“THE DYNAMICS of GENUINE FAITH”
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As I reflect upon my seventy-two years of living, and “my journey of faith” through all of the ups and downs of life, I can’t help but think of the impact all of the various experiences of life have had upon the development of my faith; i.e., “my construct of faith” (what I have come to believe, and what that looks like in my life). To put things in their proper context, I was raised in a Christian home and attended a Bible-believing church my entire life, so the gospel message was well-ingrained into my mind as a young child. Though I invited Christ into my life during my grade school years, that was just the beginning of a life I later concluded I was simply not prepared for (not that I needed to be, mind you – more on that later). Let’s look at the world in which I was raised – the 1950s were the developmental years of my life; obviously the culture and the church of that day strongly influenced the course of my life, my faith, and my spiritual development: keep in mind, “as kids we all have a very simplistic construct of faith” – it is only when we walk thru a number of challenging experiences in life that our faith grows and takes on significant substance, strength and stoutness. It was during the 50s and 60s that the believing community in America, for the most part, strongly aligned itself denominationally – that is, the church wasn’t so much viewed as “the universal church” of which the Bible speaks, but more as “the denominational church” to which one belonged and with which one identified. In the 70s, the Christian world in our country began going through a number of “doctrinal and cultural battles” that caused even greater division in the church – be it the cultural changes that swept through America, the denominational bias, the infallibility of Scripture, the style of music in the church, or the charismatic movement – all of these issues impacted the believing world in different ways, as well as the faith of its followers. In addition to all of the various issues, however, the church of that day placed far more emphasis on “doctrinal truth” than the believer’s walk or his relationship with Christ… so the culture within the church significantly impacted the faith of its adherents – thus the dynamics of “genuine faith” became a prominent issue in my mind. Essentially after a lifetime of wrestling and struggling with a number of faith issues (Scripture clearly teaches that faith is a struggle), I felt the need to put my thoughts in writing that others might possibly benefit from them (not that I’m the last word on these matters). Faith has been described by theologians as both a mystery and an enigma, because many of its precepts and tenants transcend human understanding, but that does not mean the totality of this subject is outside of the arena of human understanding – though few people understand the nature of electricity, we can all attest to its power and its usefulness in our lives. Again, it is my spiritual journey in life that has inspired me to share the dynamics of faith that God has placed in my soul. My prayer is that you will find this study an encouragement to your faith as well. Throughout this study, you’ll notice many of the words and thoughts have been italicized, underlined and emboldened – this was done to give extra emphasis to them. In addition to that, I have listed a number of biblical references that expand upon the various truths expressed; naturally, I would encourage you to read those references as well. Lastly, though a few of the faith issues covered in this study may appear to be somewhat obscure to you, try to consider the fullness of each of the issues presented. One further note: remember, you don’t speed read theological truth… you carefully reflect upon it and let the Holy Spirit cause it to settle peacefully in your heart.
The Nature of Faith

The only problem human beings truly have is that of “failing to believe and obey God.” Even for us as believers, the issue of “believing and obeying God” is still the divine injunction that produces consternation in our soul, and with which we have a very difficult time complying… therefore the number one problem any of us have is “a faith problem.” When the issue of faith is clearly distinguished in our minds, the logic of that argument becomes undeniably evident. Furthermore, “since that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23), by definition, the only problem any of us have is “a sin problem.” According to Scripture, sin occurs when we fail to trust God at any particular moment in our lives — the reality is, “we sin when we let angst rule in our soul,” because anxiety is contrary to faith (cf. Phil 4:6); its presence reveals a lack of faith, whereas the presence of faith results in the dissolution of anxiety. The truth is, all of us have a significant amount of sin in our lives (cf. Jas 3:2), particularly at the “thought level.” But due to the fact that we are inclined to identify sin as “only being actions that are overtly evil” (i.e., visible, outward manifestations of evil such as lying, cheating, adultery, murder, etc.), we don’t see ourselves as being that sinful… we certainly wouldn’t apply Paul’s evaluation of himself to ourselves – “in me dwells no good thing” (cf. Rom 7:18; Jer 17:9). Thus our problem as Christians is that we essentially “live a life of pretense,” and in some way ultimately conclude that the Christian life is basically about “being good” (though that is a reasonable construct of faith, it is not an accurate one). Therefore, the vast majority of believers live life as if it is about abiding by various divine principles and precepts… since most Christians think they actually do a pretty good job of that, they naturally feel that they are “reasonably good people.” So the long and short of it is this — they live life pretending to be what they are NOT — good. It is important to note, “there is only one who is good, and that is GOD” (Lk 18:19) – just because we are believers doesn’t make us good. The foregoing argument may appear to some of you as being some kind of strange, unorthodox interpretation of what it means to live a life that is pleasing to Christ; the reality is, this is precisely what Scripture and the pillars of the church have taught for 2000 years… but for a variety of reasons it was not a common teaching in 20th century America. People in the western world after World War II needed to “feel good about themselves,” so they bought into such cultural psychologisms as these: “As human beings we simply need to love ourselves!” & “I’m okay, you’re okay!” Sadly, feeling good about ourselves crept into our theology of faith as well.

The encouraging news is “biblical theology” is on the rebound in many segments of the church today, in spite of the fact that many still embrace a quasi-humanistic theology. As a graduate of two prominent seminaries here in the US, I have often wondered why this subject was not more clearly addressed by my professors — if it was addressed at all, it was just lightly expounded upon. As a young seminarian, I remember hearing Christian leaders say, “there are a number of different opinions on that subject; since the various issues are so controversial we pretty much leave it up to individuals to come to their own conviction on it.” Though I couldn’t imagine the apostle Paul making that kind of statement, I felt the complexity of the problem probably lay in the translation of Scripture from one language to another, and I wasn’t astute enough to adequately critique the issue. In addition to that, and in their defense, the theological culture in our country back in the 1970s was at a crossroads — denominations, Christian institutions and Christian leaders across the spectrum were debating a host of issues, not the least of which was the inerrancy and infallibility of Scripture and the charismatic movement (those were hot button issues in those days) — these theological issues became such strong emotional issues
that many groups within the church at large denigrated the integrity of other groups, and many of us were the product of that period. Conversely, the “hippy, free-love movement” in the 1960s had drastically changed our culture right before our eyes… existentialism and post-modernism brought sweeping changes to the philosophical understanding of our world… and many of the churches in our country adopted a “seeker-friendly” approach to ministry; they wanted to be sensitive to the prevailing attitudes that were becoming so dominant in our society. Obviously, there were several different schools of thought in the Christian world in those days. Since then, many churches had to regroup and rethink their moorings — no longer would a “simplistic four spiritual laws theology” adequately address the doctrines of the faith; it is precisely here where many believers and churches find themselves today.

**It is important for us as believers to remember the significance of “culture” in our lives… not only in our upbringing, but in our everyday thinking — all of us as human beings have been “indoctrinated” into the broader culture in which we live (that is, its values, standards, principles, behaviors, attitudes, etc.)… conversely, most of us belong to a “subculture” of sorts that is even more significant to us (be it, ethnic, religious, geographic, age group, pop culture, political, etc.). When we embrace the teachings and values of our narrower subculture, we naturally feel a sense of comfort, acceptance and approval — as such, we feel reasonably good about ourselves and at peace with that subculture with which we identify; the reason being is there is less anxiety and conflict in that smaller community of trust to which we belong. The word “peace” in Scripture means “joining together that which has been separated,” but peace with God and peace with the world are two very different issues. By definition, “man was separated from God at the fall” (cf. Gen 3; Is 59:2; Eph 2:12; Col 1:21-22; Rom 6:23; 8:35ff; Heb 7:25-27), but “through the cross God reconciled us to Himself” (cf. Rom 5:10-11; 2 Cor 5:18-20; Eph 2:1, 5, 16; Col 1:22), “thus establishing peace with Him” (cf. Rom 5:1). I mention the foregoing because of our tendency to place so much emphasis upon the subculture of our faith (that is, the community of believers or the church to which we belong), as opposed to our relationship with Christ. Many in the believing community substitute a relationship with Christ with a relationship with their church and other believers (though perhaps not consciously); that is they substitute an “intimate walk with Christ” with “intimate communion with their church and other believers” — though intimate communion with other believers is critical to our growth as Christians, intimate communion with Christ is the foundation of our growth; without it no growth occurs. Remember, *Christ is our life* (Col 1:4), and abiding in Him (that's intimacy) is our calling (Jn 15:5); therefore, to place the church or fellow believers before Christ is to place the cart before the horse — and one is vastly more significant than the other.

**With that said, let’s launch into this incredibly important subject called “faith,”** without which we will simply “play church” rather than “be the church.” No issue outside of the deity of Christ is more important to the believer than the issue of “faith;” not only is it the number one problem for us, it is the solution to our problem. Due to the nature of faith and all of the various aspects of it, I am placing the most important chapter or section of this study at the very end… why? because it is necessary that one first wrestle with the various issues involved before discovering that dynamic whereby one overcomes; that is, it is important that one deal with all of the difficulties of faith, before coming to that level of appreciation as to its divine significance. I liken it to my experience in the Army — it is important that one first go through all the rigors of training, before one be put in combat. With that said, let me encourage you to resist the temptation to read the last chapter first — I say that because many people like to read the last chapter of a book before reading all of the preceding chapters; though that may sound strange
to many of you, that's the way some people read books! So, following is a theological and philosophical study of what Scripture teaches us about the reality of "faith," the need to understand it from a philosophical perspective is this: philosophy is a logical explanation of reality, and it is that perspective that helps us understand the logic of faith. One further note, due to the various aspects of faith, many of the concepts will be stated several times, each focusing on the subject from a slightly different perspective. Let's begin…

**Due to the “multiple issues” involved in the theological construct of faith,** it is important to begin with a basic, generic understanding of it—though that doesn't answer many of the complexities of faith, it at least provides us with a starting point from which to launch into the subject. Essentially, the idea of faith is concerned with the establishment of “some particular reality as indeed being trustworthy.” The Hebrew word for faith in the Old Testament, he’emin, is built upon the word ‘aman, which means to be true, reliable, faithful. The New Testament term for faith, pisteuo, further develops the Old Testament concept and denotes the various aspects of the religious relationship into which the gospel calls people: “**trusting in God through Christ.**”

*The most common characteristic of pisteuo conveys a movement of trust going out to, and laying hold of, the object of its confidence: Jesus Christ.* According to the New Testament, the nature of faith rises out of testimony authenticated by God Himself (cf. Jn 10:25, 37, 38; Acts 2:22; 2 Cor 12:12; Heb 2:4); thus faith rests upon the acceptance of that testimony and lives accordingly. Faith and life are intimately connected in the New Testament. “The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology” published by Baker Book House identifies the three major tenets of biblical faith as follows—

1. **Faith in God involves right belief about God** — True biblical faith has intellectual content, and it comes from God’s Word. Those who believe God are given a confident internal assurance that what they believe is trustworthy; on the other hand, those who do not believe God, make Him out to be a liar (cf. 1 Jn 5:10); here is where the heinous nature of unbelief is evident; it contradicts the Word of the one true God and attributes falsehood to Him. A characteristic of our day is that people no longer believe in absolute truth; instead they believe everything is relative—that’s postmodern man: “what's true for you may not be true for me” (cf. Judges 21:25). Christians see things very differently… they see a world that is simply blind to biblical truth (cf. 2 Cor 4:4; 1 Jn 2:11). Throughout the Bible **trust in God** is made to rest on the belief of what He has revealed to us in His Word concerning His character and purposes. The New Testament depicts faith as knowing, believing, and obeying “the truth” (cf. 2 Th 2:13; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet 1:22); thus showing that the authors of the various books in the New Testament regarded “**orthodoxy**” (“right belief”) as faith’s fundamental ingredient (cf. Gal 1:8-9). The words “faith” and “belief” are often treated synonymously, which has led to Christians being called “believers.”

2. **Faith rests on Divine testimony** — Beliefs are convictions held on the grounds of divine testimony. Whether a particular belief should be treated as a known certainty or a doubtful opinion depends upon the worthiness of the testimony on which that belief is based. The Bible views faith’s convictions as **certainties** and equates them with knowledge (1 Jn 3:2; 5:18-20), not because they spring from supposedly self-authenticating mystical experience, but because they rest on the testimony of a God “**who does not lie**” (Titus 1:2), and is therefore utterly trustworthy. To receive His testimony is to certify that God is true (Jn 3:33), and to reject it is to make God a liar (1 Jn 5:10). The Christian faith rests upon the recognition of apostolic and biblical testimony as God’s own testimony to His Son.
Faith is a supernatural Divine gift — Sin and Satan have so blinded fallen human beings (Eph 4:18; 2 Cor 4:4) that they cannot discern the divine testimony of God’s Word, nor comprehend the realities of which it speaks (Jn 3:3; 1 Cor 2:14), nor arrive at self-renouncing trust in Christ (Jn 6:44, 65) except through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor 4:6). Only the recipients of this divine teaching, drawing, and anointing place their faith in Christ and abide in Him (Jn 6:44-45; 1 Jn 2:20, 27). As such, God is the author of all saving faith (cf. Eph 2:8; Phil 1:29); more on this later.

The author of Hebrews writes, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). This passage describes the true nature of faith, and provides us with the only definition of it attempted in all of Scripture. In short, faith makes things hoped for as real as if we already had them… and it provides unshakable evidence that the unseen, spiritual blessings of Christianity are indeed certain and true. Here is the game changer on this matter called “faith” — GOD is the one who “opens the heart for a person to believe the truth” when it is presented to him (cf. Acts 16:14). The apostle Paul goes on to tell us that “faith comes from hearing God’s Word” (cf. Rom 10:17); that is, the Spirit of truth confirms the truth of the Word to one’s heart when it is read or heard that he might truly believe it (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:13; 1 Jn 2:27). The condition set forth in Scripture for receiving this work of grace in one’s life is “humility” (cf. Ps 25:9; 34:18; 51:17; 76:9; Is 66:2; Mt 13:10-17; Rom 1:20-32; Jam 4:6); “thus faith is a gift of God… not the work of man, lest anyone should boast” (cf. Eph 2:8-9; 4:7; Jn 4:10; Rom 12:3). Of all the elements in the Christian life, the three most significant interrelated ones are Humility, Faith and Love… without a commanding presence of these three virtues in one’s life, “true spirituality” is simply an illusive pipedream. Throughout the course of this study, all three of these virtues will be expanded upon and emphasized at different points. Before moving on, let’s look for a moment at what it means to be a “truly humble person” — the root word in the New Testament that is translated “humility” is the Greek word tapeinos, which essentially means “lowness,” so the primary emphasis of humility is that of exercising “lowness of mind” (cf. Mt 18:4; Phil 2:3; Jam 4:10; 1 Pet 5:5). Thus Paul instructs believers “not to think too highly of themselves, but to think so as to have sound judgment” (Rom 12:3) — thinking highly of oneself is the essence of a proud heart. When our hearts are “humble” before God we identify with the truth of who we really are — sinful creatures in need of forgiveness and a Savior — it is only in just such a person that the Holy Spirit “gives him the grace to believe and regenerates him spiritually;” that is, “makes him spiritually alive in Christ” (read Jn 3:5; Acts 16:14; Rom 6:3-4; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1-9; and Titus 3:5).

The singular responsibility God requires of the human family is that they “humbly admit their spiritual condition,” and when they do, He will confirm His Word to their hearts; without humility, this confirmation will not take place. So the Holy Spirit opens our heart to believe (Acts 16:14), makes us spiritually alive in Christ (Titus 3:5), takes up residence in our life (Rom 8:9), leads us into all truth (Jn 14:26; 16:13; 1 Jn 2:20, 27), and ultimately conforms us to the image of Christ (2 Cor 3:18) — though Jesus did the work on the cross to purchase our salvation, it is the Holy Spirit who makes that work efficacious in our life… to the degree that we humbly discipline ourself for the purpose of godliness (cf. 1 Tim 4:7), by diligently studying God’s Word (cf. Acts 17:11; Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 2:15), and fighting the fight of faith (1 Tim 6:11-12), to that degree we will grow in faith and sanctification (that is, be transformed into the likeness of Christ; cf. Jn 17:17). Without humility characterizing our heart attitude, none of the foregoing will take place; on the one hand, no one is perfectly humble (because we all inhabit sinful flesh), yet on the other hand, God has given us the grace to exercise far more humility than any of us do. Remember, God gives us the gift of faith when our hearts are humble… likewise the gift of faith is sustained and grown by
humility; as such, it is exercised with humility. Always keep in mind “what your part” is in the Christian life, and “what God’s part” is – Scripture exhorts us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling (that is, with humble reverence before God), but work with the realization that we work not alone, God is also at work in us both to will and do His good pleasure” (Phil 2: 12:13). Thus the Christian life is a “co-operative” (both you and God have a role to play in it) – your responsibility is to seriously and diligently and humbly do your part. Believers with a humble heart seek God’s will in life (cf. Mt 6:10)… whereas those with a proud heart seek their own will in life. Several passages in the gospels provide us with a good picture of what it truly means to be “spiritually humble.” Following are four such passages:

1. Only those who are weary and burdened with the weight of sin in their lives will come to Jesus and find rest for their souls (cf. Matt 11:28).

2. Only those who are spiritually thirsty because of their sin will come to Jesus and drink of the water of life (cf. John 7:37).

3. Only those who are admittedly lost in the wilderness of sin will come to Jesus and be rescued from their sin (cf. Luke 19:10).

4. Only those who are spiritually poor, spiritually crippled, spiritually blind & spiritually lame will come to Jesus and dine with Him (cf. Luke 14:21) — those who do not admit such, are simply not interested in dining with Him… they are too preoccupied with this world and all it offers (cf. Luke 14:16ff)… the reality is, they don’t see themselves as needing a Savior (cf. John 9:40)… they simply believe their own self-righteousness is sufficient for salvation (cf. Matt 5:20; Phil 3:7-9), or that a transcendent deity is simply irrelevant to their life.

So it is GOD who gives us eyes to see… and ears to hear… and a mind to understand (read Mt 13: 10:17); it is not a product of deductive reasoning. The reality is, when God opens our heart to believe – we believe, because our eyes are opened to the truth that our humble heart is made sensitive to. Thus, with all of the foregoing in mind, faith is confidence in the trustworthiness of God, and the conviction that what He says is true and that what He promises will come to pass. So faith has the revelation from GOD as its foundation – it is not a leap in the dark;” to believe it is a leap is to believe in an unorthodox concept known as fideism.

In the minds of most people, faith seems to involve some kind of “venture,” even though talk of a “leap of faith” is wholly inaccurate. It is widely held by many that faith goes beyond what is ordinarily reasonable, in the sense that it involves accepting what cannot be established as true through the normal exercise of our naturally endowed human cognitive faculties. The nineteenth century metaphysician Immanuel Kant put it this way in his work, Critique of Pure Reason – “I have found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith;” but other theistic philosophers have clearly shown that “faith is not at all contrary to reason.” The truth is, faith without reason has no biblical foundation; to deny one is to deny the other. Obviously, one should only trust with good reason, and good reason to trust requires sufficient evidence of the trustee’s trustworthiness; thus reasonable trust has its venture-someness diminished. Reasonable faith arguably needs to conform to evidentialism — the requirement generally thought essential to rationality – to hold propositions to be justifiably and evidentially true. Again, this happens in the mind of the believer by the Spirit of truth (cf. John 14:26; 16:13). So faith and reason are clearly interrelated. If faith consists in beliefs that have the status of knowledge, then faith cannot fail
Faith is the assurance of things hoped for — The word “assurance” (hupostasis) commonly appears in ancient papyrus business documents, conveying the idea that a covenant is an “exchange of assurances” which guarantees the future transfer of possessions described in the contract. With that in mind, James Moulton & George Milligan in their book “Vocabulary of the Greek Testament” (Baker Books, 1995, p. 660), suggest the following rendering — “Faith is the title deed of things hoped for.” The Greek word hupostasis is frequently rendered “confidence, substance, reality, or nature” in the New Testament (cf. 2 Cor 9:4; 2 Cor 11:17; Heb 1:3; 3:14) — to get a fuller understanding of it, substitute each of these renderings of the word in the passages listed above. The word hupostasis literally means, “that which is placed under;” thus it refers to the “foundation or basis” — so “reality or substance” are in juxtaposition to that which is unreal or imaginary. One could say then that faith imparts reality in the mind of those things that are not seen, and enables us to believe and act as if they really exist.

Faith works like this in every sphere — Believing that there is a place called “Paris,” leads us to act as if it were so, even though we may never have been there… the belief that we will “earn money” by doing some particular work, leads us to act as if it were so… the belief that we will “inherit something genuinely promised to us by our parents,” leads us to act as if it were so. We have faith that a bridge will hold us up… faith in the engineer who designed it… and faith in the vehicle that crosses the bridge. So faith is evidence of things not yet fully seen… it gives the force of reality to what is believed. The Christian hopes to one day be perfectly free from sin, be admitted to heaven, and enjoy everlasting happiness — under the influence of faith the believer allows these things to control his mind as if they are certain future realities. God’s Word is the principal ground and foundation of hope… and faith is a confident persuasion, expectation, and assurance of those things. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) this word is translated “foothold” in Psalm 69:2. David here cries out, “I have sunk in deep mire, and there is no foothold” — essentially he is saying there is no ground or foundation under his feet; thus, he feels as though he is about to perish. Faith gives us substantial footing and provides us with a sure foundation upon which to stand. The first century Jewish philosopher, Judaeus Philo, said, “The only infallible and certain good thing is that faith which is faith towards God — it is the solace of life, the fullness of good hopes.”

Faith is the conviction of things not seen — The word “conviction” (elengchos) occurs in the New Testament only here and in 2 Timothy 3:16, where it is rendered “reproof.” It means evidence or proof which convinces another of error or guilt. The idea behind this word is that the evidence produces conviction in the mind with regard to that which is true. When a man is arraigned in a court of law and evidence is furnished as to his guilt, the idea of “convincing argument” enters the case; Albert Barnes in his “Notes on the New Testament” (Kregel Publications,
suggests this is the meaning of *elengchos* here. Thus faith in the divine declarations of Scripture provides a *convinging argument to the mind* (by the Holy Spirit) of those things that are not seen. But is this a good argument? The infidel naturally says “no.” However, when a man who has never been to “Paris” believes that there is such a place, his belief in the numerous testimonies about it which he has heard and read is to his mind a “good & rational proof” of its existence, and he would act on that belief without hesitation. In like manner, the Christian believes what God says—though he has never seen heaven and has never seen his Redeemer, he has evidence which is satisfactory to his mind that his Redeemer and heaven are undeniable realities. Those declarations are to his mind more convincing proof and conclusive evidence than all the reasonings & declarations of the infidel to the contrary. Therefore faith is the firm assent of the soul to every part of the divine revelation that it is true. If you will humbly and prayerfully study God’s Word, you will discover an incredible faith in what Scripture teaches.

The “*convincing proof*” that the declarations of Scripture are indeed true, is ultimately accomplished in the believer’s mind and heart by the “Holy Spirit” – He is the Trinity’s agent of transmission and communication, and the divine author of faith and Scripture (read 2 Tim 3:16; Jn 5:37-47; 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; Rom 15:4; Heb 12:2; 2 Pet 1:20-21; 1 Jn 2:27); without His agency, we would neither come to understand nor respond to Him in faith. Every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God is revealed, inspired, and authoritative (Mt 4:4). Paul says, “The *natural* man cannot know or understand the things of the Spirit of God because such things are *spiritually appraised*” (1 Cor 2:14) – in that verse *spiritual* is in opposition to *natural*. The psalmist understood the need for God’s illumination of His Word – “Open my eyes, that I may behold wonderful things from Thy Law” (Ps 119:18). Though God gives His children the grace to understand His Word, it is incumbent upon the believer to “accept, believe, trust, and act upon it” – such is man’s part in the matter of “*faith*” (cf. Prv 3:5; Heb 1:17; 1 Jn 5:4).

According to Scripture, the foundation of saving faith is “believing that God exists,” that He is a rewarder of those of seek Him, and that failing to believe such makes it impossible to please Him” (Heb 11:6); so without believing that God exists, there is no possibility of faith at all. To question “*the existence of God*” is to deny the very testimony of God to the human heart—God has revealed the reality of His existence to the mind of every human being, including His eternal power and His divine nature (cf. Rom 1:19-20), which is what it means to be God… and has set eternity in their hearts (cf. Ecc 3:11); however, “man in his foolishness has futilely speculated to the contrary,” and as a result, God has darkened his heart to the truth (cf. Rom 1:21). As previously stated, *when man humbles himself before God, the Holy Spirit opens his heart to believe* (Acts 16:14); such belief is not something that can be obtained through human brilliance. As the wisest man who ever lived (Solomon) said, “man does not have the capacity in and of himself to discover the work which has been done under the sun (that is, in the created realm of space, mass and time), even though he laboriously seeks to discover it” (cf. Ecc 8:17; 7:23f); so man must humbly be content to “accept reality for what it really is,” without insisting on fully connecting all the dots with regard to what he knows in fact to be true (that is the testimony of the wisest man who ever lived – remember, God blessed him with wisdom unlike any before or after him; read 1 Kg 3:5-14; 4:29-34). Furthermore, “the proud and the fool say in their heart that there is no God” (cf. Ps 10:4; 14:1; 53:1); to their mindless empty-headedness, even the demons of hell know that God exists (cf. Jam 2:19); hence, their stubborn arrogance is called “foolishness” by the Lord. In addition to that, we must believe that “God rewards those who earnestly seek Him” (cf. Heb 11:6); that the God of heaven cares about us, that He is both moral and just and will reward faith in Him. *Therefore,*
we must believe in a personal, loving, moral & caring God, who responds graciously to those who come to Him and place their trust in Him (cf. 1 Chron 28:9; Ps 58:11; Prv 8:17; Jer 29:13; Mt 6:33; Lk 11:10)... “whoever believes in Him has eternal life” (Jn 3:16); every good gift we receive from God, including eternal life, constitutes the reward of belief. It is not enough to merely postulate about God – only genuine belief in the existence of the one true God counts.

The Journey of Faith

After one experiences salvation, the next step in the soul’s progress out of the wilderness of sin, is that of entering into the land that flows with milk and honey; that’s a metaphor for the abundant Christian life (cf. Ex 3:7-8; Ezek 20:15), and it essentially is a “journey of faith.” The Lord’s words to His people through Moses was this: “You have circled this mountain long enough” (Deut 2:3); the children of Israel had faithlessly wandered in the wilderness for forty years… God would not take them into the Promised Land in their self-will… they must turn from their hardness of heart (cf. Num 14:26ff; 1 Cor 10:5ff; Heb 3:17). Likewise, the author of Hebrews tells us “not to harden our hearts as His people did in the wilderness when they provoked God, and fail to enter into His rest” (Heb 3:7-11). He then goes on to say, “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in you an evil heart of unbelief, in falling away from the living God” (Heb 3:12); such hardening is caused by the deceitfulness of sin (Heb 3:13). Amy Carmichael in her book “Edges of His Ways,” calls this mountain “discontent with the ways of God.” Thomas a Kempis in his book, “Of the Imitation of Christ,” reminds us that many believers “seek themselves in the things that they do,” and that “they stand in their good peace when all things fall after their will and their feeling; however if it fall otherwise than they desire, they are soon moved and sorrowful.” As the Lord has spoken: “You have circled this mountain long enough… it is time to move in faith believing.”

Being as each of us as believers are guilty of having a “self-orientation” in life, because of our inherent sinfulness (that is, our flesh), selfish sinful interests characterize much of our lives. The apostle Paul reminds us several times in his writings that we were created “for God” and His glory, not “for ourselves” and our own personal autonomy (cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16; Heb 2:10). The fact that “we exist for God” is a very troubling construct of faith for us, because of our innate self-centeredness – it is very difficult for us as human beings to surrender the control of our lives over to God (that’s the problem that began in the Garden of Eden, and continues to define us to this day); we proudly insist on having significant control of much of our life, rather than humbly relinquishing that control. When we humble ourselves we are expressing a genuine reliance and dependency on God… the focus of our life is changed from ourselves to Christ… this humble attitude of the heart is content to be behind the scenes, rather than in the spotlight. Pride insists on running the show and being at the controls. The reality is, “God hates pride,” Beloved, those are very poignant words. God said, “Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate!” (Prv 8:13; 3:7). He reminds us that “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling” (cf. Prv 16:18; Is 13:11). Jesus said, “He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal” (cf. Jn 12:25). Remember, “God gives grace to the humble, but opposes the proud” (cf. Lk 18:14; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). The apostle Paul was given wonderful revelations from God… in order to keep him humble, God gave him a thorn in his flesh – adversity is God’s way of keeping us humble. When you insist on running your own life your way, you can be sure God is going to rain on your little parade (sooner or later). If the apostle Paul required a thorn to keep him humble and focused on God,
you can be sure you and I require the same… or are you so proud so as to think you are greater than Paul? Furthermore, is God any less interested in having an intimate relationship with you than He was with the apostle? The reality is, God uses some adversity to inject healthy doses of humility into our hearts. As the renowned preacher A. W. Tozer said, “The meek man is not a human mouse afflicted with a sense of his own inferiority… No, he has simply stopped being fooled about himself, and has accepted God’s estimate of his own life; he knows he is as weak and helpless as God declared him to be.” Following are a number of significant quotes on “humility” by various individuals down through the centuries – the seventeenth century English Puritan, John Flavel, said, “They that know God will be humble, and they that know themselves cannot be proud.” One of the great Jewish rabbis of antiquity, Derek Eretz, said, “Be humble, that you may not be humbled.” Thomas a Kempis, the fifteenth century German priest said, “The more meek that a man is, and the more subject to God, the wiser he shall he be in all things.” The highly regarded eighteenth century British devotionalist, William Law, put it this way: “Humility is nothing else but a right judgment of ourselves.” The ancient Chinese sage, Shu Chinig, said: “Holding one’s self to be good, one loses his goodness” (it’s amazing how even an honest unbeliever can see the foolishness of a proud heart). The seventeenth century British divine and historian Thomas Fuller said, “There is no true holiness without humility.”

The apostle Paul reminds us that “the righteous man shall live by faith” (Rom 1:17); that is, “he aligns his thoughts with God’s thoughts.” So there is no skirting the issue, yet it is here on this Christian journey of faith that the soul encounters a number of challenges and difficulties. The believer who understands that there is an “abundant life” available to him, must come to the realization that this fullness of life is only experienced by genuine faith. The abundant life has often been likened to a steep mountain that must be climbed by faith — it is neither easy nor problem free. The reality of the Christian life is that everything is by faith… but due to “the smallness of our faith” (cf. Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 26:38-46; Mk 14:27-31, 66-72), and “the presence of indwelling sin” (our propensity to sin, our flesh; cf. Rom 7:14-19), the battle before us is one that requires God Himself to help us overcome. Because of the presence of our unredeemed humanness (God did not redeem our flesh, nor did He remove it from us at salvation), our minds are continually beset with sinful thoughts, and the struggle with those thoughts never cease until we are welcomed into glory (cf. Rom 8:29-30; 1 Cor 15:50-53; Phil 3:20-21; Col 3:4; Rev 21:1-8). Though we were redeemed at the cross and made new creatures in Christ who are now spiritually alive” (cf. Rom 6:3-4; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:1-6), and “guaranteed an eternal destiny in heaven” (Phil 1:6; 1 Th 5:24), God did not remove our “unredeemed humanness” from us (Rom 6:12-13; 7:14-18).… it is His will that we live with our flesh to praise of His glory and die to it daily (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:1-10; Heb 3: 13; 12:1-2; 1 Cor 15:31). Because believers are often confused and bewildered by the difficulty of the battle (which is the essence of spiritual warfare), they are frequently plunged into darkness, and despair of their condition (cf. 2 Cor 4:8-9; 1 Pet 1:6; 4:12; 5:10). It is this construct of faith with which all of us as believers struggle. Here’s a question for you: “Assuming you never overcome some of the major deficiencies in your life, what will that do to your faith?” The truth is, you are never going to overcome most of your humbling deficiencies that wage war in your soul; thinking that you can completely subdue your unredeemed humanness is contrary to what Scripture teaches — the presence of indwelling sin and trials are the two primary agents God uses to “build one’s faith” (be it yours or Peter’s), so why would He remove it? Another problem many believers have is that they see their faith as an exercise of the soul that they can use as a passport to gain God’s favor… a heavenly visa card to purchase His glorious gifts… a spiritual mantra to remove all of life’s negatives… or a magic genie to put bucks in their bank account; in other words, “they think
faith is the key to making life work the way they want it to work!” Many Christians pray for just such a faith, but since they never receive anything like that, they question the integrity of their faith. Beloved, that is simply an erroneous understanding of true biblical faith.

