our family. However, they will have trouble criticizing the good deeds we do because we are living a mature spiritual life. The evidence of our spiritual maturity will be seen in the way we treat others.

2 Peter 1:3-11

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness 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 and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But if anyone does not have them, he is nearsighted and blind, and has forgotten that he has been cleansed from his past sins. Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. (NIV)

It takes more than basic knowledge to be a Christian. It takes more than a belief in Jesus to make us a Christian. We do not want to

be ineffective or unproductive with the knowledge we already have. Our desire to learn more and our efforts to change the way we live along with the work of the Holy Spirit in our life will transform us into true children of God. Our faithful efforts to follow Jesus' commands will enable us to become righteous. We will gain a deeper knowledge of God. We will escape the corruption of the world and become self-controlled, faithful, godly, kind and loving. We will have assurance of eternal life with Jesus. We will be welcomed into heaven with great rewards.

Our trust (faith) in God will enable us to do great things for him. Our spiritual maturity will lead us to do things we never realized we could do. The more we serve God and others, the more satisfied we will be with ourselves and the more satisfied we will be with the life we are living. We achieve this satisfaction because we allow God to use us.

Romans 12:3-8

For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you. 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 who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying [warning others about the future], let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (NIV)

It is not our power which accomplishes this, but the power of God working through us by his indwelling Holy Spirit. God has created within each of us special skills (gifts) that can be used to serve him. We use these gifts to provide for ourselves and our families. We must also use them to serve God. Everyone does not have the ability to teach or preach, but everyone can do something to serve God. We do not take pride in these gifts or boast about what they enable us to do.

Instead, we humble ourselves and know we have an obligation to use them to serve others.

Ephesians 2:8-10

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (NIV)

God has created us to do good works that serve others for the purpose of bringing honor to him. If we use these gifts to honor ourselves we disrespect God who gave them to us. We are not saved by these works, but we show our respect for God by doing them for his glory.

1 Peter 4:10-11

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV)

We have the privilege to administer the grace of God to others. God will work through us to bless others. There are many ways to administer God's grace. We can teach, we can preach, we can encourage, we can comfort, we can help others in ways they cannot help themselves. Even if it is only giving a cup of water in the name of Jesus to someone who is thirsty, we have administered the grace of Jesus – Matthew 10:42, 25:37-40. Everyone can serve Jesus in some way. This is spiritual living.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What will make a Christian to be effective and productive?
Read 2 Peter 1:5-8

(more discussion questions on next page)

2. What does it mean to be nearsighted? How can a Christian be nearsighted? Read 2 Peter 1:9
3. How can we be sure of our salvation? Read 2 Peter 1:10-11
4. What should we be doing in addition to living a holy life? Read Romans 12:3-8
5. What is the purpose of spiritual gifts?
6. What is the relationship between God's grace and our spiritual gifts? Read 1 Peter 4:10-11
7. Name some spiritual gifts that we can use to serve God. Which gifts do you have that you are using to serve him? Read Matthew 25:37-40
8. What should be our attitude toward the spiritual gifts that God has given to us?

Chapter Five: SPIRITUAL GIVING

The spiritually wise person will do everything he can to carry out the Lord's work. The Lord's work is summarized in Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19-20.

Matthew 28:19-20

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations [ethnic groups], 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." (NIV)

Jesus asked us to take the Good News (Gospel) to all ethnic groups to make disciples (followers of Jesus) and to teach them to obey everything he commanded.

Jesus never asks us to do something we cannot do. The Holy Spirit is within us to enable us to do his work. Jesus will bless us with the resources to do his work if we are willing to trust him and follow his guidelines. Read these words of Jesus.

Luke 6:38

Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." (NIV)

Jesus asks us to give from our own resources. He promises to bless us so that we have more than we need – running over, poured into our lap. Jesus does not have a bank where we can go to withdraw money to do his work. Jesus does not send us a monthly allowance to cover our expenses for doing his work. Jesus asks us to give from our own resources. When we do this, he will bless us in ways we cannot imagine.

This is an important way to show our love for Jesus. He said if we love him we will keep his commandments. The command to make disciples and teach them is very important to Jesus. If we love him we will do everything within our ability to make it happen. We will willingly give our time, our money and our resources to make it happen.

Where is your heart? What do you love the most, the things of this world or your relationship with God through Jesus Christ? Think about this command of Jesus!

Matthew 6:19-21

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (NIV)

If we love Jesus, we will invest our resources into his eternal Kingdom. God required the Jews to give the first fruits of their harvest and to give a tenth of their income to support the priests and the Levites who carried out his work. Jesus asks us to give of our financial resources to support his work.

Jesus gave us these instructions through his Apostle Paul:

2 Corinthians 9:6-9

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; his righteousness endures forever." [Psalm 112:9] (NIV)

God and Jesus make the same promise over and over again. God told the Jews that he stopped blessing them because they stopped bringing the tithe to support his work – Read Malachi 3:8-12. He challenged the Jews to give the tithe and see how much he would bless them.

The more we give to support God's work, the more he blesses us. We do not give so that we will be blessed. We give cheerfully to show our love for God. When we give cheerfully out of love, he

gives us all that we need. He does not promise to make us wealthy, but he does promise to meet our needs.

Being poor is not an excuse for refusing to support God's work. Notice in 2 Corinthians 9:9 (Psalm 112:9) that God gives gifts to the poor. The poor can give generously on their own level. Read how the poor people of Macedonia gave generously – 2 Corinthians 8:1-5.

2 Corinthians 8:1-5

And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will. (NIV)

The Macedonians gave willingly and generously even though they were extremely poor. They pleaded for the opportunity to support the Lord's work. They gave because they loved God and they loved his Kingdom. They knew it was God's will for them to give generously.

God enables some people to be wealthy so that they can support God's work in a large way. These people are obligated to use their wealth as a tool for building the Lord's Kingdom. Some Christian business men give 90% of their income to support the Lord's work and live on the 10% left over. However, just because there are wealthy people who can support the Lord's work does not give those in poverty an excuse to give little or nothing. Every Christian, whether wealthy or poor, must show his love for Jesus by the way he gives to support the Lord's work.

Let us continue looking at the command about giving which Jesus gave to us through the Apostle Paul.

2 Corinthians 9:10-15

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so

that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift! (NIV)

Giving generously to support the Lord's work is an act of righteousness. When you give in this way you will be blessed by God in every way. You will be able to give generously every time there is a need.

There are five blessings that come from your generous giving. First, God will meet your needs and enable you to give generously again. Second, others will be blessed as we do our part to administer the grace of God. Third, your generosity will be an encouragement to those who receive help. Fourth, your action of faith in God to provide for your needs will be a witness to others. Fifth, those who are blessed by the Lord's work that you support will praise God and give honor to him. Your needs will be met, the needs of others will be met, others will be encouraged, your action will be a witness for Jesus and God will be honored. Many things are accomplished when we give generously. Much is lost when we are afraid to give.

