ENSLAVED TO CHRIST
by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

INTRODUCTION

The Institution of Slavery is as old as human civilization itself, and has actually existed in our world for some five thousand years (it seems to have started around 3,000 BC. Due to the fact there are so many factors involved in this discussion that need to be expanded upon, let me encourage you to carefully reflect upon what is written; obviously, one can't address every issue at the same time, so you will need to patiently consider the various aspects that are covered, and not simply jump to some emotional decision when a particular didactic does fit with your paradigm of thought. I mention the foregoing, because this subject is an extremely volatile one in many people's minds. You'll notice, I italicize, underline, and embolden a number of words — this is to give emphasis and context to each of those words and phrases. I would also like to suggest that you take the time to reflect upon the “various biblical references” that are listed, because they give clarity to much of what is written. Try not to make this study just a typical read — should you choose to do so, you will miss the depth and significance of a number of different elements presented. With that in mind, this material needs to be “carefully studied,” not just “casually read.” My prayer is that you will find it both enlightening and meaningful to your faith.

REGARDING THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY

The institution of slavery was based on a relationship of authority and submission, whereby one person owned another person and exacted from that person labor or other services. The institution of slavery extends back beyond recorded history to prehistoric times. From the earliest periods of recorded history, slavery was found in the world's most advanced regions, though the percentage of slaves in these early civilizations was fairly small. Only a handful of societies in the ancient world made slavery the dominant labor force. It wasn't until the first millennium BC that ancient Greece built a very large slave population — in Athens during the classical period, a third to a half of its population consisted of slaves. Rome would become even more dependent on slavery. According to historians, slavery appeared in the ancient world in civilizations prior to recorded history; i.e., it transcended written language. References to it appear in the ancient Sumerian Code of Ur-Nammu & the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi back around 2,100 BC (one or two hundred years before Abraham came on the world stage). These written codes contained laws and regulations relating to slavery. Hittite texts from Anatolia (Asia Minor) in the second millennium BC also includes a law stipulating that reward for the capture of an escaped slave would be higher if the slave had already succeeded in crossing the Halys River and getting farther away from the center of Hittite civilization. According to Joseph E. Holloway Ph.D, in his study titled “Slavery as
an Ancient World Institution,” the institution of slavery is as old as human civilization itself; that it appeared as early as 3,000 BC (which would have been very close to the time when God scattered the entire human family throughout the whole world as a result of their building “the tower of Babel” in Babylon – cf. Gen 11). It should be noted, slavery appeared almost universally throughout history within various ethnic groups and cultures, and was not unique to any race or some particular kind of economy — its form and nature varied greatly in the ancient world. It seems to have been very common in the Tigris-Euphrates civilizations in Mesopotamia, in the Old Babylonian Empire, in ancient Persia, on the Nile in Egypt, in the Indus Valley of India, and in China’s Yangtze River Valley. The ancient Egyptians enslaved whoever had the misfortune of losing to them in battle. Ancient Egyptian society was so heavily dependent on slave labor that slave owners had absolute rights & power over them, in order to ensure a stable society — the Egyptians used slave labor to build temples and pyramids; it was during the second millennium BC that the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. The ancient Persians acquired thousands of slaves through conquest; their victories in the Aegean Islands resulted in the enslavement of entire populations. It should also be noted that ancient Indian literature suggests that slavery was sanctioned in nearly every region of India during the first millennium BC. Perhaps a chart regarding the growth of the world’s population down through the ages would be helpful at this point — historians tell us the world’s population advanced as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Estimated Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5,000 BC</td>
<td>guesstimated by some to be the time of Adam &amp; Eve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4,000 BC</td>
<td>early in human history the world’s population was 7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3,000 BC</td>
<td>14 million (just prior to Noah’s flood)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,000 BC</td>
<td>27 million (the time of Abraham; slavery was well entrenched)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 BC</td>
<td>50 million (the time of David &amp; the Kingdom of Israel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BC</td>
<td>100 million (the end of Jewish captivity in Babylon)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200 BC</td>
<td>150 million (the period of Greek rulership)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 BC</td>
<td>170 million (the birth of Jesus Christ)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 AD</td>
<td>190 million (the fall of the Roman Empire)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,000 AD</td>
<td>265 million (Medieval Times)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,500 AD</td>
<td>425 million (the period of the Reformation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,800 AD</td>
<td>900 million (early years of United States as a nation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1,900 AD</td>
<td>1.625 billion (the beginning of the 20th century)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2,000 AD</td>
<td>6.1 billion (the beginning of the 21st century)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It should be noted, the population estimates prior to 2,000 BC are simply a guess by some secular scientists.