The reality is, faith is not in the least like that… it cannot be felt or touched or seen… it has no visible dimension, even though we insist that it have one – it is simply believing God apart from any physiological evidence. Like physical sight, however, it is nothing apart from the object upon which one is looking – you see something and know that you have sight… conversely, when you believe something you know that you have faith. Just as sight is only seeing, so faith is only believing; but what you are believing is what makes it efficacious. In addition to that, the virtue of faith does not lie in your believing, but in the “object” of what you are believing. So the important issue is this, “What is it that you are believing?” If you believe the truth of the gospel, you are saved; if you do not, you are lost. In both cases the act of believing is the same, though the things believed are diametrical opposites, and it is this that makes all the difference. Our salvation does not come because our faith saves us… it comes because it links us to the Savior who saves us. Our believing might be compared to an extension cord through which electrical energy is transmitted – it is simply the instrument of transmission, not the very energy itself. Furthermore, it is not a matter of fully understanding everything about energy in order to receive it, it is simply a matter of “plugging into the source of that energy” – hence, the extreme simplicity of faith – it is nothing more than just believing God when He says He has done something for us, or will do something for us; thus we trust Him to keep His word.

If you trust someone to do a job for you (like cutting your grass or fixing your flat tire), that simply means committing the work to someone and leaving it in his hands without any feelings of anxiety or distrust. All of us trust important matters to others in this way. We feel calm in trusting because of the confidence we have in those who take care of such matters for us. Mothers trust their precious infants into the care of nurses… we all trust our health and lives into the care of others, be it to cooks and taxi-drivers and all sorts of paid workers… we are completely at their mercy… yet we trust them without a thought of fear… even though they could choose to violate that trust. Interestingly enough, we often put our trust in people we hardly even know… we require only a general knowledge of human nature as the foundation of our trust… and we never feel (unless we're schizophrenic) as if we are going out on a limb and really doing something remarkable. The truth of the matter is, we could not live with others if we did not trust them… yet, as believers in Christ, we often struggle with trusting Him and simply claim to be “poor weak creatures who have no faith.” Imagine yourself acting in your human relationships as you do in your spiritual relationship. Suppose you begin your day tomorrow at the breakfast table with these words: “I cannot eat anything on this table because I have no faith… I can't believe the cook hasn't put poison in the coffee, or the grocer hasn't sold me a diseased product” – so you starve yourself, and head off to work. And just when you're about to board the train, you conclude that you cannot trust the engineer or the conductor, or the engineers who built the train, or those who repaired the rails – so you refuse to get on board. You now turn away and look to sit somewhere and reflect upon your predicament… but you refuse to sit on a bench in the park because you question the integrity of its structure… you refuse to take the elevator for fear that it will collapse… you refuse to take a drink of water at the fountain for fear that it has been poisoned… you refuse to read the newspaper because you have no confidence in those who wrote it… the argument goes on and on. Faith is the inherent
Is it possible that you can trust your fellowmen, but not trust God? Is it possible that you can trust men's words, but not God's words? Why is that? Furthermore, is it possible that you can commit the most precious possessions you have to weak, failing fellow-creatures without fear, yet you are afraid to commit your spiritual interests to the God of creation who laid down His life for you? The reality is, He is always ready to help you with your infirmities and needs... and you never have to schedule an appointment with Him, because He is always waiting for you. Since that is the case, put “your will” on the believing side, and “repeatedly affirm the truth” (that's the essence of believing the truth) that God loves you and cares for you;” by reflecting upon the truth of God's Word, the Holy Spirit will cause your heart to respond to it with assurance and confidence— your part is to prayerfully reflect upon the truths of Scripture, and when you do, God will give you the grace to believe it with conviction—that's the work of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 16:14; Jn 14:26; Jn 16:13); that's why He's referred to as the “Spirit of truth” (cf. Jn 15:26; 16:13). Remember, “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1), and faith is from God (read Eph 2:8; Rom 12:3; Heb 12:2); it is not something that we conjure up on our own... so as you prayerfully & humbly wade through the waters of Scripture, God will open your heart to believe its truths (that's a work only God can do; cf. Acts 16:14; Rom 10:17). The only people God withholds faith from are those who “close their eyes to the truth” (cf. Mt 13:10-16); therefore, “while seeing they do not see, while hearing they do not understand;” thus to them the Word of God is mere foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). God aggressively opposes the proud, but “extends divine grace to the humble” (cf. Jam 4:6).

When doubts enter your mind (and they will), throw yourself completely on God's Word (God's promises), and prayerfully wrestle through the truths of His Word that He might give you the victory, and restore confidence and peace to your heart. As believers, our part is to humbly reflect upon the truth: God's part is to make it a living reality in our hearts. Faith is like a plant that needs watering—though we must water it, God is the one who makes it grow (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). Don't neglect your responsibility in the growth process; if you do your faith will wilt and become extremely weak, and doubt and frustration will rule in your soul. Though we play a major role in the growth process, it is God who makes our efforts effective and fruitful. God isn't going to do for you what He has given you the grace to do (think about it). The Christian life can be compared to a beautiful piece of land in the countryside with grass and gardens—God has given you the tools necessary to work the land (mow the lawn, pick the weeds, trim the plants, plow, fertilize, water everything), and when you do your part He will cause everything to grow into gorgeous magnificence! The harder you work and the more diligent you are in doing your part, the more fruitful and beautiful will be the result. Remember, you don't cause the growth—God does!—but God isn't going to do the work He has given you the grace to do. You don't believe that? Rather than cutting your lawn for the next twelve months, ask God to cut your lawn for you! Enjoy the weeds! 😊 When you abrogate your responsibility, you will reap accordingly (cf. 2 Cor 9:6-8; Gal 6:7-9; Prov 11: 24-30). Therefore when you insist upon believing in the midst of doubt—by plunging into the Word—God will make His Word come alive in your heart and override your doubts. It is critically important for the believer to understand that he is not a “lone ranger” on the battlefield of life—God is right there beside him!
As believers, we are enjoined to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling,” but we are to work with the realization that God is also at work in us to will and do His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). Carefully reflect on those verses. As previously mentioned, the Christian life is a “cooperative effort;” both God and us have a work to do, and our part is done by “faith.” The writer Arthur Way, in his “Letters of St. Paul,” shares the following thoughts on these verses: “You have not to do it in your unaided strength: it is God who is all the while supplying the impulse, giving you the power to resolve and the strength to perform the execution of His good-pleasure.” The Lord instructed the psalmist David with these words: “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. Do not be like the horse or the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include a bit and a bridle to hold them in check” (Ps 32:8-9); essentially God’s message to David was this: “Don’t stubbornly resist the work I am doing in your life – cooperate with Me – because if I have to put a bit and bridle on you to get you to go in a right direction, then I will do that; I care too much for you to let you wander aimlessly in life” (cf. Heb 12:5-11). The immature believer sees this action by God as a negative; the mature believer sees it as a positive. Remember, we are little children being parented by a loving Heavenly Father – He is not without heart – He greatly sympathizes with our weaknesses (cf. Heb 4:15), and is mindful that we are but dust (cf. Ps 103:14)… the truth is, He doesn’t deal with us according to our sins (cf. Ps 103:10); if He did, we would all perish instantly. Furthermore, none of us are men of great faith; we simply have faith in an incredibly great God!

Trust and worry are contrary principles; they are incompatible. When a believer truly trusts in something, he ceases to worry about the thing in which he trusts… when He worries, it is plain proof that he doesn’t trust. According to this rule, it is evident that there is very little real trust in the Christian community. No wonder the Lord Jesus asked this question of His disciples – “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” (cf. Lk 18:8). He will find plenty of work and a great deal of sincerity, and doubtless many consecrated hearts… but will He find the one thing He values more than anything else? (cf. Heb 11:6). You are going to have to read this entire study in order to appreciate the significance of that statement. Though “you may not have passed this way before” (using the words of Joshua 3:4), it is your incomprehensible privilege to resolutely place your confidence in the author of life, and walk with Him moment by moment in absolute childlike trust. As the apostle Paul writes, “Be anxious for nothing (i.e., have no angst or anger in your soul), but in everything with prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God, and His peace which surpasses all comprehension shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (cf. Phil 4:6-7) – again, note your part in the process… when you do your part, God will do His part. You simply need to take everything to God in prayer – pour out your heart before Him – and He will graciously respond back to you by filling your heart with a level of peace that surpasses all comprehension. But you must do your part! Beloved, take a stand on the trustworthiness of God, and see how quickly the angst in your soul will vanish. As the psalmist David said, “I sought the Lord (that’s the essence of faith) and He answered me, and delivered me from all my fears… the angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him, and rescues them! O taste and see that the Lord is good! how blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him (again, that’s the essence of faith!). Fear the Lord, you His saints; for to those who fear Him, there is no want” (Ps 34:4-9). Again, focus on “your part” in the process, because that is all you can control… and when you do so, God will faithfully do “His part!” (cf. 1 Th 5:24). That doesn’t mean it is “easy” to do your part, because your unredeemed humanness (your flesh) will stubbornly insist on having its demands met (cf. Matt 26:36-46; Gal 5:16-17; Jam 1:14-15; 1:22; 2:20; 3:17; 4:6-8; 5:13). The truth is, “wherein sin abounds, grace abounds all the more” (cf.
Religion; I... and “God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Cor 9:8; Mk 9:23; Heb 11:32-34). That, my friend, is the foundation of this matter called “faith.” Put “your will” into believing — your faith must be active, not passive; so firmly resolve to “believe!” If you persist in living by faith (trusting all God has said), you will more and more experience the wonders of His transforming power and grace in your life.

The Crisis of Faith

The expression “crisis of faith” is a term commonly applied to periods of intense doubt and internal conflict about one’s preconceived beliefs or life decisions. Essentially a crisis of faith demands reconciliation or reevaluation before one can continue believing in whichever tenet is in doubt or continuing in whatever life path is in question; that is, the crisis necessitates a non-compromisable decision — either sufficiently reconcile the cause of doubt with the belief or decision in question, or drop the belief. Since faith, by definition, in some way leads the believer beyond human understanding, that doesn't mean intellectual difficulties automatically become difficulties in faith. John Henry Newman (1801-1890), the nineteenth century British tractarian and cardinal, made a profound impact on both the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church during his lifetime... in addressing the issue of a crisis of faith, he said the following: “I am far from denying that every article of the Christian Creed, whether as held by Catholics or by Protestants, is beset with intellectual difficulties; and it is a simple fact that, for myself, I cannot answer those difficulties. Many persons are very sensitive to the difficulties of Religion; I am as sensitive of them as anyone; but I have never been able to see a connection between apprehending those difficulties on the one hand... and on the other hand doubting the doctrines to which they are attached. Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt;” they simply cause the soul to humble itself before the Almighty.

When we think through our faith, we would be naïve to think that our “theology of thought” is without any problems... after all, the things we believe to be true about the Christian faith obviously stretch the human mind and heart — in reality, we only scratch the surface of our understanding of the Transcendent Reality of the universe — GOD (cf. Is 55:8-9; Rom 11:33-36). By insisting that we fully know is like putting all the water in the ocean in a thimble; beloved, at best any of us only have about a 150 IQ (God’s is in the eternal trillions)... so when we realize how utterly deficient we are in our thinking, we should then glory in the greatness of our God. The problem for many believers is that they have a tendency to “doubt their faith” if they become somewhat puzzled over their beliefs. There is a difference between doubt and difficulty. The person with a difficulty says, “How can this be so?” whereas the person who doubts says, “This can’t be so!” The first statement expresses difficulty, but a humble willingness to believe; the second statement expresses cynicism and an arrogant unwillingness to believe. The person with difficulties says, “I believe: Lord, help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24). Conversely, the person who cynically doubts says, “I simply can’t believe that: don’t bother to try and change my thinking!” He is locked in to unbelief, just as Pharaoh was; as such, God hardened his heart (Ex 5:1-2; 6:1; 7: 1-5). There is a world of difference between these two concepts.

A difficulty arises when we confront some biblical teaching of the church, and honestly find it hard to accept. Ultimately, we experience trials in the faith for three reasons: to strengthen us,
to clarify our beliefs, and help us to proclaim the Gospel. So doubt and disbelieving are out, but difficulties are in. The person with difficulties may be struggling, but he is struggling to understand more fully and completely. So the first reason for difficulty is that “it strengthens our faith.” Just as and athlete or musician trains and practices and sweats to attain the goal, so the believer (if he truly wants a worthwhile faith) must face difficulties and overcome them. And just as the athlete or musician is strengthened by the experience of perfecting his skill, so when we work through our difficulties, we emerge purer and stronger in our faith. Since none of us ever achieve absolute perfection in our faith, we are exhorted throughout Scripture to “grow as believers” (cf. Eph 4:15; Phil 2:12; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). A second reason for difficulty is that our faith might be clarified. It is going through the challenges of life that we ask the right questions and come to a fuller and deeper understanding of our faith. And yet a third reason for difficulty is to help us proclaim the Gospel with compassion and insight. By going through the difficulties that others go through, we are more prepared to identify with those issues that they are concerned about, and more prepared to address those concerns with answers that God can use to satisfy the questioning heart (cf. 1 Cor 10:11; 2 Cor 1:3-5).

Finally, it is so difficult to believe because it is so difficult to obey. In one of his sermons John Newman said, “To those who are perplexed in any way, for those who seek the light but cannot find it, one precept must be given – obey. It is obedience which brings a man into the right path; it is obedience which keeps him there and strengthens him in it… it is in obedience that your faith will live and your difficulties will be resolved, but it is in your disobedience that your difficulties will turn into the doubts which will eventually destroy your faith. This doesn’t mean that the church calls us to mindless obedience; instead, we are called to an open-minded and humble-hearted obedience (like little children in a loving, trusting relationship with their Father). We are also called to be inquisitive, to ask questions, to be curious, and seek to learn more… we are called to be open about our difficulties, because though they feel negative they are the instrument by which we ask the right questions in order to find the answers. We follow Christ with our hearts on fire and our minds alert. If we would find, we must seek… and if we wish the door to be opened to us, we must knock” (cf. Mt 7:7).

There are many Christians outside the church today because of a crisis of faith; they have lost the kind of joy and zeal they once had for serving God, and oftentimes they are not able to pinpoint exactly when that happened. For many it can be traced back to a crisis time in their walk with God when they reached a place of desperation and felt that God was not there… or that God failed to provide for them, so they hold that against Him. The causes for such a crisis are so varied — it could be the loss of a loved one, a financial disaster, a relationship break-up, or a job loss — the root causes can cover several issues. We can see these in the lives of five great men of God in the Old Testament… men who reached such a great crisis point in their walk with God that they asked God to kill them, and wondered why they had ever been born.

1. Moses — He responded to God with these words: “This job is too much for me… if this is the way you’re going to treat me, just kill me now and end my miserable life” (cf. Num 11:14-15). How could such a successful leader like Moses ever come to a place where he felt he could not go on? This crisis came out of a deep seated sense of insecurity; Moses simply felt he was not up to the task God had called him to do.
2. **Elijah** — Scripture tells us that “Elijah was afraid when he got Jezebel’s message that she wanted to kill him… so he walked a whole day’s journey into the desert… he begged the Lord to take his life… he had had enough… he was no better than his ancestors” (cf. 1 Kg 19:1-4). It was here where the man through whom God had performed the miraculous, asked God to take his life. Although it seems like a strange paradox, the man of power was now in his crisis time filled with fear, afraid of Jezebel, and feeling like he was all done and that no one else believed like him.

3. **Job** — This man of pain and suffering cried out to the Lord, “Why didn’t I die at birth?” (cf. Job 3:11). Here we find the prosperous and respected Job asking God why he had ever even been born. The unforeseen disaster that had come upon Job caused such suffering that Job reached a dramatic crisis in his walk with God.

4. **Jeremiah** — This renowned prophet cried out to the Lord, “Put a curse on the day I was born! Don’t bless my mother!” Jeremiah felt such an outward shame and humiliation that what he had prophesied had not come to pass, and this brought about an immense crisis of faith for Jeremiah in his disappointment with God for not doing as he had promised.

5. **Jonah** — In the midst of his humiliation Jonah cried out to the Lord, “Now let me die! I would be better off dead!” He had not wanted to preach repentance to the people of Nineveh because they would repent and God would spare them. This is exactly what happened and Jonah came to a crisis point because of his pride in wanting “his will” more than God’s will.

All five of these men ultimately chose not to abandon their faith in God. They were able to have a “crisis of faith” and not lose their faith. They did this by recognizing a salient truth—God has a plan. Though His plan may not be our plan, or we may not understand it, God is still in control. In every case God worked out His purposes even if these men initially could not see it. Whether it is fear, insecurity, disappointment, suffering or pride, only by trusting God’s ultimate plan can we overcome a crisis of faith. In each situation God ultimately provided an answer proving His complete faithfulness. The reality is this—the cost is simply way too high to sacrifice all the benefits of our faith over a temporary crisis.

**Paul Tillich’s Perspective on Faith**

*Paul Tillich* (1886-1965) was a German-American theologian and liberal Christian existentialist philosopher. Existentialism was concerned above all with the problems of human life in our modern, secular world, and how to navigate through this life. All existentialists are concerned with the need of the individual to discover valid truth in the struggles of personal existence… in their thinking “the autonomy of the individual” is the dominant philosophical ideal. Since many existentialists do not believe in the existence of God (because he is too restricting), it is necessary for human beings to construct their own philosophical ideals and values. The main themes with which the existentialist deals include the quest for meaning and validity, human freedom and choices, and the will; so they maintain that the truth of existence is grasped only in the total commitment of faith to what one believes. Being as there is such diversity in existential philosophy, some of the propositional ideas that some of them profess make it difficult
to come up with a strict definition of the prototypical existentialist. With that in mind, this particular section was included in this study only because of the “universal perspective on faith” that Paul Tillich provides for us – this liberal theologian in his noted work “Dynamics of Faith” (Harper & Row, 1957) examines what it means for a person to have faith. Tillich argues that faith is “a state of being ultimately concerned about something unconditionally.” He says if the object of faith claims ultimacy, then it demands the total surrender of the one who accepts this claim. He goes on to explain that this unconditional concern can take either a religious or non-religious form; he gives the example of Jewish faith in God as a form of ultimate concern religiously… and the concern for money and social status as a non-religious form of faith. Tillich believed that faith includes both the belief and the thing that makes belief possible. For the person who believes in God, true faith focuses on God (that which is truly ultimate) as its ultimate concern. If someone believes God is at the center of all human existence, then faith connects their essential being to God’s essential being… thus where there is genuine faith in God, there is an awareness of righteousness and holiness.

Tillich then goes on to describe what faith is not. To him, faith is not completely emotional. He says this false distortion arose from the German theologian Friedrich Schleimacher’s (1768-1834) notion of a feeling of absolute dependence. Schleimacher was a professor of theology at the University of Berlin and wrote extensively in the post-Enlightenment world, which defined religion as “sense and taste for the infinite,” and attempted to show that “life without religion is incomplete.” Rather than adopt the orthodox position that Christianity is based on divine revelation, he maintained that the common factor of Christian religious experience is the feeling or sense of absolute dependence – thus he was reinterpretting Christianity for modern man. The orthodox two-natures doctrine of Christ (cf. Eph 4:22-24) is replaced by the picture of a man in whom dependence is complete. It was Schleimacher’s profound experience of God through his sense of dependence that constituted the existence of God in him; thus he felt Jesus was able to mediate a new redemptive awareness of God to humanity. To the renowned theologian Karl Barth, Schleiermacher epitomized the liberal approach to religion which focused on man rather than God, and his philosophical perspectives found a renewed following among liberal twentieth century radicals; his Christology ultimately found a home in Paul Tillich’s mind as well.

The truth is, Christianity and Judaism both point to specific acts of God in history as the foundation for their religions. For Christianity in particular, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are a matter of ultimate concern – if these ultimate concerns are not in fact true as the Bible teaches, then says Paul, “our faith is in vain if Christ has not been raised from the dead” (cf. 1 Cor 15:14), and God has not then given us any kind of revelation or salvation in His Son. When the message of the cross loses its empirical basis, then people find another concert element upon which to focus. Sadly, liberal Christianity has relegated the resurrection to the status of myth, and does not see it as a matter of ultimate concern. As such, most liberal Protestant denominations today make “the acceptance of oneself and social progress” their ultimate concerns. The truth is, Judeo-Christian tradition was provided with a historical basis for its existence; if their “sacred history” is simply relegated to mere myth then they have no concert basis for religion. As the apostle Paul says, “The gospel is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (cf. Rom 1:16) – the gospel is actually “transformational,” not just a new perspective on human existence; through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we become brand new creations (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 5:17; 1 Pet 2:24); furthermore, when we genuinely believe and trust in Christ, our faith becomes an obedient and submissive faith (cf. Rom 1:5; 16:26; Heb 11:6; Jam 2:26),
and we reject the “self-life” (cf. Mt 16:24). Keeping the foregoing in mind, Paul Tillich was an existentialist philosopher and a neo-orthodox theologian, who eliminated the miraculous from Scripture, and rejected the belief that revelation is an act of God (he claimed it was simply a product of men). For Tillich, there is no God in the sense that He is a Supreme Person, and the Creator and Sustainer of all creation. Since he rejects such a God, he places himself outside the body of Christ and the main stream of historic, orthodox Christianity. Though he offers us an interesting perspective on “faith,” his theology precludes us from embracing his existential understanding of reality. The Bible not only calls us to believe in God and a fallen, sinful universe… but to “believe in a personal God who loves us,” and with whom we can enter into a relationship through faith because of Christ’s redemptive work on the cross.

The Fight of Faith

The apostle Paul was a great fighter… he seemed to be continually fighting against hardships of all kinds (cf. 2 Cor 11:23-33)… his was hardly a peaceful life… the apostle engaged in the unpopular business of turning the world upside down. But physical hardships were not the chief battle in which Paul was involved… far more trying were the battles that he fought against the enemies in his own camp – there were perverted Judaizers in the church misleading believers, and attacking the integrity of Paul’s preaching… there were doctrinal fights with legalizers… fights with paganism… and fights with teachers of who were jealous of his stature. In and through it all “Paul fought the fight of faith.” Down through the centuries there have been men and women all around the world who have fought this fight – Tertullian fought a mighty battle against Marcion… Athanasius fought against the Arians… Augustine fought against Pelagius… Luther fought against kings and princes and popes for the liberty of the people of God… as did John Calvin, John Knox and countless others. Likewise Paul exhorted his young friend Timothy to “fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 6:12). This world is a battle-ground of spiritual forces… it is in this unseen realm where the forces of darkness are fighting the forces of light… and where eternal realities are at stake. As believers in Christ, none of us get some kind of special exemption from this conflict; either we join the fray or we choose to live a sinful life of unfaithfulness and rebellion – embracing the faith involves a fight.

The issue of greatest importance is “the method of our warfare.” The apostle Paul reminds us that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities and powers of evil, and spiritual forces of wickedness” (cf. Eph 6:12). And the weapons we must employ to win this conflict are “spiritual weapons” – the Spirit of God and the armor of God (cf. Jn 15:5; Eph 6:10-18; Gal 5:16). Spiritual war is a “battle of faith” and must be fought with the weapon of “divine truth;” either we trust in the promises of God and prevail, or we fail to trust in His promises and are defeated. The problem with most Christians is that they shrink from the fight when they see conflict coming, and look for some way to avoid it… such believers are continually harassed with their doubts, and constantly troubled with forebodings.

Faith is the mightiest of all weapons, because it employs God. When our spirits are armed with faith, we may go confidently into any battle and expect to win, and know before we fight that victory is ours because GOD is at work. We may face our adversary with calm confidence, knowing that “He who is in us is greater than he who is in the world” (cf. 1 Jn 4:4). The central matter of faith is the object of faith, it trusts in GOD – not one’s faith or one’s self, but GOD.
Most of us have confidence in God's ability (that's not the problem for most believers), so it is not His ability that we doubt… the only question that confronts us is whether or not God will use that power to conquer our enemies, and how long He will take to do so (if indeed He does). Most of us are well aware of God's promises, but when it comes time to "directly apply those promises" to the situations and circumstances in which we find ourselves, it is then that our faith most often fails. We question whether God will really help us and make good His word to us. It was with just such questions the psalmists reflected upon and asked over & over again:

- Why, O Lord, dost Thou hide Thyself in times of trouble? (Ps 10:1)
- How long, O Lord, wilt Thou forget me forever? (Ps 13:1)
- Preserve me, O God, for I take refuge in Thee. (Ps 16:1)
- My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me? (Ps 22:1)
- To Thee, O Lord, I call; my rock, do not be deaf to me. (Ps 28:1)
- Give ear to my prayer, O God; and do not hide Thyself from me. (Ps 55:1)
- O God, hasten to deliver me; O Lord, hasten to my help. (Ps 70:1)
- O God, do not remain quiet; do not be silent; do not be still. (Ps 83:1)
- Incline Thine ear, O Lord, and answer me; for I am afflicted and needy. (Ps 86:1)
- Hear my prayer, O Lord! Let my cry for help come to Thee. (Ps 102:1)

It is with just such words that you and I as believers cry out to the Lord. Obviously, when conflicts rage in our lives, there is a strong likelihood that we will experience a high level of angst in our soul and a desperate desire to be delivered from it. When we experience severe setbacks in life (terminal illness, loss of a job, or the death of a loved one), anxiety and doubts begin to flood our souls (that's the norm), and that's where faith is challenged and questioned. Why is my world falling apart? Where is God? What have I done to deserve this? Why is He letting all these things happen to me? Does He really love me? or have I just been fooling myself? Those are questions every believer wrestles with when his or her world becomes dark.

**Fighting “the fight of faith” is a never-ending battle in this life…** we don't reach a climax in this war where the gates of hell are finally destroyed, and we finally overcome the incessant evil in our hearts. The ongoing temptations in our areas of weakness can be very disturbing and discouraging and perplexing to us, because we feel we should be making far more progress in overcoming them; after all, aren't we suppose to ultimately win these battles in life? Yes & No. Scripture tells us that our old self (our flesh) is in a constant state of "being corrupted" (cf. Eph 4: 22); that is, it is getting worse & worse, not better & better, as we would like to think. The present tense of that verb reveals that **this internal process of disintegration is continuous** – your own experience with it should attest to that fact… your flesh is far more sinful today than it was when you were ten years old; the reality is, it is going to continue to increasingly reveal its corruptness in your mind and heart as you traverse life’s journey of faith (1Cor 17:9). The theological construct of faith I understood as a young boy back in the 1950s knew nothing of this – I simply understood that “we all make mistakes every now and then” (which is wrong, we all stumble and make mistakes all the time), and that “God doesn’t love bad little boys” (which is also wrong, God loves us with an everlasting love)… if you take those two constructs of faith, you come up with something known as “perfectionism or legalism” (losing propositions!). In case this tenant of faith is somewhat foreign to you, **it is this internal sinful reality that inhabits our soul that God calls us to live with** – therefore Paul writes, **we are to forsake the old unregenerate life** (cf. Eph 4:22; Col 3:8;
Knowing that these particular problems will never be quieted in our soul, ought to help give us the resolve to aggressively fight them with a battle plan... obviously, having significant weaknesses is very humbling... it not only involves making us aware of our deficient nature, but our absolute need of fully depending on Christ that we might not fall (cf. Jn 15:5). The perfectionist in life has a very difficult time accepting his deficiencies... the truth of the matter is, they are not easy for any of us to accept. Perhaps the following metaphor will help give perspective to it — imagine being in a very competitive basketball league, where your daily works out & practices are long & intense, then on game day you play the game — you score 13 points, grab 8 rebounds, make 5 assists, make 2 steals, and turn the ball over 4 times; in addition to that you do a lot of little things wrong, including playing mediocre defense; a part of your problem is that you are overweight, slow, not very strong, and don’t have a good mental understanding of the game. Nevertheless, you don’t go nuts over your performance after the game; it is clear to you that you still have a lot to learn and that you need to get in a lot better shape. Contrast that scenario to a guy who doesn’t go to practice and work out at all... he’s a party boy in terrible shape, yet on game day he’s inserted into the line-up — he not only fails to score one point, make one rebound or get one assist; instead, he turns the ball over 16 times, commits 6 personal fouls, and is ejected from the game after hollering at the ref. Case in point — when you go through all of the practices and work outs, and put forth a reasonable effort, you don’t throw in the towel after the game and become overwhelmed by your mistakes... not at all; instead you show up at practice the next week and work all the harder at trying to improve your game. Conversely, when you fail to show up for practices and work outs, you ought to be embarrassed by your lousy performance, and you should expect to be disciplined by the coach. Point made? Employ all the spiritual disciplines God has put at your disposal to improving your game (His Word, Prayer, Obedience, Worship, Fellowship and Service), and do your best to grow your faith... always remembering that perfection is off the table, because it is ridiculously unreasonable — nobody scores 100 points in a game, grabs 50 rebounds, makes 25 assists, blocks 15 shots, and steals the ball 20 times — we’re not heavenly terrestrials! we’re fallen human beings! and we humbly play the game with a lot of weaknesses! Need help with your game? Read Jeremiah 29:13.

The Struggle of Faith

Many of us were raised in Christian homes where church was an integral part of our lives... and we may have concluded that we believe what we were raised to believe... that means we believe in God, in Jesus and His death and resurrection, and that the Bible is God’s book to us. And now
as grown adults we recognize that our struggle is not with these things… but with “faith” itself. Why? Because faith is more than just believing — it is putting your hand in God’s hand and trusting Him through all the difficulties of life. Why do we struggle? Because life happens… and oftentimes it knocks us down, and rather than giving us a giant bowl of sweet strawberries upon which to munch, it gives us a giant bowl of sour lemons. It is then that we earnestly pray and pour our heart to God… and get no response at all from Him. None. We feel like our prayers and anguish bounce off the ceiling and come right back at us. And then we wonder… where is God in all this? why isn’t He responding to my cries? does He no longer care? why the silence? Our response becomes much like King David’s response [see Psalm 22] — here was a man who was knocked down by life and struggled in his faith just like all other believers. The struggle of faith is a part of every believer’s journey (cf. Gal 2:11-14; 2 Tim 2:13; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8, 10). Akin to the struggle of faith is the presence of “doubt” in our soul — it is when we are besieged with trials and temptations that we question our spiritual integrity and the application of our faith. It is at this point that our theology of thought (i.e., what we think about with regard to our spirituality and the integrity of our faith) weighs heavily on our mind. Though there are unanswered questions in each of our hearts regarding eternal realities, the key to victorious Christian living is not to insist on having answers to all those questions (which is impossible for finite creatures), but to learn to live life accepting those questions, and live admiring the transcendent greatness of our God and Savior. So the problem is not having questions of faith, but letting those unanswered questions become “destructive doubts.” A significant part of your journey of faith, for those of you whose minds are filled with questions, is that of diligently studying an unresolved question, and pursue it until you find an answer that satisfies you intellectually. Discovering satisfactory answers is one of the most exhilarating experiences of the Christian life, and has been declared by many down through the centuries (including myself) to be an incredible faith builder.