The way we give to support the Lord's work shows both our love for God and our faith in God. If we do not feel the need to support the Lord's work with our resources, there is a serious problem with our relationship with Jesus. If we are reluctant to give of our financial resources because we are afraid God will not keep his promise to bless us and provide for our needs, there is a serious problem with our faith. Our faith and our love for God are weak if we fail to give generously.

The person who is spiritually wise will give generously to support the Lord's kingdom. He will do it cheerfully and willingly. He will trust God to provide for his needs and the needs of his family. It makes no difference whether we are rich or poor; the way in which

we give to support the Lord's work is a measure of our spiritual wisdom, our spiritual maturity and our spiritual living.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Name the two basic categories of the Lord's work. Read Matthew 28:19-20
2. What did Jesus say about the blessings of giving generously? Read Luke 6:38
3. What is the relationship between giving and our love for Jesus?
4. How do we store up treasures in Heaven? Matthew 6:19-21
5. What attitude should we have when we give to the church?
6. Are those who are in poverty exempt from giving generously? How can the poor give generously?
7. What does God promise through Jesus and the Apostle Paul about our needs if we give generously? What is the difference between our needs and our desires?
8. Name the five blessings that come when we give generously.
9. What is the relationship between our faith and the attitude we have toward giving to support the Lord's work.

PART TWO: SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Chapter Six: Neglect Spiritual Development

We are blessed to receive mercy from God through Jesus Christ. God loves us and he wants to bless us. He is willing to forgive our sins when we believe his Word (the Bible), repent of our sins, accept Jesus as our Lord and submit to baptism - Acts 2:37-38. God's ability to bless us depends on our respect for him and our willingness to cooperate with the Holy Spirit whom he gave to us at the time of our baptism – Acts 2:38.

Too often we do not take our relationship with God seriously. We neglect it. We expect God to bless us but we do little to develop a close relationship with him. In fact, sometimes we abuse our relationship with God.

There are many ways we can abuse our relationship with God. One way is to neglect to do the good things he has called us to do. This neglect can become a sin.

James 4:17

Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins. (NIV)

We can abuse our relationship with God if we neglect spiritual growth. Spiritual growth requires us to learn as much as we can about the righteous way of life. This requires Bible Study and prayer. It requires being around others who can teach us, mentor us and encourage us. It requires respecting the leaders of the church who want to help us mature.

The first failure in this abuse is to neglect our involvement in the Sunday worship service. The purpose of the weekly worship service is to honor God. The early Christians honored God every Sunday by observing the Lord's Supper – Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. The Lord's Supper reminds us of the sacrifice of Jesus. It is a time to thank God for sending Jesus. It is a time to thank Jesus for being our Saviour. The worship service is an important time to honor God in a special way through hymns of praise, prayer and the Lord's Supper.

The weekly worship service also gives us an opportunity to fellowship with other Christians. This fellowship enables us to encourage each other as we share our challenges and struggles in living a Christian life. We pray for each other, advise each other and help each other through the difficult times. We also show our love for each other as we advise and correct one another. Christian fellowship gives the elders, evangelists and leaders of our congregation the opportunity to know what is going on in our life and to give us wise biblical guidance. We give Satan the opportunity to mislead and discourage us when we neglect the fellowship offered to us by our local congregation.

Another failure is to neglect Bible studies offered by the church. The Holy Spirit will train us and transform our way of thinking into the ways of righteousness through Bible Study. Mature leaders of the church who have biblical knowledge and experience can take us through organized Bible studies which cover the things we need to know. They give us the opportunity to ask questions and get the answers we need for our personal walk with Jesus. We remain babies in Christ if we do not seek biblical knowledge from those who can teach us.

Hebrews 5:13-14

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. (NIV)

If you attend worship service only because you want to enjoy the singing, it is like an adult who is still living off of his mother's milk. You will never be a spiritual adult until you know how to distinguish good from evil. You will be misled and deceived by Satan if you do not understand what the Bible says about good and evil. This requires you to study the Bible in groups and to study it privately.

You can study the Bible privately by setting aside a time each day to read it or to listen to a recording of it in your own language. Each day, take a small portion of God's word to think about, pray about and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in applying it to your life. Never neglect studying God's Word no matter how old you get. We need God's help and encouragement every day until the day we die. We

never become totally mature and perfect in living the Christian life. Every day, Satan is trying to confuse and deceive us. Neglecting our study of God’s word is spiritual abuse. It is like starving our body by neglecting to eat food.

We must also be sure we are eating the best spiritual food. Be careful about listening to radio and television evangelists. Many of them are giving out half-truths and false teachings. This is like eating poisoned food. Many of them are giving out weak teaching which is like eating the wrong kind of food which will make you fat and lazy.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How can failing to do a good thing be sin?
2. What is the main purpose of the Sunday worship service?
3. What benefit do we get from fellowshipping with other Christians?
4. What benefit do we get from being around the leaders of the church?
5. Why is it important to privately read or listen to the Bible every day and think about what it says?
6. Why is it dangerous to depend on radio and television evangelists to be our spiritual mentors?

Chapter Seven: Neglect Spiritual Gifts

God gives to each of us special abilities that he wants us to use for him. We call these spiritual gifts. We are aware of some of them because we use them in making our living. They could be abilities in math and science or the ability to farm or the skills of carpentry and masonry. There are many skills in life. All can be use to serve God. We may not be aware of some of them until we try to do something new. These could be the ability to teach and preach or the ability to encourage and comfort.

We may be using some or all of these gifts to support our family. However, if we fail to use these same gifts to serve God, we are guilty of spiritual abuse. We are failing to do the good works that God has prepared for us to do.

Ephesians 2:10

For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. (NIV)

1 Peter 4:10

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. (NIV)

God calls some to serve him full-time. This means they use most if not all of their time to help others through teaching, preaching, counseling and other direct spiritual services. These full-time servants of God depend on those they serve to pay them. God tells us we have a responsibility to pay them for their full-time service to us – 1 Corinthians 9:4-11.

1 Timothy 5:17-18

The elders [pastors] who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages." (NIV)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why is failure to use our spiritual gifts to serve God an abuse of our spiritual gifts?
2. Why is it a sin if the congregation fails to pay its preaching elder, its pastor or its evangelist?

Chapter Eight: Use Spiritual Gifts for Personal Gain

Sadly there are some who use their special gifts to pretend to serve God when they are really seeking personal gain. They may be seeking honor for themselves. Or, they may be seeking financial gain for the wrong reasons.

Some may use their special gifts to become wealthy so they can enjoy luxury, brag about their wealth and gain the respect of worldly people. Those who have the ability to make money should use it to be generous in supporting the Lord's work – Romans 12:6-8. It is not a sin to be wealthy as long as we gain our wealth in an honest way. However, it is a sin to use wealth for worldly reasons.

Some have special spiritual gifts that enable them to directly serve God in the areas of teaching, preaching and mentoring others in the Christian way of life. Anyone who is good at this should not brag about his success. Instead he must thank God for the opportunity to serve God. He must praise God for every good thing that God accomplishes through him. And he must use God's gift for the purpose for which God gave it to him.

