

What Possible Good?

Turning the Tables on Our Pain and Suffering

**A Study of the Pain and Suffering
We All Face Living in a Fallen World
and
The Hope We All So Desperately Need**

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my true champion of pain and suffering—my sweet wife Linda.

Most people not “in the know” would never guess what she’s been through or going through at the moment. They would think that she didn’t have a care in the world just by observing her ever-present smile and positive attitude. However, I can positively attest to the fact that it is not due to the absence of pain, but rather because she has learned to “suffer well” by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Through it all she has done much more than survive. She has thrived as she has grown spiritually with an ever-increasing faith and trust in her God. I can also attest to the fact that she is definitely not a complainer since I know that not a single day goes by that she is not dealing with some level of pain, but you would not know it.

Here’s a brief rundown of Linda’s many “battle scars”: Linda has endured nearly a dozen spinal surgeries in as many years. She continues to suffer daily with constant back and leg pain due to chronic spinal stenosis and degenerative disk disease. We’ve lost count of the number of steroidal spinal injections and attempts at nerve ablation in her spine. Her future will very likely include additional spinal surgeries.

Linda has also struggled for over twenty years from symptoms related to an autoimmune deficiency called mixed connective tissue disease. Some of the symptoms include systemic features of lupus, fibromyalgia, and a variety of other painful joint and muscle issues. Most recently Linda has become a cancer survivor, having completed intensive radiation therapy after successful breast cancer surgery.

Linda’s personal response to the often-asked question of “Why me?” is simply, “Why not me?” She doesn’t seek sympathy. In fact she is known to typically respond when asked, “How are you doing?” by saying with a smile, “I am just delightful.” This response has turned into a running

joke among her close friends. They will often answer their own question about how she is doing today with, “We know... you’re ‘just delightful.’” My knowing how much pain she daily endures recently led me to ask her if she was really being totally honest in her response about her being “just delightful.” She said, “In spite of my pain, I am choosing to not let my pain dictate my attitude or impact how I interact with others.”

She went on to say, “I’m not saying it is easy. However, my prayer is that by choosing to be ‘delightful’ in the midst of my pain, I will encourage others to choose to be delightful as well. It is so important to not let anything, even pain and suffering, steal my joy in the Lord.”

In the midst of Linda’s long journey with health issues, we have often looked at each other and asked simultaneously, “What’s next?” Regardless of what’s next, Linda will continue to add to the list of the many reasons I call her my true champion of pain and suffering. However, she will always be the first to tell you that she owes it all to her own true champion, Jesus Christ, her Lord and Savior—He is first in her life in all things.

Author's Notes

As a preface to this book, I would like to share that my writing is grounded primarily in the spiritual aspects of my own journey through pain and suffering. I have personally found the most powerful moments of spiritual growth in my life have come during times of trials. During these times I have held on to God's hand and have seen firsthand his faithfulness in turning bad things into good things.

My prayer is that God may be glorified through what he has done for me and all of us. I also want us to grasp that this world is not our home, but rather it is our spiritual training ground or boot camp. God has never promised us that our life on earth would be a rose garden, yet he does promise us a permanent and glorious one after this life is over.

God's purpose for us now is that in the midst of pain and suffering, we will share the fragrance of his faithfulness with others. We will do this as we await the glorious return of his Son and our Savior Jesus Christ... when everything will be changed and be made new. No more pain and suffering.

The preparation and effort put into writing this book have not been just a "theoretical exercise" for me. As I write this book, I am speaking from my heart with conviction of what God has done to "repurpose" my life as a result of my pain and suffering. He can do the same for all of us through our trust in him. I am not unfamiliar with extremely painful situations and trials.

I want to share upfront some of my own trials that God has faithfully brought me through. I was sexually assaulted several times as a ten-year-old boy by a seventeen-year-old young man who lived in our home for a while at the invitation of my well-meaning parents. They were never aware of any of this until years later when I shared with them what had happened. They were obviously both shocked and grieved by what had happened to their young son.

Shortly after that teenage boy moved out, I developed a strong addiction to pornography which continued through my early adulthood years. After twenty-five years from the time of the abuse, I was still struggling to hang on... then I hit rock bottom, seeing no reason to go on. From the pit that I was in, there was nowhere to look but up—to God. So, I surrendered my life completely to him and he lifted me up, showing me his grace. And he has continued to walk with me daily.

Through the years I participated in an early failed marriage. Also, I experienced health issues including seven kidney stones and lower spine issues and survived both skin and prostate cancer.

My prayer now is that by sharing my personal struggles, we can all be encouraged that we are not alone. We can stand united and draw strength from each other. God will empower us to seek the same comfort for others as we have received from him. Of course, our struggles of living in this world will continue until the day Jesus comes and takes us home. At which time he will make everything new and totally free us from any more pain and suffering forever. No more tears.

I praise my Lord that through all of my trials, he has given me the victory. Some trials he has delivered me “from” quickly, while others he has delivered me “through” them and brought me safely to the other side. My prayer is that all of us will be strengthened and encouraged as we move forward together with patient endurance as we walk our own journeys through pain and suffering. Be assured... we can all have victory through Jesus.

Prologue

Moments after being welcomed by other group members to his first-time attendance at the weekly men's Bible study, Bradley took a deep breath and sat quietly, trying to let his nervousness settle. His thoughts quickly reconnected with the group as he heard someone begin to read a passage from the eighth chapter of the book of Romans, saying, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him...." (Romans 8:28 NIV^[1])

Upon hearing these words, he bent his head slightly forward, subtly shaking it. It was less about his disputing the words of the scripture and more about getting the spinning balls in his head to settle back in their assigned holes, much like a pinball machine. All the time he was hoping that no one had noticed his actions. However, stopping the spinning balls rolling around in his head was not happening.

The hauntingly emotional downhill slide had started once again. He totally tuned out everything and anyone else around him, unaware that someone had continued reading the rest of the passage. His mind instantly transported him back to "that place" where so many years ago he had found himself in total shock.

He was suddenly there again in his mind, standing and looking at his car that was destroyed beyond recognition. He remembered his wanting to cry or scream, but nothing had come out. All he had felt was a moist stinging wetness in his eyes. He did not realize that he had been slowly opening and closing his mouth without saying any actual words.

As he stood there, he looked down at his hands which were now shaking uncontrollably. Then he felt his whole body begin to shake, slowly at first and then becoming much more intense. In an attempt to steady himself, he quickly leaned over and took hold of a twisted, crumpled part of the car's roof, a car that had become Bradley's family car. It held so many special memories for him,

not only the daily trips with his wife and kids around town, but also several incredible family vacations.

While holding on to the car's roof, he suddenly felt a piercing pain on top of his head. His right hand immediately felt for the source of the pain. When he observed his bloody fingers, he knew that his head was injured. He extracted a short glass shard that his fingers found in the top of his forehead. He vaguely recalled glass flying from the windshield and side windows, spraying into his face and neck at the moment of impact.

He then winced in response to a different sharp pain on the right side of his chest. He was pretty sure he had broken a few ribs as well as his forward progress had been violently stopped by his seat belt just moments before the airbag had deployed. Then out of the numbness while thinking about his own injuries came an emerging emotional energy wave deep within him, much like the rumbling of a volcano or an earthquake. It quickly jolted his body upright, and the words seem to erupt from his mouth as he suddenly shouted loudly and painfully, "My kids?"

Why hadn't he heard them crying for their Daddy? Why hadn't he heard even some faint whimpers or groans, indicating they were at least alive? But there were absolutely no sounds whatsoever coming from the car, except for sounds of the hot car engine cooling down and some spewing noises.

Fearing the worst as he lurched forward to look into the back seat of the car for his kids, he felt a jarring blow as he hit his head hard on the car's upper backdoor frame. The impact of hitting his head caused him to step back briefly. As he leaned backward, he felt his back suddenly stiffen and almost lock in place, but he forced himself to lean forward. Once again he tried to brace himself for what he was about to see.

Bradley leaned more slowly this time into the blackness of the back car seat area. He could easily see that the back seat was badly mangled, but as his eyes slowly moved to the seating area,

his mind was not ready for what he was about to see. Both of his young sons were still sitting with their seat belts on, one in his car seat and the other on his booster seat. Their small young bodies were slumped over in their seats, not making a sound and appearing lifeless. Their little heads faced down and were covered with blood from the traumatic injuries they had sustained in the deadly impact just moments ago.

From their positions, Bradley couldn't see their faces and was afraid to raise their heads because of what he would see. His head jerked back up again when he heard the sounds of sirens from the approaching ambulance. He turned to see their flashing lights just before the ambulance came to an abrupt stop. He backed up from the car, knowing the EMTs needed to first check on his kids.

Three EMTs jumped out immediately. The first two grabbed their medical gear and started running directly to the car. The third EMT grabbed his gear as well but stopped first to assess Bradley's injuries. Since Bradley's focus was totally on his kids, he tried to pull away. But the EMT stopped him and said it was important to get him checked out for potential life-threatening injuries himself since he was still in shock. He needed to wait and let the other two EMTs do their jobs.

As he watched them extract his two kids from the car, he noticed that the two EMTs look at each other and slowly shook their heads. Their body language was conveying to him what he already feared and somehow already "knew" deep inside himself. But being a father who deeply loved his kids, he couldn't give up or give into his worst fears for even a second. So for the briefest of moments, he held on to a thin ray of hope.

But then like a knife being thrust through his heart, his worst fears were confirmed. Reeling from the pain and becoming overwhelmed with his own grief, he buried his head into his hands and sobbed uncontrollably. That's when something else hit him like he had just been hit by the

biggest lineman ever to play in the NFL. His wife. He had to somehow tell his wife about what had just happened. Life for both of them would never be the same. Would (or could) they survive this?

For months after the accident that took his kids, Bradley had played back these horrible memories over and over again in his mind. He asked himself the same haunting question of “Why?” that parents let play over and over in their heads after such a tragedy. But no answer ever surfaced.

Bradley had often tried to remember the specific topic of the last conversation he was having with his kids in the car that day, just prior to the accident. He did have some faint memories of the kids laughing about something he had just said. He held on to the sweet comforting belief that they were all likely enjoying some happy moments just before the accident from which they had apparently died instantly. This brought him some measure of comfort as well, but not as sweet as others.

Deep in his mind, Bradley often wondered if the person who had run the red light had ever considered previously what his careless driving habits might one day result in. He painfully and angrily assumed the man had likely been in the habit of not paying attention to traffic signals. The man was likely in the habit of running red lights frequently, texting or talking on his phone. Or just maybe this was truly an isolated incident. Clearly he would never know, but he needed to blame someone for the senseless tragedy that had cost him everything.

Sometimes his mind and heart would be flooded with guilt since he was the one who was driving the family car when it happened. Couldn't he have somehow avoided this? Why hadn't he made that stop at the local grocery store instead of choosing to go later? He was convinced if he had just made that stop, it surely would have delayed them from reaching that particular intersection at that specific time and his kids would still be alive.

Bradley had trouble controlling his thoughts. His mind would invariably, seeming out of nowhere, return to the crash scene. He remembered vividly how the man's car had struck with such strong force that it had literally torn the cabin of the car across the middle, almost severing it right behind the front seat.

On this particular day, as his heavy heart began to retouch all of the hurt and pain of that horrible scene, he heard his own inner voice shout, "Enough. Stop it. You are not in a safe place to be doing this." He then was jolted out of his memories back into the present, just as he heard another man's voice. It was the Bible study leader saying, "We really had a good discussion today guys. I know we are still a fairly new group, but I want everyone to feel safe to say whatever is on your mind."

He went on to say, "I'll see everyone back next Wednesday... same time and place as we continue our study of the book of Romans. By the way, I'd like to give a special thanks again to Bradley for his joining us this week. Hopefully, we will see you again next week." Bradley was grateful that everyone had assumed he was just quiet because he was new to the group.

They had all seemed oblivious to his mental absence while he had once again revisited those horrific moments. He knew that he had to get past this stuff now and move on... somehow. Then he considered what he had just thought about moving on and then asked himself, "Is it even a possibility?" He didn't think so.

In the following weeks, Bradley gradually begins to build some sense of trust and comfort with the guys in the study group. Some had even opened up and talked about their own personal struggles. Maybe, just maybe, he could ask the group two lingering questions that were continuing to burn in his heart and his mind.

Finally that day came. He had thought about it before arriving at the Bible study. This time he was determined to wait no longer. Seemingly out of nowhere, he spoke up and asked the group of

men, “What possible good could come from the death of my two young children? Please help me understand why a loving God would allow this to happen to me and my two sons?”

The group sat stunned as they listened with compassion to their friend who at last was telling them about the pain and suffering he was continuing to struggle with since the most tragic day that changed his life forever.

Some Questions Now for Readers

Questions:

“What possible good could come from this tragedy?”

“Why would a loving God allow this to happen?”

Both of these questions will stop most of us right in our tracks, leaving us totally paralyzed and speechless. How should we properly respond to someone who has asked these two questions? What, if anything, could be said or done to help them take even the slightest step toward processing this horrible tragedy? What could possibly bring them some measure of peace, comfort, and/or closure in the midst of their grieving?

Answers:

In the moment—though many seemingly pertinent scriptures or insightful words may come to our mind at that moment, let’s not overthink it. The person asking such deep-heart questions is likely not in a place or emotional state to hear, much less respond to, Bible verses that are quickly spoken, though true and our intention being well-meaning. That is because their deep sense of pain and suffering is calling out for the touch and supportive prayers of others. Since God created us to need and support each other, let’s move quickly to the person, throw our arms around them, give them a big hug, and just say we are so sorry they are hurting and would like to pray with them. Don’t worry about what to say. The Holy Spirit will give us the Spirit-led, heartfelt words to pray.

After the moment—I believe that God provides us a great deal of information and insights into the reasons and purposes of our pain and suffering, and possibly surprising to us—he shares with us different perspectives on how good can come from our pain and suffering. We will examine in depth in this book these perspectives and glean the insights God provides us to help make sense of it all.

Update on Bradley's Story

Though many years have now passed, Bradley is still the same loving, hurting father who misses his kids terribly. He easily sheds a tear even now when telling others about that horrible day. Though most of his questions as to “what, how, and why?” have remained unanswered, he has gradually begun to move forward with his life, yet never forgetting that day or his kids.

Through his personal daily devotional time in Bible study and prayer and his continued fellowship with his brothers and sisters in Christ, Bradley has arrived at a place of peace with God and his life. As this peace continued to encompass him, the Holy Spirit led him to finally forgive in his heart the man who had plowed into his car on that fateful day, killing his two sons.

As a result, he now tells others that he feels like a great burden has been lifted from his heart as he has been freed from his anger, bitterness, and depression. Bradley moves forward each day holding tightly to the righteous and strong right hand of his Savior Jesus. As he faces new trials, he now experiences Jesus' everlasting and loving arms holding him tightly and even carrying him when needed (as we all do at times).

Bradley's “nightmare experience” is repeated everyday somewhere in the world. Anyone at any time can be blindsided by the sudden death of a loved one, loss of a job, being gut-punched with the dreaded words “you have cancer,” or any of a myriad of other unexpected events or trials. All of these trials are accompanied by their own level of ongoing pain and suffering.

While we live on this earth and face trial after trial, we will all at times struggle on our own in search of answers to Bradley's two faith-challenging questions: "What good could possibly come from this trial, and why would a loving God allow this trial to happen to me?"

Purpose of This Study

The purpose of this study is twofold: First, glorify God for his faithfulness as we mutually grasp further insights, incorporate new perspectives, and gain deeper understanding from the truth revealed in God's Word concerning our pain and suffering and, second, encourage one another through sharing of our personal trust and faith-building experiences and then coming alongside of others who are struggling with their own pain and suffering.

My prayer is that this study will provide a much-needed framework to help us construct a spiritual road map that will divert us away from an easy path of blaming God for all of our pain and suffering and instead lead us to a path that will anchor us in total trust of our God in all things.

By examining God's Word together, we should gain a greater assurance of God's faithfulness as he guides us all to learn how to "suffer well." He wants us all to hold on to him as we face today's troubles and as we prepare for upcoming trials. *God loves us unconditionally. He is thus worthy of our unconditional trust.*

Chapter 1

Double-Trouble

Now entering stage right [AR1][LT2] in life's grand theater is a notorious duo that's well-known around the world, literally known by every single person. This duo's identity is intrinsically linked in each other. Just as there is no Butch Cassidy without the Sundance Kid or Bonnie without Clyde, this duo is inseparable in their identity—can't have one without the other.

Their entry on the big stage is usually not announced or even publicized ahead of time because they thrive on the element of surprise. As a result, they work very hard to ensure that their future arrival goes completely unsuspected and undetected. In some cases they will secretly arrive on the scene several weeks or even months ahead of time, just waiting until the special moment of their big reveal.

They are broadly considered as merciless villains, choosing only to perform on a dimly lighted stage in order to project an ominous, depressing, and potentially fateful environment. It comes as no surprise that the unknowing and unwilling participants in their well-orchestrated plays are indeed the tragic victims of their madness. They are not very selective in picking these victims and are totally content with just “doing random.”

Anyone at any time is fair game. All of the mystery and intrigue are enhanced by their being masters of disguise. Their initial entry into a victim's life is often effectively masked by their deceptive appearances. They can show up initially resembling something that is typically deemed harmless, presenting no immediate need for concern, much less fear or panic.

However, once this duo arrives on the stage, the real show starts as they begin wreaking havoc in their victim's life. After witnessing the initial shock and fear of their victims, the duo next focuses on destroying their victim's hope, specifically delighting in breaking their victim's spirit.

They seldom perform short plays (considered mostly a waste of their time and talent) but prefer instead the multi-act, longer plays so they can reap greater levels of devastation from their actions.

Unfortunately for their victims the impact of each act by this duo can go on for a long time. But... there's great news. There is hope. Delivery comes from the sudden brightness of the house lights as God hits the master light switch. God does this in response to the prayerful pleading requests of the victims that are his children.

The victim's (our) prayers are joined by a host of praying faithful believers who come alongside us, acting as our "prayer warriors." The dynamic duo is immediately rendered powerless by the glorious light of the Lord since they no longer have control over the situation. There may be lingering physical, psychological, and/or emotional side effects left behind from the duo's attack. However, each of these effects will be used by God for our ultimate good and his glory.

God delivers us from the darkness as he leads us along his providential path of spiritual healing. This often calls for patient endurance of the saints—his children—but he will complete the work he has begun in all of us.

It's time to unveil and disarm this "devastating duo:" *Pain and Suffering*.

Chapter 2

The Blame Game

When considering where to start this study of pain and suffering, I decided to first Google “pain and suffering” to see what good articles or books might be available to skim-read to get the ball rolling. Well, I was shocked to see that “pain and suffering” is considered first and foremost as a legal term. The first items to come up (fifty plus) from Google’s search engine were 100% related to lawsuits and settlements.

Several items even included a “pain and suffering” calculator to estimate what one might receive as a result of an injury caused by a third party. While not the type of articles I had hoped to find, it did provide a strong message: “Someone is to ‘blame’ and they must pay.” So clearly the first step is to assign the blame to whoever is responsible for our pain and suffering. So as they say, “Let the games begin.”

Leaving the legal arena, let’s move on since the scope of this study is much broader than the pain and suffering related to accidents caused by others, though that’s still part of it and will be discussed later. But regardless of the reasons or the sources of our pain and suffering, we automatically seek someone or something to blame.

Here’s a list of some common sources we blame for our pain and suffering (not in priority order):

- Major diseases and illnesses
- Family dysfunction issues
- Drug/alcohol/substance abuse and addictions
- Family genetics/history
- Classic old-age issues
- Accidents caused by ourselves

- Accidents caused by others, with or without intent
- Irresponsibility of healthcare/service providers
- Irresponsibility of corporations/companies
- Irresponsibility of governments
- Environmentally caused health conditions
- Weather/natural disaster-related issues

We can all add our own true or perceived sources to this list. Notice the lack of spiritual sources on this list. However, the devil is the primary initiator behind a number of the sources above since he is bent on our destruction.

The rest of the blame lies with us and others. *Thus we should not blame God for our pain and suffering.*

Chapter 3

Different Perspectives

After all of the blaming and finger-pointing is done, we need to step back and consider a wider variety of perspectives. There are likely new and fresh perspectives that would help us better understand what is going on in our lives and the underlying reasons behind it. This may be just what we are looking for in assessing our pain and suffering—a much-needed fresh look at our pain and suffering as explained in God’s Word.

Let’s first cover some of the more typical perspectives that we often latch onto in our search for answers as to “Why?” One classic perspective often embraced during times of pain and suffering is the *victim* perspective. Our quest in this perspective becomes an intense search for the identity of the villain who is to blame for our pain and suffering and then make them pay. Sound familiar?

Another perspective is the *punishment* perspective. It goes something like this: “We’re being punished for our past sins and mistakes, so we guess it’s time for us to pay up. We knew that we couldn’t run and hide forever. After all, the things we are going through typically do not happen to the ‘good’ people that we know.”

Sometimes after unsuccessfully test-driving these first two perspectives, we feel our anger and frustration increasing as we try to get to the bottom of our pain and suffering. So the devil takes advantage of our confusion and vulnerability by giving us a little nudge at first, followed then by a strong push if we demonstrate any resistance to where he wants us to go. In our weakness and pain, he can lead us to the increasingly popular *God did it* perspective.

Here’s the likely rationale in the “God did it” perspective: “How could God let this happen to us? After all we were just beginning to open up to him and trust him more when we get hit with a truckload of pain and suffering.” As a result we may decide that we can no longer place our trust

in God and begin turning away from him altogether. We run the risk of totally shutting down our prayer life and devotional times. We likely will stop going to church regularly and find ourselves avoiding anyone who might try to engage us in spiritual discussions.

None of the abovementioned perspectives are what would typically be viewed as being “healthy” from a mental, emotional, or spiritual standpoint. Before we examine some healthy perspectives, let’s look at a brief illustration that we will call: *The Small Cabin in the Woods*.

Small Cabin in the Woods

Three hikers set off to explore a region of a mountainous forest, each agreeing to leave on their hikes from a different location. Their plan was to use a handheld GPS device to keep track of their individual routes, recording the exact location of any spectacular views they encountered.

Their goal was to combine all of their GPS data of each amazing view and determine the shortest continuous route to see all the sights. Then they would bring all of their families back with them for what they envisioned to be an impressive guided tour. [They had agreed [AR3][LT4]to meet back up at a small coffee shop in a little town nearby where they would do their debriefing and begin working on the tour route. They would also factor in which particular location provided the best vantage points for viewing each of the sights. They were all convinced that this would be the best family tour ever.

After their hikes and GPS recording were done, they met back at the coffee shop and were enjoying their first cups of their preferred blends. They immediately talked with excitement about what they had each seen along the routes of their individual hikes.

There were a number of common sightings, for example, a very high, knee-knocking ledge that extended out over the edge of the mountain’s top, well over one thousand feet above the valley below. They also saw a large waterfall that emptied into a large pool of clear water, and then below

the pool was a smaller waterfall that fed a beautiful mountain stream that flowed through the valley below.

However, there was one particular sighting that they had difficulty in gaining a consensus of its description. It was a small cabin that they all had seen in the deep woods, on the side of one particular mountain. The first hiker with a western view said, “I loved that little elevated deck extending off the west side of the cabin’s roofline.” The other two said that they hadn’t observed the deck.

One of the other guys that had viewed the cabin from the south said, “I saw a cozy front porch with two rocking chairs.” But neither of the other two saw a front porch. The last one who had only an eastern view said, “Don’t tell me that you two didn’t see that big chimney on the east side of the house? Obviously there was no one there, as no smoke was coming out of it.”

They quickly realized that their planned family tour would need to include multiple views of this inviting small cabin to see the entire cabin.

Cabin Story’s Application

So, what does the small cabin story have to do with our processing the pain and suffering we all are experiencing?

The multiple views (or perspectives) required to see the whole cabin is exactly what we need to do before locking into any one source of our pain and suffering. In particular we need to carefully consider some potentially new, healthier perspectives before we rush to the more common unhealthy perspectives (those mentioned earlier). In modern-day “speak,” we would say there is value of our thinking “outside the box.”

Once we gain insight into some different and healthier perspectives, we will start to develop a framework that will help us to better assess the likely sources of our own pain and suffering. Hopefully, we can all make a commitment now to pursue new healthy perspectives. Our goal

should be growth in our mutual understanding of some of the not-so-obvious underlying reasons, sources, and causes of our pain and suffering. We just might gain an understanding of some things that we haven't considered before. Some may actually surprise us.

In addition to gaining insight into various healthy perspectives, we will also gain an understanding of some of the "positive outcomes" associated with our pain and suffering, the primary benefit being a deeper and richer walk of faith with God. So, let's continue our study by personally examining a number of helpful and healthy perspectives.

Chapter 4

The Fallen World

Let's first look at a very important fundamental perspective which will take us back to the origins of pain and suffering. It is called the *fallen world* perspective. To assist us in grasping this perspective, let's consider the following story that we'll call *The Island Prison*.

The man sat quietly in his prison cell on the small bed that was bolted to the floor. The bed had a tattered faded cream-colored set of sheets and was topped with a well-worn light brown blanket. There was a steel toilet on the back wall also bolted to the floor. It was only about a foot from the head of his bed and had no lid to help contain the odor. He was sure it was all by design.

The initial trauma of being introduced to his current reality was only a distant memory now as a result of having already served twenty years of his life sentence in this horribly dank dark prison. The place was filled with the vilest criminals, most being more notorious than himself. But everyone in this island prison suffered the same fate—eventual death. The only questions were how, when, and by whom. While waiting for the answers, many fought desperately for every minute of life, while death for others could never come soon enough.

The man had been tried for a crime that he had indeed committed. A tribunal of judges in France took very little time to exercise their ultimate authority to convict him and then condemn him to a life sentence for his crime. He was guilty and he knew it. The tribunal knew it. Everyone who had watched the taped surveillance video knew it.

He initially blamed his partner in crime. She was the one who had set the whole thing up, having convinced him that it was the perfect crime and there would be a really big payday for both of them. But as he later found out, his partner had gotten some bad information from a confidential informant (CI) who had formerly worked as a “snitch” for the Paris police. The CI had told his

partner that there was no surveillance equipment in the area of the crime. The clear message from the CI was that no one would be the wiser.

The CI assured them that they would be long gone by the time the French police showed up. He had also promised them that with their big payoff they could easily head to some deserted tropical island and live free forever. However, he also told them due to their newly acquired knowledge and skills that they could choose to stay operative and pull off other perfect crimes.

Looking back now the man realized he had been such a complete idiot. He should have seen the gullibility of his partner to believe the lies of the CI. If he was dumb, his partner was dumber. He took little comfort in knowing that his partner was also convicted and received a life sentence as well.

He knew of some convicted guys who had blamed their environment, their parents, and poor living conditions for their big blunder of a lifetime. But truth be told, he could not blame any of those things for his crime. In fact he had been living a life of luxury with everything he needed. He realized now that he had just taken too much for granted.

The man had liked living the good life, but deep inside he always had felt that there was much more to be had. He knew it was out there just for the taking. However, he knew that he would have to break a few laws to get it. The longer he had thought about it, the more he became convinced it was worth the risk. The key seemed to be finding the right partner who could provide good intel and help execute the big operation that he was starting to plan. Maybe he could just pull off the perfect crime and not get caught.

Well, those were just ancient memories now. There was no going back. Everything had gone from bad to worse after that brief taste of the greener grass living just outside the law. But his most painful memories that often came back to haunt him were of all that he had enjoyed yet so easily lost. If he had just been content with what he had, he wouldn't be rotting away in this rancid cell.

No one had ever gotten early release from this place. He laughed out loud merely at the thought of the term “early release.” What a joke. Everyone in this place knew that was a joke the day they got here. They were being locked up forever and the proverbial key was broken in two and thrown away.

There was literally no way to escape this place. The waters around the island were deathly cold and contained creatures with mouths full of teeth. Those underwater behemoths were driven solely by their unquenchable hunger. They needed high volumes of fuel to supply the huge amount of energy required by their massive bodies and unfathomable strength. No one even considered the possibility of a successful escape from this forsaken island. So much for his planned getaway to some deserted tropical island. He was on an island alright, but that’s where the similarities ended.

In addition to the fears “off” the island, the misery “on” the island was unimaginable. The daily forced hard labor and regular brutal beatings by prison guards had actually toughened a few of the prisoners into hardened survivors. They could take anything thrown at them. However, most prisoners ultimately died from such treatment. That was the closest thing to an “early release” program that this island prison had.

He was one of the few who were hardened. He had also been the victim of many vicious attacks from other prisoners. Though he never looked for trouble, when attacked he had no problem defending himself. Most fights in the prison had been over what he had that other prisoners wanted. They wanted his food, cigarettes, or anything else they thought he might have. At other times he was targeted by gang members to beat him into submission and gain his loyalty to their particular gang. Most of his fights had typically led to the death of the one (or more) who had attacked him.

Of course, there was an unbelievable number of diseases he had contracted over the years from the filthy, germ-filled prison environment. The medications administered by the “joke” of an infirmary did nothing to really help him. He highly suspected the meds he was given had expired

years ago or were just cheap substitutes. Even more likely, they were just placebos meant to further abuse, harass, and punish this banished bunch of criminals.