As previously mentioned, the new birth introduces a person into “a life of warfare.” That warfare is called “the fight of faith” (cf. 2 Tim 4:7; 1 Tim 6:12); the author of the book of Hebrews calls it “the battle against unbelief” (cf. Heb 3:12) — “Take care brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil unbelieving heart (there is the enemy in spiritual warfare), leading you to fall away from the living God.” Thus, the most important battle of our life is the battle to believe in the living God, and not allow our heart to become an evil heart of unbelief. Those who are truly born of God take the battle seriously, and draw on the power of God to fight it, and win it with persevering faith. “Unbelief is the root of evil and the essence of evil… all of our sinning grows out of unbelief in the living God and what He has said to us in His Word. “Unbelief” is the root of all anxiety. Think of all the different sinful actions and attitudes that come from anxiety — anxiety about finances can give rise to coveting and greed and stealing… anxiety about relationships can make you withdrawn and indifferent and uncaring. So if anxiety could be conquered, a lot of our sins would be overcome. In the Sermon on the Mount the Lord Jesus tells us four times in ten verses (cf. Matt 6:24-34) that we should not be anxious:

- Do not be anxious for your life. (v. 25)
- Which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his life’s span? (v. 27)
- Do not be anxious. (v. 31)
- Do not be anxious about tomorrow. (v. 34)
The presence of “anxiety” is a lack of faith in our Heavenly Father (Mt 6:30). As unbelief gets the upper hand in our hearts and minds (which happens to all of us frequently), one of the results is anxiety. So when the author of Hebrews tells us to, “take heed lest there be in you an evil unbelieving heart” (cf. Heb 3:12), we would all do well to listen. Anxiety is one of the evil conditions of the heart that comes from unbelief. Much anxiety, says the Lord Jesus, comes from “little faith” (cf. Mt 6:30); since none of us are men or women of “great faith,” again, we would do well to listen. Because some believers will struggle with this honest appraisal of the Christian’s condition (that they are not in any way close to being a gloriously perfect human being), they need to recalibrate their spiritual minds with the understanding that the new birth was an introduction into “a life of spiritual warfare.” The good news is, erroneous thinking can be treated successfully by our Great Physician—as you humbly study God’s Word, He will open your heart to understand it, and make it a living reality that governs your life. Note the words of the psalmist David: “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in Thee” (cf. Ps 56:3). It is interesting to note that he does not say “I will never struggle with fear.” So the Bible does not assume that true believers will have no anxieties; rather, it tells us how to fight them when they do strike. As the apostle Peter says, “Cast all your anxieties on the Lord because He cares for you” (cf. 1 Pet 5:7). Therefore when you get splattered with the mud of unbelief (that’s the norm), go to the Lord and get cleaned up through the renewing of your mind. Let God wash you with His Word, that He might clear away the mud of unbelief from your soul. As you immerse yourself in the Word, the Holy Spirit will then cleanse your heart of the sin of unbelief.

The Lord Jesus knows that we live in a world where we have a number of “needs” — He is well aware of what our needs are (cf. Mt 6:25-32). So rather than giving all of our energies to meeting those needs, Jesus tells us to “first seek His kingdom and His righteousness, and He will graciously provide for all our needs” (cf. Mt 6:33). Therefore in everything you do in life, be it at home or work or in the marketplace, put God’s purposes first, and He will provide all you need and more that you might live to the praise of His glory (Jer 40:12; 2 Cor 9:8; Eph 3:20; Phil 4:19). Whether your needs are physical, relational, financial, or whatever, God knows your needs…when you “believe” in His promises, the anxious emotion of those needs will evaporate in the warmth of His care. Thus we battle “unbelief” by the Word of God and the Spirit of God. As the apostle Paul wrote, “Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication [with thanksgiving for what God is doing in your life right now] take your concerns and requests to God, and He will supply your every need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus” (cf. Phil 4:6, 19). Someone rightfully summarized Philippians 4:6 this way: “Be anxious in nothing…prayerful in everything… and thankful for anything,” we can be grateful in all things, knowing that God is continually watching over us and has our interests at heart (cf. Ps 33:18; 34:15; Prv 5:21; Jer 1:12). We must all learn to rest in the wonderful promises of God: “Thou hast enclosed us from behind and before, and has laid His hand upon us” (cf. Ps 139:5) – says David, “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is too high, I cannot attain to it” (cf. Ps 139:6). “So the Lord goes ahead of you in all of life; He is always with you; He will never fail you or forsake you, therefore do not fear or be dismayed” (cf. Deut 31:8; Rom 8:31; Heb 13:5). Beloved, when trials and anxiety beset you, take up the book of God and ask the Holy Spirit to help you, and lay hold of the promises of God, and battle on. Remember the insightful words of Solomon to his sons — “The horse is prepared for the day of battle, but victory belongs to the Lord” (Prv 21:31); as men, we often take elaborate measures to insure success (whether it be in war, business or the home), but victory ultimately comes from the Lord alone (cf. Ps 20:7). John Piper, the chancellor of Bethlehem
College and Seminary, enumerates a number of practical ways that we can battle the unbelief of anxiety with God’s promises —

- When we are anxious about some risky new venture or meeting (cf. Is 41:10).
- When we are anxious about our ministry being useless and empty (cf. Is 55:11).
- When we are anxious about being too weak to do our work (cf. Deut 33:25; 2 Cor 12:9).
- When we are anxious about decisions we have to make about the future (cf. Ps 32:8).
- When we are anxious about facing opponents (cf. Rom 8:31).
- When we are anxious about pain and suffering (cf. 2 Cor 1:3-4; Phil 3:10; Heb 12:1-7, 11).
- When we are anxious about battling infirmities and getting old (cf. Is 46:4).
- When we are anxious about succumbing to temptation (cf. Heb 2:18; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10; 2:1).
- When we are anxious about difficult trials and problems (cf. 1 Cor 10:13; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12).
- When we are anxious about dying (cf. Rom 14:8-9).
- When we are anxious that we might fall away from God (cf. Phil 1:6; 1 Th 5:23-24; Heb 7:25).

**Faith and Unbelief are both resident in the believer’s heart.** When Jesus was approached by a man whose son was possessed by an evil spirit, the man cried out to Him saying, “Take pity on us and help us!” And Jesus responded, “All things are possible to him who believes.” Immediately the boy’s father cried out, “I do believe; help my unbelief!” (cf. Mk 9:17-25)… and the Lord delivered the boy. The truth of the matter is faith and unbelief are both close to the soul of man — when he is in the dark, gleams of light will shine in his soul… and when he is in the light, vapors of darkness will roll in to perplex and tempt him. Whenever faith and unbelief meet in an earnest heart there will be “war” — the questions raised by faith and unbelief will put pressure upon one’s whole nature, and will not be silenced until they are settled one way or the other. **The direction of one’s heart will determine which way the war will go.** Though we cannot change the tide of the roaring seas upon which our little boat floats, we can employ the sails and the helm, and let God help us navigate through the storm and ultimately calm the waters themselves (cf. Ps 37:3-5; 37:23-24; 40:2; 66:9; Prv 3:5-6; 16:9). Therefore let us seek to have:

- **A sense of Reverence:** proportioned to the momentous nature of the issue at stake; the weight of one’s soul must be felt if we are to decide rightly on its interests.

- **A sense of Need:** an awareness of one’s depletion, and caring about the health of the soul, will cause us to cry out to God for His healing touch.

- **A sense of Sinfulness:** a conviction of the gulf between what we should be and what we really are. The way to God begins in what is most profound in our own souls, and when God leads us to discover our deficiencies, there is little doubt how the war will go.

**The way to be sure of the victory of faith is to call out to God for His help.** Full deliverance from doubt and sin is only to be procured by personal contact with our Savior. So long as we turn our back on Him, we live a self-centered life that is oriented toward the dark… but as soon as we look to Him, we are enlightened and experience the God-life. For those who fear they may have lost their faith, or fear they are losing it, let them deplore the loss and cry toward that part of the heavens where they once felt the light were shining on them, and an answer will shortly thereafter arrive. Christ is present, whether you see Him or not; and He will hear your prayer, even though it may possess a measure of doubt — even the prayer of a contrite, doubting

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heart finds mercy in Christ — for He stretches out His hand of help to the feeblest. God's choicest servants are strengthened in just such fashion when they implore the throne… and the faint of heart themselves are empowered when they humbly cry out to Him (cf. Heb 2:18; 4:15-16; 1 Jn 2:1). To those who are without strength and slight of faith, to them He will increase their strength until it issues in the full confidence of perfect (i.e., mature) faith; that is, a faith that has learned to trust through all of the ups and downs of life.

**The Problem of Little Faith**

Why do so many people struggle with a lack of faith? The apostle Paul exhorts us to “walk by faith and not by sight” (cf. 2 Cor 5:7) — what we see here is a contrast between truth and perception; that is, what we know and believe to be true, as opposed to what we perceive to be true. The main reason why so many Christians struggle with a lack of faith is that they follow their perceptions of what is true rather than what they know to be true. From my perspective, probably the number one erroneous perception believers have is this: they genuinely believe (or want to believe) that if they “diligently work hard at making life work for themselves,” that life should pretty much be a pleasant, enjoyable experience. After all, proverbial wisdom maintains that we should all pretty much reap what we sow in life. Sounds reasonable — even biblical — but that’s not exactly how life works, and therein is the rub (one of the complexities of life). Obviously, each of us would have a little different idea of “making life work for ourselves.” The reality is, because our efforts haven’t resulted in “making this life a more pleasant little utopia for us,” we feel cheated and disillusioned, and wonder why things didn’t work out as we thought they would; we feel like we merited a better hand than the one we were dealt (cf. Ps 73:1-5, 13-17)… that God didn’t respond like we thought He would; hence, our faith seems to be mysteriously deficient and disappointing. By the way, “making life work for ourselves” is the same philosophy by which the world lives; the only difference is we incorporate God into our plan. However, since we make “ourselves” the center of our own little world (just like unbelievers do), it is a “self-oriented philosophy” — which is simply the reality of fleshly thinking. The truth of the matter is, God did not save us and leave us here on this planet to give us a little paradise on earth or let us make an enjoyable life for ourselves — He saved us to live a life of dying to self (not living for our self), taking up our cross, following Christ (Mt 16:24-25), and seeking His kingdom and His righteousness (Mt 6:33)… and if we do, He will make sure we have everything we need in life (Mt 6:33). I am well aware the foregoing concept might be troubling to some of you, because it seems to go against the very fabric of what it means to be a contented, happy human being — but such a life is not in agreement with the economy under which God has designed us to live; it is actually contrary to that life. The primary characteristics of “the redeemed life” are spiritual warfare, dying to self, trials, tribulation, loving and serving others — that is simply the sober reality of what it means to live righteously in this fallen world (cf. Jn 16:33). When sin came into the human family, we essentially kissed a happy utopia on this planet goodbye — that blissful life is now “our future heavenly destiny…” Life here and now is a quest for faith to overcome our inner sinfulness, the world and Satan… and to humbly walk in righteousness with God and become more conformed to the image of His Son (cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 4:19; 2 Pet 3:18). Therefore to insist that our fleshly perceptions be the standard bearer in our life, is to choose a life that simply does not coincide with divine truth… it is not like God has given us a little set of rules whereby we can make life work for ourselves — sadly, that seems to be a common practical outworking of many peoples faith; they insist the “reap what
As mentioned earlier in this study, faith is not a leap in the dark (fideism), or belief without evidence (that's the skeptics definition of faith)... neither is faith belief without proof or belief despite the evidence, rather it is a complete trust or confidence in someone or something, and such trust or confidence is built up over time as it is proven to be true and faithful time and time again. Christianity is based on faith in God and in His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. God has provided us with His Word, as a testimony of His faithfulness to His people all throughout history. In its bare essentials, Christianity is faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Despite the conclusive arguments of Scripture, many Christians still struggle with believing the biblical account. Why is that? Because it does not match up with their perception of reality, and what they would like it to be -- so in that regard, their flesh dominates the discourse in their minds. Though they believe that Jesus was a real person, and that He died by crucifixion, they sometimes question whether or not that has really made them righteous before God; because they don't see any evidence of that righteousness in their lives (they insist on empirical evidence). Due to the fact they can't "perceive" such a reality (due to the presence of indwelling sin), they struggle with a lack of faith -- their flesh-driven perception of reality is simply too dominant in their thinking; thus, their lives often don't reflect the fact that they really believe what they claim to believe.

The problem with weak faith is that it tends to focus on "problems." Interestingly enough, of all the disciples in the boat that morning when Jesus came walking to them on the water, "only Peter was willing to exercise his faith" (Mt 14:22-33). His impulsive request led him to experience an incredible demonstration of God’s power... one in which the other disciples must have been astonished. When Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus, however, it wasn't long until he started to sink because he took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the high waves around him; obviously, his faith wavered when he felt threatened by the waves. Though we may not walk on water, we all walk through tough situations in life... and when we focus on the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and not Jesus, we too stumble and sink. One of the keys to living with faith is to keep our eyes on Jesus, rather than our circumstances and our inadequacies (Heb 12:1-2). Although we often start out with good intentions, sometimes our faith simply falters, but that doesn't necessarily mean we have failed. When Peter's faith faltered, he reached out to Christ (the only one who could help him)... though he was afraid, he still looked to Christ... even in his incredibly dire moment, he cried out to Christ... when he came to the end of himself, and all seemed lost, he cried out to Christ... though his circumstances overwhelmed him, yet the little amount of faith he did have he directed to the only One who could rescue him; despite his failure to fully trust the Lord, when he came to the end of himself, he turned to the only One who could help him; so even his seemingly inconsequential faith worked! — is that a significant reality in your mind? Therefore, when you are apprehensive about the troubles in which you find yourself, and start questioning God's presence or even His ability to help, when you come to the end of you, like Peter, you too will turn to Him for help; that is simply the work of the Holy Spirit in your life (cf. Ps 23:1-3; 32:8; 48:14; 138:8; 139:1-12; Jn 6:39; Phil 1:6; 1 Th 5:24). The truth is, we are all a people of "little faith" (not big faith)... the wonder of our faith, as little and feeble as it may be, is that "it is faith in a great God." The problem with most of us as believers is that we focus far too much on our faith and not nearly enough on the object of our faith (God Almighty!). What's the application here? When we come to the end of ourselves as believers
(despite the rut in which we find ourselves), after exhausting all of our options, ultimately we will turn back to God; again, that is simply the result of God working in our lives; He knows our weak, feeble condition, and He will not let us be destroyed! Would to God that believers truly believe that God loves them that much! Read Psalm 136. It is the work of Satan to the contrary with which all of us struggle... the good news is, “God loves us with an everlasting love!”

The main reason Christians struggle with their faith, is that they don't truly know the God in whom they profess to have faith. Consider the fact that in our daily lives we don't exercise complete trust in strangers... the more intimately we know someone, and the more time we have had to see them “in action,” the more likely we are to believe what they say. So, if God is essentially a stranger to us, we are less likely to believe what He has said in His Word... especially when it comes to matters that are inconsistent with our perceptions. The only cure for this serious disparity in our thinking, is to spend more time in God’s Word getting to know Him. Beloved, Christianity is not just a theological collection of truths... first and foremost it is “a relationship with the living God” (not just an abstract, forensic, legal identity with Him)... the closer one grows in relationship to someone, the more he trusts that person and believes in him. If we are going to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (cf. 2 Pet 3:18), we must spend a significant amount of time with Him, and get to know Him better... and that means living in His presence daily, and dialoguing with Him regarding all the issues of life that seem perplexing and contrary to our perceptions. In addition to that we must share our hearts concerns with Him, and carefully reflect upon the answers that He gives to us. The word “knowledge” in 2 Peter 3:18, is built upon the Greek term ginosko – when it is applied to “knowing someone,” it means to know that person relationally, experientially, and progressively — to know them “relationally” is to know them personally as a friend (not just someone you have read about)... to know them “experientially” is to know them more intimately because you have experienced life with them... and to know them “progressively” is to have grown in your relationship with them over a period of time (obviously, you know them better now than you did ten years ago). This is the way we are to “know” Christ, and knowing Him in such fashion requires that we spend a lot of time together (like a husband & wife); remember, we are the “bride” of Christ! (cf. Rev 19:7-8; Eph 5:23, 32). Is it any wonder why a Christian would struggle with his faith if he hardly ever spends any quality time with Christ? Let me quote Peter's words in this context: “Long for the pure milk of the Word that you might grow with respect to your salvation” — since our salvation is CHRIST, the only way that we can grow intimately with Him is to feed upon His Word (cf. 1 Pet 2:2; again cf. 2 Pet 3:18) — for some strange reason we as Christians have a tendency to separate God (Christ) from His Word, as if they are two distinct realities, when in fact they are one... therefore the Word of God is “alive” (cf. Heb 4:12) – Jesus is the Word (cf. Jn 1:1, 14; 1 Pet 1:23; 1 Jn 1:1; Rev 19:13), and He wants to “dine” with you! (cf. Rev 3:20).

The world, the flesh, and the devil are the believer's three distracters. The “world” refers to the accepted “wisdom” of the unbelieving world and the culture in which we find ourselves; contextually in our society that dominant worldview is naturalism, materialism, skepticism, and atheism. The “flesh” consists of our sinful nature (our sin disposition) that still lives within us, and with which we struggle on a daily basis. For a detailed study of the flesh, see a study I did called “The Game Changer!” You can find it on my website under the “additional studies” link; it’s located at: www.TheTransformedSoul.com The “devil” refers to Satan and his minions (evil spirits — spiritual forces of darkness & wickedness in heavenly places); they seek to excite and entice us thru the world and our fleshly senses. It is by faith that we overcome these three
enemies, and we grow in our faith through the study of the Word (cf. Rom 10:17), and applying it daily in our lives; sadly, many churches spend their energies & resources on societal issues, and fail to adequately feed the sheep God has entrusted to their care. We need to continually keep in mind Paul’s exhortation to “walk by faith rather than sight” (cf. 2 Cor 5:7), and being mindful that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (cf. Heb 11:6). Think of it for a moment — how can one possibly think that he is “pleasing God” when he “does not believe Him”? If you were to tell your wife that “you do not believe her,” how do you think she would feel (especially if she is being truthful with you)? Would she not be displeased with your lack of trust in her? Thus the issue is this: are you truly interested in doing that which is pleasing to God? believing Him? or simply living according to your fleshly perceptions? When we treat God’s Word as an endearing gift to us, that is extremely pleasing to the Lord… conversely, when we treat it with indifference and skepticism, obviously that does not please Him. Furthermore, it is only when we place our trust in God’s Word (i.e., what God has to say to us), rather than in our perceptions, that we experience a radical transformation in our lives; because the lifestyle of the flesh and the lifestyle of the Spirit are completely contrary to each other (cf. Mt 6:24; Gal 5:16-17). When the believer lives according to the flesh (“his perceptions”), he lets a number of negative, internal, fleshly deductions control his thinking. Following are a few examples:

- I don’t feel forgiven
- I don’t feel blessed
- I don’t feel encouraged
- I don’t feel a deep abiding peace
- I don’t feel God really loves me
- I feel abandoned by God
- I feel hopeless and discouraged
- I feel nothing but turmoil in my life
- I don’t feel forgiven
- I feel like life is over for me
- I feel nothing but turmoil in my life
- I feel hopeless and discouraged
- I feel abandoned by God
- I feel like life is over for me

It is just such “feelings” that govern the thinking of so many believers. It is important for us to remind ourselves that the dynamic of the flesh is “feeling,” and the dynamic of the Spirit is “faith” — the two are often in conflict and contraposition to each other. It is our feelings that often cause us to run amuck. The brother of Jesus, James, tells us in his letter that “each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own desires (passions, feelings, lusts)… it is when we fail to expel those lustful feelings, that they conceive and give birth to sin” (cf. Jas 1:14-15). So sin comes from within, from our unregenerate nature (our unredeemed humanness, our flesh) — since we all have vile thoughts that are constantly waging war in our soul and urging us in a sinful direction, we must by faith counter those thoughts with godly thoughts (read Phil 4:8); which amounts to displacing sinful thoughts with righteous thoughts (thoughts that are of divine origin; thoughts that are of a transforming nature). If we fail to quickly turn in a godly direction with our thinking when beset with sinful thoughts, we will nurture those sinful desires and a hideous baby named Sin will be born (read 2 Samuel 11). The old maxim holds true even in the spiritual realm: “if you play with fire, you are going to get burned,” conversely, if you entertain sinful thoughts, you are going to sin (no matter how steeped and versed you are in your faith) — that is a “certain reality.” As sinful creatures, we simply don’t have the wherewithal in us to consider Satan’s propositions and not sin; any contrary thinking to that reality is spiritual delusion. That’s why the apostle Paul exhorts us to “take every thought captive to the obedience of
This is when we let “our sinful perceptions” be prominent in our thinking… that is, when we let our sinful feelings dictate reality in our minds, that we question the integrity of God’s Word (ultimate reality) and His love for us. Obviously, the only way to counter those thoughts is to prayerfully delve into the Word, and experience a transformation in our thinking (cf. Rom 12:2; Eph 4:22-24; 5:17; Col 1:9; 1 Pet 2:2); keep in mind, “God is able to make all grace abound to you” (2 Cor 9:8). Beloved, do not be deceived, the righteous are to live “by faith” (cf. Rom 1:17; Heb 10:38); should you reject the word of truth, you will reap accordingly (cf. Gal 6:7-9). The reality is, none of us as human beings like living a life of faith… we would all prefer to walk by sight, but that is not the economy under which God has called us to live (cf. 2 Cor 5:7).

Conversely, we would all rather do what comes “natural” to us, which would make for a far easier and less challenging life—it is precisely this issue that conflicts in so many believers minds; they somehow have come to the conclusion that “the God-life should be natural to them as believers,” and not such a difficult challenge; thus they often question their faith. Though the “God-life” is a life that is “somewhat natural” to us when we are experiencing “God-consciousness” (i.e., when we are walking with Him), clearly that is not the “consistent norm” for any of us believers; we all suffer from a lot of variance and deviation in the Christian life because we all inhabit sinful flesh.

The Battle of Life

There is a warfare in which all of us are to be engaged—the battle of life—and as the renowned nineteenth century British pastor, Charles Spurgeon, said in a sermon with that title, the soldier of Christ is to struggle with himself. “My own experience,” said Spurgeon, “is a daily struggle with myself; [though I wish] I could find in me something friendly to grace, I have searched my nature [through and through] and have found everything in rebellion against God. At one time comes the torpor of ‘sloth’… at another the quickness of ‘passion’… and yet another time we are troubled with ‘conceit’ (the devilish whisper).” Thus against our inner selves we must perpetually struggle. Unless we deny ourselves (Mt 16:24) and lay violent hands upon the impulses of our nature (cf. 1 Cor 9:27), we shall never come to the place where the crowns are distributed to the conquerors. It is at this point that another foe confronts us, the strongest of all—the devil. As Spurgeon says, he knows how to attack us in our sore points… he discerns our weakness… and he is at no loss for cunning devices. He knows how to fawn upon us and flatter us at one moment… and how to cast fiery darts at us the next, telling us that we are castaways. Furthermore, he can quote Scripture for his own purposes. Says Spurgeon, “Think not that this is an argument to be quickly terminated… this is a continuous fight… one in which every man and woman who enlists for Christ will have to wrestle till their bones shall sleep in the tomb. If thou art defeated one day, thou must overcome the next. [The key] is to always be watchful, always expecting temptation, and ready to resist it…. to fight and fight on is our vocation.”

This war is not to be won without pain or cost, says Spurgeon. In the following three paragraphs Spurgeon expands upon how to win this war. “If a man shall get to heaven, what a charge of patience he will be at… how he must bear and forbear… how he must put up with one sharp difficulty after another. If any man will get to heaven, what an amount of perseverance he will require to hold on and to hold out. What hours of prayer and wrestling with God for a blessing, and what striving with himself to overcome sinful propensities. In any man will get to heaven, what a charge of watchfulness he will be at… how he must guard the avenues of his being, and to keep his thoughts pure from guile. There cannot be much slumber for a man who would get
the eternal crown. If any man will get to heaven, what fresh supplies of zeal he will need… for he shall not drift into heaven without a conflict or a care. We must cut and hack and hew with intense energy, for the Savior says, ‘The kingdom of heaven suffereth violence and the violent take it by storm.’ If any man will get to heaven, what a charge of strength he will require, for he has to deal with potent foes. And what a charge of wisdom he will be put to the expense of, for he has to stand against the craftiness of evil creatures, and overcome one who is wiser than the ancients, Satan, the arch-tempter.” Says Spurgeon, “I beseech you to consider the greatness of the charge of this warfare; all the path of life is new to you, unmapped, untrodden, unanticipated. There is ‘no royal road’ to heaven, [only] the King’s highway leads there. There is no easy road skillfully leveled. The labor is too exhaustive, the obstructions are too numerous, the difficulties are too serious, unless God Himself come to our help. You see, you cannot go this warfare in your own strength… so do not try it… do not for a moment contemplate it… if you do, you will rue it. You must ‘rely on God’ to help you… and it is ‘by faith’ that you yield yourself to Christ, and that you desire to live as a follower of Jesus.”

Certainly you may reckon upon “God’s watchful providence.” Said Spurgeon, “You little know how easy the Almighty can make a path which otherwise would have been difficult and dangerous. Follow God’s leading and you shall never lack for His comfort. No man shall be a loser in the long run by loving and serving God. If thou be willing and obedient, trusting thyself with Christ, thou shalt find those [divine] wheels of Providence revolve for thy welfare… all things shall work together for your good (cf. Rom 8:28). Now I am not pretending that piety will procure wealth, but you are none the less likely to prosper in business for being [a faithful servant of the Lord Jesus]. I am not going to predict that you shall be without sickness, much less without temptation, ‘for whom the Lord loves He chastens, and scourges every son whom He receives’ (Heb 12:6), but sure I am of this, that if you put your trust in God and do right, no temporal circumstances shall ever happen to you which shall not be for your eternal good… in the short space of time you are to live here, you may reckon upon the gigantic wheels of Providence as your helpers, and have the Lord Jesus Christ to help you. Though sin will harass you, sin shall not reign over you… and though you struggle afoot, Jesus Christ will always be present to revive you with His precious blood, and sprinkle your hearts from an evil conscience… Christ is our very present help in time of trouble (cf. Ps 46:1). Believe this and thou shalt prove it true.

He who is a soldier of the cross shall have the divine power of the Holy Spirit to help him. Says Spurgeon, “I have sometimes thought, when some strong passion has been raging within my soul – How can I ever overcome it? The will was good, but the flesh was weak. But as soon as the Spirit of God has moved on me the flesh has given way. There is nothing in human nature too obdurate for the Lord to overcome… though it be beyond your own power to grapple with, when the Holy Spirit puts forth His irresistible power, He can smite the dragons of our iniquities in pieces. He that broke Egypt in pieces can vanquish our sins with His judgments and grace, and He can bring the new nature up out of bondage into joyous liberty. Go to the Eternal Spirit and thy worst corruptions shall be overthrown. Conduct your warfare trusting in the blessed God of heaven… Beware of the wisdom of indifference and the dignity of self-reliance. He that relies on his own wits will soon grovel in the mire… ‘let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall’ (cf. 1 Cor 10:12). A better subject is the dignity of reliance upon God and the importance of prayer, for if we are to win this battle of our life, it can only be by taking in our charge-bill to the great Paymaster, and asking Him to discharge the charges of this war. Furthermore, we must consider the necessity of holiness and prove the power of faith – trusting not only in what Christ
Overcoming Temptation by Faith

The story of Jacob and his twelve sons, particularly the one named Joseph, provides us with a wonderful backdrop on this matter of "faith that overcomes." Most of you will recall the story of how Joseph was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers — remember, his father Jacob had been tricked into marrying the oldest daughter of Laban, "Leah" (because of the deceit of her father), before Jacob was finally given his bride of choice, "Rachel" (cf. Gen 29:16-23). Leah bore Jacob six sons (cf. Gen 29:32-25; 30:17-20), but Joseph was the oldest son of Rachel (Gen 30:22-25) — "the son of Jacob's old age, whom he loved more than all his other sons" (cf. Gen 37:3), which ultimately prompted the jealousy of his brothers. Though Joseph was enslaved in Egypt at the young age of just seventeen, nevertheless he became a "man of faith" despite all the difficult circumstances in his life. Obviously, there was something incredibly unique about Joseph that distinguished him from his brothers, and set him apart even as a slave in Egypt (cf. Gen 39:41); he exercised a faith that pursued the Lord to such an extent that temptation had little room to enter.

Joseph had every reason and opportunity to be embittered over his situation, yet he didn't let bitterness rule in his heart. The truth is, faith creates a resistance against bitterness. When you think of Joseph, you might wonder just how deep his faith really was and what he believed. Consider all that Joseph's father must have told him about the God of his fathers — how God led Abraham... how He tested Abraham... how Isaac (his grandfather) found Rebekah... how Jacob met his (Joseph's) mother Rachel... how he (Jacob) wrestled with the angel... how he dreamed about a ladder that went all the way up to heaven... and the great promises of God for this land and posterity. So faith builds in us a divine awareness and a perspective on life that transcends the works of men... and opens our eyes to God's sovereign work in directing our lives.

Joseph rejected a life of just passively coasting along. Coasting can only be done when you are going downhill; you can't coast your way up a mountain. The temptation to coast is really the temptation to give up and take whatever the easiest path might be. The apostle Paul said that "tribulation produces perseverance, which produces character, which produces hope" (cf. Rom 5:1-3). Perseverance is a construct of "faith." Joseph had faith that God was using tribulation to produce perseverance in his life — here he was, taken into slavery at the age of 17... thrown into prison at the age of 28... and stands before Pharaoh at the age of 30 (cf. Gen 41:46). Consider the following: How many times do you think he was tempted to give up, but didn't? One can only attribute Joseph's steadfastness of faith to his refusal to cave in to his circumstances — he lived by faith and not by sight. It is our faith in Christ that enables us to be resistant to the very exasperations that cause feelings of drifting & futility. Such are the very doors that temptation will often use to sway us from the truth. Beloved, carefully reflect about those truths.

Perhaps a more detailed description of "temptation" is appropriate at this point. The issue of temptation is first introduced to us in the Garden of Eden — Satan sows the seeds of...
doubt, unbelief and rebellion in Eve’s heart… she is made to feel that God was withholding a legitimate objective good from her… she saw that the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a “delight” to her eyes, and that it was “desirable” to make her wise (Gen 3:1-6)… ultimately, that first temptation in the human family was a matter of “believing a lie & not believing God.” Adam and Eve opted for the satisfaction of desire rather than obedience to the commandment of God – the one manner of life says, “I shall live according to my feelings; the other says, “I shall live as God says.” So there is the “feeling-oriented life” of self-centeredness (sin), and the “commandment-oriented life” of God-centeredness (holiness) – these two ways are diametrically opposed to each other (cf. Gal 5:17); one manner of life sides with Satan, the other with God. Enticement to rebel against God is the work of Satan (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9; Rev 2:9; 1 Th 3:5)… and since the “fall” he is aided by the deceptive power of “lust” (sinful desire) in our fallen nature (cf. Jam 1: 14-15). Jesus taught His disciples to pray that they not be led into temptation, and that they “be delivered from the evil one” (Mt 6:13); obviously, Satan is an evil presence in our world – “he is prowling about like a roaring lion seeking someone to devour” (1 Pet 5:8); the good news is, Scripture tells us that “the Lord knows how to rescue godly men from temptation” (cf. 2 Pet 2:9; Heb 2:18). Though temptation is a very disconcerting issue to the believer; it is one thing to suffer from it from without (Satan and the world), it is quite another to suffer from it from within (i.e., our sin disposition; our flesh). There is something within us that “desperately wants to sin” (our flesh; cf. Rom 7:18; Gal 5:17) – be it being anxious, frustrated, angry, discouraged, depressed, proud, selfish, or seekers of pleasure; and its message to our soul in the midst of temptation can be very convincing, hence we often capitulate and fall. The flesh argues vigorously with the Spirit, and in doing so seeks to convince us of the integrity of its position. The truth is, we don’t sin because we are forced to… we sin because we want to – that is, our flesh wants to. Beloved, if we did not want to sin, we wouldn’t sin (think about that). The issue is really pretty clear: if we feed upon the arguments of the flesh and the devil, we will fall – we simply do not have the capacity to entertain sin and not fall: that, and my friend, is why we all sin so much. Our flesh is a powerful presence in our lives; you mess with it and you are going down! to think otherwise is to simply be delusionally conflicted in your mind. Therefore, either you take immediate action and turn from temptation, or you will fall (if not in action, at least in thought); so either you redirect your thinking or you will give birth to a little child named “SIN” (cf. Jam 1:15; 2 Cor 10:5; Phil 4:6-9).