One biblical example of abusing spiritual gifts is found in 1 Corinthians. The church at Corinth had a serious problem within their worship service. Some had the special gift of speaking in tongues. This gift was given for the purpose of witnessing to unbelievers (1 Corinthians 14:22). However, some with this special gift wanted to show how important they were by using the gift in the worship service even when there were no unbelievers present. The Apostle Paul gently but firmly explained to them in 1 Corinthians chapter 14 that speaking in tongues during the worship service can be an abuse of the gift. He instructed them to only allow it if there was someone who could translate the language spoken during the worship service. He also said they should limit the number of people allowed to speak in a tongue during the service to only two. Again, he also said the tongue speakers should speak one at a time. They should not allow two or more tongue speakers to speaking at the same time – 1 Corinthians 14:26-28. The Apostle Paul gave the following warnings to those who wanted to speak in tongues during the worship service.

1 Corinthians 14:4

The one who speaks in a tongue builds up himself, but the one who prophesies builds up the church. (ESV)

1 Corinthians 14:33

For God is not a God of disorder but of peace. (NIV)

1 Corinthians 14:40

But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way. (NIV)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Name some ways we can abuse our spiritual gifts?
2. How were tongue speakers in the Corinthian church abusing their gift?
3. Give some examples of people abusing their spiritual gifts.

Chapter Nine: False Teachings - part one

2 Peter 2:1-3

But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the sovereign Lord who bought them--bringing swift destruction on themselves. Many will follow their shameful ways and will bring the way of truth into disrepute. In their greed these teachers will exploit you with stories they have made up. Their condemnation has long been hanging over them, and their destruction has not been sleeping. (NIV)

It is sad that some use their spiritual gifts to spread false teachings. These people have abilities to serve God. They have influence because of their gifts. However, they have been deceived into believing they have a better teaching for Christians.

They may be deceived by worldly educated men, their culture or their own prejudice about what is best. Instead of searching the Scriptures to discover God's will, they search the Scriptures for passages that seem to support their prejudice. When they discover a

passage of Scripture which disagrees with their prejudice, they claim it means something different from what it clearly says. Their confidence in themselves and their prejudice leads them to spread false doctrine using their God given gifts. A few are so confident they are right that they knowingly tell lies in order to convince others to believe them.

2 Peter 2:15

They have left the straight way and wandered off to follow the way of Balaam son of Beor, who loved the wages of wickedness. (NIV)

Balaam was a prophet of God who accepted money from the enemy of the Jews as payment for trying to convince God to destroy the Jews. Balaam knew God would not destroy the Jews, but he could not resist the chance to become wealthy. You may remember that God spoke through the mouth of a donkey to try to convince Balaam to stop using his spiritual gifts for worldly gain – Numbers 22:26-32.

These teachers have given in to their sinful nature. They were once seeking to follow Jesus, but they did not work with the Holy Spirit to put to death their sinful nature. Over time their sinful nature took full control and they returned to their former lost condition. God will punish them more harshly than those who never tried to follow Christ – James 3:1 and 2 Peter 2:4-10.

2 Peter 2:19-22

They [the false teachers] promise them [their followers] freedom, while they themselves are slaves of depravity--for a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him. If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them. Of them the proverbs are true: "A dog returns to its vomit," and, "A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud." (NIV)

Here is an example of a false teaching spread by gifted leaders. Some who proclaim this doctrine do not know it is false because they have been deceived. Others who proclaim this false teaching know it

is not true, but they use it because they know it will encourage many to join their church.

Health and Wealth Gospel

This false teaching claims that every Christian will be healthy and not live in poverty. There are many Scriptures which promise us blessings from God. There are also many Scriptures which warn us we are in a battle with Satan and his evil forces. The Christian life will not be easy. Satan wants to destroy us and he will never stop trying to discourage us. He works hardest to discourage those who are most sincere in following Jesus. If he can destroy our leaders, he can destroy the Church.

God promises us salvation and strength to fight the battle against Satan. God does not promise that we will always be healthy. God does not promise that we will not live in poverty. In fact, this false teaching about health and wealth is a tool of Satan to destroy Christians.

It is a false promise to deceive people who hope Jesus will get them out of poverty. Some will face bad health and financial struggles as a test of their faith. They will become discouraged and turn back to sinful ways because Christianity did not bring them worldly gain. Satan blesses some with wealth and health so they will believe other false teachings that lead them away from God. Satan is very clever in his deceptions. This is the reason we must know all the teachings in the Bible well.

Here are a few Scriptures which inform us that Christians may suffer in order to truly follow Jesus and serve him.

Jesus said:

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:10-12 (NIV)

One way that worldly people persecute Christians is to keep them in poverty. This is happening all over the world where governments and leaders of false religions persecute Christians. Some are tortured

and killed by their persecutors. Can we say that God is not with these people? Can we say that these persecuted Christians are not really Christians because they are forced to live in poverty and bad health by their persecutors?

Read this promise given to slaves by the Apostle Peter:

1 Peter 2:18-24

Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if a man bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because he is conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (NIV)

The Apostle Peter did not promise health and wealth to these slaves. Instead he told them they were called to serve Jesus by remaining in their bad circumstances. They were called to witness for Christ by showing love while living in poverty, abuse and bad health.

The Apostle Paul suffered in many ways in order to serve God. One of the ways he suffered was to occasionally live in poverty.

Philippians 4:11-13

I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength. (NIV)

Can we say Paul was not being protected and blessed by God because he often lived in poverty while he was serving God? Can we say Paul was not a Christian because God allowed him to live in poverty?

The Apostle Paul had another problem. He called it a *thorn in the flesh*. Most scholars feel it was bad eyesight, but it could have been some other health problem. Read what Paul said about his *thorn in the flesh*.

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. (NIV)

The Apostle Paul knew that health and wealth are not godly goals. Paul was content to serve God under any circumstance. Those who preach the health and wealth Gospel would have encouraged Paul to be discontented. They would have said there is something wrong with the way he is living since God is not blessing him with health and wealth. The health and wealth Gospel is a tool of Satan to deceive and discourage serious people who want to follow Jesus.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Are there false teachers among us? Are they self-deceived or are they deceived by others? Do they know they are teaching a false doctrine?
2. What is the danger to the person who teaches a false doctrine? What is the danger to a person who hears and believes a false doctrine?
3. How can we know that a teaching is false? What action should we take when we discover a false teaching?
4. What is the lie that is being made by the *Health and Wealth* doctrine?
5. How can you know if someone is teaching the false *Health and Wealth* doctrine?

Chapter Ten: False Teachings - part two

Salvation by Faith Alone is another deceptive teaching that is being spread by leaders who have spiritual gifts.

These leaders have been deceived by previous leaders for almost five hundred years. This false teaching began during the reformation of the Church. Martin Luther was one of the first leaders to condemn the Catholic Church for its false practice of raising money by selling indulgences. Indulgences were the right to commit sin without punishment by making a donation to the Roman Catholic Church. Many left the Catholic Church and started their own denomination.

