

INTRODUCTION

(*The Purpose of the Book*)

Years ago I had the privilege of attending one of “Francis Schaeffer’s” national conferences on the integrity of the Christian faith – it was a memorable time for me as a young seminary student. Dr. Schaeffer was an “icon” to many of us in those days. A few years later I was honored to serve as a regional director for him at one of his conferences. Much of what Schaeffer taught made an impact on my life – up until that time I had never heard anyone give such a profound philosophical defense of the Christian faith. Those were exciting days for a young man just getting started in ministry. Like Schaeffer, I prayed and thought through what the Scriptures taught, and reviewed my own reasons for being a Christian – I learned afresh that there were totally sufficient reasons to know that the infinite-personal God does exist and that Christianity is indeed true. Upon graduating from seminary I entered a lifetime of Christian service and ministry.

The first twenty years of ministry for me were in one of the so-called “mega-churches” of America, and everything seemed to go just as I had imagined. It was a thrilling, successful time of ministry. I loved ministering to college-age young people, and was privileged to see some fifty-five of them enter into fulltime Christian service. And then I began to experience some of the “*difficulties of ministry*” I had seen so many of my contemporaries go through. It seemed like the next fifteen years were “full of problems” – parishioner issues, staffing issues, board issues, pastors falling into sin, pastors on ego trips, and finally outright betrayal by a friend. I had never experienced anything like that... naturally, I prayed about it all, but things only continued to spiral downward. I remember confiding in a friend of mine I had grown close to over the years – he had experienced many of the same issues. I recall saying something like this to him: “If I had experienced these things *early on* in ministry, I can’t imagine I would have stayed in it.” Obviously, God knew how weak and feeble I was, so He spared me a lot of angst in those early years, but now He was about to take me to another level in my Christian walk. At this stage of my growth, I felt like I had come to the point where I was at least doing “fairly well” spiritually – though the horse I was riding on wasn’t exactly “pure white,” it was at least “light beige” in color... or so I thought.

Suffice it to say, “troubles” continued to mount, and the more I prayed the worse things seemed to get. You’ve probably heard the old expression: “Cheer up, things could be worse!” Sure enough, I cheered up, and things did get worse! Like everyone else, I began to question... everything. “God, what in the world is going on in my life? I thought I was on Your side. What did I do?” Many of you have probably asked the same kinds of questions – especially, those of you who have traveled this road for any significant period of time. It is inevitable for those of us who take this path in life – but I didn’t realize that then. Somehow I thought by “doing the right things,” essentially life and ministry would be an enjoyable, positive experience. In spite of all the testimonies to the contrary, I must have felt that those were not the “rule,” but the “exceptions” – and as we all know, we are not the exceptions. Well, as my world grew “darker,” so did my soul – I had never experienced a “*season of darkness*” in my soul before. Oh, there were challenging moments from time to time, but nothing at all like I was now going through... this was a monumental challenge for me. Though I would cry out to God... nothing would happen. Why was God being so “cruel” to me? I remember thinking, “If I treated people I love the way God treats me, they’d dump me in a minute!” How can a loving God treat me so “lousy”? The more water that went under the bridge, the worse things

seemed to get... and finally, God had me right where He wanted me – sitting on the bench, so-to-speak, “all by my lonesome.” Don’t get me wrong – my wife was there with me, but the “*spiritually dark times*” we go through in life, we essentially go through “alone;” these are “one on one times” with just ourselves and God. Only God accompanies us during the spiritually dark parts of the journey.

Alas, I came face to face with something Scripture calls “the flesh”... couldn’t believe it was as corrupt and rotten as it was. The truth of the matter is, there isn’t “one ounce of good” in it. None. I remember thinking, “How in the world did I ever get this sinful?” I thought I rode a white horse! I guess I had always wanted to think that there was “some measure of good” in me. Not so. Nada. The challenge before me was that of discovering who this “old man” really was down deep... and what God had to say about all this. So I began to study – hour after hour, day after day, month after month – regarding this issue of the “*believer’s soul*.” I reviewed all my seminary notes – all five years of it – and not much seemed to stand out as to what I was now experiencing. I strongly identified with what Francis Schaeffer said: “I saw that the problem was with all the teaching I had received after I came to Christ, I received ‘*very little*’ about what the Bible says regarding the meaning of the finished work of Christ for our present lives.” Wow – that’s exactly what I felt. For some reason, I had never gotten a good grasp of the old “*sin disposition*” that was in me, that inhabited a dark room in my soul. Admittedly, it was something that always bothered me, and frightened me to a degree, but I was largely ignorant of exactly how it operated in my life... so, like most believers, I tried to “lock the cellar door on it” and as much as was humanly possible keep it bound and tied up. Little did I know, you can’t lock the door on the flesh. So here I was, just God and me, and the next thing I knew He was escorting me down into that “dark cellar” to examine what was there. He used some of the writings of the “great pillars of the faith” to reveal to me things I had never learned – things dealt with in pulpits all over America in a “very shallow manner.” Why the shallowness, I thought – those men are no different than you and me. For the most part, we are all products of the same institutional (seminary) teaching and training. However, for some reason the “spiritual struggles and seasons of darkness” we go through as believers received very little attention in the seminary classroom – probably because most of the professors either hadn’t yet experienced it in its fullness, or hadn’t yet taken the time to study the issue and find answers to the hidden questions of the heart. That may not be a fair assessment, but I’m pretty sure there is a little truth to it. At any rate, gradually the “Son” began to shine in my life again, and the “song” in my heart returned (Ps 40:1-3). I describe how this happened a little later on in this *Introduction*.

