My Journey of Faith

By Dr. Donald W. Ekstrand
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Let me begin by first saying that I basically wrote this study for the benefit of those people who have known me over the years… though many of you have known me through the various ministries of which I have been a part, and others since my days at Arizona State University, still others of you have known me since my childhood; yet as is the case with all of us, there are a number of elements in our lives that are not known to others, that actually define us and have played a significant role in making us the persons we are today. I’m thinking in particular of all the physical, relational, emotional and psychological issues that have influenced “my construct of faith” (that body of knowledge that basically governs my life). The reality is, “we all grow in our faith;” though the foundation of our faith does not change (that is grounded in the cross of Christ), the dialectics and perspectives that define our faith do change; so in that sense we grow in our faith (cf. 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). It is this “growth factor” that I have chosen to expand upon in this study. The question is, how does God actually grow our faith? (note the emphasis on God), and what are the primary instruments He uses to bring about that growth? Additionally, what role does the believer play in the process? According to Scripture, the primary agent God uses to effectuate our growth is “trials and tribulations” (cf. Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7); interestingly enough, without trials growth would not take place… so that is simply the spiritual economy (i.e., God’s divine rule) under which we live. By definition, the implication of our need to grow in our faith is the fact that “we frequently misuse & misapply our faith,” because in the final scope of things our faith is not a completely mature faith. For example, it is not uncommon for believers to think that God is angry or disappointed with them and about to lose patience with them because of their sinfulness, yet that does not quite correspond with what Scripture teaches. On the other hand, it is not uncommon for believers to become disappointed with God because of His seeming reluctance to answer their prayers and meet their needs – we see this numerous times throughout the Old Testament. It is these dark thoughts in our soul that often control the discourse in our minds, and cause us to venture outside the bounds of faith. Because believers generally see trials and difficulties as “frustrating negatives that disturb their peace,” their construct of faith is somewhat skewed and contrary to what Scripture teaches. The reality is, every difficulty and trial we go through in life is permitted by God for one reason — and that is to grow our faith; so everything we go through in life as one of God’s children is “faith related.” If you struggle with that construct, stay tuned, it will become clearer as you read through this study. Before proceeding with this study, let me draw your attention to the following — I frequently list a number of biblical references throughout my studies; such references expand upon the concepts and ideas that are being presented, so it is to your advantage that you read them and carefully reflect upon them. Obviously when dealing with Scripture, it is important to keep in mind that you’re dealing with “divine truth” — not human opinion — and divine truth requires prayerful reflection and humble acceptance (cf. Jam 1:21b). Additionally, I have italicized and underlined and boldfaced several words and phrases — this was done to give emphasis and context to the ideas being presented.

**Scripture teaches that every believer is in the process of “being transformed into the image of Christ”** (cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 1:3-14; Phil 1:6); whether you have been a believer for one year or a hundred years, you are still in the process. The grammatical constructions of the four passages I just listed refer to the fact that the work that is being done in us is being done by the Holy
Spirit, and that the ongoing process involves “painful trials” (cf. 1 Pet 1:6; 4:12; 5:10; Jam 1:2-3). It is in the furnace of affliction (that’s the metaphor the Lord uses to describe the transformation and purification processes to which He subjects His children; Is 48:10) by which God builds our faith and develops our character (cf. Rom 5:3-4). That these issues are indeed “significant” is the reality… though some of you may be inclined to argue against that didactic, let me encourage you to read this entire study before coming up with a different polemic. A popular truism coaches use in the athletic world is this: “In sports and in life adversity builds character;” that is simply the reality. Though a ballplayer may learn a number of things in football by sitting in the classroom, it is not until they are out on the playing field and practicing those things, that they are really learned and become a part of their game. In similar fashion, it is on the “battlefield of life” where we really grow spiritually, because the sober realities of life are extremely poignant instructors. The things I have gone through in life have played a significant role in the development of my faith, and have strongly influenced the person I have become today. It is important for the believer to keep in mind that “God is at work in him, and is superintending all that takes place in his life”… we don’t live in a happenstance universe; “God is causing all things to work together for our good” (cf. Rom 8:28ff – that’s a “causative verb” in Greek). There are no accidents in God’s kingdom; God has a purpose for everything that takes place in our life; the reality is, He uses everything we go through in life to “transform us into the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29-31). The following material in this study is a depiction of my life, and the process God has used to transform my life. My prayer is that the Lord will help give context to your life by reflecting upon my life… that is the reason I have written this study.

Throughout life we all at some point confront several “very difficult physical realities;” needless to say, they can be daunting and very disconcerting; such has been my experience in life. In spite of the fact that I have taught the Word now for more than forty years, I never felt the need to share the most poignant issues of my life to which God had subjected me; basically, I only shared things in a general sense in my teaching when it seemed appropriate. But as life speeds on to its final conclusion (which is inevitable in life), I felt it might be helpful to share how God has worked in my life through a myriad of issues that have profoundly impacted my thinking and my construct of faith. Hopefully, you will be able to identify with some of those issues, and see their application to your own faith. Beloved, everything I share in this study is for your benefit; I don’t share these difficult physical realities with you for any other reason… certainly not to be pitied or beatified. Why would I want anyone to pity me? The only pity any one needs is from God, not another fallen creature; and beatification far transcends fallen man, of which I am one. For those of you who are approaching the final stage of life (senior years), no doubt you have also discovered that this earthly life isn’t as grand and glorious as you were led to believe as a young person; that some of the sober realities of life have been eye-openers to you. With that in mind, much of the following will naturally be a little difficult for younger generations to fully grasp; the reality is, young people have no idea what the sober realities of old age are ultimately going to teach them — how can they? they’ve never been there. To give context to this study, it is now the autumn of 2016 — I’m now seventy-three years old, and have been in ministry for forty-four years (since 1972). Regarding those physical issues that God has used to instruct me in life and develop my construct of faith, I have essentially divided them into two categories: physical infirmities & physical circumstances. By the way, “we each go through thousands of challenges in life (not hundreds) and every day has enough challenges of its own” (cf. Mt 6:34); that’s something most young people at this point don't yet understand — life is simply
too enjoyable to a young, energetic person (that see to be the way God designed it)... though some of you may be inclined to argue against that, it will make more sense to you latter on.

**By way of introduction, let me state a few more things up front.** For the past 13 years I have pretty much given myself extensively to the studying theological issues, teaching, and writing: aside from teaching in a few churches, I have taught about fifty-five courses in various colleges here in Arizona, and have authored two books and about fifteen small booklets. All told, I have written about a hundred studies, and have placed about eighty-five of them on my website — www.TheTransformedSoul.com Obviously, studying and writing fulltime and ministering to people who contact me through my website isn’t something I envisioned doing years ago; for the most part I simply saw myself as someone who was willing to administrate, teach and serve where there was a need, not be some prototypical theologian of sorts; so the path God destined for me came as a complete surprise: oftentimes over the past thirteen years I asked God why He chose me to deal with “soul transformation” issues? Perhaps He was looking for a blue collar guy like me, who had basically hammered his way through all the ups and downs of life, to simply sit back and reflect upon the work “God does” in man’s soul. Scripture is pretty clear, only those who come to the end of themselves are able to be quiet and attentive to what God has to say; it should be noted, God is the one who brings us to the end of ourselves (and that is generally a pretty difficult journey); it is just that which pretty much now defines me. With that said, God is the one who so willed that I wrestle with all of these issues — it is not something I would have chosen to do (I’m too active and too much of a people person to be stuck in a room by myself days without end; yet that is where I ended up); the truth is, there were times when I actually found myself fighting against the things God was trying to do in and through my life (that is simply what it means to inhabit sinful flesh); as the apostle Paul expressed it — “I was compelled to do it” (cf. 1 Cor 9:16-17). When God calls us to a particular task, though there is a sense in which we acquiesce and humbly submit to His calling, ultimately the task is “God’s doing” — it is not ours — it is a divine compulsion in our hearts that drives us in that direction. Contrary to what some might think, this is not some strange phenomenon that only a very few people in God’s service experience; true God ordained fulltime ministry is a divine calling; do I fully understand that? No, not fully. In like manner, I don’t fully understand how God could have loved me so much that He sent His Son to die for me… that simply doesn’t make sense to a fallen creature; but that is the reality. That is why Charles Wesley penned those incredible words to the hymn: “Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?” Some of what I have just shared will make far more sense to you after reading this study. With all that in mind, the issue of “soul transformation” became the dominant theme in my thinking and my studies; it not only became the title of a book I authored, but the theme of my website — www.TheTransformedSoul.com

**Because I have pretty much been consumed with this theological construct, deductive reasoning dominates much of the discourse that takes place in my mind — essentially deductive reasoning questions everything.** because it insists on understanding the rationale behind it all. The reality is, we often only arrive at the truth by questioning it from every angle and prayerfully searching the Scriptures for answers. You’ll notice, scientists and detectives often arrive at the truth by questioning everything, because questioning gets you to see things in a way you may not otherwise see them — questioning has a way of opening the book of truth. If you have studied Scripture at any length, no doubt you can attest to the fact that many of God’s apostles and prophets questioned Him over and over again as to what He was doing… they weren’t into
to just blindly accepting abstract thoughts; they insisted on having a level of understanding — after all, did God not give us “minds” with which to think? Would it not then be a contradiction for Him to ask us to set them aside? I find it interesting that as a child I was often told, “Don’t question anything God says: just accept it and do what He says.” It was probably that injunction that caused me to question just about everything in life; no doubt you’ve read Paul’s teaching on the effect Law has upon our flesh: “Our sinful passions are aroused by the Law” (cf. Rom 7:5). This truth reminds me a situation where a hotel was having problems with people jumping off of their balconies (three and four stories high) into the swimming pool below, in spite of the fact that they had posted “large signs” on every balcony forbidding people to do so. Interestingly enough, when new owners purchased the hotel they removed all the signs, and the hotel never had that problem again. What do we learn? “Laws exacerbate the flesh!” There are numerous stories like this that one could quote, including Adam & Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden; they could eat the fruit of any tree but “one!” Though this principle may not have applied directly to me, it may have; since I was a little boy, no matter what seemed to be going on around me in life, I always asked the “why” question — I probably drove my mother crazy. Though it is one thing to question something with an angry heart or an attitude of distain, it is quite another to question something with a humble heart that desperately wants to know the truth. With that said, theologians constantly question everything; they simply cannot leave a stone unturned. Let me reiterate this truth one more time: “it is GOD who gives individuals their skill-sets & mind-sets and calls them to fulltime ministry; He equips those whom He calls” (cf. 1 Cor 4:7; 12:4-7,11). Would you ask a man to build a bridge who didn’t have the skills and the wherewithal to build it? No, of course not… well God does not operate in some unreasonable fashion; His modus operandi is very logical (again, that will be made very clear later on). Let me make this one comment: our skill-sets (giftedness) can be compared to an “ax;” in order for it to truly be an effective tool in our hands, it must be “sharpened,” and that’s our responsibility (if we don’t take the initiative to develop the gifts God has given to us, they will never be effective tools in His service).

The study that follows is the product of my lifelong journey with Christ. Perhaps like the majority of you, I had no idea as a young Christian how much the life ahead of me (i.e., the life God was going to subject me to — cf. Ps 139:1-6,16), would radically impact my construct of faith. In that regard, my faith is significantly different today than the faith I had in my younger years; like most believers here in the US, I thought the Christian life for the most part was basically a joyful, positive, pain-free experience… all the while looking forward to a glorious eternity with Christ in heaven! I didn't anticipate the “perplexities of faith” with which I would ultimately contend. Furthermore, I actually thought the Christian life was supposed to be a more natural experience than it ended up being, and not one that involved so much disconcertion in the soul; darkness in the soul & spiritual warfare were strange anomalies to me—things I found myself frustratingly ill-prepared to handle. Though some of the foregoing might be a little troubling to some of you, because it does not coincide with what you were taught or led to believe, I simply ask you to hear me out… in no way do I want to discourage you in your faith, or cause you to question the integrity of it; I just want you to see things as they really are, not necessarily how you may want them to be. Sadly, it was often “the shallow, superficial thinking of believers” in the Christian world in our country that controlled the spiritual discourse during the 20th century; everything was edited and reduced to its simplest form (much like the four spiritual laws)—though such thinking had an upside to it, it also had a downside… simplification is not always beneficial because it can exclude truths that are highly significant. Yet keeping that in mind,
the Christian world has never been absolutely pure in its doctrine (and understandably so)—throughout the New Testament, Paul, Peter and John repeatedly drop the ax on the various heretical teachings that surfaced in the church. The reality is, as fallen creatures we have a tendency to misinterpret Scripture and distort the truth, simply because it does not mesh with human thought; thus we’re inclined to reject difficult truths or reinterpret them to make them more acceptable; many theologians and denominations have traveled down just such a road.

It is important to remember, we are all the product of our teachers and preachers, and those who went before us… just as the forerunners of our faith were the product of those who went before them, so we stand on the backs of those who went before us—be it our parents, teachers or pastors; none of whom were doctrinally perfect. Some of them may stressed love more than holiness… faith more than grace… healing more than suffering… happiness more than struggling… deliverance more than endurance… the power of faith more than the fight of faith… human desire more than the divine will… the actions and work of man more than the actions and work of God… and seldom if ever were the perplexities of faith discussed (i.e., darkness in the soul, a crisis of faith, the struggle of faith, the predisposition to sinning, dying to self and human will, the progression of debilitating circumstances in life as one grows older, and the frequent refusal of God to manifest His presence to us in tangible ways), yet it is highly unlikely that any of our mentors knowingly or purposefully taught heresy — nevertheless the things they taught us strongly influenced our faith. As I reflect back upon my own teaching, I can’t say I actually taught something that was “wrong,” but I probably gave inordinate emphasis to some things; obviously there were some significant doctrinal truths that I didn’t expand upon simply because I did not understand them at the time. This will make more sense to you once you have read this entire study. I admittedly come down hard on American Christianity in this study, because I believe it was negligent in handling many of the more difficult issues of faith—here was America, the epicenter of the Christian world, not providing the kind of theological leadership it needed to provide; though we prided ourselves in being the leader of the Christian world, we didn’t take that solemn responsibility as seriously as we should have. The theologians of our day should have done their homework (rather than just regurgitating the things they were taught), so that the Christian community at large could have profited from it… yet to their defense, they were the product of another culture & another generation of Christians with which the vast majority of us are totally unfamiliar. Incidentally, regurgitation characterizes the vast majority of the scientific community as well — in actuality, there are very few true genuine scientists in our world today; nearly all of them are simply teaching and propounding the same stuff they were taught (the science teachers in our schools are simply regurgitators). True genuine scientists like Einstein hammer away at the core of an issue without hanging on to some juvenile preconceived bias. It has always been my conviction that “unadulterated truth” is tantamount to genuine faith (it can’t be mixed with untruth), but when the fullness of truth has not yet been fully considered, the truth that one believes, in all likelihood is somewhat distorted; for instance, many believers question “their forgiveness,” either because they don’t feel forgiven or they can’t reconcile the reality of it in their minds… hence the need for churches to preach the totality of what Scripture teaches; i.e., the fullness of what it teaches. Because of a number of difficult circumstances in my life, God chose to make “growing in grace and truth and faith” the supreme occupation of my soul. By the way, the “simplicity of faith” is an oxymoron to the believer who truly takes his faith seriously — the reality is, faith is anything but easy or simple. With that said, the last thing I want to do is come across to you one who has “arrived;” that is not possible for any of us in this life (that awaits us in heaven). For a far more extensive look at
what the scriptures teach about “faith,” let me encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith,” check it out on my website: www.TheTransformedSoul.com
If you wish to make a “copy” of that study, simply click on the “icon” in the upper right hand corner on the first page of the study to access a “pdf version” of it. Let me preface what I have written in the following pages by saying this: basically what follows may not fully be understood until you get to the end of this study, so don't worry about drawing conclusions on anything until you have completely read it. Lord willing, once you have read it, you should then be able to give definition and perspective to much of what you have experienced in your life.

A PICTURE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Before launching into this study, let me draw your attention to the “picture” I have chosen to adorn the cover of this study/booklet. If you are reading this study online, you can access the picture by clicking on the icon in the upper right hand corner of the front page of this study (you will find there “a printable pdf version of this study that includes the picture”). As you will see, the picture is of a beautiful mountain… and lying at the base of that mountain is a gorgeous valley with lots of trees and a beautiful lake. To me, the picture is a simile or graphic portrayal of the Christian life, in that it portrays the beauty of it from top to bottom. The journey of faith that I describe in this study begins at the bottom of that mountain and ends at the summit… i.e., our spiritual journey begins next to the lake in a lavishly beautiful valley with luxuriant foliage, with the mountain peak in the far distance. The initial steps we take in the Christian life are like those of a child being tenderly cared for by his parents in the lush valley below. As a child, he is not pushed to the base of the mountain to begin the climb; that is still a long way off. He simply spends a significant amount of time enjoying the most beautiful place on earth with his family and friends; every need he has is provided for by them — they are his great encouragers in life and love him unconditionally. As he reaches his teen years, he ventures over to the base of the mountain and begins to reflect upon it more seriously; yet he is still a few years away before he begins his quest to reach the summit. Once he starts his journey, however, he notices how similar things are in the foothills of the mountain compared to the valley below, and that the climb is not that difficult a struggle. It is in these early stages that he journeys with family and friends over to the steeper portions to observe the more challenging elevations. Before long the day comes when “the charge” before him is made clear — he is to climb that mountain that has occupied his gaze since childhood… doing so would frequently mean exerting a great deal of energy and spending a lot of time alone with God. From this point on, there would be little common ground from what he had known as a child down in the valley. With that in mind, he would often think to himself how beautiful the mountain looked to him as a child in the recesses below, and he would naturally surmise: “It’s like all of the hard, treacherous surfaces were camouflaged back then, but now that I see them up close they are far more challenging and demanding then I had imagined.” His spiritual journey was not quite what he had expected it to be… obviously he had a lot of learning to do if he was going to traverse this mountain. The further along he would go, the steeper the climb would become, and the more demanding it would be… thus he often fell down and injured himself; which was perplexing to him… in addition to that, there were distressing times when he would take a tumble and lose significant ground, which caused him to question why he was having such a difficult time making the climb, and why he was feeling so weak and inept? As he stopped to glance at the valley below and the mountaintop before him, it became
apparent to him that the distance between the two was vastly longer and far steeper than he originally thought it was. Occasionally, he would talk to others who were struggling on their climb as well, and together they would wonder if they would ever reach the top of the mountain. More often than not, he saw the vast majority of people simply settling down at some juncture on the mountain, and essentially giving up on completing the climb. The temptation to discontinue climbing seemed to grow stronger and stronger, yet there was a cogent inner voice in his soul that refused to let him stop; ceasing to traverse the mountain was simply not an option for him.

In spite of his commitment to push forward on the journey, the climb became increasingly more difficult — the weather got colder... the storms more violent... and the terrain much less forgiving. How in the world, he thought, would he ever reach the summit? Ultimately he would conclude that it simply wasn't in him to do so... no matter how much he would pray and plead with the Lord at the various junctures along the way, the journey never got easier — it only got harder and more difficult... and the number of fellow-journeymen on the trail was now significantly fewer than he had known early on; this in itself made for an increasingly lonely journey. Why is it, he thought, that the hardest part of the journey was the loneliest part, with far more significant problems. As he reflected back on his younger years in the valley, he remembered those times when he would look at the beauty of the mountain and dream of one day reaching its summit; that dream now seemed far beyond his reach, and a puzzling distant hope. As the years passed, he learned how absolutely essential it was to have significant communion with the Lord by studying His Word during the most difficult and trying times, and hearing His still small voice. More and more he saw the need to commune with the Lord several times a day, because without the ongoing assurance of His presence in his life, the journey only became more unbearable. He was now learning what it meant to “simply walk by faith without the slightest degree of sight” (you might want to reflect upon that aggregate); no longer would the circumstances of life be the measure of God's love for him, and no longer would they dominate the discourse in his mind. His thoughts now needed to be intentionally rooted in God's love for him and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to his heart. In his younger years he never imagined anything like this... life seemed so full of energy and pleasant back then... the serious nature of God's call upon his life was now the preeminent thing in his mind; so the battle within was now a significant issue for him... and his future destiny in glory was now his great hope. He began to wonder if it was even possible to manage his way to the top of the mountain? After years of climbing, the answer had become increasingly clear — No, climbing all the way to the top of the mountain was not even remotely possible. So reaching the summit in this life was now no longer his goal... life was now about growing in the knowledge of God's love & grace, and growing in faith [cf. 1 Jn 4:16; 2 Pet 3:18], and whenever the Lord would eventually take him home to His eternal glory in Christ, “it would be then that God Himself would perfect, confirm, strengthen & establish him... and complete the work that He had begun in him” [cf. 1 Pet 5:10; Phil 1:6]. By the way, few believers ever reach the timberline on the mountain (i.e., that height on the mountain where timber no longer grows), let alone the top of the mountain. In all probability, it is highly likely that only a handful of believers have ever traversed some of the rocky ground beyond the timberline. In case you're wondering, the top of the mountain is paradise (our eternal destiny; that place of absolute perfection and glory). Until our great awakening in heaven, all of us as believers will continue to inhabit sinful flesh and live with all the weaknesses we possess; as the psalmist David said, “God knows our frame, and is mindful that we are but dust” [Ps 103: 14]; likewise wrote Paul: “Don’t think more highly of yourself that you ought to think” [Rom 12:3]. The reality is, it is only by grace that God will one day call us home to His eternal presence, and
transform us into the image of His beloved Son. Let me encourage you to reflect upon the foregoing simile, because it is a fairly accurate portrayal of the Christian life. There is no room for the slightest degree of pride whatsoever in the life of faith. As you will learn in the pages that follow, ultimately life is all about God—not us.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY

Regarding my own personal journey up the mountain, let me begin by saying I'm no where near the timberline. My journey of faith has not at all been like the one I imagined back in my earlier years. Though there have been times of great joy and fruitful ministry... there have also been perplexing times of great disconcertion and confusion in my soul. In order to give context to my journey, let me share with you those physical infirmities & physical circumstances that God has ultimately used to develop my construct of faith. I'll begin by addressing some of the physical infirmities with which God has called me to live; obviously, this isn't a complete list of all the physical problems I've had to deal with, but it's a good summary of the ones that come to my mind at this point—like any study, you edit it 20-30-40 times (some sections more than others), and each edit inspires new thoughts, different ways of expressing things, and even new material. It is not until you are fairly satisfied with the content of what you have written, and the way in which the various topics flow and compliment each other, that you finally reach that point where you say to yourself, “Enough is enough; end of conversation!” That's when you close the book on it. After years of writing, my experience is, you never get to the point where you are fully satisfied with anything you write—never—that is just what it means to be a writer or teacher or preacher; there just comes a point where you are willing to accept your final product. Obviously the more time you spend on a particular subject, the greater the depth and the more detailed it becomes. Personally, I would compare writing something with composing a piece of music (of which I have also had a little experience); ultimately, if your composition doesn't flow and play and have rhythm, you’ve got more work to do; so either you continue working on it, put it away for future consideration, or toss it in the trash. Incidentally, sometimes you are so consumed with what you are writing, you stay up till the wee hours of the morning; yet at other times, the work is so exhausting and difficult that you have to shut it down and get out of the house, because it is simply too overwhelming to you. With all the foregoing in mind, let's proceed—

Physical Infirmitiess—Many of us have been called to live life with a number of physical ailments and infirmities... some significant, some not so significant. Following are several of those challenging physical issues God ordained to be a part of my life:

- **Difficult Neck Issues**—When I was ten years old I fell off a garage roof onto a neighbor’s driveway; I landed headfirst with my hands leading the way... the repercussions of that fall are still felt to this day... when I was younger I used to jerk my head back and forth because of the irritation that resulted when the nerve endings were damaged... my doctor told me to not jerk it back and forth because that would simply cause further damage; instead, he told me to hold my neck (stretch it) in both directions for about a minute when it was bothering me. The residual effect of that accident has caused severe deterioration of the vertebrae in my neck; I have been on medications for it now for the past fifteen years (including a minimum of four extra-strength pain killers a day); there are times when the pain becomes so intense that I have to get out of bed and walk around or sit upright for a couple of hours until
the pain subsides. I have found various postures and movements somewhat helpful, including sleeping on my left side rather than my right side (that seems to not be as irritating); nevertheless, this is a problem I have to deal with pretty much every day. Incidentally, I have importuned the Lord’s throne thousands of times on this issue.

- **Reflux Condition** — When I played football in college, I suffered an injury to my sternum and the sphincter muscle that seals off the stomach from the esophagus (which is designed to prevent reflux). For twenty-five years I suffered from a serious acid reflux condition… essentially it meant there were a number of foods I had to refrain from eating because they simply agitated the condition, and I couldn’t eat anything a few hours before bedtime. The condition became so severe that I finally opted for a new experimental laparoscopic surgery in 1998 that was invented a few years earlier, where they wrap the upper portion of your stomach around the lower part of your esophagus to form a new sphincter muscle; it seems to have worked fairly well, for which I’m grateful, but it is not nearly as effective as God’s original design. I still take meds for this condition. By the way, another physical problem I ended up getting as a result of “place-kicking” in football, was that of injuring the big toe on my right foot — in my youth I played a lot of sports barefoot, including kickball, and I would kick the ball “head on” with my right foot (not side-winding like a soccer-style kicker)… it is quite obvious today that I damaged the structure of my right foot; the big toe on my right foot is about a half-inch shorter than the big toe on my left foot; the resultant effect is my right foot is shorter and wider than my left foot. I experience a degree of numbness on my right foot that I don’t experience on my left foot… and the joint at the base of my big toe is much larger than that of my non-kicking foot; so I have an arthritic condition with my right foot. To answer the question of why I ever kicked barefoot — it wasn’t that unusual fifty years ago… there were a few other kickers who did the same thing; the reason for it was you impacted the ball more solidly barefoot than you did wearing kicking shoes; I actually kicked a ball a good five yards further barefoot than with a shoe. In spite of that advantage, however, I did use “kicking shoes” in games… but to this day, my right foot can be problematic for me.

- **Knee & Shoulder Surgeries** — Back in the 1970s when I was in seminary, I served as a youth pastor for two youth groups in southern California… on one of our youth trips we went water-skiing in the High Sierras, and I ended up suffering meniscus and ligament damage to both knees; ultimately they were both operated on — the right one eventually required removing everything from the joint. I was told I would eventually need knee replacements, and that I needed to stop doing any running or hard-walking because that would only exacerbate the problem (I now exercise by riding a bike). A side-effect of the water-skiing accident was varicose veins in my left leg, which were surgically removed about fifteen years later. The long and short of it is, my knees have done surprisingly well until the last three years — of late I have had “four cushion injections” in both knees to stem off knee replacement surgeries (so far, so good). In addition to my knee problems, I have also had rotator cuff surgeries on both shoulders, and a couple of shots in both of them the past couple of years. Lord willing, they will hang in there until the end as well.

- **Eye Problems** — I have experienced “retina detachment” in both eyes the past three years; a couple of years ago they operated on my right eye, and about five months ago they did surgery on my left eye (they inserted a “buckle” inside my left eye to keep the retina in
Being as I also had cataract problems with both eyes, I just finished having dual “cataract surgeries” — the result is, I now see much better out of both of my eyes; whereas everything had a dull yellowish tint to it before (which also made it difficult to drive at night), my world is now much brighter and less yellow. Pretty miraculous surgery when you think of it.

- **Hearing Problems** — This past year I finally resorted to “hearing aids,” because of the hearing loss that I experienced in the Army back in the 1960s… the mortar bombs and munitions had a pretty significant impact on my hearing. For those of you who know me well, you have probably noticed how often I say “What?” because I have a difficult time hearing the consonants in words (only the noise of the vowels has been reasonably pronounced in my hearing). The hearing aids have provided some relief, but they told me my hearing was too impaired to completely correct the problem.

- **Teeth Problems** — The past couple of years I have had eight teeth extracted because of serious infections (up until that time I had already experienced the removal of three teeth, so now I’m missing eleven teeth); that means I now do a lot of chewing with my front teeth, which have been damaged in the process (your front teeth are not meant to sustain heavy biting). The reality is I frequently end up biting my lips and my tongue (frequently causing bleeding), so I often rinse my mouth with hot salt-water before going to bed; I also now wear a mouth guard as well. About three months ago I had “six implants” put in by my dentist in Mexico (dental work is far cheaper in Mexico than in the US), and had to have one of my front teeth “capped,” which I broke chewing; after waiting another three or four months they will then be installing the “crowns” (the implants take about six months for the bone structure to adequately solidify); my dentist is going to make “two bridges” utilizing four of the implants (upper left and upper right). Hopefully I can refrain from doing too much more damage to my front teeth before the “crowns” are installed.

- **Lower Back Pain** — Back in the 1960s I was working for Burrough’s Corporation moving equipment and supplies… while attempting to move a 400 pound pallet, I felt something “pop” in my lower back; the long and short of it is, I have experienced lower back pain intermittently ever since; sometimes severe, at other times just mildly aggravating. For years I went to a chiropractor twice a week for treatment; the effects of that treatment were nominal, which was disappointing… learning to sit and stand and sleep in proper position, and doing special exercises proved to be of far greater help.

- **Arthritic Fingers** — Due to a number of injuries playing baseball and football, I have four fingers with arthritic joints that are frequently painful and somewhat frustrating to me… I broke one of them in a game against the Air Force Academy; years ago place-kickers used to be targeted on kickoffs; on one occasion I got blindsided and flipped over and landed awkwardly on my right hand and completely snapped my little finger in half – I had to play with a splint for two months. At a later point I also had to have two cysts on my fingers removed surgically. Those are just some of the joys of having played a few sports — nearly all of your injuries come back to haunt you at some point! 😊

- **Prostate Issues** — This is the typical old age problem for men… difficulty in urinating because of the prostate; so I take meds to counter it like many other men do… the worse
it gets, the more meds you take… ultimately, if the problem advances to a critical state, you have to undergo prostate surgery (at this point I'm about halfway there).

- **Bowel Issues** — This is a condition I've had for about 30 years (it is related to my reflux condition, which is still somewhat problematic)… I take meds for it with every meal to keep regular bowel movements; three or four times a year I have to undergo the enema routine. This particular condition is one you learn to radically discipline yourself to keep it in check.

- **Cholesterol Problem** — Because my “good cholesterol” numbers are extra low, I have to take cholesterol medication to counter it. Your good cholesterol is what makes your immune system effective and helps you fight off diseases. For years I used to get a sore throat every month or two (without fail), and could not overcome it until I discovered an antioxidant while doing some research on my own… I have been taking that antioxidant now for more than fifteen years, and if I get a sore throat at all any more, I only get one now about once a year; if I sense a sore throat coming, I triple the amount of antioxidants I take, and it seems to quiet it within 24 hours. Though I have “low” bad cholesterol numbers (which is good), I have “low” good cholesterol numbers (which is not good)… hence the need to keep my total cholesterol count “extra low” (my total cholesterol numbers at this stage in my life average about 145).