These reforming leaders were so offended by the false idea that someone could purchase their salvation that they went beyond the teachings of the Scriptures. They said there is nothing a person can do to be saved except have faith. They found a few passages of Scripture that seemed to support their human idea. They perverted the meaning of Scriptures which went against their human prejudice.

Those who teach salvation by faith alone quote Ephesians 2:8-9 as proof that we cannot be saved by any work we do. They claim that submitting to baptism is a work. They use this prejudice human reasoning to claim that baptism has nothing to do with salvation. They claim that baptism is only an act of obedience that takes place after we are saved.

Based on human reasoning, they came up with their own plan of salvation which is commonly called the *sinner's prayer*. They claim that anyone who says this prayer with sincerity is saved the moment he or she completes the prayer. Some go so far as to say that God has already decided whom he will save and there is nothing we can do about it. Others say that once you are saved by stating your faith in Jesus you can never become lost again. These false teachings go against some of the biblical truths we have already studied in this book. They ignore clear biblical teaching and substitute human reasoning in its place.

The sinner's prayer is not found in the Bible. It is a man-made idea. It has been used as a substitute for baptism. We do not have room in this lesson to examine the many scriptures that disprove this false teaching. Here are three you can read and examine for yourself.

Acts 2:38

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (NIV)

1 Peter 3:21

and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It [submission to baptism with a sincere desire to obey God] saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, (NIV)

James 2:18-26

But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified [made right with God] by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead. (ESV)

See the Appendix on page 49 for more information on this topic.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Explain the teaching of *saved by faith alone*.
2. What is the *sinner's prayer* and how is it used?
3. How is the *sinner's prayer* used as a substitute for baptism?
4. At what point in time does a person receive the saving grace of Jesus? Read Acts 2:38, Acts 22:16, 1 Peter 3:21

(more discussion questions on next page)

5. Are works necessary for salvation by grace through faith?
Read Ephesians 2:8-9 and James 2:18-26.
6. Is repentance a work and do we have to repent before God will forgive us?
7. Is faith a work?

Please read the Appendix on page 49 for more discussion on this topic.

Chapter Eleven: Backslide Into Former Way of Life

We are not speaking about leaders only, but about all members of the church who fail to pursue the righteous life on a daily basis. We are in a daily battle against Satan and our sinful nature. If we do not stay close to God with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can fall back into our former way of life. If we do not come to our senses and fight back, we will lose our salvation – Ephesians 6:10-18. God will not save us if we are content to remain in our sinful ways. Salvation comes to those who repent, honor Jesus and constantly pursue the ways of righteousness with the help of the Holy Spirit – Galatians 5:16-25.

Hebrews 6:4-8

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned. (NIV)

The Christian who abandons his relationship with God through Jesus and returns to a sinful way of life is lost. He has insulted God. He has shown disrespect for the sacrifice of Jesus. He has brought shame to Christianity. He is like land that has been planted with good seed and receives plenty of rain but produces nothing but troublesome weeds.

We will never be perfect while in this earthly body on this sinful world. Occasionally we will slip and commit a sin. That does not mean we have backslidden. However, the way we respond to sin is very important. Do we admit to God that we have sinned and ask forgiveness? Do we admit our sin to those we have offended and ask their forgiveness? Do we work with the Holy Spirit to stop sinning? God forgives as long as we are sincerely trying to follow him.

1 John 1:6-10

If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (NIV)

The backslidden person often refuses to admit he has sinned because of pride. The backslidden person refuses to repent of a sin because he does not want to give up the pleasure of the sin. When a Christian gets into this backslidden condition, there is no way God can overlook his sin and forgive him. He is insulting the sacrifice Jesus made for him. He is an embarrassment to the Lord and an embarrassment to the church.

When we see a Christian sin we can pray for them and we can encourage them to repent – Matthew 18:15-17. If they refuse to admit their sin and refuse to repent, there is nothing more we can do to help them. God cannot forgive someone who refuses to repent and ask for forgiveness.

1 John 5:16

If anyone sees his brother commit a sin that does not lead to death, he should pray and God will give him life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that he should pray about that. (NIV)

The Christian who returns to a sinful way of life, keeps on sinning and refuses to repent or ask for help or ask for forgiveness is lost for a second time.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Explain why Christians are always in a battle against sin.
2. What causes some Christians to backslide?
3. Is a person who backslides saved? Why?
4. Can the person who is backslidden be saved again?

PART THREE: SUMMARY

Chapter twelve: LIVE LIKE JESUS

1 John 2:5-6

By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked. (ESV)

I want to close with some Scriptures written by the Holy Spirit through the Apostle Peter.

1 Peter 4:1-5

Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do--living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you. But they will have to give account to him who is ready to judge the living and the dead. (NIV)

Jesus is God who came to earth in human form. He was both God and man. He was tempted in every way that we are tempted because he was human. He struggled against the sinful nature just like we do. He also lived the perfect holy life even though he was in human form – Hebrews 4:15 and 1 Peter 3:22. The way in which he handled temptations, hardship and persecution are our guidelines for pleasing God. His goals should be our goals. He is our role model for being a child of God in this sinful world.

Jesus submitted himself to suffering for the sake of righteousness. A life led by the Holy Spirit will also bring suffering on us. That suffering is not God punishing us, but Satan trying to destroy us – 1 Peter 5:8. Worldly people who do not have spiritual wisdom will look down on us and abuse us. However, they will suffer eternal punishment because they did not respect God. We will enjoy eternal fellowship with God because we pursued spiritual wisdom from the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit.

1 Peter 4:8-11

Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms. If anyone speaks, he should do it as one speaking the very words of God. If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ. To him be the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen. (NIV)

We began this little book with Proverbs 14:12 where we are warned that our ways may seem right to us, but they can lead to destruction and death. The way to avoid that is stated in the passage below:

Proverbs 3:5-7

Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight. Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil. (NIV)

The wise person trusts in God's word, not in his own understanding. If you truly trust God, you will acknowledge him by obeying every teaching in the Bible. The foolish person chooses to obey some teachings and to ignore others. If you ignore some of the teachings, you are following your own understanding. You are headed toward destruction and eternal death.

We begin the Christian life by believing that Jesus is the only begotten Son of God. We acknowledge that we have failed to live a righteous life. We are sorry for the ways we have hurt others. We seek forgiveness. We want to change the way we live. We believe that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross paid the penalty for our sins and brings forgiveness to us from God. We believe the Christian way of life is the best way of life for us and we want to live it.

This belief is the first step toward our spiritual maturity. This belief gives us faith to do things God's way and expect a good results. We make decisions based on the teachings of Jesus and the Apostles found in the New Testament. We take actions of faith because we know the Bible to be true.

From personal experience I am convinced there is a difference between hopeful belief and true knowledge. Hopeful belief is an expectation. We hope that what God said will turn out to be true. The only way to know if something is true is to experience it. True knowledge is based on experience. We obeyed God and the results were exactly what God promised. We know from experience that God's ways are best. The results of the action we took proved that God's word is true. Now we have a working knowledge of God's word.