Joseph rejected the overtures of Potiphar’s wife. When Joseph was a slave, the Pharaoh of Egypt was a man named Potiphar – his wife was strongly attracted to Joseph; she had eyes for him and began to entice him in her direction… suggestively at first, but more and more aggressively as time went on; the lust of the eyes grew into an intense lust of the flesh until it exploded in her soul. So what was it that enabled Joseph to resist the fuel of passion? Though he tried to reason with her that such action would be a betrayal of Potiphar’s trust… more importantly, he knew it would be “a great evil and sin against God” (cf. Gen 39:9). Joseph knew that sin was not just a wrong action toward others, but that it is primarily a wrong action against God (cf. Ps 51:4). Calling sin for what it is, will move you from reasoning about it to repenting of it. Joseph had a theology that informed and drove his faith… and his faith is what directed his decision. But Potiphar’s wife had no such theology, she had no faith, she just continually approached Joseph until her passivity was gone, and worked at creating that perfect moment where they would be alone together in the house… and Joseph fled leaving his outer coat behind. Like all of us, he had a temptation against faith. Several times in Scripture we are told that “the Lord was with Joseph” (cf. Gen 39:2, 3, 21, 23). By the way, “the temptation resistant faith of Joseph” is what God
used to save his life, because Potiphar would surely have put him to death if he had not suspected that all was not as it seemed. A temptation resistant faith will evidence itself because God honors and blesses that which glorifies Him. The wise believer understands his weaknesses and those areas where he is most prone to fall — as such, he distances himself from those issues that are most troubling to him (cf. Prov 5:8); he redirects his thinking when the anxieties of his flesh make themselves evident in his mind (cf. Phil 4:8; 1 Pet 4:7); and he seeks God’s help when the presence of evil manifests itself in his heart (cf. Mt 6:13; 26:41; Phil 4:6-7). It’s important to remember that a temptation resistant faith does not mean a trouble free life… on the contrary, Scripture is full of personal examples of God using “trials & troubles” to build faith in the believer’s life. Beloved, because you are one of God’s children, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness (cf. 1 Tim 4:7)... take up the armor of faith that you might walk in righteousness (cf. Eph 4:23ff; 6:10-18)... and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ that you might resist evil in all its forms (cf. Eph 3:16; 4:13-16; 1 Pet 2:2; 5:8-9; 2 Pet 3:18).

Again, if you are looking for an easy way to overcome trials and temptation — there is none! That’s why it is called “spiritual warfare,” and as an old Army veteran, let me assure you “war is no walk in the park!” (my hearing is seriously impaired today simply because of the training exercises I went through in preparation for the Vietnam war back in the 1960s; for the record, I am no war hero — I was injured in maneuvers during infantry training and was on crutches for about four months, so I was never put in combat). By the way, Scripture refers to spiritual conflict not only as “war” (cf. Rom 7:23; 2 Cor 10:3-4; Jam 4:1; 1 Pet 2:11), but as “an intense fight, conflict or striving;” it’s the Greek word agonizomal from which we get our English word “agonize” (cf. 1 Tim 1:18; 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:4), so spiritual warfare is both vexing and distressing... spiritual conflict is also referred to as a “struggle” (cf. Eph 6:12), and as something that we are to “resist” (cf. Eph 6:13; Jam 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9) and “stand firm against” (cf. 1 Cor 16:13; Eph 6:11). Some of the deplorable preaching on this subject is very disconcerting to me, because it is injurious to a believer’s faith — faith is only efficacious when it is exercised “in truth;” we have not been given the freedom to bend the rules and still win the war! With that said, overcoming temptation and the evil one isn't simply a matter of “saying some magic mantra” and bingo! experience instant deliverance! If you are one such preacher, either preach the unadulterated truth on this subject or get out of the pulpit, because such teaching is completely contrary to what Scripture teaches. My friend, we don’t preach what “we” think, we preach what “God” thinks… we don’t preach what men say, we preach what God says… we don’t preach what we want to be true, we preach what is true… likewise, we don’t believe what we want to believe, we believe what Scripture teaches. Furthermore, the reality is this: in combat we are going to suffer some painful injuries, but the good news is, in spite of humbly losing a number of battles in our walk through life, we are ultimately going to win the war! Dr. Jay Adams, one of the leading architects of Christian counseling in America in the twentieth-century, and the author of “The Christian Counselor’s Manual” (Baker Book House, 1979, p.110), had this to say on the subject of repentance: “One may not repent merely for relief... he must repent because he has sinned against God.”

In 1957, the renowned Presbyterian bible expositor, Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895-1960), preached a sermon entitled “Temptation and How to Meet It.” In that sermon he shared three ways to defeat the temptations of the flesh, the devil, and the world — those are the three categories of temptation as outlined in Scripture (cf. Mt 4:1-11; Rom 7:18; 1 Pet 5:8; 1 Jn 2:16). Contrary to what some believers think, “deliverance” isn’t some instantaneous spiritual magic that everyone would like it to be — there are no magic mantras… no magic potions… no spiritual buttons on
the side of our head that simply need to be pushed to experience deliverance from temptation. Deliverance involves “fighting!” With that in mind, most believers who question the integrity of their faith, do so because they have such a hard time overcoming temptation. Remember, we all sin because of the presence of “indwelling sin” in our lives; i.e., “the flesh” — the fact of the matter is, “there is absolutely nothing good in our flesh!” Cross reference Paul’s experience with sin in his life (cf. Rom 7:14-25); it was only after he came to the realization of “its presence” in his life, that he humbly began to understand his diabolical nature, and the need to fully identify with the righteousness of Christ and the work He did on the cross… because our sin nature has never been removed from us, it is that unredeemed part of us that we must fight to the end. There will be thousands upon thousands of times that you will stumble in your life… every one of them will be a sober reminder of your sinfulness, and the need to continually depend upon the work of Christ on the cross in your behalf (just as you did when you came to faith in Him at salvation). Over time you will increasingly be able to “accept your sinfulness for what it is” — an evil presence within that you are to fight, and being as it will win many battles in your life, rather than going off the deep end every time it defeats you, you must humbly repent and bathe in God’s mercy and forgiveness. That’s why Paul answers his need for deliverance with these words, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! Jesus died for all my sins — past, present and future — and He is not holding them against me!” (cf. Rom 7:25-8:1). Do you become angry with your little child and treat him harshly when he poops in his pants? Or do you clean him up, and then “give him a hug,” because you fully understand his childish nature? The reality is, you are going to spiritually poop in your pants all the time… simply humbly deal with it the way God would have you deal with it; there is no point in going absolutely crazy because you have made a mess of things. Learn to “fight the fight of faith” (it all begins at the cross where you receive forgiveness), that you might learn to increasingly overcome when temptation assails you.

The truth is, “our practical righteousness” is no where close to what it will be like in heaven; though it will be perfect then, it will not even be remotely close to being perfect in this life. Unless you understand how terribly sinful your flesh is, and how incredibly gracious and loving God is, you will simply focus on your sinfulness (as Paul did), and wallow in it until it makes you sick. The issue for us as believers is “our focus!” If we don’t focus on Christ, we will just continue to focus on our own sinfulness… and that will not only result in our sinning more, but becoming all the more discouraged with our performance in this life. The most important part of the Christian life is “our focus” — if we have a “God focus,” we will live far more fruitful lives… if we have a “self focus,” we will live far more sinful lives. One more thought on that: looking at yourself is only going to make you sick, because all you are going to see is a sinful performance; you will never measure up to God’s impeccable standards. Essentially you will be putting yourself under the LAW (a performance-oriented life), which will only leave you miserably defeated. It is simply not possible for a fallen creature to walk according to the Law of God, and somehow come away feeling good about himself — failure never feels good! On the other hand, when you look at Christ, who fulfilled the law for you (cf. Mt 5:17; Rom 8:14), that will cause you to rejoice in His eternal LOVE for you and His abundant grace — it has absolutely nothing to do with “you and your performance,” it only has to do with “Christ and His incredible performance.” Does that mean this is “easy”? No, not at all… because “your flesh” will never stop placing its diabolical thoughts in your mind… and you must wage war against those thoughts (by faith) all the way to the end. That, beloved, is God’s call upon your life and my life. Following is a summary of Barnhouse’s message and how we can overcome the temptations of the flesh, the world, and the devil “by faith.”
1. **The Flesh** — When you are tempted with “the lust of the flesh,” remember the word “flight.” Surprisingly to many, God does not tell us to fight this kind of temptation. Instead, He tells us to “flee” (cf. 1 Cor 6:18; 10:14; 1 Tim 6:9-11; 2 Tim 2:22). You’ve read the story of David and Bathsheba, and how David was overcome by lustful thoughts and fell. David wouldn’t have ever given in to the temptation of his flesh if he had done as Joseph did when Potiphar’s wife approached him. Compare the two stories (cf. 2 Sam 11 and Gen 39). What did Joseph do? He ran for his life! What did David do? He lingered and watched as Bathsheba bathed herself; as such, he entertained lustful thoughts, and that led him to commit two heinous sins in the flesh — adultery with Bathsheba and the murder of her husband Uriah. How do we apply David’s failure to ourselves? If there is a magazine, a movie, a television program, an internet website, or even a person that arouses thoughts in you that you know are wrong, then “we are to flee!” It’s pretty much that simple! But if you hang around and entertain the thoughts, sin is inevitable. **The lust of the flesh** (cf. 1 Jn 2:16) has to do with bodily appetites; things such as adultery, fornication, homosexuality, drunkenness, drug addiction, and gluttony. There is an old idiom that pretty much describes the reality of what happens when we fail to flee when tempted: “He who would not fall down ought not to walk in slippery places.” And then there is this proverb, “Can a man take fire in his bosom, and his clothes not be burned?” (Prv 6:27). Again, the answer is pretty simple — flee! Should you stubbornly resist doing so, you will — fall! Those are the two options (read Prov 5:8 and Prov 7:25).

2. **The World** — How do you overcome the world? The key word is “faith.” The apostle John says, “This is the victory that overcomes the world — our faith” (cf. 1 Jn 5:4). We are not told to fight the world, we are told to have faith in God instead. What does faith do? Essentially, faith makes God real in our lives. John tells us “not to love the world or the things in the world; if anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (cf. 1 Jn 2:15). When we say that someone is “worldly,” we are saying that this person loves the world and its values and the things in this world more than God. The lust of the eyes (cf. 1 Jn 2:16) is an excessive desire for the things of the world: Covetousness, the love of money, idolatry, greed, and financial dishonesty. By way of application, how do we overcome the world by faith? Suppose you’re driving your car and you notice that a “warning light” on your dashboard comes on indicating that you running low on oil — what do you do? Take a hammer and break the warning light? Or heed the message and pour some oil into the crank case? Now, if you are struggling with worldly desires, “warning lights will start blinking in your mind telling you that you have fallen in love with the world — which means you have fallen out of love with Jesus Christ” (cf. Rev 3:4). The application? Don’t fight the warning light! Turn your attention to God… get into His Word… confess your negligence and wrong thinking… if you have taken steps to align yourself with the world in some way, reverse those steps and realign yourself with the truth of God’s Word.

3. **The Devil** — The key word in overcoming the devil is “fight.” The blood brother of Jesus (James) says “submit yourselves to God… resist the devil and he will flee from you” (Jam 4:7). First, we submit to God, and then we resist the devil (not in our own strength, but His strength). Satan is not going to leave us alone until we resist him in the Lord Jesus Christ (see Rev 12:11). The devil cares nothing for our resolutions or good intentions, but he fears the blood of Christ. When the devil comes after you, show him Jesus! Go on the offensive! Tell Satan, “I bring God’s Word against you! I bring the blood of Christ against you! You are trespassing on my Father’s property and in the name of Jesus, be gone!” This is fighting
with the armor of God! Remember, Satan and his minions are committed to hindering and obstructing the work of Christ in your life, and that means “we must be strong in the strength of His might” (cf. Eph 6:10). God’s best soldiers are those who are “conscious of their own weaknesses and ineffectiveness, and who rely solely on Him” (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-10; Jn 15:5). Our weakness commends itself to the power of His might. Since the devil has various stratagems (discouragement, frustration, confusion, moral failure, and doctrinal error), we must put on “the full armor of God that we might stand and resist him” (Eph 6:11, 13). Satan knows our weakest points and aims for them. If he cannot disable us by one method, he will try for another. This warfare is not a matter of contending against godless philosophers and infidel rulers, the battle is against demonic forces of darkness who wield tremendous power… and it frequently focuses on “the pride of life” (cf. 1 Jn 2:16); things such as worldly honors, fame, reputation & position. The armor God provides for us to fight against the forces of darkness are “truth”… “righteousness” (cf. Ps 7:3-5)… “a readiness to share the good news of peace”… “confidence in the Word of God” (faith)… “assurance of our eternal salvation”… “and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” Three times Jesus quoted the Word of God when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (cf. Mt 4:1-11); beloved, remember the Word of God is living and active and powerful! (cf. Heb 4:12). Thus, with all of the foregoing in mind, we must flee the flesh… have faith against the world… and fight the devil.

Commensurate with all forms of temptation is the fact that it all takes place “in the mind.” The reality is, temptation almost always starts as “a very subtle voice in the back of our mind,” and if it is allowed to germinate, it results in sin (Jam 1:14-15). At the earliest moment one recognizes that a thought is sinful, one must apply sudden death to it, or it will plant its deadly seed. Dr. Caroline Leaf, one of the world’s leading authorities on the cognitive neuroscientific aspects of the brain, has studied the brain and the “science of thought” for more than 30 years. She is a devout Christian with a PhD in “Communication Pathology” from the University of Pretoria in South Africa. Dr. Leaf says the average person thinks over 30,000 thoughts a day — our minds never rest while we are awake! Think about that number with the understanding that many of our thoughts are fleshly and evil in origin, and such thoughts can be extremely stubborn and difficult to overcome once they are rooted. Dr. Leaf says that 87-95% of all the illnesses we experience are a direct result of our “toxic thoughts,” and by not controlling our thoughts, we create the conditions for nearly all physical and emotional illness; therefore it is important for us to exercise extreme care with regard to what stimuli we allow to enter into our thought processes. Some of the major highways in the minds for us as believers are these: morality, politics, culture, theology, physical infirmities, possessions, circumstances, worry and passions (likes and dislikes). Each of these schools of thought can range from a fairly moderate degree of intensity in our minds, to a very high degree of intensity, depending upon our predisposition… thus producing feelings of anger, fear, discouragement, anxiety, frustration, despair, depression & hopelessness.

Anger is an intense emotional state induced by displeasure; it is a strong negative emotion that rages in the soul when we dwell on an issue that challenges a strong predisposition we may have; though all anger is not sin (Eph 4:26), the majority of it is. Anger becomes sinful when it is ventilated or internalized (internalizing it leads to bitterness and resentment). When Moses saw one of his fellow-countrymen being abused at the hands of an Egyptian, he became filled with rage and snapped, and in an instant he killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand (Ex 2:11ff)… ultimately his anger clouded his judgment to the point that he acted rashly. Although Moses was right about the injustice that was done to one of his people, his reaction was wrong; his hot-
bodied volatility revealed how unprepared he was for the task God had planned for him… therefore God kept him on the back side of a desert for the next forty years so that he would realize that rescuing his own people in his own way would ultimately fail (for those of you who inclined to think God works instantaneously in our lives, think again; though it is possible, it is clearly not the norm. Anger began as a smoldering ember in Moses’ heart, and quickly burst into deadly flames, confirming the words of King Solomon: “a quick-tempered man does foolish things” (Prv 14:17; Prv 27:4; 29:22). Generally we become angry when our selfish or perfectionistic demands are violated, and such anger is often ventilated toward God as well. I have written a study on “Dealing with Anger Toward God” that I have uploaded on to my website; due to the perplexing and acrimonious nature of this subject, I would encourage those of you who want to address this issue to go online and check it out under the “Additional Studies” link of my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

Dr. Frank Minirth & Dr. Paul Meier authored the textbook, “Introduction to Psychology and Counseling” (Baker Book House, 1985; p. 261); in it they remind us that pent-up anger is the root of nearly all clinical depression. The book of Proverbs says, “a fool vents his anger, but a wise man holds it back” (Prv 29:11; 14:29). Essentially, one controls his anger best when he becomes “solution-oriented” rather than “problem-oriented” (carefully reflect upon that statement), and when he redirects his thoughts toward the Lord and those things that are good and right and pure (cf. Phil 4:6-8). Though anger may be a strong, unpleasant discontent in our soul, and one we wish was not an intrinsic part of our human personality, it may be a reality with which we must learn to live – simply wanting negatives to go away, and praying that they go away, is not necessarily going to cause them to vanish and become foreign to our nature. The reality is, in all likelihood we are probably going to have to navigate through all the ups and downs of life with a number of weaknesses in our backpack. Just because we want our internal problems to go away in life, doesn’t mean that they will go away. No matter how much we may want to “effectuate change” in our lives and the little world in which we live…frequently, it is just not going to happen, and that can be very disconcerting to a believer. God is not just some “magic genie” who is present in our life to make it problem free. Just because we are God’s children doesn’t mean we have the potential of turning our little world into some “pleasant little spiritual utopia” where the consequences of this fallen world become alien to us. Furthermore, God doesn’t hold an “annual check-up meeting” with us every year to let us identify a couple of issues that He will grant us instant deliverance from by waving His glorious little wand. Not at all. In all likelihood, we must simply learn to live with the various vicissitudes of life that are resident within us, and do so knowing that God is able to make all grace abound to us (cf. 2 Cor 9:8); by the way, most of our weaknesses have absolutely nothing to do with our meritings them (cf. Phil 4:11-13; 2 Cor 2:7-10).

June Hunt, the founder and CEO of a worldwide biblical counseling ministry called “Hope for the Heart,” says in her book “How to Handle Your Emotions” (Harvest House Publishers, 2008, p. 66) that one who is routinely troubled by an angry disposition should humbly repeat the following prayer over and over again in their life: “Lord, teach me to act, rather than to react.” In doing so one will humbly be admitting his need God's divine input in his life, and his own inability to properly handle issues like anger and emotional discontent in his own strength. Since God is the author of “peace,” one must humbly petition His throne for it (cf. Phil 4:6f; Gal 5:22); only God can give peace to the restless soul. Dr. Caroline Leaf’s message to believers and unbelievers alike is that they “detox their brains by consciously controlling their thought lives,” and this means engaging interactively with every single thought we have, and analyzing it before we decide to
accept or reject it.” Her message parallels that of the apostle Paul: “Take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5; Eph 4:22-24); though that may sound a little unreasonable to some of you, that is the highway of faith that leads to spiritual maturity (without godly thoughts one neither exercises faith nor walks with Christ). Incidentally, fleshly thoughts are “natural” (they are injected into our minds by our flesh and Satan)… whereas godly thoughts require “intentionality;” they require an act of faith, which oftentimes means “fighting the fight of faith.” Thus the secret to overcoming many of the problems & temptations of life is “right thinking;” a person cannot entertain evil thoughts & godly thoughts at the same time – one will ultimately trump the other, and without intentionality the flesh will win that battle. Incidentally, the fight of faith is a battle that must be fought throughout our entire life. Though God guards the hearts and minds of those in Christ Jesus, Paul doesn't hesitate to remind us that the believer also has a responsibility in the matter. 

The concept of “hate” is often indigenous to “anger;” that is, hate & anger are often related to one another. The Lord said to His people in the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land, “You shall not hate your fellow-countrymen in your heart” (cf. Lev 19:17). Elsewhere in the Old Testament it says that “God hates evil” (cf. Prov 6:16; 8:13; 13:5; Amos 5:15). “God hates all who do iniquity” (cf. Ps 5:5; 26:5; 31:6; 119:104, 128, 163). “God was provoked to anger when His people made idols” (cf. Deut 32:21). “God was provoked to anger when His people served the Baals and forsook Him” (cf. Josh 2:11-14). “The tempest of the Lord will burn on the head of the wicked, and His fierce anger will not turn back until He has accomplished the intent of His heart” (cf. Jer 30:23-24). “God executes vengeance in anger & wrath on the nations that refuse to obey Him” (Mic 5:15). There are about one hundred passages in Scripture that speak of God’s anger. The idea of “temperament,” however, is not always an integral part of hatred in the Bible: God said, “Jacob I loved — Esau I hated” (cf. Mal 1:2;3; Rom 9:13); the context is one of God’s elective choice. Essentially, God was saying that “He had no relationship with Esau: hence, He had no covenant love for him;” so the expression did not refer to a harsh, vindictive animosity against Esau; it simply defined the fact that He had no relationship with Esau, and not His divine wrath against evil. “Context” is crucial when defining terms in pretty much any language; Hebrew & Greek are no exception, so read all of the verses in the surrounding context of what was being said in Malachi chapter one & Romans chapter nine. Though believers are to have a repugnancy against evil, that doesn’t mean they are to exercise a harsh, vindictive animosity against those who practice it; remember, we are to “love our enemies, and pray for those who persecute us” (cf. Mt 5:44); so in that sense, we are to hate the sin, but love the sinner; yet like Christ, we are not to enter into an intimate relationship with them (cf. 1 Cor 5:6, 11; 6:15-17; 2 Cor 6:14-15). Another strong corollary of anger is “impatience” — by definition, impatience implies a lack of patience; when the conditions of the moment exhaust our patience, our impatience then takes over and rules the discourse in our minds. The blood brother of Jesus (James) tells us that trials and problems develop patience, perseverance and character in us (cf. Jam 1:2;4; Rom 5:3-4), by teaching us to trust God that what is happening to us is for our ultimate good. Though trials and problems exhaust what little patience we have, they ultimately get us on our knees that God might cause us to perseveringly work through those issues that are so besetting to us — perseverance and patience are both constructs of faith, and reveal genuine commitment (cf. Rom 2:7; 15:4-5; Gal 5:22; Eph 4:1-2; Col 1:9-11; 3:12; 1 Tim 6:11-12; 2 Tim 3:10-11; 1 Pet 2:20; 1 Pet 1:5-7; Jam 5:7-11).
By the way, I would like to ask you a question, and I would like for you to answer it within five seconds of having read the question (don’t make the question out to be something that requires an elongated answer, and don’t continue reading until you have answered the question). Here it is: “What is the first thing you think about when you think about God?” Are you ready to continue? Good. The late A. W. Tozer, one of the great preachers and Christian thinkers of the twentieth century, and the author of more than forty books, once said, “The first thing you think about when you think about God is the most important thing you think about.” After reflecting upon Tozer’s comment, you might want to think through “your theology of thought about God,” and identify that aspect of God that you truly believe is the most important thing about Him, because that characteristic will not only highly impact your view of God, but will strongly influence the way in which you live life. Being as it is the most important thing you think about, you might want to rethink your answer and the ramifications of such thinking.

To continue our study of temptation and faith, think about the following statement: If you are insistent upon finding a little “spiritual acre of utopia” somewhere here on this planet where there are no problems or frustrations — listen up — there is no such thing as a comfortable little life on a hill with green grass and a white picket fence, where weeds never grow, the grass never needs cutting, and the fence never needs repairing or painting. If this is your little spiritual dream… you are going to become increasingly disillusioned with life, because your troubles will only intensify until you acknowledge reality, and accept it for what it is (God ordained), and diligently strive by the power of the Spirit to walk with Christ in all of life. Thus life essentially for us as believers is about having a “God-focus” rather than a “self-focus.” Regarding the flesh (i.e., our unredeemed humanness), try though as we may to shut our ears to it, it frequently gets its case fully presented in the court of our mind, resulting in a measure of sin at least on the thought level (Jam 1:14-15) — at that point guilt and discouragement then do their damage… then the pain of guilt (heaviness in the soul) causes us to confess our sin to the Lord… God then picks us up, and dusts us off (cleanses us), and gets us back up on our feet again (spiritually). Does that mean we may just as well go ahead and sin that grace may abound to us? By no means (cf. Rom 6:1-2); nevertheless, the incredible reality is, when we do sin grace does abound to us (cf. Rom 5:20; 2 Cor 9:8). In short, we are to “strive against those sins that so easily entangle us” (cf. Heb 12:1, 4)… to not do so is to incur significant discipline and a truckload of angst in our soul (cf. Heb 12:5-11); therefore we can’t intentionally walk in darkness because we know God will simply forgive us any way — the resultant effect is “serious discipline.” Beloved, we don’t play games with God, because God don’t play games! The reality is, God uses the repercussions of sin in our lives (pain in our soul) to redirect our lives back to Him (read Ps 32:3-5; Ps 38:2). Incidentally, the cycle of sin, sorrow and concession happens over and over again in the life of the believer every day. On this issue, Martin Luther said: “Though we can’t stop birds from flying over our head, we can stop them from building nests in our hair.” Sinful, fleshly, self-centered thoughts will never stop surfacing in our minds (that is simply not possible to stop), but we can immediately reject those thoughts and redirect our thinking. Is it a “struggle”? By all means… but that’s the daily struggle to which God has called us… and it is this glorious battle we must fight!

God gives us two important promises to reflect upon when we are being tempted: FIRST, He will not let us be tempted beyond that which we can handle: though temptation is more than we can handle in and of ourselves, it is not more than we can handle with God, and He is always there for us to lean on. Contrary to what we may be inclined to think, God will never let our failings in life destroy us — He uses temptation in our lives as a way of purifying us (cf. Jam 1:12),
Though some of you might insist that the Christian life should be an enjoyable experience, or that there is joy in the Christian life (which in part is true), it is also true that joy is not a constant, continual, uninterrupted, ceaseless, perpetual experience for us as believers, any more than is the perfection of holiness… and should one insist that he achieve perfect holiness in life, he will naturally become extremely disillusioned and frustrated with life. The reality is, we no more
experience “constant joy” in this life than we live in “perfect holiness.” Beloved, the wonders of heaven are a future reality, not a present one; there will be no spiritual warfare in heaven, but life is filled with it here below. The hymn writer Fanny Crosby expressed it this way in her notable hymn: “Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! O what a foretaste of glory divine! Heir of salvation, purchase of God, born of His Spirit, washed in His blood.” The truth is, we only experience a foretaste of glory in this life. As the apostle Paul writes, “the Holy Spirit was given to us as a pledge of our inheritance” (cf. Eph 1:13-14; 2 Cor 5:5); that is, the Holy Spirit is the guarantee of our inheritance… the down payment… the earnest money. The idea behind the pledge is that the full amount is still forthcoming; therefore the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is a foretaste of future glory: with that in mind, the Holy Spirit is described as the “earnest or first installment” that was given to us as a pledge that the rest of the purchase inheritance will follow — when we do not walk in the Spirit, however (i.e., live according to His guidance), we don't experience joy even in its limited earthly capacity, because joy is a fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22). Though we were bought off the auction block of sin with the blood of God’s Son (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 5:9), and are now His possession, “we still only see thru a glass dimly and know in part at this point — it is not until we enter into His presence in heaven that we shall fully know and fully experience the eternal joy of His salvation” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12; Rom 8:18-25; Phil 3:12; 1 Pet 1:13; 1 Jn 3:2).

Clearly, there is “joy in the Lord,” but that does not mean there is “joy in life.” When our world is upside down and we are going through the storms of life, those unpleasantries are not only unjoyful, they are disconcerting and painful, as David, Job, Jeremiah, Elijah, Jonah and Moses attested — since we’re all made of the same stuff, our experience is the same. Scripture tells us that “Jesus endured the cross because of the joy set before Him” (cf. Heb 12:2) — though the incredible pain of the cross was anything but joyful (cf. Mt 26:39), He bore it for our sake (cf. 1 Pet 2:24); for our sake He became poor (cf. 2 Cor 8:9); the joy set before Him was our salvation! “Though God gives us things to enjoy” (1 Tim 6:17), “enjoying life and the stuff of life is not the end all in life,” as some actually preach. True joy in this life is an “intermittent experience” wherein the soul experiences the encouragement of the Spirit — this is the joy every believer longs for in the midst of life’s challenges. Remember, “joy is a fruit of the Spirit” (cf. Gal 5:22) that He produces in our hearts when we are walking with Christ. The apostle Paul tells us that “the kingdom of God is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom 14:17). Therefore, as believers we experience “the joy of Christ” when we are in intimate communion with Him; this is the joy God wants us to know (cf. Jn 15:11; 16:24; 17:13). The psalmist David said, “In Thy presence is fullness of joy” (Ps 16:11); conversely, when he was experiencing the painful guilt of sin in his life, he cried out to the Lord, “Restore to me the joy of Thy salvation” (Ps 51:12). The reason the apostle John wrote his first epistle was that “our joy may be made complete” (1 Jn 1:4; 2 Jn 1:12). By definition, “true joy is Christ—not pleasant circumstances;” though outward circumstances can make us “happy,” they do not make us “joyful.” Let's look at the derivation of the word “happy” — it comes from a word that means “to happen,” and is derived from the ancient Old Norse word “hap” (the word from which we get our English term); thus suggesting the idea that happiness is the result of what happens to us. With that in mind, outward circumstances have nothing to do with “true joy;” that is the product of the Holy Spirit when we are in intimately walking with Christ. Though being happy and being joyful are pretty much direct equivalents in English, that is not the case in the biblical languages of Greek and Hebrew — that is also why the translators of the Bible seldom used the word “happy” when translating the Hebrew terms ranan, simchah & sason, and the Greek term chara (because it could be somewhat
Jimmy tells us to “consider it all joy when we encounter trials,” knowing that the testing of our faith produces endurance” (Jam 1:2-3). The reality is, considering trials and temptation “joy” when they enter our life is not a natural response; instead it is almost always “anguishing and frustrating.” Though most of us focus our spiritual energies on praying that God would deliver us from the pain of our trials, we need to ascend to the “count it all joy view;” that is, we need to look beyond the present, through the present (we can’t escape the reality of the present), to that which is not seen, and in our prayers rise to the highest; so rather than subscribing to the natural human point of view, we need rise to the divine point of view. Considering trials joy and being genuinely grateful for them (cf. Eph 5:20; 1 Th 5:18) demands that we focus on the divine viewpoint; the reality is, no combination of happenings in our lives can be termed “bad” because God is constantly superintending — He is always at work in us causing everything to work together for our good (Rom 8:28; Phil 2:13); the seeming aggravations are but a temporary part of a larger plan for our spiritual well-being. It is only out of this perspective that we can ultimately justify being grateful. Consider the life of Joseph — it is hard to imagine going through more difficult circumstances than what he went through; he was sold into slavery by his brother and nearly everything in his life was taken from him (family, friends, home, possessions, language, culture & country), yet he responded to his brothers saying: “YOU meant it for evil against me, but GOD meant it for good” (cf. Gen 50:20). Failure to see God’s superintendence over all that goes on in our lives will cause us to distort reality, and the result will be ingratitude rather than gratitude. Incidentally, the Greek word peirasmos can be translated trial or temptation (cf. Mt 6:13; 1 Cor 10:13; Heb 3:8; Jam 1:2; 2 Pet 2:9)—the reality is, where there is trial there is temptation. It is important to note, James emphasizes “faith” and the impact that “trials” have on it; they are designed by God to produce Christ-like character in us” (cf. Rom 5:3-4), and accomplish His eternal purposes in the world (much of which has not even been divulged to us). With that in mind, it is essential that we learn to immediately take up the weapons of faith and fight when we are being tried and tempted, and that means wrestling through the issue in prayer before God — obviously, instant deliverance is not the norm; that’s why it is called a war, not a spat. When we are faced with trials we can respond in several ways — become defiant and rebel against them, grumble and complain about them, indulge in self pity, lose heart and give up under their pressure, or recognize they are permitted by God for the purpose of “developing Christian character in us.” One thing is certain, “every believer’s life ultimately is going to be filled with problems by design — not by accident” (Jn 16:33); as such, we can either respond negatively to them or positively to them. If a person insists on having a “pleasant, problem-free life,” he will end up responding in negative fashion to trials (regardless of their redeeming value). Why? because he simply can’t get past the negativity of them; thus he completely focuses on the problem rather than the solution. When the problem is front and foremost in our thinking, it will dominate the discourse in our mind. By necessity, producing Christ-like character involves suffering, frustration & perplexity; the fruit of the Spirit cannot be produced in our lives only with warm sunshine — there must also be cold, wind, rain and dark clouds. Furthermore, trials never seem pleasant (they are always painful & disagreeable), yet if they are handled properly, “they yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (read Heb 12:11).