Many Christians question whether or not it is possible for the soul of genuine believers to be overwhelmed with fear, despair and darkness. The testimony of Scripture suggests that it is. Many of the great saints of the Bible experienced extremely difficult times... times of confusion... times of doubt... times of spiritual darkness... times when they felt desperate... times of personal pain and despair... and times when they experienced no comfort or consolation from God at all. Some believers would have us think the entire Christian experience should be nothing but a positive, encouraging, victorious one – but the teachings of Scripture don’t support that view. In spite of his incredible triumph over the prophets of Baal, *Elijah* fell into deep despair (1 Kg 19:4). *David*, a man after God’s own heart, experienced significant suffering (some the result of his own sin) and frequently endured great despair (Ps 6:1-7; 10:1; 13:1-2; 22:1-2; 32:3-5; 38:1-22; 42:5, 6, 9, 11; 43:2, 5; 44:24; 69:1-3; 142:1-7; 143:6-7; also read Ps. 88). *Jeremiah* time and again cried out to God in pain and despair; he didn’t understand his suffering; his messages were a failure; worst of all, God Himself seemed distant and uncaring to him; his enemies were both inside and outside himself. Jeremiah never doubted that

God was real, but at times he seemed to doubt God's sovereignty, and felt He was being unfair – he actually wished he had never been born; this happened more than once (Jer 11:18-23; 12:1-6; 15:10-21; 17:9-18; 18:18-23; 20:7-18).

Spiritual depression, despair and darkness are such pervasive maladies in believers' lives, they are often referred to by Christian psychologists as "*spiritual common colds*." The process of my own spiritual formation and sanctification has been characterized by periods of joyful victory and frustrating defeat. **C. S. Lewis**, in his book *A Grief Observed*, concluded that the spiritual darkness he experienced in the death of his wife "Joy" was a sort of divine shock treatment. He states: "Nothing less will shake a man, or at any rate a man like me, out of his merely verbal thinking. . . . He has to be knocked silly before he comes to his senses. Only torture will bring out the truth. Only under torture does he discover it himself." Likening his former faith to a house of cards, Lewis concludes, "the sooner it was knocked down the better; and only suffering could do it" (Lewis, *Grief Observed*). Lewis experienced both the emotional and the intellectual pain of absence – not just the absence of his wife, but the immense absence of God. What disturbed him most was not the thought that God does not exist, but thought that He does exist, and that He may inflict pain from motives that we don't perceive as positive or even ethical. A vivid cinematic example occurs in Robert Duvall's movie "*The Apostle*," when evangelist Sonny Dewey, who has had his own share of darkness, paces up and down in his room, abusing God in a loud voice, "I love you, Lord, but I'm mad at You!" Lewis ultimately decided that the pain he experienced had a redemptive sanctifying purpose in his life. The truth of the matter is, *God does to us whatever needs doing, even though it is often painful*. Our incomplete, prejudiced, and generally inadequate ideas of God must be shattered in order for us to have any hope of contact with the real God. If our ideas of God are inaccurate, they are like building a house with cards — God will knock the building flat. And He will knock it down as often as proves necessary. This is the supreme end toward which a "dark night of the soul" pushes us.

Many Christian psychologists use the book of Job to illustrate what depressive symptoms look like in real life — *Job* experienced extreme sadness (3:20; 6:2-3), desire for death (3:21; 7:15-16), sleep disturbance (7:4), pessimism about life (14:1), helplessness (3:26), viewing life as worthless (9:21), physical signs of distress (16:8; 17:7), loss of appetite (6:6-7), hopelessness or despair (6:11; 7:7; 17:1, 15), weakness of body and resolve (6:12-13), anger (7:17-19), loss of self-esteem (9:21), fear of suffering (9:28; 10:19; 17:6), bitterness (10:1), sense of rejection (19:13-20). Throughout each of these passages Job reached a point of despair that can technically be described as being severely clinically depressed because of the seriousness of his symptoms and the length of their duration. The believer becomes victorious in the process of sanctification and overcomes his "*dark night of the soul*" little by little as he sees Satan's lies for what they are, and replaces them with the truths of Christ. Darkness in the soul essentially is an absence or deficiency of light; and for most Christians it is a vast interior landscape of loneliness and abandonment. Even in the midst of our loved ones and friends we persist in feeling desperately alone. Many authors conclude that it is this pervasive sense of abandonment and loneliness in the midst of a crowd that is the essence of the dark night of the soul. In short, spiritual darkness is the medium in which we learn about our own suffering, and in doing so, we pursue the essence and purpose of our unique presence here in this life.