There is a Christian song which says:

*We believe in God the Father! We believe in Jesus Christ!
We believe in the Holy Spirit! And He's given us new life!
We believe in the crucifixion! We believe that He conquered
death! We believe in the resurrection! And He's comin' back
again! Let the lost be found and the dead be raised! In the here
and now, let love invade! Let the church live loud, our God we'll
say We believe, we believe!*

When I sing this Christian song, I change the word *believe* to *know*. *I know God the Father! I know Jesus Christ! I know the Holy Spirit! I know Jesus was crucified for my sins! I know He conquered death! I know there is a resurrection! I know He's coming back again!* The reason I know is because I have experienced God working in my life.

I did not see the crucifixion of Jesus with my eyes. I have not seen his resurrected body with my eyes. I have not seen Jesus come again. But, I know without a doubt (I am totally convinced) these events are facts based on the experience I have already had with my God through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Belief leads to faith. Faith put into action becomes a complete faith. This working faith leads to experiences that give us a true knowledge of God. Our experience with God transforms our belief into a faith which convinces us that every promise and every teaching of God is true.

Hebrews 11:1

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (NIV)

We are sure. We are certain. We have no doubts about the promises of God or the truth of God's teachings in the Bible. We will

obey even when we do not understand. We will sacrifice rather than compromise when Satan and worldly people attack us. Seeking spiritual wisdom from God in the Bible with the help of the Holy Spirit will bring you to this strong faith.

The ultimate experience for a Christian is to be with God in the New Jerusalem on the new earth – Revelation 21:1-7. I know Jesus is preparing a place for me. I know I will inherit eternal life on the new earth. I am beyond hopeful belief because I know.

Is your faith based on experience, or is it still based on hopeful belief – an expectation? Are you convinced? Do you really know or are you just hoping. The pathway to experiencing God in your life is to pursue spiritual wisdom. Spiritual wisdom will not make you wealthy, healthy or successful in the eyes of worldly people, but it will make you a child of God. And, it will lead you to an eternal inheritance in God’s Kingdom.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Why will we suffer and have to make sacrifices in order to be a Christian?
2. Will spiritual wisdom make us wealthy and healthy? Why not?
3. How do we live like Jesus? What were his goals in life?
4. What is the difference between hopeful belief and faith?
5. What is spiritual wisdom and how do we get it?
6. What are the blessings of spiritual wisdom?

APPENDIX

WE ARE NOT SAVED BY FAITH ALONE!

God had a plan for our salvation before he created the world. Read John 17:4-5 and Ephesians 1:3-10. This plan involves Jesus the Messiah and each one of us. God has done his part through Jesus. God's part is called grace. Now it is our responsibility to do our part. However, there is confusion about our part.

This document is a reflection of my understanding of God's plan for our salvation based on my biblical research and the insight of Dr. Jack Cottrell. Dr. Cottrell has helped me understand God's grace and our part in God's plan through articles published in the *Restoration Herald* and his books. His explanation of salvation by grace through faith has convinced me of things I already understood and given me an open mind toward things I thought I understood. I will share with you the challenges I faced as I sought to understand God's teachings on this important topic. I feel I have come to a biblical solution to these challenges.

CONFLICTING SCRIPTURES ON THE TOPIC OF SALVATION

Here are some examples of conflicting Scriptures on the topic of salvation:

(1) Ephesians 2:8-9 says, *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast.* However, James 2:14 and 17-18 says, *What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do.* Some say we are saved *by faith*, but the original Greek in Ephesians says we are saved *through faith*. Are we saved *by* faith or are we saved *through* faith?

Also *works* and *deeds* are translations of the same Greek word used in both Ephesians and James. James says faith without deeds (works) is dead. So, are works necessary? Is my faith really dead if I do not put it into action through good deeds which are works? If my faith is dead, am I saved? This is confusing.

(2) Romans 10:9-10 says *"if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."* And, 1 Peter 3:20-21

says, *God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It [baptism] saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.* Are we saved by confessing our faith or are we saved by baptism?

(3) Again, the Apostle Peter said in Acts 2:38, *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* When the Apostle Paul was converted he was told to *'Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name'*(Acts 22:16). Peter said baptism is **for** the forgiveness of our sins. Paul was told to be baptized so that his sins would be **washed away**. Can we be saved without our sins being forgiven and washed away? Can we be saved without being baptized?

(4) Jesus said, *"But unless you repent, you too will all perish."*(Luke 13:3) Is repentance not a work? Can we be saved without *repentance*? In Acts 2:38, Peter said we should repent. If we are saved by confessing our faith, why do we have to repent? If we are not saved by our works, then why do we have to repent?

How can we be sure of God's plan for our salvation since Scriptures on the topic seem to contradict each other?

A BIBLICAL AND PRACTICAL SOLUTION TO THE CONFLICT

We have some choices. (1) We can decide what we think is true, and change the meaning of Scriptures which we think are not true. (2) We can reject the Scriptures which we do not agree with and claim they are not God's truth. (3) We can accept all Scriptures on the topic as correct and do research to discover how they all can agree with each other.

For me, I take the third choice because I believe all Scriptures are "God Breathed". I believe all Scriptures are true and all Scriptures are equally useful in understanding God's plan for our salvation. This view is supported by the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16-17. He wrote, *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

If we believe what the Apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, then the first step is to accept that there is truth revealed in every statement of Scripture on the topic of salvation. This means they do not contradict each other. Instead, they support each other in developing one topic.

Our responsibility is not to pick and choose. Our responsibility is to try to understand.

The second step is to accept that there are no false teachings in any of the Scriptures. The Scriptures are inspired by God. The Holy Spirit guided each writer in recording the facts that God wanted him to present.

The third step is to accept that all truth on the topic of salvation is not revealed in only one or two passages of Scripture when there are many passages on the topic. When we do a topical study, we must do it without prejudice. We must examine all Scripture on a topic and see how they work together to explain one topic. It is unscholarly and dangerous to choose a few passages of Scripture to build a teaching on a topic when there are many passages on the topic with equally important information on the topic.

I have discovered that Scriptures on the topic of salvation do not contradict each other when carefully examined and compared. They are separate pieces of one puzzle that make a complete picture of God's plan. If we leave out one piece, we do not have a complete picture. If we try to hide some of the pieces underneath other pieces because we think they are the same as the piece on top, we have a distorted picture. Therefore, let us see if we can join the pieces together into one picture - one explanation that is beautiful, brings glory to God and shows respect for all of God's Scriptures.

The next challenge is to look at Scriptures that seem to contradict each other and see how they may agree with each other and make a complete teaching on the topic of salvation.

(1) Ephesians 2:8-9 and James 2:17-18

How can Ephesians 2:8-9 and James 2:17-18 agree with each other? The answer is clear in both the English and in the original Greek. Ephesians 2:8-9 says we are *saved by grace*. It does not say we are saved by faith. We are totally dependent on the grace of God to save us. There is nothing we can do that makes us worthy of salvation. The key word is *worthy*. There is nothing we can do that will make us worthy of God's forgiveness.