- **Melanoma Surgeries** — The past two years I have had “two melanoma cancers” removed from my upper torso (one was quite significant and required the removal of a few lymph nodes under each armpit, and the removal of about four-square inches of flesh from the middle of my chest); with that said, I now undergo quarterly cat scans at the cancer clinic, and quarterly dermatology examinations (they freeze suspecting skin problems, and take biopsies on those that appear to be more suspicious). Over the past six months I have had several more skin cancers removed from my chest and face and shoulders (both basal cell and squamous cell cancers). My understanding is that they just continue to appear, regardless of the absence of any ongoing sun exposure, because the damage to the skin has already been done (obviously more sun exposure increases the likelihood that skin cancers will develop more rapidly); hence the need to have a dermatologist continually examine my body every three months… though they “burn off” a half dozen potential growths on every visit, biopsies are performed on those growths that look more problematic. Last month I had both a basal cell and a squamous cell cancer removed (they telescopically remove layer after layer until the cancerous tissue is no longer evident). Of all the physical infirmities that I have had to deal with, it is the melanoma cancer that produces the most problematic, because it is an ongoing problem that potentially can be life-threatening; apparently when that particular level of cancer gets into your body, it remains there until the end… though it can remain silent for an extended period of time, it can rear its head at any point; the reality is, the doctors can neither locate it or eradicate it. Though there isn't that much “physical pain” associated with it (other than the surgical aspects of it), the fact that your lifestyle requires a significant change is what has been the most frustrating for me; for instance, I can't go out in the sun any longer, which was always something I liked to do (even in the summer time), be it walking, biking, swimming or gardening — they didn't call me “sunny boy” as a kid for no reason. ☺
The reality is, I seem to do reasonably well with most of these frustrating issues in my life, until my soul becomes discombobulated or the “pain level” gets to me (I'm no fan of pain 😉) — it is then that my faith becomes challenged. Pain can be a debilitating experience, depending on the intensity of it... and can overwhelm the emotional quadrant of your soul; that's just the way we are wired as human beings. When I feel like a physical train-wreck, my patient level takes a nose dive; conversely, when I am relatively pain free, I seem to handle the problems better; that seems to be the norm for all of us. My faith problem is this — God frequently doesn’t take away the pain when I ask Him to (again, that seems to be the norm)... and when the pain intensifies, so does the disconcertion in my soul (which is simply the essence of what it means to be human and inhabit sinful flesh); the reality is, there is as much flesh in me as there is in anyone else (just because I am a believer doesn't mean I have glorified flesh... like you, my flesh is one hundred percent diabolical) — that is the reality of what it means to be a fallen creature. I am always surprised at the way some believers respond to this issue, as if they actually think they are now “inherently good” (or should be) because they are a believer... such thinking is completely contrary to Scripture, yet many in the Christian community like to think that in and of themselves they are actually a pretty good person (hence the pretense that exists in their lives). Relatively speaking you may possess goodness (i.e., in comparison with someone else); but when your so-called goodness is compared with the goodness of God, you are completely lacking. Remember, “good” is a divine quality that no human being possesses (cf. Lk 18:19). Though we are saved fallen creatures, we are fallen creatures nonetheless — for some reason that construct of faith is one that is “poorly understood” by the believing community... in large part because it has not been adequately dealt with in most pulpits. Think about it: “the only problem any of us as believers have is that we sin” — and we all sin often; so we all have a “sin problem” — do you struggle with that construct of faith? By definition, “that which is not of faith is sin” (cf. Rom 14:23), so we not only have a sin problem, we all have a “faith problem.” Just because we are believers doesn't mean we have great faith — we don't — we simply have faith in an incredibly great God! Furthermore, sin is not just “overt evil” (i.e., some evil behavior) as Satan would like us to believe... living outside the will of God in the moment is “sin,” so don't try and wiggle around and deny sin's presence in your life — it is a part of all of our lives! (cf. Rom 7:18; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10; Ecc 7:20). Since the only problem any of us as Christians have is “a sin problem — a faith problem,” you would think that subject would be constantly addressed in the pulpits of our churches; but it is seldom addressed, and when it is addressed, it is almost always dealt with apologetically, as if it really isn't that big a problem in most believers lives, or that it shouldn't be that big a problem (that was the prevailing attitude in the majority of churches in the 20th century here in America). Obviously, this subject requires an honest look at what Scripture really teaches; however, since that is not the primary objective of this particular study, let me encourage you to read a couple of studies I have written that are related to that subject: “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” and “The Game Changer.” You can find them on my website — www.TheTransformedSoul.com Incidentally, I comment more on this issue toward the end of this study. With that said, let's continue our journey on this matter of faith. Having just looked at some of the more troubling physical infirmities that have been an integral part of my life, let's now look at the far more significant physical circumstances with which I have had to live.

Physical Circumstances — Following is a brief description of some of the major experiences of life to which God has subjected me... obviously, they have all impacted my life in various ways, and have “strongly influenced my construct of faith” (that is simply the way God
develops our faith). Like all of us, there are a number of “life experiences” I would never have chosen to go through, but the vast majority of them were simply outside of my control (contrary to what some may conclude). Again, the following doesn’t include all of the challenging circumstances I have gone through in life — I have not mentioned the wrongs or mischief I got involved in my younger years; I was fairly impulsive as a little guy, and often found myself doing things I shouldn’t have done; my thinking is, I was probably more a follower than a leader, so that no doubt contributed to some of my troubles. It’s difficult to know exactly what those issues were that influenced the development of my personality; whatever they were, I tried to be a people pleaser as a kid, but sometimes that led me down the wrong road as well. The reality was, I was far more into playing as a youngster than working or doing homework — I wasn’t the little kid on the block who came home with A’s and B’s; I was just your typical C student. Following is a chronological list of those major experiences that God has used to make me into the person I am today:

• **Raised in a Christian Home** — Both of my parents were well-grounded in the faith, and highly committed to raising their children in a Bible-believing church with a strong Christian influence, and for that I am extremely grateful. Throughout my entire early life “the church we attended” was a significant part of my week; every Sunday we attended Sunday School and the Worship Service… every Sunday evening we attended the Sunday Night Service (that was common in the 50s)… every Wednesday we attended our “age-level ministries,” that often meant dinning at the church, playing games for awhile, and participating in our age-level ministry. So the church was a “vital part” of my upbringing… it was the friends I had at church with whom I most strongly identified. So church was not only an integral part of my life, it was a very significant influence on my life.

• **Influenced by the Greatest Generation** — A few years ago, the famous news commentator Tom Brokaw wrote a book about “The Greatest Generation.” It was a book about the heroes and heroines who came of age during the Great Depression and the Second World War, and who went on to build modern America. Brokaw states, “it was the values of this generation that made them so great; though they were by no means perfect, as a whole they were clearly a cut above the generations that followed.” A friend of mine, Tom Shrader, mentioned these values in a sermon he recently preached. Because of their contextual significance to my life, I thought I’d share them with you —

1. **Take Responsibility for Your Life** — Today people often shirk responsibility; that didn’t define the Greatest Generation; they not only accepted responsibility for something, they accepted the consequences of their decisions.

2. **Live Within Your Means** — Because they grew up in the Great Depression where the bag of oats wasn't guaranteed, they learned to live on less and be grateful for everything they did have. Their motto was this — “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without;” they didn't borrow money, if they couldn't afford it they didn't buy it.

3. **Be Humble** — They didn't hang their medals over the fire place; they stored them in the attic… they didn't brag about their accomplishments; all they had done was simply fulfill their duty. Humility was a divine precept to them.

4. **Live Loyally** — They took their marriage vows seriously; marriage was a commitment; divorce was not an option. They didn't shack up; when a woman got a man's heart, he
proposed, they got hitched and remained so for sixty years. It wasn't a matter of just “giving it a try;” God's call was one of commitment.

5. **Work Hard** – They focused on the objective at hand and didn’t give up on that mission until it was accomplished. They made their beds, cleaned their houses, mowed their lawns and cooked their meals. They labored for a bigger purpose: to give their families the financial security they didn't have growing up. They believed the good things in life needed to be earned by honest toil.

6. **Embrace Challenges** – They believed greatness was the product of challenges; that true true happiness came from overcoming the kinds of challenges that build character and refine the soul — this was a strong biblical teaching for them. Since God was a dynamic reality, church was a significant part of their lives.

7. **Don't Make Life Complicated** – They believed in having a common sense, level-headed approach to life; they didn't diet, they ate right; they didn't exercise, they worked hard; they didn't fuss with fashion trends; and they didn't purchase items to suit their image, they bought things that worked the best.

**Cultural Differences** — My father was born in Sweden in 1898, and migrated to Canada in 1903, where his family homesteaded a piece of farmland about 15 miles east of Calgary in the province of Alberta (it was a small Scandinavian community about 100 miles north of the US border). My father had less than a year of formal education, yet taught himself to read and write three languages; he was an extremely hard worker, as were the majority of people who lived on the farm in the horse & buggy days. My mother was raised on a farm about 100 miles east of my father's farm, and ended up marrying my dad in 1939 — my oldest brother was born in 1941, and I was born in 1943. Due to hardships in the farming industry, we moved to California in 1948, where my father worked in the building industry doing home construction (southern California was booming in construction in those days). With all of the foregoing in mind, essentially I was raised in a highly-disciplined, religious, hard-working, blue-collar family. When we moved to the United States, my parents naturally brought all of their Scandinavian and rural Canadian values with them — that was the culture that existed in our home. But outside of the home there was this new American culture wherein my older brother and I were schooled and lived… so inside the home there was the culture of my parents, and outside the home there was the culture of my friends and the society in which we lived — the two cultures oftentimes were in conflict with each other; time doesn't permit to fully expand upon the differences… though most of them were subtle, some of them were more significant. It might also be interesting to note that we attended a “Swedish Church” in southern California (the “Mission Covenant Church” of Pasadena) — one's nationality was very significant back in the early and mid 1900s; that was a strong identification element for the more than fifty-million Europeans who immigrated to the US. Imagine moving to a foreign country where you didn't speak the language… you would naturally move to an area (if possible) where people of like-heritage lived. Thus the United States back in the early 1900s had numerous communities scattered throughout the country that strongly reflected the heritage of its immigrants — be it Italian, German, French, Polish, Swedish, Greek, Jewish, etc. — they even had newspapers published in their own languages. If you are well-traveled in the United States today, no doubt you have run across a number of these ethnic communities; for instance, the US has seen a large influx of people from
Asia in the last fifty years (thus there are a number of Asian communities scattered around our country). Our family found its heritage in the church that we attended, rather than the community in which we lived (remember, we spoke English, not a foreign language). Incidentally, all of the foregoing was a significant part of “God’s plan for my life,” and was an essential element that God used to mold me into the person He purposed me to be. More on that later.

**Death of My Sister** — When I was eight years old (1952), my five year old sister and I went hiking down in a canyon at the base of the San Gabriel mountains where we lived in Pasadena… my sister drowned that day in a deep pool of water in that canyon… I was responsible for her death. It is difficult to fully understand all of the ramifications of her death, and how it affected my life (actually, it is impossible to understand)… but it impacted my life in significant ways that I will not understand until the life hereafter… it produced a level of pain in my soul that cannot be measured; her death is as vivid in my mind today as it was sixty-five years ago — it is not something that a person can eradicated from his thinking. As a believer, I have often questioned why God would have subjected me to such a horrible experience (it all seemed so cruel & unfair), yet that is simply an integral part of God's work in my life; just as God permitted Joseph to be sold into slavery by his brothers (Gen 50:19-20), so He subjected me to this extremely painful experience. The fact is, there are no answers to many of the painful realities that many of us have had to go through in life; but of this we can be sure, they are not without divine purpose (more on that later). There is not a doubt in my mind that this is the most significant negative circumstance I have had to endure in life. As I have grown older, I have reflected upon it in ways that only an older person can — of all of God's creatures in this world, probably the most beautiful of all is a little five year old girl; I am always moved in the interior of my being when I look at a little girl… they seem to have a level of sweetness and innocence that captures my soul like nothing else. I can't tell you how many times I have wept over the passing of my little sister… sometimes it has simply been uncontrollable.

**My Personality** — As a young grade-school boy, I was just your typical normal kid who liked to play and have fun… *I loved playing baseball, soccer and kick-ball* (I had a strong leg; ultimately I ended up being a “place-kicker” at Arizona State University). As a young kid, I wanted to play Little League Baseball, but my dad wasn't much into the American sports scene… he simply felt, I played enough at school and in the neighborhood without being involved in some structured league, so his answer to me was, “No, you play enough.” Remember, “playing” wasn't an integral part of his upbringing — “working” on the farm was what life was all about, and he brought that cultural value with him to the states. In the classroom I was simply a mediocre student, on the playground I was probably a little better than mediocre (though I was not great). In addition to the foregoing, I was a very “sensitive child” — it is difficult to know exactly how “sensitive” other people really are, because we can't get into their skin, but I was very sensitive to what others would say to me and about me, and how they would treat me… if I wasn't included in something, it hurt me; rejection was very painful to me. The reality is, I've always been “a fairly private person;” I was never into disclosing everything to people — I simply kept some things to myself, where I felt they belonged. Whether this was a learned trait or an inherited trait, or the resultant effect of my flesh, there is no way to really know… though many of the painful experiences of my childhood seemed to have influenced my living in such fashion. Since
I was raised in a “fairly strict environment,” in some way I felt like a little dog on a short leash (too short a leash), and I seemed to continually fight it and rebel against it; life seemed too restrictive to me… I simply wanted more freedom than I was given (no doubt my flesh had already become a significant reality in my life)... my thinking is, the restrictions I was subjected to probably caused me to be more stubborn, mischievous, independent, and rambunctious as a child. I simply wanted my freedom and not be forced to comply with everyone else's wishes… I just wanted to have fun and do my own thing; in hindsight, it seems like the strictness with which I was raised not only exacerbated the problem, but ignited my flesh. Again, it is difficult to know the impact that some restraints have on our lives as children… obviously every child needs to live in a disciplined environment if he is to become a responsible, mature adult; nevertheless, at times restraints can be too excessive. Though my parents may have been a little too restrictive at times, they obviously had my best interests in mind; as a parent myself, I can see where that can be a very fine line, and due to the fact none of us are perfect we all make mistakes at times. I want to be careful to stress the fact that my parents were not cruel — they were simply “old school” tough, as were many parents back in the 40s and 50s; that’s the world we lived in; it was a much more disciplined world than our present world. A funny little episode from my childhood comes to mind — I was probably seven years old at the time, and my friends at school told me about a new word they learned — “bastard” — they said it was a person who was wrongly born, or something to that effect; at any rate I was gullible and bought into it, and we all started calling each other bastards… well not too long after that my older brother was making me mad, so I called him a bastard in front of my father — being as my father was old school, he shoved a bar of borax soap into my mouth (that was an “old school” method of discipline 😊)... even though I told my dad I didn't know it was a cuss word, that carried “no weight” whatsoever in the punishment. Guess what? I learned real quick that bastard was a cuss word (even though in one sense it isn’t). Not sure what all the ramifications of that little scenario were, but they obviously impacted my thinking in some way; whatever that may have been, I am not one who shares all of his foibles with everyone (not many of us are); though I may share some things in a general sense in my teaching to help people see the significance of some spiritual truth… I don’t disclose things about myself for any other reason — I’ve just never believed in committing relational suicide! 😊

So why am I disclosing such personal things to you now? It is simply for your benefit. Whether or not the foregoing makes you think less of me or more of me, “that is no longer important to me” (I’m too old now to care about all of those trivialities or trying to impress someone at this point in my life)... though all of us want others to “like us,” that is no longer one of the chief constraints of my life. Let me present the argument this way — because of “man’s proud nature” he is reluctant to share his foibles with others; which, interestingly enough, is actually antithetical to what Scripture teaches (cf. Jam 5:1);... therefore he lives a “life of pretense” (pretending to be what he is not; which essentially means he’s living a lie). By the way, the word *hypocrite* in Greek literally means “to pretend;” it is used to describe playacting on a stage (cf. Mt 23:13, 14, 15, 23, 25, 27, 29); the reality is, we are not to “play act” in life, because it is not an honest portrayal of who we really are… when we pretend to be what we are not we send an inaccurate message to others. The most damaging kind of “playacting” in the Christian community is that of pretending to be “holier than Thou” — in a word, it is called “false piety.” Since all believers struggle with their humanness, the playacting of others often causes many believers to “grossly over-estimate the spirituality
of others” and “harshly judge themselves for their lack of spirituality;” i.e., they misinterpret their own spirituality because the interior of their own being does not match with what they hear and see in others. The truth is, most believers “talk the talk” but fail to “walk the walk” — they simply can’t stand for others to think lowly of them. We should all be able to sympathize with that truth, because “that is the Christian world in which most believers live.” Though the foregoing argument might be a difficult one to fully grasp, that is the reality. Beloved, life is not about us and how impressed other people might be with us, it is about God and truthfulness — and until that is the chief construct of your faith, you will forever remain enslaved to yourself and your own performance (get off the stage!). Life’s spiritual realities are far too significant to let the dark thinking of our unredeemed minds dominate the discourse in our soul; that may have been the societal culture that we lived in when we were younger, but it must not be the one we live in today. By the way, the reason I compiled this particular study is that I wanted to convey an accurate portrayal of what it means to grow in faith and be a man or woman of faith; and that means identifying things as they really are — calling an ace an ace, and a spade a spade.

• Legalistic Understanding — From my youth, my understanding of Christianity essentially was one of “being good;” that God didn’t love bad little boys (that is a tragic construct for those people/children who believe such nonsense, because that’s a lie) — you can see where that leads — legalism and perfectionism (hopeless constructs of faith). As a child, I always wondered why I sinned… no matter how much I prayed and asked God to take it away, He never took it away… so “behavior” (sadly) was the chief construct of my faith (which is a losing proposition, because you are going to continue sinning no matter what!). Whether or not “legalism” was truly the emphasis of what I was taught, that was certainly my practical understanding of what being a Christian meant; and try though as I may, I never came close to “measuring up to its impeccable standards;” as such, I started to rebel against the system; apparently the inextricable truths I was led to believe were just too overwhelming for me (things just didn’t add up), so I simply left the church and embraced a lifestyle that was more acceptable to me and made more sense; essentially I just wanted “my freedom” and be released from the bondage I felt (not sure I fully understand the rationale behind it all; but the internal pressure led me to “seek my own way in life”). Now, no longer being closely connected to a church, I simply spent my time in the unbelieving world… it was that lifestyle that became the norm for me; basically I just hung out with your typical non-believers — not a bunch of thugs; just normal, fun-loving guys. One of my friends and I took a trip to New Mexico to get a job in the cattle industry (another friend recommended it to us)... on that trip we got into a little bit of trouble and actually served some time in jail… after which we headed back home (our little dream world didn’t work they way we hoped it would). When we arrived back in California, I met a cousin of a friend of mine… she got pregnant and we got married (that was in 1964); within a few months she took off and moved to Texas to live with her parents (apparently at her mother's insistence). The reality is, I didn’t see her again for ten years… which meant I never saw my little daughter until she was ten years old (1974). Being as my ex-wife’s mother wasn’t too fond of me, she told me to “stay out of their lives;” since no other reasonable option seemed possible to me at that time, my life simply went in another direction. By the way, there was a funny little song back in those days that climbed to the top of the charts; it was titled “Mother in Law!” — it went like this, “Worse person I know, mother in law!” Though that was kind of ironic, my ex-wife’s mother really wasn’t a bad person… she simply put her foot into something she
shouldn't have. Within a few months of our separation I started working at Burrough's Corp. in their manufacturing plant in Pasadena, and two years later I was drafted into the Army (1966). Interestingly enough, when I first met my daughter at the age of ten, I was a youth pastor at Grace Community Church in Tempe (1974), and my ex-wife's mother was present, and she actually apologized to me for ruining my marriage to her daughter (so she obviously had a hand in it). My message to young people when getting married is this: marriage isn't the simple little thing it's made out to be… you're going to go through a number of ups and downs in your marriage, so it is important that you have a “strong support system” from both of your families… if one of your families is highly antagonistic to your relationship, there's a good chance it could contribute to the destruction of your marriage at some point; so you each need to develop a good relationship with each other's parents… your families and friends need to be very supportive of you. The desolution of my marriage was another very difficult life experience that God used to ultimately build my character and faith. There's no way to fully understand the significance of its impact upon my life, because such experiences not only affect you emotionally (it was extremely painful for me), but relationally, psychologically and spiritually as well.

- **Drafted into the Army** — In January 1966, at the height of the Vietnam War, I was drafted into the Army. During infantry training I suffered a serious leg injury in a fall while on a reconnaissance mission on a mountain, and was hospitalized for 22 days; I ended up on crutches for about three months, which ultimately kept me out of the war in Vietnam… so I ended up serving in a supplies battalion at Fort Ord (about 100 miles south of San Francisco on the California coast) where I had undergone infantry training. Though I am not exactly sure how everything happened in the months that followed, every time I would inquire as to “*when I would be coming down on orders,*” I was simply told, “just keep doing your job” (my thinking was they just wanted to keep me in their service and somehow made arrangements to keep me there). One thing the Army teaches you is this — when they tell you to not ask questions, you don’t ask questions. There's an old Army saying that goes like this: “*Yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die*” — for those of you who have served in the military, that little saying makes a lot of sense; you have one function and that is to do the job you have been ordered to do… too many lives are at stake to argue and play games, so when they say “*Jump!*” you simply respond “*How high?*” At any rate, after my second inquiry, I stopped inquiring, and just continued to serve out my time at Fort Ord (1966-1968)… and after that I was honorably discharged.

- **Attended College** — After my stint in the Army, I attended Pasadena City College where I got an Associate in Arts degree in Business Administration; I also played football there — my second year resulted in an undefeated season (we ended up being ranked number one in the state of California), and I was offered scholarships to play at a number of schools — I chose to play at Arizona State University because they had a history of scoring a lot of points; we only lost one game during my two years at ASU, so during my last three years of college football, the teams I played on only lost a total of one game; as such I played on two undefeated teams (which is very rare), and both of the teams I played on at ASU ended up being ranked Number 6 in the nation. Of all the players I played with at Arizona State, 28 of them ended playing in the NFL at some point; so had a pretty good group of players. During my stint at ASU, the Lord saw fit to give me my time in the spotlight (“*my fifteen minutes of fame*”); though my life had been full of a lot of negatives up until this point,
the Lord also saw fit to put a few big positives on my plate as well. I was fortunate to play on teams that scored a lot of points, which in my case permitted me to hold an NCAA record for a few years for averaging the most points scored per game throughout a career. By the way, that and one buck will get you a coke at McDonald's! ☺ The reality is, everything God does in your life serves a very significant purpose — it is only until years later that you begin to see the value of them. It was my playing football at ASU that God used to get me into ministry — Yes, God's ways are strange; I'll expand on that shortly. While attending ASU I got two Bachelor Degrees: a BS in Finance, and a BA in Business Education; since the NCAA did not permit you to be on scholarship and play a sport as a graduate student back years ago, Coach Kush asked me to work on a second degree so that I could play my senior year, so I got a “Secondary Education Teaching Credential in Business Education;” thus making me credentialed to teach in secondary schools here in the state of Arizona. Incidentally, the NCAA now permits graduate students to play sports and be on scholarship. Following graduation from ASU I started working on my MBA (Master Business Administration)… and it was during this time that God did a spiritual work in my heart, and awakened me to spiritual realities I had never heard before.

• **Spiritual Awakening** — At this stage of my life, “I thought I should feel pretty good about myself” — after all, I had done reasonably well not only in the classroom, but also in football; but in spite of what I had accomplished, I didn’t feel good… I felt empty and dissatisfied with life. Apparently God was knocking on the door of my heart, so I thought I’d try this thing called prayer again, but I didn't know exactly what to even ask for… so I simply said, “God, I don’t know why I feel so lousy about life, but I do… if you really exist I want You to become real in my life… I don’t care what it costs me… I just don't want to go on living like this… if You will become real to me I will give you my life (whatever that means).” I'm not sure why I said those things at that point, because I had no idea that God might actually use my life in some kind of ministry; obviously I wasn't well-versed in Christianity, and what I had heard years ago was now a distant memory in my mind. The long and short of it is… I had no idea as to where that prayer might lead… but within a few months, the coach of the Phoenix Roadrunners Hockey Team (the only professional sports team in AZ back in 1972) shared his testimony at a church in Tempe (close to ASU) that I had attended a couple of times (it is actually a miracle that I even went to church that night, because that is not something I did), and for the first time in my life I heard someone articulate spiritual realities in a way I had never heard them before… that the Christian life was a “journey,” not a “destination” (like I had thought)… that one grew in righteousness and faith and in his relationship with Christ, as well as the understanding of the truth, and that this process of “growing in Christ” was what the Christian life was all about. I had never heard it that way before… for some reason I thought the process was more instantaneous than that… that it was a matter of arriving at a destination, rather than going on a journey of faith… that construct of faith radically differed from the one I had known as a youngster.

• **Ministry Involvement** — Immediately after committing my life to Christ I read John Stott's best-seller, “Basic Christianity;” it seemed to answer every question I had in the docket. I began growing in my faith by leaps and bounds, and became obsessed with knowing the truth… and within a few months I became the “Recreation Director” at Grace Community Church in Tempe. I loved the work and my involvement with the people… ultimately, we ended up having dozens of basketball teams in our leagues, including a number of the most
prominent teams in the valley (the national Salvation Army Team, the national Athletes in Action Team, and Arizona State's Freshmen Team, as well as a number of the best High School Teams in the valley. We also ran men's & women's Volleyball Leagues & Softball Leagues—like I said earlier, “I loved sports.” 😊 About four or five months later, the Senior Pastor (Guy Davidson) took me to lunch and asked me to consider becoming his “Junior High Pastor.” Wow, that was a ministry I had never even thought of… but after praying about it, the Lord gave me an incredible peace that that is what He wanted me to do, so just a few days later I was working with Junior Highers! (it was like an instantaneous miracle!).

After a couple of years doing youth ministry, I felt the need for formal training in ministry and a seminary education; it was a very strong conviction that God had placed in my heart; I needed to be well-grounded in the Word if I was going to be an effective servant of His… so off to seminary I went… and Grace flipped the entire bill! (another miracle!). Though many of my younger years were very painful years… these were now the miracle years of my life. Little did I know, the extraordinarily challenging years were still ahead of me.

- **Seminary & Ministry** — For three and a half years (1974-1978) I attended Talbot Graduate School of Theology in southern California, while serving as youth pastor for two age groups in one of the local churches. These were dynamic years with regard to my construct of faith (i.e., what I truly believed) and its development. Upon graduating, I returned to Grace Community Church in Arizona (remember, they had graciously sponsored me all the way thru seminary), and started a “College Ministry” there; ultimately that ministry grew to about 400 college students, and I was able to also develop a church-wide Bible institute on our campus, called “Aletheia Bible Institute” (aletheia means “truth” in Greek); we averaged about 150-200 students for each six-week session (we held four or five such sessions a year, and each session we offered four-to-six courses). Well after five years of working predominantly with College Students, I started working with young Single Adults, and ultimately headed up all the Adult Ministry Programs at Grace. After Guy Davidson resigned as Senior Pastor to become the Director of World Medical Missions with Franklin Graham, I served as the Executive Pastor and assisted the board in giving leadership to the church, and was instrumental in providing pulpit supply by various Christian leaders from around the country. Aside from all the contributions the various pastors and co-workers made to my faith, following are those individuals whom God used in significant ways to influence the development of my faith—essentially they are the professors and Christian leaders God placed in my life at various junctures, and with whom I had the opportunity to associate and serve:

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<tr>
<th>Dr. John R. W. Stott</th>
<th>Dr. Charles Feinberg</th>
<th>Dr. James Rosscup</th>
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<tr>
<td>Dr. Guy Davidson</td>
<td>Dr. Mark Bailey</td>
<td>Dr. Josh McDowell</td>
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<td>Rev. Arvid Carlson</td>
<td>Dr. Dan Baumann</td>
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<td>Dr. Jerry Bridges</td>
<td>Dr. J. Vernon McGee</td>
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After we hired a new Senior Pastor at Grace, I felt called to pastor a church in Vancouver, Canada; after three years up there, I rejoined Guy Davidson in a church plant in the Bay Area of California, that was having a difficult time getting off the ground. After four years there, I moved to Ohio to work with a former colleague of mine in Seminary (that particular church at the time was struggling due to an extra-marital affair by a key member of
its staff). Following my time there, my wife and I relocated back to Arizona where we served together for a couple of years in another church that was struggling. After that ministry I began teaching courses on “World Religions, Christian Studies, & Leadership in Business and Ministry” at Grand Canyon University and two colleges in the Maricopa Community College District. It was during this time that I did some graduate studies on non-western religions at Arizona State University (thus making me credentialed to teach courses in World Religions in all of the state colleges of Arizona)… and completed my doctorate at Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon… and authored a textbook on Christianity for secular college students titled, “Christianity: The Pursuit of Divine Truth.”

• Spiritual Darkness – Being an ardent student of Scripture, I am often confronted with “spiritual realities” that need clarification in my mind, and more often than not, the precursor for such clarification is some challenging physical issue with which I was struggling. For me that moment climaxed in a significant way when my wife and I basically lost all of the equity we had acquired after selling our house in Ohio — after selling our house and talking with a few friends in the church about a couple of temporary investment options, we decided to invest the money through an international investor in the church who was giving others in the church a very significant return on their money… so together with some of our friends, we joined them. Incidentally, a few of our friends actually made a trip to Toronto, Canada, to check out the integrity of the individual who was basically running everything to make sure this was a wise investment. Ultimately, we were all “duped,” and had fallen prey to a ponzie scheme that had grown to more than $300,000,000. All told, Barb's and my loss amounted to $55,000… several of our friends lost significantly more than that… we all mourned our losses together, but for those of us who didn't have particularly deep pockets to begin with, the loss was a little extra painful. By the way, the FBI ultimately got involved because of the size of the scheme… they discovered it was an international operation headquartered out of Toronto, Canada. Little did we know at the time, this was only the beginning of a financial night-mare that was right around the corner… after weathering the initial storm, a few years later we lost our home to foreclosure, both of our businesses, our automobiles, and our 401K life savings — we even had to sell a number of our belongings to help settle some of our debts; so we had pretty much lost everything we owned. Now, in addition to our financial losses, there was the troubling betrayal of a friend (or so I thought) — it was difficult to believe that a fellow brother in the Lord would do such a thing (by definition, betrayal is treachery unwarranted); ultimately his betrayal cost me substantially in several ways: positionally, relationally & financially. Needless to say, I had to work through the whole process of forgiving him without ever receiving an apology (that can be very challenging depending on the magnitude of the betrayal)... obviously I couldn't help but reflect upon the betrayal our Lord suffered — in my case, Satan was ever at the door of my soul hoping that my flesh would rule the day and insist on taking a measure of revenge. I had never known betrayal at a significant level, so here I was, having to fully accept and resolve this injustice through the cross… which is simply what it means to be a believer (Mt 6:12-15). The principle idea behind the New Testament Greek word forgive is that of “sending it away;” we can't continue to keep the wrong done to us on the front-burner of our life, we have to let it go (send it away) and not keep revisiting it over & over again, no matter how strongly we feel justified in doing so. To summarize, all of these particular issues I was being subjected to produced significant disconcertion in my soul and made for a very difficult time in my life… we had attempted to navigate through
the downturn in our economy by investing our 401k in a business we thought would help keep some of Barb’s interior design employees gainfully employed, as well as keep our heads above water financially until the economy rebounded… but such was not to be the case — in the final analysis, we lost everything we owned, and when you are near the end of your income-earning years, that can be rather disconcerting. To add a little fuel to the fire: when you have been reasonably faithful and generous in your stewardship over the years, such losses are all the more puzzling; if we had been selfish with our money and unfaithful in our giving, perhaps it would have been more understandable (at least, that’s the deduction you make). The incredible irony in all of this was the fact that my betrayer had been very unfaithful in his stewardship over the years, so sometimes it is simply not possible to do the math on spiritual issues. Naturally, my wife and I sought the Lord’s help throughout this entire process… but such help was not forthcoming (that in itself presented its own set of problems)… we did everything we could to weather the storm, but it just kept rolling over us, and the worse things got the more quiet and more distant God seemingly became; theologians call it “the dark night of the soul” or “darkness in the soul” — the reality is, God simply remains silent in your deepest hour of need (cf. Psalm 10:1; 13:1; 22:1; 44:24; 55:1-8; 89:46).