But who really cared what was happening to him anymore? He knew that he was a condemned man, stuck for his remaining days in this disgusting, vile, and evil hole. He had really no one else to blame, but himself. This was his own chosen *fallen world*.

Island Prison's Application

Does this story remind us of someone? No, it is not Henri "Papillon" Charrière. Papillon was the famous Parisian underworld safecracker who was framed for murder in 1931. He received a life sentence and was imprisoned on Devil's Island in French Guyana. A Hollywood movie of Papillon's life was made in 1973, starring Steve McQueen as Papillon and Dustin Hoffman as his friend, a notorious forger.

However, in the Island Prison story above, the main character is none other than Adam, with Eve as his partner in crime and the CI being the devil himself. Adam and Eve traded a paradise in the Garden of Eden for an existence that isolated them from the presence of God. They gave into the temptation offered by a deceitful devil and sacrificed everything they had in the pursuit of "more" as they broke God's one and only law.

A few questions for all of us:

- Do some of the circumstances and consequences of a person living in a prison on an island remind us of any moments of our own life's journey?
- Were there times in our past (or possibly even now) when we've had to face our pain and suffering all alone?
- Ever feel like we were surrounded by prison walls with no hope of escape?
- How about times now or in the past when we received very little loving support or understanding from others?

- Ever live with fears of uncertain dangers from within or without?
- Do any of these things keep us up at night—circling in our mind like hungry sharks, ready to attack and consume us?

If any of these questions strike a familiar chord within us, then welcome to the fallen world in which we currently live.

Origin of the Fallen World

So we may ask, “Why do we live in a fallen world?” As we might have guessed from the earlier mention of Adam and Eve, that is where and when it all began. Possibly not realizing it at the time, but at some point, Adam and Eve both had an inner voice calling them to the possibility of ruling their own lives. It is definitely an inner voice that many today choose to listen to and act on.

In other words, they had likely entertained the idea of how nice it would be to make their own decisions. This was in spite of their living in a gorgeous and perfect place that God had custom-made just for them. He had given the garden to them as his gift of love, but eventually it just wasn’t enough.

They weren’t content to live sumptuously under God’s continual loving providential care. Then there was still that tantalizing “forbidden tree” in the middle of the garden. How could they miss it with all of that appealing fruit just hanging out there? It was well within an arm’s reach. They could see it every day. Why couldn’t they just grab it and eat it?

But they couldn’t quite convince themselves to do it, at least not yet. So the devil just sat back and waited until just the perfect moment. When the devil saw Eve one day at the tree, admiring its fruit, he slithered up near Eve in the form of a snake. The devil knew that Adam wouldn’t be far behind and they were both ripe for the picking (pardon the pun). But at this particular moment, he wanted to talk with Eve alone.

The devil had no trouble at all convincing Eve that God didn't really mean what he had said. He basically told Eve that she had either not heard God correctly or that God was holding out on her. Fruit that was so appealing and that God knew would be very beneficial to them. So when the devil tossed out the irresistible "fruit bait" to Eve, promising her that she and Adam would become like "gods" themselves, she went for it and was hooked immediately.

Eve then proceeded to repeat the devil's words to Adam, and he was hooked and reeled in as well. The devil just smirked as he prided himself on having made such a quick study of Adam and Eve. But he knew that he had grossly misrepresented the benefits. The devil had lied to them.

Surprise. Instead of becoming like gods as he had promised them, they both immediately felt shame and guilt for the first time, knowing they were naked and had disobeyed God. They hid. Then God called out to them and they both became fearful of the consequences they would face.

Adam couldn't own up to his sin and immediately played the blame game. He placed all of the blame on Eve. Then Eve decided to play the same game and blamed the snake. So even in the beginning, the man and the woman couldn't take responsibility for their own actions. We will find this to be a common reaction of all mankind to the sin we commit throughout the ages to come.

Devil Continues to Fish

Based on the devil's early success, he has persisted in using this same fishing technique. Even today he is busy tossing out the same old bait to a gullible world. However, he has a whole tacklebox full of special lures for those who need more encouragement to take the bait. He will search for just the right one that is the most appealing to us.

The main reason that the devil continues to enjoy success is that our fleshly nature still has difficulty submitting ourselves to God. Just like Adam and Eve, deep down we want to take control our own lives. In essence we each want to be our own god, calling our own shots and freely going after whatever our eyes, body, and mind desire.

If in the pursuit of our desires we happen to get hurt, get sick, go broke, or even hurt others along the way, then somehow we think God is to blame. But the blame really goes to the evil pairing of the devil and ourselves as we constantly lust for more.

Sin of Pride

The devil delights in seeing people commit the same prideful sin that he committed in wanting to be a god himself. He rebelled against the one and only true sovereign God. But all it got him was being kicked out of heaven, far from God's presence. It also got Adam and Eve kicked out of the garden. They were blocked from ever entering the garden again by cherubim posted at the garden entrance with a flashing and flaming sword.

The devil will never give up on getting us to take the bait of pride. He will pursue us until he runs out of time in the end. Sadly most will take his bait. Instead of following God, most will choose to follow the lying "Pied Piper" right into a life of misery here on earth, entrapping them until it is too late. In the end they will join him in his eternal death. Meanwhile Jesus continues to knock on the door of our hearts to offer us eternal life. Let's choose to follow him as our loving good shepherd.

Consequences of Sin

Adam and Eve were also sentenced to additional punishment as they each received from God the promised consequences for their sin. In Genesis Chapter 3, Adam and all mankind were cursed with painful labor as they would have to deal with ground that was now cursed with weeds and thorns. This was totally opposite of Adam's initial gardening experience.

God himself had planted the garden in ground that was pure and rich in nutrients. God had only asked Adam to be the caretaker of the garden. In return God would provide Adam with all the food he wanted. It was available in a wide variety of sumptuous fresh fruit. But now the "cushy" gardener job and his endless food supply were a thing of the past.

Then God pronounced his punishment on Eve and all women to come after her. All women would experience great pain in childbirth and be assigned a position of submissiveness to their husbands.

Ultimate Curse of Death

Then the ultimate punishment was pronounced on Adam and Eve as they also received what God had promised if they disobeyed him—death. This pronouncement of death included both physical death and spiritual death (separation from God). Bad news. We all have inherited the curses and punishment that Adam and Eve received as a result of their disobedience, including death. “Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12) and, again, “For as in Adam all die...” (I Corinthians 15:22).

God Is Just

All of God’s actions, though perceived as harsh in the eyes of many in the world today, were totally justified and consistent with his true nature—Holy, Righteous, and Just. Sin and evil are God’s polar opposites. God cannot coexist with sin and evil.

As a result of everyone being guilty of sin since the days of Adam and Eve, we have all come under the penalty of death. There is no bypassing of God’s justice. Therefore we all need a divine intervention to pay for our sin if we are to have hope. A perfect sacrificial Lamb [ARS][LT6] of God was required to meet God’s justice as deemed by man’s sins from the days of Adam until now—Jesus Christ, Messiah, and Lord.

World’s Plea for Coexistence

Meanwhile the world wants everyone to lovingly accept, embrace, and “coexist” in the midst of all religions and all gods on the face of the earth. The purpose of all those espousing this

objective may seem to be “righteous” on the surface and possibly even “godlike.” Some have even described it as being a true demonstration of a “spirit of acceptance, cooperation, and community.”

However, this philosophy has one primary purpose. It is all aimed at minimizing and then eliminating the fact that there is only one true God and there is only one way to heaven and that is through Jesus Christ.

From the world’s (and the devil’s) point of view, too much has been made for too long about there being only one God. Also, too much has been made about “sin” since all people make “mistakes.” The world today only wants to hear all positives and no negatives.

“Consider therefore the kindness [positive] and sternness [negative] of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided that you continue in his kindness. Otherwise, you also will be cut off” (Romans 11:22).

The only way to meet the objective of “only positives” is to eliminate one of God’s core characteristics—Justice. We’ve already discussed that the whole purpose of Jesus and his sacrifice was to satisfy God’s justice in regards to payment for our sins. To strip God of being “just” is to deny even his existence because he would no longer be the God of the Bible. Today there is a strong call from the world to stop judging others for having differences in personal values and belief systems. Who could possibly disagree with such a plea and vision?

Once again on the surface it has the appearance of a “righteous” calling for all mankind to love and unite as one. It is true that believers are not called upon by God to judge others while on this earth—that is God’s job. Instead we are called to love all men. However, we are all called to plant seeds of hope that are available only through the good news of Jesus and his sacrifice.

It is then God’s job to nurture the seed through the work of the Holy Spirit to produce the desired result in a person’s heart and yield the harvest. Bottom line, the world does not like the

word 'justice' except when it comes to punishing their own enemies. The world doesn't want anyone to judge them personally, but they are quick to judge believers in Jesus.

The world also asks, "How can anyone say or object to anything that someone else embraces as truth? After all, it is 'their truth.'" The devil once again has done a great "con job" on most of the people in the world. As needed, he just gives them a little push here and there. His objective is to lead them right where they are literally "dying to go."

Along the way, the world has clearly forgotten about their creator—the one and only true living and sovereign God: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God cannot and will not accept idolatry, false gods, self-worship, or false religions in his presence.

God's view of "coexistence" does involve our loving everyone, doing good to all men, praying for our enemies, reaching the lost, and, yes, our not judging others. But he has no tolerance for false gods or belief systems that are based on "man's truth" in opposition to "God's truth." God's Holy Word is the only eternal standard of truth.

The very first of his Ten Commandments is clearly stated. It contains no ambiguity and thus is not subject to debate: "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3). God points out over and over again in his Holy Word that these so-called other gods are really no gods at all. They are all creations either in man's mind or by man's hands.

Anyone holding up or holding on to anything as "their god" other than the one and only true living God becomes guilty of the same sin as the devil and will receive the same sentence.

Our Hope in a Fallen World

To complete the judgments of God in the Garden of Eden, the devil is also cursed. God's future judgment on Satan was pronounced through the first prophecy in the Bible about the coming of the Messiah to defeat Satan:

And I will put enmity between you [Satan] and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he [Jesus] will crush your head, and you will strike his heel. (Genesis 3:5)

Satan did strike Jesus' heel when Jesus suffered and died on the cross, but Jesus crushed Satan's head just as God had pronounced. This happened when Jesus was raised from the dead—conquering death and reconciling us back to God, thereby fully restoring our relationship with God the Father.

Jesus fully paid the price for all of our sins and then removed the “sting” (fear and finality) of physical death as well:

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15:55–57)

Satan Reacts in Anger

From man's fall in the garden until the final Day of Judgment^[AR7]^[LT8], the devil has been bent on taking as many people down with him as possible by exercising his control over the world and unbelievers. We will see in a later section of this study that this is not the case for believers—the devil's control over us is limited by God's ultimate will for us.

In the first letter of John to the early church, we are told that “The whole world is under the control of the evil one” (I John 5:19).

Remember Satan's words to Jesus during his temptation in the wilderness: “The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. ‘All this I will give you,’ he said, ‘if you will bow down and worship me’” (Matthew 4:8–9).

Jesus did not dispute the devil's claim to have power to give him such treasures. But to the devil's disappointment, the enticement didn't cause Jesus to sin as it did in Adam's and Eve's

encounter with him. Instead, Jesus said to him, “Away from me Satan. For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only’” (Matthew 4:10).

Jesus Enters Fallen World as Both Man and God

When Jesus came into this world, born of a virgin, he saw up close and personal the results of God’s chosen people, the Israelites, living in the fallen world. What did this fallen world look like to him?

Jesus saw all sorts of people regardless of economic status that were suffering from various disabilities, diseases, sicknesses, demon possessions and those grieving the death of family and friends. They were all struggling with little to no hope of relief from their pain and suffering. In the gospel of Matthew, there are many situations where Jesus was totally surrounded by those who were the victims of living in the fallen world. He had compassion on all of them and healed them (Matthew 4:23; 8:16; 9:35; 10:1; 14:14, 35–36; 25:36–44).

He also found Gentiles (non-Jews) that were plagued with the same pain and suffering. The Bible describes Gentiles as being “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). Due to Adam’s sin and our own sin, we are all subject to living in this world’s fallen condition.

Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned. (Romans 5:12)

The Bible clearly reveals in Genesis Chapter 6 that sin had become so rampant after man’s fall in the garden that God decided he had seen enough. So, God destroyed everything with breath in it, except for Noah and his family. He accomplished this by a great flood that covered the highest mountain peaks in the world.

As a result of man’s sinfulness prior to the flood, God pronounced in his Holy Word a major downward shift in man’s life span. From creation right up to the day of the flood, man’s life span

was almost 1000 years, as evidenced by Methuselah who lived to be 969 years old. But after the flood, God reduced the life span of man to only 120 years (Genesis 6:3).

As a result of God executing his plan to shorten man's life span, he sped up the aging process, accelerating the gradual deterioration of man's general health. There is no doubt, as in the days before the flood, God continues to see in our world today that man's inclination is toward evil at an ever-increasing pace. In fact it appears now to be growing near the speed of light.

Two of the popular philosophies of our times have spread like a plague globally: "Anything goes." and "It's all about me." As a result we see that self-indulgence is the norm today as evidenced by man's relentless pursuit to satisfy all his appetites, unabatedly [AR9][LT10] and unashamedly.

Choose to Walk in Jesus' Light

Those of us who have accepted Jesus as their Lord and Savior are called to "come out from them and be separate" (II Corinthians 6:17) and to "walk in the light, as he is in the light" (I John 1:7).

Question: What does "walking in the light" of Jesus entail?

Answer: After accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior of our life, we let our entire life be exposed to the light of God's Word. We totally accept his Word as the only truth and the only standard for our life. Then we move forward in faith with our goal being to live as Jesus did and walk as he walked.

As a result of regularly reading and meditating on God's Word, we come to know it and embrace it as the only truth. Then through the indwelling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit, we strive to live it. However, walking in the light of Jesus does not mean we are able to live a "perfect" sinless life. It takes more than our lifetime to transform our fleshly nature into his spiritual nature.

However, through our daily commitment to yield to the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, we will gradually be shaped into the image of Christ.

When we are faced with temptations or critical decisions that could lead us into sin, we will typically recognize it as our being on “dangerous ground” because we have God’s Word written in our hearts. However, if as believers we do fall victim to the devil’s lies because of temporary human weakness, we then become convicted in our hearts of our sin through the Holy Spirit living in us. Our guilt produces Godly sorrow that leads to true repentance (II Corinthians 7:9–11). God in that instant forgives us as Jesus’ blood continually cleanses us of all unrighteousness, keeping us in fellowship with God and his church (I John 1:9; 2:1–2).

Hope Anchors Our Endurance

We as believers still live in a fallen world today, but let’s praise the Lord that this present world is not all there is. It is not our home or permanent dwelling place for we are just pilgrims passing through. As strangers in this world, we are on a long challenging journey. It is much like we are experiencing our own wilderness wandering.

But unlike the Israelites who were not allowed to enter God’s promised land of rest due to their rebellion, we have hope as our anchor for our souls (Hebrews 6:19). As we stand on the hope we have in Jesus, we patiently endure and never lose sight of our final destination, our heavenly eternal home (Hebrews 11:10, 16; 12:22; 13:14).

As faithful believers we will ultimately be delivered from this fallen world because when we die, we will immediately be with our Lord Jesus in paradise. In the meantime, while we eagerly await the redemption of our bodies through the promised resurrection from the dead, we will suffer. But God will empower us to “suffer well.” In regards to suffering well, read the following encouraging passages: John 16:33, Acts 14:22, Romans 8:23, II Corinthians 5:1–9, I Corinthians 1:7, Galatians 5:5, and Philippians 3:20.

Someday soon God will reward us all for our patient endurance and obedience when he says, “Well done good and faithful servant.” (Matthew 25:21). Our reward will be beyond our greatest expectations and dreams. In fact it is described like this: “What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived—the things God has prepared for those who love him” (I Corinthians 2:9).

At the return of Jesus, we as believers will be caught up in the air to meet him after he has raised our bodies from the grave (I Thessalonians 4:13–18). At that moment our resurrected “mortal” bodies will be changed in an instant into “immortal” bodies just like Jesus’ body—“in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye” (I Corinthians 15:51–52).

In heaven, we will no longer experience the life we lived here in this fallen world, because God has promised us that he will totally change things: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes... there will be no more death, mourning, or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 7:17; 21:4). No more fallen world. Everything will be made New. (Revelation 21:1–5)

Chapter 5

Man's Inhumanity to Man

Two ten-year-old boys, Jake and Trevor, were BFFs (best friends forever). They were also longtime neighbors who for many years had loved to jump on their bikes and head out on new adventures.

The local park just a few blocks from where they lived was their favorite place to ride their bikes on a Saturday after another long week of school. Both were looking forward to the approaching summer when they could go riding every day for endless hours of fun. Their adventures would be interrupted only by their brief daily chores in the morning or the quick ride back home at lunch time.

Being growing boys, they never wanted to miss a meal. Besides, they needed a good supply of fuel to replace all of the energy they were burning off. Their moms always had some delicious food waiting for them as well as sweet surprises ready for them after they had eaten their “healthy” food.

On this particular day, they had decided it was time to finally try to jump their bikes over the mammoth, super-steep berm at the park. They had been [AR11][LT12]“chicken” earlier, but as they watched some older boys successfully take it, on their courage went up. They were not to be outdone by the big kids.

They shook their favorite handshake which replaced the “blood brothers” sign of pledge and loyalty that their dads had told them about. Besides, why poke your fingers with a needle and mingle their blood when you could just shake hands and be done with it? Nevertheless their commitment to actually follow through with this big challenge was now permanently sealed.

Today was “the day” and there would be no turning back. They quickly tossed a coin in the air to see who would go first. Jake won the toss. He swallowed hard because he knew what he was

about to face. As a precautionary move there was something they had both agreed to earlier. If the first one who tried the big jump encountered any problems, the next one was off the hook until they could figure out what went wrong.

They definitely considered themselves brave but also very smart. No need to make the unusually high risks even higher. They looked at each other and both laughed at the same time as they remembered a recent conversation with Trevor's dad. He had warned them about trying to jump that big berm at the park after one of them had let it slip out one night at the dinner table.

The very next day Trevor's dad had said, "You guys should be really careful out there... remember that neither of you is 'Evel Knievel^[AR13]^[LT14].'" They both looked at him quizzically and said simultaneously, "Who is that?" He then explained with great enthusiasm about Evel Knievel being the greatest performer of "jump stunts" in the world.

He went on to tell them about the time Evel^[AR15]^[LT16] had even tried jumping the Grand Canyon. Evel made his great attempt while sitting in a small rocket with a concealed parachute, just in case he didn't make it far enough and fell back into the canyon.

Then Trevor's dad asked, "Guess what?" Jake and Trevor just shrugged their shoulders. He said, "Evel didn't go far enough. But he still came out ok with only a few minor fractures and injuries due to the parachute slowing down his fall. All of the fans had ridden in their minds along with Evel on that rocket and felt his pain and disappointment. I was one of them."

Then he said, "However, the most important thing for you both to remember is that throughout his career, Evel broke almost every bone in his body at one time or another. So, I don't want the next time I see either of you for it to be in an emergency room. Be careful. Stay away from that big berm."

On this day, however, they shook that thought out of their heads. Their minds were back fully focused on the job at hand. They believed that they had appropriately factored in all of the known

risks. After one last special handshake, Jake jumped on his bike and took off full steam ahead toward the mountainous berm.

As he approached the bottom of the berm, he was sure this jump would become his personal best or “PB” as they each liked to call it. Quickly the front wheel jerked upward at a very steep angle as his bike hit the bottom of the berm and then headed up what felt like a vertical wall. He knew he would soon reach the launching point referred to as the “point of no return.”

While the experience was not like trying to jump the Grand Canyon, he did wish that he had on an emergency parachute, but it was too late to think any more about that. It was what it was. At the top of the berm, he first felt his bike lurch upward as he went flying into the air. He felt like he had entered a zero-gravity zone as his stomach experienced the thrill similar to going over the first big rise on a roller coaster.

He felt he was reaching heights greater than he had ever imagined or experienced before. After that brief moment of euphoric exhilaration, his brain shifted quickly into panic. He became fully focused on the impending moment of impact as he started his fast descent back to the earth.

He hoped he could land this thing with his tires level with the ground or even land slightly more on the rear wheel versus the front tire. He then tried to block out any thoughts of landing hard on his front wheel because he knew that would lead to an unavoidable total “wipe out.” Could he pull this off like a champion? In mere fractions of a second, he would know the answer to that question. Then it happened...bad news—the bike started to tilt slightly downward as he braced himself... and then “bam.”

Moments before the big crash landing, the ground seemed to rush up to him rather than vice versa. The impact was far worse than he had ever imagined when considering the worst-case scenario. He was immediately launched over the handlebars and sent flying through the air. He hit the ground hard about fifteen to twenty feet beyond his bike and then rolled another ten feet.

He lay crumpled on the ground, facedown and stunned. He lay there motionless for a few moments, but he soon began to regain his senses. He wasn't really sure if he had been knocked out, but that would definitely be part of the story he would tell Trevor. Other than having his breath totally knocked out of him and a few facial scratches and bruises, there were no intense pain signals coming from any part of his body.

He slowly got to his feet and shook his head further to clear his thoughts. He then looked back up at the top of the berm and wondered about what he had done wrong in his launch. Just then he saw Trevor looking down from the top of the berm with a fearful and concerned look on his face. Jake gave him a quick "thumbs-up" sign, signaling all was well.

Trevor's face immediately turned into a big smile of relief as he rushed down the backside of the berm to reach his friend. He was full of questions as he ran up to Jake, asking, "What was it like man? I saw you high up in the air for a moment and then you disappeared." Jake just grunted as he straightened his back and continued to dust himself off.

Jake blew out a big breath and replied, "That was without a doubt my biggest jump ever—my new PB. I didn't need a stinking parachute. This body is bulletproof. Maybe I am even better than Evel Knievel was when he was my age." Trevor noticed that Jake had a slight limp as they walked back to Jake's bike. He also had a slightly shaking voice as he talked. Maybe Jake wasn't as bulletproof as he thought.

They found Jake's front wheel was badly bent making it impossible to ride but was pushable. It would clearly need to be repaired, likely requiring some big muscles, special tools, and real know-how to fix it right. Trevor and Jake walked together as Jake pushed his wobbling bike back up and over the berm to where Trevor had left his bike.

As previously agreed, Trevor would wait to make his attempt of jumping the big berm until they could analyze what went wrong with Jake's jump. They were both eager to take Jake's bike

back to his house to bend the wheel back in place. Jake was starting to think that he wanted to have another attempt at the berm...right after Trevor gave it a shot.

They knew they would need to enlist the help of Jake's dad to bend the wheel back into place, but first they needed to get their stories straight on how Jake's front tire had been so badly bent in the first place. They decided to say that Jake had accidentally run into a parked car while looking over and talking to Trevor while riding next to each other. It could have happened to anyone, so they felt confident that their parents would be none the wiser. One thing was for sure, there would definitely be no mention about Jake's attempt to jump the giant berm.

They both pushed their bikes as they continued to walk, talk, and laugh about their big day. Jake's bike was making a recurring squeaking, rubbing sound as he pushed it. They just ignored it as they exchanged ideas on what adjustments to make prior to the bike's release at the launch point. The key seemed to be to shift more weight toward the back seat by leaning backward just prior to launch.

Hopefully this would ensure that the bike remained horizontal throughout the flight to ensure a smoother and safer landing. Though Jake didn't say it, he knew Trevor was fearful of repeating Jake's experience. Plus he now wondered if Trevor would still be brave enough to try it or would he employ a delay tactic by asking for more time to analyze the situation. But right now, Jake was the "man of the hour."

As they started down the sidewalk, now a good distance from the park, a white service van pulled up beside them and stopped. The van had a vehicle service and repair shop's name on it. The driver's side window rolled down, and the man inside asked the boys if they needed any help with their damaged bike. If not, he would be glad to give them a lift back home.

The driver said he had some tools in the van he could use to straighten the bent wheel if they wanted him to fix it right now. He said he had a big table-mounted vice in the back of his van that

would work great to quickly bend the wheel back in place. The boys were both excited and responded in unison, “Sure, that sounds awesome.”

Now they didn’t have to feel guilty about having to lie to their parents about what had happened to Jake’s bike. Plus they didn’t have to worry about their story being shot full of holes by their parents’ interrogations. They were both relieved that they could now just focus on getting Jake’s bike fixed.

The driver jumped out of the front seat and ran to the double doors at the back of the van. He quickly swung open its back doors, reached down and grabbed Jake’s bike. He stepped up into the back of the van, lifting Jake’s bike up with him. He then proceeded to remove the bent front wheel from the bike and place it into the head of the vice.

He turned back to Jake and asked him if he wanted to come up and help him bend the wheel back straight. The guy quickly added, “You look like a big strong guy.” Jake responded, “Oh yeah.” Jake had a big smile on his face as he jumped up into the back of the van. He was ready to show this guy just how strong he really was.

As he leaned in for a closer look at his wheel in the vice, he was struck from behind with something heavy and hard that instantly knocked him out, causing him to collapse to the floor of the van. Trevor had not witnessed what had just happened in the van. He had briefly stepped away to pull his bike up to the back of the van so he could sit on his bike as he watched the guy repair Jake’s bike.

As he rolled his bike up behind the van’s rear doors, they were suddenly slammed shut from the inside. The van’s engine was quickly started up and instantly took off as the tires spun. The van quickly disappeared down the street. Trevor sat there on his bike in shock, trying to make sense of what had just happened.

Later as Trevor tried his best to remember details of Jake's abduction, tears were still streaming down his face at the possible loss of his BFF. He had told the police officers who had arrived at the scene that his memory was still pretty fuzzy. It had all happened so fast. Trevor described the guy as a young white man. One officer quickly asked him if the guy was in his twenties or thirties. Trevor said that he would guess him to be in his late twenties but maybe older.

Trevor told the officers there was nothing that stood out to him about the guy. He was just average size. However, he did remember that the guy had light-colored hair, either blonde or light brown. He couldn't remember any other distinguishing features such as visible scars or tattoos. No limp or any other kind of disabilities were observed. There was nothing to distinguish the driver from a thousand other guys.

As he continued making his statement to the officers, he told them it was definitely a white van with blue letters on the side. He couldn't recall the name of the shop painted on the side of the van, but did recall the words "service and repairs." Another odd thing he recalled was that the van's tag on the rear bumper was covered with semi-dried fresh mud. It hadn't rained there in over a month.

As Jake's parents listened to Trevor's witness statement to the officers, their hearts sank even deeper into despair. Jake's mother finally gave in to her grief as she collapsed into her husband's arms, weeping uncontrollably. The horror and resulting pain and suffering continued for Jake's parents as days turned into weeks and then into months.

There were no calls with ransom demands. No additional witnesses had come forward with much-needed information to help move the investigation forward. There were no credible tips called in on the well-advertised tipline phone number. It was as if Jake had just fallen off the face of the earth. It took a few more months for Jake's parents to begin somehow to resume their daily

lives and fully be present for Jake's little brother and sister. They knew their minds were never free from processing the loss of Jake.

They retained some hope as they still waited for that one call bringing good news of Jake's return or at least providing them with some measure of closure. But unfortunately for his parents and his BFF, that call never came and the case would never be solved. Jake's abduction had become just another "cold case" in the police files. They along with Jake had all become victims of "man's inhumanity to man."

Jake's parents ultimately began to accept (as much as any parents can) the fact that Jake was more than likely gone forever, possibly dead and now with the Lord. They took great comfort in knowing that he had accepted Jesus as his Lord and Savior a few months before his disappearance. They gratefully remembered and cherished his bright happy face coming up out of the water as he was baptized in front of his entire family at their home congregation.

These memories felt like God was pouring warm oil over their hurts and pains and more importantly over their hearts. Jake was now in Jesus' loving arms as he awaited the future arrivals of his family into heaven.

Dark and Evil World

In the previous chapter on our living in a "fallen world," we primarily focused on sin that occurs within a person's heart and within their immediate personal boundaries. However, there is another critical category of sin that also falls under the umbrella of our living in a fallen world. It is "man's inhumanity to man."^[2] In this particular perspective, people still sin in their heart, but the boundary has been expanded to include others. In this case a person is driven to get what they want. They pursue certain victims to satisfy their pleasures with no regard for the damage they leave in their wake.

We've all witnessed 'man's inhumanity to man.' Take Jake's story as an example. We've all heard about similar abductions. However, most don't end up well for the victim(s) and their family. In addition to living in a fallen world, each tragic occurrence and the increasing frequency of such events provide all of us with a jarring reminder of the dark and evil world in which we live.

Abduction and abuse of children, along with the evils of human trafficking, are possibly the most unconscionable and devastating realities of "man's inhumanity to man." Each is becoming increasingly prevalent as the world gets more and more evil by the day. Human trafficking is already running rampant in Central and South America and is increasing in some areas of North America.