God creates us in his image to reflect his glory by living a holy life. We have sinned and fallen short of his glory (Romans 3:23). We cannot earn forgiveness through righteous deeds nor can we pay for our sins through donations to the church. Our only hope of salvation is by the grace of God. Grace is God's gift of mercy, a gift we do not deserve because of our sinfulness.

Ephesians 2:8-9 also says we are saved *through faith*. The key word here is *through*. When you go through something, it is a process. If you go through a door, you stand on one side and then proceed to open the door, you step through the doorway and then enter into the building or house. You will not end up inside the house if you only express a desire to be inside the house. You have to do something in order to enter the house. You have to unlock the door, turn the door knob, pull the door open, step through the doorway and you may want to close the door. All these actions are necessary to go through the door and enter the house.

Several actions are required to go through a door. The door is God's grace. Our actions are faith. Christian faith is more than a confession of our mental belief in Jesus Christ. Christian faith is a process we go through. Christian faith becomes a way of life. The things involved in the process are revealed in other Scriptures. This is the reason James tells us that faith without works is useless. James proves this in James 2:20-24. *Do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.* James clearly says we are not justified before God by faith alone.

Faith is not complete until we put it into action. We cannot earn our salvation with works. However, in order to be saved, we must demonstrate our faith. There are several things that God has ask us to do in order to demonstrate our faith. These actions are revealed in other Scriptures. These actions make our faith complete. These actions are the way we are saved by grace through faith. We are not saved by faith alone. We are not saved by confession of our faith alone.

God's grace overlooks the fact that we are not worthy of salvation. Our actions complete our faith through which we are saved. If we do not go through the faith process which God has required, then our faith is useless. We have only confessed our belief but we have not demonstrated faith. Read what James said about belief alone. *You believe that there is one God. Even the demons believe that--and shudder (James2:19).* Why do the demons shudder? They know they are lost because they have not repented nor done anything that God asked them to do. Confession of our intellectual belief in Jesus will not save us if we do not take the actions he has requested of us.

(2) Romans 10:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:20-21

How can Romans 10:9-10 and 1 Peter 3:20-21 agree with each other? Romans 10:9-10 tells us we are saved if we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and if we believe in our heart that Jesus rose from the dead. Here we see three things required. One thing is an action or a work. We have to use our mouth to publicly state that we have accepted Jesus as our Lord. The second thing is that our statement of faith has to come from our heart. The third thing is we have to accept Jesus as our Lord. If someone is your Lord it means he has authority over you. He tells you how you must live and what you must do. Your confession declares your willingness to carry out the actions your Lord Jesus requires of you. It is your promise to God. If you do not keep your promise to God, what will happen? Remember, Jesus condemned the Pharisees because they were hypocrites. Their actions did not agree with their claim to be God's people (Matthew chapter 23).

1 Peter 3:20-21 tells us that baptism saves us. Look at this carefully. Peter used Noah and the flood as an illustration. *In it only a few people, eight in all, were saved through water, and this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also--not the removal of dirt from the body but the pledge of a good conscience toward God. It [baptism] saves you by the resurrection of Jesus Christ.*

The Apostle Peter uses Noah and his family as an illustration of salvation through baptism. They were saved because their boat (the ark) floated on top of the water. In order for Noah and his family to be saved, they had to take action. They had to build the boat. They had to prepare the boat for the flood. They had to enter into the boat. They had to stay in the boat while it floated on the water. Peter says that the flood water which saved Noah and his family is symbolic of how baptism saves us. Baptism is not the symbol. The flood water that saved Noah and his family is the symbol – the illustration. Just as Noah and his family had to get into the boat that floated on top of the flood water in order to be saved from physical death, we must submit to baptism in order to be saved from spiritual death.

Peter says baptism is the *pledge* of a good conscience toward God. The Greek word for pledge is often translated as *request* in other translations of this Scripture. Request is a more accurate translation of the original Greek language. When we submit to baptism, we are requesting God to forgive our sins so we can have a good conscience toward God. We are not removing the dirt from our body; we are not taking a bath. We are asking God to remove the guilt of our sins from our conscience. We are asking God to forgive us so we can have a clear (good) conscience.

The logical relationship between these two passages is this. We believe in our heart that Jesus is the Christ and that he rose from the dead. We express that belief by confessing publicly that we accept Jesus to be our Lord. We continue that action by requesting forgiveness of our sins (a good conscience toward God) by submitting to baptism. Both our public confession that we accept Jesus as our Lord and our submission to baptism saves us. It is not one or the other, but both. If it is not both, then one of these passages has to be wrong.

(3) Acts 2:38 and Acts 22:16

The Apostle Peter was the first person to preach a Gospel sermon after the resurrection of Jesus. This took place on the Day of Pentecost. God gave evidence of the truth of this sermon by filling the Apostles with the Holy Spirit and enabling them to preach in languages they had never known. The Holy Spirit through Peter convinced a large crowd of people that Jesus is the promised Messiah who has set up an eternal kingdom. Read Acts 2:36-38 and 41 and think about how Peter ended his sermon.

"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ [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?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

Many in the crowd were convinced that Jesus is the Messiah. Many were ready to accept him as their Lord. However, they knew they were guilty of sin against God. Peter pointed out that they had rejected Jesus when they allowed Jesus to be crucified. They asked Peter what they should do to make themselves right with God. It is clear they already believed Jesus is the Christ and they were willing to make him their Lord. Peter then told them the rest of the things they had to do in order to be saved from God's punishment.

*Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Peter did not tell them just one thing to do. He told them two things they should do before their sins would be forgiven. They must repent of their sins and they must be baptized. Peter said their actions of repentance and baptism were for the forgiveness of their sins. The word *for* is important. The Greek word is *eis*. This Greek word means *into* or *purpose*. Peter said we should repent and be baptized for the purpose of forgiveness of our sins.*

This teaching agrees with the words spoken to the Apostle Paul when he was converted. Jesus appeared to Paul in a special vision that temporarily made him blind. Paul believed in Jesus and repented of his sin of persecuting Christians. Jesus told him to wait in Damascus for a man who would tell him the next thing he needed to do. Jesus sent Ananias who told Paul *'Get up, be baptized and wash your sins away, calling on his name'* (Acts 22:16).

Why did Ananias connect baptism to washing away our sins? Why did Peter say on the Day of Pentecost we must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of our sins? Why did Peter write that baptism saves us in 1 Peter 3:20-21? The only logical explanation is that this is the moment in the faith process when God forgives our sin. Other New Testament passages on baptism support this idea.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Galatians 3:26-27, *You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.* What does baptism have to do with being a son of God? How do we become sons of God according to this statement of the Apostle Paul? Paul says it is *through* our faith in Jesus Christ that we become sons of God. *It is not by our faith, but through our faith.* Paul also says we cloth ourselves with Christ when we are baptized. What does it mean to cloth ourselves with Christ? I believe this is a reference to the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, lives in us to enable us to live like Christ.