Doubt often comes when we let our circumstances control us – when great difficulties come we begin to doubt God's love and lose confidence in His sovereignty, and that ultimately weakens our character. The reality is this: "*negative circumstances initially have a negative impact upon us spiritually*;" that is, when we first encounter trials, discouragement is our first response. We see this

time and again in the lives of saints throughout Scripture. Our immediate response is almost always negative because our default mode is the *flesh* – that is our first responder – it is only after we prayerfully reflect upon the difficulties of life in the light of Scripture, that we come to the point where we accept them for what they are and discover their redemptive value. Scripture is replete with examples of godly men stumbling in their faith when confronted with trials, and then getting back on their feet after imploring God’s help. After **Peter** confidently proclaimed his faithfulness to Jesus, he denied Him with curses and wept bitterly (Mt 26:33-35; Mk 14:66-72). **Paul** “despaired even of life” (2 Cor 1:8), and agonized over his helplessness when struggling against the “flesh” (Rom 7:18-24). To a man, the **disciples’** hopes were dashed when Jesus was crucified (Lk 24:13-35); like everyone else, they thought that Jesus was going to free Israel from Roman rule. Their “*misunderstanding*” only served to feed their despair, just as our misunderstandings feed our despair. The disciples did not understand to whom they were truly in bondage, nor did they understand the true purpose of God’s plan of salvation. Though God accomplished great things through all of these individuals, as persons of faith there were times that they all experienced their worlds spinning out of control. Christians down through the ages have interpreted trials and tribulations as being signs of *God’s disfavor* – the reality is, they are actually signs of *God’s transforming presence!* The foregoing biblical examples of the great people of faith illustrate for us that experiences of stress and despair can be times of greatest spiritual growth.

The poet and hymn writer William Cowper, who penned the famous hymn “*There is a Fountain,*” illustrates how dramatically God’s grace can interact with our despair in another hymn he wrote called “*The Way.*” Cowper was given to long periods of depression. On one occasion, he convinced himself that he had committed the unpardonable sin... he left his home on a foggy London night and walked toward the Thames River, determined to commit suicide by drowning. As he walked, the fog grew thicker and he lost his way... after several hours of blind wandering, he found himself back at his own doorstep. Astonished at God’s intervention, he wrote a poem that later became this beloved hymn –

*God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.
Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.
Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter, and He will make it plain.*

Job’s story provides a framework for understanding this seemingly precarious, conflicted, hostile world in which we live. God allowed Satan to *test* Job (Job 1) – so also, this accuser of the brethren *tests our faith*. Every believer has a personal enemy, Satan, who consciously seeks to make him or her feel their faith is empty (1 Pet 5:8-9; Eph 6:10-12). But just as God set limits to what Satan could do to Job (Job 1:12), He also sets limits to what Satan can do to us (1 Cor 10:13; Lk 22:31-32). Suffering is the hardest and most complicated issue that believers have to face; the suffering Job was subjected to was so intense, it is hard for us to even imagine the depth of his pain... and the extremity of Christ’s suffering is without parallel; His suffering was so severe that the Incarnate One Himself cried out to His Father in great agony, “*My God, My God, why have you left Me alone?*” How awful to feel that God is no longer near you, and not know why He has left you alone – this is the worst of all life’s experiences. From the time of Adam and Eve, man has tried to escape suffering in every form. Suffering is a part of the human experience. Every adult either already has or will face grief and despair at a *significant level*, be it during the course of life or at the end of life – plans fail, loved ones die, and hopes are crushed. Because people often feel they don’t deserve the suffering they are going

through, it generally ushers in a bewildering despair – incidentally, when believers view suffering strictly as a repercussion for sin, they completely miss the primary purpose of suffering in their lives. Scripture teaches that believers suffer, not because they are being *punished* for some wrong, but because this is the instrument by which God *transforms* them into the image of His Son. Suffering is a vital component in God’s plan of salvation (Acts 14:22; Rom 5:3-5; 8:17, 36; 2 Cor 1:5, 7; 4:8-9; Gal 6:17; Phil 1:29; 3:10; Col 1:24; 1 Th 3:3; 2 Tim 1:8; 2:3, 10, 12; Heb 12:5-11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 4:1, 12-13, 17-19; 2:21; 5:10; Rev 1:9). Remember, as believers we are to “die to self” – since when is death a pleasant experience?

Do we all experience the same degree of “suffering”? No, of course not – some will be martyred for their faith (since the first century some 43,000,000 Christians have died simply because they believed in Christ)... in all likelihood, the vast majority of us will not suffer martyrdom, but each of us will experience a significant degree of suffering in some way – be it through a debilitating illness or physical infirmity... a family or relational problem... divorce, betrayal, malicious slander or rejection... loneliness, unemployment or financial loss... being the victim of some crime or catastrophic loss... a mental or psychological disorder... or a time of reckoning on our deathbed – each of these experiences can produce a tremendous amount of pain and despair in a person’s soul. Some of life’s events are a great mystery to us... things happen in life that are way beyond our understanding... we do not know everything. There is coming a day, however, when we will fully understand that *everything* we went through in this life was a part of God’s great and perfect plan for us (Rom 8:28), and that God used satanically induced despair to strengthen and refine us in our love for Him and for one another. The sufferings of this life not only make our temperament more like the person of Christ, but they also serve to detach us from the things of this world.