REGARDING SPIRITUAL DARKNESS

Many of God’s choicest saints in Scripture experienced “significant darkness in the soul,” as have scores of godly men throughout the history of the church. Needless to say, darkness in the soul is very perplexing to the mind, because we expect God to respond in a tangible way to us when the seas roar in our lives. Let me illustrate what this darkness in the soul looks like — the psalmist David cried out to the Lord: “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 says, “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” (cf. Ps 77:9-10; 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, the psalmist 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” (cf. Ps 34:4, 7, 17-19). He also 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” (cf. Ps 40:1-3). And then there are other incredible words of David: “Cast your burden upon the Lord, and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken” (Ps 55:22). Perhaps some of the most profound words in all of Scripture are these: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). Four times the psalmist emphatically states in Psalm 107 — “They cried out to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses” (cf. Ps 107:6, 13, 19, 28). The inevitable conclusion to both of these avenues of
thought is that “God ultimately rescues us from our troubles;” the idea being this: 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 simply never go away, no matter how much we petition the throne (consider the man named “Job”). Regarding this issue of darkness, David says: “Thou dost light my lamp… and illumine my darkness” (Ps 18:28; 2 Sam 22:29; Ps 27:1). The 19th century preacher from Sussex, England, Edward Mote, wrote more than one hundred hymns throughout his life including the renowned hymn, “The Solid Rock;” writes Mote: “My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness; I dare not trust the sweetest frame, but wholly lean on Jesus’ name…. When darkness veils His lovely face, I rest on His unchanging grace; in every high and stormy gale my anchor holds within the veil.” The reality is, there will be moments and seasons of darkness in your life… it is during these times when you will desperately seek an encouraging word from the Lord, though it may not be forthcoming as quickly as you want it to … rest assured, beloved, He will bring that word to your soul after He has accomplished His purposes through the darkness.

Ultimately, this experience of “darkness in the soul” is the most trying thing one can go through spiritually, because it tests our faith to the limit, and yields no tangible result… the reality is, we are simply left with “our construct of faith” (i.e., our beliefs) and nothing else. It is one thing to live with some “evidence” of God’s presence in your life (in particular, joy and peace in the Lord, and positive circumstances); it is quite another to live with no evidence whatsoever – no peace, no joy, nothing but a seemingly endless, ongoing pain in the soul that will not go away no matter how much you may plead with the Lord to remove it. This was not a spiritual reality I had studied in seminary: I don’t recall that it was ever even mentioned as a possibility, let alone discussed at length… that was simply Christianity in 20th century America — it majored on the positives, and seldom if ever addressed the negatives. Obviously, I had read the book of Job and studied his life, as well as the lives of Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah and Jonah — each of whom had asked God to “take their life” (you might want to reflect upon that for a minute) — but for some reason I concluded that was probably only the experience of the great saints of Scripture (and “I was no great saint”); surely God didn’t call any of us in this modern age to be a “Job” — why would He need another Job? Ironically, years ago when I would find myself in the midst of some painful trial, I would cry out to the Lord, “Please don’t make me another Job!” (as if the pain I was going through even remotely resembled that of Job’s — that response is actually a little funny now as I reflect back upon it)… but here I am now years later experiencing the very thing I had asked God to not let me experience; apparently God has a sense of humor. ☺ The reality is, “some of us still experience intense difficulties and darkness in the soul;” sometimes God just lets us wallow in the darkness of our unredeemed humanness; i.e., he let’s us live life for a period of time (seemingly in His absence) under the dominion of our flesh — it is here where we question everything with regard to our faith, including God’s promises. How else would we ever come to know the fullness of our diabolical nature? (such was Paul’s experience; cf. Rom 7:14-25). It wasn’t until I studied the lives of a number of Puritans and read many of their writings, that I came to an understanding of “the darkness within” that sometimes characterizes the life of a believer — here was a group of men who were open, transparent and honest about the diabolical nature of their flesh, confirming what the apostle Paul said: “In my flesh dwells no good thing” (Rom 7:18). Though I had read those words at various junctures on my spiritual journey, the reality of them was somewhat perplexing to me… obviously the fullness of them was not a significant construct of my faith… for some reason, I always felt there must at least be “a measure of good in me now that I’m a believer;” the reality
was, God needed to make it very clear that “that there was not one ounce of good in me.” It was only when I was totally emptied of “any sense of self-virtue” that my eyes were soberly opened to that fact. I cover this issue in detail in the two studies I mentioned earlier: “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” & “The Game Changer.” Contrary to what some believers may think, this is not some strange, heretical interpretation of what Scripture teaches; it is the unadulterated truth — sadly, it is a truth that was basically ignored or minimized here in the US during the 20th century; hence, believers essentially “lived their lives pretending to be what they were not — good;” i.e., “they lived a life of pretense.” Incidentally, that is the modus operandi of the entire human family… the flesh is an integral part of the very fabric of every human being (unbelievers and believers alike).

The only reason I can think that there was such silence on this issue in the Christian world in the 20th century, other than sheer ignorance, is that the proud nature of our flesh simply refuses to own up to “the diabolical nature of our inward condition” (because it is so self-condemning). It is here in particular where Arminian theology does such a disservice to the believing community. How is that? because it focuses so much on the virtue of the individual, as if he actually has some; the truth of the matter is, none of us have any (not even the apostle Paul). Essentially Arminian theology logically concludes: “If man is called to be perfect (Mt 5:48), then perfection must be possible, because God wouldn’t ask anything of us that is not possible.” Sounds like a good argument, but it not only misinterprets the meaning of the word “perfect” (teleios), it ignores the sum total of what Scripture teaches on the subject of perfection; over and over again the Bible repeatedly tells us that perfection is not possible because we inhabit sinful flesh. The word teleios literally means “having reached its end or completeness;” thus Jesus’ teaching in Matt 5 suggests completeness or maturity as the sons of God — as Christians we are to emulate God in this world and love like He does (Mt 5:44)… it is the “context” of what Jesus is saying (“loving our enemies”) that gives understanding to this injunction; in short, it is to this end that we have been redeemed: “loving others.” As John Stott states in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, “Our Christian calling is to imitate, not the world, but the Father.” That is our calling… that is to be our emphasis… that is to be our goal in life (cf. Phil 3:12-14)— to imply that Jesus is saying “you can be perfect” is to completely ignore what He is actually saying… the issue here is not about attaining sinless perfection; it is about the importance of imitating the Father in this life, as opposed to the world. Though none of us will imitate Him perfectly in this life, because all of our efforts to love are naturally contaminated to some degree by our unredeemed humanness (our flesh), it is to that end that we are to strive. It should be very obvious to every believer that there is no such thing as an absolutely perfect love emanating from any fallen human being — to actually think it is possible, is to grossly overestimate one’s capacity to love like God does, and seriously underestimate the incredible nature of God’s love. The issue is this, when we humble ourselves before God, He is able to miraculously do through us what is humanly impossible for us to do in and of ourselves (cf. Jn 15:5). Though that construct is a difficult one for us as believers to “fully understand,” that is the reality; God actually accepts and honors our imperfect faith; “He knows our frame and is mindful that we are but dust” (cf. Ps 103:14). The operative word in the foregoing is “humility” — the divine work that is being done through us is of God (not us). The problem with so many believers is that they are inclined to build their theology on just a few verses and take them out of context; you can’t build a theology on just a few verses, because our fallen human minds can easily misinterpret them… as believers we are to build our theology on the totality of what Scripture teaches.
Keeping the foregoing in mind, Arminian theology is more “man-centered” than it is “God-centered.” The resultant effect of living by such a theological construct is that highly disciplined adherence to Arminian thinking results in a fairly significant degree of “rigid piety.” Naturally, if one thinks his attempts at holiness lie within his own efforts, he will grow in some measure toward a degree of “self piety.” Down through the ages pietism has repeatedly surfaced in the Christian community—it tends to give more emphasis to the practicalities of the Christian life than the formal structures of theology; as such it gives an inordinate emphasis to perfectionism and one’s performance. The problem is, without a right theology the behavioral emphasis distorts the greater reality, which is the centrality of Christ in the believer’s life. Historically, we have seen a strong emphasis on pietism in monastic orders (be it, priests, monks, nuns, friars or abbots), as well as other segments of the Christian community (Nikolas von Zinzendorf, the Moravians, John Wesley, Brethren, Mennonites, Dutch Reformed, and even the Swedish Covenant Church—the denomination in which I was raised). That’s why it is critical that the believer have a “Scriptural based theology,” and not one that is derived at by human logic. Obviously, Scripture is full of teachings that are not only difficult to understand, but in some measure difficult to accept… but that does not give us the right to reinterpret those teachings so that “they are more reasonable to us and more acceptable to our human thinking.” Sadly, it is just such “constructs of faith” that dominates so much of the Christian world today (in particular, the entire liberal segment of Christendom, and much of Roman Catholicism); it has even impacted significant aspects of the conservative element as well. When we are confronted by a “perplexing teaching” in Scripture, there are two ways that we can respond: we can say, “I don’t believe that!” or we can say, “How can that be?” The first response reveals a complete lack of faith; the second response contains at least a small measure of faith: “as such, he is open to the truth;” and it is just such humility of thought that God asks of us… without a humble openness to the truth, “we are closing the door on it” and actually “making ourselves the final authority of what is true and what is not true.” Beloved, that is a very dangerous construct of faith; furthermore, it is antithetical to the teaching of Scripture. Does holding an Arminian theology necessarily disqualify a person from being a genuine child of God? No, but it makes the practical foundations of his faith less consistent with the truth; and only truth sets us free (cf. Jn 8:31-32). Discovering the reality of this truth climaxed in my writing the book, “Soul Transformation” (it deals with the “sanctification experience” of the believer; i.e., what the believer actually experiences in life; not just forensically, but practically). It is a collection of writings on this issue by a number prominent writers in the Christian world over the past 300 years. Obviously when any perceived reality conflicts with the teaching of Scripture, you’ve got homework to do; conversely, “when the painful physical realities of life conflict with spiritual truths,” you’ve got homework to do, and that is precisely where the Lord places us at times. For me it meant “completely rethinking my construct of faith,” and only after doing so did the Lord minister a greater degree of peace and divine truth to my soul, “thus setting me free to experience a less ‘self-centered’ spiritual orientation in life” (cf. Jn 8:31-32); obviously none of us ever reach the pinnacle of spirituality (perfect Christ-likeness) in this life, but it is to that end we are to strive.

Essentially the way God works in our lives is this: “physical realities strongly influence the development of our construct of faith.” How so? They get our undivided attention like nothing else—the pain they produce in our lives humbly drives us to our knees… to Christ… and to His Word; and therein is when God most effectively ministers to our soul. Before I continue on, let me introduce you to two strange animals that have played a roll in the development of my faith—I share them with you metaphorically. In my early years of ministry, everything seemed to go
as good as one could expect… using a baseball metaphor, “I seemed to get one base hit after another!” Joy! But after a few years of everything going my way, I began to experience some negative issues (as everyone does), and they were a little spiritually perplexing to me. It seemed like I was doing fairly well at handling the difficulties that were placed on my back… but before long “another heavy load would be placed on my back” — this continued to happen time after time; almost non-stop… in that sense I began to feel like a “mule” — mules are meant to carry heavy loads that human beings find too difficult to carry; well, that kind of defined me… I felt like a mule who was constantly getting more weight placed on his back, to the point where it seemed unreasonable… it seemed as though the weight simply got heavier and heavier until I could no longer stay on my feet, so I would fall; ultimately, I would become upset and would question God as to why He was putting so such pressure on me — “what had I done that caused Him to act in such fashion?” In my mind I felt I was doing everything I could to endure all I was going through that I might come out victorious (that was a “significant construct of faith” back in 70s & 80s — scores of books were written on “The Victorious Christian Life!” — that’s what it meant to be a believer)... yet try though as I may to succeed, it became quite apparent that God didn’t operate that way; instead He would simply put more weight on my back until I could no longer stand. It was as though my efforts never seemed to satisfy Him, because no matter how hard I strived to stand victoriously, more weight (problems, trials) would be placed on my back. Though I would pray and seek God’s help and strength, this pattern just continued over and over again. It seemed like I was always asking God why He was doing what He was doing — “Lord, I gave You my life, why are You treating me this way?” The long and short of it was, I felt like a mule that was being abused. It became such a common occurrence in my life, I knew it was only a matter of time until the next problem arrived, and that was very perplexing to me; such was foreign to my thinking early on in ministry. So here I was, a young buck, who had been weaned on all the “positives” in the Christian life… I didn’t see God as one who put heavy burdens on our backs; I actually saw Him as one who removed those burdens. That picture pretty much portrays what my faith looked like in my earlier years of ministry — apparently I had a faith that simply tried to focus on the positives; I didn’t see the Christian life as consisting of so many negatives — my understanding at that point was this: when negatives came, it was then that you were supposed to witness God’s miraculous deliverance. Obviously, I did not have a mature faith… in hindsight it was actually a very immature faith. Though I would cry out to the Lord for answers, it seemed like I seldom got any… so I just continued on down the road hoping that the clouds would ultimately disappear and that the sun would shine again. I also found it strange that after getting angry or disappointed when the weight of life became far too heavy for me, the Lord would let up and give me a break, and I didn’t quite know what to make of that? With the foregoing in mind, “essentially it was the negatives in my life that were so difficult and perplexing to me.” The disconcertion I experienced in my soul regarding this issue actually caused me to develop a correlation between “negatives” and “unkindness;” as such, I began to wrestle with the idea that my life never seemed to please God enough to get Him to respond with “kindness” and “positives.” Being as I was a “grace man,” and not a “works man,” I did everything I could to argue against that construct; but the “contrary evidence” weighed very heavily upon my heart. Keeping that in mind, I find it very interesting at how strongly “physical realities” influence our constructs of faith.

**Though the foregoing may not have been your experience…** hopefully it makes a little bit of sense to you; but if it doesn’t at this point, it should later on. This was not only my experience, but the experience of many believers down through the ages and many in Scripture. Incidentally,
years later, another animal became a part of my spiritual journey; strangely, it did not define me, but actually defined God. I began to see God as a “porcupine,” because every time I would seemingly (that’s obviously an exaggeration) draw near to Him He would hurt me, and that was equally troubling, thus causing me to cry out to Him, “Lord, why are you hurting me since I am trying to draw close to You?” “Why doesn’t my drawing close to You please You, and cause You to embrace me and encourage me, rather than hurt me?” Obviously, there was a significant deficiency in my faith that I did not yet fully understand… no doubt in large part because of my apparent insistence on defining spiritual truth by what I was experiencing in life. Much of the material that follows in this study will help answer many of the deficiencies of my faith, and the journey God ordained for me to travel. As you continue to read about my journey of faith, keep in mind “faith must be grounded in the truth of God’s Word for it to be fully efficacious.” Though that is a true construct (without question), God in His mercy does honor an imperfect faith (that is not a contradiction); He is mindful that we are extremely deficient creatures (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15). Though God does not honor the expressed faith of someone who knowingly is violating the truth (cf. Rom 14:22-23; Jam 4:17) — God doesn’t play games — He does honor the faith of those who exercise humility and with sincerity of heart and seek to do His will… so in that sense, God does not want us to constantly question the integrity of everything we do and think, and become a mental fruitcake (Rom 14:1-6, 14, 22-23); He simply wants us to live life with humility and sincerity of heart, yet be continually growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ (cf. 2 Pet 3:18). Above everything, the believer needs to let God’s peace reign in his soul, and trust the Lord to direct his path. In the following pages, you will be confronting a number of “constructs” that have not only played a major roll in the development of my faith, but in the development of many saints down through the ages.

MAKING LIFE WORK

Another critical reality for the believer is this — “We all strive to make life work!” This particular didactic is one with which most of us really struggle… striving to make life work is simply what it means to be human. Each of us take steps to keep our little wagon moving in a positive direction, and keep it from tipping over and making our lives miserable — be it working hard, diligently tending to the tasks at hand, paying our bills on time, keeping gas in our cars, cutting the grass, watering plants, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, taking baths, emptying the trash, treating people nicely, and numerous other things… none of us purposefully do things to make our lives more difficult and more unpleasant. Yet no matter how hard we try to make life work on this planet, “we frequently discover that many things don’t work the way we want them to work;” why is that? One could rightly deduce that everything in this world is in a state of deterioration (that is simply the law of entropy). Let’s look at that concept: no matter what actions we might take to make life work, our efforts usually only temporarily improve the conditions of our life… in a short period of time, it becomes painfully evident to us that additional action must be taken. For example, if a cleaning crew were to come into your home and get everything impeccably clean & orderly, in a short period of time you would discover the need to do it all over again… if you were to have your landscaper completely re-do your property (front & back), in just a few short months you would discover the need to get it all back up to snuff again… if you were to renovate your house, in just a few short years you would discover the need to re-do some of it again. The reality is, everything is in a constant “state of decline”
in this world: no matter how much effort we put into something, the residual effect will only last for a very short period of time (disturbingly so at times). It makes no difference what the project is—if you clean something, in a very short period of time you will have to clean it all over again. With that in mind, essentially life is nothing but a bunch of “temporary actions.”

My wife and I renovated a little patio home we bought a few years ago; after getting it all done (inside and out), it really looked great! Since Barb is a “designer” by trade, you can take that assessment to the bank! This past week I was reminded again at how much dust there was in the most inconspicuous places, and the need to get down on my hands & knees to hard wash significant portions of our travertine flooring—it made me think about the renovation we had undergone; as wonderful as it was up front, essentially it was just a temporary fixer-upper that we needed to attend to once again. With regard to the physical world in which we live, there is nothing we can do in life to actually effectuate a “positive permanent change;” though we can permanently destroy things, we cannot permanently make something grand & glorious (you’ll notice, nothing exists in our world today in “wonderful condition” that was made thousands of years ago, because everything disintegrates over time; that is simply the second law of thermodynamics). If you were to build the most beautiful castle ever built and put a fence around it so that no one could do anything to it… within 5,000 years it would completely disintegrate, and within 10,000 years return to dust. The truth is, the only things we can do in life that have a permanent, lasting impact, are those things that are done in Jesus’ name—everything done in His name has an eternal, lasting value; everything else in this world fades away (cf. Is 40:6-8; Jn 6:27; 1 Cor 3:12-15; Jam 1:10-11; 1 Pet 1:4; 2 Pet 3:10; 1 Jn 2:17; Rev 21:1). Note “the everythings!” So to invest your life in that which is going to fade away is “complete folly.” Lord willing, you are not living the life of a fool.

With that in mind, essentially all we as human beings do is bang away at life in an attempt to simply keep our little boat afloat… mindful of the fact that we don’t have the ability to effectuate permanent change. It is important to understand that God is the one who established this “economy” under which we live… and try though as we may to ultimately control things from our end, we are only permitted to do so in a very limited fashion. Thus we can either become disillusioned with life because we can’t make it work the way we really want it to work, or we can attempt to align our lives with the ways of God (cf. Is 55:8-9) and the work He is doing in our lives (cf. Phil 2:13); which means making our will subordinate to His will (cf. Matt 6:10; 26:39). The reality is, God is constantly tearing down all of the structures of our lives; i.e., all those things that we have a tendency to significantly depend upon, both in the exterior and interior of our world. So in that sense, God is asking us not to hang on so tightly to those human dynamics that generally govern our lives. Perhaps some of the foregoing sounds a little strange to those of you who are still in the energetic years of life… it is only after doing things “thousands of times” in life, that this truth clearly evidences itself to us; ask someone with a number of years under their belt. The reality is, there are times when we get exasperated with life, because we can’t make life work the way we want it to— it is here that we must come to understand that our plan (as righteous as it may be in our eyes) oftentimes does not coincide with God’s plan; in spite of the fact that there may be nothing wrong with what we’re doing, God oftentimes lets our little applecart tip over on us. He reminds us of this fact at every level of life by simply not letting things work the way we want them to work, and that can be frustrating and troubling to us (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; Ps 37:23; Jer 10:23; Jam 4:13-17), and can actually cause us to become “angry with God”— when we really want something in the worse way, being denied that something
can ignite the core of our being (i.e., our flesh). It's like the little kid who is told "No!" by his parents regarding something he really wants — he just starts kicking and screaming! Beloved, that's simply the presence of "the flesh" demanding its way. It is when we hang on to things too tightly (whatever those things may be) that God makes it evident to us… He might cause something to fall apart on us, or simply not let things work the way we want them to work — "God is ultimately breaking our self-will." The reality is, as human beings we are very stubborn, self-centered creatures, whom God is asking to come to the end of ourselves (Mt 16:24-25); obviously that's no small matter, because it is rooted in the very core of our being.

**After reflecting upon the various circumstances of life that God has used to mold my faith and character,** I have come to this conclusion: "it is when life is difficult and doesn't work the way we want it to, that God gets our attention and does His most effective work in our soul;" though these times can be exasperating and very disconcerting, they are far and away the most beneficial. With that in mind, the spiritual realm in which we as believers live is significantly different from that in which unbelievers live — we are simply subjected to things they are not. For instance, as believers we experience trials and tribulation in life for the expressed purpose of developing our character and refining our faith (cf. Rom 5:3-4; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:10); the unbeliever does not; thus the **believer** goes through a number of discombobulating circumstances in life that the unbeliever does not — though the **unbeliever** may go through extreme difficulties in life (injury, cruelty, sickness, etc.), the believer is subjected to "God's furnace of affliction" (cf. Is 48:10; Ezek 22:18-22; 1 Kg 8: 51; Jer 11:4)… and it is those afflictions that God uses to do His transforming work in our soul (in ways we often do not even understand)… hence the "distressing realities" we are subjected to are actually the "spiritual surgeries" we undergo to help conform our inner self to the image of Christ — the unbeliever knows no such experience. Whereas the values of this world have a home in the unbeliever's heart, they produce a level of consternation and conflict in the believer's soul that is completely foreign to the unbeliever — the apostle John describes these values as the lust of the flesh (passions)… the lust of the eyes (possessions)… and the pride of life (position — cf. 1 Jn 2:16). Whereas the unbeliever's life is governed by worldly values… the believer's life is governed by heavenly values; but due to the presence of indwelling sin (the flesh) in his life, "the believer experiences a level of conflict in his soul the unbeliever does not." Paul describes this conflict as follows: "The flesh (our sin disposition) sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; these two entities are in opposition to one another, so that we may not simply do as we please in life" (cf. Gal 5:17). The unbeliever knows no such "battle" in the interior of his being because the Holy Spirit does not reside in him; thus he essentially just does as he pleases… whereas "the believer experiences constant war in his soul between the flesh and the Spirit" — theologians refer to this battle as "spiritual warfare."

As believers, we are not at liberty to simply do "what we please" or "feel like doing" in life; we are called to a much higher standard than that — that of yielding to the lordship of Christ and His will for our lives (cf. Mt 16:24-25; 1 Pet 4:2; Rom 6:12; Eph 4:22-24; 1 Th 4:3; 5:18; 2 Tim 2:21; Heb 10: 36-38; 13:20; 1 Jn 2:17; 5:14). *It's here where the believer oftentimes finds it difficult to "integrate God into his little world"* — when the negatives of life (trials and tribulation) become too painful, he has a difficult time justifying how a loving God could allow or cause such painful realities in his life; naturally he argues from a human perspective, but it is here where things just don't add up. As the Lord told Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways" (Is 55:8) — it is "this dark side or incomprehensible side of God" that frustrates us and scares us (cf. Job 30:26; Ps 139:11-12)… "after all, how can a loving God be the author of trials and pain?"
From a human perspective that is a conundrum that is far darker and far more inexplicable than man can wrap his mind around... so, what are the options? The believer can either abandon ship or trust in the sovereign working of God in his life. Beloved, this isn't an easy construct for any of us; the greatest theologians in the history of the church have had to bend the knee and submit to the “greater good” God was doing in their lives — at some point in life, we all have to come to the end of ourselves and defer to God and His will. As human beings (even saved human beings) “we like answers to everything,” but sometimes God doesn't give us answers (probably because His answers may transcend human thought). It should be noted, the general dynamic by which the flesh operates is “feeling,” whereas the dynamic by which the Spirit operates is “faith;” as believers in Christ, we are called to “live by faith” — not our feelings, not human logic, but faith (Rom 1:17); without which it is not possible to please God (Heb 11:6). Perhaps I should expand upon that construct — though the primary didactic by which the believer lives his life is “faith,” that doesn't mean “his feelings” are never an integral part of the life God has called him to. When we are “walking in the Spirit,” it is more natural for us to be loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, gentle, generous and long-suffering toward others; thus it's not like the fruit of the Spirit-filled life is a completely unnatural experience (cf. Gal 5:22-23; 1 Cor 13:4-7; Lk 7:47; Jn 15:5; Col 3:16). Obviously if the Holy Spirit is ruling in our soul, “He moves our hearts in a divine direction;” it is not as if He lacks “an active presence in our lives”... yet on the other hand, neither does He “override our self-centeredness” — if we are walking in the flesh rather than the Spirit, we will simply reap accordingly (cf. Acts 2:43-47; 4:33-35; Phil 2:13; Jam 4:8a). When we fail to identify with the life God has called us to (cf. Mt 6:10; 6:39c), disconcertion will characterize our lives, because life won't work the way we want it to work (Prv 16:9; 19:21; 20:24; Is 43:13; 46:10; Jer 10:23).

Ultimately, the believer has to come to understand that “life isn't about him and his will, but about GOD and HIS will;” and those are two vastly different constructs. Our humanness (i.e., our flesh) naturally insists that we live a pleasant life and that the circumstances of our life be pleasant (we even pray to that end over and over again)... but such a life is not conducive to growing one's faith, and therein is the rub; thus it is common for the believer to “really struggle with surrendering control of his life to Christ” (his Lord and Master), because the very things God often brings into his life (trials) are contrary to what he wants. As mentioned earlier, most Christians essentially view trials as “frustrating negatives that disturb their peace.” It is important to remember that “we are to die to the self-life, and live to the God-life.” Jesus proclaimed, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (cf. Mt 16:24). He went on to say, “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies it bears much fruit — He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal” (cf. Jn 12:24-25). Conversely, Paul states: “I have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me... and the life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (cf. Gal 2:20; 6:14; Mt 6:10). The Lord Jesus did not die for us that we might go on living for ourselves and living as we choose; He died for us that He might live His life through us, and this He does when we “live by faith in Christ and continually depend on Him” (that is the God-life). The cycle of life on earth is this: “something dies that something might live” — death precedes life, be it physical life or spiritual life; everything we eat was alive at some point... it is through the death of that substance that we live. Jesus is not only the author of the economy of life under which we live, “He died for us that we might live” (cf. Mt 20:28; Jn 3:16); that is precisely why “He laid down His life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11). Thus, the apostle John writes, “We know love by this: He laid down
His life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren” (1 Jn 3:16); if we refuse to lay down our lives for others, we deny them spiritual sustenance, demonstrate a lack of faith, and fail to prove that we indeed are followers of Christ (cf. Jn 15:8). As Paul writes, “We were crucified with Christ for the expressed purpose that we might walk in newness of life” (cf. Rom 6:4ff).

The theme of “Suffering & Glory” is prominent throughout Scripture, and CHRIST is the pattern (cf. Phil 2:5-11; 1 Pet 3:12-22; 5:10). Suffering has always been a frustrating and perplexing issue for believers. The truth is, we live in a world where there is pain and suffering, and oftentimes it is undeserved. The psalmist Asaph ruminated over the fact that God’s people were much more likely to suffer in comparison to the wicked, and that was troublesome to him (cf. Ps 73:1-5, 16), causing him to think, “surely in vain I have kept my heart pure… for I have been stricken all day long” (Ps 73:13-14). Obviously Asaph began to question the integrity of that truism which says “we reap what we sow” — here he was a man of prayer who spent significant time in the Word, was faithful both publicly & privately, and lived a very respectful life… yet all it seemed to bring him was a daily dose of suffering & punishment, causing him to wonder “if the life of faith was worth the cost.” Asaph testified to the fact that “he had never shared his doubts and misgivings with other believers, for fear that he might betray God’s people and cause them to stumble” (Ps 73:14)— obviously he knew it was a significant issue in people’s minds. No doubt Asaph was an ardent student of “The Law of Moses,” and was well aware of its contents. Perhaps the most significant message He reflected upon was the fact that God told Israel that He would “bless them” if they obeyed Him (cf. Deut 28:1ff), and “curse them” if they didn’t (cf. Deut 28:15ff) — time and time again this was evidenced throughout Israel’s history. What is important here is that one keep in mind this maxim was given to the nation Israel, not to each individual believer. Make no mistake about it, “though we reap what we sow, we don’t necessarily reap everything we sow in this life,” the life hereafter is of far greater significance (cf. Mt 16:27; 2 Cor 5:10; Gal 6:7; Eph 6:8; Col 3:25). Notice Asaph’s ultimate response: “It was only when I went into the presence of God, that the answer to this troubling thought was finally resolved — I perceived their end; i.e., I perceived their eternal destiny” (Ps 73:17). Asaph finally came to the realization that the life of the wicked in all its fullness was a very precarious existence, because sooner or later they will be swept away by a wave of terrors that is simply too horrible to contemplate (cf. Ps 73:18-20). Oftentimes it is “the eternal perspective” that gives understanding to “the temporal” (we’ll cover this reality in far greater detail later).

The wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon, had devoted himself to discovering all the answers to life — remember, God had blessed him with a level of wisdom that “no other human being before him or after him would ever possess” (cf. 1 King 3:12); I find it interesting that it was the incredible wisdom that God had given to Solomon that all of the Old Testament prophets had carefully reflected upon — it gave contextual understanding to the work to which God had called them. In order to appreciate that statement, read the book of Ecclesiastes (the wisdom of God to man) with an attitude of complete reverence. Solomon ultimately concluded that “man cannot discover the work which has been done under the sun — even though he should seek it laboriously, he will not discover it” (Ecc 8:17). It is not in man to understand the eternal ways of God — to arrogantly insist that one can understand His ways is complete folly… no matter how brilliant one may think he is, it is not possible for him to wrap his mind around the ways of God; when we compare our little brain with God’s brain, our brain doesn’t even register on the scale (cf. Is 40:13-17). God Himself told Isaiah, “[Don’t try to figure Me out]. My ways are not your ways, neither are your ways My ways; as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are My ways.
higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (cf. Is 55:8-9). Job also struggled with the prosperity of the wicked (cf. Job 21) and the suffering to which he was subjected (cf. Job 40:1-14; 42:1-6), as did a number of other Old Testament figures including David and the prophets. The reality is, suffering refines the believer’s faith (cf. 1 Pet 1:6-7) and promotes his sanctification (cf. 1 Pet 4:1-3, 18) – all the great saints of Scripture experienced a significant degree of suffering. So pain and suffering play a vital role in producing holiness in the believer’s life, “without which no one will see the Lord” (cf. Heb 12:14; Phil 1:28; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1, 18; 5:10). The truth is, every true born-again believer grows in holiness through the chastening of the Lord... due to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives the river of life flows in us and strongly impacts the interior of our being: as such, all of us as believers actively pursue holiness and sanctification (cf. Ps 32:8; 37:23-24; Phil 2:12-13). Though we all don’t pursue it with the same vigor, every believer pursues it; that is simply a characteristic of being a child of God. By the way, God is the one who ultimately causes our sanctification (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; Rom 6:22; 1 Th 5:24; 2 Th 2:13) – neither our salvation or our sanctification are the product of our own doing. Because of God's work in our hearts our lives give “evidence” to the fact that we are children of God. It is the “efficacious chastening of the Lord” that moves us in a holy direction (cf. Ps 94:12-19; 119:71; Prv 3:11-12; Heb 12:5-11; Jn 6:36-39; Rom 8:28-31); if God were not actively at work in us (cf. Phil 2:13), our eternal destiny would not be heaven (cf. Col 1:27). Just as we responded to the message of the gospel because “His Spirit persuaded our heart to believe” (cf. Jn 6:44; Acts 16:14), so He calls us to “follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit as we live life” (cf. Rom 8:9-14; 1 Cor 2:10-14; Gal 5:16-17; Eph 4:30; 1 Th 5:19; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 1:21; 1 Jn 2:20, 27); these promptings primarily occur when we humbly study God's Word — He makes truth alive in us. Though the Holy Spirit inspires us to walk with Him, He does not force us to do so... it is the incredible love of God that motivates us to cooperate with Him (that’s the power of His love).

THE ESSENCE OF WHO YOU REALLY ARE

Another perplexing issue for nearly all believers is “understanding who they really are.” The apostle Paul defines the believer as one who possesses both “flesh” and “spirit”... one who has both “a corrupt nature” and “a new nature”... one who has within him both the “old man” and the “new man;” these two contrasting realities define who we are as believers this side of heaven (carefully read Rom 7:14-8:17; Gal 5:17, 24-25; Eph 2:1-3; 4:22-24; and 1 Pet 2:11). The reality is, we are now an amalgamation of both flesh and spirit, and they both have a prominent presence in our lives. An old southern black preacher described himself as having “two dogs in his heart;” when asked who the “lead dog” was he said, “the one I feed.” That's a pretty good description of the believer's life. Scripture essentially describes the believer as a new creation in Christ (cf. 2 Cor 5:17) who inhabits sinful flesh (cf. Rom 7:17-21) — though every believer is indwelled by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 8:9), every believer also has the presence of sin living in him... as such, he experiences a constant state of conflict in his soul: “the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh — they are in opposition to each other, so that you may not do the things that you please” (cf. Gal 5:17). The key to living the life to which God has called us, is to “live by faith;” not sight, not feelings, but faith (cf. Rom 1:17; 2 Cor 5:7). If the matter of faith is a difficult construct for you, let me to encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith;” you can find it on my website: www.TheTransformedSoul.com. Paul reminds us in his letter to the Romans that “there is nothing good in our flesh” (Rom 7:18), that trusting in it only results in “bondage” (cf. Rom 7:25). Because of the presence of indwelling
sin in my life (which is simply the reality of what it means to be human—though a saved one), I am not at all thrilled that it is an integral part of my life… in large part, because it frequently wins the day and destroys my peace. But regardless of my absolute disdain for it, it isn’t going anywhere until that great day when the trumpet sounds and Lord appears in the heavens! Hating the flesh and wishing it wasn’t a part of our lives isn’t going to change it one iota… so, what would the Lord have us do? As believers we are urged to strive for holiness and sanctification (cf. 1 Th 4:5ff; Heb 12:14; Rom 6:12); growth in holiness is to follow conversion (cf. 2 Cor 7:1; Eph 1:4; Phil 3:12; Col 1:10, 22; 3:1-11). The sober reality is, the flesh automatically interjects “sinful thoughts” into our minds (that’s a given), and we must intentionally combat them with “godly thoughts” (did you noticed the difference between the two? spirituality requires intentionality; it is not automatic). The apostle Paul sums it up this way—“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires” (cf. Gal 5:24); that is, when we were saved we determined that we would no longer live to our fallen nature; thus, we are to renew this commitment we made at salvation every day; that is basically what the Christian life on this earth is all about (Gal 2:20). Is such renewing easy? Of course not; since when is “spiritual warfare” easy? Let’s reflect upon the question we asked upfront: “Who are we?” The short answer is, we are children of God who have been called to live in the presence of the most troubling, debilitating force in all creation—sin and Satan. With that in mind, is it any wonder then that we often don’t feel good about life? When the flesh is banging away at the interior of our soul, life isn’t a happy experience. The good news is, this is not a twenty-four/seven non-stop experience; God in His mercy frequently quiets the roaring seas in our lives, because He understands how frail and weak we are (cf. Ps 103:14; 1 Cor 10:13; Heb 4:15); the bad news is (if you can call it that), this combat happens increasingly more in our lives as we grow older in our faith; but our faith should be stronger and able to endure more as older believers (cf. 1 Pet 4:1-3, 12:13; 5:6-10). Obviously a parent is more protective of his child when he is young and more susceptible to dangers… but as the child grows older he must learn to deal with some of the more harsh realities of life on his own (cf. Lk 12:48; 1 Cor 13:11; Eph 4:14; Heb 5:12; 12:4-5); obviously, that doesn’t mean as believers we do everything in our own strength—we must walk by faith and abide in Christ (cf. Jn 15:5; Phil 4:13).

When we choose to live the “self-life” rather than the “God-life,” it results in an empty heart, darkness within, and being famished spiritually—in a word, it leads to a “depressed life.” Let’s take a look at this matter called “depression.” The most common problem counselors and psychiatrists treat is that of “depression;” it is not only a problem for unbelievers but believers as well. Essentially it results from “troubling thoughts and painful thinking;” that’s why a negative state of mind is referred to as mental or psychological depression. Dr’s. Meier, Minirth & Wichern in their textbook “Introduction to Psychology & Counseling,” tell us that 85 percent of significant depressions are actually precipitated by “life stresses” (Baker Book House, 1985, p. 266). Because our unredeemed humanness often controls the discourse in our minds, “trials and tribulations” often leave us feeling discouraged, sad, angry, hopeless and depressed—this condition not only affects us physically and emotionally, but spiritually as well. So the premiere cause of depression in the life of the believer is that of “embracing a wrong perspective” (cf. Ps 73:1-3, 16-17). As Solomon writes, “Anxiety in the heart weighs it down (causes depression), but a good word lifts it up (encourages the heart)” (cf. Prv 12:25; Ps 32:3-4; 38:1-18; 42:5; Prv 17:22; 18:14). The antidote for a troubled heart is divine revelation to the soul (cf. Is 50:4)—only the truths of God’s Word (a right orientation in life) can dispel a troubled heart (cf. Jn 8:31-32; 14:1, 27). Since depression affects us emotionally, “we simply don’t feel good about life,” and that is not an acceptable construct for
the human family; as fallen creatures “we insist on feeling good” — there are few other tenants in life that are as important as that one. From the very beginning sinful man has acted on “his feelings” (Gen 3:6) and in accord with “his desires” (cf. Jam 1:14-15)… the same is true today, and that is the number one reason why people seek help from a counselor — they live according to impulse rather than God’s Word. The reality is, either we choose to live by “our desires” (and reap accordingly), or we choose to live by “God’s Word” (that’s faith) and experience His joy and peace. Because we insist on “feeling good” about life and the circumstances of life, when things are not as we would like them to be, they produce a significant level of angst in our soul.

Let’s examine this matter of “feeling” in a little more depth. Do you think Jesus “always felt good?” that He always had wonderful, positive feelings? Scripture tells us that there were times when Jesus was angry, indignant, troubled, greatly distressed, sorrowful, deeply moved & grieved; and at other times He felt compassion, sighed, wept, groaned, and experienced agony. The long and short of it is, Jesus revealed what it meant to be fully human and made in the image of God— God created us to be moral, thinking, psychological, emotional creatures. Regrettably, the early Christian theologian and apologist Justin Martyr erroneously sought to distinguish the God of the Bible from pagan gods (whose passions led them into all kinds of scandalous behavior), by wrongly arguing that the God of creation was not moved by emotions; what he essentially meant to emphasize was that God does not have mad, shameful passions like the gods of pagan mythology. So contrary to what some believers might think, we cannot say that “feeling bad” (i.e., not feeling good) is sinful — that should be pretty obvious because “pain doesn’t feel good.” If Christianity was a matter of “feeling good all the time,” we’d be in glory! Yet some segments of Christendom actually try to make it a major construct of faith. It should be noted, sometimes “we feel bad,” even though we have done nothing to cause the negative feelings… at other times “we feel bad” because sinful thoughts have dominated the discourse in our minds. Though “our emotions” are generally the result of what has gone on in our minds, that is not always the case. Sometimes we just get up on the wrong side of the bed ☹ and have no idea why we feel so low. Remember, we are “fallen, imperfect creatures,” not only physically and spiritually, but psychologically and emotionally as well. I find it interesting that nowhere in Scripture is the believer commanded to “feel anything,” because feelings cannot be controlled in an absolute sense… as believers we are simply called to “obey certain injunctions” (love others, think godly thoughts, grow in our faith, renew our minds, believe God’s Word, give to the poor, forgive one another, bear one another’s burdens, etc.). Ultimately, our calling in life is that of “mastering life,” and not letting life control us… when we let our emotions control our lives, we fail to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives. Remember, one of the fruits of the Spirit is “self-control” (cf. Gal 5:23); we need to learn to control our feelings and emotions, because they will frequently lead us astray; the reality is, Satan uses our negative feelings and emotions to move us away from God.

DEALING WITH DISTURBING THOUGHTS

According to Scripture, when “disturbing thoughts” (whatever they may be) aggravate and upset us, we are to redirect our thinking (Phil 4:8) — it’s at this point where we must immediately stop dwelling on the troubling thoughts that are upsetting us. As believers, we can’t ruminate over unpleasant thoughts without them disturbing our peace, so we must “change the channel” in our minds by taking a different course of action — if it’s something on television that’s causing
the angst, we have to turn to another station... if it's a condition in our little world, we need to do an about-face and travel a different road (cf. Prv 5:8); whatever it is that is producing disconcertion in our soul, we must stop entertaining the idea immediately and change what we are doing (i.e., go in another direction and cease being preoccupied with that which is troubling to the soul); the reality is, we don't have the wherewithal to entertain sinful thoughts and not sin, because the flesh will immediately grab the wheel and force us to go in its direction (cf. Jam 1:14) — immediate action is the only thing that will keep the flesh from doing so. Paul says, “we must take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5). Incidentally, redirecting our thoughts and the life-path we are traveling will generally occur numerous times every day, because the evil one and our flesh are continually trying to get us to live the “self-life” (the sin life) — since we never get beyond the presence of the flesh in our lives, to somehow think that we will one day achieve spiritual utopia in this life, where the flesh is no longer an active, powerful reality in our soul, is simply foolishness and wishful thinking, because that is not what Scripture teaches. Essentially, the Christian life is a moment-by-moment challenge throughout our entire life; not just a temporary one or an occasional one as some believers try to make it. Regarding our feelings, the popular 19th century American Presbyterian preacher and author, Ichabob Spencer, described them this way in his textbook “Competent to Counsel” — “feelings are largely involuntary and flow from action and attitudes,” and that “doing” often leads to proper feelings. Ultimately the principal action that we as believers must take when we find our soul in “a prison of depression” (Ps 142:7), is that of prayerfully & humbly seeking the Lord's counsel by delving into His Word, because it cleanses, renews and sets us free (cf. Rom 12:2; Col 3:16; Heb 4:12; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18; Ps 1:1-3; Jer 15:16) — let me stress at this point that such action is not just a matter of reading God's Word casually... it involves humble contemplation and meditation... don't plan on spending just ten minutes in the Word, any more than you would just spend ten minutes in a counselor's office... plan on spending an hour with the Lord; obviously in doing so, everything else in your life must be relegated to secondary status in the moment (i.e., put on the back burner)... incidentally, diligence is a correlative of spiritual discipline.

The reality is, “every believer is forced to reconcile the discourse that takes place in his mind concerning the troubling circumstances that he is encountering in life” — generally, the greater the consternation is in our soul, the more frustrated we will become with God and our faith. When the construct by which we live life is that of “making life work the way we want it to work,” no matter how wonderful and virtuous we may think that is, we will experience trouble in the soul. Again, life is not about US and our will (no matter how glorious we may think it is), it is about GOD and His will for our lives (cf. Mt 16:24-25). Furthermore, since none of us have an absolute understanding of exactly what God's will is (Jam 4:12-16), we need to humbly come down off our high-horse. Though some aspects of divine truth may not be that difficult to understand, living in accord with them is a different matter altogether. Though none of us go around soliciting trials in life, when they come we need to have a construct of faith that fully accepts them, because of their significance in our lives (cf. Rom 5:3-5; Jam 1:2-3); they are the agents God uses to not only mold our character into the likeness of Christ, but remove the dress (falsehood and misunderstanding) from our faith. I find it ironic that when God sends trails into our lives, our immediate response is to pray and ask Him to remove them, and when He doesn't, it is somewhat discouraging to us. How is that for a contradictory faith? (again read James 1:2-4). The reality is, we are a fickle people, who simply want life to be a pleasant experience. Imagine God's dilemma — if He sends trials we grumble and plead with Him to take them away; if He doesn't send trials our
faith becomes sheer religiosity (our own doing—cf. Hos 6:6; Mt 9:13). The reality is, we are not to be occupied with the removal of trials, but with the grace to accept them and the grace to fight the good fight of faith… obviously, that is a significantly different response to trials than just desiring their removal. Incidentally, is it any wonder why the vast majority of our prayers go unanswered? (cf. Mt 6:10; 16:24-25; Jam 4:3). Take a moment and think about the topics that generally define your prayer life: obviously we are all mindful of our sins and confess them to the Lord every day—should confession not be a significant daily occurrence in your life, you are walking in darkness (it’s time to repent and get back on the road of life again). Aside from confessing our shortcomings, we almost always pray that some circumstance would get better, that God would help us with some situation or deliver us from some problem, that God would open some particular door for us, that God would heal our infirmities, that God would solve our problems, and that God would make our lives better—something to that effect. The long and short of it, we would all like our lives to be a more pleasant, enjoyable experience, rather than an unpleasant, painful one. We’re willing to serve at church and be involved in various ministries, and help meet the financial needs of the church and the needs of people, but we don’t understand why the Christian life can’t be a more pleasant experience than it is. The long and short of it, we don’t want to continually deal with the disconceion that often occupies our soul (Gal 5:17); we want to “feel good about life,” and therein is the rub that frustrates us. Though the level of disconceion can be more intense in some people’s lives than others (due to the spiritual war within their soul, as well as the inherent weaknesses with which they must contend—they “differ” in all of us), we must each deal with the various issues in our soul accordingly; the reality is, we are not all made of the same stuff (we are extremely unique individuals). What makes the life of faith such a “challenging one” is our sin disposition (our flesh); it is constantly at war with the Spirit in your soul (cf. Gal 5:17), and contrary to what some think, our sin disposition has absolutely no goodness or righteousness in it whatsoever (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18); hence, the difficulty of living by faith. I come down “hard” on this construct because it is that significant to a genuine life of faith (remember humility is its foundation). Keeping that in mind, you can throw any “false piety” you have out the window; there is no room for it in the life of faith. If you really want to know just how “truly great” your faith is, measure it the next time you are subjected to one of the irritating storms of life; after you have gotten upset or disappointed, reflect upon how “insignificant” the little agitation really was. The humble reality is this: we are all men and women of “little faith”—we are not men and women of “great faith;” we are simply men and women with faith (small though it be) in a “great God!” As mentioned earlier, there is no room for pride in the Christian life; we don’t boast in our faith, we boast in the God of our faith! (cf. 1 Cor 1:30-31; Gal 6:14).

MAN’S FALLEN CONDITION

Perhaps we should look at the effects of “the Fall” and our fallen condition. Regarding the effects of it… man basically believes he is “good,” that it is his surroundings (his environment) that is the problem, not his human nature. Human history records that a number of individuals when faced with tortuous conditions have been known to respond, “I never lost my confidence in the basic goodness of people.” Such sentiment shows just how deeply human beings are grounded in man’s inherent goodness. The reality is, at the end of the age humanity’s complete lack of goodness will be revealed for what it is when everything is brought into the light (cf. 1 Cor 4:5; 3:13). Though some people are far more wicked than others, if we lift our gaze to the ultimate
standard of goodness –[the holy character of God]– we realize that what appears to be a basic goodness on an earthly level is actually corrupt to the core (cf. Is 6:5). When Adam & Eve fell in the Garden, they became totally corrupt, not just partially corrupt— their minds and wills and bodies were all affected by evil; as such, we speak sinful words, do sinful deeds & think impure thoughts because of our fallen nature— the reality is we suffer greatly from the ravages of sin. Our problem with sin is this — it is rooted in the very core of our being; thus Scripture teaches: “There is none righteous, not one… there is none who understands… there is none who seeks God… everyone has turned aside… there is none who does good, not even one” (cf. Rom 3:10-12). Though man sees himself as being reasonably good, that is not God’s judgment of mankind — His X-ray of the human heart is that it is totally corrupt, like a cancer that has spread throughout one’s entire being, and has nothing to do with how the individual “feels about himself”… it is simply the true reality of his condition. Sin not only had a residual affect upon every human being, it affected every aspect of his being. These verses by Paul in Romans 3 indicate that the whole of man’s inner being is controlled by sin — his mind, his heart & his will. Though every man has not committed every sin possible, every man has a nature which is capable of committing every sin; it is God’s superintendence over all the affairs of men that keeps this world from completely reflecting pure darkness… yet one day “the Great Restrainer” is going to remove His hands from it all (cf. 2Th 2:3ff), and the fullness of evil will manifest itself for what it really is (cf. Rev 11:3ff)… and then shall come “the end” (cf. Rev 19:20). Perhaps what amazes me more than anything is the reluctance of believers to actually affirm many of the truths of Scripture; instead they let their flesh control the jurisdiction of truth — according to Scripture, the problem is they simply refuse to humble themselves before God and accept His position on the matter; nevertheless, God still loves him in spite of his stubborn heart (cf. Is 55:8-9; Jn 8:31-32; Jam 1:21).

Interestingly enough, many believers respond to “man’s fallen condition” by agreeing with the fact that no man is perfect, but they have a difficult time believing that “there is no inherent goodness in him.” The problem is, they are judging by “externals” (not “internals”), as if what they see is sufficient to reject what Scripture actually teaches. Thus, they also believe they possess a degree of goodness in their soul as well — though they do not see themselves as perfect, neither do they see the core of their being as being without virtue; in so doing they basically minimize their human corruptness — in part, because they only see sin as being overt evil;” in spite of the fact that Scripture says “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). The reality is, when divine truth does not occupy the seat of judgment in our minds when we are reflecting upon a topic with moral significance, “sin” results (we are not talking about whether or not an apple tastes good, or whether blue is a prettier color than red)… so when God is not the dominant influence in our thinking, and divine truth is not being embraced, the result of flesh-controlled thinking is “sin.” The problem with many in Christendom is that they are simply satisfied with “externals” (being religious; having a behavioral orientation in the Christian life), but the reality is, “apart from God’s presence, people lack true goodness and kindness” (cf. Lk 18:19; Jn 15:5; Rom 7:18). Since the depravity of man is such a radical construct of faith to the human mind, because it ultimately questions the very dignity of the individual’s soul, many believers choose to defend themselves at all costs. Someone rightly stated the issue this way: “As human beings we indulge ourselves in pure unvarnished sentiment, and tease ourselves with self-delusion.” I also find it interesting that regarding the woes we do, we generally excuse them by passing the buck onto something or someone else [rather than ourselves], as Adam & Eve did (cf. Gen 3:12-13). It should be noted, you can't kill the flesh… you can't eradicate it from your life… and you can't paralyze
it to the extent that it is no longer a significant problem in your life — as the apostle Paul writes, “you must walk by the Spirit if you are to refrain from carrying out the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16); that is, “you must let the Holy Spirit be the controlling influence in your life” (cf. Eph 5:18). Though the Holy Spirit dwells in each one of us as believers (cf. Rom 8:9), He does not force us to walk in His ways; instead we are to submit to His leading (this is how the Christian life is to be lived; we are to die to self and follow Him—cf. Mt 16:24). If this is a difficult construct for you, read a study I did on it titled, “Walking by the Spirit” [www.TheTransformedSoul.com].

The apostle John differentiates between the essence of man and the essence of God, by describing them with the terms “dark” and “light” (cf. Jn 1:4-7)—that’s quite a contrast. Writes John, “This is the judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil (by the way, those emboldened words are emphatic! – Jn 3:19). Essentially the minds of men were darkened at the fall (cf. Rom 1:21; Eph 4:18; 5:8; 2 Pet 1:19); i.e., they no longer saw things as they really were; they now saw everything from a different perspective (a dark one), because the Light (God) was no longer in them; as such, they were now blinded to the truth — remember, the primary function of the Holy Spirit is to “enlighten us to the truth” (cf. Jn 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:13). As King Solomon said, “There is a way that seems right unto man, but its end is the way of death” (cf. Prov 14:12). If we simply insist on arriving at the truth through “human reasoning,” we will never arrive at the truth — even as believers we will wander in our faith; remember, darkness was never removed from the human heart at conversion, and it is this darkness [flesh] with which we must contend as we live in this world; hence, “we must continue to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (cf. 2 Cor 10:5). The reality is this — the dark thoughts of the human heart are skewed; they are the antipathy of divine truth, and are actually at enmity against truth (Gal 5:17). The Holy Spirit is the author of Scripture and is called the Spirit of truth (cf. Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), and it is God’s Word that must be that preeminent reality that guides us in the truth (cf. Jn 8:31-32; 2 Tim 2:15). This construct is so critical to our faith that the brother of Jesus (James) said: “Let not many of you be teachers, because you are going to incur a stricter judgment” (those are emphatic words; cf. Jam 3:1). By way of application: it was “that verse” that God used to challenge me to get seminary training if I was going to continue on in ministry. Those were very sobering words to me forty-four years ago and still are today. The message is very clear: “Don’t mess with the truth of Scripture!” (cf. Is 55:8-9). Our problem as Christians is that we are somehow blinded to the fact that our flesh frequently controls the discourse in our minds (thus distorting the truth); hence it is incumbent upon us to “humbly and diligently study the Word” (2 Tim 2:15; Jam 1:21), and not just read it casually. If you have a difficult time accepting what it says (which is the norm for all of us at times), prayerfully delve into it with an attitude of complete humility (i.e., with lowliness of mind regarding your true essence) until the Lord causes the truth of His word to peacefully settle in your soul — the believer’s part is to humbly give careful attention to the study of Scripture; the Holy Spirit’s part is to open our minds and hearts to the reality of it. Keeping the foregoing in mind, the thoughts of men are “naturally dark;” everything he thinks is “dark,” therefore “he lives & walks in darkness” (cf. Prv 23:7; Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 13:11; 14:20). As Scripture says, it is through the cross of Christ whereby the believer is “transferred into the kingdom of light” (cf. Col 1:13; 1 Pet 2:8; Jn 8:12; 12:46). . . and as we humbly walk with Christ in this world the light will manifest itself in and through us.
THE LIFE OF FAITH

In spite of all the “unredeemed weaknesses of my flesh” that God asked me to live with (cf. Rom 7:18; 2 Cor 12:7-10; Heb 4:15)… and all of the “physical infirmities I have”… and all of the “unpleasant physical circumstances that continue to be a part of my life,” the reality is, “I am called to walk with Christ in the power of the Spirit through faith in this world—just as you are” (cf. Rom 1:17; 8:4; 2 Cor 5:7; Gal 2:20; 5:16; Eph 4:1; Col 2:6; 3:16-17)… and only faith in the truth of God’s Word is acceptable and efficacious. Regarding the vicissitudes of life, Jesus assures us that “living a pleasant, problem-free life in this world is not His agenda for us,” the truth is, trials and tribulation are the order of the day, and some people experience far more intense trials than others (cf. Jn 16:33; 21:21-22; Jam 1:2-3; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12; 5:10). Regarding trials, seldom are they merited or have anything to do with the believer’s stubborn lack of faith (as some may surmise; cross-reference the life of Job). The reality is, in all likelihood our trials are not the direct result of our overly sinful self, and neither are those of our friends or other people we know (I mention that many believers are inclined to judge the integrity of another believer’s spirituality by the problems in his or her life; beloved, don’t go down that road; that is absolute nonsense; cf. Jn 9:1-3). The truth of the matter is, the purpose & presence of trials in our lives is not to punish us for some evil, but to “grow our faith” (cf. Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 2:2; 4:12; 5:10), of which all of us as believers have a profound need (contrary to what some may think)… as mentioned earlier, external religious piety is not a measuring stick for true spirituality; it is simply a “show case” for the proud and misinformed. The reality is, each of us can be subjected to radically different degrees of trials and tribulation, depending upon God’s call upon our lives (we are not all Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah, Job or David). In spit of all of the various issues that we may be subjected to in life (nearly all of which are within the eternal plan of God for us; cf. Gen 50:20; Jn 9:1-3), we are called to live to the praise of God’s glory (cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 10:31; Col 3:17; 2 Tim 4:18; Pet 3:18); thus it should be pretty clear, when we are encumbered with problems and still living to the praise of God’s glory, that accentuates His glory! The word “glory” is an interesting one, it can be seen as “a bright light;” hence when we live in accord with God’s will “we will be shining a bright light on Him!” Regarding our insistence on knowing the fullness of the truth, once again reflect upon God’s words to Isaiah— “[Don’t try to figure Me out with your human intellect Isaiah], My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways; as high as the heavens are above the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts then your thoughts… the words that go forth from My mouth shall accomplish what I desire” (cf. Is 55: 8-1; Ps 138:8; 1 Th 5:24). Let me say it one more time— by insisting on making divine truth “humanly reasonable & acceptable,” you are traveling down a road God warned you not to travel. If this is a troubling construct of faith for you, I would encourage you to study at great length “the eternality of God” and “the temporality of man and his fallleness” (continually contrasting the two). If you do so with a humble heart, God will open your heart to the truth. Again, this isn’t some strange, heretical teaching that transcends Scripture. The reality is: “only the God of truth can impart truth to the heart of man” (cf. Acts 16:14; Jn 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 Cor 2:14; 1 Jn 5:7); that means the knowledge of divine truth [ultimately] is not attained by either human effort or human logic… if God does not disclose it to a person, he will not come to know it. Humility of heart is essential.

