**“EXPRESSIONS of SPIRITUALITY”**

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

**Introduction**

This booklet contains five important precepts whereby a believer expresses himself spiritually. To summarize, such believers are assured of their salvation… grow in grace and faith… place importance upon fellowship with the body of Christ… understand the power of love to impact our world for Christ… and pray with faith. The essence of such principles results in spiritual vitality, spiritual integrity, spiritual sincerity, spiritual verity, spiritual devotion, and spiritual fidelity. Throughout these five studies you will find a number of “biblical references” that expand upon the various thoughts presented. Since “spiritual truth” does not settle in our hearts without prayerful reflection (it doesn’t come through casually reading God’s Word), take the time to quietly sit in God’s presence and let His Spirit peacefully implant these truths in your heart. Remember, you don’t speed-read spiritual truth. Below is a “Table of Contents” that identifies each of the five studies in this booklet, and their corresponding page numbers.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

1. Assurance of Salvation ........................ page 2
2. Growing in Grace and Faith ...................... page 11
3. Importance of Fellowship ....................... page 26
4. The Power of Love ................................ page 35
5. The Prayer of Faith ............................... page 51

Aside from these five studies, following are ten additional “spiritual life studies” that I have compiled that could have easily been included in this booklet. They include —

- Depressed Living vs. Joyful Living
- Fellowship with God
- Genuine Joy and Happiness
- Walking by the Spirit
- Peace vs. Anxiety
- Spiritual Liberation
- The Essence of Holiness
- The Essence of Loving God
- The Self-life vs. the God-life
- The Wilderness Experience

To access these studies, check out the “Additional Studies” link on my website – it is located at: www.TheTransformedSoul.com
Assurance of salvation is an issue every believer struggles with at some point in his/her life. We have all looked within ourselves and wondered how we can be saved since we sin like we do; the truth of matter is, every human being has a “sin problem.” Probably the most bewildering problem regarding the assurance of salvation is not the problem of whether or not the objective facts of Christianity are true, but whether we are personally saved by those facts — it all boils down to whether or not we have “saving faith” — this is the issue of “assurance of salvation.” What makes this such an agonizing issue for many Christians is that there are people who “think they have saving faith, but don’t.” Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven” (Mt 7:21). Obviously that’s a pretty provocative statement… therefore it is natural for many believers to question: do I really have saving faith? is my faith real? or have I been self-deceived? Most of us as pastors have counseled numerous Christians who have doubted their salvation… and many of them have become deeply depressed because of it. The key issue behind all such thinking is that “Christians believe they should be doing better than they are if they are really saved!” — as such, they have serious reservations as to the genuineness of their salvation.

The question of what constitutes “the marks of real saving faith” has been asked by Christians down through the ages. For example, during the time of the “Great Awakening” in America that occurred between 1725 and 1750, many responded to the preaching of such theologians as Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. A few years later, however, some critics charged that there was nothing real about the Awakening because many who claimed to have been converted showed no evidence of it. To respond to the Awakening’s detractors, Jonathan Edwards (one of the most brilliant minds in American history) took up his pen to write his famous “A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections” — in it he shared his thoughts on discerning the true spiritual condition of a person who claimed to be a Christian. Scripture and Edwards both correctly state that being a genuine believer involves more than just signing a card, walking an aisle, being baptized, and participating in religious activities. Obviously there is a personal recognition of one’s sins, a willingness to repent of sin, and a placing of one’s trust in Christ… the new creation in Christ (2 Cor 5:17) has new affections and has a hunger for genuine spiritual food, and these new affections exhibit themselves in the life of the believer in some form or fashion. James, the blood brother of Jesus, says, “Real saving faith will manifest itself through a person’s life” (Jam 2:14). Edwards described it this way: “The principle evidence of life is motion; so the principle evidence of saving grace is holy motion” — you can tell someone is spiritually alive by their movement toward the things of God and the spiritual fruit that results. Jesus said, “The tree is known by its fruit” (Mt 12:33). Does this then mean a true Christian won’t struggle with sin? No, not at all. The apostle Paul makes it clear that every believer will struggle with his old sin nature (Rom 7), but a true believer will not continue to live comfortably in a sinful lifestyle or in a state of perpetual unbelief — according to Scripture that is not possible (1 Jn 3:6-9). Why? Because the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit is at work in him slowly conforming him to the image of Christ (Ps 32:3-4; 38:1-4; Jn 16:8; Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 6:18-20; 2 Cor 6:14-18; 7:9; Phil 2:13; 3:21).
The 19th century Anglican preacher “J. C. Ryle” preached a sermon titled “Authentic Religion” (www.BibleBB.com), and in it he states that authentic religion is genuine, sincere, inward, solid, substantial, intrinsic, living and lasting; as opposed to being mere show, pretense, and a skin deep feeling. Jesus denounced mere outward religion as being that which is hypocritical, because it essentially was nothing more than false profession (Mt 23). How much of our religion is nothing but churchmanship? J. C. Ryle (1816-1900) said the following five signposts should be helpful in determining whether or not our religion is truly authentic —

1. **The place it occupies in your inner man.** It is not enough that religion is in your head. You may know the truth and believe the truth to a degree, but your religion must be in your heart: it must hold the reins… it must sway the affections… it must lead the will… it must direct the tastes… it must influence the choices and decisions… it must fill the deepest, lowest, inmost seat in your soul. If it does not, you may have reason to doubt whether or not your religion is authentic and true (Acts 8:21: Rom 10:10).

2. **The feelings toward sin that it produces.** The religion of God will always have a very deep view of the sinfulness of sin. It will not merely regard sin as a blemish or a misfortune which makes men and women objects of pity and compassion, but it will be the abominable thing which God hates. It will look on sin as the cause of all sorrow, unhappiness, strife and war. Above all, it will see in sin the thing which brings eternal ruin, unless we can find a ransom and get its chains broken. If this is not your religion, you should doubt its genuineness.

3. **The feelings toward Christ that it produces.** Authentic religion will cause a man to glory in Christ, without whom he would have no hope at all. It will produce confidence in Him, love toward Him, delight in Him, comfort in Him; in short, He will be the light, the life, and the peace of the soul. If this is not your religion, you have serious reason to doubt your religion.

4. **The fruit it bears in your heart and life.** The religion of God is from above and will always be known by its fruits. It will produce in man repentance, faith, hope, love, spirituality, humility, kindness, self-denial, unselfishness, a forgiving spirit, moderation, truthfulness, hospitality, and patience. Though the degree these various graces appear may vary, the germ and seeds of them will be found in every believer’s life. If this is not your religion, you have reason to doubt its authenticity.

5. **Your deep inner feelings about the means of grace.** What are your feelings about the preaching of the Word, public worship, and partaking of the Lord’s Supper? Do you merely tolerate them as being proper and correct, or are they things in which you take a deep inner peace and joy? Do you find your quiet time with the Lord, studying His Word and praying, essential to your comfort? Or do you find these practices boring and drudgery, and often neglected? If the means of grace are not as necessary to your soul as food and drink are to your body, you may well doubt whether your religion is authentic.

Obviously, judgment day will reveal every man’s religion, of what sort it is. Sit down quietly and examine yourself, and find out the authentic character of your religion. With the Bible in hand, and a humble heart, resolve to find out its genuineness. False religion will supply no comfort in the hour when comfort is most needed; that is, in the time of affliction, and on the death bed. Your repentance may be feeble, but let it at least be authentic… your faith may be weak, but let it be authentic as well… your desires after holiness may be mingled with a lot of
self, but let it also be authentic. Never be content to wear a cloak of religion. Be all that you profess… though you may sin, be authentic… though you may stumble, be true. Keep these principles continually before your eyes, and it will be well with your soul throughout your journey from grace to glory (www.BibleBB.com).

**We all have our struggles and we all need to take into account the fact that we still sin** and that we are going to struggle with our sinfulness. If you as a believer begin to doubt your salvation because “you don’t feel saved,” you are trusting your feelings instead of taking God at His word. Ask yourself this question: “Am I struggling against sin in my life?” If you aren’t, then you probably aren’t saved — but if you are, then that is a good sign that you are very much alive in Christ. Only spiritually alive people “struggle against sin” (Rom 7:14-23; Gal 5:17) — spiritually dead people don’t struggle against sin (self-rule) because they have no life force in them that counters the kingship of self. The key here is that you take your eyes off your feelings & failures and **focus on Christ, the cross and His word** (Heb 12:2). We need to draw our assurance of salvation from faith in the facts of Scripture and **not from our feelings**. Feelings are the responders of the soul or heart — they follow and respond to our understanding of Scripture, or what we have chosen to believe at some particular moment; as such, they are never a safe guide to what we should believe or of the state of our salvation.

**Furthermore, we do not draw our assurance from our works.** Though works or the spiritual changes that occur in our lives as a result of God’s grace and His indwelling presence in us can confirm the reality of our life with God… we must be extremely careful not to make such a subjective ground the basis of our assurance — because when a believer is out of fellowship he can have the appearance of an unbeliever especially if the condition lasts for any length of time (1 Cor 3:1-4). If we depend on works or obedient living to prove our salvation then we are faced with the following dilemma — if we are living obediently now, the possibility exists that could change in the future, and we would then conclude that we are not really true Christians. Scripture clearly warns against basing assurance or true relationship with God on **performance** (Mt 7:13-23; 12:31-37; 1 Cor 3:1-4; 6:19-20). God didn’t save you because of “your works or your goodness” (Rom 4:1-7; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 3:8-9; Tit 3:5-7)… He did not save you because of what is or is not in you… He saved you because of what is in Him — love and truth (Jn 3:16; Eph 1:7; 2:1-5; 1 Jn 5:5-12).

**If salvation depends in any degree on “personal goodness,”** none of us would be saved (Rom 3:10-12, 20). Salvation is not offered to those who have purposed to be good, or religious, nor is it guaranteed to those who hope God Himself will be good and gracious to them in the end. It is offered to all “meritless, helpless sinners” who are willing to believe that God has already been good to them through His Son on the cross. No life would ever be good enough to merit anything but condemnation from a holy God if judged on the grounds of moral equity. On the other hand, no sinner has fallen so low, or is so weak in himself, that he cannot find absolute rest and assurance of salvation in looking to Christ and the finished provisions of His grace (Heb 12:2). There are certain general facts about **“Christian assurance”** which should be stated: God has promised to save and keep all who put their trust in Him (Jn 6:37-9; Rom 8:29-30; Phil 1:6; Heb 7:25; 1 Pet 5:10). Therefore, having put one’s trust in Him for salvation, one either believes Him to do what He has said, or in the measure in which one fails to believe, he supposes Him to be untrue. It is not possible to grow a deep conviction of assurance in the heart where the mind is still wondering whether it has really believed in a saving way, and where the impressions of certainty have not been allowed to take root (Jn 1:21). Confidence in the faithfulness of God will not thrive where one
has serious questions with regard to the integrity of God’s Word — because that’s the basis of faith (Heb 11:6). Moreover, one cannot expect to enjoy the fruit of a committed life (love, joy, peace, and assurance) if he is not growing in his faith and in his relationship with Christ (Rom 6:12, 13, 19; 10:17; 2 Cor 3:18; Heb 11:1, 6; 1 Pet 2:2). So prayerfully affirm the truths of God's Word until they settle peacefully in your heart (Acts 16:14). Remember, to doubt salvation is not to trust/please God.

The normal Christian experience is this: “Old things pass away and all things become new” (2 Cor 5:17). The message of Scripture is clear: Christ does not come to live in a human heart and leave it unchanged. The first epistle of John is full of references to the outward evidence of the inward fact of the newly imparted divine life. The possession of the indwelling Son of God is the abiding fact of the newly created life in Him — His presence most naturally leads to blessed new realities in experience. The key question in anyone’s life is this: Do you believe there is only one God, that Jesus is God in the flesh, and that He died for your sins and rose from the dead three days later? If you answered “yes” to the foregoing, then it is highly probable that you are a believer. Notice what the apostle John said in his first letter: “Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father” (1 Jn 2:10); “every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus is not from God, this is the spirit of antichrist” (1 Jn 4:2-3); “whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 Jn 5:1); “the one who believes in the Son of God has the witness (Holy Spirit) in himself, whereas the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son” (1 Jn 5:10-11). John then concludes his letter with these words: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 Jn 5:13). The apostle Paul said, “The unsaved man (the natural man) does not accept the things of the Spirit of God — such things are foolishness to him, he cannot understand them, because these things are spiritually appraised” (1 Cor 2:14). Carefully consider what John and Paul said… then consider the “opposite position” of each of the statements listed above, so that you can better understand the position of the unsaved (the unbeliever). Are these things foolishness to you? If they are, you are not a believer. If you concur with the words of John and Paul, that is pretty strong evidence that you are indeed “spiritually alive in Christ.”

The Bible teaches that being born again means “our life is changed” — “If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; all things have become new” (2 Cor 5:17). Charles Spurgeon and John’s First Epistle identify a number of changes that take place in the lives of those who are truly born again (www.spurgeongems.org)

1. **They will no longer habitually sin.** The apostle John wrote, “No one who is born of God practices sin” (1 Jn 3:9). The regenerate person cannot continue to walk in darkness and walk in sin as a pattern of life; that is, he cannot live a life of perpetual sin and unbelief (Rom 14:23).

2. **They will seek to live a holy life.** John writes, “Everyone who practices righteousness is born of God” (1 Jn 2:3; 2:29). Where the righteousness of Christ has been imputed to an individual, a principle of holiness has also been imparted to him, and the Holy Spirit's work becomes evident in his soul (Ezek 36:27; Gal 5:16-17-24; Eph 5:17-18).

3. **They will love fellow believers.** Writes John: “We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren; he who does not love the brethren continues to abide in death” (1 Jn 3:14). It is a remarkable fact, when a person is saved he has an entirely different
attitude toward fellow-Christians; he no longer finds them strangely different or weird, or people with whom he does not want to associate.

4. **They will love others, regardless of who they are.** John writes, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God; the one who does not love does not know God” (1 Jn 4:7-8). All of the fruits of the Spirit are summed up in the word “charity” or “Christian love” — this is the sum of all grace. Believers have a tenderness in their hearts toward others that unbelievers don’t; there is a genuine compassion in believers for the well-being of others. How is it that they can love even the unlovely? Paul writes, “The love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22).

5. **They will not place their affections on the things of this world.** Writes John: “If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 Jn 2:15). Paul says, “Those who are according to the flesh, set their minds on the things of the flesh; but those who are according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit…. and the Spirit of God indeed dwells in him” (Rom 8:5, 9). The puritan writer John Owen put it this way: “If our principal is as we profess, in things spiritual and heavenly… on them will our affections, desires and thoughts be principally fixed.” These changes are not the cause of our salvation for we are saved by faith (Eph 2:8-9), but they are the evidence that we truly have been born again.

**The five main reasons people lack assurance are** —

1. **They do not remember a specific time when they received Christ.** The issue for people is to know that there was a defining moment in their life when they really placed their trust in the person and work of Christ.

2. **They question the procedure they went through when they accepted Christ.** Many evangelists and preachers emphasize the need for some form of public confession (walking the aisle or raising one’s hand); if people receive Christ privately, they may wonder if they should have made a public confession or prayed a different prayer.

3. **They struggle with certain sins.** They wonder if a true believer would have these kinds of problems. The real problem here is an ignorance of man’s sinful nature, the spiritual warfare of the believer, and the process of growing and maturing in Christ.

4. **They suffer from doctrinal misunderstanding.** They fail to understand the sufficiency of the work of Christ that solves the problem of man’s sinfulness.

5. **They look to their own works as the primary proof of their salvation.** The great reformer John Calvin emphatically warned us against looking to “our works” for the certainty of our salvation — we must look to Christ as the objective basis for assurance. To look to ourselves produces doubt and detracts from the saving work of Christ. The basis for knowing that I am a Christian is not what I do but what God's Word says about what Christ has done and continues to do for those who have placed their trust in Him (Jn 1:12; 1 Jn 5:13). The truth of the matter is, our behavior as the saints of God is not always becoming of Christ — we are imperfect and incomplete this side of glory. That is why the apostle Paul admonishes believers accordingly: “For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication: that every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honor (Rom 6:4-6, 12-13; 1 Th 4:3-4; 1 Cor 6:18-20; 7:2, 9; Gal 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:5). Paul instructs us to not let the sin nature have dominion over us, that we should obey its lusts.
If you are basing your assurance on works, by what set of criteria do you then conclude that you have actually “born enough fruit”?

Believers struggle with their faith because they haven’t completely broken away from the “old mindset of the flesh” that ruled their hearts before they accepted Christ. When we commit ourselves to the person of Christ, the old way of thinking that characterized our lives prior to accepting Christ seeks to pull us away from the narrow path of righteousness — if we resist its pull and say “no” to the old man (i.e., we crucify him) through faith, the grace of God will begin to remove the condemnation we feel. As believers, we are to live our “new life” according to the teachings of God’s Word. When we decide to walk in ways that are contrary to the world and our old nature, however, we will be thoroughly challenged in our inner man to not do so (Gal 5:17). This is why Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow Me” (Mt 16:24). Obviously you will be challenged in life to not deny your old nature, and to not follow Christ, and therein is the battle that must be fought — but to conclude that you are not saved because you are “strongly inclined” to live according to the dictates of the flesh (all of us are!), is to base your salvation on “your own goodness” and not God’s.

THE ESSENCE OF FAITH

The author of Hebrews describes faith as “the assurance of things hoped for...the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1) — that is, faith is being confident and sure of what is hoped for (that which Christ has promised), and is based upon the unshakable evidence that the unseen, spiritual blessings of Christianity are absolutely certain and real. In other words, faith brings the future into the present and makes the invisible seen. Faith is confidence in the trustworthiness of God; it is the conviction that what God says is true and that what He promises will come to pass. Faith is not a leap in the dark, belief without proof, or belief despite the evidence, rather faith is a complete trust or confidence in someone or something. Faith, of necessity, must have some revelation or promise from God as its foundation. It demands the surest evidence in the universe, and finds it in the Word of God. The challenges, afflictions and difficulties of life are the “crucible” God uses to test, prove and strengthen our faith (1 Pet 1:7). So to conclude that you don’t have faith simply because it is such a struggle for you, is to contradict what the Word of God says. George Muller put it this way: “Difficulties are food for faith to feed on.”

The believer is enjoined to live and grow in his faith through the study of the Word (Rom 10:17; 14:23; 2 Cor 10:15; Gal 3:11; Col 2:6-7; 1 Th 3:2, 10; 2 Th 1:3-4; 2:13; 1 Tim 1:18; 4:1, 6; 6:12; Heb 12:2; Jam 1:3; 1 Pet 2:2; 1 Jn 2:20, 27). As believers, we must do our part (read, study, believe & affirm His Word), and when we do, God will do His part (1 Cor 3:6; Phil 2:12-13). One of the main reasons we struggle with our faith is that we don’t know the God in whom we profess to have faith very well. Obviously the more intimately we know someone, and the more we have seen them in action, the more likely we are to believe what they say… so we must get to know Christ better (Eph 4:13; Phil 3:10; 2 Pet 3:18).
Paul exhorts us as Christians to “walk by faith, and not by sight” [or feelings; 2 Cor 5:7]. The difference between these two ways of walking is “walking according to the truth” or “walking according to perception” (what appears to be right from a human perspective – Prv 14:12). The main reason we struggle with a lack of faith is that we follow our perceptions of what is true rather than what in fact is true (i.e., what we know to be true by faith – Rom 10:17). For example, we are clearly told in Scripture that “God loves us,” but many believers do not really feel that God loves them — why? Because they don’t feel they are lovely enough for God to love them. And part of that answer is true! You are not lovely enough to be loved! Nobody is! But God doesn’t love us because we are lovely; He loves us because HE IS LOVE! The amazing thing about salvation is that God indeed does love us! That’s what inspired the great hymn writer Charles Wesley to pen that wonderful hymn — “Amazing Love, How Can It Be That Thou My God Shouldst Die for Me?” The truth of the matter is, there has never been a mature believer at any point in history who deep down felt that God loved him because He was worth loving! That is just the reality of what it means to be human! No one is lovely! We are all sinners! (Rom 3:10-12). Saved sinners indeed, but sinners nonetheless! The incredible, wonderful truth of the gospel is that GOD LOVES SINNERS! (Rom 5:8). So stop beating yourself up because you are one, and start worshipping the One who loves you and died for you! Get your eyes off yourself — that’s your problem! — and get your eyes on Jesus! (Heb 12:2). By the way, if you don’t love God, you’ve got a proud heart and you don’t realize how sinful you are… and how much you need a Savior. Believe me, none of us have anything to write home about — not even to mama! — and until we learn that, we haven’t even started down the road to maturity. Stop beating yourself up because of your sinfulness. Carefully reflect upon the words of Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the greatest English-speaking preacher of the 20th century: “As long as you see your sins as a detriment with regard to your acceptance before God, you will negate the work of the cross in your life.”