It is not at all uncommon for believers to buy into the idea that following Christ should bring a pleasant, trouble-free life – this is a very common misconception. We are often inclined to choose a holy life for what we get out of it – our own *personal happiness* is of tremendous importance to us. It is natural for us to think that a holy life should bring with it a substantial degree of personal happiness, security, success, health and wealth. According to Scripture, however, those are the wrong reasons for choosing to live a holy life. Though there are times when these things may be ours in abundance, that will not always be the case. Therefore, we have to be extremely careful not to link *circumstances* with a holy life. This can have disastrous consequences, because one day our lives will lack some or many of these qualities, and then we will doubt God’s goodness. Job made this mistake, and just like you and me, it led him to question God’s goodness (Job 29-31). We must always remember that trials and problems and tribulations have a *transforming purpose* in God’s economy. Therefore, we must live a holy life for only one reason – “it is God’s will for us” – as such, our prayer in all things must be, “Thy will be done, Lord, not mine.”

Misunderstandings can gnaw at our souls as we seek for solutions to impossible situations. The prospect of future suffering and sorrow can paralyze our souls and place us in a state of near despair. It has been rightfully said that the greatest suffering in the soul is the kind when we thirst for God and find ourselves deprived of the awareness of His presence – there is no greater pain than when God seems distant and far away. We see this internal suffering in the lives of Peter and Paul as doubts assailed them – at times they were weary and Paul speaks of his anguish and weariness of soul as a sting of the flesh. *Internal suffering* can be more purifying than any other form of pain because we are forced to cope with it. We can distract ourselves and forget about a sprained ankle or a broken arm, but when depression, discouragement, dryness, weariness, sadness, worry and fear assail us, they hound us wherever we go. Mother Angelica in her book “*Healing Power of Suffering*,” says

the “key” to experiencing God’s healing is understanding *why* God permits suffering in the soul. She says interior trials sanctify us slowly, and carry within them the power to change us for the better – it is in the soul, in our personality and temperament, that change must occur if we are to reflect the image of Jesus. We can have cancer and be completely healed, but never change... we can experience victory over some difficult situation, but never change... but when our pain is inside our soul, and we cooperate with God’s grace in using it, then it has the power to change us... and it is in our souls that God does His most magnificent work. Angelica goes on to say that...

- *Mental anguish* makes us depend upon His wisdom.
- *Doubts* increase our faith when we act according to our beliefs rather than our reason.
- *Fear* makes us trust God’s providence and hope in His goodness.
- *Anxiety* leads us to distrust ourselves and release our problems to an all-loving God.
- *Worry* makes us realize our helplessness and instills a desire in us to fully depend upon God.
- *Discouragement* over our imperfections makes us strive for holiness with greater determination.
- *Uncertainty* as to our future makes us look forward to the Kingdom of Heaven.
- *Dryness* makes us patient as we seek to love God for Himself.
- *Disappointments* detach us from temporal things and serve to make us focus on eternal things.

My own personal mistake was grounded in the “experiences” I had as a young believer. Over the years, God had blessed me in a number of ways – there were few negatives and a lot of positives – and these tangible expressions of His love for me had influenced my *practical theology* to a degree; though my *biblical theology* had remained true to the text, I obviously had wandered in the practical outworking of that theology. Clearly I understood that *suffering* was a part of the equation, but deep down I also knew (or wanted to know) that *blessing* was also a part of the equation – I have placed these two terms in juxtaposition to each other to simply make a contrasting point, though ultimately these two concepts are not mutually exclusive; suffering is actually an incredible blessing, because it is used by God to transform us into the image of His Son. Continuing to develop my previous point – apparently, the spiritual experiences I had gone through in life, had caused me to gradually drift toward a more “*mechanical faith*,” that is, “if you do this, such and such happens” – essentially, it is the idea that if you do “right” God blesses, and if you do “wrong” God judges – thus my faith in practice became somewhat “mechanical.” By the way, there are plenty of passages in Scripture that support this kind of thinking – throughout the Old Testament narrative God blessed obedience and judged disobedience (Ex 23:22-27; Lev 26:3-13; Deut 28:1-14; 28:15-68; Is 48:17-19; Ps 1:1, 4; 33:12; 84:12; 112:1-2; 119:1-2), and then there is that well-known New Testament dictum, “*we reap what we sow*” (2 Cor 9:6; Gal 6:7; Matt 25:14-29 – also cross reference the proverbial wisdom of Scripture: Prov 11:14, 25-31; 12:24-25; 13:4, 11; 14:23; 15:1, 22; 21:5, 13, 23; 22:6, 8; 28:13, 27; 29:13; Job 4:8; Hos 8:7; 10:12-13). Though these teachings are indeed true, we must be careful that we don’t misapply or misinterpret these truths, or insist on “reaping” soon after we have sown – you don’t harvest a field of wheat the day after you sow the seed. In the spiritual realm, the rewards surely follow faithful sowing “in due season” (Gal 6:9) – we must also be mindful of the fact that some of our reaping will not occur until the life hereafter (Heb 10:36; 11:10, 13, 16, 39; Rev 21:10ff).