As is commonly understood, slavery entered human history with “civilization” — without significant numbers of people and significant need, there was no need for slavery. People
who “hunted” for their food and were “farmers” had no use for a slave—they collected and grew just enough food for themselves and their family. One more pair of hands meant one more mouth to feed—there was no economic advantage in owning another human being. Once people gathered in towns & cities, a surplus of food created in the countryside (often on large estates) made possible a wide range of crafts in the town. On a large farm or in a workshop there was real benefit in a reliable source of cheap labor, generally costing no more than the minimum of food & lodging. Those were the common conditions for slavery in the ancient world—every ancient civilization used slaves. The obligation of slavery is as old as the invention of agriculture. As humans engineered ways to harvest crops and learned how to domesticate & control animals, they began to settle in communities. Some communities grew, birthing towns, some of which became large cities. People gathered together and were able to amass food, acquire possessions and supplies, and establish trade. All of these factors made life easier and more comfortable… yet, with this comfort comes power and greed, and people begin wanting more of both. As time progresses, varying occupations emerge, as do arts and written languages. Commerce is introduced between towns and cities. All this occurs while governments grow in power and privilege—and focus. Land becomes a commodity, and one that people are willing to fight for. All of these factors created the means for slavery’s development.

The institution of slavery was familiar to the ancient Hebrews, and is referred to numerous times in biblical history. Slavery was an established institution in the Greco-Roman world as well. It is thought that slaves during this time were relatively well treated (though not all); there were laws in most civilized societies that protected them against excessive cruelty or abuse. In spite of that fact, the slaves were regarded as property and had no rights in courts of law. As the Roman Empire continued to expand, a form of agricultural slavery called estate slavery was introduced on a wide scale; in this form agriculture was pursued by large numbers of slaves in an impersonal relationship with the landowner. Among agriculturalists, where surplus production led to material and cultural advancement, slaves were valued primarily as the major work force in production; such societies were considered commercial slave societies (they were exemplified by the Roman Empire). Chattel slavery is the term used regarding slaves as commodities to be bought and sold, and is often the definition we use for slavery in general, but the vast majority of slaves over the course of human history do not fit this definition. Though Plato opposed enslavement of Greeks by Greeks (who regarded bondservants as essentially inferior human beings), his pupil Aristotle considered slaves to be mere tools. Debts, piracy and wars were the main sources of slaves for the Greeks in the first millennium BC—as many as 30,000 slaves were used at a time at the Laurium silver mines at Attica. The institution of slavery consigned a majority of slaves to agricultural and industrial labor; such assignments resulted in fairly hard living. In many of these cultures slaves formed a very large part of the economy. In Roman times, the Carthaginian, Punic and Gaelic wars yielded an enormous number of slaves; the ancient historian Plutarch notes that on a single day in the year 167 BC, there were 150,000 slaves sold in a single market. Gallia, Gaul (France), north Africa and Syria were the most productive regions in meeting the slavery needs of this vast worldwide system. The increasing wealth of Rome led to an expansion in domestic slaves (taking care of children, gardening, cooking, brewing, doing the laundry, cleaning, tending to livestock and other animals) and
the servile class grew to great numbers; slaves were employed in nearly every segment of society — they could be craftsmen or even given a higher status; for example, if they could write, they could become a manager of the master's estate. Occasionally, individual slaves rose to occupy high and important positions in government on their own merits. The worst thing that could happen to a slave was being assigned to a quarry or mine, because that was a tough life. Most of the slaves were foreign, and some were highly educated and were employed as teachers and instructors. Having a large retinue of slaves became one of the prime marks of luxury... in particular, exotic slaves (especially Oriental) were in great demand. As the number of conquered provinces grew, so did the slave supply — thus most slaves were from other countries.