Fundamental to faith is believing that God really loves you and you are His eternal child (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 8:35-39; Eph 2:4; Heb 11:8; Ps 136), and that your life really counts in His economy, no matter what your position in life may be. Some of us are one talent persons, and others of us
are multiple talent persons — that was all determined by God in eternity past, and has nothing to do with any merit on our part; furthermore, it is completely unrelated with regard to how much He loves us. If this didactic is somewhat troubling or perplexing to you, reflect upon the provocative words of Jesus: “The last shall be first, and the first shall be last” (cf. Mt 19:30; 20:16; Mk 10:31); obviously those words transcend human understanding. God is GOD — does He not have a right to do as He pleases? By the way, a wonderful part of that construct is the fact that, “He is a wonderful, holy loving GOD!” (cf. Is 6:3; 45:9; 64:8; Jer 18:1-4; Mt 20:15-16; Rom 9:21). For those of you who question His rightful autonomy, do you actually think some contrary view is more virtuous? (cf. Rom 9:21; Ps 103:19; 135:5-6). It is actually quite amazing at how the fallacious, diabolical thinking of men actually judges the virtue of God? I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard someone say, “I just can’t believe that a loving God would ever send anyone to hell! I just can’t believe that!” — as if their deductions are the essence of true virtue. Obviously, the foregoing construct is a difficult one for the human family to fully understand and accept, especially when human logic controls the discourse in their minds... but hell is a divine reality. It’s amazing how fallen minds can distort and impugn divine truth and glorify the foolish nonsense of human thought (Prv 14:12). The human family actually thinks everyone should go to heaven, and no one should go to hell (though a few people perhaps may need to suffer a little reprobative action before they are permitted into the heavenly realm) — the “world” believes even the ugliest among us should be redeemed! And that, they say, is “real love!” Can you hear the diabolical human family proudly screaming those words? The reality is “holiness” is a meaningless maxim to the human family. Obviously there is not only a serious misunderstanding of the essence of sin in the human family (they don’t think its as bad as the Bible makes it out to be); conversely, the human family has very little appreciation for the love that purchased our salvation (that is, the willingness for God’s Son to die for us on the cross that He might redeem us); both of those constructs are highly distorted in the human mind. The truth is, it is just such constructs that we must humbly study if we are to grow in faith and love for God. If you refuse to sit at Jesus’ feet and learn from Him, you will never come know truth as God would have you know it, because fallen human thinking will dominate the discourse in your mind. Above everything, it should be your goal in life to “know the unadulterated truth” — no matter what it may be — why would a person be satisfied with “believing a lie?” or “defining reality on his terms?” (just because his fallen mind can’t conquer the essence of divine truth?). Have not the minds of fallen men throughout history disappointed you enough and convinced you of their senility? Beloved, if you choose to know the truth, you will ultimately discover the significance of man’s diabolical nature, and the complete absence of goodness in the human heart, as well as the incredible nature of God and His redemptive love for you. Let me suggest that you “read” a study I did on “Sin & Man’s Eternal Purpose” — this particular study completely astounded me, because [regrettably] it was a topic I had never studied in seminary; to this day that alone blows my mind, because it is this issue that gives context to the essence of man’s existence, and answers the most poignant questions of the human heart. This particular study was so overwhelming and significant to me, I chose to make it the last chapter in my book “Soul Transformation;” it’s located under the “Additional Studies Link” on my website: www.TheTransformedSoul.com

As just intimated above, “knowing that God really loves you” is the most liberating reality in the Christian faith — no other doctrinal truth holds a candle to this one; yet many believers actually question God’s love for them. Let me try and eliminate the negatives that make this construct such a difficult one. The are two main reasons why people “doubt” another person’s
love for them — “their own unworthiness” & “the way the other person treats them.” The truth is, both of these are legitimate reasons to doubt another person’s love, but the problem is these two constructs have serious limitations to them and are simply the deductions of skewed human thinking. When we apply these two reasons to Divine love, we find them grossly insufficient and inadequate. How is that? Divine truth declares that “God loved us and died for us as sinners” (cf. Rom 5:8); i.e., as totally unworthy creatures, not because we were lovely deserving creatures — the truth is, we are not lovely creatures. Regarding the matter of human logic, “it insists that the object of love in some way merits being loved;” therefore meriting love is an important construct of human love… but there is nothing in us that merits our being loved by God; neither is there anything we can do to merit His love. So the question is, “Why does God love us?” Scripture tells us that “the intrinsic nature of God is that He is love” (cf. 1 Jn 4:16; Jn 3:16); thus in spite of our unloveliness He loves us. Though you may believe that you’re a lovely person, you can only arrive at that conclusion by comparing yourself to others in the human family… so relatively speaking you may possess a degree of loveliness, but when compared with divine holiness your loveliness is seriously lacking in credulity. The waywardness of man is clearly defined in Scripture (cf. Psalm 14:1-3, Luke 18:19, Rom 3:10-18; 3:23), yet in our fallenness we persist on rejecting God’s X-ray of the human heart. The truth is, man essentially is a self-centered autonomous creature, who apart from the divine initiative would actually have no regard for God whatsoever (cf. Ps 36:1); that is simply a summary of our human condition. That should not surprise you — as human beings we all simply want to run our own lives. The reality is, we never sought God (cf. Ps 53:2-3; Rom 3:11)... He sought us (cf. Jn 15:16; Eph 1:4-9). There was simply no goodness in us that we might seek Him; remember the words of Jesus, “There is none good but God” (Lk 18:19); either Jesus was defining reality as it really is, or He was not. Whether you like that truth or not is not the point, that is the reality; to believe anything to the contrary is the antithesis of what Scripture teaches. The essence of faith is “believing God,” regardless of what you might think or feel. For instance, when you humbly confess your sins to God, He forgives you, whether or not you feel like you are forgiven. Our problem as fallen creatures (though we are saved) is that we often struggle with believing the truth; as such, we are to “fight the good fight of faith” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7). The life of faith is neither easy or automatic, it is a war in the interior of your soul (cf. Gal 5:17; Eph 6:12; 1 Pet 1:6-7). As believers, we must build our theology on what Scripture teaches, not on our own thinking or how we might feel about an issue. Remember, the reason Jesus went to the cross for us is our lack of goodness (i.e., our sinfulness).

Again, God doesn’t love us because we are lovely creatures, He loves us because He is love; and that is the chief construct of the Christian faith. Now if God loved us so much that He died for us on the cross as undeserving sinners, how much more does He love us now that we are His children — sinful though we be? (cf. Rom 8:31-32; Ps 103:10; Ecc 7:20; Lam 3:22-23; Jam 3:2). Should you somehow think that you’re a marvelous creature, go and do what Jesus told the rich ruler: “Go and sell all your possessions and give everything you have to the poor” (cf. Lk 18:22; also Mt 22:39). If that is not enough convincing evidence to you, your proud heart is simply keeping you from knowing the liberating truth of God’s love. Regarding the selling of everything you own… ultimately you would conclude that such action might not guarantee your acceptance before the Lord, so you would decline to take that action. The reality is: “God accepted and loved us in our decadent condition when we were hostile toward Him and at enmity with Him, and He still loves us now even in our sinfulness!” Keeping that in mind, we as believers need to say the following things to God every day: “Lord, I don’t know how You can love me… I’m so full of sin & such a mess; I constantly screw up… yet you continue to love Me… How can that be? Such love is too
wonderful for me... I cannot attain to it (cf. Ps 139:6; Eph 3:16-19)... thank You for so great a love, in spite of all my shame, weaknesses, and shortcomings.” If you will humbly and genuinely repeat such words to God with sincerity of heart three or four times every day for a month (it takes a good thirty days to change mindsets that are grounded in untruth; it doesn't happen overnight), His love for you will ultimately become the chief construct of your faith, and liberate you from the prison of your own sinful flesh and its stubborn presence in your life; it is only in “affirming truth over and over again” that it ultimately sets a believer free and brings peace to his soul. The problem most believers have is that they don't take the time to humbly sit at the Lord's feet and reflect upon the truth (we are sinful creatures whom God loves with an everlasting love); instead they let fleshly thoughts dominate their thinking, and affirm its lies over and over again. Is it any wonder then why most Christians have such a hard time believing? Regarding the prayer I mentioned above, you might want to write your own prayer concerning the wonder of God's love for you, because you may want to express something in it I did not... should you choose to do that, don't forget to include your complete unworthiness and the transcendent greatness of God's love, because those two truths are “the foundational truths of the Christian faith.”

The apostle John wrote, “We have come to know and believe the LOVE God has for us” (1 Jn 4:16). Obviously coming to know the love God has for us is a process, and requires humility and prayerful reflection… like all truth, it is ministered to the heart by the Holy Spirit (the Spirit of truth). To somehow think that we can study Scripture and arrive at the truth on our own without the convicting presence of the Holy Spirit, is completely contrary to what the Bible teaches. The Spirit of truth is not only the author of truth, He is the conveyor of truth to the human heart. 

**Humility of heart is essential for knowing the truth** (cf. Jn 14:17, 26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; Eph 1:13; 2 Tim 3:16; Jam 1:21; 4:5-6; 1 Pet 2:2; Ps 25:9). As believers we are to walk humbly with God in this world (cf. Is 66:2; Mic 6:8; Jam 1:21; 4:6, 10; 1 Pet 5:6) — only when we are confident that God truly loves us, are we set free from a performance-based relationship with Christ (any legalistic relationship with Christ is a debilitating proposition, because one cannot experience God's peace and joy by living a performance-based lifestyle — why is that? our efforts simply will never measure up; that's a given (cf. Jn 15:5). Without “abiding in the truth” (i.e., residing in it; dwelling in it) it is not possible to experience the fruit of the Spirit in our lives (love, peace, joy, etc.). With that in mind, what conclusion can we draw from the foregoing? The didactic (i.e., the prayer) we outlined in the last paragraph is of tremendous importance because it helps us keep everything in its proper perspective — since it is critical that our faith be grounded in the truth, we must see ourselves for “who we are” and see God for “who He is” — the reality is, “we are sinful” and “God loves us” in spite of our sinfulness — how is that? “He is love” (read 1Jn 4:16; Jn 15:9; Rom 8:31ff). The long and short of it is this, if we make little of our sinfulness, we will also make little of God's love for us; the two propositions are interrelated (read Lk 7:47). It would be one thing to be forgiven a debt of $10,000; it would be quite another to be forgiven a debt of $100,000,000 — that's the point, if you feel like your sins weren't really that big a deal, you are not only minimizing God's love for you, you are minimizing the significance of the cross. If you are truly a believer, at some point on your journey of faith God is going to reveal to you the essence of your decadence (your fallenness); contrary to what you may think now, that is no small matter. Because we all struggle with the idea that we are totally sinful creatures, God's love for us is not as significant in our minds and hearts as it should be. It should be noted, every believer should be conscious of the fact that God works in their lives to awaken them to the reality of their sinfulness — why would He let you live a life of delusion? How does God
awaken us to such a truth? He subjects us to difficult issues with which we struggle and argue, thus revealing how sinful we truly are... and in doing so, He brings us to that point where we start to see ourselves as He sees us. The problem we have as human beings is that we measure ourselves differently than God does; though God sees us as sinful creatures, we don't quite see things that way. In truth, we fight to defend our goodness and protect our integrity (as if we actually had some). Though we admit we are not perfect and that we occasionally stumble... we don't see ourselves as totally sinful. Some believers actually think that when they became a Christian they became “a better person” (they see that as a foundation of Christianity doctrine; but it is not); though they became “a child of God” when they placed their trust in Christ, the core of their being was and is still sinful... the difference is that they are now “saved sinners,” who have been given a mandate to fight against their sin disposition and not let it reign in their lives (cf. Rom 6:12). Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, “There is none good but God” (Lk 18:19)... Paul humbly confessed, “There is nothing good in me, that is, in my flesh... the truth is, I often do the very evil I do not wish to do, and fail to do the good I want to do” (cf. Rom 17:18-19). The only “good thing” in us as believers is the Holy Spirit who dwells within us (cf. Gal 5:17). The reason we believe we possess a degree of goodness is that our proud sin disposition (our flesh) strongly influences the discourse in our minds — it is fleshly thinking leads both the unbeliever and the believer to the same conclusion (that we possess some goodness). It should be remembered: when we became a believer God did not remove our sin disposition (the flesh) from us, and it is this disposition with which we must constantly contend and war against; that in large part is what the Christian life is all about. Though I am being somewhat repetitive on this subject, I feel the significance of it demands that it be presented from different perspectives.

Remember, we are to live by “FAITH” as believers (cf. Rom 1:17), not by human reason or our feelings; thus “we are to abandon human reason” (read Prov 3:5; 16:25; Is 55:8-9), and that is where the real battle takes place — obviously it is not an easy task; neither is it a goal that we will fully conquer in this life... it is actually a moment-by-moment battle that we must fight until that day when we are called home to glory; so it's a life-long battle (cf. 1 Tim 6:12). Remember the words of Paul: “we are transformed by the renewing of our minds” (cf. Rom 12:2) — “we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (cf. 2 Cor 10:5)... so if we are not saturating our minds with the truth (the teaching of Scripture), human reason will dominate much of our thinking (cf. Ps 1:2), and contrary to what one may think, human reasoning is always distorts the truth in some way; how could one conclude anything else? As such, Peter enjoins us to “long for the pure milk of the Word that we might grow with respect to salvation” (1 Pet 2:2); in addition to that, he exhorts us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). The GOOD NEWS for us as God's children is this — God understands our sinfulness, our unworthiness, and our weaknesses... yet still loves us & accepts us regardless of our deficiencies; the wonder of wonders is, He loves us unconditionally... and nothing in all creation can separate us from His love (Rom 8:35-39). With that in mind, God does not want “our unworthiness or our sinfulness” to be an impediment (or a hindrance) that causes us to question His love for us — though we are saved sinners, we are still sinners, and sinners sin! Since we do not fully reflect the image of Christ at this point on our spiritual journey (which should be as evident as the “sun shining in blue skies”), obviously there is still a lot of junk/sin in our lives (which is simply what it means to be a saved fallen human being; cf. Rom 7:18). The reality is, we were sinners when we came to faith in Christ, and we are still sinners... though each of us as believers should reflect more and more righteousness in this life (because of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives), the presence of indwelling
sin will be a constant thorn in our side, and humbly keep us mindful of our sinful condition. *The incredible difference is this: we are now saved sinners who are in “the process” of being transformed into the image of Christ* (that has been God’s plan for you from all eternity – cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gen 1:27), but the reality is we still have an extremely long way to go! If you question that, how significant do you think the “change” will be when God glorifies you when you enter into His presence in heaven? That should pretty much end the argument, because our transformation will be far more radical than any of us can possibly conceive. Obviously we all have an unbelievable journey before us. The Christian life is about accepting and believing the truth (Jn 8:31-32), not something we think is true or wish to be true; remember, anything that is contrary to the truth is erroneous and leads to bondage. Regrettably, some preachers preach a “false doctrine” that gets their parishioners into thinking that their lives ought to be reflecting such a radical degree of divine holiness that sin will only be a rare occurrence in their life, and that they are just a few inches away (spirually speaking) from walking on water!” That is not only nonsense, it is extremely misleading! (cf. Jam 3:1-2). By the way, if you think of sin as only actions that are overtly evil, your definition of sin is radically insufficient – Paul said, “that which is not of faith is sin” (cf. Rom 14:23)… therefore, when God’s will does not have preeminence in our mind and heart in the moment, we are walking in sin. Thus we are exhorted by Paul to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (cf. 2 Cor 10:5). The reality is, you can’t just let your mind run rampant and somehow conclude, “all is well!”

**Keeping the foregoing in mind, it is critically important that the Christian really believes that God loves him “unconditionally.”** After three years of walking with Jesus and being trained by Him, the disciples met with Jesus the night before He went to the cross… and in that meeting “He shared with them the most significant things they needed to know regarding the life He was now calling them to” — what He taught them that night is recorded in John 13-17; these five chapters are referred to as *The Upper Room Discourse* (this portion of Scripture is the most vital one in the entire Bible for the believer). Incidentally, just about everything Jesus’ disciples had learned up until this point was a little skewed and often wrongly interpreted… yet the Lord never came down hard on them for their misunderstandings and wrong thinking; He knew they were but little children, spiritually. God is well aware of our deficiencies and inadequacies and limitations (and they are excessive, my friend)… and what it takes to get us to understand divine truth after having lived the life of the flesh; no matter how you may look at, that is no easy task. To somehow think that one can attend a short little seminar on the subject of divine truth, and come away walking on water, is so ridiculous it is absolute nonsense. Jesus had been walking with His disciples for three years, and the reality was, they were still a seeming light-year away from understanding “who they really were” & “who He really was;” those two truths take a while to understand at any respectable depth. Like their Jewish counterparts, the disciples thought the Messiah was going to deliver the Jewish people from Roman oppression and establish His kingdom (though that indeed is true, it is still a future reality) — remember the message Jesus preached: “the kingdom of God/Heaven is at hand” (cf. Mt 3:2; 4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 9:35; 10:7; 12:28; and all of chap 13; also cf. Mk 1:15; 4:11, 26, 30; 10:23-25; Lk 4:43; 7:28; 9:60; Jn 3:3, 5); whereas Matthew refers to it as the “Kingdom of Heaven,” Mark, Luke & John refer to it as the “Kingdom of God;” essentially they are one and the same. Jesus’ disciples were eagerly looking forward to reigning with Him on the throne… even after the resurrection they asked Jesus: “*Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?*” (cf. Acts1:6). They didn’t come to understand much of what Jesus had been teaching them the past three years until
the Holy Spirit came upon them at Pentecost. Up until the very end the disciples were arguing among themselves which of them was “the greatest” (cf. Mk 31:34; Lk 9:46f; 22:24); a rather fleshly topic; they were consumed with “the kingdom” and what their part was going to be in it. Jesus didn’t scold them; they still had a lot of learning ahead of them. Though they had learned some things, they still had barely touched the surface on the bigger issues in life. The most poignant message Jesus taught His disciples in the Upper Room was that He was GOD (though they believed Him to be the Messiah [Christ], they had no idea that He was in fact GOD; they did not come to that understanding until the Holy Spirit opened their eyes to the fullness of that truth, some 50 days later on Pentecost). Jesus also told them that night that one of them would betray Him (all of them wondered “if they were the one” – cf. Mt 26:21-22)… that He would be leaving them (they had no idea what that would mean — “what about the kingdom?”)… that they were not only to believe in God, but believe in Him, because HE was the way, the truth, and the life… and that He would send them another helper (i.e., the Spirit of truth) to guide them into all truth (up until then their thinking would remain skewed and significantly fleshly in its orientation — that’s all human beings are capable of without the Holy Spirit). Though Jesus dumped a ton of information on them the night before He went to the cross, they were completely in the “fog” as to what He was telling them. Jesus then went on to tell them that the most significant thing they would need to do is “abide in His love for them,” without which they would not know His joy (cf. Jn 15:9-11); yet that would make no sense to them until He went to the cross… was raised from the dead… and the Holy Spirit came upon them and gave understanding to their minds and hearts (cf. Jn 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13). This raises an extremely point: “The truth that God loved them unconditionally, needed to be the very foundation of their faith.” That God loves us unconditionally is the most incredible truth in all creation, yet every one of us as believers struggles with that construct! Beloved, “if you do not abide in Christ’s love for you, neither will you experience His joy.” Lord willing that incredible truth will make more sense to you very shortly. Following is an important grammatical construct that every believer should know.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF THE INDICATIVE MOOD**

That “God loves us” is stated in the Indicative Mood in Greek — The implication of the “Indicative Mood” is that it was the grammatical way in which a person could state something that was “an absolute fact – undeniable reality,” obviously one could lie or speak without any authority whatsoever, which could invalidate his claim, but that was clearly not the case with Jesus Christ (“God’s anointed” – cf. Titus 1:2; Heb 6:18; Jn 1:14, 17; 8:45-47; 14:6; 16:7, 13; 17:17; 18:37). Remember, God asks us to “believe Him: believe the truth” — without doing so, one not only displeases God (in effect you are calling Him a “liar”), but failing to believe in Him keeps one from becoming a child of God (cf. Heb 11:6; Acts 16:31; Rom 10:9; Gal 3:6; Eph 1:13; 1 Jn 5:10); that’s why Jesus continually told people that everything He taught them was “the unadulterated truth.” Jesus often stated truth emphatically by redundantly prefacing His words with this phrase — “Truly, truly I say to you” (cf. Jn 1:51; 3:3, 5, 11; 5:19, 24-26; 6:32, 47, 53; 8:34, 51, 58; 10:1, 7; 12:24; etc.); all such teachings were very emphatic in the Greek language (you might want to study all of the “truly, truly passages” in John’s gospel and say them out loud when reading them!). The significance of the Indicative Mood is this: everything in life is to spring from that reality and be interpreted accordingly; “thus if God’s love for you is not the primary foundation of your thinking as you walk through life,” you are living your life as the unbeliever does (with a fleshly
self-orientation). The reality is, without being confident of God's unconditional love for you, you will have a very difficult time obeying the Imperatives (His commands), because they flow from the Indicatives (the fact that God really loves you). That is simply one of the amazing qualities of the Greek language; in that sense it possesses a quality unlike any other language—God obviously knew what He was doing when He made the Greek language the primary agent through which He would communicate truth to the world. The apostles frequently used the Indicative Mood when discussing what God has done...is doing...and is going to do; thus their teachings are “undeniable facts”—not maybe’s! (read 2 Tim 3:16; and 2 Pet 1:20-21). Let me quote a couple of portions of Scripture that might help give understanding to the significance of this construct. The apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter six, “You are not under law but under grace” (v.14)...you have been brought from death to life” (w.4,11)—both of those statements are Indicatives; i.e., they are statements of fact. Paul then states three Imperatives (commands that are to be grounded or based on the Indicatives): “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (v.12)...“Do not go on presenting your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness” (v.13); instead, “present yourselves to God and your members as instruments for righteousness” (v.13b). Remember, the Imperatives flow from the Indicatives, so if you do not understand the significance of being under grace as opposed to law, and what it truly means to be spiritually alive as opposed to spiritually dead, the Imperatives (commands) will not be as significant to you because the context is too vague. Obviously, the foregoing statements of fact require that we discover the significance of them, and not just casually give lip service to them; with that in mind, let's briefly expand upon the significance of law and grace.

We are not under LAW, but under GRACE; i.e., the economy under which we as believers live is not based upon some work we have done (that would be the essence of Law), it is solely based upon the work of Christ (and that is the essence of Grace). Because every human being lacks inherent goodness (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18), there is nothing we can do to merit salvation. Ask yourself this question: “What could I possibly do to cause God to look favorably upon me?” Keep in mind, the core value of fallen man is that “he is a self-centered creature who wants to run his own life, and do what he feels like doing in life” (cf. Gen 3:6; Jud 21:25; Rom 1:25; Jam 1:14; 1 Jn 2:16)—it is that didactic that has governed human beings since the fall in the Garden of Eden; contrary to what some people might think, the entire human family has “self-centered wiring.” The reality is, “it is this self-life” (the sinful life of our fallen nature; our flesh) for which Christ died, and it is this life that He also asks us to die to—if the self-life is ultimately the life you are committed to living, “you are embracing the life of fallen man” and “rejecting the life of God;” thus confirming the fact that God is not your Lord and Savior (cf. Mt 6:24; 10:38-39; 16:24-27)—though every believer struggles with dying to the self-life because of the presence of indwelling sin (i.e., the flesh), deep down in his heart he desires to live the God-life (cf. Rom 7:18-19; Gal 5:17)...if that is not the true desire of his heart, then he is not a believer. It should be obvious to each of us, the self-life is the life every unbeliever chooses to live, and the life with which every believer struggles (cf. Mt 6:10; 26:39). Now, those individuals who choose to identify with the life of Christ, they experience His grace (i.e., the salvation of the Lord & His favor upon their life); in so doing, they humble themselves before God...confess their sinfulness...place their trust in the work of Christ on the cross...and surrender their lives to Him (cf. John 3:16; Acts 16:31; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:21; 1 Jn 1:9; Jam 4:8). On the other hand, those who seek to secure salvation through obedience to the Law (i.e., by their behavior), they not only fail to experience God's grace upon their lives, they always see themselves as “not measuring up” because the Law condemns their imperfect
performance; hence “outward self-piety” increasingly characterizes their life (any performance-based lifestyle will result in a level of self-piety). Scripture is very clear — salvation cannot be attained by trying to obey the Law because man’s flesh is a barrier that keeps him from fully complying with the Law (cf. Rom 8:3); thus says Paul, “no one is justified by the Law” (cf. Gal 3:11). When a person insists on making their behavior the standard bearer in life, they naturally end up despairing of life, because it is simply not possible to meet the impeccable standards to which God has called them (absolute holiness). Some Christians have trusted the Lord for their salvation and are truly saved… “but are trying to perfect themselves by obeying the Law” (cf. Gal 3:2-3), which is simply not possible; the Christian life not only begins by placing one’s trust in Christ, it is a continual walking with Him every day by faith — Christ is not only our salvation, He is our life (cf. Phil 1:21; Col 3:4). Not only is justification attained by faith, so also is our sanctification (cf. Rom 5:1; Jn 17:17; 1 Th 5:23; 1 Pet 2:2; 3:15). The message is very clear — Don’t change the economy under which you live in mid-course; just as you began by faith, you are to continue by faith (cf. Gal 3:1-3).

The reality is this — when we accept God’s work of grace on the cross for us by faith, “God imputes the righteousness of Christ to us;” i.e., “He justifies us (literally that means to make us righteous) by faith in Christ” (cf. Rom 4:3; 5:1-2, 11; 4:16) — “our faith is reckoned as righteousness” (cf. Rom 4:5); notice, it is not our behavior that is reckoned as righteousness, but our faith. When we placed our faith in Christ, He saved us — Scripture clearly teaches, “there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12); incidentally, the embodied words are emphatically stated in the indicative mood in Greek, so don’t argue with it! The reality is this: either we rest upon the “finished work of Christ on the cross” and experience His grace and salvation, or we don’t experience it. Let me state it metaphorically: if we fail to hook our little wagon up to Jesus’ wagon we will not experience salvation, because He alone is our salvation and life (cf. Jn 1:4; 10:10; 11:25; 14:6). He is the life preserver that was thrown to us while we were drowning in sin (cf. Rom 1:16; 10:10; Col 1:13-14; 3:4; 1 Th 5:9). It is only by the incredible grace of God that we are set free from the law of sin and eternal death (cf. Rom 8:2); i.e., we are no longer subjected to the eternal ramifications of sin (death is no longer our destiny). So it is not Mount Sinai (the LAW) that inspires us, it is Mount Calvary (the CROSS)! Whereas truth is liberating, untruth keeps a person in bondage! Whereas the Law is enslaving, the God’s grace is liberating! The truth is, “there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ… because Jesus set us free (i.e., delivered) from the law of sin and death and fulfilled the Law for us” (cf. Rom 8:1-4)... “and those whom the Son sets free are free indeed!” (cf. Jn 8:36). Beloved, listen carefully, as children of God we are not forced to do anything (including serving & loving God), rather we are free to serve and love Christ of our own volition! Here is a strategic point, if God’s love for you is not incredibly significant to you, neither will your service and love be… as such, the more we “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (cf 2 Pet 3:18), the more we will choose to serve and love Him! It is the love of Christ that is to consume us and motivate us (cf. Jn 15:9; Rom 8:37f; 2 Cor 5:14; 1 Jn 4:19; Jude 1:21), not some law or the fear of punishment (that is pagan religion). It is only when we truly see the significance of all God has done for us (past tense), and continues to do for us (present tense), and is going to do for us in the future (future tense), that the practical outworking of our faith will become more and more evident. Since the truths of God’s Word are really TRUE, as believers we must build our faith upon them; we are to build our faith upon the INDICATIVES of Scripture; that is, we must build the foundation of our life and faith upon “reality” as Scripture defines it. If you question the foundational realities of Scripture, spend
“significant time” in the Word and let God Himself implant it in your soul [Jam 1:21; Acts 16:14]. Your part is to humbly study the Word… God’s part is to make it real to your soul. Your part is to believe the truth… God’s part is to convict your soul as to what is true… Your part is to act in faith… God’s part is to honor your faith make it efficacious and fruitful. One of my favorite hymns is an correlative of John Newton’s hymn, “Amazing Grace”… it is sung to the old Irish tune, “Oh, Danny Boy,” and goes like this—

Amazing grace shall always be my song of praise,
for it was grace that bought my liberty.
I do not know just why Christ came to love me so,
He looked beyond my fault and saw my need.
I shall forever lift my eyes to Calvary,
to view the cross where Jesus died for me.
How marvelous the grace that caught my falling soul;
He looked beyond my fault and saw my need.

Here’s another passage that helps give understanding to the significance of the indicative.
Paul tells the believers at Philippi to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in you, to will and to do His good pleasure” [Phil 2:12-13]. Again the Imperative flows from the Indicative: We are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (the Imperative), “knowing” that God is at work in us to will and do His good pleasure (the Indicative). The reality is this — the magnitude of the Indicative must weigh heavily upon one’s soul for it to truly be productive. That should be pretty clear to you — God is ever at work in you, and loves you unconditionally; how can that not help but inspire and encourage you to work alongside of Him? Beloved, it is not just a matter of knowing that as a forensic truth, it is a matter of making that truth a living dynamic in your mind and heart, and such requires significant reflection and meditation on that fact, where you “repeatedly affirm its reality.” Obviously, there are times when divine truth seems almost surreal in our minds — that’s simply what it means to be human; when human reasoning controls the discourse in our minds and tries to sway us from the truth (that is not at all unusual), that does not “invalidate the truth.” Some constructs of faith require significant reflection over and over again, because they cannot be fully appreciated by simply considering them for a moment. The most significant realities of the Christian faith must be “affirmed over and over again” for them to become the preeminent foundation of our faith as we walk through life. Growing in the grace and knowledge and love of Christ is a life-long process… daily you must let God’s love fill your heart and mind and feed upon its truth… it is not just enough to make it a little Sunday School exercise. We must give careful attention to the foundational truths of the Christian faith. Regarding the truth that God loves you unconditionally and is ever at work in your soul… that is a “fact” whether you believe it or not, and regardless of the depth of your spirituality! These truths are emphatically stated in the indicative mood. God is at work in the soul of every one of His children, and He is going to see us through to the end!” [cf. Phil 1:6; Rom 8:28-32; 1 Pet 5:10]. It ought to be pretty clear to every believer, if God doesn’t do the work, “it isn’t going to happen!” Some believers have a difficult time believing the incredible truths of the Christian faith because “they don’t see the evidence of it in their lives;” their “fleshy feelings” are playing too significant a role in their lives — remember, our feelings will often lead us astray; more often than not they are the by-product of our flesh. It should also be noted, “spiritual growth” is a far more complex issue than “physical growth.” Obviously believers need to have a “God-conscious awareness” that He is at work in them,
and not just believe it in a forensic sense as stated above—this needs to be a dynamic reality in your life because God “IS” at work in your soul. Go for a walk somewhere for 30 minutes and carefully just reflect upon that one didactic; your appreciation of that truth will sky-rocket in comparison to where it is right now. Thus you will grow substantially in your appreciation of how meditational exercises significantly impact your thinking, and cause you to see how important they are in your life (cf. Ps 1:2; 63:6-8). Though we are exhorted to work out our salvation, the reality is, we cannot accomplish the slightest level of sanctification (spirituality) in our own strength (that is simply not possible); it would be easier for us to broad-jump the Grand Canyon (Jn 15:5)… so we must ever be aware of “the Prime Mover” in our life. Sadly, many believers operate under the premise that at this stage in their life, everything basically depends on them… that God did His work on the cross, and now they must do their part. Beloved, if God isn’t doing a transforming work in your soul, no change will take place in your life spiritually; regardless of your efforts.

So it ought to be pretty clear: “God is the difference-maker in our lives—not us.” It is His transforming work that ultimately is going to conform us to the image of Christ (cf. Rom 8:29ff; Eph 1:5; Phil 3:21). It is only when we realize that God is truly at work in us, that “our efforts” have the slightest impact on our sanctification—how so? because for faith to be efficacious it must be grounded in the truth that God is truly at work in us… one can't simply give lip service to such a dynamic and expect to grow spiritually. If God indeed IS at work in us, how can we not help but make that incredible truth the foundation of our actions, as opposed to just pressing on as if the involvement of God really isn’t that significant? Ultimately, the believer must not only believe that God is at work in him, but that God loves him unconditionally (cf. 1 Jn 3:1; 4:10, 16; Rom 8:35-39). Keeping that in mind, on a human level, how easy is it to love or serve someone who really loves you, and would do anything for you? Do you find it difficult and burdensome to do something for someone who really loves you and is the love of your life? No you don’t… why is that? Because your affections strongly move your spirit. Thus, foundational to the fact that God is at work in you, is the truth that He loves you unconditionally, and it is “that truth” that must weigh heavily upon your soul for it to be the construct that effectively governs your life (cf. 1 Jn 4:19); “only that truth” will effectuate a change in your heart—God’s unconditional love must be the “chief construct” of your faith. Our problem as believers is that we often struggle with believing that God really loves us because of the negatives we experience in life, and therein is the number one work of Satan in the believer’s soul—“the one thing” that Satan does not want us to believe is that “God loves us unconditionally!” (cf. Gen 3:1-6; Jn 8:44e). Now if Satan was simply a rinky-dink little character without much clout, the battle wouldn't be a very difficult one… but he isn't just a little irritant we can smack around—the truth is, we cannot defeat him in our own strength; we are no match for him. When his input is combined with our fleshly minds, we are going to struggle with the truth (that's just the reality of what it means to inhabit sinful flesh). As Peter exhorts us, “Be of sober spirit. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour… resist him, firm in your faith” (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9). Did you catch that? The victory is won by faith.” How so? because faith not only involves believing God… it involves God… He is the object of our faith… and He's the one who makes our faith efficacious. Our faith isn't just a mental construct that possesses some level of power on its own… its foundation is God Himself and His incredible power; it is not as though God has placed a power within us to use as we would choose (even in a good sense). Efficacious faith completely depends and relies upon Christ and His power and His will, without which we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). The task at hand for us as be-
lievers is that of “believing & trusting God” to do as He wills — that is faith! (cf. Rom 1:17; Heb 11:6; 1 Jn 5:4; Eph 6:10, 16); “essentially efficacious faith results when we align our will with God’s will, and consent to do His will.” Obviously if God is not the most poignant reality in our faith… nothing will happen. So “God-consciousness” must be a vital aspect of our faith. If the foregoing reality isn’t the preeminent construct that governs your life, ask God to give you the grace to make it so; this is the one spiritual dynamic that must rule in your soul. Prayerfully reflect upon the truths in this paragraph over and over again until they have preeminence in your thinking.