The principle of “sowing and reaping” is a fundamental truth about the universe – it is not a theory... it is an unalterable law. In the final analysis, nobody outwits it, and nobody escapes it. There are no exceptions. The principle of sowing and reaping is so entrenched in societal thought that it has actually become a popular axiom – frequently, you will hear people say: “You reap what you sow... what goes around comes around... garbage in, garbage out.” It is a straight “cause and effect” prin-

ciple. But when we insist on applying this truth only to the temporal realm we run into problems, because things don't *always* work that way – the problem most people have is that they don't include the eternal dimension in their thinking. By the way, when we maintain that positive conditions are a sign of *God's favor*, and negative conditions are a sign of *God's disfavor*, the reality of life itself will eventually teach us that this is not always the case. Down through the ages believers have struggled with the idea that wicked men often prosper (Ps 73), and that righteous men often suffer (Job; Jn 9). Nevertheless, most Christians generally come to the same conclusion that the adherents of every other religion come to – that *blessings* are a sign of God's favor, and that *trials* are a sign of His disfavor, and that "God" or the "Supreme Reality" (or whatever name you choose to give Him), ultimately determines what we reap. Every religion in the world operates under just such an economy – God is favorably disposed toward those who do good, and unfavorably disposed toward those who do bad (Jam 4:6). Hinduism and Buddhism refer to this principle as "*karma*;" which, essentially, is the belief that in every action there is a consequence. The Hindus go so far as to apply this to every action, word, and thought – all of these are accounted for in the next life (reincarnation). Why is it that *all religions* embrace the "law of sowing and reaping"? Because God has placed His moral laws, the certainty of a future judgment, and eternity in the hearts of *all men* — as such, all religions have the same moral foundation, a system of rewards and punishment, and some kind of afterlife.

A natural outgrowth of this principle, is that we are all predisposed to thinking that God operates much like we operate – when someone treats us good, we return the favor... when someone treats us bad, we take offense to it. People like people who treat them good, and don't like people who treat them bad. Thus it is natural for human beings to assume that God operates in a similar fashion. The "law of sowing and reaping" supports this kind of thinking – even the most casual observer would conclude that this is a fairly good description of the way things *generally* go in this world – that the world essentially operates under the old maxim "what goes around comes around" in life. Hence, the vast majority of people live their lives with the understanding that "*what they do*" significantly influences "*what they experience*" in life. Because they want their lives to be as comfortable and trouble-free as possible, they do what is necessary to insure the best possible outcome (at least to a modest degree); obviously the more disciplined the individual is, the more effort he puts forth to make sure that this indeed is the case – this is the reason we eat healthy food, get ample sleep, exercise properly, go to the doctor for an annual check-up, purchase insurance, study for exams, change the oil in our cars, lock the door when we leave home, turn off the lights in the day-time to lower your electric bill, respect others and treat them nice, answer phone messages from friends, and take steps to prevent any other problem we think might happen. Principally, people do things to insure that they will reap positive benefits... they don't purposefully do things that will ultimately bring pain and discomfort into their lives; i.e., they don't intentionally plant "weeds" in their garden. Furthermore, the religious person applies the principle of sowing and reaping to every facet of life, and actually seeks God's help to do those things that will bring the "greatest good and blessing" into his life.

Let me apply this popular theological view to my own "financial stewardship." Though some in the charismatic community teach a *prosperity doctrine* – a kind of selfish stewardship where you give that you might receive – that was not at all the direction I was leaning... but the way God had *blessed* me suggested that He was taking care of my financial needs; so I began to naturally assume that God was blessing me financially because I was being faithful to Him with what He had given to me (Mt 6:33; Lk 6:38). This is a very popular teaching here in the western world. The danger with this kind of thinking is that it creeps into every other area of life, and God becomes a kind of "*celestial vending machine*" — you do *this* and this happens... and you do *that* and that happens... if you have devotions

in the morning, God blesses (peace, joy, and prosperity!)... if you don't have devotions, God doesn't bless (woe is me! trials and problems!). I remember a time as a young man in ministry when I went to the airport to pick up a missionary friend who was arriving back in the states from Africa – because no one else on our church's staff volunteered to pick him up, I said I would. So here I was... the good guy! riding a white horse! doing the right thing! even though I also had a tight schedule! Well... as I was traveling down the freeway on my way to the airport, a large truck in front of me kicked up a good sized pebble that cracked my windshield. The thought came into my mind, "Lord, why did you let that happen? I chose to do the right thing, and this is what I get for it?" Obviously, God didn't audibly respond back to me, but He left this frustrating little issue on my plate for me to stew over for a good awhile – "Why would God have let that happen?" I wondered. "Was there a reason for it?" As you can see, that little incident got me to thinking about "spiritual cause and effect" issues – "connecting the spiritual dots" if you will.