When does the Holy Spirit come into our life? An important promise that the Apostle Peter made in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost is the gift of the Holy Spirit. Look at it again. *Peter replied "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."*(Acts 2:38) Peter says one of the results of repenting and being baptized in the name of Jesus is that we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus. It is Jesus' Spirit living within us. We are promised this gift after we have repented and been baptized. Peter said, *"And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* This gift is something that is received after we have taken the faith actions of repentance and baptism. At baptism we are clothed with the Holy Spirit – we put on the Spirit of Christ – we are clothed with the Spirit of Christ.

Another valuable teaching about baptism is found in Romans 6:3-4. *Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.* Some want to say this

passage is only talking about the symbolic nature of baptism. They say baptism is only a representation of something that has already happened. However, the symbolism is really an indication of what is happening at the time someone is baptized.

Paul says baptism is the point in time when these things happen. Look carefully at the verbs. Baptism is when we are immersed into his death. Here again we have the verb *eis* which means *into* or *for the purpose of* benefiting from his death. Christ's death paid the penalty for our sins. Paul says we are baptized "*in order that*" (Romans 6:4) we may rise from the death or the penalty for our sins to live a new life.

Baptism makes it possible for us to live the new life. The only way to live a new life is to put to death our sinful nature with the help of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:13-17). All of this agrees with what the Apostle Peter said on the Day of Pentecost. If we repent and are baptized, our sins are forgiven and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who enables us to live the new life. This is when we cloth ourselves with Christ by putting on the Spirit of Christ.

All of the verbs in this passage of Romans chapter six indicate that baptism is more than symbolic. The symbolism of this action is directly connected to the application of the symbols. In other words, this is the point in time when these things take place. At baptism our sins are forgiven and we are given the Holy Spirit who enables us to live the new life.

Here are other passages of Scripture to consider on the topic of baptism:

Jesus said, *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.*" (Matthew 28:19) Why did Jesus mention baptism in this short and important command?

Why were three thousand immediately baptized on the Day of Pentecost after Peter preached? *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.* (Acts 3:41)

Why were men and women baptized when they believed what Philip was preaching? *Acts 8:12 (NIV) But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women.*

Why were the Philippian jailer and his family baptized immediately in the middle of the night? *At that hour of the night the jailer took them and washed their wounds; then immediately he and all his family were baptized.* Acts 16:33

Why were the disciples of John the Baptist baptized again? *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 into the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:4-5)*

There are many other passages of Scripture that mention the topic of baptism after the Day of Pentecost. None of them say that baptism is only symbolic.

HOW DID WE BECOME SO CONFUSED ABOUT GOD'S PLAN FOR OUR SALVATION?

We are not saved by baptism alone. We are not saved by repentance alone. We are not saved by confession alone. And James says we are not saved by faith alone (James 2:24). So how did we become so confused about salvation? Why do some say we are saved by faith alone? The answer is found in history.

The church in Rome, Italy became the dominant church several hundred years after Christ. This church became highly political and exhibited various degrees of corruption at different times in history. The Roman church became the administrative center for the Roman Catholic denomination. One example of its corruption was the sale of *indulgences* for the purpose of raising money to build a cathedral in Rome. Basically, an indulgence gave the owner the right to indulge in (commit) sin. This anti-biblical idea was defended through corrupt political reasoning since the money was used to build a cathedral that would make Rome look important.

Martin Luther, a priest in the Catholic Church and a Bible scholar, was one of the first to speak against the sale of indulgences. He declared that we are saved by faith alone. However, Martin Luther also taught that our sins are forgiven when we are baptized. The Lutheran denomination still follows this belief. Thus Martin Luther believed that baptism was necessary for salvation. He did not believe that a person could purchase his forgiveness through *indulgences*.

The Catholic Church refused to reverse its stand on the sale of indulgences. Many rebelled and left the church. Those who left put together their own doctrine of salvation based on a prejudice that we are saved by faith alone. Some went on to teach we are saved by grace alone and there is nothing we must do to be saved. They viewed faith to be nothing more than intellectual belief. They viewed baptism to be a work and therefore could not be required for salvation. Their prejudice led them to ignore and pervert the clear meaning of Scriptures on the topic of salvation. This period in church history is called the

Reformation. Those who left the Catholic Church are called Protestants meaning those who protest against the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church.

For over 1,500 years after the Church was started on the Day of Pentecost, it was commonly held by all Christian leaders that we are saved by grace through faith. It was commonly held that saving faith was not complete until it was put into action. It was commonly held that everyone who wanted to be saved had to believe, repent and be baptized. It was not until the Reformation that the teaching of *saved by faith alone* was taught. This teaching of *saved by faith alone* has existed less than 500 years. At the same time, there has existed down through history, and to this present day, Christians who reject both the Roman Catholic practice of selling indulgences and the teaching of *saved by faith alone*. The sale of indulgences and the teaching of *saved by faith alone* are in opposition to each other. Both are not biblical.

BAPTISM OF JOHN THE BAPTIST

Some want to say that baptism is only symbolic. They begin this idea with the baptism of John the Baptist. They point out that John's baptism was symbolic of the repentant heart. They point out that no promise was given to those who submitted to John's baptism. Some claim that Christian baptism is the same baptism as John's baptism.

It is true that John's baptism symbolized repentance. Baptism as a sign of repentance was a practice before the time of John the Baptist. John emphasized it by calling sinners to repent, commit themselves to a righteous life and show the world their commitment to repentance by submitting to baptism.

However, the baptism of John the Baptist is not the same as baptism in the name of Jesus. John the Baptist said, *"I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire"* (Matthew 3:11).

Before Jesus ascended into heaven he gave his disciples this instruction, *"Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."*

On the Day of Pentecost, the Apostle Peter said, *"Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. "And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."* The gift of the Holy Spirit

was not given to believers until the Day of Pentecost. It was given to those who were baptized in the Name of Jesus.

Apollos had to be corrected about the difference between John's baptism and baptism in the name of Jesus. Read the following passage of Scripture. *Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the [Old Testament] Scriptures. He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (Acts 18:24-26)*

Read the follow Scripture about the encounter that the Apostle Paul had with some disciples of John the Baptist. *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 into the name of the Lord Jesus. When Paul placed his hands on them, the Holy Spirit came on them, and they spoke in tongues and prophesied. There were about twelve men in all. (Acts 19:1-7)*

The baptism of Jesus is more than a symbol. It is the point in time when God forgives our sins through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross. We are promised the gift of the Holy Spirit after we have repented and submitted to baptism (Acts 2:38 and Acts 19:1-7).

THE THIEF ON THE CROSS

Some want to use the example of the thief on the cross to justify the teaching of *saved by faith alone*. Jesus was crucified between two thieves. One of the thieves showed his faith in Jesus and requested to be a member of God's Kingdom. His request to Jesus showed he had faith. Jesus responded by promising the man he would join Jesus in Paradise that very day. This man was saved because he confessed his faith in Jesus.

However, let us look at some of the overlooked details. The first detail is that Jesus was still alive and had not completed his sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. The sacrificial death, the burial and the resurrection of Jesus were necessary to institute the new covenant

between God and man. The Old Testament covenant was still in effect when Jesus promised salvation to the thief. The conditions for salvation under the new covenant had not been announced. Those conditions were clearly stated on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38).