**SIN IN THE LIFE OF THE BELIEVER**

Most believers are puzzled as to why God placed “Satan” in the Garden of Eden at creation. Remember, everything that exists is a part of the “plan of God”—we live under God’s economy; i.e., He is the One who determined “the law of the house” or “the economy under which we live.” If the God you worship is not the sovereign superintendent of all things in your thinking (by the way, that truth is stated in the indicative mood in Scripture—cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Eph 1:11; Col 1:16; Is 14:24; 46:10), you are not worshipping the God of Scripture (the God of heaven, the God of creation)… you are worshipping a god of your own making. Essentially, the reason God made Satan an integral part of the creation story is this — In eternity past, Satan was the prince of angels in the heavenly realm. God said of him, “he had the seal of perfection; he was full of wisdom and perfect in beauty… he was the anointed cherub; he was blameless in all his ways from the day he was created… and then unrighteousness was found in him; his heart was lifted up because of his beauty… he corrupted his wisdom because of his splendor (cf. Ezek 28:11-19)… he desired above everything to ascend to heaven and raise his own throne above the stars of God… and make himself like the Most High” (cf. Is 14:13-14) — obviously, it is not possible for us as “mortals” to comprehend anything of that magnitude; no doubt when we get to heaven and discuss everything with all of the heavenly creatures, we’ll then come to an understanding of eternity past and its significance on that new creation of which we are a part. According to the Bible, the resultant effect of Satan’s sin was God expelling him and a third of the entire angelic realm (i.e., his fellow cohorts) from heaven (Rev 12:4-5,7-9), and “casting him down to Sheol and to the recesses of the pit” (cf. Is 14:15; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 1:6; Rev 12:7-9)... after which God then made a “new created order” and created man in His own image, and as incredible as it may seem, He placed the serpent Satan and his angels in that new created order (cf. Gen 3:1; Rev 12:9; Eph 6:11-12).

Beloved, Satan’s presence in the Garden of Eden was no accident — God’s purpose in eternity past was to place “the entire kingdom of evil on trial,” and that trial is basically taking place in the new created order as we speak, and of which we are a part; it is the ultimate reason why we exist. The reality is, man exists because of the rebellion that took place by Satan and his minions in heaven in eternity past. Through this new created order, GOD is demonstrating His holiness, His righteousness, and the incredible wonder and power of His love, not only to those of us He made in His image (human beings), but to the entire angelic realm that preceded man’s creation. Again, in order to give contextual understanding to our existence, the reason we exist is the presence of evil in eternity past. Scripture tells us that God created everything “for His own ends” (cf. Prv 16:4; Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; Col 1:16), and that all creation is an “expression of His will, and His wisdom, and His power” (Rev 4:11); so creation is not just a fuzzy little story about a lonely God in distant space who wanted to make a people for Himself to live with Him in some eternal utopia (such thinking is found nowhere in Scripture; that is nothing but the product
of fallen human thought). At this point I would like you to carefully reflect upon “your reason for existing,” because it will radically change the way in which you look at life — again, the significance of meditation (careful contemplation) should profoundly impact your thinking; beloved, the reality is: “you don’t exist for no purpose — there is a reason for your existence.”

As the Westminster Catechism says, “man exists for the glory (and praise) of God” (Ps 19:1; Is 43:7; Rom 1:20). It was God Himself who exclaimed, “I am GOD; there is no other. I have sworn by Myself, [that at the end of the age] every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD [that word LORD is emphatic!] to the glory of God the Father” (Is 45:22-23; Phil 2:11). The reality is, God is demonstrating through the created order exactly who He is: GOD! The Lord Jesus said, at the end of the age “the accursed of God” will enter into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels (cf. Mt 25:41; Rev 21:8)… and “the blessed of God” will enter into the eternal kingdom prepared for them from the foundation of the world (cf. Mt 25:34; Rev 21:1-7). What is important is that the believer understands the “eternal nature” of things, and not just the “temporal nature” of them. By forcing everything into the “temporal realm,” one minimizes reality — [including God]— remember, God exists outside of space, mass and time; if you only see Him in the temporal realm, you are severely minimizing who He is. Beloved, the foregoing is a brief description of the creation story as presented in the first three chapters of Genesis, as well as eternity future. For a significantly more detailed contextual understanding of the reason for man’s existence, read my study “Sin & Man’s Eternal Purpose;” it’s under the “Additional Studies Link” on my website — www.TheTransformedSoul.com

Obviously, it is not possible for us as human beings to fully understand “the eternal ramifications of everything that has taken place since the foundation of the world,” but this one thing we do know, God in His sovereignty has seen fit to let everything that has happened take place; as such, it is His eternal purposes that are ultimately being accomplished in the universe (cf. Is 45:5-12, 18; 46:9-10; 55:11; Rom 11:36; Rev 22:13). Why God created us the way He did? Why He let us fall in the Garden of Eden? and why He determined our future destiny through the blood of His Son, is beyond human understanding. The reality is, “Jesus was slain from the foundation of the world” (cf. Rev 13:8; Mt 25:34) — the death of the Lord Jesus was all in the fore plan of God. When we then consider “our present earthly state as believers in Christ,” things become even more puzzling — here we are saved sinners indwelled by the Spirit of God, yet still possessing a sin disposition; it seems so illogical that both SIN & GOD (absolute corruption & absolute holiness) would reside in us? Why would God so will that we inhabit sinful flesh after He paid such an incredible price to redeem us? Why would He let an evil presence that despises Him and is completely at enmity with Him accompany us on life’s journey? (Gal 5:17). In addition to the foregoing, “Why are we called to fight against the wicked forces of darkness” and “be limited to a life of faith and not sight?” “Why is this battle before us impossible to win in our own strength?” and “Why are we called to fight this battle every waking moment?” Last, “Why is the entire angelic realm beholding everything that takes place in our lives” (cf. Lk 15:7, 10; 1 Cor 4:9; 11:10; 3:10; 1 Tim 3: 16; 5:21; 1 Pet 1:12), and why is it so mesmerized at the way in which God superintends all that is taking place in both the seen and unseen worlds?” (cf. Rev 4:8; 11; 5:9; 15:3-4; 19:1-6). When we reflect upon all that has transpired in our lives, and why God has subjected us to such perplexing conditions, from a human perspective everything seems “so strange, unreasonable & illogical.” How is it that God asks us to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), when it is not even possible to do so? (remember, as human beings we each think 30,000–60,000 thoughts a day — our minds never shut down while we are awake). Why has God so willed that
we be “constantly tempted in life” and that we be “constantly engaged in spiritual warfare”? Why doesn't He just have us fight ten skirmishes a day or a hundred skirmishes a week? (some guess that we are tempted more than a thousand times a day!). Wouldn't it be more reasonable for us to just be engaged in a limited number of battles each day? Furthermore, if God wants us to be His combatants in this universal war against evil, why doesn't He train us for battle and arrange things in such a way that we could spend part of the day getting prepared for battle and the other part of the day engaging the enemy… rather than pushing us into battle the moment we get out of bed in the morning? In addition to that, why are we called to fight against forces of darkness that are not even visible to us? And why is it that we are only able to rest from the conflict when we are sleeping? or is it possible we are even be pressured then? Doesn't that seem a bit much? It makes one wonder what else could possibly be taking place on the grand stage of the universe? Obviously, one could pose hundreds of questions, and still not be able to grasp the significance of all that is going on in that little world in which God has called each of us live. The reality is, God established “the economy” under which we live, and to insist that we can logically process all of the data with our human minds is simply foolishness (after all, we don't even understand the horrific nature of sin, let alone the supreme nature of holiness, so how would we ever come to understand all of the dynamics that exist in the universe?). It's important that we not lose sight of the fact that our human minds are but a speck of dust on the grand scale of things. So is it any wonder why God simply asks us to “walk humbly with Him”? (cf. Mic 6:8). Beloved, whatever is going on in this universe, there is no way we can wrap our minds around it. When we get to heaven our response is going to be something like this: “Oh, my goodness, I had no idea that's what was going on! There is no way I could have processed all of that!”

**Before we continue to argue too vehemently against the life God has called us to…** let's consider again all that is going on in the created order — following the expulsion of Satan and his minions from the heavenly realm, God brought forth a new created order and made human beings “in His image” (obviously, we can only understand that in a simplistic way – cf. Gen 1:27). After man’s inevitable fall in the Garden of Eden, and his continued rebellion against heaven, God sent His Son into the world to “die for these diabolical creatures,” with the ultimate goal of transforming them into the “image of Christ;” it is important to note, this was God's plan from all eternity (cf. Is 48:10; Eph 1:4, 11; 2:10; 3:11; Heb 4:3; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:20); it was not simply a reaction to an unforeseen problem. The reality is, as new creatures in Christ who inhabit sinful flesh, “we are now engaged in a non-stop war,” not only against our flesh in the interior of our soul, but against Satan and the wicked forces of darkness (cf. Rom 6:12; Eph 6:11-12). To somehow think that this is just a “silly little battle we’re fighting,” would be to completely disregard the significance of the cross and the excruciating death of God’s Son on our behalf. The reality is, as God's children “we are also participants in His universal war against evil” — never did any such war take place before, and never will there be another one hereafter… in eternity future, evil will no longer be resident in the universe (Rev 21:1-5). The magnitude of this war that takes place in the heavens transcends anything temporal man can even imagine — again, he does not even understand the essence of evil, and why it is so destructive and hideous… yet this war against evil is so essential because the consequences of it are so great. Why didn't God just instantly lower the boom on all those who refused to bend their knee in His direction? Why did God elongate the process, and make it one where the entire angelic realm and a brand new created order would each play a significant role in ultimately destroying it? The magnitude and
With the foregoing in mind, let's take a closer look at the essence of "sin in the life of the believer." Essentially sin can be viewed in two ways: there is "premeditated sin" and there is "reactionary sin." When King David had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, he committed a "premeditated sin" that ultimately resulted not only in the death of a child she conceived, but the death of her husband Uriah (2 Sam 11:1-27). Though his confession was the result of genuine contrition (Ps 51:1-17) and brought him forgiveness… the consequences of his actions were not only murderous, but became the root cause of the sinfulness that ultimately characterized other members of his family; so some sins have far-reaching effects. Scripture is very clear on this: God comes down "extra hard" on deliberate, intentional, premeditated sin — this can be seen time and time again in the Old Testament when God's people Israel committed apostasy… the resultant effect was, God dealt very harshly with them (carefully read the following passages—Deut 28:1ff & 28:15ff; 1 Chron 7:11-22). Obviously there is a significant difference between premeditated sin and reactionary sin; though both violate God's Law, premeditated sin results in "much harsher discipline." King David expressed it thus: "When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long… night and day Thy hand was heavy upon me… my vitality was drained away as with the fever-heat of summer" (Ps 32:3-4) — it was the heavy hand (pressure) of God upon David's soul that caused him to confess his transgressions and experience God's forgiveness (Ps 32:5). The Lord then told David, "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go… do not be like the horse or mule who have no
understanding, whose trappings include a bit and a bridle to hold them in check” (v. 8-9). The word of God to David essentially was this: “You shouldn’t need the harsher disciplines of life to bring you into line; I expect you to follow My instructions, and not be like an animal without understanding.” Beloved, should you or I sit down and “plan some sin,” you need to realize that God will ultimately deal with us accordingly; it is not possible for us to escape the consequences of some evil we may perform — God’s eyes are ever upon us as His children (cf. Prv 5:21; 15:3; Ps 32:8; 33:18; 101:6; 33:18). He is ever watching us… He understands all our thoughts… He scrutinizes our path… He is acquainted with all our ways… and never takes His eyes off of us (cf. Ps 139:1-6). Topically, premeditated sins would include things like the sin of adultery, murder, committing a crime, theft, taking revenge, lying under oath, committing apostasy, abandoning God’s people, being engaged in a sinful exploit, intentionally withholding pertinent information in order to make a sale, working in a sinful workplace, etc. The reality is, sometimes God waits for us to “make amends” for some wrong we have done… at other times He lets us “fully reap” what we have sown… one thing is sure, He deals with each of us accordingly (cf. Jam 4:6).

In contrast to the premeditated sins there are the “reactionary sins;” these are the sins that dominate so much of the believer’s life and constitute the vast majority of his sins. It is one thing to sin intentionally and deliberately after considering a matter; it is quite another to sin in the spur of the moment when your flesh instantly controls the discourse in your mind. Principally, reactionary sins occur when we dwell on thoughts that make us angry, are condemning, unloving, disturbing, selfish, judgmental, accusatory, egocentric, depressing, lustful, demeaning, irritable, demeaning, arrogant, impatient, jealous, worrisome, etc. (cf. Jam 3:2). Paul addressed his struggle with just such sins in Romans chapter seven when he said — “I don’t do the things I want to do; instead I do the very things I hate… thus it is the sin which indwells me (i.e., my flesh) that wins so many of the battles in my life. The truth of the matter is, there is nothing good in my flesh… thus, I often do the very evil I do not wish to do” (cf. Rom 7:15-20). The reality is, as believers we are a composite of both good and evil (both flesh and spirit), and the two entities are at enmity against each other (cf. Gal 5:17); hence, the ongoing spiritual war that takes place in the believer’s soul. The reality is, “we don’t sin because we are forced to sin, we sin because we choose to sin, and the reason we choose to sin is because we want to sin” (i.e., our flesh wants to sin). It is precisely this that every believer (including the apostle Paul) struggles with. The long and short of it is, the Christian life essentially is a matter of “saying no to the flesh — dying to the flesh,” not letting it reign in our members (cf. Rom 6:12-13; 12:1-2; Heb 12:1-2; 1 Pet 2:24); obviously that is a “significant challenge” for all of us — just as Paul struggled with it, you and I struggle with it. The only thing good in us is the Holy Spirit, and “it is only when we walk in the Spirit that we will not fulfill the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16); to claim anything else is foolish. Like many of us, Paul probably got very angry with himself when he would stumble; having been a Pharisee of the Pharisees no doubt perfectionism was an exacerbating problem for him… thus he was his own worst enemy… just because he had become a Christian didn’t mean all the junk in his trunk was removed from him… he had to learn to deal with all the issues of the flesh just like you and me. One of the most common phrases I use pretty much every day is, “Ekstrand, don’t go there!” There are so many things in this world that “get under my skin.” I am constantly confronting them in my soul. I can hear Paul saying the same thing, “Paul, don’t go there!” The key is to instantly close shop on fleshly thinking, and open the glorious vault of heavenly thinking.

Let us reflect again upon Paul’s words to the Galatians — “If you will walk by the Spirit, you will not carry out the desires of the flesh… the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the
Spirit against the flesh; they are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things you please (i.e., feel like doing)” (cf. Gal 5:16-17). The truth is, we were all born with a propensity to sin; that is, to let our feelings and human reason rule in our soul (cf. Ps 51:5; 53:2-3; 58:3; 143:2; Prv 20:9; Ecc 7:20; Rom 3:23). So sin essentially works like this in our lives: we sin when we embrace the voice of the flesh (human reason) and reject the God-conscious voice in our soul. The reality is, when the voice of the flesh controls the discourse in our minds, sin is inevitable… at least on the “thought level” (cf. Mt 5:27-28; Phil 4:8-9). What I find significant about Paul’s testimony regarding the presence of sin in his own life, is that he was not only upfront about “the problem,” he clearly defined “the solution.” You’ll notice he didn’t try and conceal the fact that he had a sin problem; not at all! He had the integrity to identify it for what it was. Obviously he had done everything in his power to overcome it (praying, fasting, pleading with God, and trying to walk by faith one-hundred percent of the time); in doing so, it became very clear to him that “sin had a permanent presence in his life” (just as it does in your life and my life). As Paul looked down the highway of sin in his life, he cried out to the Lord, “Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death; i.e., the flesh?” (cf. Rom 7:18, 24). He then goes on to give us the answer — “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Rom 7:25). Notice the significance of his answer — “There is no longer any condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus… He has set us free from the law of sin and of death!” (Rom 8:1-2). It is only when we understand and glory in the significance of the cross and God’s love for us, that we are set free from the valley of despair and defeat because of the presence of indwelling sin (i.e., the flesh) in our lives. Paul was not suggesting that his flesh would now no longer be a problem to him, or that he would no longer sin… but that the glory of the cross and God’s unconditional love for him were of such significance to his faith, that trying to live a life of perfection (i.e., a life based on his performance) was now completely removed from the driver’s seat of his life… that was no longer the goal of his life; “his goal was now boasting in his weaknesses and the glory of knowing Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17; 12:9-10; Gal 6:14). Though the presence of indwelling sin tries to drag us down to despair and death, it need not do so in our lives— we must simply redirect our focus! We cannot stay fixed on our sinfulness and our performance; instead we must focus on the incredible glory of the cross & God’s love for us! and realize that our stumbling in life is no longer a barrier that separates us from God! So we must stop treating our sinfulness as something that is so devastating and ruinous that it is somehow approaching the reaches of God’s love and grace. The reality is, we are extremely weak creatures with a lot of flaws that God is completely mindful of! Does that mean we make light of sin? and develop an attitude toward it that makes it more tolerable and acceptable? and stop being concerned about the negatives in our lives? (Rom 6:1). No! says Paul. Absolutely not! (Rom 6:15). Just because we are under grace, and not law, doesn’t mean that we disregard how we live our lives. On the contrary, when we properly understand and embrace the love & grace of God, it opens our minds and hearts to the most liberating and motivating dynamics of the Christian faith, “and lets us enter into that rest that God wants us to experience” (cf. Hebr 4:9-16). Obviously if God’s love for you doesn’t trump your sinfulness, you’re bearing a burden God never intended you to bear. Every day as believers we need to humbly affirm who we really are (sinners – that is simply the reality), and joyfully affirm who God is (our Lord and Savior who loves us unconditionally; remember Paul’s incredible words: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”). When sin causes you to despair, turn to the Lord and repeat Paul’s words, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ!” (cf. Rom 7:25). Let Paul’s words become a dynamic mantra in your life! — it’s not as though there is “magic” in the words themselves (that’s paganism), but that the truth of those words are a “dynamic reality!”
As a believer, either you live in the light of truth, or you walk in untruth (depressing darkness). Beloved, think about it: you are going to sin; the question is, “How are you going to handle it?” If your behavior dominates the discourse in your mind, you will never enter God’s rest… because your behavior is never going to be sufficient and praiseworthy. Spiritually speaking, we are like crippled people on crutches; we’ll never run a hundred yards in ten seconds… so stop focusing on your deficiencies and inadequacies, and focus on Christ (cf. Heb 12:1-2).

The message is clear – if we are “not confident” that God truly loves us and has extended eternal grace to us, we will not experience that rest; instead we will walk through life fearful that our performance is so deficient we simply cannot experience His love and grace and rest. The truth that “grace is greater than our sin” (cf. Rom 5:20) is incredibly liberating… were it not liberating, we would have an insurmountable problem (cf. Jn 8:31-32). Since the life to which we are called is one of faith (cf. Rom 1:17; Heb 11:6), we must wholly embrace the foundations of our faith, and thereby experience the wonder of God’s love and grace. Perhaps the question you are wrestling with is this: How do I know that God really loves me? After all, I’m a mess! Aside from the fact that Scripture tells us that God loves us, there is the incredible fact that God has forgiven us over and over again in life… and every time He forgives us, it gives credence to the fact that He really does love us. How do I know God loves me? “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so,” and then there is the fact that He has never stopped forgiving me, no matter how much I have screwed up in life; so I not only know God loves me because the Bible says so, I know He loves me by experience. As Peter declared, “We must grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18)—without really believing in God’s love and grace, our lives will be characterized by despair and defeat, because sin will always be a part of the Christian experience; so either you are going to glory in the incredible love of God, or you are going to groan over your miserable performance. There are only two options on the board—glory or groan! It should be pretty obvious to all believers, “the only problem we have in life is a sin problem, and everyone of us has it!” And contrary to what any believer might claim, that problem isn’t going away until we arrive at the pearly gates (heaven’s door). Though Satan will do everything he can to keep us discouraged and despairing and groaning, we don’t have to live there; “we are to fight the good fight of faith!” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12; Rom 1:17). It is only when we reach heaven’s gate, that our sin disposition will be jettisoned from us, and no longer be a disconcerting reality in our lives. Aside from confessing your sins to the Lord when you stumble, the big question you need an answer to is this: “How are you personally going to handle your sinfulness in life?” How do you see yourself, and how do you really see God? Do you see yourself as a saved sinner who continues to sin, or do you see yourself as a spiritual wreck who should be doing much better? Do you see God as one who sympathizes with your weaknesses, and understands that you are but dust? (cf. Heb 4:15; Ps 103:14), yet loves you so much He went to the cross for you, and has told you He will never abandon you or give up on you? (cf. Rom 8:35-39; Phil 1:6). Your conduct of faith must be such that you see your sinfulness for what it really is (the by-product of a fallen human being who has only traveled a few miles on the road to glory). Prayerfully study the last few paragraphs until you are really confident of your answer — remember confidence is an integral part of faith (cf. Heb 11:1), and God is the one who places it in our soul when we humbly reflect upon the truth.

I am reminded of the apostle Paul’s struggle with his flesh when he refused to let a young man named John Mark accompany him and Barnabas on a missionary trip, because Mark had left them in the middle of a ministry in which they had previously been involved (cf. Acts 12:12, 25; 13:5, 13); whatever his reason for leaving was, it presented a problem to Paul and he wasn’t willing
to give Mark a second chance. Scripture tells us that Paul & Barnabas “sharply disagreed with each other” about John Mark’s going with them on their next journey (cf. Acts 15:39; those words are emphatic in Greek). In case you have forgotten, long before Paul's conversion Barnabas had sold a tract of land during the early days of the church and gave all of the money to the apostles to help meet some pressing needs (Acts 4:36-37)… his personality was such that the early apostles called him “Son of Encouragement” — he appears to have been a very warm, caring person who was loved by the entire Christian community. Yet, here was Paul vehemently arguing against Barnabas’ desire to have young John Mark accompany them again; the disagreement ultimately led to their separating and no longer participating in ministry together… instead Paul chose a man named Silas to be his new associate. It should be noted, that less than a year before Paul was to be executed in Rome where he was imprisoned, he asked his friend Timothy to bring young John Mark with him when he came to visit “because he is useful to me for service” (2 Tim 4:11). Obviously Paul was “a very strong, tough, no-nonsense, in-your-face kind of guy,” who even opposed Peter to his face at one point (cf. Gal 2:11)… yet he was steadfast in his devotion to God and His Word. Before he became a Christian, Paul was educated under one of the most highly- regarded Jewish teachers, Gamaliel, and became involved in persecuting those Jews who had abandoned Judaism and embraced Christianity (Acts 9:1ff; 22:3-5). So Paul was not only a man of extremely strong fiber whom God used to accomplish a great work of ministry, he was a man who continually had to deal with the stubbornness that seemed to characterize the interior core of his being (cf. Rom 7:18; Jam 3:2). Just because we become Christians doesn’t mean our fleshly core becomes something with which we no longer have to contend. Not at all… our old inward disposition is something with which we must continue to wrestle our entire life; that is simply a part of the “spiritual warfare” to which God has called us (in that regard Paul was no different than you and me). It might be worth mentioning — “Paul was not given a fast track to divine truth after his conversion on the road to Damascus” (as some might suspect); we are told in the first two chapters of Galatians that in spite of his brilliant mind he spent more than fifteen years preparing for the work of ministry that God was calling him to. So here was the most brilliant, astute theologian in the history of the church studying Scripture for more than fifteen years! Let the foregoing give contextual understanding to Romans 7 & 8 as you read it. Ultimately, Paul became the author of fourteen New Testament epistles; therefore, one could say that the apostle Paul was the Einstein of Christian theology… though he was a man of incredible brilliance, it was God who had bestowed on him such brilliance, yet in spite of his brilliance he still needed to study diligently so that God could use the product of his work effectively (cf. 2 Tim 2:15)… and we have been “extremely blessed” because of it.

Obviously the “spiritual war” that takes place in the interior of our being is of such a magnitude that we often stumble and fall (cf. Jam 3:2) — the reality is, we are often overwhelmed in the moment by our flesh and we fall. In this sense, our sinning is basically “reactionary” — that is, the situation before us ignites the flesh, and in a very short period of time we sin (an example of it would be “quickly getting angry at someone or some thing”). It should be noted, if in that moment we are “walking by the Spirit,” in all likelihood we would not capitulate and stumble because of the intimate communion we are experiencing with Him… but due to the fact that walking in the Spirit requires “intentionality,” it is not the ongoing moment-by-moment habit of our lives; there's nothing automatic about walking in the Spirit as some might be inclined to believe. The reality is, the flesh is so prominent and persistent in our lives that we often entertain and consider the fleshly thoughts that are interjected into our minds. It's important to remember,
as human beings we think between 30,000 and 60,000 thoughts every day — our minds never rest while we are awake — and the vast majority of our thoughts are interjected into our minds by the flesh (though some thoughts may be neutral, like tending to some level of work, many of them are not); as such, Paul says to “take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), and redirect our thinking by “dwelling on those things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and of good repute” (cf. Phil 4:8). As alluded to earlier, the reactionary thoughts we often struggle with are thoughts that are disturbing, discouraging, judgmental, unloving, accusatory, egocentric, depressing, critical, anger, selfish, lustful, malicious, condescending, demeaning, irritable, arrogant, impatient, jealous, worrisome, envious, etc. (cf. Jam 3:2). Though the weather might be tumultuous in our exterior world, it can also be tumultuous in our interior world — it is precisely here in our inner world where we are often most conflicted and troubled. It should be obvious to everyone, we are a people of little faith who stumble quickly and frequently (i.e., we stumble in the moment). For those of you who are inclined to minimize the ongoing presence of the flesh in your life, let me simply say you have been misled. This battle against our flesh is the mother of all battles, and frequently it throws us on our backside. For those of you who have been in a significant fist fight against a strong opponent, you can identify with this — difficult fights not only involve hitting someone, they involve getting hit! Thus more often than not one comes away from a fight with a few bumps & bruises and a bloody nose. Surely you are not of the opinion that spiritual warfare is so lopsided in our favor that we never take a beating?

**By the way, since when is “death” such a simple, pain-free experience?** Well, just as the Lord Jesus suffered in the flesh for us… He calls us to suffer as well (cf. Mt 16: 24; Rom 8:17; 1 Cor 15:31; Phil 1:29; 3:10; Heb 12:1-4; 1 Pet 2:21; 3:8-11; 4:1, 13; 5:10). Jesus died for our sin, i.e., He paid the penalty for our sin that we might be justified (made righteous) before God… conversely, He asks us to die to our sin that we might live to the praise of His glory (cf. Rom 6:12, 13; 19; 12:1-2; 1 Pet 2:24). If these are difficult constructs for you, let me encourage you to read two studies I did titled — The Dynamics of Genuine Faith & The Game Changer. You can find both of these studies under the “Additional Studies Link” on my website: [www.TheTransformedSoul.com](http://www.TheTransformedSoul.com). Regarding the prayer of reflection I mentioned a few pages ago, you may need to reflect upon it (or one you have put together) three or four times a day for a month for it to penetrate deep into your soul and become the foundation of your faith. Significant truths require serious meditation for them to be correctly understood and embedded in your soul. Since none of us have a perfect faith (that is, simply embrace unadulterated truth), we need to humbly spend significant time in the Word examining the constitution of our life and our faith, as well as those errors in our thinking that are troublesome and perplexing to us (divine truth is not like simplistic third-grade arithmetic… it is a lot deeper than that and requires careful reflection, so that the Holy Spirit can minister its truth to our heart). If God’s love for you is not the foundation of your faith (rather, it is just a forensic truth) you have turned Christianity into religion and not a relationship with Christ (cf. Jn 15:5, 9-13). Though you may believe God loves you in a forensic sense (every believer believes that), unless the truth of that didactic is a living dynamic in your soul, it will not profoundly affect your life here on earth; you may be a believer, but you are not experiencing an intimate relationship with Christ (it’s like being married without being intimate; there is too much distance between you and your spouse; you fail to communicate at a deep level with each other; you are simply too private).

The second reason believers doubt God’s love is “the painful circumstances” He subjects them to — after all, no one hurts someone they love (or do they?). Obviously that particular
construct does not fully correspond with divine truth — it is simply the logic of fallen human thought. According to Scripture, “God disciplines those whom He loves” (Heb 12:5ff), and such discipline is not a pleasant, pain-free experience (cf. Heb 12:11). The word “discipline” in Greek (paideia) literally refers to the “training/education/instruction/correction” that children are subjected by their parents and guardians when growing up (cf. 2 Tim 2:25; 3:16; Acts 22:3; Titus 2:12; also Prov 13:14; 22:15; 29:15); obviously, it is to their benefit that they are disciplined or they would not become mature adults. Beloved, you and I are “God’s children,” and God is committed to transforming us into the image of His Son (cf. Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18), and the process is a life-long one (it happens little by little). Furthermore, the primary agents God uses to bring about this transformation are trials and tribulation — and, believe it or not, they are profound teachers… without such teachers we would neither grow in our character, our faith, or in our love for God. I find “the impact of trials upon our faith” very interesting — though “big trials” can have a significant positive impact upon our faith, “small trials” not so much (perhaps one could say that 500 small trials carry the weight of one big trial; I don’t know exactly what that number is, but I would think it is something like that), and it is the seemingly daily agitations that frustrate us so much. Let me share a few examples of the small trials that we’re subjected to (obviously some of them are more significant than others)— our computer shuts down and we can’t get it restarted… we’re in a hurry to get somewhere and something interrupts our world (heavy traffic, long lines, problems we have to immediately attend to)… we accidentally lock the keys in the car… we drop a coffee cup on the rug and have to get it quickly cleaned up… the watering system in the backyard doesn’t come on as programmed… our car won’t start… we forget to set the alarm to rise early for an important meeting… the air-conditioning system malfunctions… we misplace our wallet… we lose a credit-card somewhere while shopping… our favorite sports team suffers a pain-staking loss… the clothes-washer stops working in mid-stride… when we go to pickup our prescriptions we discover the doctor failed to authorize a new dosage (and obviously some of them are more significant than others) — our computer shuts down and we can’t get it restarted… we’re in a hurry to get somewhere and something interrupts our world (heavy traffic, long lines, problems we have to immediately attend to)… we accidentally lock the keys in the car… we drop a coffee cup on the rug and have to get it quickly cleaned up… the watering system in the backyard doesn’t come on as programmed… our car won’t start… we forget to set the alarm to rise early for an important meeting… the air-conditioning system malfunctions… we misplace our wallet… we lose a credit-card somewhere while shopping… our favorite sports team suffers a pain-staking loss… the clothes-washer stops working in mid-stride… when we go to pickup our prescriptions we discover the doctor failed to authorize a new dosage (and he is now on vacation)… our kids fail to show-up at an agreed upon location and are over an hour late… our home undergoes water damage during a recent rainstorm and it didn’t come to our attention until a week later… our insurance company refuses to pay for some damage we recently incurred… the car dealership tells us our car is no longer under warranty… our mechanic can’t get around to fixing our car for another three days and he doesn’t have a loaner vehicle for us… we’re in a hurry to get somewhere and the light turns red again, and again and again and again (joy! ☹)… and then there all of the slowpokes who drive in the fast lanes, and the texting maniacs who actually stop at green lights! Obviously, we each have different tolerant levels… some people don’t mind living in a mess, others are neat freaks… some people are slobs, others can’t stand sloppiness. Each of us tend to have our own set of agitations that we must live with, and that produce a significant level of angst in our soul.