The past ten years became the "crucible" for me. God was now elevating my game to a new level. No longer would He let me be content with a practical theology that really didn't mesh with *reality*. He was now going to "force my hand," as it were, to deal with issues as they really were. Keep in mind, up until this point, God had predominantly operated in my life in a "*revelatory manner*" – that is, He would clearly reveal His will and direction to me as the need arose. If I was to make a "change in ministry," He would make it very clear exactly what I was to do – I refer to this mode of operation as being "*revelatory*;" His answers didn't require supra-high levels of spiritual discernment. I recall as a young man making my first "ministry decision" – this was my prayer: "Lord, I'm not one of Your brighter students; I want to do Your will, but I'm a novice at this sort of thing, so You need to make it very clear to me exactly what it is You want me to do." Guess what? God was very clear as to what He wanted me to do! Well, for years God *clearly revealed* His will to me when I would ask Him. Then the Lord brought into my life a set of circumstances that really challenged the *practical outworking* of my faith. In the past ten years, I have been betrayed by a friend, and subjected to persecution in the marketplace for my faith (it cost me a teaching position in one of the local secular colleges – in that particular situation, however, it was clear that Satan played a role in that). The betrayal issue was a more difficult issue for me – I spent a couple of months on my knees coming to terms with what had happened, and processing the need to not only forgive my friend, but to also ask God to bless him (I was strongly convicted on that point); though he had clearly made a mistake, he was still a brother of mine. God was gracious, and I came through those two episodes rejoicing in His goodness. And then came, what I like to call, "*the time of my testing*." In short, after a lifetime of reasonably *faithful stewardship* (my wife and I tithed faithfully and sacrificially, and lived a more frugal lifestyle than the norm), my wife and I pretty much *lost everything we owned* – we had a couple of clients walk on debts owed to us in the amount of about \$150,000... we lost \$51,500 through a \$230 million ponzi scheme that a number of our friends had also become involved in... we lost our home to foreclosure... we lost both of our businesses, in which we had invested our life's savings... we lost our 401k... we lost all three of our automobiles... and we incurred an outstanding debt of some \$284,000 (I remember that number well!). Ultimately, we sold most of our possessions and settled the entire debt at about 25 cents on the dollar (we chose not to file bankruptcy). The two years it took to settle everything seemed like a lifetime. By the way, we didn't get an "easy way out" of this mess... we actually got a "very long difficult way out," including a court battle (which was not nearly as joyful as one might think, given the fact that we won it).

All the while, we were on our knees... daily and often... yet God never seemed to show up. The process only seemed to get worse and the way out more exasperating. At this point, I began to reflect

on all I had learned over the years, and why everything now had gone south. It was actually too much to really get angry about – anger seems like an appropriate response for smaller problems... not for bigger problems. Bigger problems take all of the wind out of your sail... they knock the props out from under you... they take your breath away... they suck the life out of you... they leave you despairing and bewildered... they make you question everything... there is simply no energy left to be angry. What else can a Christian do but importune the throne of God? If you're a realist, there really isn't anything else a believer can do. What can you do? Run from God? Insist that the world become what you want it to be? Obviously, those choices are not reasonable; read the book of Jonah. At any rate, God had me right where He wanted me – on the bench. Without going into more details, I began seeking "God's new direction for my life" – my mantra was, "*God, Anything! Anywhere!*" – which essentially meant, "Lord, just get me out of this mess! I will do anything and go anywhere!" I was hanging on to the *hope* that God was going to deliver me, just like He did Job, and restore my little fortune! Sounds good, right? No such luck! God was silent... not a peep... not a whisper... not even a still quiet voice... nothing... just absolute silence! I remember thinking, "What in the world am I going to do? Obviously, I can't just sit and do nothing!" By the way, I couldn't find a job of any kind no matter how much I tried. And there in the midst of this *dark winter* in my soul, God was at work...

It was time to get into the Word and rethink everything I had learned as a believer. Wow... this was going to be a journey. I started all the way back at square one. Being unemployed gave me the opportunity to study the Word *fulltime*. God had never been silent and unresponsive to my cries before – but He was now – obviously He had a *purpose* in all this. This was my season of *spiritual darkness* – little did I know, countless others had traversed this wilderness road before me. Throughout this *spiritual winter* experience, I knew God was there, even though He was silent; but His silence was exasperating and frustrating to me – I so much wanted to see the evidence of His love again. I felt the need to start over and reconstruct my faith from the ground up... concluding that I must have erred somewhere along the way in my thinking. Initially, I compiled about nine hundred pages of single-spaced notes... I studied the Word along with several commentaries and books of theology... and slowly the foundation of my faith was reaffirmed and substantiated... but God was still not going to release me from this journey of discovery. He would now have me plunge into the major issues of what I like to call "*soul transformation*," and the believer's experience regarding his journey of holiness and sanctification. This incredibly enlightening chapter of my life took me back to the writings of the puritans, and many of the great aging saints of the last two hundred years. These men were refreshingly transparent, open and honest, which was tremendously meaningful to me. They delved into those *sticky spiritual issues* that have troubled the human soul since the fall of man. What a liberating feast God had prepared for me.