Human trafficking is growing in Europe as well as people are being captured in Eastern Europe and transported into Western Europe. It is totally out of control in the Asia Pacific and the Middle East where victims experience a literal "hell on earth" as countless humans are bought and sold for either forced labor or sexual purposes. The perpetrators of these crimes against humanity include not only those who capture, transport, and supply the human trafficking market, but also those who purchase and use the enslaved victims for their businesses or sexual pleasures.

For example, it is common practice for certain members of families (deemed "marketable") to be forced by various regimes to work in other countries and send all of their earnings back to those regimes. The family members are sent off to work are threatened with potential harm (even death) to their family members back home if they do not comply. Of course family members back home receive little to nothing of the money sent back to the regime. A number of religious, charitable and human rights organizations are doing what they can to try to find and recover victims of this horrific practice.

In some cases these organizations try to prevent this from occurring in the first place by rescuing kids off the streets that would otherwise become targets for human trafficking. Adoption

of these children is one potential outcome that provides the most hope for a new life for these children, but is the exception rather than the rule.

Over the years I have heard presentations and even personally spoken with some individuals who have given their personal time and resources to find and rescue young girls and boys from human traffickers but with limited success. After years of difficult and emotionally draining efforts in the face of overwhelming obstacles, some have made the heartrending decision to move on to other ministries to serve the Lord.

Due to the magnitude of the human trafficking problem, efforts have only served to slow, but not stop, the growth of human trafficking globally. It is clearly an uphill battle, but every single person that is rescued from such an abusive existence makes it worth it all. We need to be praying for the success of these rescue efforts that often constitute the only hope for these victims of man's inhumanity to man.

The New Reality

We all find it hard to accept the "new reality" that regardless of where we may live, we are no longer safe or shielded from brutal and devastating attacks from others. We are all hearing regularly about people in the national, state, and local news being either victims or perpetrators of such violence. With the ever-emerging threat of global terrorism, no one is totally safe anywhere anymore.

The devil's demonic servants are on the move around the world, creating fear, worry, havoc, unrest, chaos, and death. They can strike without a moment's notice and seemingly out of nowhere. It could happen while we are eating out, shopping, and backing out of our driveway and in our home at night, even during church services. It's clear the devil is the initiator of such devastation, and he has many accomplices willingly to participate, sharing in the mayhem and the blame.

Beware of Intentionally Hurting Others

When talking about our living in a “fallen world” in the previous chapter, we primarily focused on man’s initial sin in the garden and our inherited sin nature. Clearly within our “personal” boundaries, we struggle with the typical temptations of “lust of the eyes, lust of the flesh and the pride of life” (I John 2:16). While such sins are usually committed either in our minds or within our personal boundaries, most of these sins can still have “unintended” consequences on others. Often the unintended consequences leave us feeling convicted and remorseful which often leads us to ask for mercy, grace, and forgiveness from God and those we have hurt.

However, “man’s inhumanity to man” is another category of sin altogether. Such sin goes way beyond any unintended consequences because its primary focus is on producing the “intended” consequences we may seek. In such cases the focus is on accomplishing our personal objectives at the expense of others.

Such sin can even include our seeking revenge on others who have offended us or whose opinions we strongly disagree with. Today this is mostly done through various avenues afforded via social media. But there are an unlimited number of ways, including gossip, to disparage others in our attempts to cause them pain as a means of paying them back for what they have done to us. This can get ugly fast and cause irreparable damage to all parties involved, destroying our witness and bringing shame on the church when viewed from those outside the body of our Lord.

Other types of such sin include deliberately participating in immoral sexual activities, abusing or assaulting others (physically, emotionally, sexually, etc.), discriminating/harassing/viciously attacking others for any number of reasons or biases, bullying targeted individuals, violently inflicting harm, committing murder, and any other desires, aims, or purposes intended to harm others. In such sins we have no real concern for any damage done to others or victims we may leave in our wake.

While it is hard for us to put ourselves in the “man’s inhumanity to man” sin category, it should be clear from the sins mentioned above we can be guilty of a number of these sins as we react to the increasing anger and prejudice in our society today. If we don’t trust God with these feelings, we will likely “go rogue” as we try to settle things our way and may even feel we are doing the will of God in some situations involving religion and faith.

If there are any unintended consequences to such sins, it is directed totally at ourselves. One major unintended consequence is our hearts become increasingly hardened by self-justification and self-satisfaction. Thus it becomes unlikely we will feel any remorse or godly sorrow for our actions as time progresses, nothing to prick our consciences of sin and our need to repent. We all know the more we do something, the more we become desensitized to the results of our actions.

In this fallen world, evil in “unbelievers” is totally unrestrained and free to grow like a cancer. The apostle Paul described it as occurring in the last days as follows: “... while evildoers and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived” (II Timothy 3:13).

God Will Be Proven as the Just Judge

God’s eyes are not blind to such perpetrators. We can rest assured knowing he will repay the violent wicked for the many atrocities they commit. In the book of Amos, the prophet of God proclaims God’s unrelenting judgment on people of violence for the atrocities committed against other people:

For three sins of Damascus, even for four, I will not relent. Because she threshed Gilead with sledges having iron teeth, I will send fire on the house of Hazael... For the three sins of Edom, even for four, I will not relent. Because he pursued his brother with a sword and slaughtered the women of the land, I will send fire on Teman... For the three sins of Ammon, even for four, I will not relent. Because he ripped open pregnant women of Gilead in order to extend his borders, I will set fire to the walls of Rabbah.... (Amos 1:1–15)

We as believers are called upon to wait for God to take his final vengeance on those who have spilled the blood of believers over the years. God assures us through prophecy there will come a time when his scales of justice will once again be balanced as he convicts the wicked on the day of his wrath:

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained. They called out in a loud voice, ‘How long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?’ (Revelation 6:9–10)

See, the day of the Lord is coming—a cruel day with wrath and fierce anger—to make the land desolate and destroy the sinners within it. (Isaiah 13:9)

I heard what sounded like the roar of a great multitude in heaven shouting: ‘Hallelujah. Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for true and just are his judgments. He has condemned the great prostitute who corrupted the earth with her adulteries. He has avenged on her the blood of his servants.’ And again they shouted, ‘Hallelujah. The smoke from her goes up for ever and ever.’ (Revelation 19:1–2)

Called to Love Our Enemies

As seen above, God is the “just judge.” God will one day exercise his right to take vengeance on those who don’t repent of committing such hateful and horrific crimes against others. However, we need to remember it is solely God’s role and responsibility, not ours. Controlling our attitudes toward those we deem as “enemies” in our hearts is one of the biggest challenges we face as believers. God asks us to take the opposite direction to what our human nature typically wants to lead us to do. God outlines his expectations of us in these situations, in spite of how difficult we may find his words. Below is Jesus’ teaching as recorded in the book of Matthew on how we are to respond to our enemies:

You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matthew 5:43–48)

Yes, Jesus knows loving our enemies is a hard thing for us to do, but he left us his example to follow and calls us to be “perfect” like our Father in heaven. While we can’t be perfect ourselves, we understand the standard is our Father in heaven. We must try our best to let the Holy Spirit transform us. It is through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and Christ’s own example that we are encouraged and enabled to love our enemies. God does not call us to do anything he does not first equip us to do.

Nothing approaches God’s perfection more than praying for those who persecute us and doing good to them. The apostle Peter tells us to not be surprised when we are persecuted by evil people for believing in Jesus. During such times we need to fully commit ourselves to God as our faithful creator and persist in doing good to all men:

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. For it is time for judgment to begin with God’s household; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome

be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? ... those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good. (I Peter 4:12–19)

Jesus also says we are indeed blessed when others insult us and persecute us. This is also a hard teaching for us to fully grasp, but God will reward us mightily in heaven for all of our pain and suffering for his name:

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)

We also should be reminded often that we too were formerly considered God's enemies. So, what was God's response to us when we were his enemies? Did he take vengeance on us or stop loving us? No, he already had plans in place before the foundations of the world were laid. Here is what God did for us:

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life. (Romans 5:10)

So let's model our behavior toward our enemies and draw strength from the examples of God the Father and Jesus the Son. Then we will be prepared to respond to others in a godly way when we are attacked or challenged by unbelievers for our faith in God.

Keep Our Eyes Open to Satan's Schemes

In addition to the encouraging and faith-building passages above, it is important we keep our spiritual eyes fully opened. As believers, we do not want to be fooled by Satan's schemes to use other humans as weapons to inflict harm on us:

Anyone you forgive, I also forgive. And what I have forgiven—if there was anything to forgive—I have forgiven in the sight of Christ for your sake, in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. (II Corinthians 2:10–11)

Knowing indeed Satan is out to destroy us as believers, we need to heed this warning by increasing our awareness of his schemes. Satan along with his demonic perpetrators and global terrorists want to claim victory by destroying our faith, inner peace, hope, and joy. As Satan leads the charge of global terrorism today, it is very clear his objective is to disrupt our daily lives. His field of scope is the entire world as he seeks to fill everyone's lives with fear and uncertainty as to "who" will be his next victim and "where" and "when" it will occur.

Terrorists are succeeding in carrying out Satan's plan through well-thought-out attacks on public targets and events. Special emphasis is placed on targeting those locations and events offering a large number of victims and creating the greatest amount of chaos and fear. One of their desired outcomes is to isolate us from each other by making us retreat and hide in our homes. The progression is becoming increasingly obvious—gradually paralyzing us and our families, destroying any sense of community, emptying places of worship, and then subtly moving in and taking over the government of our nation. The erosion of godly morals and values has already begun in our nation, and ultimately we will see removal of all references to God. Their ultimate goal is to destroy the church of Jesus Christ.

Time to Regain Our Focus

When we begin to experience the erosion of our inner peace and joy due to fear of becoming a victim of "man's inhumanity to man," we must not give into those fears or ever give up. Instead, let's stand together in courageous faith, empowered by the Lord's strength. Let's pray for God's joy and peace to fill us completely as we refuse to let the fear of man control our lives.

Our focus instead should be praying for our enemies and doing good to others, fully trusting in God to hold accountable evil people who don't repent will ultimately reap the consequences of what they have chosen to sow.

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. (Galatians 6:7–10)

Embrace Our Confidence in God

Remember these “confidences” we have in our God: First, God remains in control and he will have the last say; second, God will not at all acquit the guilty who are outside of his grace that is found only through Jesus Christ; third, our shepherd has promised us no one can snatch us out of his hand or his Father’s hand; and fourth, mere mortals have no say in our final spiritual eternal destination and hope.

...God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’ So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’ (Hebrews 13:5–6)

Chapter 6

God's Sovereignty

One day all of the little minions got into a kingdom-wide debate about where they had come from. Some said they were created by the Great King of their kingdom. Some said, "No, that is not right." So for several days there was this constant back-and-forth argument. Some say, "It is so." Others reply, "It is not so." Across the kingdom there was this persistent rhythmic singsong: "It is so. It is not so. It is so. It is not so."

Finally one day the kingdom fell into complete reverent silence out of deep fear and awe. The Great King who had created the minions suddenly appeared in the sky. He was awesome and mighty in power. He towered high over the little minions who were now scattered, hunkered down and hiding behind big stones that laid across the barren land.

The Great King had heard enough of the quarreling among the subjects of his kingdom. So in a deep "James Earl Jones"-type voice, he proclaimed, "*It is so.*" It grew deathly quiet, and then a few brave minions stuck their heads up slowly from their hiding places and shouted, "*It is so.*" Gradually all of the other minions stood up one by one and shouted loudly, "*It is so.*" Finally as a one-kingdom chorus, they all joined in unison as they shouted loudly, "*It is so. It is so. It is so.*"

Obviously the matter was settled once and for all. Calmness and peace were once again felt throughout the land. Each little minion then breathed a big sigh of relief and got back to their assigned tasks in the kingdom. The Great King's sovereignty was once again firmly established among his subjects. No minion ever challenged his authority or doubted his creation of them ever again.

God's Sovereignty Is Absolute

Though the topic of "God's sovereignty" might be seen by some as the first topic we should have covered, it seemed more appropriate to wait until first covering the first two topics of our

“living in a fallen world” and “man’s inhumanity to man.” By presenting these two key perspectives first, we have already begun to embrace the reality of the world in which we live. It is the direct result of the consequences of man’s initial sin in the garden and our continued sin, generation after generation. These two perspectives clearly place the blame of pain and suffering on Satan and ourselves.

Having this awareness upfront allows us to now delve into God’s sovereignty without quickly jumping to the wrong conclusion: “Since God is sovereign and in control of our lives, then we can blame God for all of our pain and suffering.” Hopefully now we will not rush to put God directly in our rifle’s sights of the real target to be blamed for all of our pain and suffering.

Merriam-Webster defines “sovereignty” as “supreme power over a body politic; freedom from external control; autonomy; controlling influence; one that is sovereign.” These characteristics all apply directly to the Holy Trinity—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Thus as believers in God the Father, we are disciples of God the Son and recipients of the indwelling God the Holy Spirit.

Therefore, God’s sovereignty implies his sole possession of supreme power over his created universe with the autonomy of the Holy Trinity acting in oneness in all regards. God is free of all external control and is thus the sole controlling influence on our eternal destiny. As the subjects of God’s eternal kingdom, we are each called to, first, believe in his sovereignty as being absolute, second, accept it with a servant’s heart, third, embrace it with complete assurance, and, fourth, trust it fully with unshakable faith, hope, and love.

Our Struggle with Sovereignty

Children, at least ones who are still preteen, view their parents as having supreme power and control over their lives. The Golden Rule is taught and understood early on in their lives. But I’m

not talking about “treating others the way we want to be treated” (though this must be taught as well), but rather “he who has the gold rules.”

Children in their early years are indeed totally dependent on their parents for everything, but they will still make a few early attempts to take control of their lives away from their parents. The age period when this is most likely to occur is often referred to as the “terrible twos.” However, it is not just limited to this age period.

Fortunately most young children typically find these early attempts at taking control very unsuccessful. Firm and consistent discipline following each failed “attempted coup” should begin to reinforce the sovereignty of their parents. They learn to make adjustments to avoid discipline but hopefully also learn the importance of honoring and respecting their parents as well as others in positions of authority.

Let’s imagine for the moment your five-year-old child named Josh gets a major attack of wanderlust in your local shopping mall. It happens at the exact same moment you turn your back to him in a clothing store as you examine a potential purchase. He heads straight out the clothing store’s front door and down two doors to the toy store you had passed on the way into the mall.

You turn around and look, but he’s nowhere to be found in the store. In a panic, you rush out of the store and look both ways but don’t see him anywhere. You spot a mall security guard standing out in front of another store, and you quickly run straight to him with fear in your eyes. The security guard understands immediately what’s happened and gets on his radio and shouts, “Code Red... Lower Level, Zone 4.”

Fortunately it only takes a couple of minutes for the toy store manager to spot your child. He escorts him out of the store and takes him to the security guard, who in turns gives him to you with a few words of caution.

What would your reaction be? Upon seeing your child, you would quickly calm yourself and say in a sweet voice, “Josh, honey, it’s so good to see you are alright. Mommy was a little worried, but all is ok now. I can see you would really like a new toy today, so let’s go back inside the toy store and buy you one. Then Mommy will take you to McDonald’s and buy you a big ice cream cone.” *Not.* [Note: Feel free to substitute Daddy for Mommy in this story and it conveys the same message.]

We would obviously see this as a major violation by our five-year old of family rule number 2: “Never walk away from a parent when out in public.” This rule is only outranked by family rule number 1: “Never talk to a stranger or go anywhere with a stranger.” Should there be serious consequences in regards to a child breaking either of these rules? *Yes...* for the future safety of your child.

Back to the Garden

Here we go back once again to the Garden of Eden. It is amazing how many really bad things had their start right there among the fruit trees.

So one day when things were going kind of slow in the big garden, Eve decided to talk to a stranger. After a lot of sweet talk and promises, Satan led her right where he wanted her to go, breaking God’s number one and only garden rule.

And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.’ (Genesis 2:16–17)

In spite of God’s warning, Eve ate from the tree anyway. Guilty. She then gave some to Adam and he ate. Guilty. Their actions confirmed their belief that God didn’t really mean what he said and thus he wouldn’t punish them like he said. This is one of the major problems persisting in our world today—not truly believing God really means what he says.

Bottom line, as much as we might contest it, God is sovereign. He reigns and rules. In the garden (before Adam and Eve sinned), God clearly communicated a “direct command” to not eat from the tree in the middle of the garden. It also included a serious warning of promised fatal consequences. But Adam and Eve ate of it anyway.

This is analogous to a certified electrician telling us not to touch an exposed 220-volt bare wire because it will kill us. But we start thinking he is just trying to scare us. After all, we experienced a little shock once from static electricity and it was no big deal. But really how bad could it be? Sure it would be stronger, but the electrician is just being overly dramatic and cautious. So we reach out when he’s not looking and grab the wire to show how fearless we are, and then “pow”... just like that, we are dead from electrocution.

By God’s very nature, “He is Truth.” and “He is Just.” What he says, he means. But the devil, on the other hand, is a liar and unjust in all his ways. Jesus said lying was the devil’s native language. (John8:44)

We may be thinking, “But how about God showing a little mercy and grace to Adam and Eve? After all it was their first mistake.” Though God is indeed eager to show his love through the riches of his mercy and grace, he will never bypass justice in the process. “The Lord is just.” (II Chronicles 12:6; II Thessalonians 1:5; Psalm 50:6–7; Isaiah 5:16; 61:8).

The following passage describes the “Law of Sin and Death.” Stated another way: “If we sin, we will die.” It’s that simple. He is just in condemning us of our sin:

The one who sins is the one who will die. The child will not share the guilt of the parent, nor will the parent share the guilt of the child. The righteousness of the righteous will be credited to them, and the wickedness of the wicked will be charged against them. (Ezekiel 18:20)

There would be no bypassing of our condemnation without God's justice first being met, otherwise God would not be proven to be true and just. Without the perfect, sinless sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, there would be no mercy and no grace for anyone.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement, through the shedding of his blood—to be received by faith. He did this to demonstrate his righteousness, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his righteousness at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:25–26)

So here is the really *good news*. News that needs to be proclaimed to all of the world by all believers in Jesus: “We no longer stand condemned.”

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit who gives life has set you free from the law of sin and death. (Romans 8:1–2)

Spiritual death is no longer a punishment for our sin as Jesus suffered spiritual death for us on the cross as he was abandoned by God and tasted the fires of hell in our place. However, the punishment of living in a fallen world and experiencing physical death was not eliminated by Christ's death on the cross, for “it is appointed to all men once to die” (Hebrews 9:27).

But the good news continues as the “sting of death” has been totally eliminated for all believers in Jesus. Believers no longer have to live with the fear of death in regards to its finality or judgment of eternal death... being eternally away from God's presence and eternally punished in the lake of fire reserved for the devil and his followers. This penalty has all been totally born and paid for by Jesus.

'Where, O death, is your victory?' 'Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God. He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15:55–57)

God loves us deeply as demonstrated by the gift of his Son. We can now receive the gift of eternal life, free of charge. His heart longs to reconnect with our heart—for all eternity.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. (John 3:16–17)

God's sovereignty means he has control of everything, including carrying out his amazing plan of redemption and hope. Therefore, our "ultimate victory" is assured through Jesus' own death and resurrection.

If we haven't claimed victory in Jesus yet, remember, "today is the day of salvation" (II Corinthians 6:2).

Chapter 7

The Will of God

The man sat in the stands a few rows up from the floor watching the local high school basketball team playing in the big conference championship game. At the moment he had his head buried in both hands. He was shaking his head in disbelief at a huge missed layup opportunity that would have put his team ahead for the first time tonight.

As he raised his head slowly to continue watching the game, he immediately noticed his four-year-old daughter was no longer sitting right next to him. Somewhat in a panic, he quickly looked over the crowd nearby and was relieved to finally spot her standing just a few rows below him. But his concerns quickly grew because she was on the floor at courtside.

She had both feet firmly planted slightly behind the bright red line, outlining the entire court and creating the out of bounds line. He had told her earlier when they came into the arena to never cross the red line. He had warned her she could get accidentally run over and hurt by one of the big tall basketball players. She had sweetly replied, “Ok, Daddy.”

As he looked at her now, she slowly turned her head to look back up at him to see if he was watching. Their eyes met and immediately locked in place. As she continued looking at her father, the expression on her face turned somewhat defiant. She then proceeded to slowly raise her right foot in the air and deliberately extended it well over the red line. As her father watched in fear and anger, he instantly mouthed the words, “Don’t you dare.”

But without another moment’s hesitation, she brought her foot down quickly, slamming it on the other side of the red line. From her facial expressions, it was clear she felt victorious as her little mouth formed into a big mischievous smile. She knew she had just challenged and successfully defied her father’s will. She thought to herself, “I won.” Well, we won’t get into the

father's own facial reaction and follow-up actions, but suffice it to say there were appropriate consequences for her actions.

God's Will Trumps All

We have already established our God is indeed sovereign and is always true to his word. Whatever he says, prophesies, or promises, it will be done just as he has said.

So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. (Isaiah 55:11)

In this passage God's will (expressed as "my word") is also implied by the phrases above: "what I desire" and "the purpose for which I sent it." God's will was fully expressed and implemented through his Son Jesus. Everything Jesus did while living on this earth was all about doing his Father's will. He taught the Jewish crowds that doing his Father's will was the reason he had come:

For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. (John 6:38–39)

Jesus didn't come so he would be honored by men while he was on the earth. Instead he came that his Father in heaven would be honored and glorified. He was looking for disciples that would be obedient to all of his Father's commands. This is clearly confirmed in the following passage:

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. (Matthew 7:21)

Jesus kept pointing up to his heavenly Father when he was questioned about who he was and about the works he was doing. Jesus also emphasized the importance of his Father's will when teaching his disciples how to pray by saying:

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. (Matthew 6:9–10)

This is exactly the way Jesus prayed himself as demonstrated in the Garden of Gethsemane as he prayed three times the following prayer, saying:

My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done. (Matthew 26:42)

God's Good, Pleasing, and Perfect Will

Through God's gift of the Holy Spirit, our sovereign Lord will accomplish his spiritual transformational plans for us. The Spirit will lead us and guide in all truth as we study God's Holy Word. In the process God will write his laws upon our hearts and minds as he reveals his will to us:

Do not conform 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. (Romans 12:2)

Church Submits to God's Will

The early church understood and depended upon the will of God to lead them. One such example was when the apostle Paul visited various churches on his way to Jerusalem to deliver a gift offering from the Gentile churches. All of the churches were concerned about Paul's personal safety because of the many threats on his life from Jewish leaders throughout his ministry. They all knew Jerusalem was a "hotbed" of hostility toward him. So they tried to stop Paul from going to Jerusalem. But when he could not be dissuaded from going, they conceded and said, "The Lord's will be done" (Acts 21:14).

As believers they would accept whatever might happen to Paul in Jerusalem as God's will. Since they had been persecuted themselves for their faith in Jesus, they knew firsthand that

protection from persecution was not one of God's promises. The prophet Agabus had taken Paul's belt and said:

The Jewish leaders in Jerusalem will bind the owner of this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles. (Acts 21:10–11)

While they didn't presume to know how God's will would play out for Paul in Jerusalem, they knew God's will would prevail. They knew for sure from Agabus' prophecy that Paul would be arrested and bound in Jerusalem. They also likely knew this meant if the Jewish leaders didn't kill him first, the Romans would get involved in regards to imprisonment and punishment.

Another example of Paul's submitting to God's will and it being predominantly on his mind occurred as he was leaving Ephesus on his way to Jerusalem:

But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." (Acts 18:21)

A broader application of submitting to the will of God at all times is given to us in the book of James, who is assumed to be the brother of Jesus:

Now listen, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money.' Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that.' (James 4:15)

Reliance upon God Is the Key

God's will is that we rely totally upon him and him alone. However, as we have just discussed, this does not come naturally for us as believers. We still have the tendency to go our own way far away from God. Like the old hymn "Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing" says, we are "Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it... Prone to leave the God I love."

We often grow impatient and tired of waiting on God to act according to our expectations. We feel we must take control ourselves if things are going to happen in our way and our timing. The

apostle Paul admitted he needed to be taught to not rely on himself as he once did when he persecuted Christians. While he was still a man of action as a believer, he had to learn to rely on God, wait patiently, and not get ahead of God. This aspect of God's will was learned the hard way through his many trials:

Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us. (II Corinthians 1:9–10)

Jesus wants us to rely on him, but for most of us this means we will often learn the hard way, just as Paul did. Jesus wants us to have peace and joy and not to fear, worry, or panic about such pending trials. It is not because trials won't come. They will. But he wants us to know he has overcome the world. (John 16:33) Jesus has foreknowledge and thus knows well in advance when we need his faithful and loving support.

God's Will and Our Suffering

Two of the most powerful and clarifying passages in the Bible in regards to pain and suffering are found in James' letter to the Jewish Christians and Paul's letters to the Gentile Christians:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. (James 1:2) and Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. (I Thessalonians 5:16–18)

These teachings run so counter to human nature it would likely draw a laugh or a sneer from unbelievers if they were to hear it. But even as believers, we too might think, "It doesn't make sense." This primarily reflects the struggle we have with a couple of the expectations presented here.

Firstly, though we may grasp the concept of patiently enduring pain and suffering, our “rejoicing” about it is an entirely different matter. Are we really expected to actually rejoice in our trials? We are likely thinking this is truly an impossible expectation. From a human nature perspective, it is indeed impossible.

Here is an example of rejoicing in the midst of trials. In this case believers in the early days of the church were undergoing severe persecution because of their belief in Jesus. This too is a strong testimony of what God can do through us and for us as our faith once again defies logic and human reasoning:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. (Hebrews 10:32–35)

Secondly, how can we accept our trials as being the “will of God” for us? God’s allowing us to suffer trials seems to run totally opposite to all of the other characteristics of God for which we find easy to praise him for with grateful hearts. For example, we clearly take comfort and rejoice over the thought of God actually “singing over us” or his “taking delight in us” (Zephaniah 3:17).

Also, it is easy for us to sing praises to God for his everlasting “agape” love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, patience, hope, power, peace, and many other blessed assurances... which we should clearly do. However, if we only want to experience those special situations where we sense God is anointing our heads with his soothing oil until our cup of blessings overflows as described in Psalm 23:5, we will likely not submit to God’s will when he attempts to grow us spiritually through times of trial, thus not achieving true transformation.

The truth is we don't want any part of pain and suffering, so why would we rejoice in it? It frightens us to even think pain and suffering is part of God's will for us. If true (which it is), then what else will we face in the coming years as part of God's will? If we ponder it for very long, it may actually produce fear in us and cause us to stop praying "Thy will be done."

Our rejoicing in trials and accepting them as God's will for our lives are two attitudes that are humanly impossible for us to achieve alone. So when we find ourselves insufficient for anything God has asked of us, what should we do? It reminds me of the old V8 juice commercial when a person is totally drained of energy and then he slaps himself on the forehead as it dawns on him, "I could have had a V8." So when we are feeling defeated and drained of our own energy as we deal with life's trials, we should respond similarly, "I could have asked God to help me."

So the answer lies in God's power to help us to do the impossible: rejoice and accept God's will in times of trial. What is impossible for us in our human nature is possible for God. He wants to share his divine nature with us, his children.

Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.' (Matthew 19:26) and *His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.* (II Peter 1:3-4)

Thus we should look to God and ask him through his Holy Spirit to begin transforming our hearts, minds, and attitudes to deal with our trials in a more godly way. We should take great joy in the knowledge our God deeply loves us and has our best in mind. It is all for our good and God's glory. Our quest should be to become more like Jesus as we honor him through our suffering by "suffering well." If suffering makes us come to know and love Jesus more, we should rejoice in that outcome.

The desire to know God more deeply even if it takes more fiery trials is powerfully presented in a song written and sung by Travis Cottrell entitled, “Your Word Is Life to Me.”^[3] It takes great faith and trust in God to even think the words of this song, much less say or sing them. Are we near this point in our faith? If not, then we can make a special request of God to “increase our faith.”

The apostles said to the Lord, ‘Increase our faith.’ (Luke 17:5) and Immediately the boy’s father exclaimed, ‘I do believe; help me to overcome my unbelief.’ (Mark 9:24)

The key is whether or not we are ready to “surrender” all of ourselves to Jesus and allow God to do the work he wants to do in our life through his refining fire. Commitment to God is not possible without our first surrendering all to him as we pray, “not my will God, but your will be done.” (Luke 22:42).

We should take great comfort as well in knowing any trial or temptation we do face has first been filtered by God for us personally to ensure we can endure it.

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. (I Corinthians 10:13)

So let’s pursue with passion our desire to know God more. Such passion will produce spiritual peace and joy. We can then rejoice and give thanks to God in all circumstances—good and bad. Hold tightly to the fact it is all under God’s control. He will give us all we need to not only endure it, but also become more like Jesus in the process. Remember Jesus will stand with us. Draw strength and stand encouraged in knowing our God has “got this.”

God’s Promises Express His Will

It is very important to remember God has promised us he will always walk with us through whatever trials we face. He will “never leave us or forsake us” (Hebrews 13:5). But God has never

promised us an easy life or that we would not suffer persecution or trials. We need to realize while those are our desires and often our expectations of God, they are not what God has promised us.