The road to maturity & assurance involves spending more time in God’s Word, and getting to know God better — “to know Him is to love Him!” (Jn 17:3; Eph 3:16-21; Jn 4:8, 10, 19). The Word is God’s communication to our soul — it not only reveals the Lord Jesus to us, and the path of life wherein to walk, but it also acts like a “mirror” that exposes all of our blemishes and imperfections. God has called us to a life of holiness, which essentially amounts to surrendering the control of our lives to Him… listening to Him… and walking with Him. Remember, without listening to God and obeying Him (that’s faith), it is impossible to please Him (Heb 11:8). The president and founder of New Life Ministries, Steve Arterburn, describes the essence of what “healthy faith” really looks like in his book, “More Jesus, Less Religion.” Let me close this study by sharing some of his thoughts with you —

A “healthy faith” is based in reality — The psalmist David wrote, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me” (Ps 23:4). That’s the expression and expectation of a healthy faith — not only that God’s presence will go with us wherever we go, but that there are some dark, deadly shadowy places that each of us must traverse in life; such dark things exist because we live in a fallen world. A healthy faith gets us through those dark valleys… whereas an unhealthy faith likes to pretend that the valleys don’t really exist! David also penned these words: “Troubles without number surround me; my sins have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head, and my heart fails within me” (Ps 40:12). Notice how honest and transparent David is before the Lord — he told the Lord the precise condition of his heart, and it wasn’t pretty. This is also an expression of a healthy faith. Earlier in the psalm he wrote: “I waited patiently for the LORD; He turned to me
and heard my cry. He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; He set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God” (Ps 40:1-3). Slimy pits and dark valleys exist in our world, and just as surely, every believer will pass through them (there are no exemptions!); we all occasionally fall into the mud and need to be rescued, cleansed and comforted. David never shrinks from telling it like it is. Healthy faith helps us embrace who we are, what we are, and where we are — not who we wish we were, and who we think we should be! David declares a failing, fallible humanity… and a loving, merciful God who chooses to involve Himself in our lives. A healthy faith acknowledges vulnerabilities, short-comings and weaknesses, and the need to depend upon a loving God to get us through all the valleys and slime pits of life. We have to embrace the fact that we are a people who must live by grace (we constantly need it!) through faith every day of our lives, because we are going toumble and stumble all the way to the end! That may be humbling, but that’s reality!

**Reality can hurt** — Discomfort, pain, conflict and spiritual warfare is reality. A healthy faith helps us embrace these realities, and trusts Christ to walk with us through them. *A healthy faith is based in reality* — we all fail, we are all sinners, we all stumble in many ways, we all land in the mud more often than we will admit, and the dark valleys are a fearful thing for all of us. The truth of the matter is, *we are all 100 percent, certifiably fallible!* David reminds us that God never forgets that fact: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear Him; for *He knows our frame and is mindful that we are but dust*” (Ps 103:13-14). By the way, whether you admit it or not, you’re just as big a “mud ball” as I am! The apostle John also reminds us that we will continue to sin every day: “If we say that we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves, and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to God, He can be depended upon to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong… if we claim we have not sinned, we are actually calling God a liar, for He says we have sinned” (1 Jn 1:8-10). When we walk in the light we admit who we are, we experience daily cleansing, and enjoy the companionship and fellowship of other humble Christians and the Lord Jesus Himself (1 Jn 1:7).

**The way it really is** — Growing Christians strive to see the world and themselves as they really are, not through some rose-colored lenses or stained-glass filter. They do not feel compelled to explain away hardships or events that mystify them; they’re willing to live with some ambiguity in life; and they trust God to rule the world in righteousness (even if it means difficulty for them). As with Job, we must sometimes come to that humble place where we say to God, “Behold, I am insignificant; what can I say to You? I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job 40:4). Healthy faith refuses to ignore daily struggles or sweep them under the rug — instead it brings those issues into the light of Scripture and the scrutiny of the Holy Spirit. Unhealthy faith runs from reality, avoids confronting it, and even denies it. The healthy believer does not look to God to magically change his circumstances, but looks to Him in the midst of trials for the strength and comfort he needs to weather the storm. Believing *God is faithful to help us through our trials and tribulations, we have no need to run from them, but rather embrace them.* Healthy believers see the problems before them… do what they can do to resolve them… and trust the Lord to do the rest.

**The Bible commands Christians to “take a close look at themselves” and ensure that they are truly in the faith**, to make sure they aren’t self-deceived into thinking they are truly saved when they are not. Paul says, “Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!” (2 Cor 13:5). Peter says, “Be diligent to make your calling and election sure” (2 Pet 1:10). If you are still not sure whether or not you truly are a believer, let me encourage you to establish in your
mind, once and for all, that you are indeed one of God’s children. Simply pray this sinner’s prayer that has been prayed by countless millions all over the world —

Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner and need your forgiveness. I believe You died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead. I ask You to come into my life and forgive me... I now surrender my life to You, Lord, as best as I know how... take it and make me the person You want me to be... and grant me the grace to trust You and follow You as my Lord and Savior. Thank You for loving me and forgiving me and making me Your child. This I pray in Your name. Amen.

For those of you who have really struggled with “the issue of assurance,” I would like to encourage you to prayerfully work through this study three or four times, so that you can affirm over and over again the wonderful truths of Scripture in your life. In a sense, this will amount to “reprogramming your thinking” — after years of affirming wrong thoughts, you may find that the “ruts in the road you have traveled” are deep and difficult for you to navigate. Ask God for the grace to travel the road of life without the hindrances of satanic deception and untruth that have plagued you. Remember, above everything else, Satan wants to keep you bound-up, bewildered, enslaved and defeated (1 Pet 5:8-9; Jam 4:7); such is his primary objective in your life. This is the essence of “spiritual warfare,” and the immediate battle before you is the most important one of all — your identity in Christ. I have included a study on “Sanctification” on my website — www.TheTransformedSoul.com — it is a verse-by-verse study of Romans 6-8. Check it out and prayerfully and carefully work your way through it. My prayer is that you will find it a very liberating study — remember, God’s will for your life is that you be “free indeed!” (Jn 8:31-32; Rom 8:2; Gal 5:1).

“Growing in Grace & Faith”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

The lesson we learn from every life form is that “all things grow” [or they die] and that growth is highly dependent upon specific environmental factors — warmth, nutrients, moisture, sunlight, and some kind of internal guidance system. By properly assimilating the various elements, everything gradually grows from a state of immaturity to a state of maturity. It should be noted, what is true of the physical realm is also true of the spiritual realm. The apostle Paul charges us to “grow up in all aspects of Christ” (Eph 4:15); likewise, Peter urges us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18), and “grow with respect to your salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). The Christian life begins with “birth,” and after birth comes “growth” — if there is no growth after being born, then there is no life (Jam 2:14-20; 1 Jn 3:17; 4:8, 20, 5:1, 3). To be “in Christ” means to be saved, regenerated, and growing in sanctification (holiness). Jerry Bridges reminds us in his book, “Growing Your Faith,” that there is no such thing as an “adult Christian” who no longer needs to grow... that spiritual growth doesn’t just happen, but requires a diligent, intentional application of the “spiritual disciplines of grace” that God has provided for us. We’ll expand more on these disciplines later. It should be noted, growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ means that you come to a fuller understanding (through His Word) of what God did for you on the cross, and continues to do in your life by His Spirit, and that you walk in obedience to His will in this world — those are tall orders that require a lifetime of growing, learning and serving.
Because “grace” is foundational to our Christian growth, it is important that we launch this study with a correct understanding of grace. A general definition of grace is this — *Grace is undeserved blessing freely bestowed by God, without regard for any human merit.* Here are a few ways various theologians have described it: **A. W. Tozer** says, “Grace is the good pleasure of God that inclines Him to bestow benefits upon the undeserving.” **Henry Ironside** describes it thus: “Grace is not only undeserved favor, but it is favor shown to the one who has deserved the very opposite.” **Jerry Bridges** writes, “Grace is God reaching downward to people who are in rebellion against Him.” One unknown author explained it like this: “Anything this side of hell is pure grace.” Grace has been contrasted with justice and mercy as follows —

*Justice* is getting what you deserve.  
*Mercy* is not getting what you deserve.  
*Grace* is getting what you do not deserve.

With the foregoing definitions in mind, it is also important to remember that there are two kinds of grace: **Common grace & Saving grace.** **Common grace** is extended to all human beings without discrimination — God’s sustaining care is given to all humanity, irrespective of merit… be it through His provision for their physical needs, or the restraint of evil in the world (cf. Matt 5:45; Rom 13:1-7; Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). Therefore the essence of the biblical doctrine of grace is this: “**God is for us even though we are against Him**” (cf. Jn 3:19; Eph 2:1-3; Col 1:21). In comparison to common grace, **Saving grace** is that grace whereby God redeems, transforms (sanctifies), and ultimately glorifies people. Unlike common grace, which is universally given, saving grace is only bestowed upon those who place their trust in Christ for salvation (cf. Rom 5:8; 10; 8:29-30; 11:6; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 5:18; Eph 2:8; Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 Jn 4:10,19). So God is not merely *for* those who have been saved in a general way, but has effectively acted toward them in a saving way; thus grace is summed up in Scripture in the name “Jesus Christ” (cf. Jn 3:19; Eph 2:1-3; Col 1:21). In comparison to common grace, God’s saving grace not only overcomes sin and enmity through the cross, but establishes covenant fellowship with Him. Why is God gracious to us, you ask? because He is gracious in Himself — just as He loves us because He is love; not because we are deserving or lovely (which none of us are). The truth of the matter is, if grace were an obligation on God’s part, it would no longer be grace. All of us are sinners through and through (Rom 7:18), though some actually think they’re better than others. In truth, God should be “**against us**” — not “**for us**.” So grace is God’s favor through Christ to people who deserve His *disfavor*… yet, wonder of wonders! God in His love came to this world in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem us with His own blood (Jn 3:16; Eph 2:1,4-9; 1:7, 14) — “God made Him (Christ) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). That, my friend, is grace. It is also important to remember that the operation of God’s grace is a **deep mystery** that far exceeds the capacity of the human mind to understand (Is 55:8-9; Rom 11:33, 36).

Before proceeding to the “next section,” let me stress the importance of reading the various biblical references that have been provided throughout this study, because they are critical for gaining greater insight and a fuller understanding of the ideas and concepts presented. To “fully quote” each biblical reference would make this a far longer and more cumbersome read to some of you. So rather than just casually reading through this material, make it a “devotional study,” even if it takes you a week or two to complete. You will discover that your faith will be greatly enriched in doing so, just as mine was in writing it. I would also suggest that you make a “hard copy” of this study (if you are getting it from my website), and with a marker and pen in hand “highlight and make notes” regarding those ideas and statements that are the most poignant and
meaningful to your own spiritual walk. Let me remind you, grasping the issues of grace and truth and faith are essential for experiencing a fruitful and joyful life; they are the three main elements of spiritual growth!

The Need to Live by Grace

The grace of God “teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives” (Titus 2:12). Though God loves and accepts us “just as we are,” He does not leave us that way — by the same grace through which He saves us, He sets about to change us. It is by grace that God provides a way to be saved… it is by grace we are enabled to believe… it is by grace that our hearts are instructed in the ways of godliness… and it is by grace that we are enabled to walk in newness of life — in short, salvation beginning to end is all a work of grace (God’s unmerited favor). If you think God “owes” it to you, then you have completely misunderstood your spiritual condition; the truth is, you and I are diabolical enemies of God who “deserve” death. It is our diabolical, unrighteous, self-centered “flesh” that distorts this reality. Not having a “righteousness of our own,” every believer inherits the “righteousness of Christ” (Phil 3:8-9); none of us did a thing to deserve it. This is called the doctrine of justification; the word “justify” means to “declare righteous” (Rom 3:28; 4:3-5; 5:1) — it was only by grace that we were given the righteousness of Christ. Though all of us as believers now have the “righteousness of Christ” (because of the gracious work of Christ on the cross), we are now to “walk in that righteousness” as His children — and this is done by depending upon the gracious indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:26-27; Gal 5:16). Remember, Scripture tells us that “apart from Christ we can do nothing” (Jn 15:5), but “through Christ we can do everything” (Phil 4:13). So we are not only dependent upon the righteousness of Christ for our acceptance with God, we are dependent upon the power of Christ for the ability to pursue spiritual growth. Therefore we must learn to depend on both the righteousness of Christ and the power of Christ — this is what it means to live by grace, and this is why “grace” is foundational to spiritual growth.

It should be noted, we are not saved by grace and blessed by works; we are not only justified by grace through faith (Eph 2:8), we stand and live every day in this same grace — we do not add “works” to grace; rather, we are so gripped by the magnificence and boundless generosity of God’s grace that we respond out of “gratitude,” rather than out of a sense of “duty.” This only occurs in those believers who truly acknowledge “their bankruptcy” with regard to righteousness; they are only too mindful of their own corruption — this is the “humility” necessary to experiencing more of God’s grace (Mt 23:12; Jam 4:6). Obviously, if God’s [gracious] work on the cross and in your soul isn’t that “big of a deal in your mind,” then there will be very little gratitude in your heart for all He has done for you. Remember, God bought you off the auction block of sin (you were a “child of Satan”), and redeemed you with His own blood (Rom 5:9; Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19). If that sobering thought doesn’t produce “gratefulness” in your heart, then the truth is you may not be saved at all (2 Cor 13:5), or you have wandered away from the cross. Steve Brown (one of my favorite authors), in a sermon he preached on “The Song of Grace,” put it like this: “The problem isn’t that we have made the gospel too good; the problem is that we haven’t made it good enough.” Though we should seek to practice spiritual discipline and obedience, we must be careful to do so out of a “grateful response to God’s grace,” rather than trying to earn God’s blessings. The truth is, our motivation is more important to God than our performance — the problem many believers have is that they are more concerned about their performance than their motivation. Scripture tells us that
the Lord “searches men’s hearts” (1 Chr 28:9), and “exposes the motives of their hearts” (1 Cor 4:5). The long and short of it is this — our motives must spring from a love for Christ and a desire to glorify Him. Jerry Bridges says, “We cannot have such a Godward motivation if we think that God owes something to us… or that we must earn God’s favor by our disciplines… or fear that we may forfeit God’s favor by our lack of them. Living under the grace of God frees us to obey God and serve Him as a loving and thankful response to Him for our salvation, and for blessings already guaranteed us by His grace. Only when we are thoroughly convinced that the Christian life is entirely of grace will we be able to joyfully practice the disciplines that help us grow” (Bridges, pp. 27-28).

The Need to be Motivated by Love

Paul writes to the church at Corinth that it is “Christ’s love for us that compels us” (2 Cor 5:14). Christ’s love compels us to live no longer for ourselves but for Him who died for us — the idea here is a commitment to the lordship of Christ in every area of our lives. We are no longer to live for ourselves but for Him — this is what spiritual growth is all about. Only a deep realization of the “love of Christ for us” can compel us to make this kind of commitment. Christ’s love for us must be the governing influence that controls our lives, not a fear of consequences or an expectation of some reward. The “present tense” of the Greek verb that Paul used in his statement to the Corinthians is particularly helpful here — thus his words can more accurately be translated, “the love of Christ continually constrains us.” In other words, Christ’s love was the constant wellspring of Paul’s motivation every day… he never took for granted the death of Christ for him… as such, he was compelled and impelled to live for the One who died for him. Writes Paul: “Blessed are those whose transgressions are forgiven… whose sin the Lord will never count against him” (Rom 4:7-8). What an incredible encouragement to know that God will never judge us for any of our sins — my sinful nature is as wicked as the next person’s, so I know the import of that statement — therefore we are to ask God to purge those sinful traits from our character, that we can (by His Spirit) put them to death as Paul instructs us in Romans 8:13. It is only when we are “compelled by His love for us” that we will seek to put away those sins.

No one who studies the life of the apostle Paul can help but wonder what made him serve so tirelessly and selflessly — it was because of Christ’s love for him (read Acts 9:1-22). The apostle John tells us the only reason we love God is “because He first loved us” (1 Jn 4:10, 19). Therefore it must be “God’s love for us” that compels us and moves us along in the Christian life. As Paul contemplated the incredible love Christ had shown to him, he could not help but be moved along in service to the Lord. John MacArthur writes in his commentary on 2 Corinthians: “It was that magnanimous, free, unmerited love of Christ that controlled, drove, and motivated Paul [to live for Christ].” Paul never lost his sense of wonder at Christ’s love, as he expressed so profoundly in his letter to the Romans (8:35-39). Furthermore, that’s why Paul could say, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me” (Gal 2:20). To the Ephesians he wrote that “the love of Christ surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:19). In short, it was the incomprehensible, unbreakable, unconditional love of Christ for him that overwhelmed Paul. The hymn writer Charles Wesley expressed it this way — “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou, my God, shouldst die for me!” The apostle Paul’s argument is irresistible — Christ died for us that we should no longer live for ourselves, but for Him (2 Cor 2:15). Jesus did not die for
us so that we might go on living selfishly for ourselves and do what we please (Gal 5:17; Rom 8:5). . . as we are all tempted to do. No! Christ died for us that we might henceforth turn our lives over to Him in willing, whole-hearted, glad devotion. The truth of the matter is, when the reality of this truth is shallow in our thinking, we will continue to live for ourselves.

The “root” of every spiritual problem we have is “a questioning or doubting of God’s love for us in some way” — and the enemy of our soul wants to keep it that way. The issue is very clear: either we believe that God really loves us, or we question it to some degree, and in so doing make the Christian life a more frustrating and joyless journey. If you really want to become all God wants you to be, and experience all He wants you to experience, you must believe in the unconditional love of God — if you put this issue on the back burner, thinking “something else” must be the problem, you will NEVER become a fruitful, joy-filled Christian. Only the realization that “God really loves you” will deliver you from the bondage you are experiencing and transform your life. There is no greater truth for the believer to affirm. End of argument. Our problem as human beings is that “our feelings” often dominate and control our thinking — remember, our thought-life is the true measure of who we are (Prv 23:7); so our thought-life must be controlled. It should be noted, “thinking” is our most constant activity; our thoughts are our constant occupation — we are never without them, but we can choose the direction and content of those thoughts. When we continue to entertain sinful thoughts once they have been identified as such… sin will immediately conceive, and with it, its painful results (Jam 1:14-15). So when we “feel” that God really doesn’t love us, that He is actually frustrated and disappointed with us and rejects us, the sin of not believing that He really loves us and that He is really for us (it is sin to not believe Him) overwhelms our spirit, and our own self-induced painful estrangement results — and again, Satan is thrilled.

It is important for us to remember, the dynamic of the flesh is “feeling,” and the dynamic of the Spirit is “faith” — note the contrast, feelings vs. faith. Though all of our feelings (desires) are not necessarily sinful, many of them are, and therein lies the problem — so we must learn to immediately say “no” to the sinful ones — this means “to stop reflecting on fleshly desires (feelings)” and “intentionally start focusing on godly thoughts” (Phil 4:8-9). We do so, understanding that this decision (battle) is often a difficult one (Gal 5:17). It should be noted, victory often comes only through prayer, affirming what is really true (that is the essence of faith), and depending on the Holy Spirit (knowing that our own willpower is simply not sufficient). That is what it means to be engaged in spiritual warfare — by the way (it goes without saying), none of us “feel” like fighting this battle. Furthermore, many Christians become disillusioned after years of “fighting the flesh,” because it does not die or calm down — thus they think their efforts as a believer have been nothing but a “failure,” because their flesh seems to keep winning battles. As a result they simply give up fighting. In the next section of this study, we will see that “the flesh never dies in any of us” in this life… but before proceeding to that section, let me first expand upon this “feeling” issue a little more, and the need to be “motivated by love.”

Feelings are incredibly important to everyone — we all want to “feel good.” Nobody likes feeling bad, and “feeling good” is just about as important to believers as it is to unbelievers — the difference is, when we “don’t feel good,” we immediately go to God and ask Him to deliver us from our “negative feelings”… and why not? He’s God! And He can “change our feelings” instantly if He wants to. Therein is the “rub” for most believers: why doesn’t God make me “feel good” when I ask Him to do so? What possible “joy” could He get out of my “feeling bad”? If I’m His child, and He really loves me, why would He want me to feel bad? Sounds logical…
but it doesn’t jive with reality. Such logic questions there being a “divine purpose” in all negative experiences. It is only through trials and bewildering difficulties that God is able to “transform us” into the image of His Son (cf. Rom 5:3-5; 8:23-25; Heb 12:1-11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2, 12, 18; 5:7-10), and get us to go to Him and enter into “His plan” for our lives; which is dying to self, the world, the flesh, and sin (Mt 16:24-25; Rom 8:36; 1 Cor 1:5-10; 2 Cor 4:10-11). The truth the matter is, if we “felt good” all the time, there would be little reason for us to go to God and enter into “His transforming plan” for our lives. Years ago I came up with a pithy little saying that pretty much describes the human psyche: “Nothing feels better than feeling good.” Because I enjoyed “feeling good” so much, and didn’t like “feeling bad,” that little saying became a favorite of mine— I noticed how “good” it felt not to be in a state of pain after recovering from some sickness, and how “good” it felt to get out from under some painful experience that I was going through. At that point, I would then turn to God and tell Him, “God, it sure feels good to feel good; thank you for delivering me out of this mess!” I was well aware of the fact that God had a hand in it in some way. However, shortly after the “high” (the “good feelings”) I was experiencing, I noticed how quickly it disappeared. It was the Lord simply teaching me that there is a lot more to life than feeling good, and as long as I made that the top priority in life it was really going to affect my life spiritually.