This book that is now in your hands is a product of that search. It doesn't necessarily include the years of preliminary research that I did through various commentaries and books of theology – at least not directly – but it does include the reviews and summaries of some of the most significant books and studies on the subject that I was able to assemble the past couple of years. The process I use when reading a book is this – if I find the book an encouragement to my heart, I go through it a second time critically, underlining and high-lighting and making marginal notes. The third time through the book, I identify the major teachings of the book. After that, I then do a "summary" of the book – *that is the end product that this particular book contains*. These "notes," if you will, represent those issues that were particularly meaningful to me when I studied them; such notes become sources of encouragement to me later on – they're like a spiritual diary for me –

and every time I re-read one of the summaries, my soul is nourished; that's how significant these subject matters are for me personally. I have read this series of summaries at least a dozen times from cover to cover – not only because I ended up printing it, but also because of the need to “remember” and “reflect upon” what I had learned. From my perspective, the information this book contains is *critical* to the believer's well-being... so critical, that I can't imagine not reading these summaries many more times throughout the years God still has planned for me. After forwarding several of these “summaries” to friends of mine, and getting positive feedback from them, I felt the need to put a number of them into a single book. So, rather than having others read twenty-two of the most select books on “*Soul Transformation*,” they can read the “meatiest portions” of those studies in a single volume.

The style of writing that I use when doing summaries is a kind of “devotional style” – as such, the material is meant to be read in a reflective meditative manner. It should also be noted, on occasion I took the liberty to expand and clarify some of the issues the various authors taught; you will find these supplemental studies offset with a “border” around them – my intention was always to complement their material, not to argue against it or develop some totally unrelated topic. In addition, I made the “lead statements” in every paragraph **bold**, to assist the reader... and then underlined, *italicized*, and **emboldened** words and phrases to help communicate and highlight the major concepts that are presented. Hopefully, you will find these writing features helpful as well. Another element I included is a Glossary of Terms at the end of the book; a study of these terms will prove most helpful to those not familiar with them. Furthermore, for those interested in identifying the location from where I got the material, I placed within each study the “page numbers” of the author's book where he discusses the matters presented – for instance, if you go to “page three” of the first summary, you'll notice (9-35) at the end of the first paragraph – that means all of the material “preceding” those numbers was taken from *pages 9-35* of Martyn Lloyd-Jones' book, “*Spiritual Depression*.” The material which follows that to the end of the first paragraph on “page four” was taken from *pages 36-63* of his book, and so on. Should you decide to reference the material, you can do so by reading those particular pages.

The “topics” I have covered in this book all relate to the ongoing transformation, liberation, and sanctification of the believer's soul. The various issues presented not only include the positive experiences the believer goes through on his spiritual journey, but the negative experiences he goes through as well – these experiences range from joyful to painful, gratifying to frustrating, encouraging to debilitating. There is also a presentation in this book of the unilateral work God does in the believer's heart (irrespective of the believer's input), and the work He does in the believer's life as a result of the believer's faithful cooperation. By discussing such topics, it is only logical that the targeted audience to whom this book was written is “believers.” The believer should know that without a firm understanding of the issues presented in this book, he is simply left to struggle without answers, and combat the enemy of his soul with insufficient weaponry; hence, the expressed purpose for my writing this book. My heart bleeds for those Christians who “wander aimlessly” in their Christian life – in a sense, they are like sheep without a shepherd; they are ignorant of many of the *sobering spiritual realities of life*, as well as all God has really done for them as one of His children, all He is continuing to do for them, and all He is going to do for them in the future. My frustration with “western (American) Christianity” is that it is *overly simplistic*; it teaches only one side of grace; it lacks a cohesive theology of holiness; it lacks a theology of adversity and suffering; and it offers no teaching at all on the critical issues of “darkness in the soul” and “seasons of darkness” – consequently, it leaves the struggling believer bewildered,

frustrated and oftentimes guilt-ridden. Furthermore, its teachings on faith, struggling with the flesh, and walking in the Spirit are *very shallow* at best.