You, however, know all about my teaching, my way of life, my purpose, faith, patience, love, endurance, persecutions, sufferings—what kinds of things happened to me in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra, the persecutions I endured. Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. (II Timothy 3:10–12)

Notice Paul’s experience and reaction to trials: First, he underwent all kinds of trials; second, he accepted his trials as part of living a godly life; third, he didn’t blame God for his trials; fourth, he endured them faithfully; and fifth, he said Jesus rescued him from all of them. This last point seems contradictory to the other four points. How can Paul say that Jesus “rescued” him? Clearly he didn’t mean Jesus prevented or stopped the persecutions from happening. So what did he mean?

The spiritual perspective we gain from Paul is that Jesus always stood beside him, encouraged him, and empowered him to be strong in his faith in the midst of and in spite of his many trials and persecutions.

But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion’s mouth. (II Timothy 4:17) and ... the Lord stood near Paul and said, ‘Take courage. As you have testified about me in Jerusalem, so you must also testify in Rome.’ (Acts 23:11)

Consider Trials as Loving Discipline

If we totally trust and rely on God’s will to be done in our lives, we will receive “spiritual eyes of faith” to see the good coming from our pain and suffering. So as believers we should view all of our trials as God’s loving discipline of us, believing our trials will produce spiritual fruit in us and through us.

But we have to get past our hang-up with the word “discipline.” This is hard for us to do because discipline in our past was directly linked with our fear of punishment. When a parent or teacher disciplined us in the past, it felt like punishment. We couldn’t understand the true purpose (motive or intent) of the one doing the disciplining or the true benefit to us.

Though we may be all grown up by now, we still don’t like the mention of discipline. So if God were to discipline us, we would think he is punishing us for something we did wrong. As faithful believers our God wants us to realize as a result of his perfect love for us, he wants to eliminate all of our fears. This includes the fear of punishment. He knows we can’t live a sinless life even as believers. So his response to our sins of weakness is not punishment, but rather in his patience and forgiveness, he helps us move forward.

There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. (I John 4:18)

God loves us because of who we are in him: “we are his children.” We are made “perfect” through his perfect Son Jesus, not because we are or must become perfect performers. So let’s push the word “punishment” aside and think only of the true purpose (motive and intent) of all good and appropriate discipline. I personally believe the following descriptive words do a better job of describing the true purpose and intent of God when he disciplines us as his children: train, educate, coach, guide, correct, reposition, redirect, steer, and so on.

Let’s now look at some of the most insightful teachings we have in regards to God’s disciplining (correcting/training) his children according to his will through the trials and hardships we face:

...have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, ‘My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose

heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.’ (Hebrews 12:5–6)

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live. (Hebrews 12:7–9)

They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:10–11)

God Willed the Death of Jesus

In concluding this discussion on God’s will, let’s spend some time considering God’s will on the greatest day of pain and suffering ever—Jesus’ arrest, trial, persecution, and execution on a Roman cross.

We may find it hard to view Christ’s pain and suffering on the cross as being the will of God and not man’s will. The wills of the Jewish and Roman leaders were not trumping God’s will. Not at all. God was in control of what was happening to Jesus, not them. Evil men were only instruments God chose to use to carry out the sentence he had already pronounced on his own Son Jesus. See the prophecy given to the prophet Isaiah who lived about 800 years before Christ:

Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush him and cause him to suffer... makes his life an offering for sin.... (Isaiah 53:10)

When the church was established on the day of Pentecost, the apostle Peter also made this point very clear. He told the crowd the crucifixion of Jesus, though carried out by the Jews and Romans, was consistent with God's plan and foreknowledge:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. (Acts 2:23)

It is important in the midst of our own pain and suffering we remember the pain and suffering Jesus experienced for us. Jesus wasn't given a fast-acting lethal injection or killed with a single swift swing of a sword. He was not provided a quick exit strategy to minimize his pain and suffering. To do so would have been to grossly understate the required justice of God.

God executed his full and "just" wrath on Jesus as required for complete retribution (payment) for all of the horrible and deplorable sins of all mankind from Adam's sin in the garden until the end of time. Again, as seen earlier, vengeance belongs to God and "he will repay" (Romans 12:19). It is clear God had no intentions of "underpaying" the cost of the debt we all owe for our sins. He thus would take full vengeance as promised.

For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' (Hebrews 10:30)

Speaking further about God's justice, God demands the debt of our sins be fully paid. As a result of our not being able to atone for our own sins, God purchased our salvation for us through his grace. However, it is not "cheap grace." This is borne out and demonstrated by the most intensive pain and suffering possible by Jesus, our Lord and Savior.

At the time of Jesus' sacrifice for us, God gave us his own testimony as to the extreme intensity of Jesus' suffering by turning daylight into the blackest of nights, shaking the earth with a violent

earthquake, Christ's extreme thirst, Christ's cries of abandonment from the cross, the temple curtain that separated the Holy and Most Holy rooms being torn from top to bottom, and the opening of graves of some of his holy people and then raising them to life three days later when Jesus was raised.

I personally believe Jesus experienced all of the pain and suffering (both physical and spiritual death) any "sinner turned believer" would have experienced apart from God and experienced by all unbelievers on the day of the Lord. Therefore, in addition to his physical pain and death, Jesus had to experience separation from God and a fiery torment. Anything short of what actual sinners deserve and will experience would have cheapened grace.

I heard a preacher once say God didn't actually abandon Jesus when he was on the cross, but rather it was just the way Christ "felt" in the midst of his pain and suffering. His concern was [AR17][LT18]that if God truly abandoned Jesus, then he could abandon me. However, the preacher totally missed the point that God abandoned his own Son on the cross so we would not be abandoned. All Christ suffered in his spirit while on the cross was *real* as he took on all of our sin, guilt, and shame so we would not have to suffer the same punishment.

If this was not the case, it would imply God the Father was easier on Jesus than he will be on actual unforgiven sinners. God does not show favoritism, so Jesus fully experienced the full impact of our debt of sin as he became "sin for us."

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5:10)

To say otherwise implies being abandoned and separated from God is not part of the penalty (debt of our sin) the unsaved will have to ultimately pay. Consider the following passages about the unsaved being separated from God, and then we can draw our own conclusion about whether this is a real punishment or just a "feeling":

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and the glory of his might on the day he [Jesus] comes to be glorified in his holy people and to be marveled at among all those who have believed. (II Thessalonians 1:8–10)

[Note these additional scriptures: “And between us [the saved] and you [the unsaved] a great chasm has been set in place...” (Luke 16:26); “But your iniquities [sins] have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so the he will not hear” (Isaiah 59:2); “They [Gentiles] are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts” (Ephesians 4:18); “Remember that at that time [when unsaved] you were separate from Christ...without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).]

Though we may have to face torture or an excruciating physical death for the name of Jesus, we are blessed through Jesus we will never have to taste, touch, or comprehend the intensive spiritual pain he endured for us. We all need to spend a lot more time meditating on Jesus’ total sacrificial experience on our behalf since it was our sins which were paid for on the cross. Such time spent will help us to more fully appreciate the grace God has demonstrated through his Son Jesus by paying the great price for our sins.

God Wills We Know His Son

In the book of Isaiah, God has painted a very graphic portrait of his suffering Son to show how great a sacrifice was made to redeem our lives from the eternal condemnation we all deserve. As we read the description of the ways Jesus suffered as portrayed in Isaiah Chapter 53, let’s use these words to create a picture of our Savior suffering for us:

He was despised and rejected by mankind... a man of suffering, familiar with pain... he was pierced for our transgressions... by his wounds we are healed... was led like a lamb to the

slaughter. (Isaiah 53:3–7) and ... many...were appalled at him—his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness. (Isaiah 52:14)

From the accounts provided in the four Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John), we also see Christ's suffering in the various stages, providing fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy above:

- Suffering intensely in his soul as he prayed three times with tears as drops of blood.
- Being betrayed with a kiss from Judas and forcefully arrested in the garden.
- Being led bound before the Jewish and Roman authorities.
- Hearing false accusations made about him, plus mocking and beatings as he stood silent.
- Suffering as the Jews cried out for his crucifixion.
- Having his body ripped to shreds by the severe flogging and scourging.
- Feeling a crown of thorns driven on his head, puncturing his flesh, causing blood to flow.
- Being forced to wear a purple robe and hold a staff as Roman soldiers mocked him.
- Suffering once again as the Jews demanded his death by crucifixion.
- Observing Pilate washing his hands while proclaiming his innocence of Christ's blood.
- Hearing the Jews reply by crying out Christ's blood be on them and their children.
- Struggling to carry the cross up the steep, well-worn path to Golgotha's hill.
- Seeing Simon of Cyrene sharing the weight of the cross as he struggled to carry it alone.
- Being laid on the cross where the nails were driven into his hands and feet.
- Being raised as a public spectacle in shame because they had taken his clothing.
- Hanging six long hours on the cross.
- Laboring to breathe while giving in to the downward pull of gravity on his body.
- Being mocked continually by those viewing him.
- Challenging him to come down from the cross if he was the Son of God.
- Witnessing darkness coming on the world as the sins of all mankind were placed on him.

- Experiencing spiritual death—separation from God and feeling the torment of Hades.
- Crying out desperately in spiritual pain, asking his Father why he had forsaken him.
- Being given wine vinegar to drink after calling out he was thirsty.
- Proclaiming then his substitutional sacrifice was at last finished.
- Calling out finally in a loud voice, Jesus committed his spirit into his Father’s hands.
- Breathing his last breath, he died physically.
- Having his side pierced with a spear.
- Having a mixture of blood and water flowing out of his side, confirming his death.
- Being taken down from the cross.
- Being buried in a tomb.
- Being raised to life three days later.
- Ascending to heaven to be with the Father... where we will join him someday.

Even before Jesus honored his Father’s will by yielding himself to the arresting mob to carry out his unbelievable persecution and horrific execution, we are told Jesus learned obedience (was perfected) through the things he suffered:

During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered prayers and petitions with fervent cries and tears... he was heard because of his reverent submission. Son, though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who would obey him.... (Hebrews 5:7–9)

We are also called to learn obedience (be perfected) through the things we suffer. This too is God’s will for us.

God will turn all of our pain and suffering into obedient trust in him so Christ’s victory becomes ours.

Chapter 8

God's Laws of Nature

One very funny Christmas holiday movie which I have seen a number of times is called *Christmas with the Kranks*.

The father, Luther Krank, is determined to resist the traditional neighborhood Christmas tradition of decorating his house and yard for the holidays. His neighborhood was notorious for going overboard with enough displays and lights to rival downtown Las Vegas.

Throughout the movie there is one disaster after another as the whole neighborhood, then the whole town, joins in trying to first encourage and then force Luther to rekindle the holiday spirit, in other words, comply or else.

Mrs. Krank (Nora) is not totally bought in to Luther's plan of having "zero" decorations in their house and yard. However, she tries really hard to be supportive of her husband while at the same time trying to keep peace with the neighbors. But as the movie progresses, Nora starts to crumble under the constant pressure from the neighborhood and the town. She is also torn between loyalty to Luther and having their home warmly decorated for the arrival of their daughter and her new fiancé.

As things unfold, tensions reach an "atomic" level. Luther seems to immensely enjoy playing prank after prank on his neighbors. But they answer his pranks with some of their own harassment. In each case either Luther or his neighbors suffered the consequences of violating the basic laws of nature. Movie viewers roared with laughter as they watched the action, often knowing what was coming next as each prank was being set up.

In the end Luther's frozen stubborn stance against decorating for Christmas begins to gradually melt away. He finally gives way as he hears and sees the gentle words and acts of kindness from

others. Everyone pitches in to make it special for Luther's and Nora's daughter's arrival. Their daughter finally arrives and all is well as everyone's Christmas spirits are restored.

The funniest moments of the movie highlighted what can happen when we either ignore or knowingly violate the basic laws of nature, all given by God at the creation of the universe, the earth, and all that's in it.

God Set His Creation in Motion

When God created the earth, he set the natural order of things in motion. The earth continues to spin on its axis today as it orbits around the sun, creating our four seasons of the year. The sun comes up in the east each morning as it brings daily light to the earth. It also brings darkness in the evening after it sets in the west. As the earth spins, God-given gravity holds things down on the earth to keep them from spinning off into space.

The moon faithfully orbits the earth, providing light at night and much-needed tides to support the flow of food supplies for marine life in the oceans and various tributaries. Finally, the predictable and repeatable cycles of the moon are referred to as "phases." These phases change as the amount of light reflected from the sun varies through the months. The resulting lunar calendar has also been used for years for various purposes, including the *Farmer's Almanac*. Finally, also in the heavens are the stars which have always been fascinating to man and have provided solid reference points used for ship navigation since the beginning of maritime travel.

God's creation continues to operate day in and day out according to his laws of nature. These laws come into play as we go about most of our daily activities. We learn as we grow and mature to more fully respect these laws of nature, mostly as a result of trial and error as we press the boundaries of God once again.

Extreme sports are a good example of how we love to defy God's laws of nature. While none of us has the power to change these laws, we all want to find ways to control or overcome them.

It is clearly the same struggle we have of not wanting to operate within the spiritual boundaries of God's will for us. Though we may not receive instant consequences for violating spiritual laws, there are often instant consequences when we lose respect for God's laws of nature.

Another example of testing the limits of God's laws of nature was recently observed while visiting the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The typical tourist viewing areas we observed on the South Rim provide safety to visitors by either strong steel rail fences or heavy rock walls. However, any daring, foolhardy [AR19][LT20] visitor is not restricted to just these areas. Anyone can easily climb over the fences or rock walls or can just go to the end of these barriers and walk around them, right up to the edge of the canyon. While visiting we saw a number of people venturing out onto these unprotected areas for extreme viewing or selfies, most being totally unaware that they were more than likely standing on an outcropping with nothing underneath for at least three to five hundred feet. The Park reports there are two to three accidental falling deaths each year.^[4]

Most of us with a good measure of common sense realize these laws are given for our own good, providing us with protection and safety but also many benefits if properly used. For example, exposure to fire can burn and injure our bodies, but the same fire can be used to cook our meals and warm us during cold weather. These laws are very trustworthy and dependable and can be harnessed for use in advancing technology and our quality of life.

God's Intervention in Nature Laws

Though the laws of nature were set in motion at creation, God continues to retain ultimate control over his universe and its laws. For example, God chose to intervene in his natural laws several times around the time of the Great Flood during the days of Noah.

- God changed the way the earth was watered when he brought rain on the earth for the very first time: "... God had not sent rain on the earth... but streams (mist) came up from the earth and watered the whole surface of the ground" (Genesis 2:5-6) and "... I am going to

bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it” (Genesis 6:17).

- God also intervened by changing man’s diet after the flood: “Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (Genesis 9:3).
- God set a “rainbow in the clouds” as a sign as he promises to “never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life” (Genesis 9:11–17).
- God lowered man’s life span from about 1000 to just 120 years: “My Spirit will not always contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years” (Genesis 6:3).

There are many other powerful examples of God intervening in the laws of nature. Here are just a few more:

- Red Sea parted and the children of Israel left Egypt and passed over on dry ground while the sea closed in over Pharaoh’s army behind them (Exodus 14:16–29).
- The Israelites cross the Jordan River on dry ground as Joshua leads them into the Promised Land (Joshua 3:1–17).
- In response to Joshua’s prayer, the sun and moon stood still for a full day during the battle with the Amorites (Joshua 10:12–13).
- The shadow on the stairway went backward ten steps to confirm Isaiah’s prophecy to King Hezekiah (II Kings 20:9–11).

Of course all of God’s miracles are examples of his intervening in the laws of nature to accomplish his will. He often intervenes for us with special healings which medical science can’t explain. Based on the prayerful pleas of his spiritual children, God may choose to intervene in the

natural laws in a special way purely out of his rich mercy and grace. Right in the middle of the fallen world in which we live, God can reach down and touch his servants in unique ways.

As earlier noted, God may choose to not intervene and just let things run their “natural” course. In such cases rest assured we can still find his “sufficient grace” to help us walk in full faith and trust, fully receiving his grace and mercy in our hour of need:

Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need. (Hebrews 4:16)

Obedience to God’s Laws of Nature

So, what’s the implication of God’s natural laws on our own pain and suffering? As it turns out, it provides one of the clearest explanations and reasons for a certain class of pain and suffering. It is very clear any consequences of our violations of God’s natural laws are our own doing. Sorry, but there’s no one to blame but ourselves.

“Ouch, I just burned my hand on the stove.” Who’s to blame for my pain? Just ask the person who severed their finger with a table saw who’s to blame? Ask the person who fell off their roof while trying to put up Christmas lights? Ask the person texting on their phone who just plowed right into the back of someone’s car?

As clearly seen in these cases, violations of God’s natural laws can be very unforgiving. We don’t run into another car and just bounce off with no damage to either vehicle (unless playing at an amusement park with “bumper cars”). Laws of nature do not work that way. Violations yield very predictable results, often with the consequences coming very swiftly and painfully, some lasting a lifetime.

Of course it is never easy for us to shoulder all of the blame, so we will either try to share the blame by implicating an accomplice or just flat out lay all of the blame on someone else. I once tried to blame an accident at an intersection on the other guy, claiming the light was still yellow as

I went through the intersection (at least it was yellow the last time I looked before increasing my speed). Several eyewitnesses disagreed with me so the police officer gave me the ticket.

A friendly warning though is in order in regards to identifying someone to share the blame. We should be very careful about implicating our spouse, a sibling, or a friend. Talk about potential long-term pain and suffering.

Our wanting to blame someone else and then getting them to pay for our mistakes are the main reasons there are so many “frivolous” consumer lawsuits. It is hard for us to admit many of the accidents causing injuries happen to us because of our own unsafe practices, lack of attentiveness, not reading instructions, or general clumsiness.

For example, we may have just nailed our right foot to a board with our new nail gun. After a lot of pain and suffering, doctor’s visits, and then running out of pain pills, it finally hits us. Chaching. Oh yeah. Let’s “nail” the manufacturer. They’re the reason for all of our pain and suffering. So, let’s get them to pay for our emergency room, medications, and rehabilitation costs. They should have specifically told us a nail from their nail gun could actually go through our foot.

Sowing and Reaping

God has embedded one fundamental law of nature which has both physical and spiritual implications —“sowing and reaping.” We clearly see this law in effect in the agriculture area as we plant tiny seeds and watch things grow. It is indeed a miracle. For example, here is what Jesus said about the mustard seed and the resulting mustard plant:

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds come and perch in its branches. (Matthew 13:31–32)

We are also given a parallel spiritual teaching about reaping the consequences of our sowing spiritual seeds (good and bad) in our lives. We should not be surprised at the results of what springs up from what we have planted:

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. (Galatians 6:7–8)

As we reluctantly have come to realize, the blame for our own pain and suffering related to our violating God's laws of nature is totally on us. So, rather than blaming the hammer, the oven, our steep roof, the slick sidewalk, anything, anyone, or even God, we need to accept the responsibility and blame for our own actions violating God's natural laws—*let's just own it... our personal embarrassment as well as the painful consequences.*

Chapter 9

Two Gates

Let's imagine we lived back during the times of the Wild West. Traveling by horse one day, we were following the instructions we had been given to go left at the upcoming fork in the road. So we pulled on the left reins of our horses as we made the turn, continuing up the wheel-rutted dirt road. As we rounded the next corner, we saw our destination up ahead. It was a high-walled frontier outpost located on the Grand River in eastern Oklahoma, just above its convergence with the Arkansas River. It was actually a military fort typically filled with soldiers and horses, named Fort Gibson.

As we approached the fort, we could see the guard at the enclosed lookout platform standing on the top right side of the big gate. We had been making supply deliveries over the past few weeks to a series of forts along the frontier. These forts were strategically placed to protect the western border of the Louisiana Purchase.

We weren't surprised as we approached the gate to hear the guard holler out: "Halt, who goes there?" "Where did you come from?" "What business do you have here?" Those were the three most commonly asked questions by the guard each time we arrive at a different fort's front gate.

These fort guards or "gatekeepers" played a vital role in the protection of those inside the fort. Their job was to challenge the entry of any approaching outsider and conduct an "on-the-spot" risk-threat analysis. If they perceived a real threat of imminent danger, they would provide a loud and immediate lifesaving warning. They would shout out loud, "Enemy at the gate." Then they would start sounding their bugle to give the urgent "charge" signal. This would alert all those inside the fort to come out quickly with their guns drawn and blazing at the first sight of the enemy.

Gate - First Line of Defense

While these gatekeepers were very important in the emergency protection plan of the fort, the gate itself was really the main “first line of defense.” As a result the gate had to be strongly constructed, basically impenetrable. It would have to withstand being repeatedly rammed and battered by those desperately attempting to get inside the fort. A strong gate equaled a strong defense, whereas a weak gate meant sure defeat. If the gate collapsed as a result of the all-out assault, the fort could be quickly overwhelmed and outpowered by wave after wave of enemy combatants rushing inside.

Applying these aspects of physical protection to spiritual protection, it is interesting to note Jesus didn’t describe himself as a gatekeeper, but rather proclaimed himself as “the gate,” a role reserved for the trusted shepherd of the sheep:

Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... who ever enters through me will be saved... I am the good shepherd... the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... the sheep listen to his voice... and follow him. (John 10:1–18)

A common practice of the chief shepherd at night was to literally lay down across the entrance to the sheep’s pen (sometimes a cave or rock-walled enclosure) so nothing could get to the sheep without first going through him. By doing this he was reassuring his sheep of their protection, safety, and security, not just by shouting a warning like a gatekeeper, but by literally defending them with his life:

No one will snatch them out of my hand... and... no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. (John 10:27–30)

Jesus represents one of only two gates—Jesus is God’s “life gate,” whereas the devil offers his “death gate.” Clearly the devil was tempting Jesus in the wilderness after forty days of fasting to go through the devil’s gate. He was promising Jesus undeniable joy and satisfaction from the many

deceptively alluring things he offered him (and us as well). But Jesus instead set a very powerful example for us by using the Word of God as his chief weapon in rebuking the devil, saying each time, “It is written....” After the devil grew tired of the Sword of the Spirit (Word of God) being used against him, he left Jesus in the wilderness without further temptations “until an opportune time” (Luke 4:13).

Only One Gate to Eternal Life

Jesus wants us to go through “his gate.” His is the only gate leading to eternal life rather than to eternal death behind the devil’s gate:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it. (Matthew 7:13–14) and Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)

Satan Calls to Us from His Gate

As believers we have to battle with Satan daily as he slithers in to dangle temptations right in front of us. He has made tempting morsels prepared just for us. If needed, he is ready to serve them in small bites to get us to ultimately walk through his gate and eat the whole plate which he has laced with either his controlling potions or deathly poisons. He knows each of our weaknesses very well and seeks to use them against us.

He doesn’t care where we are at any given moment or who may be around us. He may even choose to tempt us while we are sitting in a church pew or when we are in the act of worshipping with other believers. The walls of the church building offer no protection from temptation and trials or in any way blocks the devil’s entry.

Satan will casually throw stuff right into the mix of our thoughts. He particularly looks for those times when our minds are drifting or in neutral as we sit idly daydreaming. He knows his greatest opportunity is when we are at our weakest, times when we have dropped our guard.

Remember Jesus' words to his apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest? He wanted and needed their support as he prayed in the garden, but their physical tiredness and sleepiness overtook them repeatedly:

Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. 'Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.' (Matthew 26:40–41)

How often do we also fall victim to the same old tricks and deceptions the devil has used successfully in the past? It is amazing (and sad at the same time) how quickly Satan can grab our attention by waving the same old familiar enticing offerings in front of us. Let's remember Satan's offering is only a lie, an illusion, or a mirage. It will quickly vanish before our eyes if we begin chasing the particular pleasures he's dangling before us. Behind his "smoke and mirrors" lies the horrible reality he has once again suckered us into entering his gate.

A Gambler's Story

I recently heard an interesting but sad interview on the radio. It was the story of a professional gambler who was explaining his reasons for gambling. He said he had a desperate need to tell someone about his life, his dilemma, so they would not go down a similar path.

He quickly stated, "I love to gamble." He said he had convinced himself of his need to gamble was somehow just a part of his DNA. However, his story and love for gambling were not accompanied with success. He went on to admit over the span of his life from a young adult up to this point, he had been a "net loser" of money. Yes, he had indeed been a big winner at times, but each time it was followed by a long series of consecutive bigger losses.

He shared he had never lost bigger than when at one point he lost his wife and marriage. Even his kids had given up hope for him to ever change. They had first stopped all of their financial support in covering his daily living expenses and the cost of flights for him to visit them. Finally they also cut off all communications with him.

He said the loss of his family alone had been so great that regardless of his future winnings, he would still die a net loser. Then the interviewer asked him, “Why do you choose to keep on gambling?” His answer was not what we might have thought. It was not to keep alive the remote possibility of winning another big jackpot and hang on to a dream of becoming a “net winner” before he died.

No. It was all about the thrill and adrenaline rush of the entire gambling “roller-coaster” ride. He got charged up from both the ups and the downs, the wins and the losses. The whole intoxicating environment and experience were now all he lived for. It made him feel alive, giving him a much-needed distraction from an overwhelming feeling of pain from losing his family.

He then said he couldn’t stop himself from entering the “gambler’s gate.” In fact the temptation was so great he couldn’t even stroll by the smallest, most remote casinos without going inside. He confessed it was like he would be overcome first by some alluring voice calling to him. As he took his first step inside the door, he would encounter an invisible force leading him closer to the bait.

He said all it took for him to take the bait once inside was seeing the bright flashing neon lights and hearing the sounds of the charged-up crowd inside the casino. Then the hook would be firmly set by the inviting sounds of little musical jingles being emitted from the spinning slot machines, followed by the clinking sounds of coins falling into the stainless steel pot below the wheel, proclaiming another lucky winner.

He would finally be reeled in by the rattling sound of the little ball bouncing along inside the spinning roulette wheel and the thud of the dice hitting the back of the craps table. By this time the

gambler was indeed at the point of no return. He had once again entered the world of “random chance” known as “luck,” even though he knew the outcome would likely be his losing once again. Though he knew the math, statistics, and probabilities always pointed to the odds being in favor of “the house,” he proceeded as a man out of control.

He said it was like telling a drunk he would have a really bad hangover with a splitting headache the next morning if he didn’t stop drinking. But it didn’t really matter anymore because his mind was not thinking rationally anyway... just give him what he wanted now. The same was true for the gambler.

The gambler then pleaded, asking, “But what was I going to do? There was no way out. I was a prisoner to my gambling passion. I might as well have had chains on both of my legs that dragged me inside once again. There were just too many attractions inside to resist for an addict like me.”

God – The Chain Breaker

The Gambler’s addition was indeed a sad story. But it doesn’t have to stay or end that way because we do have choices. Sadly the choices are not seriously considered until we hit rock bottom. When there’s nowhere to look but up to God. And God is there waiting for us if we’ll just take hold of his compassionate, loving, and forgiving yet powerful hand.

God is always ready for us to come home to him. It’s completely analogous to the story of the “prodigal son” (Luke 15:11–32). We have to finally admit we are utterly helpless and hopeless and in need of rescue. The power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit also stands ready to make a way for us to conquer such strongholds—break those chains that bind us.

Great news! God is a “chain breaker!” So here is a personal question for each of us. In our current or past life, are there roads to temptation we go down repeatedly? Does the addiction, the chains of bondage, or helplessness of the gambler sound familiar to us?

Struggling with Addictions

Addictions can come in a variety of areas. Some of the more common addictions are sexual related (promiscuity, adultery, prostitution, pornography, etc.), substance related (prescription painkillers; wide variety of illegal drugs, alcohol, and tobacco; a wide variety of over-the-counter painkillers and stimulants, etc.), greed related (indebtedness, credit card abuse, gambling, kleptomania, etc.), and food related (compulsive overeating, weight loss obsessions, anorexia, etc.).

And there are many other deceptive treats available from Satan's candy store, all mastering our thoughts and actions, often becoming life-altering and potentially destroying what is near and dear to us. All of these treats invite us to come on in and eat until we are filled, as chains are subtly locked onto our legs, capturing us and rendering us hopeless to change.

When we have sin in our lives becoming out of control, we will experience pain and suffering in many forms. Most addictions have the potential to impact us emotionally, physically, and spiritually. Many can destroy us if we let them fully run their courses. The specific impacts from addictions include guilt; shame; fear of discovery by family, friends, and colleagues; and fear of losing our spouses, children, family, friends and other important relationships, plus our jobs and respect of ourselves and others.

As seen in the life of the gambler, all of these potential impacts will often lead us to being pulled into a deadly downward spiral, right into the deepest darkest pits of despair and hopelessness.

We Must Own Our Addictions

As mentioned in Chapter 2, as in most of our suffering, we desperately want to blame others for our addictions. We say, "They (whoever 'they' are) drove us to do it. We are the 'true victim'

here.” Or we may choose to blame God for our weakness to giving into temptation repeatedly. We say, “It’s God’s fault for not stopping us or rescuing us from our addictions.” Wrong on all counts.