An additional thought on being “motivated by love” — Paul writes, “In view of God’s mercy, offer your bodies as living sacrifices to Him” (Heb 12:1). Our motivation to obey and serve God cannot rise to such heights until we learn to live daily by grace, and experience freedom each day from the bondage of the performance treadmill. Says Bridges, “A genuine heart response to the worthiness of God is the highest possible motivation for pursuing the disciplines of spiritual growth and for obedience and service to God. But we cannot ‘break through’ to that level of motivation until we are first motivated by His grace, mercy, and love. As long as we struggle with ‘earning our own acceptance with God,’ we will not be motivated by His grace, mercy, and love.” We will only “grow in grace” when we become progressively more aware of our own continued spiritual bankruptcy, and the unmerited, undeserved favor of God — as we grow in grace, we will discover that His love will compel us to live, not for ourselves, but for Him who died for us. It should be noted, making God’s grace, mercy and love our primary motivation in life doesn’t happen instantaneously — because of the presence of indwelling sin (the flesh), it happens in small incremental steps that occur in our daily walk, moment by moment, as we strive to “walk in the Spirit.” Remember, this is the life God has called us to while we sojourn here on earth, and He is well aware of the fact that it is not an easy one, and that it involves many ups and downs (Jn 16:33; 2 Cor 4:8-11; 1 Pet 4:1, 12-13, 18; 5:7-10). All of us as believers are “spiritually challenged” every day, so keep your helmet on and stay in the game! (Eph 6:17).

The “Means” of Spiritual Growth

Paul tells us in his letter to Titus that “the grace of God teaches us to say ‘no’ to ungodly living” (Titus 2:11-12). Paul used this same word when he charged fathers to bring up their children in the training (discipline) and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4). So this teaching (or discipline) is not simply the impartation of knowledge, as important as that may be, but the work of God in our souls to conform us to the image of His Son. Though in the physical realm children eventually reach adulthood and are no longer under the discipline of their parents, in the spiritual realm we remain under God’s parental discipline as long as we live. As Jerry Bridges puts it, “The
very same grace that brings salvation also trains us to live lives that are pleasing to God — all of God’s disciplinary processes are grounded in His unmerited and unconditional favor (grace) toward us” (Bridges, p. 38). So it is God Himself who initiates and superintends our spiritual growth; this is not to say that we have no responsibility to respond to God's spiritual child-training, but it is to say that He is the one in charge of our training. God uses His Word and other people as His messengers (including pastors and other believers), as well as circumstances to train us — our response is to be one of affirming those truths (that's faith), and trusting and obeying Him.

Again, grace teaches us to say “no” to ungodliness and worldly passions. Ungodliness in its broadest form basically means to disregard God, to ignore Him, or to not take Him into account in our life; ungodly people have no regard for God. As believers we are to “have regard for God” in everything we do. When we trust in Christ as our Savior, we bring a “habit of ungodliness” into our new life in Christ… but now that we are under the reign of grace, grace teaches us to “renounce this attitude of ungodliness.” Obviously this training does not occur all at once in our lives — when we come to Christ, God begins a process of rooting out ungodliness from our lives that continues throughout our earthly journey. God has called us to a “holy life” (1 Pet 1:15-16); that is, to a life of “moral purity,” because God will not have anything to do with sin — He is holy and He hates sin (1 Pet 1:15-16; Rev 15:4; Zech 8:17; Heb 1:9; 1 Jn 1:5). Remember, God's Spirit is the Holy Spirit. Since the word “holy” means to “separate,” God calls us to separate ourselves from sin… to purify ourselves from everything that contaminates the body and the spirit… to throw off everything that hinders this effort… and to abstain from those sinful desires which wage war against our souls (2 Cor 7:1; Heb 12:2; 1 Pet 2:11). So to pursue holiness is to take aggressive action to separate ourselves from the sinful expressions of the flesh, and the ever-encroaching temptations of the world around us.

Since life is a constant series of “choices,” it is through these choices that we develop Christ-like habits of living. “Sinful choices” tend to cloud our reason, dull our consciences, stimulate our sinful desires, and weaken our wills; therefore each sin we commit reinforces the habit of sinning and makes it easier to give in to that temptation the next time we encounter it. On the other hand, making “right choices” tends to strengthen our resolve against sin. So it is possible for us as believers to “train ourselves” in either a right or wrong direction — and that’s the sober reality. Making the right choices to obey God involves the discipline of “mortification.” To mortify means to “deny” our sinful desires… to “subdue” them… to “deprive” them of their power… to “put them to death,” be they thoughts, words or deeds. Paul was explicit about these misdeeds in his letter to the Colossians — “Put to death whatever belongs to your fleshly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry” (Col 3:5). It is important to note that we are to mortify our sins — not our sin nature — we cannot eliminate the principle of sin (the flesh or indwelling sin) in this life; rather we are to mortify “the specific sins,” which are an expression of indwelling sin. The goal of mortification is to break sinful habit patterns, and weaken the habits of sin so that we make the right choices. Furthermore, it is important for us to “constantly” fight against them — we are to “continually,” every day (as the flesh seeks to assert itself) fight against them. No believer, regardless of his spiritual maturity, ever gets beyond the need to mortify the sinful deeds of his flesh; therefore, we must make it our business, as long as we live, to mortify the sins that so easily entangle us (Heb 12:1). Remember, when God redeemed us, He did not redeem our sinful flesh… He simply bought us off of the auction block of sin and made us brand new creations in Christ — but much to our consternation, He left the old man in us (therefore we long for the redemption of our bodies – Rom 8:23); thus the life of
righteousness to which we are called involves dying to the ways of the old man and its sinful inclinations; and that is no pleasant walk in the park… it involves fighting the fight of faith!

We must also realize that in putting habits of sin to death, we are saying “no” to our own internal natural desires — all sin is desired, thus mortification involves an internal war against our sin disposition (Gal 5:17). So mortification involves a struggle between what we know to be right (according to our biblical, Holy Spirit induced convictions) and what we desire to do (according to the flesh). Whatever our particular areas of vulnerability to sin are, mortification is going to involve a struggle, and often it will be an intense struggle. Because our fleshly sinful desires are strong and run deep, they cry out for fulfillment — that’s why Paul used such language as “put to death.” As you pursue holiness, you must realize that you cannot do this in the strength of your own willpower, or think that mortifying sin somehow makes you more acceptable to God — the Christian life is always about the righteousness of Christ and the power of Christ.” Knowing this you will then be motivated by gratitude and strengthened by the Holy Spirit as you seek to be holy because God is holy. Reflect upon the words of Paul to his friend in ministry, Timothy: “Godliness is a means of great gain when accompanied by contentment” (1 Tim 6:6); incidentally, it is when our lives are being governed by the flesh that we lack contentment.

The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells us to “put off the old self” and “put on the new self” (Eph 4:22-24; also Col 3:9-10)... so we must work simultaneously at putting off the characteristics of our old selves, and putting on the characteristics of our new selves… spiritual growth involves this two-fold change in our character. Paul goes on to tell us that the “old self” is in a constant state of becoming more and more corrupt through the lusts of deceit — thus, it is very clear that our “flesh” (“old self”) is not capable of undergoing some improvements; it is rotten to the core, and is increasingly becoming more rotten every day (Eph 4:22). Who among us cannot attest to this? We are far more corrupt today than we were ten years old! why? because the operation of lustful deceits within our souls has made our flesh significantly more corrupt. That is simply the reality of our condition. Conversely, the “new self” is in a state of being renewed and growing in its likeness of God through the Holy Spirit’s work in our minds by the Word or truth (cf. Jn 14:16-17; 16:13; 17:17; Eph 4:23; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 6:17; Phil 2:13; Heb 4:12); remember, we are sanctified by the Word/Truth (cf. Jn 17:17). So the “old self” is in a steady state of decline (that is, it is in a constant state of worsening); where as the “new self” is in a constant state of getting better (improving). With all of this emphasis on practical Christian living, it is critical that the believer not lose sight of the fact that it is “grace” that teaches us (Titus 2:12-13)… that it is by His grace whereby we are undergoing God’s parental training… that it is by His grace that God disciplines and forgives us… and that it is by His grace that God enables us to live the Christian life. As the apostle Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but GOD was causing the growth” (1 Cor 3:6). In the same way, there may be “actions that we take by faith,” but God is the source and ultimate cause of any fruit or growth that takes place in or through us — we can no more cause fruitfulness or spiritual growth than we can cause our salvation; all we can do is simply follow the Lord’s instructions.

The Holy Spirit works in a twofold manner in our lives — when He works in a monergistic (that’s the term used by theologians) manner in us, He works alone apart from any conscious effort on our part… when He works in a synergistic manner in us, the work He does is one in which we participate, because He enables us to work. So whether it is the Holy Spirit working alone, or His enabling us to work, ultimately all spiritual growth is the result of His work — we cannot make
one inch of progress apart from Him (Jn 15:5). Paul tells us that as believers we are in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ by the Spirit (2 Cor 3:18) — this progressive work of changing us into the image of Christ is known as the “doctrine of sanctification.” Though sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit, it does involve our wholehearted response in obedience to His directives and the regular use of the spiritual disciplines. Though all believers are growing in their likeness to Christ, some make more progress than others because of their commitment and participation in the process.

**Scripture tells us that sanctification actually begins at conversion** — God prophesied of this through His prophets Jeremiah & Ezekiel: “I will put My law in their minds and write it on their hearts… I will give them a new heart and put My Spirit in them and cause them to follow my decrees” (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:26-27). So God has made us a “new creation” (2 Cor 5:17)… has given us a “new life” (Jn 3:3-8)… and this “new disposition” causes us to desire to be conformed to the will of God — however, the residual effects of our “old self” make this a struggle. The Christian life is entirely a work of grace. It is like God walking you to a location somewhere, and telling you to take your shovel and dig a hole five feet deep, and then remove a large container from the hole and open it, and to your surprise you discover it is full of “gold!” Can you then claim that it was a “work” that you did? The truth of the matter is, God could have taken a “blind man” or a “retarded child” to that location and done that work. Somewhere along the line, every believer needs to come to that point in his Christian experience, where he sees God alone as the source of everything that is good in his life. It is only the stubbornness of one’s diabolical flesh that will keep a person from doing so. Need you be reminded that every believer struggles with this? why? because we all inhabit sinful flesh (that is, a sinful, self-orientation in life).

**Our part or response to the Spirit’s work is that** “we pursue spiritual growth, all the while being consciously dependent upon the enabling power of the Holy Spirit.” Christlikeness is the goal for everyone who trusts in Christ. As Paul said, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me the strength” (Phil 4:13). Conformity to Jesus is a lifelong process that will never be completely attained in this life — that’s why Paul refers to the “continual change” in his letter to the church at Corinth: “With ever-increasing glory, from one degree of glory to another” (2 Cor 3:18). Though sin as a reigning power was defeated at the cross, it will seek to harass and sabotage our Christian life as long as we live. One of my professors in seminary, Jerry Bridges, reminds us of the difference between the unbeliever living complacently in sin (he has total disregard for God), and the believer struggling against sin (because of the presence of indwelling sin and the presence of the Holy Spirit in his life) — if we are going to pursue spiritual maturity, he says, we must accept the fact that there will be “continual tension within us” between our desires and our performance (Bridges, p. 57).

**The Need for God’s Word**

The primary means of growth God has given us is “His Word.” Peter tells us to “long for the pure milk of the Word, that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2) — we grow spiritually by “renewing our mind” with the Word (Rom 12:2). The Holy Spirit uses the teaching of the Word to continually influence and change our values and convictions, thus producing a change in character. God made us “thinking creatures,” and it is through our “minds” that He communicates His will to us — and it is through the Holy Spirit that God’s Word is made intelligible and understandable.
Spiritual truth differs from other kinds of truth in that it requires the Holy Spirit to understand (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). Scripture is the very word of God — “All Scripture is God-breathed (inspired by God’s Spirit) and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequately equipped for every good work” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The apostle Peter wrote: “Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord (through the Word); seeing that His divine power (the Holy Spirit — emphatic!) has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him (via the Word) who called us by His own glory and excellence. And by that same mighty power, He has given us all of His rich and wonderful promises (in His Word), in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:2-4) — notice carefully the emphasis upon God’s Word and the Holy Spirit with regard to the experience of His grace and peace in our lives. Without the Spirit effectuating God’s eternal Word in our hearts, there is neither salvation nor sanctification. Every believer should be able to attest to the power of the Holy Spirit when ministering “truth” to his heart — as no doubt you can recall, there have been times when you have been prayerfully reflecting upon the Word and God has made it “real” to your heart with a deep abiding peace… perhaps it was during a particular sermon that you experienced it… or the reading of Scripture or some book that captures the essence of divine truth — when your heart was humbly investing itself in God’s Eternal Word, He opened your heart to a particular truth that was being taught (Acts 16:14); though it may not happen every time you are immersed in the Word, it happens frequently enough in every believer’s life to give understanding to this principle. Our responsibility as believers is to humbly and prayerfully consider the Word, and act upon it as the Spirit directs — that is why Peter exhorts us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). Regarding the process God used to communicate His Word to humanity in the first place, He used men of faith “to write down His Word under the direction and inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (2 Pet 1:21); so they didn’t just write “their own thoughts,” but the thoughts they had under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit — God made it as real to them as He makes it to you and me; aside from the work of the Holy Spirit, they would have had no confidence in what they were thinking and writing; therefore they attested, “No prophecy of Scripture (i.e., no revelation of truth from God) is a matter of one’s own interpretation; for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (2 Pet 2:20-21). Therefore God’s Word is both a reliable and authoritative expression of His will, even though man had a part in its construction.

The author of Hebrews tells us that “faith is confidence in the trustworthiness of God… and the conviction that what God says is true” (Heb 11:1). Since the substance of faith is intelligible, it must come to us through some sort of revelation, and that revelation is God’s inspired Word. The apostle Paul confirms this truth when he tells us that “we acquire faith when the truths of God’s Word are carefully considered” (Rom 10:17), be it through the spoken or written word. You’ll notice that faith comes to us through God’s Word, not through the wisdom, philosophy or psychology of men. It is when God’s Word is carefully and humbly considered that the Holy Spirit convinces us of its truthfulness, and plants it in our hearts, thus producing conviction (Jn 14:16-17, 26; 16:7-14; Jam 1:21-25). According to Scripture, we are to read and study His Word daily… meditate on it day and night… carefully examine what others say it teaches… memorize it and obey it (Deut 17:18-19; 2 Chron 7:14; Ps 1:2; 25:5; 119:11, 105, 165; Jer 15:16; Jn 14:23; 16:13; Acts 17:11; Rom 12:2; 16:25-26; Col 3:16; 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 Jn 2:5; 5:3-4). Remember, “God’s Word is living and active and powerful” (Heb 4:12; 1 Th 2:13; 1 Pet 1:23), it is not just a book of knowledge or carefully crafted words. The key forbelievers is to let the transforming power of God’s Word (the Holy Spirit) dwell in you richly (Eph 6:17; 5:18; Col 3:16); therein is how we grow in holiness and sanctification (Jn 17:17).
One of the things we must do if we are going to grow into Christlikeness is to “develop Bible-based convictions & divine perspectives” — these must be believed so strongly that they affect the way in which we live. The “convictions and values” that govern our lives, will either come from the sinful world around us, or from God’s Word — one of these two forces will impact and influence our lives more than the other; obviously, we cannot completely stop the world from influencing us, but we can limit its influence by daily and prayerfully seeking the wisdom of God in His Word. If we do not intentionally and actively seek to come under the influence of God’s Word, we will come under the influence of the sinful world around us. The impact of our culture with its heavy emphasis on materialism, living for one’s self, and instant gratification is simply too strong and pervasive for us to not be influenced by it to some degree. So we are either being drawn more and more under the transforming influence of Scripture, or we are being progressively drawn into the web of an ungodly society around us. Therefore we must continually submit our minds to the transforming influence of God’s Word, the chief instrument the Holy Spirit uses to sanctify us.

The Need for Full Dependency

The psalmist reminds us, “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labor in vain” (Ps 127:1). Though God is intimately involved in the building, it is equally obvious that the builders are also involved. The builders cannot put away their tools and go fishing and expect God to build the house — they must work — but they must carry out their responsibilities in “total dependence on God.” Paul put it this way: “Work out your salvation with fear and trembling… but work with the realization that you work not alone; God is at work in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13). Probably the most important means of growing in a “conscious sense of dependence on Christ,” is through the “discipline of prayer” — prayer is the tangible expression of our dependence. In Psalm 119, the writer teaches us about the discipline of prayer — twenty-two times he prays to God for “help” in obeying His law. Here are just a few of them:

~Revive me according to Thy word (v. 25)
~Teach me Thy statutes (v. 26)
~Make me understand the way of Thy precepts (v. 27)
~Strengthen me according to Thy word (v. 28)
~Teach me, O Lord, the way of thy statutes (v. 33)
~Give me understanding, that I may observe Thy law (v. 34)
~Make me walk in the path of Thy commandments (v. 35)
~Incline my heart to Thy testimonies (v. 36)

Though the psalmist was ardent in his desire to obey, he recognized his dependence on God for doing it. Earnest prayer for divine enablement is essential for us as well if we are to experience spiritual growth and victory over sin. None of us are endowed with a reservoir of strength from which to draw — it is always “by the Spirit” that sinful deeds are put to death and spiritual growth is achieved. Jerry Bridges reminds us that holiness always requires “continual effort on our part” and “continual nourishing and strengthening by the Holy Spirit” (Bridges, p. 89). The chief characteristic of our sinful nature (or “flesh,” as it is called in most Bible translations), is an “attitude of independence toward God;” thus we tend out of habit to “act independently” (Rom 7:19). It is the admission of helplessness and dependence that is so repugnant to our sinful spirit of self-
Jesus told his disciples they needed to abide in Him, because “apart from Him they could do nothing” (Jn 15:5). Just as a branch abides in a vine by drawing all its life and nourishment from the vine, so we as believers must fully “depend on Christ” (abide in Christ) if we are to grow in holiness and live fruitful lives. We abide in Christ by cultivating intimacy with Him through prayer, reading and obeying His Word, fellowshipping with other believers, loving and serving others, and being continually conscious of our union with Him and our need to depend upon Him in all things. The maturing believer knows the more he gets to know Christ through His Word, the more intimate his relationship will be with Him, the more he will understand His will, and the more he will think His thoughts after Him. Jesus wanted His disciples to have a deep inner joy that comes from dependence upon Him; He wanted “His joy” to be theirs (Jn 15:11). Jesus taught that real, genuine joy comes by fully depending upon Him in every aspect of one’s life (cf. Rom 14:17; 15:13; Gal 5:22; 1 Th 1:6; 1 Pet 1:8; 1 Jn 1:4; Jude 1:24).

The Need for Suffering and Patience

As we look back at the children of Israel and their exit from bondage in Egypt, we see that they were actually only “eleven days” from Canaan (the Promised Land)… yet it took them “forty years” to get there! (Deut 1:2-3). Why was this? We need only look at ourselves for the answer — we traverse ground very slowly… and often we have to go back and travel the same ground over and over again! “We are slow travelers, because we are slow learners… like the children of Israel, we are kept back by our unbelief and slowness of heart,” writes C. H. Mackintosh in his commentary on the Pentateuch (Loizeaux Brothers, 1972, p.603). The wonderful truth is this: our God is a faithful and wise as well as a gracious and patient Teacher. Sometimes we may think we have mastered a lesson, and as such we attempt to move on to another, but our wise Teacher knows better, and He sees the need for “deep ploughing” — As Mackintosh puts it, “He will keep us, if need be, year after year at our scales until we learn to sing” (Mackintosh, p.604). While it is very humbling to us to be so slow in learning, it is very “gracious of God” to take such pains with us, in order to make us sure. Just as the children of Israel failed repeatedly, and stubbornly went their own way, so we too repeatedly depart from the ways of God and follow our own fleshly imaginations. Though Scripture provides us with all we need to perfect us in holiness (2 Tim 3:16-17), we are still prone to follow the devices of our own sinful inner self. Remember, the duty of a servant is simply to obey, to do as he is told, not to reason or question — he fails as a servant insofar as he exercises his own private judgment. The one grand business of a servant is to “do his master’s will” (Mackintosh, p.607). Strange as it seems, all men are inclined to exercise their own private judgment in the things of God. The reality is, the Word of God is the only authority in heaven and earth — anything else is the rule of our conscience in direct contrast with the voice of the eternal, living Word of God, Jesus Christ.