Jesus instructed His disciples to “pray that they not enter into temptation” (cf. Mt 26:41; Mk 14:38; Lk 22:40). Temptation is a strong internal desire to walk in your own ways and not in the ways of God (cf. Jam 1:14) — it comes from our old, evil, fallen, unregenerate nature; Paul refers
to it as “the flesh” (cf. Rom 7:18). The reality is, we are enticed to sin by our own fleshly desires; entering into temptation means “yielding to it.” According to Jesus, the conquest of temptation only comes thru watchfulness and prayer. The Lord Jesus told His disciples to “keep watching and praying” — the present tense of the verb focuses on continuous action; hence the need for continual spiritual vigilance in the Christian life. We must continually be aware of all that is going on in our life and the little world in which we live: this vigilant conscious awareness keeps us in a state of preventative readiness to any attack by Satan (cf. 1 Pet 5:8). As believers we need to always be consciously alert to the schemes of the devil… and seek to overcome by petitioning God’s throne. It should be noted, we don’t pray that we won’t be tempted; temptation is a given! We will be tempted both from within and from without! We pray that we will not enter into temptation (i.e., yield to it). Jesus’ prediction of His disciples’ spiritual deflection earlier that evening (cf. Mt 26:31) should have served as an urgent call to prayer, but the lateness of the hour and the emotional demands of the day apparently were too much for them, and they couldn’t find within themselves the strength to pray fervently. Jesus then told them, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Mt 26:41); i.e., “the human spirit is willing, but human nature is terribly weak.” So Jesus acknowledged that doing what is right is often very difficult. God’s children can claim with the apostle Paul that they genuinely want to do good, but they will also confess with him that they often fall short in doing what is right (Rom 7:15-20).… therefore, much to the consternation of every believer is the sober truth that the intense nature of temptation at times is simply too much for us, and we come to the realization that “there is a strong principle of evil present within us” (Rom 7:21). Peter no doubt learned an incredibly important lesson that evening — he needed to be aware of the craftiness of Satan and the importance of prayer if he was going to live a holy life. After serving the Lord faithfully for a number of years, he admonished Christians everywhere to “Be of sober spirit! Be on the alert! Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour!” (cf. 1 Pet 5:8). Peter also gave them this assurance: “The Lord knows how to rescue the godly from temptation” (2 Pet 2:9). Beloved, we need to humbly pray for God to “deliver us from evil” (cf. Mt 6:13), and not conclude that we have enough spiritual strength to stand in and of ourselves — the name of the game in a word is “humility.” As the psalmist David prayed, “When I cried out to You, Lord, You answered me and increased the strength in my soul” (cf. Ps 138:3); that is a work only God can do; only God can give us the strength to stand. However weak you may be feeling… however rough the road is you are traveling… however heavy the burden you are carrying, it is the strength of God that will help you overcome. Reflect upon the following passages — Ps 28:7-8; 37:39; 46:1; 73:25-26; 119:28; Is 12:2; 40:29-31; Eph 6:10; Phil 4:13.

So with the foregoing in mind, what really is this thing called “prayer”? The nineteenth century theologian, Charles Hodge, said that “prayer is the converse of the soul with God”… keeping that description in mind, it is important to remember that “the essence of prayer is the alignment of our will with God’s will.” Therefore, “wrestling with our fleshly inclinations” is often a vital part of prayer (because they are frequently at the forefront in our thinking). Since seeking the mind of Christ (2 Cor 10:5) is essential for effective prayer, “self-examination” is one of the chief characteristics of prayer. To keep prayer in a proper perspective, the prayer of the righteous is: “Thy will be done!” (Mt 6:10; 1 Jn 5:14-15). Thus prayer is not a matter of “trying to convince God of the merit of our will or what we want,” even though that is understandably an integral part of some of our praying (Mt 26:39). With that in mind, the Christian life essentially is conformity to the will of God, and that means reflecting & meditating & wrestling with the truths of God’s Word — faith, my friend, is a “fight!” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). So prayer is not just
the solicitation of God’s help to get us out of trouble... or deliver us from evil... or enlarge our bank account. First and foremost then, efficacious prayer begins by approaching God with a “right attitude”—being humbly mindful and grateful for who God is (our Maker, our Lord, our Master and our Redeemer). In the process of seeking His face, God will then clear away all the conflicting thoughts that surround our circumstances, that we might come full circle and pray in concert with His will. Thus in prayer, we experience God as personal and powerful; He not only hears us, but He responds to us in kind. As Jesus taught — we are to “pray in His name;” that is, for His name’s sake (cf. Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23) — to ask for something in Jesus Name is to ask in accord with His mind and His will (cf. Mt 26:39, 42; Jn 6:38); hence, it is to ask for those things which glorify Him... bless mankind... and enhance our own spiritual good.

Reflect upon David’s prayer in Psalm 143: “For the sake of Thy name, O Lord, revive me; in Thy righteousness bring my soul out of trouble” (v. 11); essentially, David prays, “Lord, because You are gracious, merciful, long-suffering, and abound in lovingkindness, goodness and truth; and because it is Your desire to be known as such, deliver my soul from trouble.” The prayers of most believers lack this perspective — most often they simply ask God to do something “for their sake and what they have done”... rather than “for Christ’s sake and what He has done” (Ps 127: 1; Jn 15:5; 1 Cor 3:6). Beloved, God’s will (not our will) needs to be the “primary reason” for any request (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23). Following are 36 passages that stress the importance of action taken “for God’s sake;” carefully reflect upon them to enhance your appreciation and understanding of this concept — unless one understands the principle involved, one will not embrace God’s call upon their life and their ultimate reason for existence: 2 Kg 19:34; 20:6; Ps 23:3; 25:7, 11; 44:22; 69:7; 79:9; 106:8; 109:21; 143:11; Is 42:21; 43:25; 48:9, 11; Jer 14:7, 21; Ezek 20:14, 22, 44; Dan 9:17, 19; Mt 10:18; 16:25; Mark 10:29-30; Luke 6:22; Acts 9:16; Rom 1:5; 1 Cor 4:10; 2 Cor 4:11; 12:10; Phil 1:29; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 2: 13; 1 Jn 2:12. Furthermore, the faith we bring to prayer must not only include the belief that God hears our prayers, but that He is disposed to answering them (cf. Heb 11:6; 4:15-16). In keeping with the essence of prayer that Jesus shared in the “Sermon on the Mount” (Mt 6:9-13) — through prayer we express our reverence and adoration for God... we defer to His wisdom and His will for our lives... we bare our souls in contrition before Him... we pour out the thanksgiving of our hearts to Him... and we present our petitions and supplications to Him. The last two paragraphs are a significant study in and of themselves; let me encourage you to view it as such.

Faith Working Thru Love

Principally, human beings are “relational creatures”... they were created to be in relationship with God and their fellow man; they were not created to live for themselves, but to live for their Creator, and in so doing, care for their fellow man. When sin entered the world, man aborted his calling and chose to live for himself; hence, he became a self-centered creature. When the Lord Jesus was asked what the great commandment in the Law was, He said “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... and you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Mt 22:36ff). Living life with an “other’s orientation” is God’s call upon our lives, yet one that is completely foreign to human thinking. The night before Jesus went to the cross He gathered His disciples in the Upper Room to celebrate Passover with them and share the most important truths for living out God’s call in this world. He began that incredible evening of ministry by “washing their feet” — why would Jesus do such a thing? why was “that action” so important in His thinking? Wouldn't a “warm personal hug” have been far more
appropriate? Here was the God of the universe humbly washing their dirty feet, and after doing so, He then said to them, “If I, the Lord, stooped to wash your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet” (cf. Jn 13:14). The problem with sinful man is that he is so reprobate, he would never stoop to consider others more important than himself – in truth, he is diabolically sinful. Even the hearts of redeemed men are hard and self-centered; their focus in life is almost always on themselves… but that is NOT the way God created us. However, as sinners redeemed thru the blood of the cross, God is now calling us to “love our neighbor and love one another” (cf. Mt 22:39; Jn 13:34), and thus fulfill the LAW of Christ (cf. Gal 6:2; Jam 1:25; 2:8; 1 Jn 3:16-19; 4:7-8).

What is this thing called “love”? The essence of love begins with God, “who is love” (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8, 16); outside of God there is no love… we love because God first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 3:1, 16; 4:10, 19)… the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that we might be children of love (Rom 5:5). Love is the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22), not the product of our own doing. This love that is from God (agape love), “seeks the other person’s highest good in the moment, not its own” (cf. 1 Cor 10:24; 13:5; Phil 2:3, 21). The night before Jesus went to the cross, He sketched out a picture for His disciples as to what their future was to look like: they were to be part of a new community, and the foundation of that community was that they were to “love one another” (Jn 13:34). Love was to be the distinguishing mark of Christ’s followers; though one possess every gift of the Holy Spirit, gives all of their possessions to the poor, and has faith to remove mountains, “if they have not love (emphatic!), they are nothing!” (emphatic! cf. 1 Cor 13:1-3). Beloved, that is a very powerful statement! Love is the supreme virtue in all the universe; we are saved because God loved us… and we are saved that we in turn might love. What does love look like? In a word, “Jesus!” That’s why He told His disciples to love one another “as I have loved you” (cf. Jn 13:34); “as He has loved us, so we are to love one another” (cf. Jn 3:16, 18, 23; 4:10, 19). Carefully notice, unless we know and experience God’s love, we will not love others – it is only by experiencing God’s love, that we are motivated to love… so if God’s love for you isn’t that significant in your mind, your love for others will not be either.

What did “love” look like in the New Testament world? The book of Acts tells us that the believing community “had all things in common;” that they would sell their property and possessions and share with all who had need (cf. Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-37). The people of God were to be a caring people in an uncaring world. Do you find it strange that this is a very rare characteristic of the Christian church here in the west today? Back in the 1950s there was a believer named R. G. LeTourneau – he was the inventor and manufacturer of the largest earth-moving equipment in the world… he set out to prove the integrity of God’s promise to bless those who were faithful in their stewardship (cf. Lk 6:38; Mt 25:14-27, 35-40); he kept increasing his tithe to the poor until it exceeded ninety percent, and God ended up blessing him in ways that few have ever been blessed. LeTourneau simply stepped out in faith believing that “Jesus meant what He said.” The Lord Jesus told His disciples, “the world will know you are My disciples if you truly love one another” (cf. Jn 13:35). The generosity that characterized so much of the early church inspired me to take a look at the history of the church since the first century – the renowned theologian Tertullian in 200 AD, confirms the teaching of Jesus in his writings, when he quotes the heathen: “See, how they love one another!” Yet just two hundred years later in 400 AD, the greatest preacher since the second century, Chrysostom, complained of the believing community’s “lack of love” (cf. Leon Morris’ commentary on John’s gospel – Eerdmans Publishing Co; 1973; p. 633). Why the decline in love? I find it interesting that genuine love among Christians here in the west has declined significantly since persecution no longer characterizes our world; as such, we seem to be more
inclined to living a selfish lifestyle. One can make a case that where life is easy and persecution is minimal, believers integrate into their respective cultures, practice self-centered living, and show less love to believers and unbelievers alike. With that in mind, perhaps we need to rethink our construct of faith. It seems like believers always need to be “pushed” to be a people of love (cf. Heb 10:24-25; 13:1). The theologian Augustine in 400 AD (time period of Chrysostom) stated the following – “In this life two loves are striving in every trial for mastery: love of the world and love of God. The conquering love, whichever it be, puts force upon the lover and draws him after itself” (Sermon. xxxiv). Which love rules in your heart? (cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Jn 2:15-17; Jam 1:27).

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians tells us that God is not looking for ritual or circumcision or any such thing…the only thing that matters is “faith working thru love” (cf. Gal 5:6) – God is looking for a faith that is prompted by LOVE, not LAW. The main problem in the Galatian church was the issue of “legalism” – where the primary focus was upon obeying Laws (cf. Gal 1:6; 3:1-3, 11; 5:1-3). There is a world of difference between LOVE & LAW, and being as the difference is so confusing to so many people, let’s take a moment and differentiate between the two concepts. Carefully reflect upon the difference between LOVE & LAW… and keep that difference in mind as you navigate through this section of the study:

- **LOVE** is about truly caring for someone
- **LAW** is about obeying a divine precept

Do you see the difference? Though the “action” rendered by the one who loves and the one who lives according to the law may be the same – giving $20 to a poor man – the “motivation” (heart) is completely different. As the apostle Paul tells us: “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), thus making it possible for us to fulfill the royal law of God: “loving our neighbor as ourselves” (cf. Mt 22:39; Jam 2:8; Gal 5:13-14), and this we do “by an effectual, Spirit empowered faith.” Thus the issue is “faith working thru love” (cf. Gal 5:6). The question is, what is the correlation between FAITH & LOVE? It is only when we understand the dynamic of “faith” (a strange nebulous concept in the minds of many believers) that the relationship between these two biblical tenets falls into place; the reality is, it all begins with FAITH, so let’s start with a working definition of it: in its simplest form faith is believing & obeying God.” Yet being as that basic definition is still a little puzzling to some, let’s dive into it a little deeper as the author of Hebrews does: faith involves “conviction” (Heb 11:1). Remember, faith is not self-generated. it is produced in us by the Holy Spirit when we humble ourselves before God — therefore when divine truth is being presented to the humble person (either thru the written or spoken word), “the Holy Spirit opens the heart to believe” (cf. Acts 16:14); without Him doing so that person would not believe (1 Cor 1:18; 2:14) — that is why the Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of Truth” (Jn 14:17; 15:26); He is the source of all biblical truth (cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21; 2 Tim 3:16). Therefore the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us an “inner conviction” that God’s communications are indeed true; this inner conviction is not a state of mind that we come to by our own human efforts, any more than receiving physical sight is an act of our own efforts; hence, faith is a gift from God (cf. Eph 2:9). Regarding the issue of “humility,” God told His servant Isaiah – “To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and trembles at My word” (cf. Is 66:2).… similarly, David said, “Thou will not reject, O God, a broken and contrite heart” (cf. Ps 51:17). With that in mind, the message is this: God does not convey His precious truths to proud people; He doesn’t cast His pearls before swine (unbelievers – Mt 7:8; 13: 10-16). In order for our faith to become efficacious and fruitful, it is important that we possess a
“humble heart” so that this deep abiding conviction reigns in our soul. Though God honors our faith even when it is deficient and lacking (because He is so gracious and merciful; cf. Ps 103:10; Lam 3:22), our lives are significantly more fruitful and our ministry more effective when our faith springs from a deep abiding conviction that is produced in us by the Holy Spirit; again that only happens when our hearts are humble and contrite. As the apostle Paul says, “we are to walk in a manner worthy of our calling, clothing ourselves with humility… accepting each other in love” (cf. Eph 4:1-2); without humility we cannot walk in love. With that said, let’s focus our attention on the correlation between **FAITH & LOVE**.

It is only when we have received **FAITH** from above (i.e., have been given a deep inner conviction regarding divine truth; that we truly believe God), that we come to understand and see the significance of **LOVE** (the preeminent virtue of God). Remember, **LOVE** is what purchased our salvation (cf. Jn 3:16), and through it we can minister God’s grace to others by the Holy Spirit; **so love is the fruit of the Spirit** (cf. Gal 5:22). When **divine truth** reigns in our soul, **LOVE** reigns in our soul… conversely, when **love** does not reign in our soul, the **flesh** dominates the discourse in our minds and hearts (a not uncommon experience in the mind of a believer) — hence Paul exhorts us to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). The reality is, truth reigns in our soul “by faith” (i.e., by a conscious awareness of a particular truth and God’s presence in our lives)… and it becomes alive and active when it is accompanied by a “humble heart,” remember, faith is an “inner conviction” in our hearts and is the work of the Holy Spirit. Our “faith” is not something that is automatically efficacious simply because we are born again Christians… our faith is an ongoing work of grace in our souls that is made alive and active in us when **humble contrition** characterizes our spirit — so if you try to **avoid humility**, you will not walk in faith (they are inseparable); conversely, if you try to **avoid loving others**, you are denying the very essence of Christianity (which is **CHRIST**, who is **LOVE** — Jn 4:8). The most important precept in all of Scripture is **“loving God and loving others”** — when we abrogate that responsibility, we are denying the faith that God has called us to (Jn 4:7-8). It is by a deep abiding conviction (a Spirit inspired faith that results when we humble ourselves) that we love others: Paul identifies it as “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6); **faith is an essential element of genuine love… and without humility there is no faith. You can’t take “humility” off the table, and you can’t take “love” off the table**; they are the premiere tenets of the Christian faith. Just as **faith** is not faith without humility (right thinking about who you really are)… **so love** is not love without faith (because faith employs the power of the Spirit – cf. Gal 5:22-23).

**Love does not exist outside of faith** (i.e., outside of our oneness with God)… so when **GOD** is removed from the picture you have nothing left but human effort; that’s why Jesus said, “apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Therefore, unless we are “conscious” of God’s presence in our lives, everything we do will simply be the result of our own efforts, and will amount to nothing more than our trying to obey a bunch of rules and laws; you can’t separate “faith” and “God” – if you have true faith, you are intimately connected to God; your faith is “in God,” not in divine precepts that are somehow separate from God (that’d be nothing but gobbledygook). Regarding “being conscious of God’s presence” — when you are walking with a friend down a path somewhere, you are always conscious of his presence… though every thought may not be about “him,” you are always conscious of him being with you; he is never completely oblivious to you. In the same way, when we navigate through this life we are to “walk with Christ each step of the way,” and in doing so we are naturally conscious of His presence with us. Obviously, when you walk with someone you carry on a lot of conversation with that person… you don’t
just ignore them. In the same way, when you walk with Christ, there is a significant amount of conversation that takes place between you and Him: when you mess up, you confess it immediately… when troubles beset you, you dialogue with Christ about those problems… when you're in the throws of a decision, you confide with Him as to what you should do… and because He loves you and you love Him, you are constantly thanking for His presence and praising Him for His goodness and kindness to you. He is a part of every aspect of your life. John describes this life of faith as “abiding in Christ” (cf. Jn 15:1ff); that is, having intimate communion with Him and considering Him in all things… Paul describes it as “walking in the Spirit” (cf. Gal 5:16) and “letting the Word of Christ dwell in you richly” (cf. Col 3:16)… James (the blood brother of Jesus) describes it as “drawing near to God that He might draw near to you” (cf. Jam 4:8)… and Peter describes it as “applying all diligence to your faith” (cf. 2 Pet 1:5) and “growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (cf. 2 Pet 3:18).

Scripture tells us that “the righteous live by faith” (cf. Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38)… that is, believers are to live a life that esteems God's promises and is pleasing to Him (Heb 11:6); they are to highly regard the Lord's input into their lives — His voice is to be the dominant one in their minds; they are to be extremely sensitive to what God has to say to them… and that, beloved, is “faith.” “Loving others” is an expression of faith: it is a deep inner conviction that the person before you is greatly valued by God, and in need of His loving touch… so when we are humble before God (i.e., aware of our own need of mercy and grace), the Holy Spirit impresses upon our hearts the need to reach out and love those around us — such love is both purposeful and intentional. In the same manner, we “overcome temptation” by faith… when we are “beset with trials” we entrust our lives into God's care by faith… we have confidence that “God forgives us” by faith… we have confidence that “God truly loves us” by faith… we have confidence that “God will provide for every need we have in life” by faith… we have confidence in “our eternal destiny” by faith… we have confidence that God is superintending and “controlling every situation” in our lives by faith… we have confidence that “God's promises to us” are really absolutely true by faith. Let me once again remind you that without a “humble heart” we would not be able to approach life with a deep abiding confidence and assurance that God is working on our behalf… instead, doubt and despair would dominate the discourse in our minds. Why? because the opposite of a “humble heart” is a “proud heart,” and God is not gracious toward those who are the proud & unsubmitting — He only gives grace and strength to the humble. He actually resists/opposes (antitasso) is a military term) the proud; i.e., He becomes a formidable foe who actually “ranges in battle against them” because of their unwillingness to embrace the truth (cf. Jb 4:16; Jam 4:4, 6; 1 Pet 5:5).

The reality is, “we love because God first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10); without a genuine awareness of God's love for us, which is the foundation of our faith, we would not respond to others with love; though our actions might be the same (giving $20 to a poor person), they would not be nearly as effective as Spirit-empowered love; unless we are intimately abiding in Christ and His Word (i.e., we are intimately walking with God), we are simply acting in our own strength (cf. Jn 15:4-7). It is “Spirit-inspired living” (the essence of walking with Christ and true faith) to which God calls us (Gal 5:16). The reality is, most believers walk through life in their own strength… trying to be as good as possible… and hoping that God is somehow pleased with them… yet they seldom experience a “conscious awareness of God's presence in their life,” perhaps concluding that God essentially is a distant God… or that He is displeased with them… or that He is simply too busy to be occupied with them (imagine your child feeling that way about you as their parent); that is
a sad construct of faith, hence they live a life that is simply the inspiration of their own human, fleshly thinking, and Satan couldn't be happier. Living such a life could also be the result of believing that God is actually more deistic in His essence than personal; i.e., a God who is not relationally intimate with them. That is a lonely way for a believer to live; such thinking would cause him to walk alone in his own quiet little world, and fail to let the love of God impact his own life and the world around him. Sadly, that is how many believers walk thru life. The truth is, God wants to be such an intimate part of our lives that we become the hands, feet, eyes, ears and mouth of Jesus in this world as He lives His life in and through us (Gal 2:20), but that can only happen when we are **consciously aware of His intimate presence in our lives** (more on this later); such an awareness is a construct of genuine faith (truly believing that God has taken up residence in our lives and is intimately in love with us). When we live in such fashion **“we don’t love simply with words, we love in deed and truth in the power of the Spirit”** (cf. 1 Jn 3:16-18; 4:7-11; Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22-23).

**According to Scripture, we are to invest our lives in people** (can you think of another reason why God is keeping us on this planet? keep the Great Commandment in mind), for God’s sake and to His praise and in the power of the Spirit, and not simply give **“lip service”** to them. Christ **“dwells within us and wants to minister His love and grace through us to others”** (cf. Gal 2:20)... as such, it is not the **LAW** but **LOVE** that is to constrain our lives (2 Cor 5:14); when God is **consciously present** in our life (that’s what it means to walk with Him), His love is made manifest in and through us. **The great commandment is not that we obey God’s LAW, but that we LOVE Him and LOVE our fellow man** (Mt 22:36-39). It is important to note that **LOVE is not a feeling, but an action** – an active response to a particular situation that is inspired by the Holy Spirit... but if we are not walking with Him, our heart will not be sensitive to His leading, and we will simply assess everything according to the natural inclinations of our flesh. Our problem even as believers is that we generally let **“our fleshly feelings”** dominate the discourse that goes on in our minds, thus resulting in behavior that is fleshly-oriented vs. Spirit-oriented. It’s important to remember, the dynamic of the flesh is **“feeling,”** whereas the dynamic of the Spirit is **“faith”** (living in accord with the Word of God; i.e., with Christ and His Word). Incidentally, no where in Scripture are we ever commanded to **“feel”** anything, because our feelings and our emotions cannot be controlled – if we feel good, we feel good... if we feel sad, we feel sad... if we feel bad, we feel bad; that is just the way our fallen human psyche works. The good news is this – we can effectuate a change in our feelings and our emotions in the moment by **“controlling our thoughts and communing with God.”** Due to the fact our thoughts determine in large part how we feel, we need to control our thought-life (cf. 2 Cor 10:5; Col 3:2), and let God’s Words abide in us (cf. Jn 8:31-32; 15:7; Rom 12:2; Phil 4:8-9) — again, that is simply a fundamental construct of faith.

**During the days of Jesus’ ministry, “the LAW was prominent in Judaism.”** How so? Down through the ages God’s Law was misunderstood and wrongly interpreted by many in the Jewish community. During the days of Moses (some 1400 yrs before Christ), God had communicated the fact to His people that He was a **“HOLY GOD”** (read Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 21:8; Ex 3:5-6), and that He was to be **OBEYED;** not ignored. The most emphatic statement in all of Scripture is this: **“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts!”** (cf.Is 6:3; Rev 4:8); the triple redundancy makes it the most profound statement in all the Bible. So our understanding of God begins with the idea that God is a **HOLY GOD** – “in Him is no darkness at all” (cf. 1 Jn 1:5); “He dwells in unapproachable light” (cf. 1 Tim 6:16). There is nothing dark or unholy in God — every other quality of God rests upon that truth. That’s why God’s Spirit is called the **HOLY SPIRIT.** With that understanding
the religious leaders of Israel focused on **OBEYING GOD’S LAW**... so these men scoured the Pentateuch (all five books of Moses) and came up with a list of 613 different Laws (365 negative and 248 positive) — they are all written down in the Torah. Ultimately the Pentateuch became known as “The Books of the Law” or “The Mosaic Law.” Over the years the religious leaders of Israel debated the significance of all these laws and how each one should be interpreted (these rabbinic traditions are contained in the Talmud) — the problem was, they simply focused on the **“actions”** that were required (because that is what they believed the essence of the Law was)... and not the **“attitude”** of the individual’s heart. Judaism today has progressed to the point where they now believe that only the exceptionally wicked need fear judgment, that for the vast majority of people it will mean rewards — again, those are the kinds of deductions that **human beings** make (incidentally, many in the Christian community today have arrived at that same conclusion; so it matters not what Scripture emphatically states, it only matters what human reason will accept).

Let’s take a look Judaism’s understanding of the Law during the first century. Jesus told the people, “**Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My load is light**” (cf. Mt 11:29-30). **Judaistic Law** and its corresponding Pharisaical regulations during the time of Christ were not only a wearisome burden for the people, but an exhausting struggle that didn’t even result in salvation (read Mt 11:28; 12:1-14; 23:4; Rom 3:10-12); by contrast Jesus was encouraging His people to “**Come to Him and experience rest for their soul**” (cf. Mt 11:28). Jesus used the **“yoke”** that was put on animals for pulling heavy loads, as a metaphor for the discipline of discipleship; He was not identifying **“His yoke”** as **“compliance with the Law;”** be it, the Law of Moses or Judaistic Law (an inaccurate rendering of God’s Law). The **“Lord Jesus fulfilled the Law for us”** (read Rom 4:3-4; 8:3-4; Gal 3:1-6,11), because as human beings we are simply not capable of fulfilling it ourselves — all we bring to the table of salvation is **“SIN!”** (read Rom 3:21-28). **Our salvation is the person of Christ! Not obeying the Law! And rather than being rigid and harsh, Jesus is gentle and humble** (read Mt 11:28; 12:15-21; 18:1-10; 19:13-15); **He knows our frame and is mindful that we are but dust! His yoke is easy and His load is light — we trust Him to traverse all of the insurmountable hurdles for us! because we are not capable of doing it ourselves! That’s **“grace!”**” Beloved, as believers, we are not under the Law, but Grace! (read Rom 3:24; 5:20; 6:14).

As you will recall, Jesus frequently **“corrected”** the Pharisees erroneous understanding of the Law. For example, He explained to them, “You have heard that the ancients were told **‘You shall not commit MURDER,’** but I say to you that everyone who is **ANGRY** is guilty of murder.” You have heard it said, **‘You shall not commit ADULTERY,**’ but I say to you, if a person **LUSTS** in his heart after a woman he has committed adultery in his heart.” On several occasions Jesus differentiated between what they **thought** was obedience to the Law, and what obedience to the Law really was. With that said, His own disciples began to wonder who could possibly be saved (they were still legalistic in their thinking as well). Jesus responded, “**With men** [emphatic!] it is impossible, but with [emphatic!] God all things are possible” (Mt 19:25-26). The truth is, all of us as human beings are so diabolically sinful, we don't have the capacity within us to obey God’s Law; **thus salvation from beginning to end is the work of GOD!** All God asks of you and me is that we **“humble ourselves before Him”** (admitting our sinfulness and our helplessness). Reflect upon the story of the Pharisee and the tax-collector who went to the temple to pray — only the tax-collector left the temple **“justified”** (righteous) in God’s eyes, because he cried out to Him with these words, **“God be merciful to me the sinner”** (Lk 18:9-14). Scripture teaches over and over again that **God is opposed to the PROUD but gives grace to the HUMBLE** (cf. Lk 18:14; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). If you want
to experience God’s grace in your life, genuinely humble yourself before Him, being mindful of the fact that “He sympathizes with your weaknesses” (Heb 4:15), and that “He is mindful that you are but dust” (Ps 103:14).

As believers, God has called us to a “life of servitude” where the interests of others becomes our concern (cf. Rom 15:1-3; 2 Cor 5:17; Phil 2:4, 21). Regarding the various injunctions in Scripture “to love,” we are not to regard them as simply being actions that we need to take, because we will miss the whole significance of what it means to love. In order to grasp the significance of “loving,” everything we do is to be done “unto the Lord… not unto men” – let’s take a closer look at that difference: We are called to be “slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; doing everything unto the Lord and not men” (cf. Eph 6:6-7); obviously that’s a strange concept for most believers. Why don’t we do things as unto men? The truth is, if we do things unto men (rather than God), in all likelihood we will focus on their unworthiness, and probably conclude that they are undeserving; thus, our actions will become motivated by Law rather than Love. The issue of “love” is this: God loved us so much that He laid down His life for us in all our unloveliness (only God can love like that)… but if God loved us “that much,” then the least we can do is “love Him” in return; “so all of our love is to be an offering unto the Lord, which is our spiritual service of worship” (cf. Rom 12:1). In serving Christ, we are to “serve one another” (cf. Gal 5:13; 1 Pet 4:10), “but it is the Lord Christ whom we serve” (cf. Col 3:24)… “we serve a living and true God” (cf. 1 Th 1:9; Heb 9:14). Beloved, we were created in Christ Jesus for “good works” (cf. Eph 2:10).… why else would God leave us down here on this sick, sinful planet? By the way, when we get to heaven “we will serve Christ forever!” (cf. Rev 22:3) – the reality is, loving others is never going to cease in all eternity! so we may as well learn to love down here! While we live here on this planet, it is by faith that we fulfill Christ’s command to “love one another,” hence, it is by faith that we stop living for ourselves and “lovingly serve others” (Gal 5:13). Remember, the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “LOVE” (Gal 5:14). Paul in his corrective letter to the Galatians (many of whom were “legalists”), says that God is not looking for rituals or circumcision, but that He is looking for “a faith that loves” (Gal 5:6); not a faith that is idle, or a faith that merely believes in doctrinal truth, but a faith that manifests itself in unselfish service; a faith that is prompted by LOVE rather than LAW. In his letter to the church at Roman, Paul reminds us that “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5), thus making it possible for us to fulfill the law of God: “loving one another & loving our neighbor as ourselves” (cf. Gal 5:13-14), and this we do “by faith” (cf. Gal 5:6); trusting God to make it efficacious to the praise of His glory! Apart from Christ we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5). That is the correlation between faith and love.