Let’s go back to the book of James to clarify this whole process of temptation and sin, often leading to our addictions. We will see it is solely our responsibility:

When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13–15)

We may even respond half-jokingly to ourselves and others, “The devil made me do it.” However, that’s not true. We are the one who responded (or continues to respond) to the devil’s offer. It was our choice and decision each time whether or not we would perpetuate our addictions. Yes, the devil is typically the one who made the offer (temptation), enticed us, negotiated with us, sold us a bill of goods, and then sealed the deal with us, literally making a contract between us and him.

Instead of listening to the devil’s lies and offers, let’s listen to the Holy Spirit’s pleas for us to *stop* and accept Jesus’ alternative offer of walking with him. Listen to how Jesus describes himself in his various “I am” statements. He offers us himself as the true way out of sin’s pit and will break our chains of addiction and give us true life instead.

I am the way and the truth and the life. (John 14:6)

I am the bread that comes down from heaven. (John 6:41)

I am the light of the world. (John 8:12)

I am the gate for the sheep. (John 10:7,9)

I am the good shepherd. (John 10:11)

I am the resurrection and the life. (John 11:25)

I am the true vine. (John 15:1)

I am Teacher and Lord. (John 13:13)

I am God's Son. (John 10:36)

So let's desperately grab ahold of Jesus' right hand where we will find security because no one can snatch us away from him. He wants to be our "lifeline," one we so desperately need. He will free us^[AR22]^[LT23] from any remaining strongholds in our lives and equip us for battle. He will teach us through his Word and the Holy Spirit how we can quench the fiery darts of the devil as Jesus did himself when on this earth.

Equipped to Defeat Our Addictions

God has equipped all believers for spiritual warfare. For we are all in a daily battle between our fleshly nature and our spiritual nature. The devil aligns his forces with our fleshly nature as he attempts to leverage our weaknesses to destroy us as well as our faith in the process. However, the Holy Spirit aligns his forces with our spiritual nature to leverage his strengths to gain the victory over the devil. We should know as believers to never attempt to take on the devil with our own power. We must equip ourselves with the divine weaponry of God, the full spiritual armor he provides:

Finally be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the Devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish

all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. (Ephesians 6:10–17)

To keep ourselves armed, we need to stay diligent in our reading and meditating on God's Word, also praying continually and being a fruitful member of his church. There are no shortcuts. Once fully armed it is time to let the Holy Spirit lead the charge to demolish the remnants of any remaining strongholds in our lives. Add this next passage to your spiritual arsenal:

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons that we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (II Corinthians 10:3–5)

Fully trust in God to deliver all he has promised us. If he promises something, we can be sure he will give it to us when we ask, providing all we need to live godly lives. Claim all of his promises as your own now. Then move forward in confidence knowing God's perfect promise-keeping record:

Not one of all of the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. (Joshua 23:14)

Now anytime we hear Satan's voice calling to us or see him throwing his fiery darts at us, likely mad we don't give into him so easily anymore, we can just ask the Lord Jesus to rebuke the devil for us. Jesus is greater than the devil:

You, dear children, are from God and overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. (I John 4:4)

Jesus will act immediately on our behalf. He will himself rebuke Satan directly to his face while rescuing us as he moves in front of us as a shield. He will then give us all the strength we need to continue to stand strong in him. We will personally experience immediate unimaginable

power, courage, peace, and victory. All we have to do is just believe. Consider the following example from the book of Jude:

But even the archangel Michael, when he was disputing with the devil about the body of Moses, did not himself dare to condemn him for slander but said, 'The Lord rebuke you.' (Jude 1:9)

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have indeed called us to a secure and loving relationship with them. As promised in the passage below, God will give us all we need to make the right choices in our lives as we are given the opportunity to share in his divine nature:

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

Bottom line, do we really want to get rid of a lot of the pain and suffering we have been experiencing in our lives, in our marriage, in our relationships, and so on? Then let's determine now to stop letting the devil have mastery over us in any area of our lives. Place an "Out of Business" sign in front of the devil's gate.

Then choose to enter through the gate of Jesus Christ where we will find eternal life.

Chapter 10

The Potter's Hands

Let's now enter a unique place called the Potter's House.

Fortunately, we don't have to go back to ancient Biblical times to meet a potter or go into one's workshop because that's exactly what my wife Linda and I recently did on our first trip to the State of Arizona.

After flying into Phoenix, we drove our rented car north into the Tonto National Forest. We were both very excited about staying at a vacation rental property in the mountains just below the Mogollon Rim. It sounded like a perfect place to spend a week of uninterrupted leisure and spiritual time together, sharing some awesome sunsets and gorgeous scenery.

After a couple days of resting, we decided to check out the sights in the immediate area in the valley below. Our outing was rewarded with some neatly tucked-away hidden treasures—an old single-room school house dating back to 1884 with a bell on the roof and an outdoor toilet, various other historical site markers, and a number of quaint arts and crafts shops. All of these treasures were nestled deep in the narrow valley between two rising mountain ridges.

One such shop Linda had spotted on a locally produced tourist map of the immediate area was a small pottery shop, just off the main highway running along the valley. Leaving the paved two-lane road behind, we traveled up a single-lane, graveled, and bumpy road until we spotted the address of the shop on the left side of the road. There were no marked parking spaces, so we just pulled into the dirt driveway between a little shop and a big detached, rustic storage shed.

We couldn't see anyone through the little shop's front windows or anywhere else for that matter. But we finally noticed just down the hill a small cottage surrounded by trees had a light shining through one window. We were both hopeful this was where the shop owner lived.

We took a narrow stone pathway back down along the side of the road to some steps leading down to a railed door which was the entryway to a small covered patio on the south side of the little shop. We noticed a little cowbell hanging over the door so we rang it. After waiting a few minutes, we found the door unlocked, so we decided to step down into the patio to look around.

After looking briefly at the artwork hanging around the edges of the patio, we were relieved to see a lady coming up the pathway from the cottage below. When she arrived at the patio, she warmly greeted us, being so happy we had hung around. Her grandson was visiting her at the cottage and she hadn't noticed us when we had first pulled up.

Then she quickly unlocked the little shop's front door and invited us to come in as she turned on the lights. The front and side walls of the little shop were covered with shelves displaying her unique works of pottery. There was also a stand-alone set of shelves in the center of the showroom that completed her display area. Each individual piece of pottery was uniquely beautiful. There were many shapes, sizes, and colors, each having a multitude of potential uses, only limited by the purchaser's imagination.

At the back of the store, there was a small cashier's counter for conducting business transactions, but there was no cash register or even a credit card reader. The only visible items on the countertop were a pen caddy and a receipt pad (the kind that produced a carbon copy by pressing down hard). In a drawer was an old hand-operated credit card imprint device... ok, maybe we are talking ancient Biblical times.

Directly behind the counter was the lady's workshop. This was where the potter did her creative work, generating masterpieces to sell in her little shop. There were no walls or curtains separating the work area from the showroom. In her work area, we saw a variety of pottery pieces that were obviously her "works in progress."

We also saw several five-pound bags of dried compressed clay each labeled by type and geographic location. The lady pointed out some of the unique color combinations of the clay reflected its specific mineral composition. There were also a number of large jars of various colored powders for mixing with the base clay of choice to achieve the desired design and coloring effect.

Linda was captivated by it all, herself being an admirer and sometimes a creator of various arts and crafts, just not pottery. She asked the kind lady to walk her through the entire process of making a piece of pottery. The lady's face immediately lit up and she easily fell right into a master teacher role.

She was obviously delighted to have an eager, appreciative, and attentive student. She treated Linda much like an "apprentice" could watch the master at work. After all, who knows, maybe Linda would be interested enough to carry the artisan's craft forward at some point. Or at least it might encourage Linda to buy more of her pottery.

But, in either case, what a wonderful and special moment for both of them. I smiled to myself as the walk-through tour began. Linda was clearly the focus of the potter's attention. I was just the "tag-along" spouse.

The potter first took Linda through the selection process of choosing the right base clay and then choosing a color of powder to add to the clay. She illustrated how she would thoroughly hand-blended the clay and powder mixture, squeezing and working it together. It reminded us both of kneading bread dough.

We found it fascinating to watch the unique integration of the powder's color with the clay's base color. Then she explained how she placed the blended lump of clay on her manually driven flat turning wheel. The shaping all took place on the wheel except for any manually applied impressions or designs she wanted to add to the exterior of the piece she was making.

Once the lady finished talking about the hand-mixing and shaping work, Linda was excited about what was coming next in the process. She had seen a significantly scaled-down process a few months earlier as one of our granddaughters worked on a small pottery project in her art class at school.

Behind the wall of the mixing and shaping area were the potter's two large hot kilns (fired furnaces within thermally insulated chambers). Linda knew this was where the real "magic" took place. The potter was excited also and became more animated in her presentation. She described the amazing transformation of colors took place in the high-temperature treatment depending on the particular clay mixture and temperature in the fired kiln.

The potter knew exactly what to expect after years of experience, but we didn't. The samples she showed us demonstrated the dramatic color transformations that took place in a variety of ways. Some bright colors became more muted, muted colors became brighter, and some colors changed entirely to a different color, all working together to form a breathtaking new design.

At the completion of the tour, we realized we had made a complete loop, ending right back at the little cashier's counter. How convenient. Of course, located right in front of the counter were all of the display shelves and cases, filled with amazing pieces of pottery. But now, each was viewed with a deeper sense of appreciation to the uniqueness of each piece. Each piece had its own interesting color patterns, reflecting the time, effort, and touch of the master potter's hands.

Before the tour, Linda had locked her eyes on a small pretty vase with delightful swirls of various earth tones. Of course, as Linda went back to pick it up, its rare beauty came out even more. It was the product of the potter's process of using just the right mixture of base clay and colored powder, expertly hand-blending and shaping and then refining it perfectly to its final splendor by the heat transformation process.

Linda picked up the vase and set it on the counter, where she further admired it in a slightly different lighting. She then praised its beauty and design to the potter who had made it. It turned out to be one of the potter's most recent productions, so she revealed further what made this particular piece so spectacular.

She said in addition to the gorgeous earth tones, it had the subtle imprints of plant stems and leaves on its surfaces which were made more visible as she turned the vase to catch the lighting just right. That did it. Sold. Truth be known, it was sold even before they agreed upon the price.

The lady was all smiles and continued to talk as she wrapped it carefully for us to hand-carry back on the plane ride home in a few days. The beautiful vase is now displayed on a shelf in our living room. Linda loves to show others the vase and tell of those special moments spent with the potter.

God Is Our Master Potter

So, as we might guess, the analogy of Linda's (and my) visit with the potter in Arizona ties quite strongly with God's depiction of himself as a potter. In a spiritual sense, we too start out as just a lump of clay. God, on the other hand, is the true "master potter" who wants to mold and shape us to be like him in every way. We are each a direct result of his work in us.

Yet you, Lord, are our Father. We are the clay; you are the potter; we are all the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8)

God lovingly transforms each of us according to his plan for accomplishing his will in us and through us. However, we are not all "look-alikes." Though each one of us is gradually being transformed by the Holy Spirit into Christ's image, certain aspects of his character are more prominent in some than in others by design, not chance.

We can easily think of people who stand out to us in regards to one particular characteristic of God. For example, if asked to name someone who is the most "encouraging" person we have

known, we could likely name someone pretty quickly. The same is true about the other characteristics of God's nature: compassionate, patient, generous, hospitable, good listener, wise, loving, gentle, kind, humble, meek, merciful, forgiving, and so on.

These special endowments of God's character are often consistent with the unique spiritual gifts he has given to each of us. Some of these gifts we are born with as a result of God's work in his initial design of us in our mother's womb. Others are gifts of the Holy Spirit specifically given to us when we accept Jesus as our Lord and Savior. Such gifts can be bestowed quite quickly if deemed necessary at the time by God for the progress and effective functioning of the spiritual body of Christ, the church.

For example, from the day of Pentecost and throughout the life of the apostles, there was a considered outpouring of spiritual gifts, most to confirm the words being spoken were indeed from God and not man. These included gifts of prophecy, healing, and speaking in tongues.

Finally some of God's gifts and abilities evolve more slowly over time through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. This happens as a result of our being shaped and prepared for specific works of service to God so we will be ready to serve at just the right time. Only God knows when that will be. We don't, but we will in time.

For example, we often see spiritual leaders arise from among us, who suddenly show themselves quite capable to lead the church through challenging times of growth, struggle, or opposition. Little did they know what God was preparing them to do.

God clearly can create and raise up whatever, whoever, and whenever he so deems it is needed to carry out his will through the church, for example, missionaries, pastors, evangelists, elders, deacons, greeters, teachers, prayer warriors, givers, and so on.

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for special purposes and some for common use? (Romans 9:21)

Yielding to the Potter's Hands

So how are our individual relationships going with the master potter? Do we always yield to his hands as he begins shaping us into his image? Sometimes we may become stubborn, pushing back and resisting God's divine, caring, and loving hands right in the midst of his trying to shape us. We may also become indifferent, not interested or even caring anymore about God's efforts to change us.

A sign of our resistance is when we stop accepting or embracing God's will for our lives. Instead we want to try our own hand at the potter's wheel in order to make us the way "we" really want to be. We may want to be more successful according to this world's standards. Besides, God's way seems to be holding us back. We think God really doesn't understand what we want and need. So we choose to exercise our free will to go our own way and be our own person. The following passage expresses it well:

You turn things upside down, as if the potter were thought to be like the clay. Shall what is formed say to the one who formed it, 'You did not make me?' Can the pot say to the potter, 'You know nothing?' (Isaiah 22:16)

At times we may become angry with God because of what he has allowed to happen in our lives. In the midst of our pain and suffering, we may grumble and want to shout to God, "What are you doing? I thought I could trust you to give me what I want." As a result we (though merely clay) may choose to defy God and turn away from him entirely because we feel he is no longer trustworthy.

We may even harden our hearts (stiffen our clay) to even the slightest pressure from his loving hands to work with us. As a result, we fail to learn by our trials that our God is actually helping us to be shaped to be like him. We stop growing and thus become stunted, no longer able to see what has happened has the potential of being for our good and his glory.

Woe to those who quarrel with their Maker, those who are nothing but potsherds among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, 'What are you making?' (Isaiah 45:9)

Any resistance on our part when God is trying to shape us can result in our actually becoming “marred” in his hands. We then become no longer useful for the purposes he intended. However, in such circumstances the potter gives us a justified warning.

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord: 'Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message.' So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. Then the word of the Lord came to me. He said, 'Can I not do with you, Israel, as this potter does?' declares the Lord. 'Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, Israel.' (Jeremiah 18:1–6)

Though we may end up marred at times due to our own unyielding spirits, it doesn't have to be a permanent condition. It's never too late. God does not just shut down his potter's shop and walk away, but is ready to resume his work when we are ready. God is always waiting and watching with great anticipation of our return to him.

When we are finally ready to trustingly yield ourselves once again to God's hands, he is eager to resume his work of changing us into the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. He knows we need his touch to transform us from our fleshly, earthly nature into his spiritual, divine nature. Are we ready to let him resume his work in our lives?

Remember, as learned in the “Potter's House” analogy, true beauty and greatness of a piece of pottery are not in the value of the raw materials used. *True beauty and greatness in value are only imparted by the touch of the Master Potter's hands.*

Chapter 11

The Spirit's Control

God equips all believers with a new heart which has an embedded homing beacon—like a spiritual GPS (global positioning spirit). Due to God's omniscience and omnipresence, he always knows exactly where we are and what we are doing. We can't lose or hide from God. However, by exercising our free will, we can choose to either follow his directions or to go our own way, veering a little offtrack or even going totally off road.

We, as believers, all have an ultimate destination programmed into our hearts—leading us to heaven with God for all eternity. However, when we get off course (whether intentionally or unintentionally), as all of us will do sometimes, we will always have a clear path back home. Our GPS—the Holy Spirit—will work with us to help navigate our journey to eternity with God.

Similar to a real GPS, we will be “warned” pretty quickly when we are getting off God's desired path. We will often then be directed by the Holy Spirit to make an immediate U-turn or redirected to the way needed to get us heading back in the right direction. Just as in the case of an actual GPS in our car, we may choose to ignore the Holy Spirit's attempt to redirect us to God's path. God will not make us follow his path by taking away our free will. So we retain the freedom to either follow the directing of the Holy Spirit or deviate from course.

We can get off course by thinking we know a “better way” than God's way. Or we may feel we can't trust God anymore because of recent failures, trials, struggles, losses, sickness, and so on. Or we may let temptations get the better of us, following our own fleshly lusts or addictions. Or we may find ourselves aligning our thoughts and beliefs with false teachers and alternative religions.

In all these cases, we let temptation pull us into a dark alley, believing we can always back up anytime we need to reverse our course. However, the deeper and further we go, we will likely feel

we've reached the point of no return, no way out. We feel powerless, even paralyzed, unable to back up or turn around. Ravi Zacharias once said: "Sin will take you farther than you want to go, keep you longer than you want to stay and cost you more than you want to pay."^[5]

Satan offers a wide variety of religious "spiritual" diversions, well-planned excursions to take us right where culture and society today want us to go. These excursions become easier for us when we begin to distance ourselves from God and his eternal truth. Some of these popular and trending spiritualisms include self-deification, karma, new age practices, mystical meditations, oneness with nature, universal spiritual connectivity, mediums, astrology/horoscopes, satanism, demonology, Eastern and Middle Eastern religions, and so on.

Holy Spirit: Advocate/Intercessor

Jesus first described the Holy Spirit as being our "advocate" to help us and be with us forever, living in us, teaching us, and reminding us of all of the words of Jesus as he guides us into all truth:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you... he will testify about me... he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you. (John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; 16:12–15)

In addition to being our advocate, we are told the Holy Spirit also "intercedes" for us as he helps us with our weaknesses and gets deeply involved in our personal prayers with groans only our Father understands:

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. (Romans 8:26–27)

Furthermore, the indwelling Holy Spirit confirms we belong to Jesus and will give life to our mortal bodies and peace to our souls because Christ lives in us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will help govern our minds so through his working in our hearts, we may have victory, peace, and joy through the power of Christ:

The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace. The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, then even though your body is subject to death because of sin, the Spirit gives life because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies because of his Spirit who lives in you. (Romans 8:6–11)

Spirit's Transformational Work

The Holy Spirit has been given God's blueprint for transforming and sanctifying us, making us holy like God. We all have become honorable vessels of clay containing God's greatest treasure—God's glory displayed in Christ and our own promised eternal glory. After each of us has been uniquely designed, crafted, and shaped for our specific service to glorify God, we are called into action to help those he has placed in our lives:

For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory displayed in the face of Christ. But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.... Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (II Corinthians 4:6–7, 16–17)

The transformational work of the Holy Spirit to mold us into the image of Christ begins when we accept Jesus as the Lord and Savior of our lives. This fulfills the promise of Jesus that the Father would send his Spirit to carry out the work he has begun in us and bring it to completion:

And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit. (II Corinthians 3:18) and Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Philippians 1:6)

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus promised us as his disciples if we are thirsty for righteousness, we would be filled (Matthew 5:6). Jesus fulfilled this promise by supplying us with God's spiritual water. This is described by Jesus as being like "rivers of living water" as he dwells inside our hearts through the Holy Spirit:

Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, 'rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified. (John 7:38–39)

The indwelling Holy Spirit confirms we have been chosen by God. The Holy Spirit will also help us through times of trials, times of severe pain and prolonged suffering. He will fill our hearts with divine-supplied "joy" in place of our sorrow:

For we know, brothers and sisters loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you welcomed the message in the midst of severe suffering with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. (I Thessalonians 1:4–6)

Spirit Refines Us with Fire

A key perspective of viewing pain and suffering is in understanding the Holy Spirit's sanctifying work in us to make us holy. The process of sanctification is facilitated by our being "refined by the fire" during our own personal trials with pain and suffering accompanying them. This process of refinement accomplishes the same purpose as the potter's kiln (furnace)—driving out all of the impurities related to our corruptible fleshly nature.

This includes purification from all of the sins we commit when letting our "sin nature" take control rather than the Spirit. The end result of our refinement by the Spirit is our faith becomes of greater value to God than the purest gold.

In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the end result of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (I Peter 1:7)

But we ought always to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth. (II Thessalonians 2:13)

God Remains in Control

Recall from the earlier definition of “sovereignty” in Chapter 6 that sovereignty included two other key descriptions: “freedom from external control” and “being a controlling influence.” God’s supreme power—exhibited through his creation of the entire universe, his raising of Jesus from the dead, and his gifting us with the Holy Spirit—ensures us of his ability to control everything, including the transformation of our souls:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3:20–21)

In the midst of our trials, the pain we feel may not feel very pleasing. However, if we allow God to complete his work in us, we will ultimately be pleased at what he has done for us, with us, and through us. This “controlling” aspect of God’s sovereignty is probably one of the most difficult things for us to get our minds wrapped around.

While no one has all of the answers on exactly how God controls events and circumstances in our lives, we can all benefit from a deeper dive into this subject. Here is a sampling to promote your interest to dig deeper:

From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ (Acts 17:26–27)

God’s Control Persists in Our Pain and Suffering

Now let’s return to the general theme of this book by addressing the various ways God’s control comes into play in regards to our pain and suffering. The following perspectives have helped me

personally at times to better frame the possible purposes and reasons behind certain events and situations I have encountered. I pray they are helpful to all of us as well.

As mentioned under the previous discussion on the “Master Potter,” we established God has the right and the capability of ultimate control over our lives. But as we also established, God will not force his will on us. He’s given us “free will,” so if we don’t want to yield ourselves to his will, we don’t have to. God always gives us the freedom to walk away from his potter’s shop and go our own way.

However, if we do walk away from God, then our lives become subject to our own feeble and ultimately “unsuccessful” plans. Plus this will leave us wide open to the influence of the devil, often leading our lives to going totally “out of control.” We quickly find we are subjected to a perpetual life of suffering “unintended consequences” and loss of any real stability. We become subject to unexplained variability as we experience both extreme highs and lows. This is because in reality most of the things we attempt to do on our own are truly outside the realm of our personal control.

We may like to think “we” are in control of everything but quickly find out that we are not. In fact, any life lived apart from God is best described as a series of random events of “chance.” Our life experiences are then often seen as either “good luck” or “bad luck.” In other words, our choice to do life without God is chaotic at best, totally unpredictable and unstable, leaving us very confused.

Our Life is Not Left Up to Chance

When considering the possibility of life being left up to pure chance, I am reminded of an ancient Chinese proverb. It is called “Sāi Wēng Lost His Horse.”^[6] Here is a brief excerpt for your consideration: “Sāi Wēng... raised horses for a living. One day, he lost one of his prized horses. After hearing of the misfortune, his neighbor felt sorry for him and came to comfort him. But Sāi

Wēng simply asked, “How could we know it is not a good thing for me?” After a while, the lost horse returned with another beautiful horse. The neighbor came over again and congratulated Sāi Wēng on his good fortune. But Sāi Wēng simply asked, “How could we know it is not a bad thing for me?....”

This proverb includes two more verses; however, it could go on and on with its back-and-forth dialogue, and its points are firmly made: First, when we are left to a life of random chance, the reasons behind everything happens to us are unclear and uncertain. What might appear as an apparent misfortune might actually have a silver lining, a blessing in disguise—“good luck.” Second, but there is also the flipside message within the story. What may at first appear to be good luck can really become misfortune—“bad luck.” Third, so, “good luck or bad luck—whose to know?”

So, if we choose to go our own way rather than walk with God, our lives quickly become “out of control” and full of uncertainty, loneliness, fear, worry, and anger. Stress mounts up and displays itself in our homelife, relationships, and the workplace. We often experience disastrous results in all these arenas of our lives. We find no peace or rest in our souls. So as TV personality, author, and psychologist Dr. Phil often asks the guests on his TV show about the results of their particular choices for doing life, “How’s that working for you?”

My pray is if any of us are still caught up in a life ruled by chance, please stomp on the brakes right now, come to a complete stop, and turn around and head back to God. The good news is we can arrive there instantly with a single prayer: “Dear God, I’m back. Please forgive me.” God will welcome us home immediately with open arms. No penance to pay. God will renew and refresh his Spirit within you, restoring clarity, hope, and a renewed purpose to your life.

God's Promises for Us in Trials

As we've discovered from previous discussions, God does not promise us an easy, trial-free life on this earth. However, he does promise he will give us unlimited strength, courage, and patience to face any trial. Throughout our trials he has promised us he will make sure our trials are not more than we can bear (I Corinthians 10:13).

God wants us to totally trust in him to see us through our trials. He promises us he will stick by our side each step of the way:

"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid." (Hebrews 13:5b–6a)

One of the amazing things that God does for us is to give us inner peace in the midst of our trials as he also restores our inner joy—beyond anything we could ever have imagined. This peace will replace all of our worries and concerns about our daily lives and the circumstances in which we find ourselves:

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

Isn't it time we left our life of chance, filled with worry and fear, and returned to God as we let the Holy Spirit live fully within us? *Allow the Holy Spirit to once again transform and revive our heart, mind, and soul.*

Chapter 12

Two Interesting Conversations

Recall the three questions asked by the fort gatekeeper in Chapter 9? One of the three questions he asked was, “Where did you come from?”

Conversations About Job

This same question is asked by God of Satan when he shows up, seemingly uninvited, at the same time God’s angels came to present themselves before him. God uses the opportunity to quiz Satan about what he has been up to. God then calls attention to a man named Job as a shining example of one of his truly faithful servants on earth. Satan then confronts God about Job’s faith and suggests a test:

One day the angels came to present themselves before the Lord; and Satan also came with them. The Lord said to Satan, ‘Where have you come from?’ Satan answered the Lord, ‘From roaming throughout the earth, going back and forth on it.’ Then the Lord said to Satan, ‘Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one on earth like him; he is blameless and upright, a man who fears God and shuns evil.’ ‘Does Job fear God for nothing?’ Satan replied. ‘Have you not put a hedge around him and his household and everything he has? You have blessed the work of his hands, so that his flocks and herds are spread throughout the land. But now stretch out your hand and strike everything he has, and he will surely curse you to your face.’ The Lord said to Satan, ‘Very well, then, everything he has is in your power, but on the man himself do not lay a finger.’ Then Satan went out from the presence of the Lord. (Job 1:6–12)

This same dialogue is basically repeated again in Job 2:1–7, except this time Satan makes a request to conduct an even more severe test. This time Satan is given permission to strike Job’s body with afflictions, but not to kill him. In both of these encounters, God filtered Satan’s requests based on his infinite wisdom and assessment of Job’s faith to withstand Satan’s onslaught.

Satan is proven wrong both times about his prediction of Job's reaction to his trials. God is proven right. In spite of Job's massive losses (first, all of his children and livestock and then finally his own health), Job did not sin by charging God with wrongdoing (Job 1:22; 2:10). In the end, Job was richly rewarded for faithfully enduring the horrible pain and suffering from the afflictions Satan brought on him. God gave Job twice the number of blessings he had in the beginning before he suffered his first fiery trial (Job 42:10–17).

Conversations About the Apostles

There is another example of an interesting conversation between God and Satan. This time it is in the New Testament and occurs prior to Jesus' arrest, persecution, and execution on a Roman cross. Here is what Jesus conveys to his apostles, with a specific prayer for Simon Peter:

'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.' But he replied, *'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.'* Jesus answered, *'I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'* (Luke 22:31–34)

Jesus knew Satan's sifting would be limited to the scattering of all of his disciples upon his arrest as Satan struck deep fear within their hearts as they feared for their lives (Zechariah 13:7; Matthew 26:31).

It is important to remember the apostles had not yet been empowered by an indwelling Holy Spirit and were thus subject to their fleshly nature of "fight" or "flight." Peter had tried both. He first fought by swinging a sword, cutting off the ear of a man, which led to Peter being rebuked by Jesus. So, since that didn't work, he took flight like the rest. Each apostle denied Jesus by their actions, but Peter added his own three verbal denials.

Bottom line, not one of his apostles takes the risk of coming to Jesus' defense. Not even John spoke up for Jesus though he did stay in close proximity to Jesus throughout the ordeal, unlike the

others. All of them were indeed sifted in one way or another, but it seems clear Jesus prayed to the Father he would limit what Satan could do to those who were deemed to be faithful apostles.

All of the apostles except Judas stuck with Jesus in the end and found forgiveness. Each was fully restored to fellowship with Jesus and would go on to become noted “pillars” of the church, including the apostle Paul who was added to their number later.

All of the apostles would come to know pain and suffering firsthand as they were persecuted, beaten, jailed, and ultimately exiled or martyred. Each honored their Lord and Savior as a testimony of their faith. They provide each of us with a clear and powerful example of true discipleship and our being called to carry our own cross. Like the apostles, we are encouraged to stand strong whatever our circumstances may be and remain faithful to the end... no matter what.

Application of These Conversations

So, what are we to conclude from these two interesting conversations between God and Satan? Today Satan may be totally blocked from having direct access to God’s throne in heaven as a result of the “game changer” when Jesus crushed his head when Jesus was raised from the dead (Genesis 3:15). However, there still remains the possibility of Satan proposing tests of our faith today even with his restricted access to God’s throne.