The LORD spoke the following words to His people while they were in the desert — “You have stayed long enough on this mountain…. Behold, I have set the land before you; go in and possess the land which the Lord swore to give to your fathers” (Deut 1:6-8). Thus it was with Israel in their desert wanderings, and thus it is with us. Ultimately, we are to leave all our matters in the hands of a loving Father — He is the one who arranges our movements for us, and fixes the
bounds of our habitation… He tells us how long to stay in a place, and where to go next. He has
taken charge of all our concerns, all our movements, all our wants (Mackintosh, p. 611). Scripture gives
us the fullest assurance that God can and does guide His children in all things — “The steps of a
man are ordered of the Lord” (Ps 37:23; Prv 16:9; 20:24); “I will instruct you and teach you in the way
which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you” (Ps 32:8). Thank God it is so, or
we would all be left to the mere impulse of our own will — by the way, the path of self-will is
sure to be a path of darkness and misery, whereas the path of obedience is a path of peace and
divine favor (Mackintosh, p. 613). Why did the children of Israel stay in the wilderness? because of
a “wilderness mentality;” their thoughts were fleshly, and it kept them in bondage. It was only
after years of wandering that they were ready to “jettison fleshly thinking” and be “renewed in
their minds;” it was only then that they were ready to take possession of their rightful inheritance.

The “renewing of our minds” takes place “little by little” — one small step at a time. The
LORD told His people in the desert that He would “clear out the [godless] nations in Canaan little
by little” (Deut 7:22). We don’t conquer all of our enemies in life in one swell swoop — it takes time,
and it happens little by little. The apostle Peter said, “After you have suffered for a little while,
the God of all grace will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet 5:10). Why
do we need to suffer for a little while? Because it is through suffering that we “die to ourselves”
and “surrender to the lordship of Christ” — and it is only then that we fully come to appreciate
the “freedom that is ours in Christ.” So in all the trials of life, God is doing His sanctifying work
in us through our suffering (Ps 33:18; Prv 10:28; Rom 4:18-21; 5:5; Gal 5:5; Titus 1:2; 2:13; Heb 3:6; 6:19). Sometimes God takes His time to bring about our deliverance — it is often through a difficult period
of waiting that God “stretches our faith” and lets “patience” do its perfect work (Jam 1:4). Remember,
God is at work in your life and bringing about your deliverance “little by little” (Phil 1:6; 2:13); with
that in mind, that should be a great encouragement to you.

The Need for Fellowship

God created us to be dependent not only on Him but on other believers as well; none of us have
the spiritual wherewithal to “go it alone” in life… contrary to what many believers refuse to ac-
knowledge, we all the need one another (Jn 13:34; 1 Cor 12:21; 1 Jn 2:10-11). King Solomon reminds us
that “as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another” (Prv 27:17)… and “two are better than
one”… if one falls down, his friend can help him up; but pity the man who falls and has no one to
help him up” (Ecc 4:9-10). One of the many advantages of fellowship is the mutual admonishing or
encouraging of each other in the face of temptation or attacks from Satan. That’s why the writer
of Hebrews said, “Encourage one another daily, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s
deceitfulness” (Heb 3:13)… and “Do not give up meeting together as is the habit of some; rather
consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and encourage one another” (Heb
10:24-25). The apostle Paul expressed His desire to be “mutually encouraged by another’s faith”
(Rom 1:12). Historically, the church’s Apostles’ Creed speaks of “the communion of saints,” referring
to both the objective community relationship and the experiential sharing of spiritual fellowship
with one another. J. I. Packer, in his insightful book “God’s Words” tells us, “The Puritans used
to ask God for ‘one bosom friend,’ with whom they could share absolutely everything and main-
tain a full-scale ‘prayer-partner relationship;’ and with that they craved, and regularly set up,
group conversations about divine things” (p. 200). So the Bible not only teaches the importance
of spiritual fellowship, but church history also affirms it. We must look to God to lead us to that
“special person” with whom we can develop intimate fellowship; as the old Puritan adage goes, “Have communion with few, be intimate with one.” The Puritans realized the importance of genuine spiritual fellowship.

**Spiritual fellowship involves the sharing of our sins and struggles** and failures and discouragements, as well as our blessings and our joys. James (the brother of Jesus) told us to “confess our sins to each other and pray for each other” that we might experience the healing power of the Holy Spirit in our life” (Jam 5:16). “Healing the soul” is the most wonderful healing God does in the lives of His children. Though this aspect of fellowship is threatening to most of us, we seem to forget that “no temptation has seized us that is not common to all of us” (1 Cor 10:13). The Lord Jesus gave us a new commandment the night before He went to the cross — it is that we “love one another,” that we genuinely care for one another by helping carry each other’s burdens (Jn 13:34; Gal 6: 1-4; Jn 3:10, 17; 4:7-8, 20-21). It should be obvious, if we do not know the struggles another person is facing, we cannot encourage, help, or pray for him in a meaningful way — by the way, genuine, heartfelt intercession is the most important ministry we can have in the life of another individual — “the prayer of the righteous accomplishes much” (Jam 5:16) — remind yourself of the context!! The question is, do you really believe that? Furthermore, if we are not having communion with God and learning from Him, then we will have nothing to share with others — the reality is, when we share our thoughts with others, we learn because we are forced to carefully think through and develop our ideas.

**It should be remembered, if you and I are going to grow spiritually**, we cannot play “Lone Ranger” — we must incorporate spiritual fellowship into our Christian lives. In most cases it proceeds at the “small group” level and proceeds to grow from there. Just as you dialogue with God regarding spiritual matters, so you also need to dialogue and interact with others regarding spiritual matters; and when you do, the Holy Spirit will minister grace both in your life and through your life. Remember, the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer, and it is His ministry in and through each one of us that transforms our lives. The issue is, do you really believe this? Faith believes it and acts upon it. The Great Commandment is that we “love God and love our fellow man” — let me emphasize the fact that this is a “command,” not an “optional extra credit assignment” (Mt 22:36-39). Obviously, “our responsibility” toward others in this world is an absolute in God’s economy — there are no exemptions! God didn’t make any of us self-sufficient, autonomous creatures — it is our diabolical flesh that demands independent autonomy… and it is the reason Cain selfishly responded to the Lord, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Gen 4:9). Scripture give us an emphatic, “Yes, you are!” (Lk 10:25-37). The selfish flesh in all of us seems to “frequently grumble” at the thought — “I didn’t cause their problem; why do I have to help?”. Can you hear the groaning of your “sin disposition” within? Isn’t it interesting how it actually tries to “justify” our not getting involved, as if we have some special exemption, or that we have some alternative way to reach the goal! Beloved, there is nothing I can do to force you to abandon such thinking; all I can do is implore you to comply with the teaching of Scripture. To stubbornly resist this action, for whatever reason (shyness, or any other reason) is simply giving in to the voice of the evil one… you must take the step, because no one else can take it for you.

**The Need to Serve God**
The apostle Paul tells us that “we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do **good works**, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). God intends for all believers to be “**active workers**” in His kingdom. To this end God has assigned every Christian a **function** in the body of Christ, and **equips** each of us to fulfill that function (Rom 4:3-8). As believers we are all members of the body of Christ, and share in the common life of Christ…and as such we are to use our **spiritual gifts** to serve one another and build each other up in the faith (1 Cor 12:7, 11; 1 Pet 4:10-11). Obviously, the effective use of our gifts does not occur without **diligent effort** on our part. Paul’s friend in ministry, Timothy, already had the gift of teaching, yet Paul did not hesitate to urge him to “be diligent to present himself to God as a workman who could handle accurately the Word of Truth” (2 Tim 2:15). He was **accountable** to God for the development and use of his gift…and as a teacher he had to study zealously to learn God’s truth and then had to labor diligently to communicate it in a clear and inspiring manner.

Every person has a gift to serve in **some capacity** and must strive to become competent and proficient in doing so. If you are not yet aware of what your precise gifts are, “**get involved in various ways in your church,**” and over the course of time “**your giftedness**” will become apparent to you and others also — why? because the Holy Spirit will “**use your efforts**” to minister to others. It is when “**our service**” bears fruit that our gifts are confirmed. If you don’t know where to start, get involved by “assisting someone in their ministry” — it will grow from there. You are responsible to **take some initiative** — inquire of others and get involved! As the apostle Paul said, “To this end I labor, struggling with all Christ’s energy which so powerfully works in me” (Col 1:29); though Paul “**worked hard**” in his labors, he “**depended upon the power of Christ within**” to guide and direct his efforts, and to make them fruitful and effective. We are to do the same.

Jesus reminded his disciples, “**To whom much is given, much will be demanded**” (Lk 12:48). Beloved, the sober reality is this — one day all of us as believers are going to have stand before the “**Judgment Seat of Christ**,” not to be judged for our sins (Heb 10:17), but to have everything we have done in this life as believers carefully scrutinized and appraised (2 Cor 5:10; Mt 12:36; Mt 25:14-30; Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:12-15; Gal 6:7; Eph 6:8; Col 3:24-25). As a result of this judgment of our works, there will be “reward” and “loss of reward.” The apostle John had some other sobering thoughts to share on this subject — “Little children, abide in Christ (walk in obedience before Him), so that you may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame when He appears” (1 Jn 2:28). The word “**have confidence**” literally means “**to be able to speak**” — can you even imagine “**not being able to speak to Christ**” when He returns to this world because of “having lived your life selfishly”? Instead you will feel such “**intense shame at how you lived**” that you will not even be able to “look at Christ” or “speak to Him” when He looks at you — rather you will turn away in embarrassment and shame. **That is an incredibly sobering thought,** and sadly for many that will be the reality. Though they are saved (1 Cor 3:15), and will spend eternity in heaven with Him, their initial entrance into Christ’s presence will be one of overwhelming shame (not joy) — why? because they did not submit to God’s purpose for their life — they were simply into “living for themselves.” Beloved, those are not my words, those are God’s words. I simply implore you to not ignore them.

**Regarding the judgment seat of Christ** — it is necessary for the appointment of **our eternal position** of rulership and authority with Christ in His role as King of kings and Lord of lords (Mt 20:20-23; 24:45-47; Mt 25:14-30). Each of us as His children are destined to “**serve God**” in some capacity in His eternal kingdom. Do you care about your eternal future? Is it really important to you? There is only “one thing” that you can do to prove that you do care: **you must become intentional**
about your Christian life and your walk with Christ, and give it everything you have. If you don’t, you are letting your “sin disposition” run your life. End of argument. Remember, the person who wants to experience greater reward and godliness “must clothe himself with humility by serving others” (Jn 13:1-15; Lk 22:27; Gal 5:13; 6:7-10; Phil 2:5-11). One final word — in contrast to the “Judgment Seat of Christ” for the saved… the “Great White Throne Judgment” is for the unsaved of all ages (Rev 20:11-15), where different degrees of punishment will be meted out, and where they will be eternally cut off from God’s presence and His sin-cleansed universe.

The LORD said to the children of Israel when they were in the desert, “I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses: choose life that you may live!” (Deut 30:19). Likewise, He said to them, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you… and through the rivers, they will not overwhelm you… and when you walk through the fire, you will not be burned” (Is 43:2). The apostle Paul exhorted us to “not lose heart and grow weary, for in due time and at the appointed season we shall reap” (Gal 6:9). In other words Paul is encouraging us to “keep on keeping on!” Never quitting, because victory is certain! (Ps 138:8; Is 42:3; Phil 1:6; 1 Th 5:24). By the way, the four references just underscored should be a great encouragement to your heart. Our problem as believers is that our carnal, fleshly minds have had so much practice operating freely, that it requires effort and intentionality to “choose right thinking.” Remember, we are reprogramming a very carnal, fleshly, worldly mind to think as God thinks! Impossible? No! — Difficult? Yes! But God is on our side, continually reprogramming our mind! Though we are all cooperating with God to some degree as believers, obviously we are not all cooperating with Him to the same degree. The issue in life is that we grow in grace and faith, and continue steadfastly in the battle (because that indeed is what it is)… and that means taking God’s call upon your life seriously and working at it every day… knowing that God is also at work in you (Phil 2:12-13).

This is the will of God for you — your sanctification (1 Thess 4:3) Prayerfully and humbly make Christ your life (Phil 1:21; Col 3:4)

“THE IMPORTANCE OF FELLOWSHIP”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Introduction

God is relational — due to the fact we were made in His image we are also “relational beings.” As mentioned in the preceding study, our calling in life is to share His life and have fellowship with one another — outside of our relationship with God, our relationship with our fellow man is our supreme reason for existence. The most important things in all creation — by far — are the “people” who inhabit this planet; as such, they are to be the chief occupation of our lives. We are to love and care for them as we do our own lives; this is God’s will for the entire human family (believers and non-believers alike — cf. Gen 4:9; Mt 22:37-39; 25:35-45). That essentially is the way God wired us. The problem with man is that his interior makeup was completely marred and corrupted when he fell in the Garden; hence he now lives life in a way that runs contrary to God’s intended purpose and design.
During my life, I (and no doubt you as well) have found “the nature of man” to be extremely baffling and confusing — why on earth would a person hurt someone they love? Some people may be a positive influence on our lives physically (health, business, etc.), while at the same time be a negative impact us mentally and spiritually. Psychologists tell us it is rare that any two people are in harmony on all three levels — physical, mental and spiritual (Ostaro). Down through the ages some strong leadership personalities have exercised significant influence over the masses, be it for good or for evil; on the other hand, some of them misused their powers and did great harm to humanity — men like Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse Tung, Edi Amin, et al. In most instances, only those people with a deep level of spiritual sensitivity are aware of the impact that others have on their lives.

Relationships are our reason for existence — relationships with God and with our fellow man. Throughout life we constantly interact with people — some of our associations are a great help to us spiritually, while others may be a great hindrance to us. All of our relationships effect our “well-being” in some way — be it physically, emotionally, or spiritually. It is through relationships with others that we grow and evolve into the people we become. Therefore, it is important that we cultivate relationships that improve our lives spiritually, and imbue us with godly values and meaning. Proverbs 13:20 tells us that we will be significantly affected by the people we choose to relate to — either we will become wise by associating with those who are wise, or we will suffer destructive consequences by associating with those who are imprudent. Thus our associations affect both the growth and the development of our lives. If living a healthy, productive life is really important to us, we will give serious attention to the relationships we foster… with that in mind, truly loving parents give careful attention to the social structures in which their children are involved.

Psychologists tell us there is a strong correlation between “healthy relationships” and people’s physical health and psychological well-being. Arthur Aron, a professor of psychology at New York’s Stony Brook University says, “Relationships are enormously important for health, and there are lots of studies on the biological processes that account for the link between relationships and health” (Johnson). Conversely, the health risks from going it alone in life or isolating oneself from others, are comparable to the risks associated with cigarette smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity. Research done by the “Life Science Foundation” at the University of Minnesota shows that —

- People who have a strong social network tend to live longer.
- The heart and blood pressure of people with healthy relationships respond better to stress.
- Strong social networks are associated with healthier endocrine system and cardiovascular functioning.
- Healthy social networks enhance the immune system’s ability to fight off infections diseases. (Life Science Foundation)

Most people have read studies that link marriage to living longer in life. Study after study shows married couples are healthier and suffer far fewer heart issues than unmarried couples. This makes a lot of sense because God designed us to be social creatures; therefore it only follows that companionship, and a loving relationship and a support system, are just as important to our “heart health” as eating veggies and getting lots of exercise. Pastor Dan Walker says that relationships can bring us great joy or deep distress — unfortunately, we live in a
world where relational problems abound and half of all marriages end in divorce; so marriage
is now viewed as something disposable: “If it doesn’t work out, you simply look for somebody
else” (Walker). Denise Webster reminds us that “stressful relationships can backfire on our good
heart health… [therefore we need] fun, supportive and deeply meaningful relationships.” The
bottom line is good relationships help keep us healthy, whereas bad ones have a negative effect
upon our heart, brain, and our overall health. Webster offers four practical suggestions for
regulating relationships:

- Be grateful for your friends and family; don’t take them for granted.
- If you have a spat with your friend or spouse, clear it up as soon as possible (Eph 4:26);
dwelling in a feud is detrimental to your health.
- If you are somewhat of a loner, try to take an active role in expanding your circle of
relationships.
- To minimize the impact of people causing you stress, be mindful how you interact with
them. (Webster)

A new study strongly demonstrates the value of “social relationships” for increasing a
person’s lifespan. In the journal *PLoS Medicine*, Brigham Young University professors Julian
Holt-Lunstad and Timothy Smith report that low social interaction essentially is more harmful
than not exercising… twice as harmful as obesity… and the equivalent to being an alcoholic.
The researchers analyzed data from 148 previously published longitudinal studies that measured
frequency of human interaction and tracked health outcomes for a period of seven and a half
years on average. Smith states that “constant interaction is not only beneficial psychologically
[increases our mental health] but directly effects our physical health” (Nauert). Carol Ryff has
been doing research on the connection between relationships and health for a number of years.
In one study which followed 10,317 people from birth over 36 years, data on social relationships
was collected along with biological markers important for indicating wear and tear on the body.
Measures included systolic blood pressure, urinary cortisol levels, and epinephrine levels. The
data support the idea that negative relational experiences are associated with greater wear and
tear on the body, and levels of oxytocin in the body (Ryff).

Have you ever wondered why some of your relationships are more effective than others?
Researchers have learned a lot in the last 30 years about what makes good relationships tick,
and it boils down to just a few basic things. Unfortunately most folks are only minimally aware
of those elements, and therefore aren’t doing everything they can to improve their relationships.
Arthur Aron recommends giving attention to just three things —

- Mind your mental health — for relationships to be effective, keep stress to a minimum.
- Keep the lines open — conflicts are inevitable in relationships, learn to communicate.
- All relationships require effort and attention — spend the time and energy, it pays off.

Psychologist Tim Kasser, the author of “The High Price of Materialism,” has shown that the
pursuit of materialistic values like money, possessions, and social status (the fruits of career
successes) leads to lower well-being and more distress in individuals, and is also damaging
to relationships. Kasser writes, “My colleagues and I have found that when people [place a
premium on] materialistic values, they have poorer interpersonal relationships and contribute
less to the community.” Such people are also more likely to objectify others, and use them as
a means to achieve their own goals. In a 2004 study, social scientists John Helliwell & Robert Putnam, authors of “Bowling Alone,” examined the well-being of a large sample of people in 51 countries around the world. They found that social connections — in the form of marriage, family, ties to friends and neighbors, civic engagement, workplace ties, and social trust — “all appear independently and robustly related to happiness and life satisfaction, both directly and through their impact on health.” Furthermore, they add, “If everyone in a community would become more connected, the average level of subjective well-being would increase.” This may explain why Latin Americans, who live in a part of the world fraught with political & economic problems, but are strong on social ties, are the happiest people in the world according to Gallup (Smith). It may also explain why Louisiana came in as the happiest state in the country in a major study of 1.3 million Americans published in Science in 2009 — this surprised many at the time, but makes sense given the social bonds in Louisiana communities. Meanwhile, wealthy states like New York, New Jersey, Connecticut, and California were among the least happy, even though their inhabitants have ambition in spades, and year after year send the greatest number of students to the Ivy League. In another study Putnam and a colleague found that people who attend religious services regularly are, thanks to the community element, more satisfied with their lives than those who do not; and people with ten or more friends at their religious services were about twice as satisfied with their lives than people who had no friends there (Smith).

Barry Schwartz, a psychological researcher based at Swarthmore College, says that “relationships and community impose constraints on freedom, binding people to something larger than themselves.” The problem with our culture, he says, is that it assumes that “limiting freedom” is detrimental to well-being. Schwartz, who has done extensive research on this issue suggests that “too much freedom [or a lack of constraints] is actually detrimental to human happiness.” Journalist Rod Dreher has also come to see the virtue of constraints. He believes the secret to the good life is “setting limits and being grateful for what you have” — meanwhile, many of his East Coast friends, who have pursued the money tree, good jobs and success, feel empty and alone. “Community means more than many of us realize,” Dreher says, “and it certainly means more than your job” (Smith). New York Times writer David Brooks referred to a study that started in 1938 that tracked 268 students over the course of their lives that was finally coming to a close; it has revealed two amazing finds —

- Relationships had more to do with the flourishing of life than almost any other factor.
- Humans are capable of change at any point in their life.