My heart not only grieves for parishioners, but also for “pastors.” Our seminaries, for the most part, have done a reasonably good job of teaching us about the fundamentals of the faith, and have given us a good overview and introduction to numerous biblically related subject matters — studies in theology, original language studies (Hebrew and Greek), hermeneutics (science of literary interpretation), church history, missions and evangelism, discipleship, philosophy and ethics, Christian education, pastoral care ministry, spiritual leadership, biblical counseling, and various courses on books of the Bible. Being as nearly “every discipline” needs at least one course, and some two, three or four courses, that limits the amount of time one can give to some of the more critical issues like *soul transformation*. Therefore, from my perspective, our seminaries have not dealt sufficiently with the matters presented in this book – spiritual formation, spiritual development, and the nuances of spiritual growth – they simply do a piecemeal study on the “spiritual disciplines” that are needed in the believer’s life. Let me give a word of exhortation to pastors at this point: I would like you to read through this entire book before you start preaching on the material that is in it. One thing is certain, you will find a significant amount of material in this book to preach on. If you will read through the entire book first, you will gain a better perspective on the subject matter as it is presented, and enhance your ability to communicate it with greater clarity. Obviously, none of us as pastors come to this subject with an “empty cupboard” – we have all agonized over these issues for years... Lord willing, this book will shine a light on these issues in a new and refreshing way for you. My heart’s position is that you preach “*Soul Transformation*” issues at least once a month. It has been well said, “If you speak to discouragement, you will never lack for an audience.” You and I both know that the Christian community in America is “hurting terribly;” they are desperately crying out for answers that bring peace to their souls. They are tired of spiritual pretense and inadequate answers, so be transparent in your preaching, and expound upon those issues that deal with “*pain in the soul*.”

It should also be noted, this book does not contain a number of “extreme positions” that only a radical few endorse, or that are suspiciously questioned by conservative theologians. The teachings in this book reflect those of some of the most respected Christian writers since the reformation. They have long been recognized by many in the Christian world as being “pillars of the faith.” They include *seventeenth thru nineteenth century writers* – Jonathan Edwards, John Owen, Thomas Watson, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, John Newton, John Bunyan, Alexander Maclaren, Dwight L. Moody... *twentieth century writers* – Oswald Chambers, G. Campbell Morgan, A. W. Tozer, Henry A. Ironside, Donald G. Barnhouse, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, C. S. Lewis, John R. W. Stott, Warren Wiersbe, Francis Schaeffer, James Montgomery Boice... and *contemporary writers* – James I. Packer, Ravi Zacharias, R. C. Sproul, Charles Ryrie, Alastair Begg, Eugene Peterson, John MacArthur, David Jeremiah and Charles Stanley. Furthermore, those *Christian colleges and seminaries* in America that favorably align themselves with these teachings are – Moody Bible Institute, Wheaton College, Dallas Theological Seminary, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Reformed Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Talbot Graduate School of Theology, Western Seminary, Southwestern Seminary, Denver Seminary, Phoenix Seminary, Westminster Theological Seminary, and Calvin Theological Seminary, just to name a few. I listed the names of individuals and institutions above to give those who are less theologically discerning “confidence” in the credibility of the various positions that are presented in this book.

As the author of this book, perhaps a brief introduction is appropriate. I was born in Calgary, Canada in 1943; my parents and grandparents grew up on farms in Scandinavia and Canada, and we immigrated to the states in 1948. The evangelical community in those days was highly conservative and legalistic – “*certain behaviors*” were the distinguishing characteristics of spirituality. If you struggled with “sin,” you were viewed as near apostate – as such, Christians lived their lives putting on a “good front.” It was an interesting era – western society in those days exhibited a lot of admirable qualities, and people basically kept their problems “in house.” So there was a degree of moral discipline back then that no longer exists in today’s society. Hypocritical? Perhaps. In part. Nevertheless, back in the 50s people essentially subscribed to a Judeo-Christian ethic – they were outwardly polite, respectful, moral and kind. It was an age of *conformity*. Once the mid-60s arrived, however, *nonconformity* fast became the mood of the day (Judges 21:25), and every diabolical behavior imaginable exploded onto the scene – profanity, drugs, sex, questioning authority, and being unashamedly transparent – obviously, these behaviors affected the Christian community as well, both for good and for bad. For the most part, the vast majority of clergy back then were still “old school,” because this new *independent spirit* came upon us so quickly. As such, the people in the pew learned to live compromising lives, and before long this transparent spirit of nonconformity also crept into the church; and therein lay the challenge of the day. It was precisely during this time in our culture that I recommitted of my life to Christ – what followed were some forty years of ministry, both in the pastorate and the college classroom. Though believers, in large part, still try to “*smile*” their way through life (as in the past), the spiritual battles within are becoming more and more evident even on their faces – society itself is becoming increasingly debased, degenerate, and corrupt. The hearts of believers across the broad spectrum of Christendom are “*crying out for answers*” to the real problems of the soul – superficiality no longer cuts it when you are genuinely hurting. Fortunately, it is in just such an environment that God’s Spirit is best able to do His quickening work in the soul.

I have borne my soul in this book for your benefit, and have been as transparent as I can be with my thoughts and convictions. My prayer is that God will use the teachings of some of the greatest Christians writers in the history of the Church to further “*fan the flame*” in your heart for true spirituality. God willing, that indeed will be the case. Stoke the flame within, my friend.

In the good yoke,

Dr. D. W. Ekstrand