The fact remains we are still tempted and tried every day by Satan, yet God does indeed limit the power of the fiery darts Satan throws at us. Whether or not actual conversations take place today between God and Satan, let’s not forget God’s assurance to us concerning the temptations we will face as his servants. God does promise he will filter every temptation (or trial) Satan presents to ensure we can endure it.

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it. (I Corinthians 10:13)

God doesn't tempt us (James 1:13), so that leaves only one adversary for us to contend with, Satan. But remember we never stand alone in our battle against Satan. In addition to God's filtering and restricting our temptations and trials, we have Jesus and the Holy Spirit to stand with us, help us, and speak for us. Both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are called our "advocates" (I John 2:1; John 14:26) and are described as "interceding" for us (Romans 8:26, 27, and 34).

What does their role entail? The Oxford Lexicon^[7] defines "intercede" as to "intervene on behalf of another, mediate, negotiate, moderate, arbitrate, etc." This is exactly what was happening when God interceded between Satan and Job and when Jesus interceded between Satan and his apostles (especially Peter). The intermediary role of Jesus and the Holy Spirit between Satan and us is clearly implied as well in I Corinthians 10:13 above, whether directly or indirectly.

The temptation and trials proposed by Satan are specifically targeted at God's children must in all cases be evaluated and filtered by God. It will lead to either God's denial or his concurrence but likely tempered with stipulations and modifications. In either case, God remains in control of our lives as he keeps us sheltered from destruction by Satan as we remain safely in his heavenly "witness protection program."

Our comfort lies in our having complete faith and trust God will do what he deems best for us. He is the only one who can take our pain and suffering and use it for our good and his glory, as he further molds us into the image of Jesus. He will not allow us to experience more than we can bear. *God will richly reward our faithful endurance of our own pain and suffering.*

Chapter 13

Embedded Thorns

One of the most speculated and often passionately debated topics in the Bible is the identity of the apostle Paul's "thorn in the flesh" (II Corinthians 12:6–9). Everyone has an opinion. The speculations span from the physical realm to the spiritual realm.

This debate is not unlike the one about what words Jesus actually wrote on the ground with his finger when confronted by a group of Jewish teachers and Pharisees with rocks in their hands. The issue involved whether or not to stone a woman caught in the act of adultery. Regardless of what he wrote on the ground, Jesus' convicting words to the group were "Let anyone of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). This sent all of them packing except for the woman. Jesus then told her, "Then neither do I condemn you... Go now and leave your life of sin" (John 8:11).

In both of the cases above, there are no clear, definitive answer as to "what?" So everyone is free to "put in their two cents." However, it is not my plan in this particular study to go through a discussion of the various proposed answers or ideas about either of these two situations.

Yes, Paul did have a thorn in the flesh. This only proves Paul was not exempt from having ongoing problems and issues to struggle with, much like us, whatever it was. We all have what we would likely call our own "thorns" God has not yet totally removed from us. So we wonder if Paul's thorn was the same as ours.

This is the main reason Paul's thorn in the flesh feels so personal to most of us, whether physical or spiritual. Regardless of what Paul's thorn was causing him to struggle, he did pray with pleadings three times to have it taken away. However, it was not taken away. Thus his situation also proves we do not always get what we ask God for.

God's response to all three of Paul's prayers was brief and very clear though compassionate:

My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness. (II Corinthians 12:9).

Our Own Thorns

What we typically consider as our thorns are the major struggles in life of either a physical or spiritual nature. So the possible mix of issues we may classify as thorns more than likely involve our families, spouses, children, personal relationships, health, jobs, bosses, co-workers, addictions, repetitive sins, and so on.

Ongoing pain and suffering stemming from our thorns in life can seem like a hopeless, endless cycle, as we continue our search for resolution of our struggles. We become convinced if it was just removed, we would finally have peace and happiness. We often become so desperate to find relief we will often try anything offered by anyone, anytime or anywhere.

But we will typically find these well-intended offerings aren't actually very helpful to us. They often just add to our frustration and can even accelerate our downward spiral. We fail to realize our search should only be pointed in the same direction as Paul's inquiry, seeking our relief directly from God.

While we may not necessarily like God's particular response to Paul's request, there is no one else we can put our faith in who is as wise, knowledgeable, powerful, and compassionate as our God. He will lovingly assess our request because he cares for us. And because he does, he will answer in compassion and with infinite wisdom and knowledge of what is best for us.

God's focus is on the spiritual aspects of our lives in the long term, whereas we tend to focus on the physical aspects in the short term. Besides, who knows? God's response to our "thorny" situation may not be the same as his response to Paul's thorn. Some have personally experienced immediate relief as a thorn is totally removed.

Bottom line, only God has the complete picture of our situation, so we should fully accept and trust his response to all of our requests.

Purposes of Our Thorns

God's will for Paul was about his not becoming "conceited" (or "puffed up") because of the "exceedingly great revelations" God shared with him when he was called up to paradise in the third heaven. He had heard "inexpressible things, things no one is permitted to tell" (II Corinthians 12:1-4).

Regardless of the source of our pain and suffering, God always has a desired outcome in mind. Though we may not see it initially or in the midst of our own "thorn" experiences, we can be sure God will use our trials as he works to shape our hearts and character to be more like Jesus. As we wait on the Lord for his response to our thorns, we should draw strength and patience from Paul's example of perseverance, as he entrusted his future to God's grace, one day at a time. It seems apparent his thorn didn't slow down his ministry to the Gentiles.

It is important for us to always remember the following passage as we deal with pain and suffering from our own thorns. Hold on to the fact our hope in Christ will ultimately be realized. This hope will not disappoint us as God has never under-delivered on his promises. Therefore, we will never be ashamed of believing in God's promises because not one of God's good promises has ever failed.

'...we also glory in our sufferings, because we know suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us" (Romans 5:3-5).

"You know with all your heart and soul not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed" (Joshua 23:14).

God also offers us his support and encouragement to help us persevere as we are sometimes called to endure our thorns a while longer. He will support us with his inexhaustible divine power.

He will encourage us to stand on his unlimited supply of glorious grace. *God's grace was sufficient for Paul and it will sufficient for us as well.*

Chapter 14

The Greed Trap

Let's start with a short story we'll call *Mouse in the House*.

The small mouse was persistent in its vigilant nightly reconnaissance for food. It was well-equipped with state-of-the-art aroma-sensing nostrils and laser-like night vision optics. After having come up empty several nights in a row, it had the feeling tonight would be the time it would finally lock its radar onto a rewarding target.

Though filled with excitement over the mere possibility of at last finding food, the mouse waited patiently in the dark, stealthily tucked in behind the refrigerator. It just knew this night would be different. So, he could hardly contain himself. As the mouse sat there in the darkness, it remembered all of the intelligence it had recently gathered on the new homeowners, Brian and Silvia. [Note: Brian and Silvia are fictitious characters created by the author for illustration purposes only.]

It had already collected enough evidence to convict these two owners of being "super neat freaks." This was especially true when it came to keeping a "spotless" kitchen. And they were so predictable. After every meal or late-night snack and before the lights in the kitchen were turned out, they would put everything away in its own special place in the pantry or refrigerator. Lastly, they would eliminate any remaining food crumbs by wiping down all of the countertops and then finish the job with using some disgusting kitchen cleaner on the granite countertops and the graphite sink.

However, the real problem was with Silvia since Brian seemed to be frequently absent in the evenings with work-related activities. So the mouse had developed detailed recon reports on her practices and habits. The one thing making this particular night most exciting to the mouse was the obvious preparations being made for a rare evening party at the house. He had heard them

talking in the kitchen about being excited to celebrate Brian's recent promotion to vice president of marketing with a few special friends.

The mouse's plan at this point was to just lay low and listen with his new spy gear eavesdropping device came with wireless earbuds. Now he could especially take note of anything he heard falling to the floor as snacks were served or during the cleanup afterward. The mouse had a particular interest in the cheese and cracker snack tray already sitting on top of the counter awaiting the arrival of their guests. He had smelled the enticing aroma the instant it had been unwrapped.

Of course, having resolute patience was the key to pulling off this little covert operation. In addition to its patience, it was proud of its uncanny night vision. It had easily detected and avoided the hauntingly penetrating eyes of an old owl just the night before. The mouse had been forced to go on an outdoor adventure due to the lack of any accessible food in the house. But as typically happens to any old crusty, cantankerous mouse, its past successful operations had turned it into a pretty cocky rodent. Along with its growing pride came an overinflated sense of invincibility.

The mouse was fully confident it would be amply rewarded when the lights went out at the end of the party. However, in the meantime there was this boring hum of the constant chitchat in the house and out on the patio. It had already persisted way too long. But what seemed like an eternity finally came to an end around 11:00 PM as the guests said their final congratulations and goodbyes.

The mouse sighed deeply. The end of its waiting was drawing anxiously near. Sure enough Silvia started the post-party "clean room" sanitation procedures, starting first in the living room and then outside on the patio. Brian, "Mr. VP," wasn't interested in helping her clean up which came as no real surprise to Silvia or the mouse.

However, what was surprising was Brian's sudden departure in his car to go somewhere. But in only fifteen to twenty minutes, he was back home. He walked back in the kitchen and opened

the refrigerator door briefly and took something out. He then turned and walked to the kitchen counter. The mouse could hear him open a package wrapped with plastic that had an alluring crinkly sound all mice love to hear.

The mouse laid there totally convinced whatever it was, it had to be fresh food of some kind. He sniffed even harder but sensed nothing. He then heard a Ziploc bag open, and at long last, he got his nose filled with the smell of the “C word.” *Cheese*. The mouse could barely contain itself now.

Then the mouse heard something faintly click, followed by a soft sound of something being placed at floor level, just around the corner from the refrigerator. It couldn't see what it making the odd sound, but its ears were deafened now and its eyes blinded by the stomach juices starting to pump big-time.

In fact its eye balls were bulging almost coming out of their sockets, and its nostrils were both flared wide open, resembling the end of an elephant's trunk. It was literally vacuuming in the rich and wonderful flavor of sharp cheddar cheese now wafting its way under the refrigerator, being directly funneled to its intended target. But the mouse showed tremendous restraint and didn't rush out just yet.

It still remembered the other night when Silvia had come close to catching sight of it as she had flicked the kitchen light right back on after turning it off a couple of minutes earlier. His experience and finely tuned wisdom had paid off because this night Silvia had done the same thing again. Ok, now the coast was clear. The mouse now greedily giggled to itself in anticipation.

[But little did the mouse know one of those boring patio conversations from earlier in the evening had included a recent mouse sighting near the garbage can of their next-door neighbor. So much for the stealth of the overly confident mouse. This revelation had led to Brian's making a

fast dash to a super discount store nearby to buy a mouse trap. He knew Silvia would not be able to go to sleep and rest well until the purchase was made and the trap was set].

Sensing it was at last safe to venture forth, the mouse started to let off its brakes. Its heart rate was now rapidly going off the charts. It then blasted full speed ahead from behind the refrigerator. Its path had already been programmed into its onboard computer as it had prepared in advance for this exact moment.

The mouse completed the first leg of its journey down the side edge of the refrigerator in record time. Just as it reached the front edge of the refrigerator door, it made a quick hard left turn. It felt its weight shift onto its two right feet as it made the turn, but it didn't lose traction. Traveling now at warp speed, its eyes were forced opened even wider by the high g-forces as it plunged headfirst into the cheeseball... bait.

Instantly its head was buried deep in the soft cheese right up to its ears. But after just one millisecond of amazing flavor and ecstasy beyond imagination... *snap*, it was all over, fatally executed by a cheap one-dollar mouse trap. Lights out. End of story.

In this little "Mouse in the House" story, there is more than meets the eye. This is a story of both an "overconfident mouse" and a "driven young man." It turns out that the mouse and the man have a lot in common. Both are driven by greed and an unquenchable drive for more. They were both determined and convinced nothing would get in their way to slow down their quest.

In regards to the mouse, the "greed trap" had already been baited and set, leading to its ultimate demise. Similarly, Satan was already at work baiting and setting his own trap for Brian. Sadly, Silvia and her marriage to Brian could end up also caught in the "greed trap," either as a willing accomplice or an unwilling victim.

Judas - Sad Story of Greed

Judas was an apostle of Jesus, but sadly in title only. Unfortunately, Judas wasn't numbered among the faithful due to his allowing greed to blind him, much like the mouse. Greed drove him into making a self-serving decision to deliberately betray Jesus.

Judas stands out as the only apostle who didn't take off running at Jesus' arrest in the garden. Sound like an admirable epitaph? It's not, because there was no reason for him to run since he was the "traitor" who orchestrated the whole thing.

It clearly wasn't a momentary act of weakness because Judas had already developed a heart of stone, hardened by his greed. (John 12:6) In spite of being in the physical presence of Jesus for three years as one of the apostles, Judas seems to have spiritually distanced himself from Jesus. He likely continued to tag along with Jesus, being disconnected in heart but keeping his eyes on Jesus to see what he was really up to.

As he listened and observed Jesus, he was probably undecided for a while as to Jesus' actual intentions. But Judas did have one important question for which he needed an answer. Would Jesus become the actual king of Israel and deliver them from their enemies (the Romans) as Judas had been taught by the Jewish chief priests and elders?

If so, then Judas just might have a straight path to success with the potential of untold wealth as King Jesus' treasurer, a job he already held as "keeper of the moneybag" from which he benefited. The scriptures tell us Judas "used to help himself to what was put in it" (John 12:6).

But in the end, Jesus was just a big disappointment to Judas. Jesus' intentions became even clearer to Judas as Jesus began talking more and more about his impending death. It was time to make a decision... a choice. The tipping point came soon for Judas as Jesus rebuked him to his face, likely embarrassing him in front of the other apostles.

Jesus had responded to Judas' mockery of the dear woman who had just anointed Jesus' body with an expensive bottle of perfume. Judas accusingly proclaimed that it should have been "sold and the money given to the poor" (John 12:4–8). It was clear to Jesus that Judas wanted the potential money from the sale of the perfume for himself.

The scriptures say right after this event, Judas "went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them" (Mark 14:10). So, Judas decided it was time to "cash out" as he chose to betray Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Not huge, but at least it provided one last payday for him. Besides, he didn't really think they would do much more than arrest and punish him. He likely never thought the Jewish leaders would actually kill Jesus since up to this point, it had all been just a lot of threats with no action. Besides he knew they couldn't actually execute Jesus without the approval from the Romans who didn't seem to be strongly opposed to Jesus.

However, after the arrest of Jesus, things progressed further than Judas had imagined. When he finally saw Jesus actually being condemned and not just slapped on the wrist, he was "seized with remorse" (Matthew 27:3). But, rather than repent of his sin, Judas chose to kill himself instead. Greed had so hardened Judas' heart it blinded him to who Jesus really was—his loving and forgiving Savior and Lord. Though he confessed his sin to the chief priest and elders (Matthew 27:4), his greed had already done a number on his heart, hardening him to the point where he couldn't repent. He killed himself instead. Sad indeed.

The Day Greed Collided with Unforgiveness

The sadness of Judas' story in regards to his inability to repent and ask for forgiveness brings to my mind another sad story. It involves the greed on one man colliding with the unforgiveness of another. This particular story is more personal to me since it involved my grandfather.

My grandfather (I called him “Granddad”) on my father’s side was a carpenter was well-known and respected in the community. He was known to be a hard worker and a man of his word, but sadly not a believer in Jesus.

His wife (I called her “Grandmother”), his son and daughter, their spouses, and all of their children were baptized believers. They attended church services every time the doors were opened and served the Lord where and when needed. Though my Granddad was one of the carpenters who helped build our new church building, he never went to church with us a single time I can remember.

Though Granddad didn’t have much to do with me as a young boy (or any of the other grandkids for that matter), he chose to finally befriend me by making me his fishing buddy when I became a teenager. I was surprised at first and thought it may have been solely because I could now drive his old black Ford pickup for him on country roads to take him fishing; this was several years before I was even sixteen. We never saw a policeman on any of the country roads, except when they were chasing my Mom, a noted speedster... but that’s another story.

In any case I was thrilled we got to be friends at last. However, it continued to bother me being the only grandkid that he chose to befriend. My two sisters and two girl cousins deserved special time with Granddad also. Sometimes I wondered if it was just a temporary thing soon passing? Even if that was the case, I told myself I would enjoy my relationship with Granddad as long as it lasted. I held onto hope it would continue for the rest of his life.

When Granddad and I were^[LT24] alone together, we would mostly talk about fishing. We spent a lot of time together on the back roads driving to farm ponds and small lakes. Sometimes he would tell me about his early years of growing up on a farm. Most of these stories I was hearing for the first time. Sure, there were times when it would get quiet, but we were both comfortable just riding along and being together out in the country.

It was right in the middle of one of those quiet moments one day when Granddad just blurted out, “You know, Christians are hypocrites.” Needless to say, I was shocked by the sudden outburst, his angry tone, and the forcefulness in which he said it. I didn’t know what to say since I hadn’t yet found my voice in discussing serious issues with most adults. Plus I was a little unsure if I should still be afraid of Granddad based on his earlier gruffness when I was much younger. I wondered if it was directed at the rest of our family, my Dad, or just Christians in general.

After sitting there in silence for a few moments, Granddad finally went on to tell me about something which had happened to him a few months earlier, still causing him to stew about it. He told me he had made a “high-dollar” custom fly rod for a preacher in town. Fortunately as he identified the man, I was glad and relieved to learn that it was not the preacher at our church.

He then went into detail as he told me how he had specially ordered all of the materials which cost him a lot of money. Once all of the materials had arrived by the rural route mailman, Granddad said it took him a full week to make the fly rod. He had to first prep the multipiece blank rod by gluing on the handle, the rod tip, and the interconnectors. He then carefully wrapped each of the ten rod eyelets on the nine-foot-long yellow fly rod using a special dark blue silk thread. The final touch was applying a waterproof clear, glossy finishing glue on the thread wrappings. He said that it was indeed a beautiful rod, one that he was very proud of. It had great action too. He knew the preacher would love it.

He called the preacher to tell him his fly rod was ready for pickup. The preacher showed up early the next morning to pick it up. He practiced casting a fly in Granddad’s front yard and immediately said he loved it, which produced a large smile on Granddad’s face. But, in an awkward moment, the preacher told Granddad he had forgotten to bring his money with him to pay for the rod. He asked if he could go ahead and take it since he had already planned a fishing

trip with a friend for that very afternoon. He then promised my Granddad he would return the very next day to pay for the rod.

Well, my Granddad chose to take the preacher at his word. He told him to go ahead and take the rod. Granddad then wished him good luck and hoped he enjoyed fishing with his new fly rod. Primarily because he was a local preacher, Granddad had full confidence the preacher would return the next day as he had promised and pay for the rod. Plus Granddad was expecting a little tip for all of his hard work based on the preacher's effusive praise.

At that point in telling his story, my Granddad stopped and turned to me and asked, "You know what?" I shook my head "no," remaining silent once again. He said, "To this day that preacher who supposedly was 'a man of God' has never paid me one red cent. So, like I said, Christians are hypocrites." Though I didn't say it out loud, I had to admit that the preacher was indeed a hypocrite, plus he was a greedy man, a liar, and a thief.

Needless to say, my Granddad continued to let his bad experience with the greedy preacher grow into a heart-numbing spiritual cancer. Granddad's lack of forgiveness and his determination to hold a grudge ultimately did harden his spiritual heart into a stone. It reinforced his already firm stance of not becoming a Christian or going to church.

Sad to say, but this story of greed of the "preacher man," his lies, betrayal, and theft surfaced again and again over the remaining years that we spent together. I could tell each time Granddad told me the story, he believed he was telling me about it for the first time. I was never quite sure if his memory was failing or if he was just trying to justify his keeping the wall up against believing in God or Jesus.

Advancing forward now about twenty-five years, I had earlier graduated from college and was now living in Texas working for a major oil company. A few months earlier, I had returned to

Oklahoma for Grandmother's funeral. Granddad didn't go to the funeral because he knew everyone at the funeral would be talking about God and heaven.

A few months had already passed since Grandmother's death. So I decided to drive back to Oklahoma to visit my Granddad since he had recently been moved into a nursing home in town, being unable to take care of himself. It was not the best place to be in your senior years, but there weren't many options since he did not want to live with anyone else in the family. He had earlier had a falling out with his daughter when she was serving as a caregiver for both of her aging parents. My Dad lived about three hours north and Granddad wanted to stay in his hometown.

My trip to see my Granddad was a special "heart trip" for me because I felt strongly led by the Holy Spirit to finally talk to him about his soul and his need for Jesus. I prayed often on my drive there, asking God to give me courage in talking with Granddad and to help me know what to say. As soon as I arrived and walked into his room, his tears started immediately to flood his eyes. I could tell he was very lonely and depressed. He was surprised and seemed pleased to see me.

He was lying on his back in his little single bed with his head propped up on his pillow. I leaned down and hugged him. He immediately told me how much he missed my grandmother as he began to weep more deeply. It was an extremely sad moment for me to see my Granddad crying with a broken heart. He had always been such a strong stoic man, never demonstrative in any affectionate way.

As I sat on the edge of his bed, I took his hand and held it for the first time. I told him I loved him and had some very good news. I told him that he could actually be reunited with Grandmother in heaven since she was already there waiting on him. I then shared with him how that could happen for him. All he needed to do was believe in Jesus. Then confess to Jesus he was a sinner and was ready to repent, accept Jesus as his Lord and Savior, and be baptized.

There, I had said it. After what had seemed like an impossibility for me over the years was now done. I had finally gotten it out of my head and through my lips through the power of the Holy Spirit. I had just shared the Good News with my Granddad. I took a deep breath and leaned backward a little to let him think about what I had just said as I kept holding his hand.

He had momentarily stopped crying and was in deep thought. Then new tears formed in his eyes as he said in desperation, “I just can’t.” I then pleaded by asking him, “Not even when you could see Grandmother again?” He shook his head “no” and said, “I just can’t do it. All I know is Christians are hypocrites. They are no better than I am. Remember that preacher who lied to me and cheated me out of my money?”

I should have been ready for this question after all of the times I had heard this story. But after twenty-five years, it still shocked me because I wanted to believe he had finally gotten past his experience with the preacher. But he just couldn’t bring himself to forgive that man. The preacher was indeed guilty and had majorly betrayed my Granddad’s trust. After all, the preacher had violated the old bedrock ethical saying of those days: “a man’s word was his bond.”

Without Jesus living in Granddad’s heart, there was no way he would or could ever forgive that man. And since Granddad had done nothing wrong in his mind or heart, his view was there was no need to repent of anything.

I then said another quick prayer in my heart to God, “Please help me here, Lord.” I looked down at Granddad and asked him if he considered Grandmother, his son, and me to be hypocrites as well. He shook his head “no.” So I said, “What that preacher did to you was wrong, but Christians are also human, have weaknesses and do sin. We all make mistakes and need to be forgiven. Granddad, please just believe, repent, and accept Jesus now as your Savior. This will open the door for you to enter God’s heavenly kingdom when you die.”

I sat there again and waited for a response. When he finally responded, it stripped the last bit of hope from my heart. He looked straight at me and firmly said as he cried out, “*I just can’t.*” As his weeping continued, I was praying really hard to God, begging him to just give me the right “new” words to say; surely I just needed to say it differently. He just wasn’t getting it. Then what I heard in my heart through the Holy Spirit was not what I had expected, but was clearly the truth: “You need to stop. There is nothing left to be said. It is too late.”

What a heartbreak it was for me to accept I had exhausted all efforts at this point. For a few brief moments, I sat there feeling like I had personally failed. But the Holy Spirit gave me immediate peace by assuring me the failure was not mine, but my Granddad’s.

I had convinced myself earlier this was going to be a glorious day with my Granddad gladly accepting Jesus. I thought the timing was finally right with his being in the midst of grief over the death of Grandmother. But it was not to be, for just as Judas’ hard heart had blocked out the loving words of Jesus, Granddad’s hard heart could not be penetrated either, even by the hope of possibly seeing his wife, my grandmother once again.

Sometimes I have wondered what Granddad’s decision about Jesus would have been if he hadn’t been wronged by a greedy man so many years ago which had now appeared to have been cemented in unforgiveness. What a collision had taken place on that day many years ago. But in the end Granddad was responsible for his own decisions as well as the resulting damage to his heart his unforgiveness had caused. I will never know if Granddad somehow made his peace with God after I left, but I knew I had finally shared the gospel with him, so it was all in God’s hand to provide the increase—I was just the sower of the seed.

As I drove back to Texas in the afternoon, my eyes would often fill with tears of sadness, still flowing from my broken heart. I wanted so much for my Granddad to know Jesus like I knew him. So, my plea to all of us is that if we ever start to think our hearts may be hardening due to

unforgiveness of others, we need to get on our knees immediately to the Master Potter, asking God to remake our heart into a new soft, tender, and caring heart. Let's not wait until it is too late to turn back to the only one who can restore us and make us new.

Satan Lies Saying Greed Is Good

In the 1987 movie entitled *Wall Street*, the lead character was a guy named Gordon Gekko, a wealthy, unscrupulous corporate raider. He'd buy financially struggling companies at a very low price while promising a bright future for its employees. He'd spin a tale of hope for the targeted company based on his promised personal investment in the company. He'd talk at length about his personal plans to expand the manufacturing capacity of key facilities and provide for highly efficient operations through new technology. Of course, it was all a big lie. After buying the company, he would quickly break it up and sell it off in pieces. He would typically leave the employees high and dry.

In one of his presentations to the shareholders of a large corporation, he quite effectively delivered his key business philosophy. The passionate, compelling, and intoxicating message was "Greed Is Good." As a result the shareholders sold their company to him, and the rest is history—another 'chop shop' job.

But, as often is the case with extreme greed, a lot of moral and ethical lines get crossed. After years of his corruptive practices, he was finally caught, arrested, and sent to prison for insider trading violations. Gekko's fate is predicted appropriately by one of [Aesop's](#) Fables, "The Dog and Its Reflection"^[8] or its adaptation in a children's story, "The Greedy Dog."^[9]

The sequel to the original *Wall Street* movie picks up Gordon Gekko's story just as he is getting out of prison, having lost most of his fortune and his entire family as victims of his greed. He first tries to repair his broken relationship with his daughter with little success due to broken trust. However, he doesn't give up and in the meantime picks up where he left off in his greedy business

practices because his heart hasn't changed. He is still full of the same manipulative, evil and greedy philosophy had wrecked his life earlier.

The story of Gordon Gekko chronicles the journey of greed's birth, growth, and its disastrous consequences. Like most of Satan's victims, he is still firmly ensnared in the "greed trap." This journey provides a good example of one of God's laws of nature as discussed in Chapter 8, "Reaping what one sows." The painful consequences of this man's constant quest for more provide us many strong warnings why we shouldn't go down the path of greed.

Believer's Response to Greed

Our much-needed response to greed is the same for all sin which so easily entraps us and leads us down a path to destruction. We must slam on the brakes and bring ourselves to a screeching halt. Then we must initiate a major course correction by turning around quickly and passionately pursuing Jesus instead of greed.

Our pursuit of Jesus will be richly rewarded as we get to know him more, realizing just how deeply he loves us. Then as we begin to experience his faithfulness in our personal lives, we come to the realization we really can fully trust him. As our daily pursuit of Jesus continues, we begin loving him in return, walking with him in faith, serving others and anticipating our living with him for all eternity.

The spiritual warning from the Garden of Eden episode, Judas, and many others throughout God's word is very clear: "Run from the deceptive call of greed because it is all a big trap." It will not bring lasting happiness, joy, or peace, but rather just the opposite. It brings stress, worry, fear, and horrific consequences.

On the other hand, what Jesus offers us is a spiritual life rich beyond all imagination, fully satisfying us with a life more abundant than we could have ever imagined.

I [Jesus] have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. (John 10:10)

and

God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. (II Corinthians 9:8)

Our new abundant life with Jesus may (or may not) include an outpouring of material blessings, but its true abundance is found in the spiritual blessings it brings. As we mature spiritually, we will begin to realize greed no longer has control over us because we have changed the focus of our worship from material things to worshipping Jesus alone. As we look to Jesus for spiritual blessings, we begin to realize Jesus is daily fulfilling one of the great promises from his Sermon on the Mount.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6)

Jesus feeds our soul continually, sustaining us as he gives us the blessed assurance of eternal life with him. We also find God's priorities suddenly become our priorities, no longer aligned with the priorities of the world of greed in which we live. We no longer live according to our will, but God's will. And it's no longer for our glory, but for his glory.

God's Work Principles

Since greed is so strongly related to the financial side of our lives, let's look more specifically now at our finances and our interactions with the workplace.

We all have to deal with money, whether we have a job or are retired. Needed income enters our lives in one way or another and is used to pay for the living expenses of ourselves and our families. Our financial goal, at least initially in life, is to successfully manage our spending to operate within a balanced budget. However, it is pretty easy for things to go "off rail" shortly thereafter as we live in a world of easy credit and fast loans.

In spite of the temptation to borrow more money to support an ever-expanding lifestyle, we all see the need to start saving a little money along the way for both expected and unexpected future expenses, for example, a down payment on a future house, college for the kids, retirement, appliance failures, or major auto repairs. However, we quickly discover our savings lag far behind what we would like as we struggle to live within our means. While there is nothing inherently wrong with our wanting to improve the living standard for ourselves and our families, it is easy to let the “cart” (bigger house, nicer car, etc.) get ahead of the proverbial “horse” (our income).