The director of the study, George Vaillant, summed up the research with this statement: “It was the capacity for intimate relationships that predicted flourishing in all aspects of these men's lives” (Homesley). As Christians, we clearly see the reason for this conclusion — relationships are a critical component to human flourishing because humans were created to be in relationship. Part of being made in the image of God is having the capacity for intimate relationship… and the supreme relationship above all relationships is that of intimacy with God Himself. Before any other human was created, Adam knew his Creator… he communed with his Maker… therefore the number one relationship we are to develop is with our Maker. God made us for Himself (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16). When God is our number one relationship, we will naturally develop healthy relationships with our fellow man — that is as sure as day follows night. Following are five tips for maintaining the most important human relationship in life — that of “marriage.”
1. **Speak Up** — In a healthy relationship, if something is bothering you, it is best to talk about it instead of holding it in.

2. **Respect Your Partner** — Your partner’s wishes and feelings have value; let them know you are making an effort to keep their ideas in mind; mutual respect is essential in maintaining healthy relationships.

3. **Compromise** — Disagreements are a natural part of healthy relationships, but it is important that you find a way to compromise if you disagree on something. Try to solve conflicts in a fair and rational way.

4. **Be Supportive** — Offer reassurance and encouragement to your partner, and let your partner know when you need his or her support. Healthy marriage relationships are about building each other up, not putting each other down.

5. **Respect Each Other’s Privacy** — Just because you are in a marriage relationship, doesn’t mean you have to share every moment and every experience with your spouse. Any healthy relationship, irrespective of its depth and intensity, calls for space, trust, equality, freedom and respect. Having healthy boundaries in marriage is not a sign of secrecy or distrust — it is an expression of genuine trust and unconditional love. No human being has the capacity to be the “end all” for another person at every moment in their life; so to demand that you be precisely that for your spouse is to not only have a poor understanding of yourself, but also of your spouse — it is to live in the world of unreality. Though each of us may be “the love of someone’s life,” none of us can be “all things” to that person, because none of us is God; we all have severe deficiencies and our fallenness has only compounded the problem.

**Because this issue is so significant in some people’s lives,** let me expand upon the essence of “possessiveness” at this point. When relationships are based on fear, power, control, jealousy and possessiveness, ultimately they become unhealthy, destructive relationships that end up consuming both persons in the process. Ultimately, possessiveness stems from feelings of insecurity, where the possessive person doubts the love and dedication of the other individual — as a result, the possessive person becomes jealous and controlling. Possessive individuals are often prone to looking through their spouse’s phone messages, emails, pockets, or purses for “evidence” to support their suspicions; obviously, such behavior is not acceptable. Possessive people are typically self-pitying, easily offended, supra-sensitive, selfish, argumentative, and lacking in self-confidence. Springing from a mix of insecurity, suspicion and fear, possessiveness is starkly negative both in its realm and its effect. The marriage relationship is not meant to make us feel trapped, smothered, restrained, and confined; rather, it is meant to be the most wonderful, liberating, fulfilling human relationship we can experience on this planet. Loving is all about believing, caring, sharing & trusting. With that said, healthy boundaries should not result in living with restrictions that are reserved for children. Each spouse should be able to —

- Go out with his or her friends without their partner
- Participate in activities and hobbies they like
- Not have to share passwords to their email, social media accounts, or their phone
- Respect each other’s individual likes and needs (love is respect.org)

**The Concept of Biblical Fellowship**
The spiritual significance of people in our lives revolves around the concept of “fellowship” in the New Testament. The primary meaning conveyed by the Greek term koinonia is that of “participation” — this word is used nineteen times in the New Testament, and in addition to being translated “fellowship,” it is also translated “contribution,” “sharing,” & “participation;” and can also be translated “partnership” & “communion.” There is no sense of abstraction in the use of the word, but rather of actual participation in that to which the term refers. The sense of sharing and self-sacrifice that is inherent in the word is clearly evident in those references dealing with financial support in the early church (Rom 12:13; 15:26; 2 Cor 8:4; 9:13; Gal 6:6; Phil 4:15; Heb 13:16). It is clear in these passages that Paul viewed the contribution for the needy Jewish Christians in Jerusalem, taken up from the poverty-stricken Gentile Christians in the Hellenistic world, as the ultimate expression of fellowship among Christian people (Elwell, p.445). Furthermore, that the early church maintained fellowship daily (Acts 2:42), is evidenced in the communal lifestyle Luke describes in Acts 4-5. It should also be noted, just as one may participate in God-honoring activities with fellow human beings, so one may also engage in sinful acts of wickedness (1 Tim 5:22; 2 Jn 11); so the word fellowship is not just reserved for the godly interactions of believers.

The Bible says the first-century Christians “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship” — note the connection between the apostles teaching and fellowship. When a believer is in fellowship with God, he becomes consumed with His Word (it is the agency by which the mind is renewed — cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 2:2), and the desire to share the dynamics of it with other Christians. Just as sports is the topic of interest to the athlete, and music is to the musician, and science is to the scientist, so biblical truth is to the believer. When people are out of fellowship with God, however, they have little appetite for the Word and are also almost always out of fellowship with other believers. Fellowship with God and fellowship with other believers go together — they are inextricably linked. As Greg Laurie puts it, “Fellowship is praying together, serving together, and growing together spiritually” (Laurie). Thus Christian fellowship essentially is a mutually beneficial relationship with fellow-believers — those who believe the gospel are members of God's family (and as such, are brothers and sisters in Christ), and their oneness in Christ is the basis of their fellowship. Though we all have friendships and relationships with unbelievers, true spiritual fellowship can only occur within the body of Christ, because of the mutual ministry of the Spirit in our lives, and our common beliefs, purposes and goals. Just as “iron sharpens iron,” in true Christian fellowship Christians sharpen one another’s faith and stimulate one another to exercise that faith in love and good works (Prov 27:17; Heb 10:24-25).

Isolation (going it alone) is one of the most dangerous things that can occur in the believer’s life. Scripture tells us “we need each other” (1 Cor 12:7-21; Eph 4:16) and that there is “strength in numbers” (Ecc 4:9-12; Mt 18:20). It is good to know that when we need someone to pray for us, that we have a network of friends to draw upon… or when we need a word of encouragement, that there is someone of like faith there to share it with us (2 Pet 1:1). We practice fellowship when we serve the body with our spiritual gifts and our natural abilities, and the more we serve and care for the body the more conscious we become of the needs of the body… the Holy Spirit then moves us to help meet those needs. Church is more than a service — it is a living organism — it is a body whose head is Christ, and as long as all the parts of the body are connected to the head, they will work in perfect unison with each other (Eph 4:16). The first century church used to meet every day and partake of the Lord’s Supper, signifying their fellowship and union with Christ and with one another. The term “one another” is mentioned 54 times in the New Testa-
ment — such injunctions teach believers how to have healthy relationships with each other. Following is a partial list of the various “one another” passages:

- Jn 13:34 — Love one another
- Jn 13:14 — Wash one another’s feet
- Rom 12:10 — Be devoted to one another
- Rom 12:10 — Give preference to one another in honor
- Rom 12:16 — Live in harmony with one another
- Rom 14:13 — Do not judge one another
- Rom 15:7 — Accept one another
- 1 Cor 1:10 — Agree with one another so that there will be no divisions among you
- 1 Cor 11:33 — Wait for one another
- 1 Cor 12:25 — Have equal concern for each other
- Gal 5:13 — Serve one another in love
- Gal 5:26 — Do not provoke and envy one another
- Gal 6:2 — Bear one another’s burdens
- Eph 4:2 — Show forbearance to one another in love
- Eph 4:16 — Build one another up in love
- Eph 4:32 — Be kind and compassionate to one another
- Eph 4:32 — Forgive one another
- Eph 5:19 — Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
- Eph 5:21 — Submit to one another
- Col 3:9 — Do not lie to each other
- Col 3:16 — Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom
- 1 Th 5:11 — Encourage one another and build each other up
- 1 Th 5:15 — Be kind to one another
- Heb 10:24 — Stimulate one another to love and good deeds
- Jam 4:11 — Do not speak down against one another
- Jam 5:9 — Do not complain against one another
- Jam 5:16 — Confess your sins to one another and pray for one another
- 1 Pet 4:8 — Keep fervent in your love for one another
- 1 Pet 4:9 — Be hospitable to one another without grumbling
- 1 Pet 5:5 — Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another

The number one reason why many believers “stop meeting together” is that they think in terms of what they GET from a meeting rather than what they can GIVE to it — did not Jesus say, “Give and it shall be given to you”? (Lk 6:38). Sadly, many spouses have “getting” as their first priority; is it any wonder then that they have become disillusioned? Some really poignant verses that help us understand the importance of approaching fellowship with the right attitude are found in Eph 4:11-13 — “He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” This passage shows us that God’s people need to be prepared for works of service, because it is through these works that the body is built up… as we serve one another in love we grow deeper into unity and become mature in faith and look more like Christ. When we approach fellowship with an attitude of “what we can give,” we bind ourselves to our brothers and sisters in Christ through our service to them. This will never occur if we are TAKERS or SPECTATORS — it will only occur if we are GIVERS or SERVANTS. God wants us to be active members of the body of Christ, fully playing our part, and this cannot happen if we do not come together and serve one another. Christians are to encourage one another and stimulate one
another to love and good deeds (Heb 10:24-25). When they do that their times of meeting together are uplifting and edifying, and everybody leaves having been built-up and encouraged; incidentally, that kind of atmosphere causes people to want to come back for more, as opposed to a self-centered atmosphere of criticism and complaining. If you will encourage others through your service, you can be sure that God will see to it that you are encouraged as well (Mt:6:33). Thus fellowship places us in the position to build up our brothers and sisters in Christ and to experience an infusion of God’s grace into our own lives. In short, fellowship involves a conscious effort of getting to know others and establish strong ties with them so that we can encourage them and also be encouraged, thus resulting in our growing together in Christ and experiencing greater measures of grace… and ultimately developing a strong healthy community of believers.

By way of illustration — years ago I remember hearing about a frustrated young minister who went to visit an older minister. While they were sitting by an open fire, the young minister began talking about how frustrated he was with the people in his church, and that he felt like throwing in the towel and giving up. As he talked the older minister took some tongs, picked up a glowing coal and sat it on the hearth. After a while the young minister stopped talking to see what the older minister had to say to him. The older minister pointed to the coal which was no longer glowing. He said, “If you neglect fellowship you will become like this coal… the glow that you once had will cool down… you can only maintain your spiritual glow while you remain in the body.” Do not underestimate the value of fellowship. Be devoted to it like the early church was, and remember what is at stake. When the church comes together, are you helping the world see Jesus? or are they just seeing “a bunch of hypocrites”? Do you approach fellowship thinking in terms of what you can give rather than what you can get? Do you think about how you can help to make things “right” rather than about what you think is “wrong”? Do you gather with other believers with the intention of encouraging them and serving them? Have you taken church for granted and allowed busyness to squeeze true fellowship out of your life? Are you on a spiritual sabbatical? Like that little lump of coal that lost all its glow, get back in the fire and let God use you to encourage and uplift others in the body through your service of love. Let it begin with you.

The Application of Biblical Fellowship

On the Day of Pentecost following the ascension of the Lord Jesus, some three thousand souls were added to the church as they listened to Peter proclaim God’s prophetic Word… by the way, these converts were all Jewish; essentially the early church was completely Jewish. The physician Luke goes on to describe the life of the church following these conversions. He states in Acts 2 –

They continually devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. And everyone keep feeling a sense of aw; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them all, as anyone might have need. And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)
The very first evidence Luke mentions of the Spirit’s presence in the church is that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching.” The early disciples sat at the apostles’ feet, hungry to receive instruction, and they persevered in it (see Acts 17:11) — the life-giving content for the church is revealed truth. As John Stott says in his commentary on the book of Acts, “Anti-intellectualism and the fullness of the Spirit are incompatible, because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth” (Stott, p. 82). A commitment to the apostles’ teaching is foundational to the growth and spiritual health of every believer. Peter wrote, “Like newborn babes, long for the pure milk of the word that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2). And to the Romans Paul wrote, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). John MacArthur says in his commentary on Acts, “Scripture is food for the believer’s growth and power… there is no other” (MacArthur, p. 83). Such words should remind us what the Lord said to the prophet Hosea: “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hos 4:6). The church cannot operate on truth it is not taught… furthermore, believers cannot function on principles they have not learned. Despite the hate, ridicule and persecution the early disciples suffered, they remained faithful to the apostles’ teaching. It should be noted, contemporary devotion to the apostles’ teaching means submission to the authority of the New Testament.

Luke goes on to say that these early disciples also “devoted themselves to fellowship” — that word in Greek is koinonia; it comes from the word koinos which means “common.” As believers we share in common the “life of Christ” — as Christ was in this world, so are we to be His eyes, ears, mouth, hands and feet in the world. Luke goes on to tells us that the first Christians “had all things in common,” and “shared their possessions with one another as any of them had need” (Acts 2:44-45). Many of the early Jewish Christians lost their livelihoods due to their profession of faith in Christ, and the rest of the believing community stepped in to meet their needs. It is interesting to note that the Essene leaders of the Qumran Community (an ultra conservative, monastic, ascetic Jewish community near the Dead Sea during the time of Christ), were also committed to the common ownership of property — any candidate who was accepted into its membership was obliged to hand over all of his property to the community. The issue of “common property” has been debated at various points throughout the history of the church as to whether or not this “injunction” is one that all believers should heed. It is important to note, however, that even in Jerusalem the sharing of property and possessions in the early church was “voluntary” — the fact that “they broke bread in their homes” clearly suggests that many believers had not sold their homes. Furthermore, no where are we told in Scripture that the believing community sold everything and pooled the proceeds into a common pot. Additionally, such a principle for Christian living would have obviated the responsibility of each believer to give in response to the Spirit’s prompting (cf. 1 Cor 16:1-2). The message conveyed in Acts 2:45 is that people sold property as anyone might have need. History tells of individuals down through the ages who responded in just such fashion when the need of fellow believers became so significant. Regarding the sin of Ananias & Sapphira in Acts 5 — it was not one of greed or materialism, but one of deceit; they simply pretended to give everything they had so that others would revere them and think more highly of them. The “injunction” given to believers in Scripture is that of being generous toward the poor & the needy (cf. Acts 4:34; Rom 15:26; 2 Cor 11:9; Gal 2:10; Eph 4:28; Phil 4:15-18; Jam 1:27) — essentially Christians are called to “generosity”… thus Christian fellowship is Christian caring and Christian sharing (cf. Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 6:18; Luke 3:11; Jam 1:27).
Closing Comments

For a Christian to fail to actively participate in the life of a local church (by serving the body) is to withhold his services to the body and to live outside of the will of God. We were not gifted for no purpose. Those who choose to isolate themselves and refuse to serve in some capacity are disobedient to the direct command of Scripture. The author of Hebrews charges us to “consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together (as is the habit of some), but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near” (Heb 10:24-25). As John MacArthur writes, “The Bible does not envision the Christian life as one lived apart from other believers; all members of the church, the body of Christ, are to be actively and intimately involved in a local church” (MacArthur, p. 84).

“THE POWER OF LOVE”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

Introduction

The most important theme in all of Scripture is “love.” God is not only described as being love, His preeminent command to all humanity is that they love. Nothing in all creation is more important than love — nothing. Yet for some reason, there seems to be a bit of confusion even in the church today about love. Here’s the thought that spiked my interest to do this study: When we love others, are we simply obeying God and conveying the virtue of some divine truth to them, or is there more to love than that? Is there actually some “genuine power” inherent in an act of love? That is, when we express love to others do we experience the infusion of some “divine energy” into our lives, and does the one being loved also experience some “beneficial effect”? Since God is the ultimate power behind every action in the universe, does He then effectively make every act of love fruitful and accomplish His divine purposes? Let me explain it this way: God is referred to in Scripture as “The Almighty” (Gen 17:1; 35:11; Rev 4:8; 19:6, 15) because all power essentially belongs to Him. Though God has allocated a limited degree of power to us as His creatures, we can only exercise that power within the parameters He has established; God simply does not allow actions that run counter to His permissive will — which essentially is what it means to be GOD. He is the only sovereign in the universe (1 Tim 6:15); there is no other (Is 45:5-7). So God is the one who ultimately determines the resultant effects of all our actions — though we may often sow according to our own dictates, it is God who determines what we reap (Gal 6:7; Prv 16:1, 9). By the way, this isn’t some strange, new teaching — theologians have believed this since day one — it is simply a common sense explanation of what it means to be GOD. Therefore, since God is the preeminent power in the universe, can we rightly deduce that there is actually some “inherent power” in love (that is, a God-caused effect)?

The Bible is pretty clear on the subject of “sowing & reaping.” God has given us significant freedom to choose the kind of seed we sow (actions we take), but He is the one who determines the results of those actions (Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21; Is 55:11). Since we do not have the capacity to determine
the ultimate outcome of a matter; we must bow to the sovereign rule of heaven. We do not live in a strict “impersonal cause and effect universe” where we control the outcome of our choices; so no matter how clever we may think we are, we cannot manipulate the outcome of things by pushing all the right buttons to make life work according to our own choosing, even though we all try our hardest to make life work the way we want it to work! Nevertheless it is very clear, we don’t possess the ability to control the circumstances of life, because the reality is, we don’t live in a “mechanical universe” — God is in charge, and He is the governing **Power & Authority behind every action**. Though things generally progress in a somewhat logical, predictable fashion, we can all attest to the fact that **life is not an exact science**, and try though as we may, we cannot force the final outcome of situations and events, no matter how passionate we are in our attempts to do so. The one fact that supersedes all others is this: **God is GOD** (Is 45:5-7). Similarly, God’s Word is not merely an **abstract document** that simply describes the events of history and the constitution under which we are to live; rather it is a **living active reality** (Heb 4:12) that gives definition and clarity to the **modus operandi** of God — and God is love. Hopefully the foregoing introduction helps provide an adequate launching pad for the theme of this study — **the inherent power of love**.

**Love is Not an Abstract Principle**

*Is true love simply a “virtuous abstract principle” that God commands us to express,* or does love actually have **“inherent transmittal powers”**? That is, does love have real, bona fide effects? For example, when we express *agape* love, do the effects of such action produce in us, physiological, psychological, and spiritual benefits?… and does the recipient of our love also experience real, bona fide benefits?… or are such expressions merely actions without any necessary effects? Again, it was this thought that precipitated my doing this study, and like most studies, as I studied the subject my attention was drawn to a seemingly endless number of other related subjects. Though I tried to remain focused on the issue at hand, I did find myself venturing into some related matters. I trust the following material will help bring resolution to the matter of whether or not there is really **power** in love. By the way, since **true love** is the fruit or by-product of the Holy Spirit, it accomplishes God’s desire both in the one who loves, and in the one who is being loved; so loving not only effectuates some kind of change in us, it also serves God’s purposes in the life of the one who receives love. Consider the following —

**Imagine a world without love — “a world without God would be a world without love.”**

Every day God pours His love into the human heart and keeps the world from destroying itself. Without the influx of God’s love into the human soul, man would only be a creature of instinct and “survival of the fittest” would rule. In a loveless world without God, life would be hell. The most powerful force in the universe is “*God’s love.*” The late **E. Stanley Jones** put it this way, “**God is love, and works by love, and by nothing else than love.**” The power and presence of God in the world is love, and it is His love that provides the healing touch that encourages our hearts and restores our damaged emotions — money, things, success, and fame will not heal the pain in our souls; only God’s love can bring healing to our lives. And more than anything else, we need to be transformed by the power of His love! As **C. S. Lewis** says in his best-selling book *The Four Loves:* “[Admittedly] it is still a mystery as to what the fullness of love truly means… [but] one thing we do know is that in order to know what love means, we must experience it… [and] ultimately, **love is what forms people into who they are and who they become.**”
The late Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ International, said, “Love is the greatest thing in the world… the greatest power known to man!” Bright reminds us of the fact that its emphasis in life and word changed the course of human history as first century Christians demonstrated a quality of life never before witnessed on earth. The Greeks, Romans, Gentiles, Jews and heathen hated one another. Among all the nations of the world there was hardly a thought of love to each other (if one people group felt stronger than another, they would simply set out to conquer and enslave them!); the very idea of love and self-sacrifice was completely foreign to the ancient mind (study the ancient Roman world). The truth is, no people group had ever been a people of love. When the first century world observed Christians from nations over the then known world, with different languages and different cultures, actually showing love to one another, even to the point of self-sacrifice during times of plague or illness, it was mindboggling to them; completely beyond their comprehension. In keeping with the words Jesus told His disciples, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35), a common refrain developed among the masses in the ancient heathen world: “Behold, how these people love one another!” That was the testimony of the Roman world to Christianity, because the Christian community was unlike anything they had ever known!