My thinking is this — it takes more than a hundred of these little irritants to move our faith even one percent in a positive direction… the reality is, “we are very slow learners” (by the way, God knows that, and He is very patient with us). The agitations that we are subjected to in life, though frustrating, aren’t as impactful as we may think they are… on the other hand, they do move us in a right direction (even though we may not deal with them as we think we should — remember, the flesh has a very strong presence in our lives; to claim anything to the contrary is foolish). In light of the fact that small trials dominate so much of what goes on in life, “God is ever at work in our soul slowing transforming us into the image of Christ” (cf. Rom 8:28-30; Phil 2:13; 1 Cor 15:10). The author of Hebrews warns us “to not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord”
(Heb 12:5-6; Prv 3:11-12; 13:24); to regard it lightly is to downplay its significance and deny its importance in your life — the reality is, it is incredibly significant. Every trial we go through in life (big or small) has been ordained by God for the expressed purpose of moving our life in a right direction (in spite of the fact that we might even argue vehemently against it). Beloved, if you are truly interested in really moving your life forward in Christ (i.e., “growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ” — 2 Pet 3:18), you need to learn to “embrace the negatives” that God places in your life for the expressed purpose of growing your faith (cf. Rom 5:3-4; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12-13; 5:10). Remember, all the trials we go through in life are “faith related;” that’s the reason we are subjected to them… they are sent into our lives for the expressed purpose of growing our faith, and removing the dross from it… not to punish us for some wrong we have done. No where in Scripture do we find “God punishing His children” (He punished unbelieving Israel, but not the believing remnant); instead “He disciplines His children.” Though the two actions may be equally painful, the reason for each of these actions is different — retribution vs. correction… unbelievers are punished, whereas believers are disciplined. It is only when we grow in the knowledge of God’s love for us (cf. 1 Jn 4:16), that we will grow in our appreciation of the difficulties He sends our way, and actually consider them joy (cf. Jam 1:2:3) because of their supreme importance in transforming our lives. The truth is, without “abiding in God’s love” (Jn 15:9-11)— that is, believing that every action He is taking in our lives is for our good — we will never respond with joy to the trials He places in our life (cf. Rom 8:28). So either we grow in God’s love and experience His joy and His peace, or we live according to the dictates of the flesh and experience frustration, discouragement and anxiety. Keeping that in mind, James encourages us with these words, “if you will draw near to God, He will draw near to you” (cf. Jam 4:8; 1 Jn 3:1-3). It is also important to remember, “as long as we inhabit sinful flesh on this planet, we will never arrive in the Christian life (i.e., achieve a state of perfection), thus, we’re continually enjoined to grow as Christians;” that’s why the apostle Peter exhorts us to “grow in salvation and grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (cf. 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). So weather you are ten years old in the faith, or a hundred years old in the faith, “growth” is always God’s call upon your life — be you a pope, a pastor, a professor, a painter, a plumber, a potter, a parent, a pupil, a prince, or a princess! 😊

THE BELIEVER AND INDWELLING SIN

In the “Sermon on the Mount” the Lord Jesus said, “if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out” (cf. Mt 5:29)... at a later point He went on to tell His disciples to “take whatever disciplinary action is necessary to keep from stumbling” (cf. Mt 18:9). The reality is, as believers we each have a number of inherent weaknesses (cf. Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 12:7-9), and some of them are so pronounced we need to give very careful attention to them… to proudly insist that we don’t have any fleshly problems or weaknesses is to simply deny the truth — humble yourself and admit your condition. Essentially, Jesus reminded His disciples that they needed to be very much aware of those things that “caused them to sin,” since the grammatical construct is in the present tense; the emphasis is on those issues that are a constant problem to them… thus His admonition to them was this: “Take drastic measures regarding those issues that are a constant thorn in your side... remove every temptation to evil, no matter what the cost.” The apostle Paul expanded upon this teaching by telling Christians that anything that causes them to stumble, or caused others to stumble (cf. Rom 4:13, 21; 1 Cor 8:9, 13; Phil 2:3-4), needed to be removed from their lives. Jesus had exhorted His
disciples to “deal radically with sin, and strike at the root of any unholy disposition,” thus eliminating those things that are extremely difficult for them to handle. The message is clear: if there is something that continually defeats you, humbly remove it from your life. Here is a short list of common issues with which believers are prone to struggle — issues that anger you and ignite your flesh, politics, television programs, sports, certain people, newspaper, internet, sexual temptations, possessions, drugs and alcohol. It was precisely this didactic that caused many in the ancient world to become a recluse or move into a monastery — they felt if they could simply remove themselves from much of the world, the temptations they were experiencing would no longer trouble them; as a catholic friar Martin Luther discovered, “Satan can climb fifty-foot walls!” So to somehow think that one can find a little oasis somewhere in the world where temptation would no longer be a problem to them, is simply foolishness. What Jesus was addressing was “that issue” (or issues) that constantly won the day in their soul and caused them to stumble. By way of application, let’s assume “the daily newspaper” that’s delivered to your house is the first thing you give your attention to in the morning — that and a cup of coffee are not only the synergistic dynamics that help kick-start your day, they frequently keep you from spending quality time in the Word. If that’s the case you need to remove it from your life (i.e., cancel your subscription) — guess what? you just sent one of the instruments that causes you to stumble out the door! So what are you now going to do with “your coffee time” each morning? Try replacing it with studying God’s Word for thirty-minutes every morning for “one month” (notice I didn’t emphasize reading God’s Word like you would a newspaper 😊). The reason I mentioned “one month,” is that it is often the amount of time that is necessary to change a learned behavior.

Let’s move on to another issue that is troubling to the human family: the issue of “sexual lust & sexual sin” (it was precisely this issue that Jesus was addressing in Matt 5); again, you need to eliminate anything that “significantly contributes to your stumbling in this area;” not doing so means your flesh will overpower you in the moment and win the day. The reality is, sexual lust is a powerful presence in the lives of most people — it has been a problem since the beginning of time; it is simply a part of the very fiber of our being (our flesh). Over and over again in Old Testament times “sexual sin” caused immense problems. Let me give context to this issue — remember, we are “sexual creatures;” that’s the way God made us; that’s the way we are wired (cf. Gen 1:28). Every creature God made (be it animal or human) is a sexual creature; every human being is sensually attracted to the opposite sex. It was in the Garden of Eden that sin manifested itself in the human heart and perverted God’s creatures. Time doesn’t permit us to expand upon all the ramifications of our fallenness… the reality is, sexual sin has been a significant problem in the human family since the Fall of Adam and Eve. Essentially, the three main problems with which the human family struggles are SEX, MONEY & POWER. The apostle John said, “All that’s in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, are not of the Father, but are of the world” (cf. 1 John 2:16) — the lust of the flesh would be the passions we have and the need for sensual gratification… the lust of the eyes are all of the possessions we seek, be they monetary goods, or personal appearance and pomp… and the pride of life is the position of being the governor of one’s life and giving inordinate value to social standing and self-glorification. Sex, Money & Power are often identified by the terms Pleasure, Prosperity & Pride — these three core values dominate the landscape of the human soul… “every human ‘want’ fits into one of these three categories.” It was precisely these three issues that Satan tempted Jesus with in the wilderness (cf. Mt 4:1-11); as Scripture attests, “He was
tempted in all ways such as we, but did not sin” (Heb 4:15). First He was tempted with satisfying His physical appetite (i.e., His inward sensual pleasures in verses 3-4)... next, He was tempted with personal gain (i.e., prosperity and possessions in verses 5-7)... and last, He was tempted with power and glory (i.e., with pride and position in verses 8-10).

If you would carefully analyze “television programming” in our country, you would see that “the three chief dynamics that define our culture are Sex, Money & Power!” There's hardly a show on that stupid tube that doesn't emphasize these values. Though these three issues have always been the chief characteristics of the human heart, our culture today has made them far more visible and pronounced than they were just fifty years ago, to the point where the majority of Americans now publicly embrace them; i.e., they no longer bring shame to the vast populous of our country... and many “believers” are tracking with the world. For 250 years our society promoted biblical values, whereas the bulk of our society today actually despises them... how did we as a society completely reverse its values so quickly? Though some Christians might be inclined to think that “the issues mentioned above are not that big a problem to them,” they simply need to take a look at them in a more revealing light, and consider the ramification of these issues on their own life—they need to look at the practical value they place on their possessions (i.e., how prone are they to dress to the hilt; how generous are they in sharing their wealth with others, as opposed to building their own estate; and how significant is their weekly tithe; remember the words of Jesus: “to whom much is given, much shall be required” [read Lk 10:30-37]; the reality is, we are each stewards of “God's property” [God owns everything in the universe], and He is going to hold us all accountable for everything He entrusted to us—cf. Lk 12:48; Jn 3:27; 1 Cor 4:2, 7)—the logic ought to be clear, “He entrusted things to you for a purpose” (reflect on that thought); at the end of time God is going to reveal all of the ways in which you were faithful (selfless) and all of the ways in which you were unfaithful (selfish—cf. Lk 16:1-8; 12:42). Next, they need to consider how important it is that they be esteemed by others, rather than others thinking lowly of them and not respecting them. Last, they need to reflect upon how they satisfy their sexual passions? And how troubling the matter of sexual gratification is to them, and then consider what steps they take (if any) “to keep themselves only unto their spouse as long as they both shall live?”

Let me summarize the human condition with which all of us suffer—because of our fallenness we give inordinate value to wealth & possessions (cf. Lk 12:13-34; Acts 5:1-11; 2 Cor 9:6-15; 1 Jn 3:17-18)... we insist on governing our own lives (cf. Mt 16:24-27; Gal 2:20; 6:2, 9; Phil 2:3-4; Col 3:17)... and we want to gratify our sensual passions (cf. 1 Cor 6:13-20; 7:1-4, 8-9; Eph 5:1-5; Col 3:5; 2 Pet 1:5-11). Beloved, because of the FLESH we are naturally greedy, selfish, immoral creatures. Contrary to what some may think, when we were saved, God never removed our flesh from us (i.e., our sin disposition from us); as such, we inhabit sinful flesh... that ought to be pretty clear, because we all stumble over and over and over again every single day. God asks us to “die to our flesh and die to sin;” that is the “spiritual war” to which we have been called (cf. Rom 6:6, 12-14; 12:1-2; 13:14; Gal 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; Heb 3:13; 12:1-2). The reality is, proudly denying the severity of our problem (as is the custom of a significant number of believers) will only keep a person in bondage. It is only when we humbly live in the light of truth that we experience God's liberation in our soul (cf. Jn 8:31-33). Remember, “God only gives grace to the humble” (cf. Jm 4:6), and His call upon the lives of human beings has always been to “walk humbly with Him” (cf. Mic 6:8). Obviously as believers, we don't all suffer from each of these issues with the same degree of intensity... we don't live in a world where all things are equal; some have been given a more favorable lot
in life, and others a less favorable lot. If your lot in life happens to be a less favorable one, the seeming inequity might be perplexing to you, and can cause you to question the integrity of the system and the economy under which you live. The reality is, we all differ in numerous ways—we don't have the same degree of health and wealth, our physical and mental capacities differ, our giftedness and skill-sets differ, our education and breaks in life differ, our personalities and psychological makeups differ, our attractiveness and looks differ, the infirmities and problems with which we are called to live differ; obviously the list can go on ad infinitum. Some people were born with a gold spoon in their mouth... others were not. Some people, regardless of their wealth and looks, experience horrific depression and pain in their soul. Are all of these differences fair? Not many of us would say they are... but an answer regarding those disparities will not be forthcoming until we enter into the eternal state. The reality is, we can't change the hand we were dealt; we can grumble all day, but that's not going to change things one iota, and continual grumbling will simply make us angry and miserable. Therefore the question is this, Can we accept our lot in life? Can we accept the fact that all things are not equal? Can we trust that God has a purpose in it all and that He has a very unique calling upon each of our lives? Suppose you were to lose your sight and become incapacitated due to some accident next week, and that you would lose your job and all your possessions because of a law-suit—how would you handle it? What if you were completely innocent? (cf. Job 1:21; 2:10; 1 Sam 2:7-8; 1 Cor 4:7). Would you rejoice in your circumstances (God's call upon your life), or would your sin disposition argue so strongly to the contrary that you would simply despair of life? (cf. Jam 1:2-4). For those of you have never gone through a debilitating experience, you might honestly say you have no idea how you would respond. The truth is, how could you know? You've never been down that road. The reality is, the presence of indwelling sin often rules in our soul and wins the day when our world is turned upside down. Sometimes the internal pressure we experience can be extremely intense; at other times, not so much. In some cases, the issues with which we are called to live are far more challenging to us than others, and require far more radical action in order that we might overcome them. Whatever your lot in life may be, you must deal with the Possessions, Position & Internal Pleasures with which God has called you to live.

**Now with all of the foregoing in mind,** it was the "pretense" with which so many believers lived in the church of my childhood that caused me to question the integrity of my faith: incidentally, the church in which I was raised was a very vibrant one—on that score, I could not have been more blessed; I loved my friends. The war in my soul, however, was very disconcerting to me because my life didn't measure up to the life others were professing to live; essentially, the message they were communicating was this: "sin was not a problem in their life;" but it was clearly a problem in my life. So "the Christian community of which I was a part was pretending to be what they were NOT—GOOD!" Remember, "only God is good" (cf. Lk 18:19). Though their pretense may have had a degree of innocence to it (i.e., they were simply hiding their own shame), nevertheless their pretense still posed a problem... and it was their pretense that did such a dis-service to me and a significant number of believers in the Christian world. The resultant effect was, many Christians struggled unduly with their faith (including many in leadership, because they knew their faith didn't measure up to what they thought it should, and that the interior of their lives reflected that). The truth is, any time one is "playing-acting," he is misleading people (in spite of the fact it may not be intentional); with that in mind, don't pretend to be this pious saint that you are not! “Humility” (not pride) is be the chief characteristic of the Christian family. If the Christian community was open and honest and transparent, believers would not only hunger for the truth, they would gravitate to it as the apostles did to Jesus; thus they would
be far more inclined to press on in their faith, in spite of the fact that the war they are called to fight is a difficult one. On the other hand, when “pretense” is the order of the day, it not only misleads but discourages its adherents, because untruth never encourages believers. I come down extremely hard on this principle, because it was precisely this issue that caused me to jettison the Christian life and run amuck in my younger years. The dishonesty and lack of integrity in the Christian world (though they did not knowingly or purposefully mislead) was very damaging to its adherents—ultimately, the pretentious behavior of the so-called mature caused the vast majority of believers to act as if they possessed a fairly significant degree of practical righteousness and godliness; in a word, it is referred to as “false piety.” It doesn’t take a theological degree to see its negative impact upon the church (i.e., “God’s called-out ones”). So here was the Christian community, thinking that its expressed piety was actually a positive, when in fact it was a negative. Would the believing world have changed its behavior patterns if it knew it was a negative? Probably not, because most old people are so entrenched in their beliefs and values, they won’t change; that has been evidenced time and again in the Christian world. I remember one day discussing with a group of believers if they would be willing to “change the name of their church,” if in fact it would give them a more effective platform for ministry in the community… after reflecting upon it they said, “No.” Obviously their answer could have been the result of not really believing that a “name change” would make them a more effective witness, or that their church’s name was simply something that was too important to them to change (that was their identity). The question as Paul states it is this, “Are you willing to become all things to all people that you might win them to Christ?” (cf. 1 Cor 9:19-23).

**Perhaps the following will help shed light on the foregoing** — the question often surfaces, “Why does God permit error in the church, if it is so misleading?” That’s a good question… I have asked it many times. Because we don’t see “the big picture” (i.e., the eternal picture), we are often unable to connect the dots; i.e., understand the integrity of what truly is the case. Remember God’s words to Isaiah, “My ways are NOT your ways; Your thoughts are NOT My thoughts” (cf. Is 55:8-9); to insist that everything God does correspond with human thinking, is to make God far smaller than He is. Can we not think that God in His sovereignty actually has an incredible purpose for His permitting all of the dysfunctionalism and impropriety that goes on in our world, as well as in the Church? It ought to be very clear to everyone, God permits a significant degree of imperfection in the Church, because none of us are close to being perfect. For years I argued, “God, why did you permit me to believe things that simply were not true?” “Why did you not protect me from untruth?” “Why did you permit me to sit under teaching that actually possessed some error?” Now, if your understanding of God is very limited and narrow, you may struggle with such questions, and might even abandon your faith, because you insist on correlating everything with “human reason.” One of the arguments I kept using was this: “God, if all of us are indwelled by the Holy Spirit, why is there such disagreement in the Christian world as to what Your Word really teaches?” Obviously, this was a very frustrating issue for many believers down through the ages. Paul exhorted his friend Timothy with these words, “Be diligent to present yourself approved (those words are emphatic) to God as a workman who needs not be ashamed (that word is emphatic), handling accurately the word of truth” (cf. 2 Tim 2:15). Clearly the believer is to be “diligent” in his study of the word; the Greek word spoudazo literally means to “zealously and earnestly exert oneself” in studying the Word… Peter uses this same term when he exhorts believers to, “be all the more diligent to make certain (that word is emphatic) about God’s calling and choosing you” (2 Pet 1:10). James (a blood-brothers of Jesus)
writes, “Let not many of you become teachers (that word is emphatic), knowing that you will incur a stricter judgment” (those words are emphatic – cf. Jam 3:1). When reflecting upon the three verses just quoted, give careful attention to the words that are “emphatically emphasized.” Obviously, many people have a very simplistic theology and simply read Scripture casually… in doing so they often draw their own conclusions, ignorant of the fact that “human reason” oftentimes is the devil’s workshop when it comes to divine truth — since our flesh frequently controls the discourse in our minds, we must be mindful of the fact that our human thoughts might be inspired by Satan, thus causing us to fall prey to his arguments (cf. Gen 3:1-6; Eph 6:11ff; 1 Pet 5:8-9). That’s why our theology of God (i.e., what we truly believe about God) must be one that embraces the totality of how Scripture defines Him. It is one thing to have a theology of the Christian life that isn’t completely accurate, it is quite another to have a theology of God that is not accurate; in comparison to the former, the latter is extremely critical… if there is one place you do not want to err, it is your thoughts about God; when you have a wrong understanding of God, your theology of life will simply end up being an amalgamation of human ideas. Obviously, it took me a good while to finally arrive at that point where I was able to simply “let God be GOD… and glory in His eternality.” If you were able to get into “my stubborn mind,” you might have a much greater appreciation for that didactic; needless to say, it was a life-changing one for me.

Let me address the matter of “sexual sin” in a little more detail. Regarding the matter of pornography in our world today, recent studies on internet-porn-use reveal that it is exploding in growth… in 2013 (that’s three years ago) Google research showed that porn sites get more traffic than Netflix, Amazon & Twitter combined. Let me just share a few numbers with you from August, 2014 — 64% of all American men view porn at least monthly (the percentage of Christian men is nearly the same)... 79% of men ages 18-30 view porn at least monthly… 67% of men ages 31-49 view porn at least monthly… and 55% of married men view porn at least monthly. Statistics in the UK are very similar to those in the US — 75% of Christian men view porn at least monthly… 41% of Christian men admit to being addicted to pornography… and 30% of church leaders view porn regularly. Incidentally, 33% of Christian females age 13-24 use porn regularly… so it’s not just a male problem or a problem for unbelievers. The point is, “sexual temptation is no small issue in our world.” There are numerous websites that share these statistics: two of them I just viewed are “Road to Grace.Net” and “Sexual Sanity.Com.” There are dozens of websites that provide this information in more detail should you care to investigate it more thoroughly. With that said, let’s return to our study — being as sexual sin is one of the most poignant problems for believers, “drastic action is a must;” contrary to what someone may have learned in a sermon, believers will not overcome this problem simply by fasting & praying about it a few minutes a day; that would be akin to God “removing temptation from your soul,” thus making life a wonderful, trouble-free, sinless paradise. Beloved, that does not at all equate with what Scripture teaches; in addition to prayer & fasting, drastic action is essential! With that in mind, are you going to listen to Jesus, or are you going to listen to some poor preaching that is totally off the grid? The question you need to answer is this — What are the “primary sources” at your finger-tips that must be removed from your life? — Unblocked Internet? HBO television? Other R & X-rated channels? Some Porn Magazines? If “internet protection” is a new phenomenon to you, you may need to consult with a number of sources that now exist out there in the world today. The wisest man who ever lived, King Solomon (cf.1 Kg 3: 7-14), expressed the problem this way to his sons, “[If you’re struggling with sexual temptation], keep far away from that chick; don’t even go near the door of her house!” (cf. Prv 5:8). Obviously
if you are in the proximity of sin, it is “highly likely sin will win the day!” Don’t foolishly use the “I can do all things thru Christ” promise (Phil 4:13), as if the Christian life is simply a matter of using Scripture as a magical incantation. According to the Word, one of the great safeguards against stumbling is that of “staying as far away from sin as possible.” To simply ask God for deliverance without distancing yourself from “the problem,” is lunacy — “You must create the best environment possible & proceed from there.” Hopefully, your ears are open to what the essence of what Scripture teaches on this subject; no man can deny the severity of the problem when some provocative “flesh-igniting image” is put in his face — that is simply what it means to be a fallen human being (though you are saved, your sinful nature still abides in you). What angers me are those in the Christian world who deny this truth. The truth is, churches need to “preach the integrity of truth, and share God’s answers regarding how to overcome.” Though none of us will ever walk through this world without stumbling, we can all make significant progress in every area of life, by just being willing to “take the actions that are necessary.” I think it was Martin Luther who said, “Though we can’t stop birds from flying over our heads, we can stop them from building nests in our hair.” Beloved, let’s say you reduce your stumbling by 50% in the next year, simply because you have taken some drastic actions — that is very substantial! My prayer is that that indeed would be the case. Remember, the name of the game in the Christian life is “growing in your faith!” — and efficacious faith is grounded in “truth!”

The problem with most believers is that they are not into taking drastic action; they think a little worship and a few prayers should be sufficient (beloved, you must learn the truth about “your faith” — it is a very “weak faith,” we are not a people of “great faith,” we are simply a people of faith (small though it be) in a “great God!” Those believers who “boast of their faith” are actually spiritual midgets (cf. 1 Cor 1:31; 2 Cor 10:17; Gal 6:14). Beloved, pay heed to the simple instructions of GOD! It should be noted, in some cases the action might need to be so drastic that you need to get a new job… or move to a different location… or take some other equally decisive step — though it is rare, sometimes such radical action is necessary. To somehow think that you can toy with the temptations of life (i.e., treat them lightly), means that you are going to end up on your backside… why would God let you run your life “your way” and bless it?
To hold that position is absolute nonsense; it the complete antithesis of what Scripture teaches; so stop stubbornly deluding yourself. It is really pretty simple to understand: “if you play with fire, you’re going to get burned.” So let God identify those things in your life that need to be excised… and then do what you need to do to eliminate them; the truth is, “eliminating things” isn’t that difficult a task; canceling some subscription is actually easy! And there is always an alternative way to get a needful thing accomplished. By the way, you will be surprised at how quickly you adjust to its absence! It should be noted: because the principle involved in this teaching can be so widespread, one could erroneously misapply it to a host of issues including “running from responsibility;” clearly that is not what the Lord was teaching. What is important is that the believer humbly seek the Lord’s guidance and wisdom, and take an action that corresponds with His leading — obviously taking no action is not the answer. Beloved, when the temptation to sin is only a few feet away, you are going to sin (your flesh is no different than anyone else’s). You must simply be willing to take the action that is necessary — changing the television station you’re watching because it is igniting your flesh or making you angry is very easy; simply change the station! ☺ This is an action I take all the time (every day). Stopping your paper delivery is also very easy: just stop it! ☺ That’s an action I took years ago — it not only cleared my morning calendar, it eliminated a host of irritating issues that leaped into my
mind every morning... when you entertain some thought that feeds a temptation, your flesh is going to grab on to it like a starving snake (Jam 1:14-15). Obviously, there are a myriad of ways in which you are going to continually be tempted... the point being, don’t stubbornly subject yourself needlessly to temptations that are going to throw you on your backside. When temptations arise, immediately go in another direction or you will ignite your flesh! It is this humble acknowledgement of your weaknesses that pleases God and causes Him to do a work of grace in your life in the moment (cf. 2 Cor 12:9-10; Heb 4:15; Jam 4:6).

**GOD IS WORKING HIS PLAN IN YOUR LIFE**

Another incredible reality is this – God is actually working out “HIS PLAN” for your life in this world (cf. Ps 139:13-16; Ps 23; Ps 56:8; Prv 16:9; 19:21; Ecc 11:5; Is 25:1; Jer 29:11). Many believers struggle with the idea that the life to which they have been called is “God’s plan” — contrary to popular opinion, that is the reality; arguing to the contrary doesn’t change that fact. God is not just sitting on the sideline watching man run around and do as he pleases. We don’t live in an accidental, happenstance world that is the product of our own doing (that is simply the thinking of fallen man and our modern world — cf. Ps 14:1; 53:1). God is not only the author of all that exists, He is the author of life and all it contains — clearly that is a difficult construct for human beings to understand. The human response to such a didactic (that God is orchestrating His purposes in this world) is to conclude that human beings must then be robots; but that does not at all correspond with divine revelation. Being as this particular construct is a pretty significant one in and of itself, some of you may need to read some of the works of noted theologians on this subject... or some of what I have written on it (check out my website). With that in mind, let me briefly expand on this subject to at least give “context” to it; hopefully I can shed a little light on it. Let me begin by saying this: *Ultimately we need to see things from an eternal perspective* (i.e., from God’s perspective; remember, He is the initiator of everything that exists; everything begins and ends with GOD; to take Him off the table is to take the answer to everything off the table). The reality is this, when trying to see things from an eternal perspective... one will ultimately and logically conclude that the Eternal Prime Mover (GOD) is in absolute control of all things... and that nothing in the universe happens outside of His superintendence. Incidentally, there are numerous passages throughout Scripture that attest to that fact. The logic is actually pretty simple: if you were GOD and nothing else existed... and you were to create something, would it not be in total subjection to you and your will? Obviously, it would; how could it not? As the only Eternal Reality, Scripture tells us that “God does all things after the counsel of His will” (cf. Eph 1:11) — of course He does; what other logical conclusion could one possibly come to? Anything else would be completely nonsensical and illogical. It is only the Temporal Mind that argues to the contrary, because it sees the created order as “the big reality;” when in fact (compared to God) it is NOTHING! Less than nothing! (cf. Is 40:17-18, 22-26).

*When one dismisses that which is “Eternal” from his thinking,* as if it is not that significant, he completely distorts reality. It is the “small temporal minds of men” that mess everything up; their minds are not only small, they are fallen and perverse... they actually see themselves as the center of the universe, which is about as illogical a didactic as one could possibly arrive at; yet human beings actually defend that didactic — no wonder God calls the thinking of men “foolish” (cf. 1 Cor 1:20)... in actuality, it is beyond foolish; it is arrogant and downright stupid! The truth is, it is just such thinking that often controls the discourse in our minds... I find myself constantly
interpreting reality from my vantage point; like everyone else, my temporal mind is always distorting reality. Beloved, when trying to see things from an eternal perspective, it is essential that one see “The Eternal Prime Mover” as all that exists outside of creation (i.e., the temporal realm)... only then can one argue sensibly. Though that didactic is a difficult one for any of us to wrap our minds around, it will make more sense to those of you who question it in just a few minutes. To somehow conclude that the God of creation removed His hand from the created order (which in itself is nonsensical; remember, He is all that existed), and let things happen as they may (whatever that means), without in any way effectuating the result, simply defies logic. Let us again attempt to define the essence of that which is eternal — if you are the Eternal Creator, by definition you would transcend everything else that exists, because everything else would have come into existence through you... thus should you decide to create something, its essence would naturally be temporal, rather than eternal, because only you as Creator possess eternality — again, by definition only that which has existed from all eternity possesses eternal essence, and the only thing that has always existed is GOD. As the only Eternal Reality, God naturally lives outside of the created order (space, mass and time); i.e., He transcends the created order. As such, He naturally sees the END from the BEGINNING — though that may be a difficult construct for you at this point, read on, I'll give a graphic depiction of it shortly. The foregoing is precisely the way the Bible defines the God of creation (Is 46:10; 14:24; 25:1; Ecc 3:11; Rom 11:33-36).

Now, to somehow suggest that the Eternal Transcendent One is simply a “deistic god” (i.e., one who simply created everything and saw no need for further involvement; therefore he simply wound up the clock and left everything alone); is another construct that defies logic and reason. Many people in the world see God in that light... that things just happen as they may... because they don’t see God as one who is eternal, they simply see Him as one who is temporal and completely unaware of the future... yet such thinking is not only illogical, it is the antithesis of what Scripture teaches — it does not at all define the God of the Bible (the God of creation). Furthermore, it denies the essence of what it means to truly be Eternal. Essentially, the problem is this: man exists in the Temporal Realm (the created order), and his understanding of God is that He also exists in this realm, so everything he thinks about God is vastly smaller than He really is. Obviously, it is extremely difficult for man to appreciate anything in the Eternal Realm, because his temporal mind does not have the capacity to see the fullness of something that is eternal (i.e., infinite) in nature. For instance, should you try to come up with “the largest number in the universe,” you could not do so because numbers just continue on ad infinitum (they never end). It is at this point where the human mind just “shuts the door” on the subject, and stops thinking about it, because his mind has reached a barrier it cannot go beyond. The same logic can be applied to “space” — there is no end to it... it just keeps going and going and going; now should one actually come to the end of it, you’ve got another issue to deal with: What’s on the other side of that “end”? More space... so you must simply “shut the door” on that subject as well. Most of you are no doubt aware of the fact that there is “no end” to space — it just keeps going and going and going, etc. Obviously the created order in some way reflects the glory of its Creator (i.e., the eternity of God), and it is just such dynamics that transcend human thought.