Before we establish the link between our income and the potential for greed, let’s first examine some key Biblical “work” principles. These principles address our work attitudes, motivations, and practices. First, it is interesting to learn work has its origin in the very nature of God. He neither sleeps nor slumbers. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is always working for us, in us, and through us:

...He who watches over you will not slumber. Indeed, he who watches over Israel will neither slumber or sleep. (Psalm 121:3–4)

My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I [Jesus] too am working. (John 5:17)

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Next, in everything we do, we should do it all in the name of Jesus and for the glory of God. This includes all of our life’s work, both in the home and at our workplaces. In addition, we need to all work consistently with the attitude “it is all for Jesus” we are working, not just for our boss or anyone else.

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3:17) and ...whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. (I Corinthians 10:31)

Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving. (Colossians 3:23–24)

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (Ephesians 6:5–6)

Also, in regards to our working, the apostle Paul reminds us all God expects us to provide for all those he has entrusted to our care. This requires we are gainfully employed or self-employed as an integral part of our daily lives. Our family, especially our children and aged parents, needs to be supported by our working to provide the necessary income to at least provide food, clothing, and shelter for them.

Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (I Timothy 5:8)

It comes as no surprise in most of the developed global and national economies, there is strong competition in the workplace. Everyone is pursuing advancement coming in the form of pay raises, bonuses, and promotions. It is all a part of the work-reward system persisting throughout the ages in one form or another. While not always monetarily compensated, a good employee is often recognized by their employer for their quantity and quality of work.

The system strongly incentivizes each employee to do their best in order to succeed. For example, take Joseph—the “coat of many colors” guy whose father was Jacob. Though being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, he advanced from being a slave in Potiphar’s house to running his whole household.

Then after being falsely charged by Potiphar’s wife of sexual assault, Joseph was imprisoned where he again advanced to second in charge, right beneath the warden. Then Joseph is released

from prison and becomes second-in-command over all Egypt, right beneath Pharaoh. Now that's what I call an accelerated advancement program.

As we struggle to get ahead in the workplace, it is so easy to start doing things solely to impress the boss. If we fall into this trap, we shift our focus from being a good employee to one of gaining any leverage or advantage we can in the race for rewards and recognition, even at the expense of others. However, as followers of Jesus, we need to be honest and dependable workers at all times, not just when others are watching. We need to not take credit for other's work. And even be let our work speak for itself, not being self-promoting.

God makes a further requirement of those who can work, to be able to share with those who can't work to provide for themselves, "... must work, doing something useful with their own hands, that they may have something to share with those in need" (Ephesians 4:28).

Finally, God wants us to follow the work direction of those in authority who supervise our work, treating them with respect. This should be grounded in our own reverence and respect of the Lord. But this is also expected when we find ourselves working for a tough, unappreciative, and demanding boss.

"Slaves [or employees], in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters [or bosses], not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh" (I Peter 2:18).

[Note: Throughout ancient times there were very few masters. Most people found themselves as slaves, either forced or out of necessity to support their families. For example, everyone who lived and traveled in Abraham's camp addressed him as 'master' and 'lord,' clearly suggesting a master/slave relationship. This is not unlike bosses and employees in the workplace today. Fortunately today we have much more favorable working conditions than they did – at least in most developed countries. Elsewhere, however, things haven't changed much since the first century].

In addition to the work principles mentioned above, believers also understand we should make our giving financially back to God our first priority. After giving appropriately in support of the Lord's work, we can next take care of our family's short- and long-term needs. In the process we can honor our God through obedience by our working hard, being a good employee, paying the family bills, staying within our budget, and faithfully paying down our debts. We are called to be good stewards of all God has entrusted to us.

Returning to Story of Brian and Silvia

Now, let's shift gears and return to the story of Brian and Silvia we introduced in the opening story of the "Mouse in the House." First backing up some on Brian's and Silvia's timeline... shortly after they had graduated from college, they were married. It was a modest wedding held at a small secluded church chapel with only a small group of family and friends in attendance.

Brian was the first to quickly find a job, so they made immediate plans and proceeded to move right away. They had decided early on to start small in regards to housing by renting a low-maintenance condo. They found a suitable condo for rent near Brian's job would minimize his commute. Next Brian traded in his "prized" but clearly aging Jeep for a small fuel-efficient sedan. Not a happy event, but a necessary next step.

Since Brian had a good-paying job now, it wasn't necessary for Silvia to start working right away. She decided to delay working and take a much-needed break. She felt drained from four years of college especially from all that had happened right after graduating. She was also warming up to the idea of possibly starting a family soon. Brian had agreed with the idea and was fully onboard.

Through the first year of their married life, everything was going well between them. It helped there were no financial issues causing stress in their relationship. They were living very modestly, even saving a little and keeping their spending well within Brian's salary. They had zero debt, so life was indeed good.

After a calm and stable first year of marriage, they began to lose their initial enthusiasm to start a family. They were enjoying the benefits of finally settling into a normal routine and comfortable lifestyle. They decided it was probably better to not rock their little boat in the pleasant calm waters by having a new baby added to the crew. When they would have a conversation about having kids, they would both immediately step on the brakes and start talking about the high cost of raising children.

Why “cost” was becoming a more frequent topic of conversation and consideration was their focus was starting to shift from having children to possibly upgrading their housing and vehicles. They had been watching their friends buying bigger houses and nicer cars. They both wanted a piece of the action for themselves. Their earlier contentment also began to wane as their daily discussions were almost exclusively now on new home listings and auto sales promotions.

However, even with a little tucked away in savings, their financial limitations made them face some harsh realities. They both knew in order to move ahead with the purchase of a bigger house and nicer cars would require them to make some critical changes. They just needed to convince themselves it was worth the sacrifices required on both of their parts.

So they quickly narrowed their options down to three main ones: First, Brian would work harder and longer hours in his current job in hopes of a promotion and bonuses; second, Silvia would start working to increase their family’s income; and third, while Silvia worked, Brian could go back to school to get an advanced degree or get a new degree in a whole new area of education had a lot more income potential.

They spent a lot of time discussing these options and finally agreed the first option was the best and easiest to implement. Plus Silvia wasn’t ready to give up her freedom just yet. This strategy proved to be a successful one for a number of years. During the past few years, Brian was promoted to higher-ranking and better-paying positions, recently advancing into company

management positions with nice raises, bonuses, job titles, prestige, and new benefits, including stock options.

However, like most plans, it had its ups and downs along the way with occasional stress in their relationship, as arguments became more frequent and intense. Most arguments stemmed from Brian's work schedule, working long work hours every day, including weekends. This meant he was away from home a great deal. Silvia was getting lonely, bored, and missed having time with Brian.

But they had both accepted these issues as part of the adjustments all married couples had to deal with. So they worked hard to stay at peace with one another and agreed to move forward, anticipating brighter days ahead.

If we now advance forward a few years, we find Brian and Silvia have actually survived Brian's long hours at work and now have two small children. As experienced by all growing families, it didn't take long for them to begin feeling their existing residence getting smaller and smaller. They needed more bedrooms, living space, and a bigger backyard. Plus they loved their friend's new home theater and game room. It would be so nice and allows them to have more quality family time together watching movies, playing games, or just chilling after a hard day at work.

In addition to their need for a bigger house, Silvia's car was really too small for a family car. She desperately needed to trade her car in for a new minivan or large SUV. Silvia then could help out the other mothers who often had helped her in shuttling around her kids and their friend's kids to school and after school activities. Plus a bigger car would be nice for family vacations.

Brian was already working longer hours, entertaining clients and going on regular overseas business trips. As a result Brian and Silvia hardly had any time together anymore which they both missed, but sacrifices had to be made for the family. So, not surprising, their relationship began to

suffer. They both felt sad as the distance between them continued to grow. They both felt helpless about the situation since they didn't know what they could do about it. So, they just let their life go on without any further adjustments.

Then their third child came along, of course unplanned. At this point they still had not purchased a larger house and Silvia still drove the same small car. The bills continued to pile up faster than ever. Finally out of desperation following several shared moments of severe panic, they both knew something had to give.

It was clear additional income was needed and fast, but from where? They both stopped talking and just looked at each other. They simultaneously had come to the same conclusion. It was time to implement their earlier second option: Silvia needed to get a job would likely require her working outside the home. While this step really didn't impact Brian's work life much, life for Silvia and the three kids would change drastically.

In addition to her working at a new job, she would need to retain her responsibility for all of the family's home needs and chores, including the increasing needs of their kids. It was clear they couldn't afford a nanny or housekeeper because the extra income from Silvia's job was needed to keep their heads above water.

A year later Silvia was still pushing herself to the limit, working full-time while she managed the daily operations of their home. She had to handle all of the kids' transportation needs, arranging their rides to and from school as well as their multiple after-school activities. She could either provide the transportation herself since her boss was very understanding of working moms or she could work out a ride-sharing program with the other parents in the area.

Her focus, rightly or wrongly, remained on keeping everything running smoothly, so when Brian finally came home at night, he could relax and not have to deal with any pressures related to family issues. She felt his being the top "bread winner" of the family entitled him to some extra

rest and downtime. Underneath all of these tasks Silvia was taking on was her strong sense of loyalty to her husband and kids.

Silvia continued to shoulder the sole responsibility for her family's "at home" success. She found herself driven by fear that in spite of her efforts, the wheels might still blow off the figurative "family bus." Therefore she dug deeper to find the strength to do all she could to support her husband and her kids. Failure was not an option.

As the days wore on, Silvia was starting to feel a deep weariness as her normal stress started to become more than she could continue to handle. Clearly she was becoming overloaded, barely holding it all together... until... Brian's infidelity came to light. That's the moment when the wheels of the family bus finally blew off.

In looking back, there were three critical questions Brian and Silvia had failed to answer and commit to before implementing their greed-driven strategy. Here they are:

(1) Can they maintain their solid personal relationship by sustaining good open lines of communications, fully supporting each other, and, above all, remaining loyal and faithful to each other, no matter what?

(2) Can they maintain their homelife—establish and sustain a good balance between their work and family time?

(3) Can they maintain their relationship with their kids; meet their developmental needs; listen to their children's problems; support their children's social, educational, and spiritual development needs; and provide a loving, safe, and peaceful environment in the place they call "home"?

Positive responses to these three questions are a "must" if they were to succeed, but "therein lies the rub." If anyone of these three questions suddenly has a "negative" response, it can all go "off the tracks" fast and roll down the hill. When this happens, the ensuing madness will consume

everyone. The entire family will quickly shift from the “getting ahead” mode into “pure survival” mode.

With Brian’s infidelity, the madness had begun. I think we can see where this is heading. Like the unfortunate small mouse in the story at the beginning of this section, this is Brian’s and Silvia’s “snap” moment.

Proceeding this moment there were definitely a number of warning signs were ignored. Metaphorically there were smells of an overheated engine and burning tire rubber. These signs were all considered as only temporary “near misses” which likely everyone experiences and thus no need to panic... until everyone is suddenly thrown forward as the emergency brakes are fully applied.

The family bus begins to spin. It then goes from rocking on its two right tires to rocking back on its two left tires. In the process everyone has lost their sense of direction. A complete rollover is imminent. Survival mode is quickly replaced with the “bail out” mode. This appears to be the only chance anyone has of making it out alive.

In the aftermath of such disasters, most don’t know where to even turn. Sadly, they often turn on each other. Very few look to God in these situations because integrating God upfront in their earlier work life and home life decisions hadn’t been deemed a priority.

But there is always someone (Satan) who remains lurking in the shadows who has been there from the very start of this family’s journey. He led both Brian and Silvia right into one of his specialties—greed. He made sure he was there for the closing scenes as the curtain fell. His mission had not only been possible—it was fully accomplished.

Even today Satan loves to watch and even marvel at the damage he causes to individuals and families. He knows if his victims don’t get divine help from God, they will eventually collapse

under the onslaught of pain and suffering he has planned for them, possibly lasting for years to come.

Greed Is Not Good

Finally, we need to challenge Gordon Gekko's (and Satan's) well-packaged lie: "Greed is good." Now we all know for certain: "Greed is *not* good."

Let's stop Satan now from stirring the cauldron of greed and covetousness deep within our hearts. Instead let's choose to stand together on God's promises—he will supply all of our needs, take care of us, and will never leave or forsake us.

As a result of our trusting only in God, we will save ourselves and those we love from a great deal of heartache, pain, and suffering. Remember "godliness and contentment is great gain" (I Timothy 6:6). Contentment is a good way to fend off greed and will also help us to be good stewards of all God has entrusted to us. Godliness (God-likeness) is best emulated through a spirit of thanksgiving as we give back to God from the "firstfruits" (not "last fruits" from what is left over) of our financial and material blessings.

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

and

For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. (I Timothy 6:7–8)

Make God first in all aspects of our lives. He will replace our "greed" with "gratitude" and give us peace through contentment as we "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness." (Matthew 6:33)

Chapter 15

Turning the Tables

One of the highlights in growing up and living in a small town in southern Oklahoma was the weekend entertainment. Of course, living in the South meant the real celebrities in town were the football players of our team called the “Leopards.” Everyone knew them and talked about their latest performances on the field. Young boys and all of the girls idolized them. It was definitely our own version of *Friday Night Lights*. Those old enough can remember our one State Championship when the town went crazy celebrating with cheerleaders, fire trucks, and police cars.

The other popular weekend entertainment options included a twelve-lane local bowling alley, a skating rink just north of town, and a drive-in movie theater up on the hill a little further north of town. I particularly remember a sign posted year-round at the entrance to the drive-in theater which read: “When Spring has sprung and grass has riz^[LT26], this is where the movie is.” Spelling and good grammar were not considered a high priority in my hometown.

However, running a close second to football as the most popular event in town and the desire of every teenager was the weekend ritual referred to as “dragging Main.”—I’ll explain this in more detail later.

One evening while I was participating in this weekly event, I saw one of the funniest things I had ever seen. It was a pretty amazing thing to witness. It happened in the parking lot of one of the two hamburger joints in our small country town. But I am starting to get ahead of myself. Let me first provide a little background and context.

I was finally a senior in high school and was starting to feel like a grown-up young man, though my behavior was not always consistent with such level of maturity. But I still held my head high

and took great pride in the fact I was getting ready to leave this little town and go to “The University of Oklahoma.”

On one particular night, I was out for the typical Saturday evening of *dragging Main*. I was driving my (“not cool”) 1967 dark blue, single cab, long bed Chevy pickup truck. No, all of the adjectives did not make it “cooler.” I just added them here to make me feel a little better. It was one of the few pickup trucks driven by teenagers in our town on a weekend evening for all to see. I probably drew a few sneers as I drove by the crowds of teenagers gathered for this weekly event.

That’s right, I had a midsized pickup truck which served as my only means of transportation, including my only option for dating. My Dad bought it for me to help him work in the oilfields of Oklahoma. While it was also great for fishing, it was a nonstarter for dating. Girls spent most of their time in it trying to keep grease and oil off of their clothes.

My older sister had the cooler car—a 1964 Chevy Bel Air or Impala (can’t remember which). I would have traded her for the opportunity to drive it to the big event each weekend. Then, go figure... my Mom had the hottest car of all in the family—a 1954 “souped-up” white Ford sedan with “glass-packed” dual mufflers that richly bellowed (or “bellored”... in Oklahoman language^[AR27]^[LT28]). It was a sweet sound...the envy of most teenage boys. Of course, I didn’t get to use Mom’s car after I had a wreck in it one night on a country road going to see a play at a rural school with my little sister as a passenger... enough said about that.

The much cooler guys in town had their “hot cars”: Camaros, Firebirds, and Mustangs. One was owned by a friend of mine. I still remember one Friday night when he asked me to ride with him in his new 1967 baby blue Mustang with white leather interior, definitely an eye-catching and girl-attracting car.

That particular night was totally different from anything I had ever experienced. The sneering had totally stopped and the girls were actually waving and hollering at us. [LT29] Even though I was

only a teenager, I was smart enough to know that it was “the car” they were focused on, not me. But I could always dream.

One of “places to be” was an intersection located between two drive-through burger joints located diagonally on opposite corners. On the weekends it was the place for teenagers to hang out, sit on the hoods of their cars, and watch the local traffic pass by. Though this “hub of life” was the highlight of the drive, it was only one part of the one-mile roundtrip path of “dragging main.”

About one-quarter mile down the road past the two hamburger joints, we would make a right turn onto the old official Main Street of town, still paved with red bricks from many years ago. Once reaching the far end of Main Street, we would make a U-turn and drive right back down Main Street. Then at the north end of Main Street, we would make a left turn and head back to once again pass by the “hot” burger joint intersection. Anticipation built as the intersection neared since we could once again parade in front of the gathered hollering crowds.

Let’s now return to the moment when I saw one of the funniest and amazing sights still burned into my brain to this day. As I was waiting for the red light to change, I noticed in the parking lot to my right a big football player (250+ pounds, 6+ feet tall) pushing a small short guy (120 pounds max, 5 feet max) to the ground. I thought for sure the smaller guy would just lay there for a few moments, catch his breath, get his bearings, get up and dust himself off.

I’m still not sure what triggered the forceful push from the big guy, but I think what ensued next was pure “pent-up rage” from being harassed as the “runt” of the group for years. I knew that the small guy had been friends with the big guy because I had seen them hanging out together at school. But on this night, rather than staying on the ground, the small guy quickly jumped to his feet and then vertically leapt upward about three feet in the air and locked both legs around the big guy’s waist.

The small guy then proceeded to rapid-fire, bare-knuckle punch the big guy in the face, over and over again. I sat there stunned, not noticing when the traffic light had turned green. Fortunately neither did the people in line behind me. We were all aghast as the big guy was getting the flogging of a lifetime, worse than any whipping he'd received on the football field.

Yes, it was funny in one regard because the big guy couldn't shake the small guy loose as the small guy kept his legs locked around the big guy's waist. The small guy continued to pound away at the big guy's face. Two of their friends were standing nearby, watching it all. Both seemed somewhat shocked at first and then started laughing in disbelief. They finally came over and pulled the small guy off the big guy.

By this point though, there was no fight left in the big guy. He just took a couple of stumbling steps backward, shaking his head in disbelief and shock. He wiped his bloody lips and nose and then felt all over his puffed-up face to assess the damage. He was obviously very relieved to have the pummeling stopped.

Though it was all over in a matter of minutes, it was a lesson the big guy would never forget. The small guy grew at least a foot in everyone's eyes that night after witnessing the fight. I'm sure the little guy inside must have felt a champion prizefighter. It is the best example of someone "turning the tables" as I ever personally witnessed.

Turning Tables: God's Specialty

According to Oxford's English Dictionary^[10], the phrase "turning the tables" is said to have "originated with the playing of board games in the seventeenth century." It means "to reverse one's position relative to someone else, especially by turning a position of disadvantage into one of advantage; to cause a complete reversal of the state of affairs."

Turning the tables is exactly what God does when he sees Satan inflict physical, mental, or emotional pain and suffering upon us. Satan intends for us to "cow down" and surrender in fear or

exhaustion after he has assailed our faith with a huge barrage of his fiery darts. Satan loves to discourage us, hopefully disabling our faith and making us either run away or abandon our God altogether. He hopes as we run away we will quickly drop all of our spiritual armor on the ground, leaving us totally vulnerable to his further attacks.

He loves to catch us when we are alone and disarmed, totally unprotected and fully exposed so he can execute his planned destruction on us. But there is “good news” for us as believers. God’s purposes are just the opposite. If we hold on to him instead of letting go, the tables will be turned on Satan completely, leading to our victory and his defeat. Satan will find himself and all of his efforts to take us down totally thwarted once again.

Tables Turned: Joseph’s Story

Joseph, mentioned in the last chapter as an example of advancing up through the ranks as a result of his remarkable service to his masters, also provides one of the first great examples of God’s work of turning the tables in early Biblical times. This time we’ll look into more details of his story to permit us to grasp our God at work in Joseph’s life.

Joseph was more loved by his father than he loved his ten other sons. This was because he was the son Jacob had with Rachael, his most beloved wife. As a result Jacob made Joseph a bright, multicolored coat he wore proudly, especially in the presence of his brothers who were jealous and despised him.

Adding to their hate for him was his telling them about his dreams implying one day they would all bow down and worship him. They clearly viewed their little brother as a spoiled and arrogant brat. Who wouldn’t? We all understand how they might have felt that way.

When the brothers had finally seen and heard enough, they conspired to kill Joseph at a time when he was far away from their father’s presence and protection. Just when an opportunity presented itself to kill him, a financial opportunity popped up right in front of them. So, they

avoided becoming murderers and decided instead to sell him as a slave to a passing caravan of Ishmaelites on their way to Egypt. After collecting their money, they concocted an elaborate story to tell their father of Joseph's sure-demise by a wild animal.

Upon arrival in Egypt, the caravan then sold Joseph to a wealthy man named Potiphar. In spite of Joseph's outstanding service and advancement in Potiphar's house, he was falsely charged of sexual assault by Potiphar's wife. He was then thrown into jail for a few years until he was released because a servant of Pharaoh remembered Joseph could interpret dreams. Pharaoh had just experienced two back-to-back disturbing dreams which no one could interpret.

Joseph was called and he then proceeded to explain to Pharaoh the meaning of his two nightmarish dreams. It turns out both dreams were the same in meaning, foretelling of seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of severe famine in all Egypt and the surrounding area. As a result of God's blessing Joseph with the gift of interpretation and wisdom, he was promoted on the spot to second-in-command in all Egypt with only Pharaoh ranking higher.

After the seven years of plenty were over, Joseph's own family was still living in Canaan where they soon began to starve as the severe famine had also reached their land. Upon hearing there was plenty of food in Egypt, Jacob sent Joseph's older brothers to Egypt to get food and return home.

After two such [AR30][LT31]trips with Joseph accusing them each time of being spies, and when he could no longer continue his ruse, he finally revealed his true identity to them.

They were at first shocked and couldn't believe it was really Joseph. Then suddenly realizing Joseph had the power to imprison or kill them, they feared it was finally "payback" time. However, instead of taking revenge, Joseph showed them mercy as he hugged and forgave them. They were immediately overwhelmed and expressed their thankfulness and gratitude. They even offered to become his slaves for life, fulfilling his earlier dreams.

Here is what Joseph then said to them. Please listen since this is good stuff. It becomes apparent God was in total control the whole time:

But Joseph said to them, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives. So then, don’t be afraid. I will provide for you and your children.” And he reassured them and spoke kindly to them. (Genesis 50:19–21)

In summary, Joseph, through the wisdom, foreknowledge, and will of God, had just *turned the tables* on his brothers and Satan, always lurking in the background. Joseph’s older brothers had betrayed him by first planning his murder and then deciding to make some money by selling him into slavery. Joseph had ended up in a foreign land, separated from a father who loved him deeply. He endured his long captivity in prison after being falsely accused. End of story? No way. God indeed had other plans.

As Joseph continued to yield himself to God’s purposes though living under some pretty harsh conditions, God prepared him to rise up and save his whole family and the entire country of Egypt. Jacob chose to not seek revenge, but rather to forgive his brothers. Joseph had witnessed firsthand how God could turn something really bad into something really good—the classic definition of *Turning the Tables*.

Further Turning Tables on Satan

Here is another example of how God turns the table, but this time it is more directly inflicted upon Satan and his schemes. Listen to how God comforts us in times of pain and suffering so we in turn can comfort others... as we have been comforted.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. For just as we share abundantly in the sufferings

of Christ, so also our comfort abounds through Christ. If we are distressed, it is for your comfort and salvation; if we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings we suffer. And our hope for you is firm, because we know that just as you share in our sufferings, so also you share in our comfort. (II Corinthians 1:3–7)

As established earlier, Satan's aim in attacking our bodies, minds, and spiritual security is to disable and defeat us. But he is not satisfied with the defeat of just individual believers like ourselves. His overarching plan is to do the same thing to the entire church of Jesus Christ. But God once again turns the tables on Satan when we use our own personal experiences with pain and suffering as a means of preparing us to help others walking through trials. These experiences will often open up unique areas of service we might have never previously envisioned.

Table Turning: Our Role

For example, current cancer patients (or recent survivors) who are believers are being equipped by God to support and provide comfort to other victims of cancer. Believers can come alongside others in prayer and words of encouragement, walking with them through their cancer journey. As we sit in waiting rooms of cancer treatment centers, we will see others waiting as well for their cancer treatments of radiation and/or chemotherapy.

God will empower us to reach out to comfort and encourage them as he has comforted and encouraged us. Anyone who has ever had cancer and faced the grueling process of radiation or chemotherapy knows waiting rooms can be very quiet and somber. But we don't have to be intimidated by our surroundings. These locations can provide a great opportunity for us to offer a warm smile and a gentle compassionate greeting.

Most people will politely respond, assuming we too are somewhere we just as soon not be. By our warm and friendly greeting we have just opened a door for further conversation. We can next

briefly introduce ourselves and tell them about why we are there. These initial kind actions on our part can help create a safe and comfortable environment for others.

It's amazing how quickly bonding on some level can happen in such cancer treatment waiting rooms. Knowing they are talking with someone who can easily relate and empathize with their condition, people tend to relax and are quite open to telling total strangers their story. Plus it is common for family and friends to feel awkward talking to them about their cancer.

The next time we visit the waiting room and see them again, there will likely be an easy reconnection made with them. Topics of conversations will begin to gradually shift to other more comfortable topics, for example, family, work, and general life stuff. Though we may not realize it at the time, we have just become a "table turner" as well.

Making such personal connections is exactly what Jesus would do. He loves turning the tables on the devil too—turning our deep physical and emotional despair into everlasting spiritual hope. We can do the same thing for others.

While this particular example of our comforting other cancer patients may not be directly applicable to our own areas of pain and suffering, the principle remains the same. We can still comfort others as we have been comforted in areas unique to ourselves.

We don't have to think very long about it before we realize God has already equipped us to comfort others as we have been comforted. However, for a variety of reasons we just haven't taken that first step of reaching out to others. In our hearts the Holy Spirit has likely been slowly warming us up to the idea. He is ready now to take us to the next level. He has probably already brought a name into our minds of someone who could use our love and support in the midst of their own struggles. We just need to stop depending on our own strength and turn over our worries and fears to God letting him empower us to reach out to others.

After we finally reach out and help someone, God will then open our spiritual eyes to other doors of opportunity and lead us right through them. By following the leading of the Holy Spirit, we can share God's love, comfort, and reassurance with others as we become his hands and feet. We honor and glorify God when we serve him in response to his faithfulness to us. He has indeed been faithful to us as he has walked side by side with us through our pain and suffering. In addition to walking with us, he will even carry us as needed until he has brought us safely to the other side.

Table Turning by the Church

There is no better way to use our experiences with pain and suffering than in ministering to our brothers and sisters in the church of our Lord. First of all, it is very likely we are not the only member of the church where we attend who have undergone (or are undergoing) the same issue or trial we have faced (or are currently facing).

We are all part of the family of God. God's desire is for the church to function as one body, each doing our part to support the other members of the body. One way this can happen is choosing to participate in a church-sponsored support group where we will find others who are empathetic to our particular issue causing us pain and suffering. God made us to need each other. So, let's take comfort in knowing we are not alone and start looking for others who can share our struggles as we share theirs as well.

The New International Version (NIV) translation of the Bible contains over one hundred scriptures in the New Testament referring to our doing things for "one another" or "each other":

Finally, all of you, be like-minded, be sympathetic, love one another, be compassionate and humble. (I Peter 3:8) and Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Galatians 6:2)

The devil wants to convince us it is better if we try to make it all on our own. The last thing Satan wants is for the church to act like the church. So his goal is to isolate us from everyone, even

family and friends, because it will slow down our recovery (or stop it altogether) and make us more vulnerable to his attacks. He knows that if he can convince us to go alone on this journey, we are basically inviting him to go with us.

Satan will use shame, guilt, pity, or anger to keep us from seeking help from other believers or participating in a support group. Satan wants us to pull ourselves away from the church and go into hiding. We need to be aware the devil has in mind to take us down. He will attempt to push us on a downhill slide into despair, and then anger, and then deep depression coupled with feelings of hopelessness. At this point the devil will have us right where he wants us—immobilized and helpless to change our situation.

It is far too common for us to “exist” in the state of depression and hopelessness for years on end. Though often not desired by us, often our only hope is for someone led by the Spirit to pursue a special “intervention” for us. Such interventions are usually initiated by a loving yet desperate family member or a friend.

If an intervention has not yet happened for us and we have entirely stopped going to any church for some time, we may not feel like the church is an option for us. While there is a plethora of reasons why we may have stopped going to church, it is never too late to put a stop to our loneliness, go back to the church, and reach out to other believers for help.

One of the most important roles of the church is to help members and nonmembers right when they are at their critical times of need. We should go back to church, be open about our struggles, and initially just ask for the prayers of others. The church will likely provide immediate assistance or provide focused guidance on how to get help for us. If the church has existing services, counseling, support groups, and so on, then members will tell us about how best they can provide help for our specific needs.