We All Need to Love and Be Loved

**Loving and being loved is fundamental for survival.** Love is the deepest, most profound experience we can have, and the ultimate source of fulfillment in our lives. There is nothing more satisfying and life affirming than the act of loving and being loved. Love is very healing and is essential for our physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. Love actually has a physiological effect on the body — have you ever noticed how much better you feel physically and how your mood improves when you receive some affectionate expression (though it only be a hug) from someone who really loves you? Loving and being loved actually improves our physical health by boosting the immune system and effectuates the feel good neurotransmitters in the brain that control our mood outlook on life, and feelings of well-being.

**If you have been fortunate enough to experience deep, profound, soul-touching love** with your spouse, you know there is nothing more fulfilling in life. And for those of you who have experienced losing that love, you only know too well that it is the most excruciating experience you have faced. When your relationship with your mate is full, happy and passionate, it raises your level of functioning, gives you more energy, and increases your mood; however, when the relationship grows progressively worse, you experience the effects of grieving and you grow weaker, thus showing the powerful impact that love and grief have upon our bodies.

**Not only does love improve our health, but it also lightens our load.** The difficulties and challenges of life are much easier to deal with when love is in our life. We feel happier and more capable, and it makes life richer and more worth living. Love can also help us get through the difficult times, and it assists us in the acceptance and adjustment process of living with a chronic health condition. So cultivating love in life is one of the most beneficial things we can do for our health and to live a fuller and more enjoyable life. The most fulfilling relationships are the ones that are deep and meaningful; as such we need to cultivate love on a daily basis and immerse ourselves in it, and allow ourselves to love others deeply and completely — it is the greatest gift we can give ourselves and to others. So allow yourself to feel love and express
love, by building deep meaningful relationships… allow yourself to be vulnerable… immerse yourself completely in the loving experience. Though there is always the possibility that you may suffer rejection, don't let that stop you, because the benefits far outweigh the risk.

**It is a harsh reality that people with a chronic illness, health condition, or personality disorder, are not as desirable to be around; thus it may be very difficult in certain situations to find and develop strong relationships. But this does not mean that we must be “loveless” — love can be found in many places, including nature, children, family, friends, and even pets. If you have a health condition that limits your ability to interact socially, then spending time with nature can be of magnificent option. It is possible to have such an intimate relationship with nature that it can fulfill some of your relational needs. Though nothing can take the place of deep loving connections with other human beings, this can at least fill the gap in part — if that be the case, learn to commune with nature on a regular basis, and let God minister to your soul in that context. Some people place “bird feeders” in their backyard, and before long their yard is full of beautiful birds — being a bird watcher can bring a significant amount of joy to your life. In some places here in the southwest there is an abundance of wildlife: jackrabbits, ducks, geese, coyotes, bunnies, chipmunks, blue jays, desert wrens and roadrunners — it is very possible to actually get many of them to eat out of your hand. When done on a routine basis, this can become a very fulfilling experience. So touch, smell and feel the trees, the plants, the rocks and the wind… mingle with the wildlife… sit with the sun and the clouds… and appreciate the magnificent beauty God presents to you every day in nature. God meant His creation to be an enjoyable experience.

**The vast majority of psychologists believe “man’s greatest need” is to love and be loved, and that nothing is greater than the mighty force of love. Love is as critical for us psychologically, emotionally, and physically as oxygen is to our bodies. Therefore the less we express love to others, the more depressed we are likely to feel… and the less we receive love from others, the more depression we are likely to experience. Psychologist Ellen McGrath, in an article she wrote for Psychology Today said, “Love is probably the best anti-depressant there is because one of the most common sources of depression is feeling unloved.” It should be noted that most depressed people are also very self-focused (thus less loving), making them less attractive to others… as such, they naturally deprive themselves of love. The truth of the matter is, the more connected we are with other people, the healthier we will be both physically and emotionally… and the less connected we are, the more we will be at risk. There is a mythology in our culture that says “love just happens” — as a result, the depressed often sit around passively waiting for someone to love them. But that's not the way love operates. To get love and keep love you have to go out and interact with others and learn basic communication skills.

**McGrath goes on to say that most of us get our ideas of love from “popular culture.”** Our culture speaks often about love, but because it is more a sentimental and emotional substitute for true love, it is unstable and untrue. Emotions are merely our reactions to outward stimuli, and even on our best days our feelings and emotions can be fickle and unreliable; as such, they are much like water — easily swayed, easily changed, and highly dependent upon circumstances. We come to believe that love is something that sweeps us off our feet, but this pop-culture ideal of love consists of unrealistic images created for entertainment, which is why so many of us are set up to be depressed. It is part of our national vulnerability, like eating junk food, constantly stimulated by images of instant gratification. We think it is love… when it is simply infatuation.
One of the consequences of infatuation love is that when we hit real love we become upset and disappointed because it does not mesh with the cultural ideal. As such, some people get demanding and controlling, and want the other person to respond to what their ideal understanding of romance should be… completely ignorant of the fact that their ideal is misplaced. Therefore it is essential that we change our approach to love to ward off depression. Following are a few action strategies people should take to get more of what they want out of life — to love and be loved.

- **Recognize the difference between deep infatuation and love.** Limerance is the psychological state of deep infatuation — it feels good while it is there, but it rarely lasts. Limerance is that first stage of mad attraction whereby all the hormones are flowing and everything feels so right. Psychologists tell us that limerance lasts on the average for about six months. It can progress to love — though love in our culture mostly starts as limerance, it frequently does not evolve into true love.

- **Understand that love is a learned skill:** it is not something that comes from hormones or our emotions. Renowned psychologist Erich Fromm called it "an act of will." Ultimately, if you don't learn the skills of love you virtually guarantee that you will be depressed, not only because you will not be connected enough, but because you will ultimately experience many failures.

- **Learn good communication skills.** They are a means by which human beings develop trust and intensify connection. The greater your ability to communicate the less depressed you will be, because you will feel known and understood.

There are always core differences between two people; no matter how good or close you are, those differences will surface if the relationship is going right. The issue then is to identify the differences and negotiate them so that they don't put a distance between you and the other person and kill the relationship. You do that by understanding where the other person is coming from, who that person is, and by being able to represent yourself. When the differences are known you must be able to negotiate and compromise on them until you find a common ground that works for both of you. McGrath offers the following considerations —

- **Focus on the other person.** Rather than focus on what you are getting and how you are being treated, read your partner's need. What does this person really need for his/her own well-being? This is a very tough skill for people to learn in our narcissistic culture, because we are so self-focused and self-obsessed.

- **Help someone else.** Depression keeps people so focused on themselves they don't get outside themselves enough to be able to learn to love. The more you can focus on others and learn to respond and meet their needs, the better you are going to do in love.

- **Develop the ability to accommodate “simultaneous reality.”** The loved one's reality is as important as your own, and you need to be as aware of it as well as your own. What are they really saying? What are they really needing? Depressed people think the only reality is their own depressed reality. Carefully reflect upon this point — it is critical for growing in love.

- **Actively dispute your internal messages of inadequacy.** Feeling unloved and rejected are cardinal features of depression. As a consequence of low self-esteem, every relationship blip is interpreted far too personally as evidence of inadequacy. If you are quick to feel rejected by a partner, deep down within you will believe it is the treatment you fundamentally deserve. Carefully note the following — the rejection really originates in you, and the feelings of inad-
equancy are the depression speaking. Recognize that though the internal voice is strong it is not real — it is simply the “self talk” that is going on within you (those things that you are telling yourself). It is important that you talk back to it, that you actually verbalize a response: “I am not really being rejected, this is not really evidence of inadequacy; this is nothing more than a mistake or misunderstanding or disagreement we are having; regardless of the feelings I’m having I shall express love in tangible ways.” When you reframe the situation to something more adequate, you can act again in an effective way and find and keep the love that you need.

The Psychological & Physiological Effects of Love

Scientific research shows that love is a quality of good health. Dr. Glen Jenson, professor of Family and Human Development at Utah State University says that research shows that “people who feel loved, or when it is reciprocated, live longer, happier, have better health and make more money.” Not only do people who feel loved have a better life expectancy, but they also live a healthier lifestyle. Says Jensen, “To have someone who cares for you and loves you, makes you feel more encouraged,” and people who do not experience that encouragement or love in their life from others, tend to be more prone to depression and loneliness and don’t function as well in society. Aside from emotional health, love can also be a benefit to physical health — studies have linked love and intimacy to good cardiovascular health. Dr. Dean Ornish, who is famous for his low-fat diet for reversing heart disease, says in his book “Love and Survival” that though “the diet can play a significant role… nothing is more powerful than love and intimacy.” The director of Behavioral Medicine at Duke University, Dr. Redford Williams, says that though we do not have actual databases at this point, he believes “at least as many people die from social isolation as [from] smoking, and maybe twice as much as deaths caused by dietary choices.” So scientific research suggests that there is a strong connection between psychological and physiological health and the experience of love and intimacy.

Lorri B. Smalls says the effects of love on “psychological health” is a well noted factor in the way our society functions as a whole. She writes, “The lack of a loving environment in the home can create the perfect storm for countless problems… it often breeds feelings of insecurity and hopelessness…[and ultimately causes those not receiving love] to make the same repeated mistakes when interacting with others.” An emotionally abusive person controls their partner by manipulating them with deprivation, harm, isolation, or abandonment. Emotional abuse kills a person's spirit, and makes them feel like they have to walk on eggshells to get along with the one they love. Smalls goes on to say that, “Love without compassion, from a psychological standpoint, undermines a person's confidence and trust; and a lack of compassion can quickly lead to contempt and chronic resentment…. when loved ones fail to show respect or consideration for how someone close to them feels… [it] inflicts emotional pain, and is interpreted as betrayal. Failure of compassion in a relationship creates a toxic situation that can leave deep emotional scars throughout the course of any intimate relationship.” On the other side of the spectrum, many situations can be significantly improved when individuals strive to love each other with kind words and deeds. As such, Smalls concludes, “a loving environment encourages a person to be more giving to others and less suspicious of other people's motives.”

Bob Trowbridge, a pastor for more than 40 years, states in an article titled, “The Effects of Love on Psychological Health,” that one of the most healing modalities for both physical and
psychological problems is “touch.” It has been known for many years that people receive some healing benefits from being touched (even by beauticians & dentists!). Being hugged and being touched is something we all need — many years ago, it was found in England that babies in orphanages were dying and there seemed to be no cause. It was finally discovered that no one was touching or holding the babies; the babies actually died from the lack of touch. Subsequent scientific experimentation with animals revealed exactly the same results — if animals did not experience the touch of another animal, they died in just a few weeks! The lesson these studies show is that we literally cannot live without love and the touches that accompany love; so touch and hug those you love — it not only makes a difference in your life, but it makes a difference in the lives of those you touch. By the way parents, studies show that many of our children desperately need to be hugged — start hugging your children at birth and never stop hugging them, and verbally affirm your love for them every day! Allow yourself to hug and be hugged, to touch and be touched… it could not only save your life and your sanity, but your children's also! The benefits of love on physical, mental, and emotional health cannot be overstated.

**Love is the essence of living a good life.** Without love we live our lives for ourselves, and by living self-centered lives we impact others in a negative way, and thereby make life less enjoyable and harder to bare for both ourselves and for others. *The need to be loved is exceptionally strong in all human beings.* From childhood to old age, human beings want to be loved by those around them. Love connects people in the strongest of ways. It produces care and concern, without which no one would take the responsibility of looking after others. Furthermore, love makes the difficulties of life bearable, and helps ease the struggles of life. The love given to a child is more important than any material goods a family can provide — life cannot just run on cold, hard rules — the warmth of love is essential for the infusion of a joyful spirit in life. A home without love, however orderly and organized, does not fulfill its designed purpose. *Love or the lack of it has a profound effect on the lives of children* — their mental capability, their fluency of speech, and their observations and deductions on life, are all affected by it. Love is absolutely essential to our well-being (cf. Article on Love in Bibliography).

**There are “several effects” a child experiences when they are given love.** They are happier and calmer… they are more at peace with the world… and better able to endure disappointment. If a child is not given love, he or she often resorts to misbehavior to get attention. When loved, they are more confident of themselves… it is a great boost to their self-esteem. People form better relationships with others when they are loved. A loving relationship with ones parents makes an individual kinder and more loving… conversely, a lack of parental love hardens the heart, and makes people less prone to showing love to others. It should also be noted that children who are shown affection have a far more positive outlook on life — when a child is loved he looks at the world with enthusiasm and is more eager to try and experience new things. A home with no love produces a negative outlook, and curtails natural curiosity and deadens the child's interest in life. Furthermore, an individual who knows what love and affection are will be more responsive to what his parents and elders tell him, and any sort of reproach and scolding will become easier to stand when they know they are loved. When a child lacks love he naturally reaches out to people around him to pay more attention to him, and in order to get attention, he may even start trouble — that's a common way of receiving attention for those who are not given love. A lack of love causes children to have a low sense of self-worth; as such they are far more likely to become self-centered and selfish. Both young and old people must experience love and give love; without it, they are far more apt to feel depressed, lonely, embarrassed, and worthless;
and as such, they are not able to impact the lives of others in a positive way. It is our God-given responsibility as human beings to love others as best we can... and in so doing make our lives and the lives of others significantly healthier, more productive, more fulfilling, more enjoyable, and happier (cf. Article on Love by Michael Cassell; see the Bibliography)

We were Created to Love and Be Loved

God is the giver of life and He is love, therefore “love” is the energy that gives life (1 Jn 4:8, 16). We were all created to love and to be loved. Love is the meaning of life and the purpose for life, though that may be hard to believe for some of you who have been weaned on this materialistic, impersonal, mechanistic world — if you would completely isolate yourself from all other people for a significant period of time, you might then see how critically important loving relationships are. Life is about people, not stuff... and whereas people are to be loved, stuff is to be used. The love of God is both sacrificial and selfless in nature — all of His love is sacrificial in nature, and others oriented. God loves to love us and give of Himself for us — it gives Him great joy; it is why He made us! Before we experienced His unconditional love, we were broken and empty — physically alive but spiritually dead — no level of intellectual enlightenment could give life to our soul (only love could do that), and once we experienced God’s love, it transformed us! God’s love is so great we cannot comprehend it! Hey, we don't even understand human love (why do we love those who hurt us most?). All we know is that we are dying for love and we can't change that! It has all to do with our basic and elemental need for love (that’s the way God made us), and not the “you have to love yourself” nonsense that is preached in the liberal pulpits of our world — the truth of the matter is, people love and care for themselves so much, that life is all about them and their own “self-orientation” (Eph 5:28-29; Phil 2:4) — by the way, I didn’t say like themselves, I said love themselves! The problem with man is that he is “ego-driven;” he has been conditioned by his flesh and the world to navigate life with all of his own self-interests at heart, and his soul is influenced and guided by all the things to which he has become attached. He needs is to experience the LOVE that made him!

Most of us as believers initially experienced the love of the Father “through someone” — in all likelihood, God came to each of us through a person He had already filled with His love. It wasn’t religion that we experienced, but God’s love, and that made all the difference. It was loved that changed our lives. Everything that has been accomplished in our heart was done by the power of love. We only learned to abandon the old structures that governed our lives when we experienced God’s love… and when we did, we no longer wanted anything to do with our “old life.” We now longed to hear the loving voice of the Father, because it was His voice that awakened us to His loving reality. It wasn’t religion or man-made performance that delivered us from darkness — it was the love of God that brought us into the light. And as we pressed on in our search of love, it drew us closer to the Father, and filled us more and more… and with every new increase of love came deeper and deeper transformation that ultimately led to a maturity of love. The love of the Father did it all. Nothing is above love because nothing is above God… and God is love.

Religion does not heal people... it just binds them to a man-made system of performance standards that ultimately leaves them discouraged and defeated. Only love has the power to heal and make people whole… only God has the ability to repair what He has created. When God
gives His love He is giving Himself, and by Him we are made whole. It was our estrangement from Him that created our brokenness in the first place, and it was our sin (our opposition to Him) that created the expanse between us and Him. Furthermore, we cannot learn love by studying it or meditating about it — to learn what love is we have to experience it! To know the LORD we have to experience Him! That is why theology is so desperately limited in its power to aid growth. The apostle Paul writes — “If I possessed all the knowledge of theology in the world, but I don’t have love, I have absolutely nothing!” (1 Cor 13:2). So if I am the most religious person on the planet but I don’t have love, I am nothing at all! The most important thing for believers is that they **grow in love** (Gal 3:13; Eph 4:16; Phil 1:9; 1Th 3:12; Heb 10:24), and in so doing effect their families, communities and towns with the power of God’s love! The world will only come to realize that God is good when they experience His love! Sadly, many in the church today reflect nothing but the Pharisees of Christ’s day. The world is going to go from bad to worse in the years ahead. As Christians, we don’t do what we are supposed to do! When we feel like doing wrong, we feel like bragging, we’re not to brag! When we feel like doing wrong, we’re not to do wrong! If we all “felt” like doing the right thing, life would be a piece of cake! But that’s not the reality! Love is an action we are supposed to take that almost always runs contrary to our feelings! Here are five other common reasons we fail to love —

1. Our flesh (sin disposition) is still an extremely active and dominating force in our lives.
2. Our flesh (sin disposition) seems to dominate our lives when the going gets tough.
3. The needs of others do not seem as important to us when our own selfish desires surface.
4. The fact that God loves us does not elicit a spirit of gratitude when we are self-obsessed.
What True Love Really Looks Like

Mutual Christian love is the evidence that the “unseen God” is revealed in us when we love one another (1 Jn 4:12, 20) — by loving one another we prove that God abides in us (1 Jn 4:12-17), and that His love has been perfected in us (the perfect tense of the Greek verb here suggests that this was something that began at a point in time in the past — at conversion — and that it is continuing to be perfected in us throughout the course of our lives — 1 Jn 4:12, 17). John Stott calls it “God’s present and continuous activity of love.” The truth of the matter is, either God’s love is being perfected in the human soul or Satanic hatred is being perfected in it. Paul tells us that the love of God was planted in our hearts when we first believed (Rom 5:5; Tit 3:6); and that this love in us is the strongest apologetic that God is indeed present in this world (Jn 13:35; 1 Jn 3:14; 4:20). John goes on to say that if we do not show a degree of genuine love to our Christian brothers and sisters when they are in need, then we simply do not love God (regardless of our profession), and we are just deluding ourselves by claiming that we do love Him. James Montgomery Boice says, “It is by practicing a real and self-sacrificing love for one another that we learn to love the One who sacrificed Himself for us” — though it is at the cross where we first learned what love is, and how powerful it is, we grow in our appreciation of God’s love the more we practice and express it. Paul gives us a clear definition of love and “what love looks like” in real life (1 Cor 13:4-7) — following are the fifteen qualities of love He lists, and the corresponding powerful benefits that result from such expressions, both in the life of the one doing the loving and the one being loved:

- **Love patient:** it is patient endurance under provocation — the one loving does not let his impatient feelings rule; thus others are not only not agitated with us, but pleased with us.
- **Love is kind:** it is active goodness that considers the interests of others — the one loving shows kindness by assisting others in their need; those being loved are encouraged by it.
- **Love is not envious:** it is pleased that others are honored and exalted — the one loving rejoices in another’s good fortune; those being loved are able to genuinely share their joy with others.
- **Love is not arrogant:** it realizes that whatever it has is a gift from God — the one loving realizes everything he possesses is the result of God’s grace, and others are blessed by his humility.
- **Love does not act unbecomingly:** it is always courteous and considerate — the one loving doesn’t injure others with his actions; hence others are not offended by them, but pleased with them.
- **Love does not seek its own:** it is not selfish but has others in mind — the one loving is not into himself, but others; as a result the others are encouraged by his “selfless orientation” in life.
- **Love does not get provoked:** it is willing to endure slights and insults — the one loving does not compound a difficult situation by striking back, thus quieting others in their affronts.
- **Love does not think evil of others:** it does not attribute bad motives to others — the one loving thinks highly of others; thus encouraging others to see the good in others as well.
- **Love does not rejoice in unrighteousness:** it takes no pleasure in it — the one loving does not take pleasure in wrongdoing; thus others are more apt to see the evil of malfeasance.
- **Love rejoices with the truth:** it rejoices when truth triumphs — the one loving rejoices when truth triumphs, and those around him are uplifted and encouraged in the truth as well.
- **Love bears all things:** it endures all things, even the faults of others — the one loving accepts others with all their foibles; those being loved are grateful for such a benevolent spirit.
• *Love believes all things:* it seeks to put the best construction on all actions — the one loving shows faith in others; those being loved are encouraged by another’s confidence in them.

• *Love hopes all things:* it earnestly desires that all things work out for the best — the one loving is supportive in spirit; those being loved are encouraged, uplifted and heartened.