So as believers we are exhorted to “love and serve others,” care for those in need (Jn 1:27), and look out after the interests of others (cf. Phil 2:4)… yet in doing so, there will be a price to pay because “love is sacrificial” – it will cost us time and resources and convenience and comfort and the denial of our own selfish interests. Hence, it should be quite obvious that such actions require “intentionality,” and will not happen if we do not “discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness” (cf. 1 Tim 4:7-8). As the apostle Paul told Timothy, “God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline” (cf. 2 Tim 1:7) – the word discipline literally means “to have soundness of mind,” therefore “discipline requires fighting the good fight of faith” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12); thus it will not happen if we refuse to give up living an unfaithful self-centered life. The night before Jesus went to the cross, He gave His disciples a “new commandment” (that is emphatic in Greek) – they were to “love one another,” and not have a spirit of rivalry (because
that would disrupt their mission); the attitude of love would be the bond that would keep them united in spirit and purpose. Jesus Himself had set the example for them to follow (cf. Jn 13:34)—love was to characterize the believing community—and that is precisely what happened in the first-century church; “genuine love” was an integral part of the church; believers truly cared for and loved one another. As stated earlier, believers held all things in common, and actually sold anything they owned to help those in need (cf. Acts 2:44-45; 4:32, 37; Jam 1:27; 1 Jn 3:23; 4:7, 11)... so the distinguishing mark of true discipleship was “love for fellow Christians.”

**We can make all the excuses in the world as to “why we can’t serve and love Christ;”** none of them are acceptable to God... even if we are restricted physically, we can still be prayer-warriors and encourage others by phone, etc. The writer of Hebrews understood full well the nature of man, and his reluctance to reach out to others, so he exhorts believers “to never stop assembling together, and never stop stimulating one another to love and good deeds and being an encouragement to each other” (Heb 10:24-25), because such a caring, others-oriented lifestyle is far more likely to occur when believers commune with other believers in the fellowship of God’s people; the truth is, most believers need to be pushed in this area. Beloved, at some point on your spiritual journey, you need to pick up the sword and fight the good fight of faith, and cease making excuses (if that defines you). Remember, “faith without works is useless” (Jam 2:20). Again, if loving and serving God is not the reason He has left us on this planet, what is the reason? Does your reason for existence differ from that of the unbelieving world? How does it differ? Following is a brief summation of what Scripture teaches regarding the issue of “servanthood.” It’s a topic that is mentioned numerous times throughout the New Testament. Carefully reflect upon some of the passages I have listed below; these are our marching orders:

- **Mt 22:39** — Love your neighbor as yourself.
- **Jn 13:34** — Love one another as believers in Christ.
- **Acts 1:8** — Be My witnesses to all the earth.
- **Rom 10:14** — How shall people come to faith if they are not told?
- **Rom 12:6-8** — Let each exercise his or her gifts accordingly.
- **1 Cor 4:1-2** — We are to be faithful stewards of God’s mysteries.
- **1 Cor 12:7** — We have been divinely gifted to serve others.
- **1 Cor 15:58** — Be steadfast, always abounding in God’s work.
- **2 Cor 1:4** — Comfort others in their affliction with God’s comfort.
- **2 Cor 5:10** — We will all appear before the judgment seat of Christ.
- **2 Cor 5:4-6** — As servants of God we may endure much hardship.
- **2 Cor 9:6-8** — He who sows sparingly shall reap sparingly.
- **Gal 5:6** — All that matters is “faith working through love.”
- **Gal 5:13** — Through love serve one another.
- **Gal 6:2** — Bear one another’s burdens and fulfill the law of Christ.
- **Gal 6:7** — Do not be deceived, what you sow you will reap.
- **Gal 6:9** — Do not lose heart and become weary in doing good.
- **Eph 6:6-7** — As slaves of Christ, do all things as unto the Lord.
- **Phil 2:3-4** — Regard others as more important than yourself.
- **Phil 4:13** — We can do all things thru Christ who strengthens us.
- **Col 3:23** — Do your work heartily as for the Lord, not for men.
Mt 25:45 — In as much as you did it to the least, you did it to Me.
1 Th 3:12 — Abound in love for one another and for all men.
2 Th 3:13 — Do not grow weary in doing good.
Titus 3:8 — Be careful to engage in good deeds.
Heb 10:24 — Stimulate one another to love and good deeds.
Jam 1:27 — Care for orphans and widows in their distress.
Jam 2:20 — Faith without works is useless.
Jam 4:17 — To know the right thing to do and not do it, that is sin.
1 Pet 4:10 — We have all received special gifts to “serve” others.
1 Jn 3:17-18 — Do not love with mere words, but in deed and truth.
1 Jn 4:7-8 — Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God and everyone who loves is born of God; the one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

So, where does one start if “being a servant” has not been a significant part of one’s life? Let me encourage you to start by making one day a week “a service day,” where you intentionally serve others as God leads you; if you are “open” to serving (i.e., open to being an instrument for God in this world), God will bring people into your life who have needs and He will use you to help meet those needs, even in the simplest most inconspicuous ways. Simply begin your service day by asking God to make you mindful of all that is going on around you… and make you sensitive to His leading… and that He would give you the grace to help meet people’s needs. Throughout the course of a day, you will need to be “conscious” of God’s call upon your life, and repeat this prayer at various intersections of your day; remember, such a lifestyle requires being consciously aware of Christ's presence in your life, which is completely contrary to the self-centered life of the flesh. Because of the reluctance of so many Christians to actively serve Christ in this world (for whatever reason), let me strongly encourage you to step out in faith and serve, no matter how small you think your faith is. Don't buy into Satan’s little argument that God can't use you because you’re such a spiritual wreck! If God can use a “donkey” to do His work (cf. Num 22:28), He can use you and me! By the way, should you choose to “consciously walk with God” throughout the course of a day, you will grow in your awareness of the following ten things — you will increasingly become:

1. Mindful of God’s involvement in your world
2. Mindful of God's presence in your life
3. Mindful of the needs of others in your life
4. Mindful of your self-centeredness and your need of confession
5. Mindful of the cost of serving others
6. Mindful of the steps you need to take to serve others
7. Mindful of the fruitful results of serving others
8. Mindful of the joy you experience when you serve others
9. Mindful of your level of commitment to loving and serving others
10. Mindful of your need to love and serve others every day of your life

One of the most profound thoughts regarding “serving others,” and rendering service unto the Lord, is the judgment scene of Matthew 25:31-46. The judge places the “sheep” on His right, and the “goats” on His left. The sheep are invited to enter into His glorious kingdom, whereas the unrighteous goats are separated from Him forever, and cast into everlasting fire. The “test”
is the care rendered to Him while they walked on this earth. To the sheep He will say, “I was hungry and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me drink; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was in prison and you came to Me; etc.” To which the sheep respond, “When did we see you hungry and feed You?” He will answer them saying, “To the extent that you did these things to even one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it to Me.” Conversely, to the goats He will say, “To the extent that you did not do these things even the least of these brothers of Mine, you did not do it to Me.” The issue is this: Jesus so intimately identifies with His people, that any action toward them, is action toward Him. When Paul was on the road to Damascus to ravage the church, bind its followers, and bring them back to Jerusalem, the Lord appeared to Him in a blinding light and said to him, “Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” (cf. Acts 9:1ff) – remember, Paul’s name prior to his conversion was Saul – and Saul responded, “Who art Thou, Lord?” And He said to him, “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting.” Again, we see Jesus closely identifying with His people. By the way, can you imagine the absolute devastation that Paul must have felt that day when Jesus spoke to him? Here he was, a persecutor of God’s people (cf. 1 Cor 15:9-10; Eph 3:8; 1 Tim 1:15-16), yet God graciously brings him into the fold – as Charles Wesley put it, “How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?” Think about it – how can it be? Whatever actions are done to God’s people are done to Christ. In spite of the fact that we can’t fully grasp this concept, that is the reality; as autonomous self-centered human beings, such intimacy is simply beyond us. The key to serving & loving others is to recognize the significance of that person in God’s eyes… that our service is the equivalent of doing it unto Christ Himself! That God identifies so intimately with us is simply beyond us, especially in light of the fact that we are so sinful… that God truly loves and cares for us is beyond words and too wonderful for us to conceive; in the psalmist’s words, “It is too high for us, we cannot attain to it” (cf. Ps 139:8; Rom 11:33; Job 42:3).

Walking Humbly with God by Faith

As believers “we are to walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8). As stated earlier, the concept of humility literally signifies “lowness or lowness of mind” — the opposite of thinking highly of oneself (Phil 2:3; 1 Pet 5:5). Though in classical writings humility was despised as being servile, it is highly virtuous in biblical teaching: Abraham, the progenitor of faith (Rom 4:1-5), said of himself before God, “I am but dust and ashes” (Gen 18:27)… Moses “was more humble than any man on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3)… David, the man after God’s own heart, said of himself, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Ps 51:3), and “God Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust” (Ps 103:14). Isaiah, the prince of prophets, said of himself, “Woe is me, for I am ruined! I am a man of unclean lips” (Is 6:5)… Jeremiah, the prophet to God’s people when they were taken into Babylonian captivity, said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer 17:9). Jesus said of John the Baptist, “No one born of women is greater than him” (Mt 11:11); the baptizer said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (Jn 3:30-30) — beloved, is that your theology of thought? The Apostle Paul said of himself, “In me dwells no good thing; that is, in my flesh” (Rom 7:18). James, the blood brother of Jesus said, “We all stumble in many ways” (Jam 3:2). In like manner, the Apostle John said, “If we say we don’t sin, we make God a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 Jn 1:10). The reality is this — man has nothing to boast of in and of himself, thus “humility of heart is the bedrock of faith” (Rom 3:27; Eph 2:8-9). The model Christ presented to us was the unselfconscious humility of a child” (prayerfully reflect upon that — read Mt 18:1-4), and an example of it in “selfless service” (Jn 13:1-17;
Lk 22: 24-27) – in all ministry for Christ, the underlying keynote is “humility” (cf. 1 Pet 5:3-6; Lk 17:10). Consider each of the following passages on humility:

- **Ex 10:3** – God to Pharaoh: “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me?
- **Ezra 8:21** – “We humbled ourselves before God to seek a safe journey from Him.”
- **Mic 6:8** – “What does the Lord require of you? That you walk humbly with your God.”
- **2 Chron 7:14** – “If My people will humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will forgive their sin and heal their land.”
- **Ps 25:9** – “God teaches the humble His way.” He doesn’t teach the proud His way.
- **Ps 37:11** – “The humble will inherit the land.” (Mt 5:5) Not the proud.
- **Prv 11:2** – “With the humble there is wisdom.” There is none with the proud.
- **Prv 15:33** – “Before honor comes humility.” (Prv 18:12) Without humility there is no honor.
- **Is 66:2** – “To this one will I look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit.” Not the proud.
- **Matt 11:29** – Jesus said, “Learn from Me… I am gentle and humble in heart.” Not proud.
- **Matt 23:12** – “Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; the humble will be exalted.”
- **Eph 4:2** – “Walk in a manner worthy of your calling, with all humility… and love.”
- **Phil 2:3** – “Do nothing from selfishness, but with humility of mind serve others.”
- **Col 3:12-14** – “Put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility… and love.”
- **Jam 1:21** – “With humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your soul.”
- **Jam 4:6** – “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”
- **1 Pet 3:8** – “Let all be harmonious, sympathetic, kindhearted, and humble in spirit.”
- **1 Pet 5:5-7** – “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble. Humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all of your anxieties on Him, because He cares for you.”

**Humility is a matter of having a “right attitude” before God:** that is, having a “right mindset” before Him: agreeing with Him that things are what they really are – any other conclusion would simply be a “distortion of reality.” The reason we fail to see things as they really are is because we are “fallen creatures” – our minds were “darkened at the fall” when sin alienated us from God. At the fall, we not only experienced “physical death,” but “spiritual death” as well – separation from God. Paul put it this way: “we were children of darkness, dead in our trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1)… but when we humbled ourselves before God and admitted our condition, “God made us alive together with Christ, because of His great mercy and love for us” (Eph 2:4-5). Due to the fact “indwelling sin” still abides in us as His children, we are continually challenged by its input in our hearts and minds; thus we frequently buy into dark thoughts – therefore, we are inclined to think that we are better than we are… stronger than we are… and more deserving than we are. The only way to properly recalibrate our minds is to humbly feed upon God’s Word that it might supplant the perverted attitude that exists in our hearts (Jam 1:21) – remember, “we are transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Heb 12:2). Just because we are believers doesn’t mean we automatically see everything in its proper light; our diabolical flesh is a very dark powerful presence in our lives; one with which we must continually contend (Gal 5:17) – and therein is the rub: “we must fight the good fight of faith in our hearts & minds” (1 Tim 6:12), which essentially is “a war against our flesh and the spiritual forces of darkness” (Gal 5:16-17; Eph 6:12).… and to foolishly claim that this battle is fairly easily won is nonsense — that would be like saying the cross was easy.
It is also important to recognize that as human beings “we are each totally unique,” with our own strengths & weaknesses and our own set of issues & problems. Just as some of us suffer from significant physical infirmities and others do not, some of us suffer from significant mental conditions and others do not… yet none of us are remotely close to possessing physical or mental perfection. We are all fallen creatures and our differences as human beings are extremely wide-ranging – we not only don’t look alike, our personalities are different, our skill-sets are different, and we each suffer from a myriad of internal conditions due to the fall (contrary to how wonderful we may appear to be to other people). The ultimate truth is, there is no such thing as human perfection or a generic human being; that’s right, we are all atypical. Furthermore, God created each one of us in the womb with vastly different qualities and predispositions (cf. Ps 119:73: 139:13-14; Is 44:24). In addition to that, we were all raised in different families and experienced vastly different upbringings… we were all raised in different cultures and indoctrinated into different philosophies of life and values… some of us were unfairly mistreated and abused in life and have experienced significant psychological damage, and as a result we have a very difficult time understanding ourselves and reconciling all that has happened to us, even as believers. I find it interesting that many Christians judge others as if we are all essentially the same; we are not. The differences between us can be immense, yet we are often taught to believe that our commonality overrides all of our differences, that there is a “generic concept” that adequately defines us all. That’s a very troubling deduction for many people, because it ignores many of the troubling deficiencies that define them. Sadly, when “spiritual realities” are preached from the pulpit, they often ignore the uniqueness of the individual, and preach a “one size fits all” doctrine. The reality is this: “some believers have a far more difficult road to travel in life than other believers;” we are not all the same… “there is no generic understanding of the human family”… we are all totally unique individuals. Though we are all sinful human beings (that broad definition is basically the extent of our commonality), exactly what that looks like in each of us is “radically different.” All of us have certain psychological and emotional issues, and as painful and frustrating as they may be, we may never overcome them in life… some believers are victims of extreme mental anguish, others are mentally retarded, and still others are so psychotic and schizophrenic that you wonder what planet they were born on. Whatever our physical health and mental disposition may be, God asks us to live with ourselves, foibles and all, and do our best to overcome them, and trust the Lord in spite of them. Beloved, regardless of the extent of our fallen condition, with all of its serious deficiencies (remember, we are fallen creatures who live in a seriously fallen world), God is glorifying Himself in and through us — that is simply the wonder and greatness of our God (cf. Is 45:5-7; 46:9-11; 55:8-11; 64:8;Jer 32:17, 27; Rom 11:33-36; Col 1:16). One verse in particular stands out to me: “Behold, I am the LORD, the God of all flesh; is anything too difficult for Me?” (cf. Jer 32:27) — let that verse settle deep in your heart.

Let’s look at the bigger picture for a moment… Scripture tells us that “as believers we were all chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world” (cf. Eph 1:4; Mk 13:20; 2 Th 2:13; Col 3:12; 2 Tim 2:10; Titus 1:1; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 17:14)… to somehow think that we assessed all of the evidence and came to the right conclusion by deductive reasoning is nonsense; if that is truly the case, why were we blessed with such incredible reasoning ability and others were not? or are we a product of chance in some way, where we just happened to be in the right place at the right time, and were fortunate to have a right attitude at the right moment? Such conclusions are not only contrary to what Scripture emphatically teaches, but contrary to divine sovereignty and the resultant effect of the fall – how so? because one would be making the construct of faith a deduction of fallen human reasoning, thus insisting that we were not in complete darkness after the fall, but still had an degree of light and goodness in us whereby we could still discern the truth and see things as they really are (cf. Jn
1:4; 3:19-20; 8:12; 12:46; Rom 1:21; 3:10-12, 18; Eph 4:18; 1 Pet 2:9; 1 Jn 1:5). Jesus very emphatically told His disciples, “You (emphatic) did not choose Me, but I (emphatic) chose you, and appointed you, that you should go and bear fruit” (cf. Jn 15:16, 19; Jn 6:70; Acts 1:2; 9:15; 10:41). Carefully reflect upon those words: “you did not choose Me.” God’s sovereign choice has been the modus operandi of heaven from the very beginning – be it His selection of Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Jonah, Isaiah, Job, Jeremiah, Paul, all the judges, prophets & apostles, and the entire believing community (cf. Gen 12:1-3; Ex 3:10ff; 2 Sam 6:21; 1 Kg 8:16; 1 Chron 28:4; Neh 9:7; Ps 78:70; Jer 1:5; Ezek 20:5; Acts 9:11ff; and 9:15). As the Creator of all things (space, mass, time & life), “does it actually sound strange to you that God had a plan?” What would really be a stretch of human reasoning is to believe that the Eternal, Omniscient One did not have a plan – that He somehow “created everyone with an equal chance of making the right decision (i.e., it was all man’s doing), and letting the chips fall where they may.” To conclude such is to then deny the advantage that some people clearly have. To wrestle with the truth that your salvation was totally the work of God (beginning to end) is to ultimately ignore the eternal omniscience of God and His rightful sovereignty over all that He does (cf. 1 Tim 6:15-16) – if this eternal reality is a difficult truth for you to accept, let me encourage you to study the concept of “eternity” (in contrast to that which is “temporal”); wrestling with those two realities will help put this issue in its proper perspective. Remember, nothing existed but the Transcendent Eternal One (GOD) before anything else came into being, and everything that has come into being (space, mass, time & life), came into being through Him (cf. Jn 1:1-4; Gen 1:1-2:1; Ps 90:2; 102:25; Is 45:18) – in actuality, God spoke everything into existence; and as He planned it, so is it (cf. 2 Kg 19:25; Is 14:24, 27; 22:11; 37:26; 46:10-11; 55:8-11; 59:21; Ps 138:8). In choosing us to be His eternal children, God made us sensitive to the truth and to His call upon our lives… and in so doing “we humbly responded to Him in faith believing that He indeed is God, and a rewarder of those who seek Him” (cf. Heb 11:6); this was not something that we could conjure up on our own. It should be obvious – unless God gives us the grace to believe, we would not believe… unless God opens our heart to the truth of our sinful condition and our need of a Savior, we would not respond to His love (cf. Acts 16:14) – that is simply the process whereby every believer comes to know and accepts the truth: when we heard His Word (either spoken or written), He made our heart sensitive to it, and we believed it (that's faith)… He didn’t “force” us to believe it – we “chose” to believe it under the enlightening inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the fact “we are created beings,” Scripture (GOD) asks this question: “Shall the thing that is molded say to the molder, Why did you make me like this?” (Rom 9:20). “Does not the potter have a right over the clay?” (Rom 9:21). “Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay?” “Shall the clay say to the potter, What are you doing?” (cf. Is 29:16; 45:9; Jer 18:1ff). The reality is, we are each the product of God’s hands – though our humanity may struggle with accepting that fact, that does not invalidate it; insisting that it not be so does not make it irrelevant. The truth is, “God formed our inward parts, and made us who we are in our mother’s womb” (Ps 139:13)... “as such, we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (cf. Ps 139:14). In addition to all of the positive characteristics we possess (including spiritual gifts), we all have a number of negative characteristics (idiosyncrasies) as well; which is simply the result of living in a fallen universe (God didn’t make us perfect in our mother’s womb). With that said, God would have each of us live with all of the different characteristics that are a part of who we are, to the praise of His glory (Jn 9:1-3). The reality is, “God asks each of us to live with a number of negative challenges in life;” though some of us have exceedingly more than others, God has willed that we possess the ones that we have (Jn 21:21-22)... so walking with Christ and living with our sinful flesh and all of our
idiosyncrasies and weaknesses is what life is all about on this planet… obviously it is no utopia; God never intended it to be one (that is simply not the way He designed the economy under which we live), and if your goal in life is to make it one, He is going to rain on your little parade and disillusion you. So when we try to make our life “a wonderful little paradise,” which is what most believers try to do, God is not going to let that happen, because that is not the reason we live on this planet (cf. Mt 6:25-34; Lk 12:15-34; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:1, 12; 5:10). There’s no such thing as “heaven on earth.”

Always keep in mind, “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts; neither are His ways our ways: as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are His ways higher than our ways” (cf. Is 55:8-9). To argue to the contrary not only makes God less than He really is (the only sovereign in all the universe), but leads one into a foolish, mindless state of existence. In actuality, everything we possess (be it physical, mental or spiritual) was given to us by God… thus everything we have belongs to God (it is only our insistence on “personal autonomy” that makes us rebel so strongly against “the law of submission”)… the truth is, there is absolutely nothing in all creation that God does not own (cf. Ps 24:1; 88:11; 135:6; Prv 3:19); it is only our fallen nature that insists on thinking and acting to the contrary — the reality is, we are simply “stewards” of “God’s possessions” (cf. Gen 1:27-28; 2:15-17; Lk 16:2; 1 Cor 4:1-2; 1 Pet 4:10). As stated earlier, take a look at everything you possess, and consciously reflect upon the truth that “none of it is yours, it all belongs to God” — seeing things as they really are doesn’t happen without deliberate thought; so take a few moments and carefully reflect upon several items that God has entrusted to you (your car, furniture, clothes, appliances, tools, your bank account & your wedding ring; then consider a number of seemingly cheap insignificant things), and look at each of them as truly belonging to God — that’s the perspective that God wants us to have in life. Though that is a very sober truth, it is one that is very calming and humbling… one that actually takes away the anxiety in one’s soul and brings a genuine, grateful perspective to one's life… after reflecting upon several different items, then thank God for His kindness to you and His wise bestowment upon your life (regardless of the perceived quality of that which He has entrusted to you). With that understanding, you will neither glory in your perceived greatness, or grieve over your perceived smallness… because truth truly sets you free to be the person God wants you to be.

Remember the words of the apostle Paul: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” The sad reality is — the most gifted among us are the most proud — they actually think that in some way they are the product of their own genius and the work of their own hands. “What about all of our own efforts?” they say. The Lord reminds us that “He determines what we reap” (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; Ps 37:23; Jer 10:23), and that “He is the One who gives us the power to make wealth” (cf. Deut 8:18); thus not even our accomplishments are of our own making. Ask yourself these questions: Are you a good athlete? who do you think gave you your athletic ability? Are you smart? who do you think designed your brain? Are you good looking? who do you think determined your looks? Are you good at some particular craft? who do you think gave you your skill-set? Everything you possess in life is the creation of God — you are not the self-made man you might be inclined to think (cf. Dan 4:30-37; Is 10:5-19); so whatever your lot in life may be, do not boast as if it is of your own doing, or despise it because it is so displeasing and unsatisfying to you. It is important that every believer look at themselves in a mirror and reflect upon all of their perceived assets (look at your hands, your feet, your arms, your legs, your face, your hair, your skin, your entire anatomy… and try to think that it is not you, but merely those tangible and intangible things that God has entrusted to you, and has so decreed that you walk through life and serve Him with them in this world)… then tell yourself
that “you are not what you see;” rather, that all of your traits are simply things God has given to you for His purposes and His glory. The reality is: the real you is “your personhood” … “your immortal soul” … that which shall one day be in heaven. That is the “you” with which God would have you be occupied… not all the other traits and characteristics that are to be used in caring for and serving others, and fulfilling God’s purposes in this world. Furthermore, why would one “glory” in something that is passing away? things like one’s body or some worldly possessions? (cf. Mt 6:19; 19:21-24; 1 Tim 6:9-12; Prv 23:4-5). Jesus tells us, “where our heart is there our treasure is also” (Mt 6:19-21). Beloved, don’t ignore the reality of that statement. Essentially, the “true you” involves your character and your life – not the other stuff; all of the other stuff will be jettisoned before you enter into glory… the other stuff is going to pass away… it simply has a “temporal purpose” in God’s plan for your life here on this planet… so don’t make it what it is not.

God in His wisdom has given you the wherewithal to be His servant in this world… you are to be a steward of all He has given to you. The word “stewardship” in Greek (oikonomia) means “the management of a household” (cf. Lk 16:1-8; Mt 20:8; Lk 12:42). The idea that man is a steward of God is inherent in the creation story in which man is appointed lord of all things except himself (cf. Gen 1-3). The chief requirement of a steward is that he be “faithful” to God’s call upon his life (cf. 1 Cor 4:2)… so we are to serve Him in whatever way He has blessed us, and be generous with all He has given to us; because what was given to us was not given to us to just selfishly use for our own pleasure. Should we refuse to walk in His ways and serve others in life. Scripture tells us that there will come a day when we will seriously regret that choice (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15)… though heaven is a certainty for every believer, many will be shamefully humbled right before they enter into it (read 1 Jn 2:28) – the word translated “have confidence” in that verse means “to be able to speak;” thus the idea being expressed is that those believers who fail to abide in Christ in this life will be “embarrassingly speechless” when they appear before Christ, and will not even be able to look at Him because of the unfaithful way in which they lived life. Therefore, because they failed to humbly obey God here below, they will be seriously humbled before entering into the eternal state (heaven); remember, there is no glorification without humiliation. Beloved, those are some very sober thoughts: I can’t imagine standing before the Lord when He returns and “shamefully shrink away from Him because of the unfaithful way in which I selfishly lived life.” The question for the believing community is this: how can we be so negligent with the life God has given to us? as if the cross essentially has no temporal relevance? Listen to the words of Jesus: “The faithful and sensible steward is the one who does the will of God – everyone who has been given much shall much be required” (cf. Lk 12:42-48; Mt 25:14-30). Every believer needs to ask himself this question: “Why did God give me the resources that I have been blessed with?” Says Paul, “It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy” (cf. 1 Cor 4:2). Beloved, those are very sobering words; life is not just a big party for us to selfishly enjoy to the max and live life our own way – that is not the reason why we exist; that's the reason unbelievers exist (how can you possibly deduce that that is your reason for existence, if indeed you have? I grieve for you if you have); the truth is, we have been given the responsibility to love and care for other people.

The question the infidel asks is this: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” And God’s response is, “Yes, you are!” (cf. Gen 4:9; Mt 25:35-36; Lk 10:30-37; 1 Jn 3:17-18). The typical human response is to try and escape that responsibility – because men are fallen, sinful creatures they will simply argue till the moon stops shining to get out of doing their part! Here’s how they argue: “I'm too busy! I’m too tired! I've got other responsibilities!” “I didn't cause that problem so why do I have to help?” “Why can’t someone else help?” Dearly beloved, it doesn't take very much thinking to see how
diabolical we are as human beings... sadly, even believers are pretty selfish creatures, and that is precisely the “basis” of God’s judgment. Carefully reflect upon the following: God entrusts some people with much for the purpose of helping those who have little; by the way, this is all in accord with God’s divine plan — you are aware (are you not?) that you could have been one of those who was given little (would you have preferred that?). Everything you have been entrusted with has been given to you that you might care for and serve others — that is the Great Commandment! (cf. Mt 22:36-39). How long are you going to continue making excuses (if indeed you are doing so) for your indolent behavior? The reality is this: God is ultimately going to reward every person according to his loving deeds or his unloving deeds (read Mt 25:14-46); the reality is, either you are responding with love in a given situation, or you are not responding with love; those are the only two options. Carefully consider for a moment what the word “responsibility” means — essentially it means “responding according to one’s ability.” God has given all of us certain abilities and He asks us to respond accordingly. With that said, “Are you a responsible child of God?” Why not? What is it that keeps you on the sidelines? Beloved, the question begs asking and answering. Let me put it this way, you are aware, are you not, “that your love for God is revealed in how much you love others?” The reality is, if you show very little love for others, it simply means you really don’t love God that much (carefully read Jn 14:15, 21, 23; Jn 15:10; 1 Jn 3:16-18; 4:7-13, 20; 5:3). Beloved, the foregoing isn’t a bunch of quacky rhetoric; it is the unequivocal truth of Scripture.

Regarding “spiritual progress,” the progress one person makes might be radically different than the spiritual progress another person might make, and the reality is, these differences are often imperceptible from a believer’s perspective. In Matthew 13 when the Lord was explaining “the parable of the tares” to His disciples, He told them that it is often difficult to distinguish between tares (unbelievers) and wheat (believers), “therefore allow them both to grow together until the harvest at the end of the age” (Mt 13:28-30, 36-43). With that said, for those of you who are inclined to “pass judgment on the spirituality of others,” there’s an old Indian proverb that addresses it well — “one should not judge another person until he has walked in his shoes;” the reality is, we have no idea of the path a particular person may have walked in life to get to where they are now. Since some of us may have been given a “gold spoon” in life... that is, we were raised in a beautiful, loving Christian home, lived in a trouble-free environment, we were attractive, smart, sociable, gifted, friendly and kind, and we placed our trust in Christ at a very young age — one could deduce that we ended up on a spiritual scale of one-to-ten at about “seven” as a teenager in high school! conversely, someone who may have suffered from excruciating problems in life may have ended up on a scale of one-to-ten at “three” at the very end of their life (just to help bring understanding to this little scenario, these ratings are established by a special vote of believers); yet this person may have made far more progress in life than the person who was raised with the gold spoon. The truth is, there is no way to make a comparison — how would you compare the lives of John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, Mary the mother of Jesus, Zaccheus, the woman at the well, Mary Magdalene, the man born blind in John 9, the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts 8, the Centurion Cornelius of Acts 10, and the business woman Lydia of Acts 16 — they all have radically different stories and lived radically different lives, even though they were all essentially raised in the same culture! There is simply no way to judge fellow believers... because we know nothing of all the internal issues that is an integral part of who they are, their giftedness, or their life’s experiences... as such, we simply leave all of that in God’s hands (the Genius who made us).

Furthermore, we don’t live in some kind of sanctified utopia (not even as believers); we live a very ugly fallen world that God isn’t going to eradicate until the last trump, and we are called to
live with the complexities of this diabolical world; all the while inhabiting sinful flesh. Whatever your situation in life may be (be it fairly good or painfully difficult), the good news is, “God knows all the peculiarities & quintessential dynamics of your life” (cf. Ps 139:13; 138:8; Is 55:11; Jer 29:11). He has a plan for you that is completely unique — no one else in all of history has ever traveled the road He has assigned to you. You may be a one talent man or a many talent man (cf. Mt 25:14ff)… your giftedness had nothing to do with your meritting it in any way, or God loving you because you are inherently better than someone else… it was all simply God's sovereign choice. God isn't into comparing you with someone else, or judging you by some universal norm; everyone's life stands alone in its uniqueness — though all believers are on the same team, we all play a different position, and we all have a different cross to bear (consider Jesus’ words to Peter in John 21:22).