Another overlooked detail is that it was impossible for the thief to do anything else while hanging on the cross. He could not submit to baptism before he died. He could not live a righteous life since he died within a few minutes. He could not put his faith into action. The only action possible under his circumstances was to confess his faith in Jesus.

Another possibility to consider is that Jesus made an exception for the thief because of his circumstances. Jesus has the authority to make exceptions to the conditions for salvation. He can and may do that for certain people because of their circumstances. However, we do not have the authority to make exceptions to God's teachings on salvation or any other topic on which God has spoken to us through His Word. Human reasoning does not stop, overturn or make useless what God has revealed to us through His Word.

EXCEPTIONAL CIRCUMSTANCES

Some want to say baptism is not necessary for salvation because there are circumstances where a person cannot be baptized. They use examples of someone being converted in a dry desert where there is not enough water or someone dying before they can be baptized.

However, these unusual circumstances do not make God's Word untrue. God is the judge and he will decide if these circumstances are worthy of an exception to that which he has revealed to us in His Word. I personally feel God will make exceptions for those who are sincerely trying to obey God, but their circumstances make it impossible for them to fulfill all his requirements. Again, just like the thief on the cross, only God has the right to make those exceptions. It is dangerous to teach those exceptions as if they are the teachings of God.

Jesus, who is both God and man, did not make an exception for himself. Jesus was in the wilderness being tempted by the devil. One of the temptations was to ask God for an exception. Read about it below.

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot

against a stone." Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" Matthew 4:5-7 (NIV)

Any time we teach something which is an exception to what is taught in God's revealed Word, we are testing God. We are asking God to do something that is not necessary.

THE SINNER'S PRAYER

A very common practice is to use the *sinner's prayer* when you bring someone to Jesus. Following is one example of the sinner's prayer which I found on the internet:

"Heavenly Father,

I come to you in prayer asking for the forgiveness of my sins. I confess with my mouth and believe in my heart that Jesus is your Son, and that he died on the Cross at Calvary, that I might be forgiven and have eternal life in the kingdom of Heaven.

Father I believe that Jesus rose from the dead and I ask you right now to come into my life and be my personal Lord and Savior. I repent of my sins and I will worship You all the days of my life! Because your word is true, I confess with my mouth that I am born again and cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ. In Jesus name I pray, amen.

If you read these words and truly believe them in your heart, praise the Lord, your name will be written in the 'Lamb's Book of Life'!

The Bible hints at prayer in the process of seeking our salvation. Here are some examples:

The instructions of Ananias to the Apostle Paul, *"Now why do you delay? Get up and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on His name."* (Acts 22:16) The phrase, *calling on His name*, indicates that Paul should say a prayer. In this Scripture, both prayer and baptism are conditions for salvation - having our sins washed away.

Romans 10:13 says, *"everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* Romans 10:13 is a quote from the Old Testament - Joel 2:32. *Calling on the name of the Lord* indicates a prayer. The context of Romans 10:13 is Romans 10:9-10 where we are instructed to confess with our mouth that we take Jesus to be our Lord and that we believe in our heart Jesus rose from the dead. Some see this confession to be a public confession before others who can witness the event. The Apostle Peter quoted Joel 2:32 in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts

2:21), but he went on to list repentance and baptism as necessary steps for the forgiveness of our sins.

So, what saves us, our confession or our prayer or both? Is calling on the Lord just a matter of prayer? Or is there more to it than prayer? Could it be that *calling on the name of the Lord* includes our repentance, our confession of faith, our commitment to Jesus as Lord, our submission to baptism and prayer?

Notice in our example of the sinner's prayer that the last paragraph says, *If you read these words and truly believe them in your heart, praise the Lord, your name will be written in the 'Lamb's Book of Life'!* It is claimed that this prayer brings you salvation. This is a man made prayer. We do not find it in the Bible. There are several different version of this prayer on the internet. How can we be sure which version is the right formula? Can we have confidence in our salvation if we only say a man made prayer?

Also notice in our example that the last paragraph of the prayer says, *Because your word is true, I confess with my mouth that I am born again and cleansed by the blood of Jesus Christ.* We cannot tell God that we are born again and cleansed by the blood of Jesus! This is not something that we do for ourselves. Instead we call on the Lord to cleanse us, to forgive us and to give us rebirth into his new way of life with the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Again, the term *born again* comes from Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus (John 3:1-8). Jesus told Nicodemus that he had to be born again of the water and the Spirit. The water is a reference to baptism and the Spirit is a reference to the Holy Spirit. We know that baptism is symbolic of being born again (Romans 6:3-4). The Holy Spirit is a gift given to us at baptism (Acts 2:38). Born again is something that God does for us. It is not something we can claim has happened before we call on the Lord. We cannot tell God it has happened, we must ask God to make it happen. Our part in asking is more than repeating a prayer. Our part is to believe, repent, pray, confess our belief in Jesus, commitment to Jesus as Lord and submit to baptism.

SUMMARY

Let us be careful not to oversimplify God's plan for our salvation. We are certainly saved by grace. There is nothing we can do to make ourselves worthy of salvation. However, almost all of God's promises are conditional. This means there are certain conditions we must meet before God will fulfill his promise.

Naaman was a commander of the Syrian Army (2 Kings 5:1-14). God offered to heal Naaman of his leprosy if he would wash himself in the Jordan River seven times. Naaman was greatly offended by these conditions (2 Kings 5:11). First, Naaman was an important man. Naaman expected the prophet Elisha to come out of his house, wave his hand over the leprosy and heal him immediately. Instead, Elisha sent his servant with instructions from God. Secondly, he objected to bathing in the Jordan River. He had nicer rivers to wash in at home. Thirdly, he thought it was unnecessary to wash himself seven times. These conditions seemed foolish to Naaman. However, God did not heal Naaman until he humbled himself and submitted to all the conditions of God's promise (2 Kings:4:14).

There are several things in the New Testament which God has clearly asked us to do in response to his offer of salvation from the penalty of our sins. We can call these the conditions under which God will save us by his grace. Just like Naaman we cannot tell God how to bless us. We must not pick and choose the conditions we will use and reject the ones we do not like. If it is impossible for us to meet some of God's conditions, he has the authority to make exceptions. However, it is dangerous for us to teach possible exceptions as if they are the teachings of God. We are not God and we have no authority to make exceptions on behalf of God.

We are saved by grace through faith. We are not saved by grace by faith. *Through faith* means actions that we take because we have faith. In my opinion, the Bible is very clear on this when you accept with equal value all Scriptures on the topic of salvation. There are several conditions for making faith complete that we must respect in God's plan of salvation. There are several conditions that seem to be required before God will forgive our sins. Those conditions include belief that Jesus is God and the only valid sacrifice for our sins, repentance from our sinful life, confession of loyalty to Jesus as Lord and submission to baptism. Those conditions do not make us worthy of salvation. However, they are still conditions that God has clearly revealed to us through His Apostles in their writings which were guided by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).