In this way the church is much like a spiritual emergency room (ER). A fully functioning church per Jesus' desire will never turn someone away involved in a life crisis. And unlike an actual ER, we won't have to wait forever to be helped. If we are in need of help, we should make a firm decision now to go as quickly as we can to any Jesus-believing church for help. We will quickly find that we are no longer alone in our struggles.

Of course our coming to the church for help is the same as our coming to Jesus for help. He always awaits our entry into his kingdom. "Come unto me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28) and "A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not put out until he has brought justice through to victory" (Matthew 12:20).

More on Role of Support Groups

Whether we have already been rescued from our trials or we are still making our way through them, we can benefit greatly from our involvement in a "support group." A support group is made up of people having either gone through or currently going through a common area of personal struggle.

Because of our sharing a common struggle with those in a group, there is a natural connection (or bond) formed among group members, increasingly so as we are validated by other's shared experiences. We will learn quickly that we are not the only one to go through what was sure to have felt like a unique, very difficult (possibly horrific) trial. Such trials (likely driven by past events) are very personal and likely something previously concealed as being too private to tell anyone about. God works through support groups to validate our trials and feelings as being authentic and in the process let us know we are not alone. "No temptation [or trial] has overtaken you except what is common to mankind..." (I Corinthians 10:13).

Some of the more common areas of personal struggle requiring validation and sustained healing and recovery include grief, divorce, abandonment, PTSD, substance abuse, psychological

abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, pornography, gambling, etc.. We all want to experience true healing and recovery from the fallout and consequences of our current or past trials. However, it takes a strong commitment of our time, honesty, transparency, and vulnerability to promote the healing we desire.

We need to realize there are few “quick fixes” to most of life’s problems. We do occasionally hear about someone’s testimony where they experienced immediate deliverance from a strong addiction, deep depression, and so on. Though we may not have experienced the same rapid deliverance, it is important to rejoice with them and praise the Lord for their instant healing. To God be the glory.

Such miraculous interventions are always a possibility for our God because he is not limited by time, power or capability. Nothing is impossible for our God. In these somewhat rare cases, the person delivered in this way is endowed with an awesome testimony about God’s amazing power. It is an encouragement and confirmation that our God is alive and well on planet earth.

However, at the time we hear of such miraculous deliveries, we may feel cheated, jealous, or even doubtful of their healing. However, we should realize these are thoughts coming from the devil and do not reflect our true heart. The devil wants to discourage us, confuse us, and even make us doubt our faith or God’s love for us.

However, remember that in addition to being a “creator” (or maker), our God is also a “potter” (or transformer). As a creator God speaks things miraculously into existence in an instant, and his power is clearly observed by all. But as a potter God masterfully demonstrates the same power as he shapes us from a lump of clay, which is pretty much how most of us look and feel when we are right in the middle of a major trial—just a lump of clay.

The great news is that when the potter has completed the work he began in us, we will look the same as the one healed instantly. So, a more slowly, gradual healing process is no less miraculous.

Those who are healed through the caring work of the potter's hands are also endowed with a dual special gift—our testimony of God's healing power and our encouragement of others to trust the potter's hands.

With all of that having been said, there is no doubt our involving God early on in the whole healing and recovery process is critical. God has his amazing way of bringing various pieces of our “trial puzzle” together, revealing the past and laying out a hopeful future for us. He also works within us to ensure our healing and recovery are sustainable.

Summary of Support Group Benefits

Let's now summarize the specific benefits of participating in a support group: One, certain struggles are best shared in an environment where our privacy is protected and we feel safe expressing our deepest pains and feelings; two, support group provides the benefit of talking with others who will listen, understand, and empathize with us without judging or criticizing us; three, we will find the much-needed validation we seek as we and others share personal thoughts, feelings, and actions in the midst of our struggles; four, we become willing to be more transparent, open, and vulnerable to others in the group as we tell our story; five, others in the group will commit to walking with us and beside us; six, we will appreciate being held accountable for our work and attendance at group meetings; and seven, it will become our “belonging place.”

As our time progresses of being in a safe, supportive, and encouraging environment, our inner healing continues to gradually take place. It is a clear demonstration of God doing some of his best work through others.

In searching for a support group, we may discover our local church doesn't have an existing recovery support group for our particular issue. Don't panic. We should stop and give serious thought to another possibility: God may be calling us to create a new support group at our church. We may possibly lead the effort or work with someone else experienced with either leading a

support group or getting a new support group going. God will give us the courage, guidance, wisdom, and possibly a little push at times to help us step out in faith.

When we do take the first step, we will find ourselves empowered by the Holy Spirit as we move forward to help others. We will learn to trust in the Holy Spirit to also lead us to someone in the midst of their own struggles who is interested in forming a group as well.

It's amazing what can happen when we engage God through prayer and turn things over to him. He does remarkable things to encourage us and keep things moving in the right direction. At the end of our healing and recovery process, we will clearly view our God as the master liberator.

God is the expert in breaking us free from those “chains that bind us.” Therefore we should rely totally on God and not ourselves. We should run directly to him—our rock and redeemer, an ever-present help in “times of trouble” (Nahum 1:7; Psalm 9:9, 10:1, 41:1, 59:16).

Rely on God, Not Ourselves

This aspect of growing in our reliance on God during times of trouble is best expressed by the apostle Paul. Paul needed the church to know what he had suffered for the sake of Jesus but more importantly “Why?” Listen as Paul explains his trials and tribulations, plus the important role prayers of the church played in getting him through it all:

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about the troubles we experienced in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt we had received the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead. He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many. (II Corinthians 1:3–11)

The answer to “Why?” presented by Paul is “we might not rely on ourselves but on God.” We can then be fully assured God will continue “turning the tables” on the devil for us.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. (Romans 8:28)

Chapter 16

The Role of Prayer

In most of our previous discussions in prior chapters, we have stressed the importance and power of prayer. It is tightly interwoven within the various descriptions of each perspective and our response to our own pain and suffering.

It is imperative we pray and talk to God when we encounter seemingly insurmountable obstacles and challenges along our walk of faith. Developing a deep, daily personal prayer life is a must as we journey through pain and suffering. When we encounter hard times in the midst of our trials, we need to automatically extend our need of fervent prayers to other believers we know and trust.

In other words, let's make our prayer circle as large as we can. My wife Linda and I can state unequivocally from our own experiences, there are tremendous benefits in our asking other believers to join us in prayer. On occasions we have had literally hundreds of believers praying for us at the same time, lifting our names up to the throne of God. They become our much-needed "prayer warriors," and the results have been amazing.

Yes, the prayer of one righteous person can make a huge difference (James 5:16). Now think about multiplying one request by hundreds or thousands. God loves to hear from his children and will do incredible things for us when we rely on him and join with other believers in prayer. We will find it to be nothing short of miraculous in its evidence of God's love and power in the midst of life's many storms.

Power of Prayer: Hezekiah's Story

Let's first step into the prayer life of one of Judah's more righteous kings during the period of time when Israel was divided into two kingdoms. This particular king was over the tribe of Judah. His name was Hezekiah.

The Kingdom of Judah was made up of only the tribe of Judah (including priests from the tribe of Levi to take care of the temple in Jerusalem). So the remaining Kingdom of Israel was made up of the other ten tribes. There are two specific accounts of where King Hezekiah offered urgent and deeply earnest prayers. Both of his prayers are recorded in the book of Isaiah, Chapters 36–38. In each account God answered Hezekiah’s prayers in a very powerful way.

Let’s set the stage in regards to Hezekiah’s first prayer. King Sennacherib of Assyria had captured most of the cities in Judah, and then he sent his field commander to the fortified city of Jerusalem to convince King Hezekiah to surrender. The Assyrian field commander read the letter from Sennacherib outside the walls of Jerusalem, well within the hearing of those standing on the walls.

He warned the people to not listen to what King Hezekiah was telling them about their God being able to save them. He said it just wasn’t going to happen. Hezekiah got up immediately and took the letter to the temple where he spread it out before God and prayed this prayer:

Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, enthroned between the cherubim, you alone are God over all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. Give ear, Lord, and hear; open your eyes, Lord, and see; listen to all the words Sennacherib has sent to ridicule the living God. It is true, Lord, that the Assyrian kings have laid waste all these peoples and their lands. They have thrown their gods into the fire and destroyed them, for they were not gods but only wood and stone, fashioned by human hands. Now, Lord our God, deliver us from his hand, so that all the kingdoms of the earth may know that you, Lord, are the only God. (Isaiah 37:16–20)

Here is God’s immediate and powerful response to King Hezekiah’s prayer.

Then Isaiah son of Amoz sent a message to Hezekiah: This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Because you have prayed to me concerning Sennacherib king of Assyria... I will defend this city and save it, for my sake and for the sake of David my servant.’... Then the angel of the Lord

went out and put to death a hundred and eighty-five thousand in the Assyrian camp. When the people got up the next morning—there were all the dead bodies. (Isaiah 37:21–36)

In regards to King Hezekiah's second prayer, he later became deathly ill. Isaiah the prophet heard directly from the Lord concerning Hezekiah's prognosis, and it was not good. So Isaiah went to Hezekiah and broke the bad news to him. He indeed was going to die and not recover. Here is Hezekiah's response to the news of his impending death:

Hezekiah turned his face to the wall and prayed to the Lord, "Remember, Lord, how I have walked before you faithfully and with wholehearted devotion and have done what is good in your eyes." And Hezekiah wept bitterly. (Isaiah 38:2–3)

Then God sent Isaiah right back to Hezekiah with his revised compassionate message in direct response to his prayer.

This is what the Lord, the God of your father David, says: 'I have heard your prayer and seen your tears; I will add fifteen years to your life. And I will deliver you and this city from the hand of the king of Assyria. I will defend this city.' This is the Lord's sign to you that the Lord will do what he has promised: 'I will make the shadow cast by the sun go back the ten steps it has gone down on the stairway of Ahaz.' So the sunlight went back the ten steps it had gone down. (Isaiah 38:4–9)

Yes, God can and will respond to all of our prayers in a powerful ways as he did for King Hezekiah. Maybe not exactly the same answer he gave to Hezekiah, but he will respond powerfully consistent with his will for us.

[Note: One of the most powerful prayers I have ever heard was in the 2015 movie entitled *War Room*.^[11] This particular prayer was spoken by Miss Clara, played by the actress Karen Abercrombie. It is a prayer which must be heard, not read. Please listen to an excerpt from the movie posted on YouTube; the hyperlink is provided in Appendix I, Reference No. 11.]

God Answers All of Our Prayers

We've likely all heard it said over the years by some our prayers are answered in one of three ways: first, yes; second, no; or third, not now. While this particular summary may be somewhat descriptive of God's responses to prayer, it is much too limiting. It calls for us to look at God's response to our prayers as if it was a three-way light switch with two of the three positions appearing to be negative responses.

This summary of how God answers prayers does not present the option where God responds to our prayers with an "adjusted" or "somewhat modified" answer. After processing our individual requests in prayer, God may actually elect to give us a "custom" response consistent with his will for us and our ultimate good—not as simple as yes, no, or not now.

A couple of years ago, my wife Linda and I participated in a twelve-week Bible study using detailed workbook materials developed by Beth Moore on the book of Daniel.^[12] During one of the sessions, Beth Moore gave her own version of the three ways God responds to our prayers during times of trials: First, he rescues us immediately from our trial; second, he walks with us through the trial; or third, he takes us home to be with him in heaven.

Notice all three of these are "positive" responses. Behind this view of how God will answer our prayers is a strong belief and trust God will do his work in us, through us, and for us. Bottom line, we need to believe God works totally for our benefit from his perspective, not necessarily from what we would personally ask or prefer. We have a very limited spiritual grasp of God's eternal purposes for our individual lives.

We are called to look solely to God and depend on him alone as his will unfolds before us during our individual walk of faith. Thus we are called to rely on his will for us and accept it completely in faith. We should choose to move forward holding on to God's righteous right hand, even before it becomes clear to us what his response is to our prayers.

So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand. (Isaiah 41:10)

We should never doubt God has our best at heart and will always be there for us. We can also rest assured underneath us at all times are his everlasting arms ready to carry us when needed.

The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms. (Deuteronomy 33:27)

The Prayer Offended in Faith

I love the following encouraging words found in the book of James in regards to our prayers offered in faith:

And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up. If they have sinned, they will be forgiven. Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (James 5:15–16)

However, this verse has been inappropriately used by some to support the validity and success of their personal faith-healing ministries. Its misuse comes in the conclusion if there is any lack of instantaneous miraculous healing of a sick person, it is blamed on the “weak faith” of the person being prayed for. In other words, if they just had more faith, they would have been healed.

However, this totally circumvents God’s assessment of each situation in regards to his will someone be instantaneously healed or not. Contrast this thinking with the millions of “faithful” believers who have prayed for years for God’s healing power, protection, and deliverance but proceeded to die anyway from a variety of long-term illnesses and trials, for example, one, major disabilities; two, various major illnesses; three, imprisonment; four, starvation; five, repeated beatings and torture; and six, martyrdom by sword, fire, crucifixion, and so on.

Are we to believe God didn't act in each of these cases to heal instantly or to immediately rescue these disciples only because their faith was too weak? Then there is Paul's "thorn in the flesh" we discussed earlier in Chapter 13. His thorn was not taken away after praying three times. Notice God didn't say to him, "You are stuck with your thorn because your faith is too weak." Instead God said, "My grace is sufficient for you." (II Corinthians 12:9).

Finally, remember Jesus prayed three times asking the Father "If it was possible, may this cup be taken from me." Then he added, "Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). Of course, we know from the prior chapter on "God's Will" it was the Father's will Jesus drink the cup (his persecution, crucifixion, and death).

I believe we have to agree "weak faith" was not the reason specific prayers were not answered in instantaneous relief in regards to the Paul's and Jesus' specific requests. But in both cases, the chief objective was the will of God be done. So, in that regard, their prayers were ultimately answered in the affirmative because they accepted fully what God had decided. Our prayers should also have "God's will be done" as our primary objective, even if it means our specific request is not answered in the way we desire. So, is our faith important in our prayers? Absolutely.

But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord. (James 1:6–7)

Here are two key points to remember about our prayers being offered in faith to God: First, we must believe God is "able" to do anything, not doubting his capability or power (Matthew 19:26; James 1:6), and, second, we must not "put God to the test" by demanding or expecting a certain response to our prayers (Matthew 4:7).

Both of these aspects of a faithful prayer are demonstrated in the awesome example of the strong, confident, and faithful prayer of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They all refused to bow down to the image King Nebuchadnezzar had built (even if God chose to not save them):

...we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty's hand. But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3:16–18)

Accept in Faith God's Responses

The Christian music group “MercyMe” has a song entitled “Even If.”^[13] It is an awesome song which personally ministered to me during my journey through prostate cancer. As it encouraged me, it encourages all of us to accept God's responses to all of our prayers offered in faith. Specifically, the chorus of the song calls for us to have unshakeable belief in God's unlimited capability in doing whatever we ask of him but, at the same time, challenges us to continue looking to God alone even when he chooses to not provide the immediate relief we earnestly request of him.

This MercyMe song expresses the kind of steadfast faith God is looking for in all of us—a faith trusting completely in his infinite love, mercy, and wisdom to provide his best response for us at that particular moment in our lives. Then as we reflect back on our journey after each trial has passed, we will realize once again our God has done more for us than we could have ever envisioned:

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

So, let's keep sharing our needs with God in prayer as we firmly believe *God is "able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power at work in us."* (Ephesians 3:20)

Chapter 17

Victorious Hope

We close this study of pain and suffering by reanchoring ourselves firmly in the hope we have in a promised eternal heavenly paradise will be far superior to this temporary fallen world we currently live in. Please hold onto these precious holy words:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal. (II Corinthians 4:16–18) and We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. (Hebrews 6: 19)

As our stay here on this earth continues, we as believers in Jesus must press on through it all. Our journey here is very much like being pilgrims in our own wilderness wandering. We too are in search of our own promised land. But unlike the Israelites, we as believers will all enter our promised eternal rest when Christ returns to take us home.

Remember this hope of a future heavenly home is reserved only for those choosing to go through the gate of the good shepherd Jesus who leads us to eternal life. Sadly, most of the world will not enter through Jesus' gate, but will instead choose to enter through the devil's gate leading to death. The devil and his followers will ultimately suffer the eternal consequences of their wrong choices.

Of course, as believers, our entry through Jesus' gate is only made possible through the sacrifice of his body, the shedding of his blood on the cross of Calvary, and his resurrection from the dead. He has permanently marked us as "his" as he placed his seal on us, guaranteeing our own resurrection and salvation:

Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. (II Corinthians 1:21–22)

At his return we will lay down this temporary earthly body, get a new immortal body like Jesus' body, and then move into our new permanent heavenly dwelling.

For we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed instead with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. (II Corinthians 5:1–4)

This hope is the only thing keeping us as believers steadfastly enduring the pain and suffering in our life on this earth. There is indeed something far better than this earthly existence. Thank you Lord for your precious promise of heaven.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us. (Romans 5:1–5)

God has indeed poured out his love into our hearts and given us “everything we need for life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). As a result, our hope will not disappoint us because God is faithful and will reward us just as he has said. We will not be ashamed of believing in God because we will all stand triumphant with him in the end, supremely joyful in the presence of all of his glory.

In the end we will stand victorious with our Savior, forgetting all of the pain and suffering we patiently endured while faithfully living for Jesus in this fallen world. *Our blessed anchor of hope is securely tied to the eternal truth that all of God's promises are "yes" in Jesus.* (II Corinthians 1:20)

Epilogue

Thanks for coming along on this journey into seeing through God's eyes what's going on in a world full of pain, suffering, and sorrow. We have navigated together carefully through the deep, murky, and often turbulent waters of our own pain and suffering.

While going on this journey, we have touched on a number of different perspectives, mostly spiritual, to hopefully help us begin to put into context the things we may be suffering from personally or the horrific things we have witnessed taking place all around us. Hopefully and prayerfully, we have all been helped by viewing pain and suffering through these different sets of lenses.

As stated earlier, the topic of pain and suffering is a complex one, and often it is difficult to properly assess its origin and purpose. It has indeed been a challenge to navigate through it. Hopefully we have all gained some additional knowledge and insights increasing our understanding and perspectives of our own pain and suffering.

So, with God's help, we now know we'll make it through our trials, and in the process we will learn to "suffer well." I've said it before and I will say it again: It is imperative as we suffer, we continue to hold tightly to Jesus' righteous right hand and lean on his everlasting arms which are always there to hold us and carry us when needed.

God will always be there for us as we continue to make our way through our current trials. We should be better prepared for the next one coming our way... and there will be a next one. So, let's all embrace the following truth—God is very much aware of our hurting, tears, confusion, and loneliness as we struggle physically, mentally, emotionally, and possibly spiritually through our times of trials.

To assist us in coming to really know God more deeply and receiving all the comfort and strength available to us, please use the compendium of comforting scriptures provided in Appendix

II. I believe we will find those particular scriptures from the compendium will minister to us directly and specifically, whatever our struggles and trials may be.

As we read these passages, consider each as words actually being spoken directly from God's heart to ours, reassuring us he will always be with us and will work to make everything come out for "our good."

Let's close with a final heart question—best asked by the old church hymn: "Does Jesus Care?"

Refrain: "Oh, yes, He cares, I know He cares, His heart is touched with my grief; When the days are weary, the long nights dreary, I know my Savior cares." [14]

Oh, yes, he cares.

Appendix I

References

Listed below are the specific references to sources of material used in development of this book for use by those who are interested in further exploration of this subject:

1. All referenced or quoted scriptures taken from New International Version (NIV) English Bible; first published in 1978 by Biblica (formerly the International Bible Society) and by Zondervan in the United States, updated in 1984 and 2011
2. Origin of phrase: “Man’s Inhumanity to Man”—believed first documented in the Robert Burns’s poem called “Man Was Made to Mourn: A Dirge in 1184.”
3. Song: “Your Word Is Life to Me” by Travis Cottrell: https://youtu.be/30Yo_Z8Noqk
4. Grand Canyon National Park: www.mygrandcanyonpark.com
5. Wikipedia: The Free Dictionary: wikipedia.org: “Ravi Zacharias (born March 26, 1946) is an Indian-born Canadian-American Christian apologist. A defender of evangelical Protestantism, Zacharias is the author of numerous Christian books, including the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association’s Gold Medallion Book Award winner, *Can Man Live Without God?* in the category “theology and doctrine” and Christian bestsellers *Light in the Shadow of Jihad* and *The Grand Weaver*. Zacharias is the founder and chairman of the board of Ravi Zacharias International Ministries (RZIM) and host of the radio programs....”
6. Chinese Proverb: “Sāi Wēng Lost His Horse,” www.thoughtco.com
7. Definition of “intercede” provided by www.lexico.com by Oxford
8. Aesop’s Fable: “The Dog and Its Reflection,” numbered 133 in the Perry Index; en.m.wikipedia.org
9. Short Story: “The Greedy Dog”: <https://shortstoriesshort.com>

10. Origin of phrase “Turning the Tables”: Grammarphobia Blog, June 26, 2013
11. Link to brief video excerpt on YouTube taken from the 2015 movie *War Room*, written, directed, and produced by the Kendrick Brothers (Alex and Stephen):
<https://youtu.be/fempzeX1mKg>
12. Restatement (non-quote) as heard from Beth Moore of Living Proof Ministries, Workbook study series: *Daniel: Lives of Integrity and Words of Prophecy*
13. Song: “Even If” by MercyMe: <https://youtu.be/B6fA35Ved-Y>
14. Excerpt from song lyrics: “Does Jesus Care?”. Original song lyrics by songwriter Frank E. Graeff (1901); www.hymnary.org

Appendix II

Comforting Scriptures

As I have personally gone through many of life's trials, I have found the following seventy plus scriptures to be very soothing and comforting. While reading them, I have felt as if God was holding me very close, giving me a wonderfully firm yet tender embrace. As he whispers these words of encouragement in my ear, he gives me hope even when the situation seems to be hopeless with no way out.

We all need reassurances God is with us and will stay with us through it all. I believe we will all find those passages in this list which minister directly to us in our specific area of need, regardless of the type, source, reason, or purpose of our pain and suffering or the prognosis at the moment.

The first twelve passages are complete scripture quotations since there was no good way to reduce them to just one key point without excluding some of their wonderful and powerful messages. In the remaining passages, I have tried to capture the essence of the message by showing only a key phrase. However, even for these I suggest we read the entire passage in the Bible to get the full impact from the entire context.

Other than these distinctions, the following passages are intended to provide much-needed food for our heart and soul (not listed in any particular order). Let them all minister to us individually as we hear these words sent from God's heart to ours. Then claim each of his promises as if they are spoken directly to us in our time of pain and suffering:

- ✓ No tears in heaven: *He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.*
(Revelation 21:4; 7:17)

- ✓ Your sorrow will end: *The Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.* (Isaiah 60:20; Jeremiah 31:12–13)
- ✓ Eternal glory awaits us: *For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.* (II Corinthians 4:17–18)
- ✓ God has plans for us: *‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.’* (Jeremiah 29:11)
- ✓ The Lord is our shepherd: *The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name’s sake. Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely your goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.* (Psalm 23; John 10:11–29)
- ✓ We are God’s: *But now, this is what the Lord says—he who created you, Jacob, he who formed you, Israel: ‘Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior....’* (Isaiah 43:1–3)

- ✓ Close to the crushed in spirit: *The righteous cry out, and the Lord hears them; he delivers them from all their troubles. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. The righteous person may have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all....* (Psalm 34:17–19; Isaiah 57:15, 18–19)
- ✓ Trust in God: *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.* (Proverbs 3:5–6^[AR32]^[LT33])
- ✓ Blesses us and keeps us: *The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.* (Numbers 6:24–26)
- ✓ Spirit of God rests on us: *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you... if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name... So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.* (I Peter 4:12–19)
- ✓ Deliverance: *He has delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us again. On him we have set our hope that he will continue to deliver us, as you help us by your prayers. Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gracious favor granted us in answer to the prayers of many.* (II Corinthians 1:10–11; Exodus 14:13; Job 33:28, 36:15; Nehemiah 9:28; Psalm 3:8, 34:4, 56:13, 79:9)

- ✓ Perseverance: *Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.* (Romans 5:3–5)
- ✓ Amazing peace: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:6–7)
- ✓ Faithfulness: *But the Lord is faithful....* (II Thessalonians 3:3; Hebrews 10:23)
- ✓ Promises: *...comfort in my suffering... your promises preserve my life.* (Psalm 119:50)
- ✓ Present with us: *...I am with you always, to the very end....* (Matthew 28:20)
- ✓ Never leave you: *...Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.* (Hebrews 13:5)
- ✓ Will come to us: *I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.* (John 14:18)
- ✓ Your peace: *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you.* (John 14:27; Isaiah 26:3–4)
- ✓ Goes with us: *...your God goes with you....* (Deuteronomy 31:6)
- ✓ Don't be afraid: *...do not be afraid; do not be discouraged.* (Deuteronomy 31:8)
- ✓ Righteous not forsaken: *...never seen the righteous forsaken...* (Psalm 37:25)
- ✓ Is beside us: *He is at my right hand... will not be shaken.* (Acts 2:25; Proverbs 3:25–26)
- ✓ Strengthens us: *Do not be dismayed; I will strengthen you....* (Isaiah 40:10)
- ✓ Secure fortress: *Whoever fears the Lord has a secure fortress....* (Proverbs 14:26)
- ✓ Our refuge: *The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed....* (Psalm 9:9; 18:2, 34:40)
- ✓ Gives us rest: *Come to me... and I will give you rest....* (Matthew 11:28)
- ✓ Is gentle with us: *A bruised reed he will not break....* (Matthew 12:20)
- ✓ Be courageous: *Be strong and courageous....* (Joshua 1:9)

- ✓ His Army: *...hills full of (God's) horses and chariots of fire around Elisha.* (II Kings 6:17)
- ✓ We are overcomers: *you... have overcome them... God is greater....* (I John 4:4)
- ✓ Battle is God's: *...for the battle is the Lord's....* (I Samuel 17:47; II Chronicles 20:15)
- ✓ Look to God: *...do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.* (II Chronicles 20:12)
- ✓ Fights for us: *The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still.* (Exodus 14:4)
- ✓ Wait patiently: *Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.* (Psalm 37:7, 46:10)
- ✓ Hears our cries: *...He does not ignore the cries of the afflicted.* (Psalm 9:12; 116:1–2)
- ✓ God avenges: *...It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.* (Romans 12:19)
- ✓ Hears our prayers: *...his ears are attentive to their prayer.* (I Peter 3:12)
- ✓ He sees us: *...eyes of the Lord are on those who fear him....* (Psalm 33:18)
- ✓ Power in prayer: *...prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.* (James 5:16)
- ✓ Find grace: *...receive mercy... grace to help us in our time of need.* (Hebrews 4:16)
- ✓ Renew strength: *...who hope in the Lord will renew their strength....* (Isaiah 40:31)
- ✓ Cares for us: *Cast all... your anxiety on him, because he cares for you.* (I Peter 5:7)
- ✓ Guards us: *...will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4:7)
- ✓ Can do all: *I can do all things through him... who gives me strength.* (Philippians 4:13)
- ✓ Angels: *The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him....* (Psalm 34:7)
- ✓ Comforts us: *Blessed are those who mourn... they will be comforted.* (Matthew 5:4)
- ✓ Compassion: *... the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort....* (Isaiah 49:13)
- ✓ Our salvation: *Lord, be gracious to us... our salvation in distress.* (Isaiah 33:2)
- ✓ Sings over us: *The Lord... will rejoice over you with singing.* (Zephaniah 3:17)
- ✓ Love and peace: *...the God of love and peace will be with you.* (II Corinthians 13:11)
- ✓ Heals us: *...I have heard your prayers and your tears; I will heal you.* (II Kings 20:5)
- ✓ Reap joy: *Those who sew with tears will reap songs of joy.* (Psalm 26:5; I Peter 1:8–9)

- ✓ Protects us: *...as for me, afflicted and in pain—God, protect me.* (Psalm 69:29)
- ✓ Sufficient grace: *...he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you....'* (II Corinthians 12:9)
- ✓ Taken up our pain: *...he took up our pain and bore our suffering....* (Isaiah 53:4)
- ✓ Spirit's help: *...the Spirit helps us... intercedes... with wordless groans....* (Romans 8:26)
- ✓ Our good: *...God works for the good of those who love him....* (Romans 8:28)
- ✓ Completed work: *began a good work in you... carry to completion....* (Philippians 1:6)
- ✓ Providential care: *God... bless me... let your hand be with me....* (I Chronicles 4:10)
- ✓ He carries us: *He gathers the lambs... carries them close to his heart....* (Isaiah 40:11)
- ✓ Our shield: *...Lord, are a shield around me, my glory....* (Psalm 3:3–4)
- ✓ Take heart: *...be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.* (Psalm 27:13–14)
- ✓ Rejoicing: *...weeping may stay the night... rejoicing comes in morning.* (Psalm 30:5)
- ✓ Victorious: *...we are more than conquerors through him who love us.* (Romans 8:37)