Beloved, whoever you are, God accepts you just as you are, warts and all (as confusing as that may seem to you); He simply wants you to put your hand in His hand and walk with Him thru life (as challenging as that may be), and share your heart with Him at every intersection of life. Don't focus on others and who they are, or the dark input of the world around you… simply focus on Christ and let His Word radiate in your heart and encourage you in your walk. Don't even think about being a people pleaser; that's a dead-end street. It is this construct of faith that needs to give definition to your life. Embrace it and let it bring joy to your heart! You are God's creation! Don't for one moment look down upon yourself and the body that God has given you to inhabit — by the way, you are simply a “steward” of that body and all the traits God has given to you… technically they are not yours; they belong to the One who made you; so view them with different eyes. Don't begrudge God's call upon your life, as painful and unique as it may be! God doesn't make mistakes! Everything was designed with a purpose in mind. Reflect upon what Jesus said to His disciples: “Many who are first will be last, and the last, first” (Mt 19:30). Here's something to think about: will God make the ugly duckling in this world one of the most beautiful creatures in the life hereafter? I have a feeling He will. Reflect upon God's words to Isaiah: “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways. My ways: My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts… the words which go forth from My mouth shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Is 55:8-11; Ps 138:8; Rom 9:21). Beloved, at some point on your journey of faith you need to turn the reigns of your life over to God, and let Him be GOD. Anything else will simply bring frustration and discouragement to your life. Remember, we are God's creatures living in God's universe — He is the One who has established the economy under which we live: fight it and your life will be miserable; accept it and you will know His peace (the complete absence of anxiety; what more could one want?). God determines what you reap in life (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21; Is 14:27; Gal 6:7). So in living life, it is always best to keep the “bigger picture” in mind.

Humility causes us to approach God with “transparent honesty” (it hides nothing). It is not a matter of “being embarrassed” because we're so spiritually deficient — that is simply the reality of who we really are. Little kids don't get embarrassed when they poop in their pants or fall down when they're trying to walk; again, that is simply who they are (young, immature human beings). Obviously with growth, they will eventually overcome many of their childish behaviors, but they will never completely conquer all their imperfections because of the “fallen nature” that is a part of the very fabric of their being; the truth is, no one reaches perfection in this life. To our consternation, it is this fallenness with which God asks us as believers to live. With that in mind, here is how we should “humbly” approach God — we should simply articulate things to God as they really are, and not try and put things in a better light — THINGS ARE WHAT THEY ARE! Would you
want your little child to be “dishonest with you” about things that are going on in his life? Well, you need to be open and honest with God about what’s going on in your life. Take a moment and reflect upon what was going on in the “Upper Room” when Jesus met with His disciples the night before He went to the cross — the disciples had just finished arguing among themselves which of them was “the greatest” (Lk 9:46ff; 22:24ff; Mt 20:26ff; Mk 9:35; 10:43); a concept that was totally foreign to human thinking. He then proceeded to serve them by “washing their feet” (Jn 13:5ff), thus humbling them even further. Imagine the humiliation you would feel if a person of high esteem bent down and washed your dirty feet — it would be very humbling — now imagine the Lord Jesus stooping to wash your dirty feet; is it any wonder why Peter initially refused? (Jn 13:5ff); this was the function of a servant in that culture. After such a profoundly humiliating moment for them, Jesus then informed them that “one of them would betray Him” (Jn 13:18f) — the silence in that room must have been deafening… “at this point each of the disciples began to fear and wonder if they were the one” (cf. Mt 26:21-22; Jn 13:22). To their credit, they each finally come to the end of their egos… their primary concern was now “the possibility of their own individual culpability” — hence, here they were at long last “demonstrating signs of genuine humility and self-distrust…” they were all now aware of the profound nature of their own inherent sinfulness. It is just such humility that must characterize the heart of every believer; we are not spiritual giants with incredible strength and stamina; contrary to what our deepest desires may be, we are all fallen sinful human beings whom God has redeemed and are continually in need of His mercy and grace. It is very disconcerting to think that many churches actually preach the need for believers to love themselves more and have a higher level of confidence in themselves; yet nothing could be further from the truth — life isn't about us, it's about God! It's not about how wonderful we are, it's about how wonderful God is! Though we may want to think good about ourselves, that is not the reality; only God is good (cf. Lk 18:19). When human thinking controls the day, beloved, we are in trouble… though we are a forgiven people, we still inhabit sinful flesh and are still an extremely needy people — so come down off your high horse.

In the midst of any temptation, “we need to humbly admit our own spiritual deficiency;” that is, we need to agree with God that we don’t have what it takes to stand in our own strength; that without His grace and His intervention in our life we will fail (cf. Jn 15:5). No matter how vigorously we may argue to the contrary, that is the reality. Furthermore, it is not a matter of being embarrassed because of our deficiency, or apologetic because of how terribly inadequate we are; again, that is simply the reality of who we are. Consider the quadriplegic, should he be embarrassed because of his condition? Should the polio victim in a wheel chair be apologetic because of his condition? Of course not, that is simply the reality of who they are. Likewise, as fallen human beings “we are all totally deficient in and of ourselves” (cf. Is 64:6; Jer 17:9; Eph 4:22); “there is nothing good in our flesh” (Rom 7:18). So why do we argue to the contrary? One of the major reasons we struggle with accepting this reality, is that we simply identify sin as being actions that are overtly evil (lying, stealing, profanity, adultery, murder) — though those actions are indeed sinful, Scripture tells us that “anything that is not of faith is sin” (cf. Rom 14:23); thus thinking thoughts that are contrary to the will of God is sin, and disregarding God’s input into our lives is sin — in short, sin is an inward condition of the soul that refuses to submit to God… essentially it is a matter of having a self-centered orientation in life (which is the resultant effect of the fall). So it is our narrow definition of sin that obscures the fact that we are totally deficient.” Like the disciples,
we simply need to humbly admit our condition, and jettison the idea that we are really “wonderful, sweet little creatures;” there is nothing in us that merits applause… any other conclusion is simply delusional. Beloved, this is the essence of “divine truth” – to argue with it is complete folly – the truth is, “a lack of confidence in ourselves is where true spirituality begins.” To quote Micah the prophet: “What does the Lord require of you? That you walk humbly with your God!” (Mic 6:8). We are to continually walk in humility, and not act as if our inherent sinfulness was a condition that only characterized us at salvation… because it still characterizes us!

There is no room for “self-confidence” in the Christian life! Recall the experience of the apostle Peter – “he felt he had the wherewithal in him to pledge his loyalty to Christ!” Jesus humbled him and gently told him, “Peter, this very night you will deny Me three times” (Mt 26:31-35). When God (in a sense) let go of the reins of Peter’s life, He let Peter live in his own power and his own strength, and he fell (cf. Jn 15:5); just like you and I do when God takes His hands off of the reins of our lives. God in His omniscience knows best… as such there are times when He lets us fall to keep us ever mindful of our inherent sinfulness and complete lack of strength… it is only in the school of life that we learn this incredibly important lesson – though it’s a sober instructor, it is an effective one. Just to keep everything in proper perspective, you and I have not walked on water as Peter did… so we can disrobe ourselves of any garment of pride that somehow thinks that we possess greater spirituality than what Peter had. The reality was this: Peter had simply not yet arrived at a full understanding of his own inadequacy… it was only through his painful, soul-wrenching denial of the Lord Jesus that he came to see himself for who he really was. You’ll notice, Jesus didn’t get angry with Peter for his arrogance and self-confidence. Why would He? Peter was only being the person he was. Should Peter have been embarrassingly apologetic because of his condition? No, again, that was simply who he was — a fallen human being just like you and me. The wonderful news is, in spite of our fallen condition God loves us with an everlasting love! As long as you insist on having a “self-focus” in life, God’s love for you isn’t going to be that significant in your thinking. Incidentally, God doesn’t love us because we are lovely (as many are inclined to think); He loves us because “He is love” (cf. 1 Jn 4:16, 19), and it is that incredible reality that will ultimately transforms us into the image of His Son (not our own brilliance, beauty or righteousness). As the British hymn writer Charles Wesley said, “How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?” The key to living the Christian life is to never lose sight of two facts – who you really are (a redeemed sinner, but still a sinner nonetheless), and who God really is (the only sovereign, loving, redemptive God of creation – He is both our life and our righteousness).

There are actually two ways in which we as fallen creatures erroneously view ourselves – there are those who glory in their greatness and goodness (which is the epitome of delusion), and there are those who wallow in their sinfulness and maliciously denigrate themselves… obviously, both positions are wrong. Scripture tells us that we are to simply confirm the reality of our sinful condition; that is, humbly admit who we really are, and not disavow the reality of it and somehow conclude that because we are now Christians we have been made “good.” Though we have been made “holy” unto the Lord (i.e., “set apart unto the Lord for His purposes”), and will one day fully reflect the moral character and perfection of Christ when we enter into His presence in heaven… that is not yet the case; such is still a future reality. It should be obviously apparent at this point on our spiritual journey, that none of us come close to perfection; furthermore, there isn’t one thing we can do to change the essence of our sinful flesh – God is not even going to do that… at the very end of our life He is simply going to jettison it; God never redeemed our sinful flesh. What God calls us to do is simply admit our condition and turn from our self-serving orientation in life, and
put our eyes on Christ (Heb 12:2; Eph 4:22-24); that is, make Christ our focus in life. By the way, when we navigate through life with a “self-focus,” we no longer walk in faith… and “sin” becomes the chief construct of our life (Jn 15:5; Rom 14:23); the resultant effect is a very conflicted life. Is it difficult for one to acknowledge his true condition? Perhaps in some strange way, but once we truly admit it, the truth of that admission brings an incredible peace to the soul (via the Holy Spirit), and we are set free from the bondage of diabolical thinking, and no longer have to walk through life pretending to be what we are not — good. Again, compare the spiritual stature of a believer to the physical stature of one who is born crippled — for the crippled person to beat himself up because of his condition is nuts! He was born that way! Should he pretend to not be crippled?

Obviously, Satan is going to do everything he can to use “our deplorable condition” to his advantage, and keep us focused on all the junk in our life (which essentially is what it means to have a “self-focus” in life); but that doesn’t mean that we counter his argument by telling him and ourselves that we are not that bad a person! that we are actually a pretty good person! We're not! And we don’t need to apologize for it! Again, that would be like apologizing for having a terminal disease that we were born with! (cf. Ps 51:5-6). Incidentally, our sinfulness can all be traced back to the dark deceitful work of Satan in the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:1ff). The reality is, if we weren’t so much into “feeling good about ourselves” (and who we really are in & of ourselves), we probably wouldn’t be so gullible on this issue; but that’s the operative reality that governs so much of our lives. Regrettably, many churches in our country today teach their parishioners that they aren’t as bad or sinful as Satan makes them out to be! So Satan actually uses the reality of our inherent sinfulness both to his advantage and our disadvantage; and in doing so, he gets us to question the integrity of our faith and our salvation. Here’s his argument: “If you were really a Christian you wouldn’t sin like you do!” and we buy into the stupidity of that argument! That’s like telling the cripple, “If you were really a human being you wouldn’t be crippled!” Beloved, such didactical reasoning is mindless nonsense! The evil one wants us to see our deficiencies as a sign that we are unspiritual! After all, the proof is in the pudding (right?) and “sin is the proof!” It’s a circular argument that presupposes that the child of God does not sin; which is a lie! (cf. Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8, 10). Like Jesus, we are to refute his lies with the truth of Scripture (cf. Mt 4:4; 7, 10) — that’s faith! (cf. Rom 10:17). Beloved, Satan’s lies are not so brilliant and mind-boggling that we can’t see through them; they simply require a basic understanding of what Scripture teaches (Christianity 101). Though in and of ourselves we are unspiritual, we have been made spiritual through the blood of Christ — so our spirituality does not rest upon our personal goodness (Rom 4:3-5)… because we don’t have any! Therefore our defense is Christ, not ourselves! Because our “inherent sinfulness” is such a critical issue for us as believers, I feel it is important that we expand even further upon it (in spite of the fact that it may be a bit redundant).

The reality is, God knows everything about us, and “He’s not disappointed in us.” Are you disappointed in your little child with Down Syndrome? Then why would you think God is disgustingly disappointed with you? You suffer from a condition that you were born with… it is a condition that was spread throughout the entire universe; a condition so bad that it required the blood of God’s only Son to remedy. As incredible as it may seem to you, God sympathizes with your weaknesses (Heb 4:15)… “hence, you are encouraged to draw near to Him with confidence, that you might receive His abundant mercy & grace to help in time of need” (Heb 4:16). The reality is, we are all extremely needy people; every one of us as believers need truckloads of “mercy and grace,” not “the rod of the Law!” Would you beat your retarded little child because he poops in his pants? The amazing incredible nature of our God is that He doesn’t deal with us according
to our iniquities (Ps 103:10). If that doesn't thrill your soul, either you are blind to the truth, or you have fallen for the lies of Satan and disbelieve the truth. As a believer, if you understand reality for what it really is — that God is truly loving, merciful & gracious — you will be mesmerized by the indescribable wonder of that truth! The reality is, God looked down from heaven and saw humanity being held captive by the evil one in complete darkness, and because of His love and compassion He entered into human history in the person of Jesus Christ, and laid down His life that He might redeem us with His precious blood (cf. Col 1:13; 1 Pet 1:18-19). That is how astounding and glorious our God is! It's no wonder the apostles ultimately became the men God called them to be. If for some reason the love of God is not preeminent in your thinking as one of His children, you will navigate thru the Christian life with dark, discouraging thoughts. Once your eyes have really been opened to the truth, God's love will trump your sinfulness, and His joy will displace your anguish. An immature believer likes to think he is a pretty solid character, but the more he grows in faith, the more he comes to realize how desperately sinful his flesh is (cf. Jer 17:9; Rom 7:18); conversely, the mature believer demonstrates a heart of genuine humility and self-distrust (that's the construct of faith that must characterize our lives if we are going to experience His peace and joy). Following is an example of how all of us as Christians should “humbly approach God” — it is just straight-forward humility. Some of it you may fully identify with, some of it you may not at this point in life — simply relate to those truths that more clearly define you at this intersection on your journey of faith.

Tell God who you really are — you should be able to verbalize “the real you” after having lived a number of years in your skin. In order to see the essence of what humility looks like, reflect upon the following prayer: “God, I really struggle with who I am; not only who I am as a human being (a fallen creature), but who I am as one of Your children. I desperately want to have a better life, and live life in a way that is more pleasing to you… but I constantly stumble and fall… not necessarily with evil intent… I just seem to always end up on the ground somehow. My sin disposition (my flesh) always seems to get the best of me… I wish that were not the case, but it is… it's very discouraging to me because I think I should be a lot better than I am. I realize you have asked me to live with my flesh… yet, try though as I may, it is just too overwhelming to me… I fall over and over again. It is very disconcerting… to somehow think that I can completely subdue it is simply out of the question — I can't — there is no way in the world I can overcome it. So where do I go from here? How can I genuinely draw closer to You and experience Your acceptance and warm embrace?” The foregoing, beloved, is what humility looks like from a transparent human perspective. You'll notice, the emphasis is upon the believer himself and his own inadequacy, and not upon the work and presence of Christ in his life (we'll deal with that shortly).

After pouring out “everything” in your heart to God with complete transparency (all your concerns, anxieties, frustrations, fears, grumblings, shortcomings, and sins that you actually think are unforgivable), then go to Him with your petitions — as Paul said, “In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving (that's a given when you know God is ever at work in you, regardless of circumstances, tending to every need you have, and will ultimately override every wrongdoing in your life), let your requests be made known to God, and He will minister a great measure of peace to your soul” (Phil 4:6-7). Beloved, you can't put peace in your soul — but God can! When temptation besets you, tell God how troublesome it is to you… how difficult it is for you… how terribly weak you feel… how prone you are to stumbling… how much you need His mercy and grace; obviously it is not a matter of your “meriting” anything — that in itself is a contradiction of grace. Neither is it a matter of “God turning His back on you” because you're so undeserving
(essentially that would be a matter of “merit” as well). The reality is, if you “humble yourself” you are an automatic qualifier to be a recipient of grace! All God truly asks of you is a humble heart—not all He wants to hear from you! He knows the mess you are in is anything but easy, and He will not let your little boat capsize in the storms of life (cf. Mt 28:20; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:5)... He knows your frame, how weak and feeble you are; until you come to the realization of that truth and accept it, you will continue to panic on the stormy sea. You must come to that point in your life where you “truly accept who you really are—a sinner?” though you are a saved sinner, nevertheless you are still a sinner. In as much as you refuse to accept the condition of your humanness (the fleshly, sinful nature that you were born with), your failure to meet up to “your own expectations” will prove to be a very significant discouragement in your life. God knows how discouraged you are with yourself and your own walk... He wants you to turn from your own sinful “self-focus,” and run into His arms (like your own little child does with you) and tell Him how much you need Him, and how defeated & miserable you feel. Incidentally, do you know what makes you run into His arms? Failure—painful failure. Reflect upon that truism. How would you respond to your own little child if he ran into your arms and was completely transparent with you? yet just kept crying and beating himself up because he had made such a mess of things? Well if you would lovingly respond with understanding and compassion, how much more would our Lord respond with love? (cf. Mt 7:11). Unless you really understand that God loves you unconditionally... that He knows that you are but dust... and that He sympathizes with your weaknesses, you will live with a level of fear and anxiety that He never intended you to live with (cf. Ps 106:1; 103:14; Rom 8:35-39; Heb 4:15).

Accepting yourself for who you really are is not a miserable, painful experience; it is simply a matter of accepting the very person you were when you were conceived in your mother’s womb (cf. Ps 51:5). Just because you have lived with a proud distorted view of reality, that may have even caused you to “feel good” about yourself in some way, doesn’t validate that view. The truth is, it is far wiser for us to live life believing the truth, than to live life believing a lie, because sooner or later the lie will be exposed for what it is. For instance, if you claimed you were a brilliant scholar or a world-class athlete (when in reality you suffered from significant mental & physical deficiencies), sooner or later the truth of who you really are would humbly disclose to you the stupidity of your claim. To somehow conclude that living a life of unreality has a strange degree of psychological acceptability to it, is to ignore the reality that one day everything shall be brought into the light and revealed for what it is and rewarded accordingly (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-14; 4:5; Eph 5:13; 2 Th 1:6-10). Beloved, as a believer, God simply asks you to “be who you are” (a sinner saved by grace), and “not pretend to be who you not” (a good person). Furthermore, you are to live life with the understanding that God accepts you just as you are—and that is extremely liberating! (cf. Jn 8:31-32). Once you humbly accept yourself for who you really are (both in and of yourself and in Christ), God will pour out His grace upon your life (Jam 4:6) — He will replace the angst in your soul with His peace. It is a whole lot easier to live by grace than to live by law and pretense (cf. Mt 11:28-30; Gal 5:1) — all pretense will do is bring a lot of anxiety, frustration and misery into your life. When you humbly & genuinely accept yourself for who you really are, you will then approach God with thoughts such as these—“Lord, I now see myself as You see me... how I really am... thank you for giving me the grace to see things as they really are, not as how Satan or my flesh would have me see things, and that I no longer have to beat myself up because of my sinfulness. Obviously I want to live a life that brings praise to Your name... but because of my sinful nature, it is very clear that I am going to stumble a lot (which is very humbling), just as Your Word says (cf. Jam 3:2). May I not become consumed with my shortcomings and failures, but with the greatness of my Savior
and Lord. When I fall, give me the grace to get up and humbly seek Your face and forgiveness, and Your compassionate embrace, and move on again in the power of Your Spirit.”

**Though our sinful behavior is oftentimes very humbling and disconcerting to us**, we are not to let it overwhelm us and discourage us and destroy our faith (as Satan so desires)—it is simply one of the ramifications of living in this dark fallen world. Carefully reflect upon the following statement: *Sin is what it is—a discontinuity of our allegiance to Christ and a diminution of our faith in the moment.* Just as Peter compromised his allegiance to Christ—we do the same. *That doesn’t mean we have a disingenuous faith, it is simply the residual effect of inhabiting sinful flesh.* “Though we are afflicted in every way, we are not crushed... though we are perplexed, we do not despair... though we are persecuted, we are not forsaken... though we are struck down, we are not destroyed” (cf. 2 Cor 4:8-9). Carefully reflect upon those words of Paul. With that in mind, we are to pray as the psalmist David prayed, “Teach me Thy ways, O Lord; lead me in Thy truth, for Thou art the God of my salvation. Thou teaches the humble Your way” (Ps 25:4-5, 9). “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me—a broken and contrite heart You will not despise” (Ps 51:10, 17). “Your faithfulness is a shield and bulwark, O Lord... You give Your angels charge concerning me, to guard me in all my ways” (Ps 91:4, 11). “Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; see if there be any hurtful way in me... lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23-24). As a humble believer (that is, a believer who truly desires to walk with Christ), you should be able to fully identify with these words of David.

**Contrary to Satan’s message to you**—God is not against you... He does not hate you... He never punishes you; no where in Scripture is a believer ever punished (are you aware of that?); only unbelievers are punished—believers are disciplined (read Prov 3:11-12; 13:24; 22:15; 1 Cor 11:32; Heb 12:5-11; Rev 3:19). The Lord forgives you times without end, and loves you with an everlasting love! There is no end to it! It will never cease! **Nothing will ever change that!** Keeping that in mind, “God is committed to making you like His Son” & “what He purposes He accomplishes!” (cf. Ps 138:8; Is 46:10; 55:11; Phil 1:6). So remind Satan that you are no longer one of his children— that you are now a child of God; that darkness no longer rules in your heart— that the blood of Christ has redeemed you, and that you have been transferred into the kingdom of light: “So take a hike!” You are no longer interested in his trash! The eternal reality is this—Christ died to redeem you from the kingdom of darkness (Col 1:13); every sin you ever commit (past, present and future) has already been forgiven; no sin you ever commit will affect on your eternal destiny; all of the ramifications of your sins were resolved at the cross, and nothing in all the universe is ever going to change that! All sin does now in your life is cause you to experience the pain of it in your soul... grieve its presence when it occurs... reaffirm in your mind and heart its diabolical nature... and cause you to once again glory in the unconditional love of God and His eternal forgiveness. You might remind Satan of his eternal destiny: “In just a few short hours, you creature of darkness, you are going to experience the fullness of God’s unrestrained wrath! Never again will you be permitted to glory in your craft! Only extreme suffering awaits you!” The sadistic side of me (in actuality, it is probably the glorious side of me) longs to be present on that day when God casts him into the eternal abyss—he has caused enough pain in my life to relish the day of his destruction. To you who are “universalists” (that is, you believe God is so loving He would not send anyone to hell—not even Satan), you obviously have failed to study the ways of God throughout history (read the Old Testament)... you are going to be shocked when God dispenses His wrath upon all that is evil. It is amazing at how the sinful minds of men (be us believers or unbelievers) try to remake the God of heaven into “the kind old grandfather of the universe,” who in the final
analysis chooses to overlook all the little wrongs that are done by His creatures. Incidentally, that is pretty much the position that modern day Judaism has taken. *I find it interesting that the “most emphatic statement” in all of Scripture is this: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD God Almighty!”* (cf. Is 6:3; Rev 4:8); “that triple redundancy” makes it the strongest statement in the Bible; “in God there is no darkness whatsoever!” (1 Jn 1:5). The truth is, the wrath of God will make the wrath of men look like a mere slap in the face. Beloved, “faith” believes what God says, not what men think… and on this issue, men’s thoughts and God’s thoughts are light years apart (read Is 55:8-9). At some point on our journey of faith we need to move beyond the proud, insipid nature of our little minds, and defer to the eternal word of God; it should be noted, without humility one will never abandon his fleshly thinking, because the Holy Spirit only works in the humble heart… and He is the One who transmits truth to our heart — that's why He is called the Spirit of Truth (cf. Jn14:17, 26; 15:26).

**Being honest and transparent with God about “who you really are,” and all that is going on in your life, in a word is “humility.”** Start accepting yourself for who you are: a broken creature who is loved by God. If you weren’t such a dilapidated train wreck God would not have had to go to the cross for you. By the way, a significant part of your dilapidation was caused by Satan and his minions; he is the reason why sin entered the universe; thus he is the reason for death & every conceivable evil. The human problem was “so diabolical” it took the death of God to resolve it (a concept none of us will fully understand until we enter into the eternal state). It is not that you are to glory in the fact that you are a broken creature, but that you are loved by God in spite of your brokenness. Accepting yourself for who you are, doesn't mean that you feel good about who you are… but that you understand the reality of who you are. Should you insist on “feeling good about yourself” (which is not possible because of your inherent sinfulness), the troubled sea in your heart will just keep on roaring. The issue of feeling good about oneself means that person's focus is on himself rather than God – as stated numerous times earlier, “get your eyes off of you and focus on Christ.” The fact that none of us ever stop sinning in life (Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:8-10) ought to convince us of our inherent sinfulness (though the Bible tells us that that indeed is the case, our experience in life also confirms that truth)… and the fact that we keep sinning over & over again in life, and God keeps forgiving us over & over again, ought to convince us that God really does love us (again, though the Bible tells us that He loves us, our experiencing His forgiveness times without end confirms the incredible reality of that truth)… *perhaps that is one of the reasons why God lets us stumble so often – to keep us ever mindful of our condition and His eternal love. Incidentally, the fact that you are inherently sinful, and the fact that God loves you, are the two most important affirmations you must make in life. You must keep them in juxtaposition to each other and affirm each of them every day!* (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:12; Ps 14:3; Ps 136; Lam 3:22; Jn 15:9, 13; Rom 5:8; 8:35f; 1 Jn 1:9; 4:10). I’ve written a study on these two realities called — “The Game Changer!” because that indeed is what it is. You can find it on my website under the “Additional Studies” link at: www.thetransformedsoul.com The Christian life calls for a complete change of focus; thus — start accepting yourself for who you really are — & start feeling really good about Jesus Christ! Your flesh will always insist on having a “self focus!” and as long as you insist on coming to that point in life where you feel good about yourself, you will always be discouraged with yourself. If you choose to ignore that reality, you are in for a difficult, painful life. Make Christ your focus in life! He is your life! (cf. Col 3:4; Heb 12:1-2; Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 4:10; Eph 4:18). *You are to die to yourself (that's humility), and glory in Christ!* (the supreme transcendent reality of the universe!). It should be noted — life as a believer in Jesus Christ is not a matter of staying in a constant state of “feeling ashamed for who you are and of yourself!” Though the evil one loves it when you stay there! Get over it! Accept who you are! God does, and He is not angry with you because of it!
The reality is, we can either beat ourselves up because of our “spiritual deficiencies,” or we can learn to accept our condition as a reality that is simply a part of the “transformational world” in which God has called us to live, and strive to overcome in our daily walk with Him. Both God and us have a “role” to play in “our transformation” (i.e., “our sanctification”) — Paul exhorts us to “work out our salvation with serious reverence and fortitude before God… yet work with the realization that we are not working alone… God is also at work in us to will and do His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). So the sanctification stage of the Christian life is “a cooperative effort” — both God and us have a work to do. Essentially we are called to cooperate with God as we walk through life. With that in mind, we can either live out our life in this world “beating ourselves up because we are so spiritually deficient!” or we can “diligently and humbly cooperate with God knowing that He loves us and that an incredible eternity awaits us!” The reality is, we are not at all what we one day will be, and on our journey through life we are going to stumble and wrestle with our flesh all the way to the end… so we can either beat ourselves up all the way, or exercise the spiritual disciplines God has provided for us — His word, prayer, the Holy Spirit, fellowship and service in the body of Christ — and do so with our eyes on Christ, “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2). Remember, the fullness of our transformation into the image of Christ (it is only partial at this point), does not fully take place until we stand in God’s presence in heaven (Rom 28:32; 2 Cor 3:18); hence the words of Peter: “Beloved, in this greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while you are distressed by various trials (for those of you who question whether true believers ever get “distressed” in life, read that statement again), that the proving and testing and purifying of your faith by fire may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ… and after you have suffered for a little while (though trials are beneficial to grow our faith, they are also very painful), the God of all grace, who has called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:10). It is through the rigorous challenges of life that the integrity of our faith becomes more and more evident and is strengthened (that, beloved, is the purpose of trials). Though that may be frustrating and disconcerting to us at times… that is the reality.

The Holy Spirit uses “trials” [the sober instructors of life] to create a humble perspective in our hearts as to what is really true, and it is this perspective with which God wants us to live life; obviously if we think we should be far better than we are (i.e., approaching perfection), we have bought into the lies of the evil one, which will only leave us seriously disillusioned. Imagine this scenario — you are an orphan in grade school, and have been “adopted” into a very nice family — now, you can either live with fear that if you do something wrong they are going to kick you out of the house… or you can live with the assurance that no matter what you do, your status as their child will never change. The reality is, you will come to the realization that the second of those two options is the right one when you are never kicked out of the house for disobeying them and doing something wrong, in spite of the fact that they affirmed their love for you over & over again, and told you they would never abandon you. After years of messing up, however, you will finally conclude that your adopted parents really do love you… that your behavior does not affect their acceptance of you, and that nothing will ever change that. Furthermore, after a few “significant miscues in life” you will stop fearing dismissal altogether. Let me apply this point as follows — God adopted you into His family (Rom 8:15), and He will never ever abandon you (Heb 13:5). Never! Incidentally, it is only through trials and difficulties and struggles that you will come to fully believe that God really does love you… and then you will enter into His rest (cf. Heb 4:9-16).
With all of the foregoing in mind, “make Christ [not you] your first love;” make Christ the one you live for. It is antithetical to true spirituality to think that you could ever get to that point in this life where you are proud of who you are in and of yourself. Scripture is pretty clear on the matter of “pride;” there is no room for it whatsoever in the heart of man. Instead, we are to stay in a constant conscious state of humble transparency before God, where we are continually being open and honest with God about who we are in and of ourselves, and who we are in Christ. When God hears a humble heart, He then knows He has “a person” that He can do a wonderful work of grace in and thru; so rather than denying who you are, or hiding all the trash of your life under the rug, you are to be open & transparent with God, and humbly run into His arms with everything in your life. By repeatedly approaching God with humility, you will grow in your understanding of who you really are, just as Paul did (read Rom 7:18)… and how wonderful God really is, just as Paul did (read Rom 7:24-25). So stop fretting over all of the junk in your life (Jam 3:2); take all your anxieties to God (1Pet 5:7), and glory in the fact that “He is ever at work in you to will and to do His good pleasure” (Phil 2:13) — transformation is a long process, and God isn’t going to finish that work until you are ready to enter heaven’s gates.