• *Love endures all things:* be it persecution or ill treatment — the one loving accepts ill-treatment as under the disposing hand of God; thus those rendering it are not encouraged to continue it.

**Why Believers Struggle with Walking in Love**

*Even born again believers find it difficult to “walk in love.”* Since love is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), we cannot “walk in love” in our own strength (Jn 15:5). Though the love of God has been poured out into the hearts of all believers (Rom 5:5), so that His love flows through their personalities; nevertheless, the indwelling presence of sin (the flesh) often quenches and circumvents the Spirit’s fruitful work in us (1 Th 5:19; Eph 4:30). *In order to counter the effects of our sin disposition, it is essential that we “abide in Christ” and maintain intimate communion with Him (Jn 15:4-5); if we fail to abide in Him, our flesh then gains the upper hand in our lives. It is also important for the believer to understand that if he doubts & questions God’s love for him, that will significantly affect the level of intimacy he experiences with Christ — intimacy in any relationship is always grounded in love, so being absolutely sure that the other person really loves you is paramount to enjoying that relationship. If you doubt the other person’s love for you, the relationship at best will be a shallow experience. The wonderful truth about our relationship with God is that His love for us is pure and unconditional; no matter what we do He will never reject, abandon, or stop loving us! Never! (Rom 8:29-31; 35-39; Phil 1:6; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 13:5). That’s why it’s called Amazing Love!*

**God’s love for us is not dependent upon “us” — if it were, we wouldn’t experience any!**
The truth of the matter is, none of us even come close to meriting His love… the good news is it is the incredible, unconditional, eternal love of God that is the foundation of our relationship with Him! And there are no strings attached to God’s love… no caveats! no secret clauses! no “you’ve blown it too many times!” By the way, the only reason we love God is because He loves us (1 Jn 4:10, 19) — God is the one who initiated our relationship with Him… it was all His doing! (Jn 3:16; Rom 3:11; 5:8). Therefore if we aren’t confident in God’s love for us, then our relationship with Him (from our perspective) becomes a performance-based relationship — one that is totally dependent upon us and what we do. For the sake of argument, let’s assume our relationship with Christ does depend upon us — what do we have to do to insure its certainty for all eternity? Make ourselves “really good”? How are we going to do that? How are we going to live up to God’s impeccable standards? Clearly, that's not a conceivable option, so reject that proposition and accept God’s propitiatory work on the cross for us as diabolical sinners; because that indeed is what we are! Salvation is all by grace (Rom 3:28; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 2:8-9; 2 Tim 1:9). As Charles Wesley put it, “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me!”

**We also need to remember that Christ “fulfilled the law” for us,** and since that is the case, why are we still trying to fulfill it ourselves and measure up to its standard? The truth is when we attempt to do so, we are in a sense actually negating the work of the cross in our lives; not in the sense that we cease to be God’s children, but in the sense that we are distancing ourselves from Him by ignoring the sufficiency of His completed work for us (Jn 19:30) — thus causing us to actually doubt that we really are His children, which is the natural outgrowth of thinking we
need to make some significant contribution to the matter; clearly there is nothing we can offer to God that would cause Him to grant us “meritorious acceptance.” Until we come to the point of realizing that salvation is “all of God” (beginning to end), we will keep a barrier between Him and us, and continue to experience a frustrating distance in our relationship with Him. So if the issue of your performance is a problem for you, you need to ask yourself this question —

**What is it in the cross that is not sufficient for me?** What else could God have done that He did not do? The only answer anyone can offer is this: Why didn't God remove my sin disposition from me… because it has done nothing but cause me problems! The truth of the matter is, every one of us can totally relate to that, but asking God to remove our sin disposition is akin to asking Him to completely change the economy under which we live, and change the rules of the game; obviously He is not going to do that! The fact is, an integral part of the life to which God has called us is that of dying to our sinful selves and living for Christ (Mt 16:24; 1 Cor 15:31; Eph 4:22-24). Admittedly, the presence of indwelling sin is a monumental problem for all of us, and crucifying it is neither easy nor painless — death is difficult and painful, and spiritual warfare is an excruciating bloody experience; by the way, only a “spiritually proud person” will deny that. Because “sin” is such a disconcerting issue for the believer, let me encourage you to read a study I did on the subject titled, “Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose” — www.TheTransformedSoul.com — it is a subject that was never discussed in seminary… but it is one that has transformed my life!

**The really good news is that God is continually at work in us** (regardless of our performance) conforming us to the image of His Son (2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:12-13), and He promises (guarantees) to one day complete that work (Rom 8:29-30; Phil 1:6). The economy that He established for doing this work is one that requires our participation and cooperation — the good news is, the Holy Spirit gets all of us to cooperate with Him to some degree, though some of us are less cooperative than others — the more we cooperate, however, the greater will be our joy and our eternal reward… and the less we cooperate the greater will be our pain and our loss of reward. The wonderful news is, God is ultimately going to complete the work He started in us (one way or the other), thus removing the burden from our shoulders of making ourselves acceptable to Him (Mt 11:28-30). That burden was all borne by Christ! The fact that God indeed loves us unconditionally is what makes our salvation possible, and it is only upon the rock of a loving God that we are to build our lives (Mt 7:24-27). So don’t add any “buts” or “what ifs” to the equation!!! There are none!!! That means we must build our entire lives upon the fact that God really does love us!!! Every ounce of our salvation (past, present and future) is all the result of “God’s love and grace” (Eph 2:1-9); there is absolutely nothing we can “do” to make it more efficacious — God did it ALL!

All God asks of us is that we place our trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross; by the way, He has even given us the grace to trust Him! Imagine this scenario — you’re drowning out in the middle of the ocean, and God comes along and reaches out and grabs your hand and draws you to safety — two things could have happened: you could have told God to let go of your hand and reject His loving offer to save you, or you could have expressed tremendous gratitude to Him for saving you (which is what you did if you are a believer). That is really a pretty accurate picture of salvation — it is all the work of a loving God! That’s how incredibly powerful God’s love is! So stop beating yourself up for being so sinful and undeserving! And stop looking at yourself and start looking at Christ! (Heb 12:1-2). He loves you unconditionally!
The Importance of Abiding in Christ

To abide in Christ means to be “intimately connected and fully occupied with Him;” it is to make Him the center of your life, the lord (master) of your life (Jn 15:1-11; 17:20-23; Phil 1:21; Col 1:1-3). What is the central thing that you are preoccupied with in life? If you have never really thought about that question, go for a walk somewhere and try and answer that question. Is it the stuff of this world? Is it your agenda? or is it God’s agenda? If it’s you just wanting to do your own thing, then this world and self fulfillment is your focus. The appropriate question is: Why are you investing your life in this world? Why are you so enamored with this world? What is the lure that has attached itself to your heart strings? You are aware, are you not, that this world... (13:1-3) Paul says, “Without love, anything we do for God or others has absolutely no value...” (1:5-6; Phil 2:4; 1 Jn 2:8, 15-17). So either you want your life to ‘really count’ and make an eternal difference, or you simply want to make your life as comfortable & enjoyable as possible. Consider the consequences of such a life (Lk 12:15-21).

Here is something else you should think about — if you really think you are a believer, yet this world is basically what you are living for, there is a strong possibility that you are not a believer; you are simply fooling yourself into thinking that your profession of faith and your pseudo-good behavior is “proof of your assumed status.” Be careful if those are your thoughts, because in and of ourselves none of us have anything to offer God. Jesus said, “There is none good but God alone” (Lk 18:19; Rom 3:12), and “A part from Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5). God asks us to walk with Him in life, and to do so is to be occupied with Him... to love Him... to love His Word... to love His people... to trust Him... to obey Him... to depend upon Him... to value what He values, and to desire what He desires (read Ps 1:2; 119:97, 127, 165; Jer 15:16; Jn 7:17; 14:15; 2 Cor 10:5; Col 1:9-10; 3:1-3). To sum it all up, if God is truly your master, you will walk in the light of His love (1 Jn 1:7; 4:7-8, 20). When the Holy Spirit began the process of sanctification in our lives, we were given a mandate to “live out that which God had worked in to us” (Phil 1:5-6; 2:12-13); and in so doing to “walk in God’s love” (not only in word, but also in deed — Jn 13:34; Phil 2:4; 1 Jn 3:17-18) — and therein is the power that transforms our lives and the world around us!

Paul says, “Without love, anything we do for God or others has absolutely no value” (1 Cor 13:1-3). Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist and founder of the Menninger Clinic, said, “Love is the medicine for our sick old world. If people can learn to give and receive love, they will usually recover from their physical or mental illness.” The problem, however, is that few people have any idea of what true love is. Most people seem to think of it only in terms of nice feelings, warm affection, romance, and desire — which is essentially a selfish love; the direct opposite of biblical agape love. Self-giving love (agape love) demands something from us; it is a love that is more concerned with giving than receiving, and is as rare in the church today as it was in the church at Corinth — the reason being, agape love is unnatural to human nature. The supreme measure of agape love is God’s love — “He loved the world so much that He gave His only begotten Son to atone for our sins” (Jn 3:16). So love above all is sacrificial; it is the sacrifice of self for the sake of others, even for others who may care nothing at all for us and who may even hate us (Mt 5:44-45; Rom 12:20). It is not a feeling but a determined act of the will — love is the willing, joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own — everything a Christian does should be done in love (1 Cor 16:14). Paul said, “Without love, everything we do for God or others is of absolutely no value, and profits us nothing” (1 Cor 13:1-3), because our actions are self-centered. Ultimately, agape love is a by-product of the character of the person doing the loving, rather than
the worthiness of the object being loved. John MacArthur says in his commentary on I Corinth that “lovelessness is behind all disobedience to the Lord, and love is behind all true obedience.”

**People who give lots of love, receive lots of love… so love creates love.** The antithesis is also true, when I am not feeling loved, I don't have much love to give, because I want to receive it. Thus love is circular: we can't love unless we're loved, and seldom are we loved unless we are loving — the good news is, love is available to us, because God is loving us all the time… and if we will but receive His love we can then give love. God often sends love to us through other people and through little loving impulses; our job is to recognize it when it happens and receive it. Love generally comes in little ways, and we generally give love in little ways. As we learn to act on little loving impulses, and recognize and receive the love that is being given to us, and we are grateful to God for those expressions of love, it increases, and we find ourselves giving more love and receiving more love. When we don’t feel loved, however, it is hard to see beyond the negatives, or beyond the ways in which we aren’t being loved. So when we don't feel loved, we need God's help — there is no other solution… because God ultimately is the source of all love. Therefore when we can't see the love around us, when we seem deaf to God's loving impulses, we need to ask Him to help us experience His love, and help us give His love to others. God so much wants us to receive His love — it is His gift to us — and as we accept it, we have love to give to others… and the cycle of love begins again. Remember this, God began the circle by loving us, but without the realization of His love for us (accepting it), we won't continue it.

**Is there “power” in love?** Consider this: God purposed in Christ to love us to Himself! That in a nutshell is the power of God's love! Paul said, “It is the power of God unto salvation!” (Rom 1:16). God took sinful creatures like you and me (children of the devil, adherents of darkness, lovers of self and His enemies — Jn 3:19; Rom 3:10-12; Eph 2:1-3), and purposed in Christ to love us to Himself that we might become His children (Jn 3:16; Rom 1:16; 5:8; 8:31-39; Eph 2:4-5; 3:19; Col 1:13-14; 1 Jn 4:10). Look at the power of God's incredible love — it totally transformed us! It delivered us from being one of Satan's kids, to being a joint-heir with Christ! That's the power of love! Rather than remaining hostile enemies of God, we joined His army! Rather than being lovers of self, we became lovers of God! Rather than being a people of unrighteousness, we became a people of righteousness! To experience being loved by God is to know the powerful, irresistible nature of true love. Divine love is giving; it is not selfish and does not use… whereas human love is selfish and seeks its own; it seeks to benefit itself in some way, to be esteemed, and to even be worshipped! Moreover, God did not love us in order to get something from us… but to give Himself entirely to and for us!

**Experiencing God’s Love Daily**

**The “mind” is the door through which the power of God’s love enters into our lives.** That's why the Bible says, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Rom 12:2). The message is this: In order to have a new life, you need a new way of thinking, and God designed the “mind” to be the door through which we enter the world of change. You can change your life by changing what you put into your mind; especially when it is God's love that you allow inside. Admittedly, there is considerable confusion regarding the role of the mind in spirituality and the experience of positive change. For many people, the mind is actually a stumbling block,” because it is given an inordinate emphasis — those who worship at the altar of the mind elevate it to almost “god-status” — the positive thinking gurus preach a gospel of “mental omnipotence” that is
supposed to cure all ailments. Nothing could be further from the truth. Conversely, those who have an “adversarial relationship” between their mind and faith, struggle through life trying to bring their unruly mind into submission. They often hold their mind in contempt because so many of their thoughts make them uncomfortable. They hope their spirituality will give them control over their unwanted, disturbing, and frightening thoughts. They even try to ignore their mind, hoping it will all go away, or at least stop irritating them with thoughts they don’t want to entertain. They try to divorce themselves from their mind claiming all they need to do is “live by faith” — if they only have enough faith, everything will turn out fine. Where is the truth in all this? It lies in between these two extremes. God designed your mind to be the door through which the power of His love flows into your life — it is through the “mind” where God’s love is brought to bear upon the problems of life. When we fill our minds with the power of God’s love, miraculous things happen… but it isn’t the mind that makes them happen, it is God’s love that makes the miraculous come to pass. The truth is, you can have a new life if you open your heart and mind to the power of God’s love… you can actually become a new person who thinks new thoughts and experiences positive emotions.

The Christian physician, Dr. David J. Abbott, spent nearly his entire adult life providing medical services for some of the most disadvantaged people on the African continent. He learned to intentionally practice the presence of God in all of life, and see the goodness of God in everything around him. He says, “Everywhere and at all times, God is at work in my world… although He speaks quietly, I can hear His message of love when I become silent and listen.” Though practicing God’s presence may seem difficult at first, he says, if you continue His voice (love) will become louder and your vision will improve. When you practice God’s presence, you will experience His love, and you will feel the power of His love flowing through you to others… and each time you love and give assistance to others (the needy, the sick, the downtrodden, and the dispossessed) you practice the presence of God. You actually experience His presence when you love other people, and you experience His power by allowing His love to flow through you to others. By the way, you cannot ignore the needs of those around you and experience the presence of God. When God’s love flows through you, it heals you and the person you are loving. When you practice the presence of God, your whole life becomes reorganized around the central fact that God is at work in you and through you by the power of His love. Abbott encourages believers to daily “jump into the ocean of God’s love and have a life transforming experience!” Though it is easy to forget God and focus on other things, our problems, and ourselves, we need to remember that a wrong focus blinds us to the presence of God. All of God’s creation is a beautiful witness to God’s love and care, and it is all a perpetual reminder that God is good and that He wants our lives to be good as well. We do it by opening our hearts and minds to the power of God’s love. Abbott shares the secret of experiencing the power of God’s love on his website; if you are really struggling with “experiencing love” in your life, visit his website (PositiveSelfTalk.Com). Following are some of the ways Abbott says God frequently speaks to him:

• I hear God’s voice in the sound of laughter and joy.
• I see the beauty of God’s pallet painted in the sunrise and the sunset.
• I see His infinite power in the billions of galaxies that He created and hurled into space.
• I feel His care in the warmth of the sun that shines on my face.
• I see the twinkle in His eyes in the stars at night.
• I see reflections of His power in lightning and hear echoes of His power in thunder.
• Every time a baby is born, I know that God hasn't given up on humanity.
• I hear God speak in the silence of the wilderness.
• I hear God sing in the songs He has given to each bird.
• I feel God's love in the love that I have for my own children.

Some Final Thoughts

Take a moment and reflect upon the power of hate & the power of love; note the incredible contrast and the effects of these two powers — the power of hate is WAR, whereas the power of love is PEACE. Jesus said, “Either you are for Me or you are against Me” (Mt 12:30); either we love God or hate God…either we are Christ-oriented or self-oriented…spiritual peacemakers or spiritual anarchists. Since God is the Supreme Reality behind all reality, nothing happens in this universe without it going across “His Desk” to accomplish His purposes. Though some of you may struggle with the idea of divine providence and the sovereignty of God, consider this — the greatest philosophers who ever lived (including many who were non-believers in the strict sense of the word) postulated that GOD (the First Cause of all things) of necessity must be sovereign in the absolute sense. Think about it — if GOD is the Eternal Existent One (the One who existed before all things), then NOTHING can happen outside of His sovereign will (absolutely nothing), because by definition everything has its source in God, be it the unseen world or the seen world. Furthermore, nothing exists in the sense that God exists; thus Scripture refers to Him as “the Great I AM” (the ever existent One; Ex 3:14-15; 6:2-6; Jn 8:58; Heb 13:8; Rev 1:8; 4:8); as such, He is omnipresent, omniscient and omnipotent. Fifty-eight times Scripture refers to God as “The Almighty” or “God Almighty,” because all power belongs to Him (cf. Gen 17:1; 35:11; Job 40:2; Rom 11:36; Rev 1:8; 4:8; 19:6) — every other power (so-to-speak) only exercises a power on loan to them, and no one is free to exercise that power outside the parameters God has ordained (Job 1:8-12). By the way, God is not in any danger of being over-powered and incarcerated by some other power in the universe — that is the stuff of Hollywood — obviously if all power belongs to God there is no opposition in the absolute sense. Never cease to forget that God is infinite in every way… for Him to be less than infinite, He would be something, to be sure, says Francis Schaeffer, “but He would not be God!” Remember a trillion times anything that is not infinite, is a speck of dust compared to that which is infinite… so don't get too enamored with that which is temporal. For those of you who struggle with the concept of divine providence or the sovereignty of God, I can only recommend that you study the two contrasting principles of eternal existence and temporal existence. Ultimately, the issue isn't that difficult to resolve even in a [temporal] human mind.

Let's again return to the topics of the “power of hate” and the “power of love.” The apostle Paul defines both the characteristics and the resultant effects of these two powers in his letters to the Romans and to the Galatians (Rom 8:2, 6, 13; and Gal 5:19-23) —

• The power of HATE — results in “death” (Rom 8:2, 6, 13), and is characterized by immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry (worshipping that which is not God), sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing (Gal 5:19-21) — those are the diabolical qualities of ungodliness and unrighteousness.

• The power of LOVE — results in “life” (Rom 8:2, 6, 13), and is characterized by joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22-23) — those are the qualities of godliness and righteousness. Note the commands of Jesus, Paul, Peter and John —
Jesus: “Love one another” (Jn 13:34)
Paul: “Through love serve one another” (Gal 5:13)
Peter: “Fervently love one another from the heart” (1 Pet 1:22)
John: “Let us love one another” (1 Jn 4:7)

“THE PRAYER of FAITH”
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

The Nature of Prayer
Communion with God (prayer) is the very essence of the Christian life. At its heart, prayer is “walking with God”… it is “an ongoing dialogue with God” that characterizes a life lived in vital relationship to God… thus it is “an ongoing experience of God’s presence in our lives.” Prayer is much more than getting God to run errands for us… it is a matter of “turning our soul to Him;” the psalmist David describes it as the lifting up of the soul to God: “Unto Thee, O Lord, do I lift up my soul” (Ps 25:1). When we lift up our soul to the Lord it gives God an opportunity to do what He desires to do in us, by redirecting our heart and mind toward Him… and doing a work of grace in this troubled world through us; hence, prayer essentially is “putting ourselves at God’s disposal” — it is not a matter of persuading God to do what we want Him to do… nor is it a matter of bending the will of a reluctant God to our will; therefore, we must not conceive of prayer as overcoming God’s reluctance, but as “laying hold of His highest willingness.” Though God may capitulate at times and grant us our persistent stubborn requests, ultimately that only brings “leaness to the soul” (Ps 106:15); essentially, it amounts to being cursed with the burden of a granted prayer that is not fully in accord with the will of God — such cursing is itself a very sober teacher.

Sadly, many believers simply reserve prayer for “deliverance from physical emergencies” (dangerous moments, sickness & illness, physical deficiencies, and challenging circumstances). Although such emergencies are significant moments for prayer, and remind us of our complete dependence upon God for everything in our lives, “spiritual manna from God to feed our souls” is a far more important reason for prayer. Remember, we generally pray when we have a need or the issues of life are somewhat disconcerting to us… hence, we bring our need to the Lord in hopes that He will deliver us from our condition. Keeping that in mind, contrast the perspective of prayer that seeks God’s input into our life, and what it is He wants to do in and through us (cf. Mt 26:39). Thus, the ultimate essence of prayer is seeking the face of God and fellowshipping and communing with Him — communion with Him not only builds our relationship with Him, but “helps facilitate our being transformed into the image of Christ” (2 Cor 3:18); which is the highest end God has for us as His redeemed children… and this transformation takes place in large part when we commune with Him through prayer, and whereby we “consciously align our will with God’s will.” God wants us to spend quality time with Him — away from everything else — where first and foremost we seek His face, and in doing so, love Him more and reflect His glory more.
Such fellowship with the Most High, not only effectuates a change in us, but enriches and strengthens our faith.