Perhaps the best way to understand the significance of that which is Eternal is to graphically compare it with that which is Temporal. To do that, take a piece of paper and draw a small circle on it, and place the words “space, mass & time” inside that circle (by the way, these qualities are the essence of the created order)... and then place the word “GOD” outside the circle — such a graphic depiction helps a person differentiate between that which is eternal and that which is
temporal. Since it is important to see GOD as transcending the created order, carefully look at the graphic depiction you have just drawn. You’ll notice GOD exists outside of the created order in the “eternal realm;” i.e., that realm that is “infinite in scope” (there is no end to it); by the way, the eternal realm doesn’t just stop at the end of the paper upon which you drew everything… it continues on ad infinitum; it never stops. So you might also write “temporal realm” inside the circle, and “eternal realm” outside the circle. Now when you take a look at what you have drawn, the magnitude of that which is Eternal should start to overwhelm your thinking, because it is infinitely greater than that which is Temporal; there is no comparison between the two. As your drawing attests, “Time” is a part of God’s creation (it did not exist in eternity past); hence “time” in all its fullness is visible to God—He sees both the beginning and the end; that’s why Scripture alludes to the fact that “God planned the beginning from the end” (cf. Is 46:10; Jn 1:1-2; 6:64; 8:44; Heb 1:10; 1 Jn 3:8; Rev 21:6; 22:13). Since some people struggle with the idea of God seeing that which is still yet future (at least in the temporal realm); that is understandable as long as you keep God in the temporal realm, but God exists in the eternal realm; so seeing something that is still yet future, is not a problem when looked at from an eternal perspective. Remember, God is omniscient—there is nothing He does not know (past, present or future). It is only when human beings force God into the temporal realm that God loses His incredible majesty. Remember, GOD transcends space, mass and time. The prophet Isaiah over and over again focused on the eternity of God and the temporality of man. At one point he wrote, “All the nations of the world are as nothing before God; they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless… it is God who reduces rulers to nothing” (read Is 40:17, 23; also Is 40:18, 25, 28; 42:8; 43:10-13; 44:6-8; 45:5-7, 22-23; 46:9-11; 55:8-11; 64:8; 66:1-2)—the point being, that which is eternal is “infinitely greater” than that which is temporal…the two cannot even be compared (again, the biggest number you can come up with is totally insignificant when compared with infinity; there is simply no way to compare that which is infinite with that which is finite—since that which is infinite is endless, by definition that which is finite almost doesn’t even exist; for instance compare the number five to the number seven that has one billion zeros after it; as stated above, it is not even possible to compare the two). Again, the human mind simply “shuts the door on the subject” because it has ventured into an area that is infinitely beyond his ability to think; in short, it transcends human thought. Ultimately the point is this—without an appreciation of the “Eternality of God,” one seriously minimizes Him and comes up with illogical explanations when trying to define reality and the cosmos—what else could one come up with? he has taken the eternal answer off the table! Hence, his answer is simply the product of exceedingly limited human thinking, which God has described as “foolishness;” the reality is, he simply operates in the “small circle” that you drew on the paper; somehow concluding that “therein” is the answer to everything that exists, and in so doing passes judgment on things that require an understanding of that which is “outside of that circle.”

The reality is this: if the “INFINITE ETERNAL GOD” is not preeminent in your thinking (i.e., “if He is not that Reality in your mind that transcends all things,”) then you will ultimately only embrace those constructs that are nothing but the product of fallen human thinking…how could you possibly deduce anything else? Keep in mind, the human mind is “infinitely small!” In the final scope of things, by comparison, the human mind almost doesn’t even exist! Yet the vast majority of human beings “worships at the altar of human thought;” which is about as nonsensical and empty-headed as one can get. Is it any wonder that God called the thinking of men “foolishness”? (cf. 1 Cor 1:19-20, 27-29; 3:19; Ps 94:11; Ecc 1:17). If the foregoing is troubling to you, let
me encourage you to read the works of the great philosophers and theologians down through the centuries, because they are ardent believers in the integrity of “TRUE LOGIC,” in that sense one could say they are logicians. The reality is, true unabated logic must have an eternal aspect to it (i.e., something that transcends the temporal), if it is to reach a logical level of understanding regarding the temporal, and not simply be satisfied with limited temporal thinking. I find it interesting that the blood-brother of the Lord Jesus, James, called the wisdom of God “reasonable” (cf. Jam 3:17). . . the apostle Paul goes on to say that without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, such divine wisdom cannot be understood by the human mind (1 Cor 2:14). Let me share some of the most prodigious words ever spoken by Albert Einstein — because of his respect for truth (the reality of what is) and the integrity with which he approached ultimate reality, let me quote him: “The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation . . . His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.”

To take the foregoing arguments a step further, to somehow think that all things are the result of “random chance” is also illogical, because it defies the laws of science. Science has clearly demonstrated by the scientific method that random chance never results in order, design or function; thus establishing what is known as “the second law of thermodynamics” (law of entropy). Hence, by definition, where there is order, design or function there is a cause (i.e., a creator), and that is what science is all about — “discovering why things are what they are, and why things work the way they do.” It is difficult to know why a believer would struggle with constructs of logic, but for those of you who do, let me encourage you to study the subject in detail, and not just settle for remedial answers pro-offered by a corrupt world that refuses to accept the possibility that there is a “God” — by the way, all evidence points in the direction of a Creator; no evidence points in the direction of evolution. Naturally when you exclude the possibility that a “Supreme Being exists,” you don’t end up with one! Wow, isn’t that amazing? And then you have the audacity to claim that one doesn’t exist! It’s called “circular reasoning!” If you start with the presumption that there is no God (i.e., you presuppose no God exists) . . . guess what? you’ll end up proving there is no God! It’s such a juvenile approach to determining ultimate reality, that most scientists of any repute are now embarrassed by the narrow-mindedness of those in the scientific community who insist on approaching the subject with preconceived bias. The reality is, the bias that influenced their search, ultimately determined the answer that they arrived at. By the way, this is primarily the result of “leftist ideology” in higher-education here in America — I think it is important for you to know that there are very few other countries in the world that embrace such a narrow-minded approach to this issue; this is simply the consequence of liberal America’s “demanding a separation between church and state . . .” thus GOD is no longer an acceptable reality in the public arena here in America (including our schools). . . that’s why you no longer find it in the textbooks used in our schools (it’s forbidden) . . . that’s how much “hatred” there is in liberal element that essentially now controls the public arena here in America. Let me repeat myself, such thinking is not prevalent in the scientific communities of England, France and the vast majority of other countries . . . it is only prevalent here in “the land of the free!” (how’s that for an oxymoron?).

You would think the logic of the second law of thermodynamics and the logic of the great philosophers of history would move the scientific world in America in another direction, but many of them refuse to acknowledge that such a Transcendent Reality might exist . . . after all,
they would have to admit they were wrong; and that is a very humbling experience for anyone; think about it, you've written textbooks and lectured all over America, and have **emphatically declared that “evolution” is a proven fact on the world stage!** And now you have to stand up before the world and admit that you may have been wrong? The question that begs asking is this, “**Why there is such an animus against religion here in America?**” And “**Why do so many of our scientists argue so vehemently in defense of evolution?**” About thirty years ago (1981) the British Museum of Natural History in London opened a new exhibit on evolution to mark its one hundredth anniversary. One of the world leading scientific journals, “**Nature**” (a very popular American publication) ran a critical editorial in response to the museum’s suggestion that “**evolution by natural selection was only one of a number of possible explanations.**” Two weeks later, twenty-two members of the museum’s distinguished staff of biologists wrote the following letter to the editor of the journal —

Sir, as working biologists at the British Museum of Natural History we were astonished to read your editorial… How is it that a journal such as yours that is devoted to science and its practice can advocate that theory be presented as fact? This is the stuff of prejudice, not science, and as scientists our basic concern is to keep an open mind on the unknowable… Are we to take it that evolution is a fact, proven to the limits of scientific rigor? If that is the inference then we must disagree most strongly… we have no absolute proof of the theory of evolution.

**Numerous non-Christian scientists** (I express it that way to alleviate any suspicion one might have regarding the various scientists I quote) from around the world have stated unequivocally that “**there is no hard evolutionary evidence,**” contrary to what many American leftist ideologists have claimed. I quote a number of these scientists in a study I did titled, “**Ultimate Reality**” — you can find it on my website should you desire to read it. It is also important to mention here that the more advances science makes in the world, the more credibility “**creationism**” gets, and the less credibility “**evolutionary theory**” gets. Here's the logic: if something is indeed true, the evidence cannot reveal it to be untrue — that is one of the sacred beauties of truth… thus one should “**never fear the facts,**” because they can only substantiate that which is true.” The only facts one should fear, are those that are “arrived at dishonestly;” such facts distort reality — this has happened a few times down through the ages, to the embarrassment of those who propounded them; among them was the insistence of many that the earth was flat and not round; sadly, even the Pope jumped-in and sided with “**the flat earth**” group. The good news is, every year in America more & more scientists are coming out of the closet and abandoning evolutionary thinking (because the evidence continues to embarrass its adherents) and move scientists in the direction of “**creationism.**” If evolution were indeed true, it would be easy to prove (because **all the evidence** would point in that direction; another simple law of logic), but since it is not true, it cannot be proved (it is not possible to prove an untruth as being true); furthermore, the more evidence the scientific community continues to discover, the worse evolutionary thinking appears; so it is not a matter of our fearing that we will one day wake up and discover we were wrong, and that we were the stupid people! Truth can never be disproved… it can only be vindicated. I find it interesting that the common message now being promulgated in the scientific world in America is this: “**Whether or not there is a GOD is a religious issue, not a scientific one, and we don't involve ourselves with religion.**” The reality is, there is still a “**disparagingly, fervent heat**” in the soul of many scientists here in America, because to them
“religion is absolutely repugnant;” they hate the fact that many parents teach their children that God exists; conversely, they refuse to let society teach their children that He might exist. One can’t help but see how they are going to respond when they stand before God’s eternal judgment and are “forced to give an account for the nonsense they espoused,” and ultimately suffer the consequences (cf. Mt 12:36; 16:27; Jn 3:19; Rom 2:5-9; 1 Pet 4:5; 2 Pet 2:4-6). At this point in time, it appears to be a big joke to them, but the day is coming when the Creator will look them in the eye… and there will be no place to run and no place to hide… and contrary to what some of you may think, the price they are going to pay is going to be eternal damnation — I am well aware, that is a difficult construct for temporal human minds.

I find it interesting that “when one logically examines the physical universe without bias,” he will conclude that there is some kind of Transcendent Reality behind it all (which most refer to as “God”) — genuine science and bona fide philosophy both arrive at that conclusion… how is that? They simply refused to exclude God as a possibility — to them, if God exists, He exists; if He doesn’t exist, He doesn’t exist. They are not into disproving His existence… instead they intentionally approach things without some pre-conceived bias. Incidentally, God calls that person a “fool” who ignores the evidence that He exists (Ps 14:1; Rom 1:19). As the brother of the Lord Jesus [James] said, “The wisdom from above is reasonable—logical” (cf. Jam 3:17; Is 1:18; Dan 4:34; Acts 17:2; 18:19); that is, it is not senseless gibberish. In support of such thinking, let me encourage you to read the thinking of the world’s great philosophers down through the ages. I say that because philosophy is simply a logical explanation of reality;” thus in wrestling with philosophical thought, one gains a greater appreciation for “logic” (God’s modus operandi in the universe). Remember, God gave us minds with which to “think,” and thinking is a vital part of “faith” (cf. Rom 12:2). God isn’t into a happenstance, irrational universe. Even though the majority of philosophers down through the ages were not necessarily Christians (some were), they all basically acknowledged that “logic” not only suggests, but concludes, that there is a Transcendent Reality (GOD) behind all things; the reality is this -- when one looks at all of the data, logic does not lead to any other conclusion. Let me share a simple argument with you that might help put everything in its proper light — pick up a very simple object like a “pen” and take a careful look at it, and then answer this question: “Did the pen just evolve? or was it made?” Why did you come up with the conclusion that you did? Be specific. What evidence did you use to support your answer? There isn’t a single person in the entire world who would conclude that the pen simply evolved. Here’s the issue — anything that possesses order, design or function was “made” (it has a creator) and did not evolve, because such things are simply not possible by random chance; the scientific method clearly bears that out. If you should choose to argue to the contrary, you need to demonstrate that evidence, and not simply conclude, “I just can’t believe that!” The reality is, this is a closed case, because there is no contrary evidence. Now, since you and I as believers cannot arrive at a “logical conclusion about everything in life” (cf.Is 55:8-9), there are times when we must trust in the words of the One who made us; the reality is, God has been faithful to us enough times over the years, and has given us enough knowledge about Himself that we can trust Him and trust what He says. Remember, it is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of the truth.

Now, should you insist on thinking that you are the author of much that takes place in your life, what criteria do you use to make such a deduction? Your own efforts and accomplishments? What conclusion would you draw should your successes, wealth and health be instantly removed from you? Maybe you should read what Job had to say (cf. Job 1:21)… or would you conclude that “you just experienced some bad luck in life?” If that’s the case, that would make “happenstance,”
rather than you, the ultimate answer to everything (and take God and His divine input off the table as well). With that in mind, the only alternative you would be left with is satisfying yourself with gambling at the “Crap Table” in Vegas, and hope that the dice simply bounced in your direction. But what if it doesn’t? All you can do is basically conclude, “that’s just the way the cookie crumbles!” Now if everything happened to go according to “your plan,” you could make the claim the “you are the chief cause of everything in your life!” But (that’s an important “but”) God in His wisdom tells us that, “He won’t permit us to successfully run the show in our lives.” Perhaps He might for a short period of time, so that He can knock it all off the table in one big fell swoop, “to teach us that we aren’t the big cheese in life… that we aren’t the difference maker… that we aren’t the big petunia!” By the way, there is no reason for a believer to ever have to go down that road; only the most stubborn of us insist on doing so (cf. Ps 32:8; 37:23; Prov 16:9). Just because God has established laws that work in the operation of the universe, doesn’t mean “our actions” are the ultimate cause of everything in our lives (cf. Prov 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; Ps 37:23; Jer 10:23; Ecc 1:14-15; 2:17; 3:14; 7:13-14; 12:13-14). Though one can attempt to logically exclude God as the supreme postulate in life, and may satisfy himself for a season, there will come a day when his little world is tipped upside down. Ultimately God will have the last word in all of our lives, and in the end will shine His light on everything, and reveal it all for what it is (cf. 1 Cor 4:5; Dan 4:30-37); thus for a person to stubbornly refuse to consider the presence of the Transcendent One in all of life is pure folly… beloved, use your stubbornness to pursue divine truth.

As the John the Baptist declared in his last testimony, “A man can receive nothing (that word is emphatic in Greek, so think of what he said with that in mind) unless it has been given him from heaven” (Jn 3:27). Before continuing on, humbly reflect upon that construct and apply it to everything you possess in life (not only the physical things you have in life, but your giftedness as well). The apostle Paul said, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (cf. 1 Cor 4:7; Deut 8:18; Rom 12:3, 6; 1 Pet 4:10). Though such constructs are troubling to those who insist they are the product of own efforts and genius, after years of living through all of the ups and downs of life, and studying God’s Word, one cannot ultimately arrive at such a shallow conclusion; if you are truly a believer, the Holy Spirit would have instructed your heart on this matter… the issue is simply too significant for God to let a believer live his entire life thinking that “he is his own man.” Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon during the Babylonian captivity of the Jewish people some six-hundred years before Christ, “foolishly believed he had accomplished everything by the might of his power” (cf. Dan 4:30); as such, God lowered the boom on him and made him live like a beast out in the field and made him eat grass for seven years, “until he recognized that the Most High is the ruler over the realm of mankind and bestows it upon whoever He wishes” (Dan 4:32). After Nebuchadnezzar was restored, “he raised his eyes toward heaven, and ‘reason’ returned to him, and he blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him saying: ‘His dominion is an everlasting dominion (isn’t it interesting that he interjected “eternity” into the equation?), and His kingdom endures from generation to generation” (Dan 4:34). The reality is, God is the omnipotent, eternal Sovereign of the universe; none of us are the product of our own doing or making. Writes the apostle Paul, “The wisdom of men is absolutely foolish to God” — you are a man, are you not? (cf. 1 Cor 3:18-19; 1 Cor 1:20-21). Take a moment and read what happened to King Herod Agrippa I (cf. Acts 12:21-23). With all of the foregoing in mind, “humility” should characterize our hearts… and where there is humility God extends “grace” (cf. Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5).
It may come as a surprise to some of you, “our part” in the life of God in our lives is actually miniscule (nearly invisible) when compared with “God’s part”… yet because we are inclined to think far more of “our part” than God’s part, the perceived truth with which we live life is often a distortion of reality. Think of it this way — if we could measure reality in percentages, and God is the author of ninety-nine percent of all reality in our lives, and we are the author of just one percent of it, yet we insist on essentially being occupied with our one percent, are we not distorting reality? The question is this: What is the reality that truly defines your life? You? or God? If it is truly GOD, why then does He not occupy the judgment seat of reason in your soul? And why do you not continually defer to Him and His will for your life? Could it be that you are actually trying to change the rules of the game (pardon the metaphor), or have you not yet learned the rules of the game? In addition to that, why are you trying to move the hand of God to do your bidding in life… as if you can actually get God to do your will rather than His? Sadly, that’s how the vast majority of believers live their lives. Is it any wonder then that the Christian community struggles so much with life, and is so reluctant to die to itself and its own will? (cf. Mt 16:10; 10:38; 16:24; 26:39). Obviously when our unredeemed humanness (i.e., our flesh and our will) dominates the discourse in our minds and insists on determining much of what goes on in our lives, we cannot help but become spiritually disillusioned, that should not be surprising to any of us. That is precisely the reason why we as believers often struggle emotionally & psychologically. The problem is, the interior of our soul is just too convoluted, stubborn and ambivalent for it to be grounded in absolute truth.

The reality is, God is doing a “good work” in our lives that depends very little on us. He is not only superintending all that takes place in our lives — He is working in our minds and hearts to effectively grow our faith and transform our character; even though we frequently resist His hand and are uncooperative, God accomplishes His purposes in us (cf. Rom 8:28-30; Gal 5:17; Phil 1:6; 1 Pet 5:10). Ironically, most believers somehow think they are the primary mover and shaker in their life, that without their input and effort, God’s program for their life would actually self-destruct and not be accomplished. Obviously that statement needs to be clarified because some believers might actually deduce that we are then nothing more than “puppets” in God’s hands, thus establishing a doctrine of fate, that whatever happens in life is simply God’s doing; yet that does not at all correspond with what Scripture teaches (as mentioned earlier). The reality is, God is able to move us in a right direction and make all grace abound to us (cf. 2 Cor 9:8); He is able to “instill and inspire” thoughts and actions in the interior of our soul that conforms with His will; in spite of the fact that they we often distort them after we have considered them. Even though the expressions of our faith are imperfect, they still find acceptance with God — you read that right, God accepts our imperfect faith; we are still fallen creatures incapable of any level of absolute perfection. The New Testament’s premiere theologian (the apostle Paul) said, “I do not even examine myself” (cf. 1 Cor 4:3) — how is that? Paul admittedly did not fully understand himself or the presence of indwelling sin in his life (Rom 7:14ff). As fallen creatures (even though we are saved) we are not capable of perfection on any level, let alone perfectly assessing the interior of our being. An essential dynamic for the Christian is this: “we must be humbly mindful of our weaknesses and limitations” (2 Cor 12:9-10). The reality is, we are extremely flawed creatures who are continually being seduced into thinking (by our sin disposition) that we are actually pretty solid characters; we even pride ourselves to some degree in who we are. Beloved, there is no room whatsoever for pride in the Christian life, because we have absolutely nothing to be proud of (cf. 1 Cor 1:29-31; 9:16; 10:17; Gal 6:14; Jam 4:13-17; Prv 16:18; 29:23). It should be
noted: though God does not honor our faith when it is knowingly intermingled with error and unrighteousness, He does honor our faith when it is humbly (though imperfectly) expressed to Him. Obviously a lot of ignorance exists in the souls of God’s children, because we simply lack the ability to perfectly assess the interior world of our being, or that unique little corner of the world in which God has placed us — why else would we be exhorted to “grow” with respect to our salvation, and be transformed by the “renewing of our minds”? (cf. Rom 12:2; 1 Pet 1:2; 2 Pet 3:18). Again, the reality is we “barely” reflect the image of Christ in this life (even though He indwells us by His Spirit), and “are no where near” what we are going to be like when we experience glorification in heaven. With that in mind, how do you think God responds to our seriously imperfect thinking and imperfect behavior? (cf. Ps 103:10, 14; Ecc 7:20; Rom 3:10-11; 7:18; Heb 4:15; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 3:10). Perhaps the following question will help solve this issue in your mind: Would you beat your grossly-deficient-immature-child up if he caved into the wayward pressure in his soul and did something wrong? (cf. Ps 103:10; Lam 3:22; Ps 136:1-26; Ezra 9:13; Rom 5:20; 8:31-39), or would you lovingly discipline and correct him because you understand him and can sympathize with his weaknesses? (cf. Heb 12:9-12; Jam 3:1; Gal 6:1-2; also cf. 1 Cor 13:4-7).

The reality is, “in and of ourselves” we as believers bring absolutely nothing to the table but sin and waywardness (note the emphasis: “in and of ourselves”); when we get to heaven it will be very evident to us at how little we actually contributed to our sanctification and development. As strange as it may seem to some of you, the more one grows in his faith, the more he becomes aware of his own weaknesses, shortcomings and insufficiencies; the truth is, we are grossly insufficient in and of ourselves (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:10-12; 7:18; 2 Cor 12:7-10). The apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells us that “our old self” is in a constant state of becoming more and more corrupt through the lusts of deceit — that is, our flesh is in a continual state of decline; it is rotten to the core, and is increasingly becoming more rotten every day (cf. Eph 4:22). Who among us cannot attest to this? As young children we were far less corrupt in the interior of our being than we are today — why? because the operation of lustful deceits in our souls over the years has made our flesh significantly more corrupt… that is simply the reality of our condition. As fallen creatures our flesh is not capable of undergoing some improvements; no matter what action one might take, it is never going to get better (that’s why it is going to be jettisoned from us when we enter into the eternal state). It is “our new self” that is in a continual state of being renewed and growing in its likeness of God (cf. Eph 4:22-24)… and this is being done through the Holy Spirit’s work in our minds & hearts by the Word (cf. Jn 14:16-17; 16:13; 17:17; Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:18; Eph 6:17; Phil 2:13; Heb 4:12). So the “old self” is in a steady state of decline (worsening), and the “new self” is in a constant state of advance (improving).

Beloved, it is in quietness before God that we are humbled and made aware of how little we really contribute to our sanctification (even as committed believers). When our world becomes dark and God seems very distant to us (which happens to all believers), then the depth of our spirituality is made manifest to us — this does not happen so that we might grieve over our condition, but that we might cast ourselves completely on Christ; for HE is our salvation and HE is our life (cf. Gal 3:4). The reality is, when we focus on our own performance and our own efforts, that will ultimately cause us to despair of life, which [as strange as it may seem] isn’t all bad, because God uses our failures in life to get our attention, and get us to take our eyes off of ourselves and place them on Christ (Heb 12:2). Sadly, many believers have been taught a doctrine of self-improvement, works and service… though we are to grow in our faith (i.e., grow in our dependence on Christ – cf. Jn 15:5), that does not mean we grow in our own goodness, because we
have none (cf.Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18). Though we are fallen, decrepit creatures who don’t even understand ourselves, we can declare with the 18th century English hymnwriter Augustus Toplady who wrote the popular hymn “Rock of Ages” — “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” The reformer Martin Luther reminds us that “whatever our heart clings to… that is our God.” Despite our condition, every one of us as believers can rejoice with the words of David: “Thou hast known me from all eternity, yet He still loves me!” [cf. Ps 139:16]… as well as those of the apostle Paul: His eternal love will keep that which I have entrusted to Him until that day” (2 Tim 1:12). One of the most incredible truths of all Scripture is this: “God fully understands our condition and sympathizes with our weaknesses” (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15)… carefully reflect upon that statement. God understands why we get upset, and why the interior of our soul is often full of angst… He knows what we’re made of! So don’t be too hard on yourself when you blow it; there is not one child of God who doesn’t. That word translated “sympathy” (sumpateo) literally means “to have a fellow feeling with” or “to suffer with.” Paul used this same term in his letter to the Corinthian church (cf. 1 Cor 12:26). The King James Bible translates Hebrews 4:15 this way: “We do not have a high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.” Our weaknesses and infirmities move God to care for us and sympathize with us in all of our temptations; though Jesus knew how incredibly powerful and vexing temptation was, He never sinned — still He is fully able to sympathize with us as fallen creatures. The reality is, He knew by experience how much power one needs to overcome. In spite of the fact that our decrepit nature is ever before us, the cross of Christ and His tender, redeeming compassionate love needs to be the overwhelming inspiration of our soul.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Again, let me quote the words of “Albert Einstein.” He described the created order this way: “The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation… His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.” Such a statement should not be surprising to the genuine believer. If God is truly the omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent Eternal One, then anything He does must possess such brilliance, that it is beyond human understanding. Though we may understand some things at an “elementary level,” that is the extent of our understanding. In actuality, our understanding of things with eternal depth is “infinitely small!” Imagine a God with an IQ in endless trillions doing something — anything — how is it that one with a maximum IQ of 150 (comparatively speaking, that’s almost zero) could hope to fully understand something God has done? It would be easier for a new born baby to explain the essence of Quantum Mechanics and Einstein’s theory of relativity. For us to pride ourselves on our genius is about as mindless a construct as one could possibly have. Beloved, I beg you, come down off your high-horse if that is the seat you are sitting on, and carefully reflect upon the words of Einstein. Furthermore, how could a construct of thought that believes in the omniscience and omnipotence of God be troubling to the believer? Why would a believer insist on making every word of God reasonable and acceptable to human thought? Additionally, why are the following words of God to Isaiah so troubling to some believers? “I am God; there is no other… I have declared the end from the beginning… My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure (Is 46:19-10)… surely just as I have planned it, so shall it be (Is 14:24): who can frustrate what the Lord has
planned?” (Is 14:27). Said Isaiah, “Thou art my God... Thou hast worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness” (Is 25:1). Likewise God Himself said, “From ancient times I planned it... now I have brought it to pass” (Is 37:26). And then there are those profound words of the Lord to the prophet Jeremiah: “I know the plans that I have for you... plans for welfare and not for calamity, to give you a future and a hope” (Jer 29:11). Such words should resonate in a wonderful way in the believer's heart, and not antagonize or discourage him. No other words could be more comforting than these: “knowing that God is on the throne... that He is faithful to do as He has promised... and that He loves us with an everlasting love” (Jer 31:3). To understand the miraculous nature of God's call upon your life, let me encourage you once again to read a study I did on “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith.” Either you are inclined to believe the foregoing and experience the grace of encouragement and peace in your life... or you have still chosen to disbelieve it and experience frustration, anxiety and discouragement in your life. With that in mind, you may need to “affirm those truths” over and over again, until they settle confidently and peacefully in your soul. Let me remind you, the foregoing is the testimony of Scripture and an endless number of believers down through the centuries. The key to living the life God has called you to live, “is to ask Him at every juncture of life for the grace to deal with whatever it is you are going through.” Therefore at every intersection of life ask God for:

- the grace to believe the truths of Scripture
- the grace to accept what is before you
- the grace to submit to His will for your life
- the grace of forgiveness when you stumble and fall
- the grace to forgive others when they have wronged you
- the grace to love the unlovely in your life
- the grace to walk up-rightly in this world
- the grace to say no to temptation and the evil one
- the grace to believe God when your world is upside down
- the grace to deal with the trials that you are going through
- the grace to overcome your doubts and fears
- the grace of healing and deliverance and wholeness
- the grace to grow in your faith and knowledge of Christ
- the grace to overcome the opposition you are feeling
- the grace to live with your flesh... and on and on and on

The reality is, we need “grace” at every juncture of life, because “without grace” we simply don't have what it takes to live victoriously and overwhelmingly conquer – it is simply not in us to do so in our own strength (cf. Jn 15:5). With that said, throughout the course of any day, ask God for the grace to deal with every situation in which you find yourself. If you do not understand the essence of “grace” in your life and how it operates, perseveringly study this issue until it is the premiere reality that governs your spiritual understanding. By asking God for the grace you need to tackle every situation, you will be consciously and humbly identifying with who you really are in and of yourself (a sinner — though you are a redeemed sinner, you are a sinner nonetheless)... and consciously and humbly identifying with who God is (your salvation, your life, your strength, your shield, your provider, your deliverer, your eternal hope, your sanctification, and the lover of your soul); those two perceptions are foundational to living the life of faith; without a proper perspective of yourself and God, you will live life distorting reality.
To somehow insist that “things go the way you want them to go in life” or “that life be a happy experience” is to have a construct of faith that is completely foreign to Scripture; yet we all insist on it in varying degrees due to the influence of our sin nature which frequently controls the discourse in our minds. It should be noted, the word “happy” comes from the Old Norse word “happ;” thus happiness is the result of what “happens” to us; if our circumstances are pleasant, we are happy… if they are not, we’re not happy. Don’t confuse our English word “happy” with the biblical word “joy” (they are altogether different words)… by the way, I expand upon this in depth in my study, “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith.” Let me reiterate, “the Christian life is a life of grace” (learn that truth at all costs); without God’s grace, you will simply live a defeated life where your performance, anxiety and debased thinking will rule the day. That’s why Peter exhorted believers to “grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ” (cf. 2 Pet 3:18). By addressing every situation with the need of grace, you will constantly be reminded that it is by grace you live… by grace that you stand… by grace that you walk in righteousness… and by grace that you even have faith. In short, focusing on grace gets your eyes off of yourself, and places them on Christ where they belong (cf. Heb 12:2). Why this is such a difficult principle for believers to embrace is hard to understand, because it is the clear, emphatic, unequivocal teaching of Scripture. I guess it just shows how dominant our flesh is in our thinking; yet even though the flesh is prominent in our lives (and that it is), the presence of the Holy Spirit is preeminent in our lives — and that, my friend, is no contradiction. Thank God that indeed is the reality. The truth is, it ought to thrill your socks that our God is the Eternal Preeminent Reality in all the universe, and that He is faithful to do everything He says, “and as He has said… so shall it be.” (cf. Is 55:11; Mt 24:35).

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