Central to the believer’s walk is that of “cultivating intimacy with Christ” — there is no close second on this issue; either a believer makes intimacy with Christ his number one priority, or he will simply live life according to a bunch of religious precepts. Being a Christian is about “being in a relationship with Jesus Christ,” in that sense, Christianity has more accurately been identified as a “relationship” rather than a “religion” — because religion essentially focuses on complying with the various religious teachings & emphasizes the obedience of certain precepts. The big question is: “How does one cultivate intimacy with Christ?” Obviously in any relationship there is “communication” — two-way communication! — we must humbly share our heart with God, and in turn humbly listen to what He has to say to us in His Word; by definition, that means spending time in His word. As the apostle Paul teaches, Christ is our life (cf. Col 3:4); that is, it is Christ who lives His life in us (cf. Gal 2:20). … and this He does when we live by faith (cf. Gal 2:20). As both the Old & New Testaments teach, “The righteous live by faith” (cf. Hab 2:4; Ps 37:3; 115:9-11; Prv 3:5; 22:17-19; Is 12:2; Jer 17:7; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38), and that faith is in God’s Word (Rom 10:17). When we humbly receive the Word, God implants its reality in our hearts (cf. Jam 1:21); that is, He makes it alive in our hearts (cf. Heb 4:12)… without believing God’s Word, we distance ourselves from Him and fail to please Him (cf. Heb 11:6); the logic couldn’t be more clear, when we fail to believe God, we essentially are calling Him a liar, and such is obviously not pleasing to Him. How could it be? When you tell the intimate love of your life that you don’t believe them, your distrust of them ultimately creates division in your relationship. It is one thing to distrust someone who has not proven themselves to be trustworthy, but such is not the case with Christ (He never violates our trust). Jesus said to His disciples the night before He went to the cross, “When you abide in Me and My words abide in you (abiding is the essence of intimacy), your life will be fruitful” (cf. Jn 15:5)… and I will respond to your petitions (Jn 15:7)… and you shall experience My joy (Jn 15:11). The key to abiding is “affirming the truths of God’s Word” over and over and over again that they might settle peacefully in your heart (by the Holy Spirit), and become the constitution of your life (cf. Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; 1Jn 2:20, 27). Due to the fact that the Living Word is Jesus Himself (not abstract divine concepts), when His Word is in you, it is actually Christ who is working in you and transforming you and making you more like Himself (cf. Jn 1:1, 14; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 2:20; Phil 2:13; Col 1:27; 3:15-17; Heb 4:12).
Cultivating “intimacy with Christ” is the key to experiencing the transforming wonders of His grace in your life. Christ dwells in you (i.e., He has taken up residence in you) and wants to commune with you often throughout the course of a day (cf. Jn 14:23; Rom 8:9,11; 1 Cor 3:16; Gal 4:16; 1 Jn 4:13) — no communication? no intimacy. If the foregoing discussion is somewhat confusing to you, this is not a spiritual reality you will want to pass over and ignore. Therefore prayerfully read it over a few times, and also reflect upon the various references that have been provided. *Intimacy with Christ is the foundation of true spirituality,* just as intimacy with your spouse is essential for having a very close, meaningful relationship. You are aware, are you not, that you are the bride of Christ? That makes this analogy very relevant. Intimacy with Christ is only achieved by prayerfully meditating and reflecting upon the truths of His Word and dialoguing with Him; it is not achieved by simply reading a short little daily devotional — it requires deep reflective thought. The living Word of God (Christ) must occupy some quality time in your life, and you must reflect upon divine truth at different intervals throughout the course of a day — therein is “life!” We’re not just talking about entertaining the mind with the various spiritual concepts and ideas, we’re talking about “dialoguing with the Living Reality of the universe.” Christ Himself — He is the Living Word (cf. Jn 1:14; Ps 1:2-3; 25:4-5; 63:6; 119:9-16; Jer 15:16). When we live outside of the Word (i.e., when we don’t feed upon His Word and commune with Him), we don’t experience “life,” because we don’t experience Christ, who is life; thus we experience “darkness and death” (the absence of life). Let’s compare this truth to an appliance that must be plugged in and turned on for it to be operable — though all of us as believers are plugged in to Christ (i.e., we are saved), many of us live a life that is simply not “turned on and operational;” thus we are like beautiful appliances that are basically in an “inoperable mode,” which is not what we were designed to be.

The more preeminent “God’s love for you” is in your mind and heart, the more you will increasingly reject the voice of the flesh in your life, the more joy and peace you will experience in your life, and the more fruitful your life will be (Gal 5:22-23). When we humbly abide in Christ (i.e., when we are genuinely intimate with Him), the more fruit our lives will bear (Jn 15:5; Gal 5:22-23). *The Christian life starts with a “humble heart;”* God loves the humble and extends grace to him (Jn 4:6). Reflect upon God’s words to the apostle Paul: “My power is perfected in [humble] weakness!” (2 Cor 12:9); remember, we have no strength in and of ourselves (Jn 15:5); “hence, when we are admittedly weak, then we are strong!” (2 Cor 12:10). How is that? because that’s when God actively works in and thru us. The condition is “humbility.” Only the humble acknowledge that they are weak! The two dark options are these: living a life of delusion, thinking that we’re good enough in and of ourselves! or living a life of discouragement, thinking that our life is such a mess there is no hope for us! Both of these lifestyles take GOD out of the picture. Beloved, rather than living in a world of unreality, choose to live in a world of reality. Carefully reflect upon Paul’s account of what God did in his life (read 2 Cor 12:7-10)… and then reflect upon the words of David in Psalm 34 (verses 2, 4, 6, 7, 8, 18).

*My soul shall make its boast in the LORD;*
*Let the humble hear and be glad.*
*I sought the LORD, and He answered me,*
*And delivered me from all my fears.*
*This poor man cried and the LORD heard him;*
*And saved him out of all his troubles.*
*The angel of the LORD encamps around those*
Who fear Him, and rescues them.  
O taste and see that the LORD is good;  
How blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.  
The Lord is near to the brokenhearted,  
And saves those who are crushed in spirit.

The Human Condition

The problem with the unbelieving world is its absolute insistence on “complete autonomy;” that is, they are simply into “running their own lives” ... they are not into “submitting to someone else and their standards;” which essentially is what it means to “be your own god.” The problem with sinful man is that he insists on “feeling good about himself,” and refuses to see himself as a condemned sinner — as he looks at himself, he believes he is actually a fairly good person, not an evil person. As with all men, they simply see sin as “overt evil” (lying, stealing, adultery, murder, etc.); they don't see it for what it really is — an inward condition of the soul that refuses to submit to God. As the apostle Paul said, “that which is not of faith is sin” (cf. Rom 14:23); so disregard for God's input into one's life is sin — that is sin in the broadest sense of the word. Thus religion to the liberal mind is something that is simply not acceptable. Reflect upon the story of Eve in the Garden of Eden: “she saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to her eyes; that the tree was desirable to make her wise, so she took from its fruit and ate” (cf. Gen 3:5). The devil's temptation was that “she would be like God and be a completely autonomous creature” (Gen 3:5). That is the message of secular humanism today; it simply perpetuates Satan's lie: “You are your own God! No one should rule over you and force you to bow to their way of thinking! No one should be your boss in life, and tell you what to do! Your life is “your life,” and no one has the right to take it from you!” Sound logical? Of course it does, because our flesh is in complete agreement with that line of thinking. That, my friend, has been the problem of man since the world began.

After the children of Israel were ruled for some 300 years by “God-appointed judges”... they tired of being ruled by them and chose to follow their own inclinations and “do what was right in their own eyes,” and not bow to the values and opinions of others (cf. Jud 21:25); in short, they chose to be their own god. Incidentally, that has been “the heart attitude” of many in the Jewish community down through the ages; they worshipped the Lord with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him (cf. Is 29:13; Mt 15:8-9); they forgot the Lord their God (cf. Ps 106:13, 21, 25, 35, 39; Is 17:10; 51:13; Jer 3:21; 13:25; Ezek 23:35; Hos 8:14); they not only passively rejected Him, they aggressively killed the prophets God sent to awaken them (cf. Lk 11:47), and even killed His Son (cf. Acts 2:23). In modern times this heart attitude has characterized many in the reformed liberal movement of Judaism (that is, Reformed Judaism vs. Orthodox Judaism) — many of them turned to a religionless nationalism, materialism and Marxism. The majority of highly influential Jewish leaders in our country today, both in the legal and political sectors, as well as the entertainment industry, are “extremely liberal” and have a very strong animus against religion. It is this element in our society that has made the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) the dominant voice in our culture as well as the Democratic Party — at its foundation is an intense hatred for religion... hatred for those who are against homosexuality and gay marriage... hatred for those who are against abortion... and hatred for those who are for the reading of Scripture and prayer in our schools and the public sector (that is why it no longer exists in our schools today, and why it is
increasingly being discontinued in the public arena). All of those in the western world today who “hate Christianity” are ardent secular humanists who insist on their having “personal autonomy” without the slightest influence of religion in their culture; these secular humanists are even succeeding in taking “Christ” out of Christmas — in short, they are atheistic existentialists. Though the foregoing could be used to make a “political statement,” that is not at all my intention (please don’t go down that road)… it is simply meant to show how satanic presence has operated in our culture (and in the Jewish culture down through the centuries). The truth is, there are also a number of atheistic existentialists in the Republican Party; though the percentage of such political ideologues is less in the Republican Party than it is in the Democratic Party; the reality is, there are more Orthodox Jews in the Republican Party than in the Democratic Party.

Since the fall, human beings have deplored the idea of “relinquishing control of their lives to some deity,” and have continuously fought to establish their own autonomy in the world. Though many have lorded over people down through the centuries, and imposed religious beliefs upon them to control them… they either worshipped because “they feared the gods” (believing that they were obliged to worship them)… or they simply gave “lip service” to their gods (as ancient Israel did)… ultimately, however, the masses basically “sought their own personal liberty.” For those of you with teenage children, you’ll notice at the end of their high school years, they will start “demanding autonomy” and “being their own person.” It is not only rooted in our culture, it is rooted in their flesh; they simply want to “run their own lives and not have other people tell them what to do.” It should not surprise you that “this attitude” also exists in the minds and hearts of believers — remember, we all possess sinful flesh. I find it interesting that “Christians do everything they can to run their own lives and co-exist with God.” Though God has told them to “deny themselves” (cf. Mt 16:24), and surrender their lives to Him by serving Him and following Him in life (Mt 16:24-26), they do so only half-heartedly — their desire for “personal autonomy” is simply too imbedded in their soul to fully surrender to the will of God, so they compromise their commitment and find the following a satisfying alternative: “they attend worship services, read short daily devotionals, serve at various junctures, fellowship with other believers, and give lip service to the various doctrines and teachings of the Christian faith” — but they struggle terribly with completely surrendering their lives to the “lordship of Christ.” The truth is, believers simply insist on “having some reasonable degree of control over their own lives.” Personal autonomy is a beast that lives within all of us… it is our unredeemed humanness that battles against the Spirit that indwells us (cf. Rom 8:9; Gal 5:17), and forges its way into the decision-making room of our lives at every intersection of life throughout the day. It is the dark side of man that insists on dealing with life as he sees it (cf. 2 Cor 5:7)… hence, he does his best to make life work for himself, because deeply embedded in his soul is the belief that “that is where true happiness and fulfillment in this life are really found.”

In closing, let’s look at a summarization of “the life of faith” — life essentially involves three things: Physical realities, Relational realities & Spiritual realities. All three of these realities are meant to be “enjoyed,” but that cannot happen unless they are kept in their proper balance: first and foremost must come the Spiritual, then the Relational, and then the Physical (in that order). When we insist on reversing the order, “joy” no longer resides in us, because joy is instilled in our heart by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22). Furthermore, it is only by “genuine faith” (the denial of self and submission to the Lordship of Christ; i.e., saying no to our will & yes to God’s will) that we can keep these realities in that order. Joy should be the number one emotion that every believer desires in his life; by definition, joy is the absence of anxiety and the presence of
grace — what else could one truly want more in his life than joy? Jesus emphatically declared to His disciples, “Apart from Me [emphatic] you can do nothing [also emphatic]” (cf. Jn 15:5) — both of the emboldened words in that verse are emphatic! There is no skirting the issue — when we are not abiding in Christ, our lives bear no fruit! On that score, nothing more really needs to be said, perhaps with this exception: No doubt you’ve heard the story of the man who was arrested for being a Christian… after his trial in court, he was released because there wasn’t enough evidence to convict him. Lord willing that would never be said of you or me; remember, the evidence is “love.” The primary problem for believers is that “physical realities” can be very disconcerting; especially to those who insist that therein lies happiness (true joy) — that is a construct of faith that must be corrected. Another problem for modern man is the notion that everything can be made “easier” than it is — the reality is, anything worth while requires “effort;” therefore, when the “struggle” to accomplish something is minimized, so to is the “end-product.” So as believers, we can’t look for “short cuts” in hopes that we can minimize the demands of true discipleship… there are no short cuts; don’t let Satan deceive you… in addition to that, there is no “special anointing” subsequent to salvation that makes conformity to the image of Christ a walk in the park! That is pure heresy! For a quick read of thirty of the most profound New Testament passages on faith, check it out below… for additional studies dealing with “Soul Transformation Issues,” go online to my website at — www.TheTransformedSoul.com

Beloved, fight the good fight of faith!
Thirty Profound New Testament Passages on Faith

- Matt 14:31 – “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”
- Matt 17:20 – “If you have faith as a mustard seed... nothing will be impossible to you.”
- Acts 15:9 – “God also gave the Holy Spirit to Gentiles; cleansing their hearts by faith.”
- Acts 16:5 – “The churches were being strengthened in the faith & growing in numbers.”
- Rom 1:17 – “The righteous man shall live by faith.”
- Rom 3:22 – “The righteousness of God has been manifested thru faith in Christ.”
- Rom 3:28 – “A man is justified by faith, apart from the works of the Law.”
- Rom 4:5 – “Abraham’s faith was reckoned by God as righteousness.”
- Rom 4:16 – “The reason righteousness is by faith, is that it might be by grace.”
- Rom 10:17 – “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.”
- Rom 12:3 – “God has allotted to every believer a measure of faith.”
- Rom 14:23 – “Whatever is not from faith is sin.”
- 1 Cor 13:2 – “If I have all faith... but have not love, I am nothing.”
- 1 Cor 16:13-14 – “Stand firm in the faith... and let all that you do be done in love.”
- 2 Cor 5:7 – “We walk by faith, not by sight.”
- 2 Cor 13:5 – “Test yourself to see if you are in the faith; examine yourself.”
- Gal 2:20 – “The life we live, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us.”
- Gal 5:6 – “Ritual or circumcision means nothing... only faith working through love.”
- Eph 2:8 – “By grace you have been saved through faith... it is the gift of God.”
- Eph 3:17 – “Let Christ dwell in your heart through faith... being grounded in love.”
- Eph 6:16 – “Take up the shield of faith, that you might extinguish the darts of Satan.”
- Phil 1:27 – “Stand firm with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel.”
- 1 Th 3:10 – “Complete what is lacking in your faith.”
- 1 Tim 6:12 – “Fight the good fight of faith.”
- Heb 11:1 – “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for... conviction of things not seen.”
- Heb 12:2 – “Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith.”
- Jam 1:3 – “The testing of faith by trials, results in endurance and a more mature faith.”
- Jam 2:20 – “Faith without works is useless.”
- 2 Pet 1:5 – “Applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence.”
- 1 Jn 5:4 – “This is the victory that overcomes the world — our faith.”
ADDENDUM

The Categories of Faith

In 1992, Tyndale House published a book called “The Handbook of Bible Application” — it has provided the Christian community with a wonderful resource to help Christians apply the Bible to everyday life. In it is a section on faith that presents it from three perspectives — Ineffective Faith (which I identify as Defective Faith), Weak Faith & Effective Faith. Following is a summation of these three kinds of faith, and some additional thoughts on them.

DEFECTIVE FAITH

Defective faith attempts to take things into one’s own hands — Sarai took matters into her own hands by giving Hagar to Abram… like Abram she had trouble believing God’s promise that she would beget a child in her old age (Gen 16:1-16). Out of this “lack of faith” came a series of problems. When we take over for God because things don’t quite correspond to His Word, we’re going to run into trouble. For Abram & Sarai, “time” was the greatest test for letting God do His work. Contrary to how we may feel, sometimes we simply have to “wait.” When we ask God for something and have to “wait” for it, we are frequently tempted to take matters into our own hands.

Defective faith is characterized by a lack of trust in God — When the Israelites were trapped against the Red Sea with the Egyptian army sweeping in for the kill, the people thought they were doomed (cf. Ex 14:1-31). Even though they had seen the delivering hand of the Lord when the “death angel” passed over their houses, they felt completely without hope with the Egyptian army breathing down their neck… their destruction seemed imminent. Israel had to learn from “repeated experiences” that God was able to provide for them, and they have been recorded in Scripture for our instruction (cf. 1 Cor 10:11). By focusing on God’s faithfulness in the past we can face crises in our lives with confidence rather than with fear and complaining.

Defective faith is characterized by an unchanged life — God calls us to an active life of faith and obedience. John the Baptist compared people who claim to believe in God (but don’t live for Him) to “unproductive trees” that will one day be cut down (cf. Mt 3:17) — each of us will be judged according to the productivity of our faith. Just as a fruit tree is expected to bear fruit, God’s people should produce a crop of good deeds (cf. Jn 15:1-5; Eph 2:10; Titus 3:8). God has no use for people who call themselves Christians but show no evidence of it; we are of no value if we are simply Christians in name only. If others can’t see our faith by the way we treat them, the reality is, we may not be God’s people at all — we may be deceiving ourselves. Paul exhorts us to “examine ourselves” to see if we are really in the faith (cf. 2 Cor 13:5). Furthermore, you can’t be faithless in your Christian life and expect to have the assurance of faith (cf. Heb 11:1). To be productive for God, you must become a student of the Word (because through it God will affirm the truth to you), obey His teachings, fight against sinful desires, and actively love & serve others.

Defective faith seldom goes beyond mere words — Some people talk the talk, but they don’t walk the walk; their lives are simply all talk… they know the right words to say, but their lives don’t reflect God’s presence and power. The apostle Paul says that the kingdom of God is to be
“lived,” not just discussed (cf. 1 Cor 4:1-21); there is a big difference between knowing the precepts of the faith and living them out. Don’t be content with mere knowledge… strive to live out the truth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

**WEAK FAITH**

**Weak faith tends to quickly focus on “problems”** — Interestingly enough, of all the disciples in the boat that morning when Jesus came walking to them on the water, “*only Peter reacted in faith*” (cf. Mt 14:22-33). His impulsive request led him to experience an incredible demonstration of God’s power; one in which the other disciples must have marveled. When Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on the water toward Jesus, however, it wasn’t long until he started to sink because he took his eyes off of Jesus and focused on the high waves around him; obviously, his faith wavered when he felt threatened by the waves. Though we may not walk on water, we all walk through tough situations in life… and when we focus on the circumstances in which we find ourselves, and not on Jesus, we too stumble and sink. One of the keys to living with faith is to keep your eyes on Jesus, rather than your circumstances & your inadequacies (Heb 12:1-2).

**Weak faith often fails us** — Although we often start out with good intentions, sometimes our faith simply falters, but this doesn’t necessarily mean we have failed. When Peter’s faith faltered… he reached out to Christ (the only one who could help him). Though he was afraid, he still looked to Christ. So even in his dire moments, he cried out to Christ… when he came to the end of himself, and all seemed lost, he cried out to Christ… though his circumstances overwhelmed him, yet the little amount of faith he did have he directed to the only One who could rescue him. Likewise, when you are apprehensive about the troubles in which you find yourself, and start questioning God’s presence or even His ability to help, you must remember that He is the only one who can really help. The truth of the matter is, we are all a people of “little faith” (not big faith)… the wonder of our faith (as little as it may be) is that it is faith in a “great God.” The problem with so many believers is that they focus too much on their faith (it is small, beloved; very small!) and not enough on the object of their faith (God Almighty!). May the following statement be an encouragement to you: if you are a man or woman of faith, you can be confident of this, in your deepest hour of need in this world you will turn to Christ, because down deep in your soul you know there is no one else to turn to. That’s the ministry of God’s Spirit in your heart. He will not abandon you in your deepest hour of need (cf. Ps 103: 14; Heb 4:15; 13:5; 2 Tim 2:13). The truth is, if everything depended upon you and me, none of us would arrive in glory — from beginning to end, our salvation is of God (cf. Rom 8:28-32, 35-39), and nothing will ultimately allay your fears more than that incredible truth. God loves you.

**Weak faith is actually a part of the process of belief** — People who hear about the resurrection for the first time may need time before they can comprehend this amazing story (cf. Lk 24:1-2). Like the disciples, they may pass through four stages of belief: first, they may think it is a fairy tale, something impossible to believe… second, like Peter they may check out the facts but still be puzzled about what happened… third, only when they encounter Jesus personally will they be able to accept the fact of the resurrection… and fourth, as they commit themselves to Jesus and devote their lives to serving Him, only then will they begin fully to understand the reality of His presence in their lives.
Weak faith can become stronger faith with God’s help — The attitude of trust and confidence that the Bible calls “belief” or “faith” (cf. Heb 11:1,6) is not something we can obtain without help (cf. Mk 9:24). Faith is a gift from God (cf. Eph 2:8-9; Acts 16:14), and no matter how much faith we have, or how much we grow in grace, we never reach the point of having arrived at the pinnacle of spirituality and being self-sufficient. Obviously, this will be incredibly clear when we take on glorified bodies in the heavenly realm, and are fully transformed into the likeness of Christ — the “change” will be dramatic for everyone of us, because we all inhabit “sinful flesh” and stumble often in this life (cf. Jam 3:2). None of us will get to heaven and see an old friend who just underwent a few minor changes. Ask yourself how much you are really “like Christ” in this life? And how radical you think your transformation will be when you are glorified? If you simply go thru a few “minor changes,” you better ask for a re-do! because none of are close to being what we one day will be (cf. 1 Jn 3:2). Furthermore, growing in faith is a constant process of renewing our trust in Jesus daily through an infusion God’s Word into our lives (cf. Rom 10:17; 12:2; Eph 4:23).

Those with weak faith need to recognize their limitations — Every child of God is laden with weaknesses (cf. 2 Cor 12:7-10; Heb 4:15) — that’s simply what it means to be human; hence we are always at the mercy of God. We are all weak in some areas and stronger in others. Our faith is seen as strong if we can survive contact with sinners without falling into their patterns… it is seen as weak if we must avoid certain activities, people, or places in order to protect our spiritual life (we all have a number of significant weaknesses); yet that step is a “wise step” for the person who knows he is weak in a particular area. It is important to take a self-inventory in order to discover our strengths and weaknesses. In areas of strength, we should not fear being defiled by the world; rather we should go and serve God in such areas. In areas of weakness, we need to be cautious and restrain ourselves in such environments. If we have a strong faith but shelter it, we are not doing Christ’s work in the world… if we have a weak faith but expose it to those entities that in all likelihood will cause us to stumble, we are being extremely foolish (cf. Prv 5:8). Many of us have a “thorn in the flesh” to keep us humble — be grateful for it; it’s there for your own protection. God’s grace is sufficient for you (cf. 2 Cor 12:9).

EFFECTIVE FAITH

Effective faith depends on God — The disciples’ request was genuine; they wanted the kind of faith that could radically forgive others (cf. Lk 17:1-10). But Jesus didn’t directly answer their question because the amount of faith is not as important as is its genuineness. What is faith? It is total dependence on God and a willingness to do His will. Faith is not something we use to demonstrate our own spirituality and strength to others… it is complete and humble obedience to God’s will, and a readiness to do whatever He calls us to do. Being a “proud man of faith” is a contrariness, because pride & faith are diametric opposites. Interestingly enough, the apostles in the early stages of growing in their faith, discussed among themselves “which of them was the greatest” (cf. Mk 9:34; Mt 18:1-4; 23:11; Lk 9:46; 22:24-26). They had been raised in a “highly competitive proud culture” — the Pharisees exemplified it to the tee (cf. Mk 7:21-23; Jn 9:40; Jam 4:6). The word “Pharisee” means “separated one;” the Pharisees regarded themselves as “separate ones” who were organized around the observance of purity & tithing laws. Tradition has it that they were the creators & shapers of early Judaism following Israel’s sixth century BC captivity in Babylon under King Nebuchadnezzar… and during the first century the Pharisees were the spiritual authority to the masses. Historians tell us that there were only about 6,000 Pharisees during the time of Christ, so they were not a large majority, but they were the most influential
group in Jewish society. They loved to be noticed and loved attracting attention to themselves (cf. Mt 6:2, 16; 23:5-6; Lk 14:7; 18:11). With their pretense to piety, they were in reality avaricious, sensual & dissolute (cf. Mt 23:25; Jn 8:7). It was just such men who had strongly influenced the first century Jewish culture in which the early church was birthed, and in which the disciples were raised; so it no doubt strongly impacted their thinking. When Christ came on the scene, He identified pride for what it was (evil), and proclaimed humility to be the virtue of virtues (cf. Mt 11:29; 18:4; 23:12; Phil 2:8; 1 Pet 3:8; 5:5). Those whom Christ identified as “men of faith,” were to be “men of humility.” The amount of faith they possessed was not as important as the kind of faith they possessed — their faith was to be in our all-powerful God… they were to believe in Him and everything He taught. As such, men and women of strong faith humbly see themselves in complete need of God's mercy and grace in all situations; therefore, by definition, the person who thinks he is “spiritually strong,” is actually proud and blind to his own weaknesses (cf. 1 Cor 10:12; 2 Cor 12:7-10). We’ve had enough of this “pride nonsense” in the Christian world for years… if it is dominant part of your life, repent my friend, and bow before your Maker.

Effective faith rests on what Christ has done — As the apostle Paul states clearly in 1 Corinthians 13:13, faith, hope & love are at the heart of the Christian life. Our relationship with God begins with faith, which helps us realize that we are delivered from our sins by Christ’s death (cf. Rom 5:1-11). Hope grows as we learn all that God has in mind for us, and gives us the promise of the future. And God’s love fills our life and gives us the ability to reach out in love to others.

Effective faith grows under trials and pressure — The book of Hebrews encourages believers to persevere in their Christian faith and conduct when facing persecution and pressure (cf. Heb 10:19-39). Though we don't normally think of suffering (the moment we are experiencing it) as being something that is good for us, it is the instrument God uses to build our character and patience (cf. Rom 5:3-5; Jam 1:2-4). During times of great trial, we may feel God's presence more clearly and find help from Christians we never thought would care. Knowing that Jesus is with us in our suffering, and will return one day to put an end to all our pain, helps us grow in our faith and our relationship with Him. Faith not only means resting in what Christ has done for us in the past, but it also means hoping for what He will do for us in the future (cf. Rom 8:12-25; Gal 3:10-13).

Effective faith is hopeful anticipation & quiet certainty — Do you remember the excitement you felt as a young child when your birthday was approaching? Some of you may have been filled with overflowing anxiety. You knew you would certainly receive gifts and a number of other special surprises. Birthdays combined assurance and anticipation — as does faith. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen (cf. Heb 11:1); it is a conviction based on past experience that God’s new and fresh surprises will surely be ours. We are assured in our inner man that God will do what He says; though many of His promises are yet future, we still look forward with confidence that we will receive them (cf. Jn 20:24-31).

How to Win the Battles that Matter Most

As believers, you and I have been created in Christ’s image, and have been given the powerful heart of a warrior to fight for what’s right in this world. It is only when we take on the battles that God wants us to fight (about issues that have eternal value) that we truly come alive as God’s children. Following are a number of practical applications from Craig Groeschel’s book,
“Fight: Winning the Battles that Matter Most” (Zondervan Press, 2013). Craig is the founding pastor of LifeChurch.tv, a pace-setting multi-campus church (they have hundreds of campus’ all over the country), and the author of several books. His ministry is headquartered in Edmond, OK. Here is how you can fight and win the battles that matter most:

1. **Join the spiritual war around you.** A war between the good and evil sides of the spiritual realm is taking place around you constantly… if you don’t actively engage in those spiritual battles, you’ll be especially vulnerable to evil attacks that can negatively impact every part of your life (cf. 1 Tim 1:18-19). Don’t settle for sitting on the sidelines of fights when God wants you to be on the front lines, helping to overcome evil with good. To fight spiritual battles successfully it is important to place your focus on God, and not on your weaknesses… and God will then give you the strength to fight. Pray for the courage and the help you need to fight spiritual battles every day. As you do, expect God to transform you into a stronger person who becomes more like Jesus Christ every day.

2. **Fight for causes that are greater than yourself.** God is looking for men and women who are willing to join His redemptive work in this fallen world, and wants you to be one of them. Look beyond the immediate concerns of your life and take advantage of the opportunities God has given you to fight for causes that have more far-reaching significance (cf. Gal 6:9-10), such as integrity, courage, justice, compassion, and spiritual truth.

3. **Put your God-given strengths to use in the world.** Don’t waste the gifts God has given to you to use in serving Him and loving the people around you (cf. Mt 20:28; 1 Cor 12:7; 14:12; Gal 5:13; Eph 4:11-12, 16). Pray for the wisdom to discern the best specific ways you can put your gifts into action to make the world a better place.

4. **Fight against three dangerous attitudes.** Lust says, “I want it.” Entitlement says, “I deserve it.” Pride says, “I can handle it.” Each of these three attitudes are spiritually dangerous, because they can trick you into thinking that you can handle temptation in your own power (cf. Jn 15:5). We must fight against these attitudes by humbling admitting the reality of our human vulnerabilities and weaknesses (cf. Rom 12:3), and relying on God’s strength in every situation. We fight lust by wanting God more than anything else… we fight entitlement by keep in mind that the only thing we truly deserve as sinners is death, but God has graciously given us life and blessings that we don't deserve because of Jesus’ death on the cross… we fight pride by recognizing that we can’t really handle any situation without God’s help.

5. **Choose to be led by the Holy Spirit rather than your emotions.** Your emotions are unreliable because they reflect only a limited perspective on what is going on in your life, and they are constantly changing according to your circumstances. But we can always rely upon the Holy Spirit to give us reliable guidance that reflects God’s perfect wisdom (cf. Jn 14:26; 16:13). So refuse to base your daily decisions on emotions & feelings (anger, pride, anxiety); instead, as the Holy Spirit to meet you where you are and give you the wisdom you need in every situation (cf. Gal 5:16).

6. **Watch out for small compromises.** Whenever you face the temptation to make a small, moral compromise, remember that doing so sets you heading in the wrong direction in life, thus making it easier for you to gradually move farther away from God and find yourself
sinning in bigger ways. So avoid small compromises as they come into your life, and should you make a mistake, correct your course as soon as possible by confessing your sin, repenting of it, and receiving God’s forgiveness and help to overcome the sin (cf. 1 Jn 1:10; 2:1).

7. **Choose your battles wisely.** Rather than depleting your energy and time fighting battles that don’t have eternal value (such as seeing how big you can build your muscles or how fast you can climb the corporate ladder), focus most of your strength on leading the people around you into righteousness (cf. Heb 10:23-25). Don’t just settle for succeeding at that which doesn’t last… fight for that which has eternal value (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15).

8. **Put on the full armor of God.** Prepare yourself well to fight evil with good by putting on the helmet of salvation (deriving confidence from the fact that your relationship with Jesus makes you right with God)… the breastplate of righteousness (relying on the power of Jesus’ righteousness at work within you)… the shield of faith (believing what God says about who you are)… and the belt of truth (standing boldly on God’s truth to resist the lies in this fallen world). Stand on the gospel of peace (relying on God’s redemptive power working through your life as you serve)… and wield the sword of the Spirit (using the Bible’s truths as weapons to fight for good purposes by applying them to your life — cf. Eph 6:10-18).

9. **Learn from your mistakes and failures.** Don’t get stuck in regret, guilt, shame, anger, self-pity, or despair after you experience failure or make a mistake (cf. Rom 5:20). Instead, learn from what you have gone through by repenting of your wrong decisions, seeking God’s guidance for the future, and moving forward while trusting God each step of the way. Keep in mind that no matter how badly you may have failed in the past, God’s grace is greater than all our sin, and He still wants to work through your life to accomplish good purposes in the world.

10. **Surrender your life to God every day.** Make a daily habit of surrendering your own plans to God, inviting Him to use your life each day to accomplish His plans for you (which are far greater than one can possibly do on his own). As God shows you which battles He wants you to fight, do so in confidence that God will use your life in ways you never dreamed possible (cf. Eph 3:20-21).

The apostle Paul exhorts us to “fight the good fight of faith” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12). God never said it would be easy nor that we can choose a lazy life, and simply be takers and not givers. It is a battle and we need to fight that battle until we win it, and being as it is a spiritual battle, we must do so by “faith.” Furthermore, the battle is not to gain health or wealth or fame or even peace — the battle is for “faith!” Beloved, it is “faith” that pleases God (Heb 11:6); i.e., placing your trust in Him when all the conditions around you suggest otherwise — that pleases God greatly — the life has called us to is one of “faith, not sight” (cf. 2 Cor 5:7)… living according to God’s Word, not according to the dictates of our flesh. Hence, we are to “deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow Him” (cf. Mt 16:24).