The reality is, we need “alone time” with God, where we experience His love and grace in our lives. If it was essential for Jesus to commune with the Father, obviously it is essential for us as well. Jesus believed in prayer… He knew the efficacy and power of prayer (that is, the efficacy and power of communing with the Father)… He knew the importance of experiencing intimacy with the Father. As believers, we too need to believe in prayer (communing with the Father). Though our motivation to pray is sometimes quenched when Satan gets us to doubt whether or not our prayers will work or make any difference (notice the self-centered perspective Satan wants us to have regarding prayer), such thinking misses the main reason for prayer — conversing and dialoguing and building and maintaining a relationship with our Heavenly Father. Obviously, if spiritual sustenance (manna from heaven that feeds our soul) isn't our primary consideration when praying, we will be easily distracted when praying. So, prayer is not a duty or a religious obligation or a means whereby we gain “spiritual brownie points” with God — what possible merit could such a religious action produce? If that's what prayer is, why not just hire someone else to light our little prayer candle for us, and do our praying for us, and help build our heavenly bank account? That kind of religious perspective is totally foreign to Scripture, so don't turn your prayer life into some kind of meritorious ritual or magical incantation — even though that is the essence of prayer in the majority of religions in our world. True biblical prayer is “movement of the soul toward God:” thus the foundation of our praying is “relationship with God,” and growing in that relationship. Though making requests are clearly genuine aspects of prayer (be it enrichment from poverty, protection from danger, deliverance from temptation, or fulfillment of a want or need), the need for communion with the Father is far and away the most important and the most significant aspect; this is clearly seen in the prayers of Paul in the NT (cf. Rom 15:5-6; Eph 1:16-17; 3:14-21; Phil 1:9-11; Col 1:9-12; 2 Cor 13:7-9; 2 Th 1:11-12; 3:16). When Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, essentially He told them that their prayer should include the following five things: 1) expressing reverence and adoration for God; 2) deferring to His wisdom and His will; 3) bearing the soul in contrition; 4) pouring out heart-felt thanksgiving to God for who He is; and 5) presenting petitions and supplications to Him (cf. Mt 6:9-13; Lk 11:1-4).

Daily nourishment from “Scripture” is indispensable to living the life of prayer, because God's Word expedites the intervention of God in our life, and is the primary means by which He reveals Himself to us and discloses His will to our hearts. The reality is, our theology (that is, what we truly believe about God, which is the foundation of faith) is actually nurtured by prayer, and since theology is inseparable from spirituality, we cannot afford to neglect either Scripture or prayer and expect to grow in grace and faith — with that in mind, meditation & contemplation are both supplements of prayer, and draw us closer to God. The most acclaimed preacher and Bible commentator in the post-apostolic era of the church was John Chrysostom (400 AD) — he frequently spoke of Scripture as being “essential nourishment for the believer’s soul;” it is the manna from heaven that is ministered to the soul by the Holy Spirit. Regarding prayer, he says “it is a harbor in the storms of life, an anchor for those who are storm-tossed… it silences the passions of the soul, assuages the rebellion of anger, dismisses envy, dissipates evil desire, withers the love of worldly things, and brings great peace and serenity to the soul.” It is the means which unites man with God, and involves both a wrestling in the dark and a resting in the stillness… though there is a time to argue and complain to God, there is also a time to lay down the gauntlet and submit to Him. So prayer is both a pleading with God that He will hear
and act upon our requests, and a surrender that confidently trusts God to act in His own time and His own way… but, as the theology professor Donald G. Bloesch says, “this confidence comes only through struggle” — ultimately in prayer, we seek to bring our will into conformity with the purposes of God; so we pray not simply for our own personal wants and happiness, but for the righteousness of God and the advancement of His kingdom. Chrysostom goes on to say that we must pray with ever vigilant attention (which is only possible when we understand with whom we are conversing), and that during such times we are His servants offering sacrifice to God. Furthermore, we must seek spiritual progress by prayer with contrition, with reverence, with serenity, and with true humility… though sin oftentimes obstructs our walk with God, it is in prayer that we approach Him and are once again reconciled with Him.

Down through the ages, monks persistently searched for “the most quiet corner possible” to set up their sanctuary of prayer, because “silence” helps concentrate the mind, gives rest to the spirit, and keeps it in constant readiness. The object is to have external quietude penetrate into the soul, for without inner silence & peace, external quiet is of no avail. When the serenity of the soul is accompanied by gratitude toward God, great results can be achieved spiritually. Obviously, the community of monks greatly valued quietness of heart and solitude in the soul, just as our Lord did — He often went off into a quite lonely place to commune with the Father (cf. Mt 14:23; Lk 5:16; 6:12; 22:41); likewise, He enjoined believers to “go into their inner room and close the door when they pray” (Mt 6:6). The chief obstacle to prayer is often the vain thoughts and imaginations that Satan places in our minds to draw us away from the essence of prayer; therefore writes one monk, “the doors of the mind and of the heart must be well guarded, so that the originator of evil will not control them and be able to enter freely.” Chrysostom goes on to say, “Are you in a state of calmness and serenity? then, beseech the Lord to make more permanent this joy in your heart. Are you troubled by the onslaught of tribulations and temptations? beseech the Lord to calm the storm in your life. Has your prayer been heard? thank God. Have you not been heard? persist in your prayer until you are heard.” Contrition and compunction (that is, overcoming distressful thinking) are essential companions for effective prayer. When we tame our will by steadfastly abandoning non-spiritual thoughts and our love for the world, compunction will rule in our soul… but it is only achieved by temperance, vigilance and humility; efficacious prayer awaits those who pray without distracting imaginations. The enemies of prayer are burning desires, sinful delights, and diabolical thinking. [the source for much of the material in these last two paragraphs can be found in the book, “Athonite Flowers”].

Prayer in the Midst of Struggles

King David provides believers with a powerful reminder of their inherent weaknesses, and the wonder of God’s grace and love to “quicken them” even in the darkest of times. He says in Psalm 143 — “Quicken me, O Lord, for Your name’s sake; for Your righteousness sake, bring my soul out of trouble” (143:11). In this psalm David asks the Lord to revive his spirit; in it he employs one of the strongest levers to move the hand and the heart of Omnipotence — the glory of God. As the nineteenth century pastor of London’s Metropolitan Tabernacle (where Charles Spurgeon would later become pastor) James Smith (1802-1862) said, “The soul that has been once quickened, often feels its need of being quickened again.” Like you and me, David often prayed for this blessing. He knew what it was to be overwhelmed, and have his heart desolate within him… as such, he looked up and sought the help of Heaven. He cried with fervor and
pleaded with earnestness; he entreated for his life and sought deliverance from his enemies, as well as instruction in God’s ways, and a renewed sense of God’s loving-kindness. David’s soul was troubled, as all of ours are at times (though some more than others). Our faith is feeble and our unbelief is strong… at times we don’t seem to be able to get a grip on God’s promises or appropriate them to ourselves… we look on them with longing eyes, but we cannot draw from them the comfort we need. Obviously, Satan comes with his temptations in an effort to draw us from the Lord, and lead us to doubt and fear—if he can divert our minds from the glorious gospel, he can soon bring us into bondage, if not into open sin… then darkness spreads over our soul and a gloom seizes our spirit… and we then feel a deadness in reference to all that is holy… the Word of God fails to make a sweet impression or offer us any refreshment… and the throne of grace loses all its attractions. We try to pray, but the most we can do is sigh and groan.

**Deadness of soul is a debilitating condition.** To be surrounded with spiritual food, and not have an appetite to enjoy it is bewildering; to be loaded with privileges, yet feel neither life nor comfort from them is frustrating. Writes James Smith, “It is at this point that the hidden evils of the heart, the concealed corruptions that lie embedded deep in the soul, begin to rise, rage and roar. Such foul, filthy, and unmentionable corruptions are discovered. These terrify and alarm us, while Satan suggests that it is impossible for God ever to dwell in such a vile heart… or for Christ to love and nourish one so corrupt. It is at this point that the soul is like the troubled sea—it finds no rest; just tossing, trembling, doubting, fearing, sinking, sighing, and groaning.” (these quotes by “James Smith” are from my own files, but I do not have their bibliographic references). Smith inquires of us: “Do you know anything of this? Many of the Lord’s people do. Some, who appear to others to have a very smooth path—because all without appears to be prosperous—suffer a martyrdom within. It is a difficult road along which many of God’s flock travel, but all do not sink so deep in the mire, or pass through such miry roads, as David and other godly leaders did.” David prayed, “**LORD, Quicken me! Revive me!**” Only the Holy Spirit can quicken our hearts—He gave us life at first, and He is the one who must renew us again & again. Just as God in nature renews the face of the earth in spring, so the Holy Spirit renews the souls of God’s tried and troubled people. “**Bring my soul out of trouble!**” was David’s cry. We can get ourselves into trouble, but only the Lord can bring us out of trouble; and this He does in His own way, and in His own time. In Psalm 143, **David used two pleas to God, two reasons why God should act** —

**First, “For Your name’s sake”—i.e., because You Lord are gracious, merciful, long-suffering, and abound in loving-kindness, goodness and truth; and because it is Your desire to be known as such. David here was praying, “**For the sake of Your own glory, show Yourself to be the God of loving-kindness and power which You are esteemed to be, that my soul might praise Your name** (Ps 23:3; 25:11; 31:3); for the sake of the honor of Your name, that it might be honored by others, may it please you to quicken and deliver me and deal graciously and bountifully with me!” (Ps 25:15; 34:17; 138:7; 142:7). Likewise, we are also to **plead the name of Jesus**, and pray that for His sake, on account of who He is and what He has done and suffered for us, that we might be renewed, and that He might be praised. 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). Think about that. Asking God to do something “**for His sake**” or “**for His Name’s sake,**” essentially is a direct equivalent of asking God to do something “**in Jesus Name — for Jesus sake**” (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23). Remember, God’s will (not our will) needs to be the “**primary reason**” for any request (Jn 14:13-14; 15:16; 16:23). It should be noted, to ask for something in Jesus Name is not simply to insert His Name at the end
of a prayer — it is to ask in accordance with His mind and His will (Mt 26:39, 42; Jn 6:38), and it is to ask for those things which will glorify God, bless mankind, and are for our own spiritual good. Furthermore, in order to ask in Christ's Name, we must live in close fellowship with Him, otherwise we would have no inclination of His attitude... and the closer we are to Him, the more our desires will be the same as His desires... so when we live in the center of His will, and walk in fellowship with Him, and ask for that which the Lord desires, we can be sure that our prayers will be answered — “the effective prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (Jas 5:16). Following are 36 passages from Scripture that stress the importance of action taken “for God’s sake:” carefully reflect upon them to enhance your appreciation and understanding of this concept — 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; Matt 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; Philips 1:6; 1 Pet 2:13; 1 Jn 2:12. Never forget, ultimately life is about God, not us... God is the One who is preeminent, not us — that thought runs completely contrary to the flesh, because the flesh is all about self and its own autonomy. By the way, it most takes believers a “lifetime of struggling” to apprehend and accept this truth (Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 3:21; Col 1:16; 1 Tim 1:17; Heb 2:10; 1 Pet 4:11; 2 Pet 3:18). Carefully and prayerfully reflect upon each of the verses listed above in this section.

Second, “For Your righteousness’ sake” — from this expression we understand God’s faithfulness to His Word, in which He has promised to do these things for us... and His just dealing with us, as those in covenant with Him, for God has covenanted to withhold no good thing from us (Ps 84:11). Blessed be God that we can “plead His name!” — even though we can plead nothing of our own! Yes, we can “plead His righteousness!” — not withstanding our own unrighteousness! Think about that: why do we try to make ourselves “presentable to God” (which is impossible) in order to get Him to respond favorably to us? Remember, the only thing that is acceptable to God is that which is “perfect!” — and Jesus is the only One who is perfect! We can approach God’s throne in heaven only because of Christ and His perfect righteousness! Even though we ourselves have “absolutely nothing” to bring to the table (so-to-speak), we have been given the wonderful privilege of pleading “His righteousness!” Carefully reflect upon this concept — we can plead His righteousness, even though we lack any righteousness of our own! With that said, all praise and glory goes to God! none whatsoever to us! So why do we insist on being able to “bring something to the table” when we have absolutely nothing to offer? That is the work of Satan in our souls, insisting that we come worthy in and of ourselves (at least to some degree)... lest God cast us out! Satan will always make us feel “shamefully unworthy of God’s love when we sin”... the truth of the matter is, Satan is a religious junkie who wants to get us all tangled up in a “religion of works!” By the way, if that’s the track you’re on, get off of it! You will never merit a single ounce of worthiness! Jesus is our righteousness! beginning to end! (Gal 3:3, 11, 19). Get your eyes off of yourself, and get them on Christ! (Heb 12:2). Jesus is our salvation... not us! Every good and perfect gift comes to us “from above”... that HE might be praised! Not us! Beloved, when you approach God's throne, simply plead the blood of Christ! The truth is, there isn't a man living on this planet who can stand in God's presence because of anything he has done! If this is a strange concept to you, prayerfully wrestle through it again and again until it peacefully settles in your soul (Ps 103:14).

Writes James Smith: “Soul trouble is the heaviest trouble!” As Solomon said, “A man may sustain some bodily infirmity, but a wounded spirit — who can bear?” Yet, when soul trouble weans us from SELF, and drives us to the LORD, it does us good. Says Smith, “Whatever makes us pray is a blessing!” — when the soul is troubled, it is at this time that our theology becomes
more than just some forensic truth. The good news is, the Lord's name and His righteousness and faithfulness may always be pleaded by us — we cannot plead our own names, or our own doings — but we can always plead the name of Jesus! even though we are shamefully guilty of some wrong! Therefore, however dark or dead we may feel… however Satan may tempt us, or corruptions work within us… however feeble our faith or strong our unbelief… let us still cry out to the Lord and 

plead His name & grace! that He may quicken us again, thus bringing our souls out of trouble… setting our feet upon a rock… and establishing our doings to the praise of His glory! It is also good to remember that what David experienced (at least in part) was also for our benefit (1 Cor 10:6, 11), and was recorded for our instruction and encouragement (Rom 15:4).

Paul writes: “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man” (1 Cor 10:13). There is no such thing as a new trial or new temptation under the sun; none of us are subjected to a “totally unique trial” — they are all common to men. All those men of great doctrinal knowledge down through the ages, who were at the forefront of Christian ministry, had their ebbs and winters. Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) battled terribly with a depressed soul — he saw his depression as his “worst feature.” He once said, “This depression comes over me whenever the Lord is preparing a larger blessing for my ministry.” Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) suffered from depression throughout his life. Writes George Marsden in his biography of Edwards: “Even as he kept the disciplines of the faith, he was frequently afflicted by times of spiritual darkness.” Likewise, Martin Luther (1483-1546) also experienced great discouragement in his soul — on one particular occasion he was forcefully reminded of this by his wife, Katharine: seeing him unresponsive to any word of encouragement, one morning she appeared dressed in black mourning clothes. Luther inquired as to the reason, and she responded, “Someone has died.” “Who died?” questioned Luther. “It seems God must have died” his wife replied. Luther got the point. All of God's great saints were familiar with the despondency and depression that David and others in scripture experienced. The author of Psalm 42 was downcast and troubled in his soul, because it seemed to him that God had forgotten him — thus he was far more aware of God's absence than God's presence… just as we often are.

Many of the saints in Scripture experienced “darkness of the soul,” and untold numbers of godly men down through the ages have also experienced it. Needless to say, it is perplexing to believer's minds, because we expect God to respond in a tangible way when the seas roar in our lives. Let me quote the words of the psalmist David — “My God, why have You forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning… I cry by day, but Thou dost not answer, and by night, but I have no rest” (Ps 22:1-2). Likewise he writes, “To Thee, O Lord, I call… do not be deaf to me… hear the voice of my supplications when I cry to Thee for help” (Ps 28:1-2). Later he goes on to say: “Hear my prayer, O Lord; give ear to my supplications… my soul longs for Thee as a parched land. Answer me quickly, O Lord, my spirit fails; do not hide Thy face from me” (Ps 143:1, 6, 7). Similarly the psalmist Asaph writes, “Has God forgotten to be gracious? Or has He in anger withdrawn His compassion? Then I said, It is my grief, that the right hand of the Most High has changed” (Ps 77:9-10; also Ps 10:1; 13:1; 42:1-3; 51:12; 88:1-7). Job writes, “When I expected good, then evil came: when I waited for light, then darkness came” (Job 30:26). Keeping those passages in mind, David at another point writes, “I sought the Lord, 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. The righteous cry and the Lord hears, and delivers them out of all their troubles. The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Ps 34:4, 17, 19). Likewise he says, “I waited patiently for the Lord; He inclined to me and heard my
cry. He brought me up out of the pit of destruction... He set my feet upon a rock... and put a new song in my mouth” (Ps 40:1-3). David also writes: “Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Ps 55:22). Here are some of the most encouraging words in Scripture: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble” (Ps 46:1). The psalmist emphatically exclaims four times in Psalm 107, “They cried out to the Lord in their trouble; and He delivered them out of their distresses” (Ps 107:6, 13, 19, 28). The inevitable conclusion of both avenues of thought expressed above is that “God ultimately rescues us from our troubles,” the idea being that His rescuing is not always as swift and pain-free as we would like it to be; the reality is, there are times when the darkness is so long and debilitating that one feels it will never go away, no matter how much we petition the throne (cross-reference the forgoing with that man named “Job”). Regarding darkness, David said, “Thou dost light my lamp, and illumine my darkness” (Ps 18:28; cf. 2 Sam 22:29; Ps 27:1). These are the incredible teachings of God’s Word. Beloved, don’t argue with it... accept it.

Prayer and a Crisis of Faith

The common expression “crisis of faith” is a term applied to periods of intense doubt and internal conflict about one’s preconceived beliefs. The believer who undergoes challenging difficulties says, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mk 9:24); the reality is, none of us have a perfect faith: there is a degree of unbelief in every heart (that is simply the residual effect of inhabiting sinful flesh. As such, believers are exhorted in Scripture to “grow as Christians” (cf. Eph 4:15; Phil 2:12; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). And as Jesus Himself said, “If we would find, we must seek... and if we wish the door to be opened to us, we must knock” (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 even 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 extremely 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 this 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 take their life, 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'd 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 each 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, or He may not reveal it to us, **God is still in control, and still working.** 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.

**When we take our doubts and troubles to the Lord, we enter something called “prayer.”** But what exactly is the meaning of **“prayer”**? The 19th century theologian, Charles Hodge, describes prayer as **“the converse of the soul with God”**… keeping that description in mind, it is important to remember what we stated earlier, **“the essence of prayer is the alignment of our will with God’s will”** (carefully reflect upon that definition). 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; that is serious reflection about what it is we truly believe. 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!”** (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 not only **personal,** but **powerful**… He not only hears us, but 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) — as stated earlier, 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. Perhaps it is helpful to keep the concept of faith in mind when praying, because it is only the “prayer of faith” that resonates with God (Heb 11:6). Here are some quotes on faith you might reflect upon:

- Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen (Heb 11:1)
- Prayer soars to heaven on the wings of faith – St. John Climacus
- Genuine faith in God is efficacious in prayer – Anonymous
- Faith gathers strength in us by practice – Joseph Addison
- Faith gives certitude to our prayers; without faith prayer is but wishful thinking – Anonymous
- Faith is being confident of God’s hearing us, and His responding to us – Jeremy Taylor
- Faith trusts God in this dark, fallen, upside down world in which we live – Anonymous
- Faith puts its hand in God's hand that it might walk uprightly through this rocky world – Anonymous
- Faith and a sincere life are required of us, not loftiness of intellect – Thomas à Kempis
- The only way to learn strong faith is to endure great trials – George Muller
- Faith alone unites the soul to God – St. John of the Cross
- Faith discerns God and the things of God – John Wesley
- Faith is conscious of God’s presence in one’s life – G. S. Meriam
- Faith believes in the existence of God and the unseen order – Anonymous
- Faith is the disclosure of truth to the human heart by the Holy Spirit
- Faith triumphs over incongruity and meaninglessness – Reinhold Niebuhr
- Faith is a gift of God, not a gift of reasoning – Blaise Pascal

Let me encourage you to read a couple of other studies I have done on these issues—they are: “Transformed Living” and “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” – you can find them on my website at: www.thetransformedsoul.com Some of the foregoing material was taken from these two studies.

Bibliographic Sources for the Five Studies

In addition to the various individuals quoted in each of the foregoing studies, some of the themes and material was taken from the following authors and sources –

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