People not only became slaves due to being defeated in war, but because payment of a debt, and punishment for a crime. War was the main source of supply, and wars were frequent and brutal in early civilizations. When a town falls to a hostile army, it was normal to take into slavery those inhabitants who would make useful workers and kill the rest. Slavery was often the direct result of poverty — people would sell themselves into slavery because they were poor peasants and needed food and shelter; the lives of slaves were normally far better than that of peasants. Very few slaves actually attempted to escape; only those who were treated unusually harsh tried to escape. Borrowing and debt were introduced into societies that once only knew day-to-day survival. A bad harvest may cause one man to borrow food from a neighbor in order to feed his family through the year, hoping that the following harvest will not only reap enough to feed his own family but good enough for him to pay back his acquired debt. Those slaves that were in positions to gain the trust and confidence of their masters, often attained favors and a higher status by their master. Emancipation from slavery (i.e., becoming a freedman) became a significant factor in the Roman social system — slaves could obtain their freedom by buying it, by receiving it as a gift of outstanding service, or by being granted it in the deceased owner's will. The term that is most commonly used regarding this freedom is “manumission.” It should be noted, slavery never disappeared from medieval Europe — while slavery declined in northwestern Europe, it persisted in southern Italy, Sicily, Spain, Russia, southern France, and North Africa. Most of these slaves were “white,” coming from areas in Eastern Europe or near the Black Sea. When Europeans began to colonize the New World (the Americas) at the end of the 15th century, they were well aware of the institution of slavery. As early as 1300, Europeans were using black and Russian slaves to raise sugar on Italian plantations. During the 1400s, a few decades before Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, Europeans exploited African labor on slave plantations built on sugar producing islands off the coast of West Africa. The slave trade on the east African coast and in Arabia was constant between the 1st and the 15th century — Africans were sold into the Middle East by way of Yemen, the Persian Gulf, and other Islamic countries. Slaves were also transported from Africa to Malaysia and to the Indonesian Islands, arriving as far away as the Polynesian Islands in the Pacific Ocean. The slave trade between Africa, China and the Middle East was the largest of its kind until the coming of the transatlantic slave trade.
The World’s Attitude Toward “Slavery”

The attitude toward slavery in the ancient world was entirely different from that in more recent times. It is difficult to accurately assess its offensiveness and its malfeasance in our day, because of the criminality of it by so many in the modern world; in spite of the fact that many who experienced it here in North America did not see it in that negative a light; when the masses were set free under Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Declaration in 1863, many slaves in the south chose to continue living with their masters and serving them, which corresponds with what Hebrew Law stated during Israel’s exodus from Egypt. The Lord said to Moses, “Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before My people: If you buy a Hebrew slave (a Hebrew could become a slave to pay off a debt, or make restitution for a wrong), he shall serve for six years; but in the seventh year he shall go out as a free man, without payment. If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall also go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him children, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. However, if the slave says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children, and I don’t want to go free — then his master is to bring him to God, and have his ear pierced to the door-post, thus permanently identifying himself with his master’s house; then the slave will serve his master all his life”’ (cf. Ex 21:1-6). I think it is important that we as Christians at least “respect the words of the Lord,” and not make them out to be something they are not. With all of the “hatred” that exists in our world toward the idea of slavery on any level, this is a very difficult concept for even believers to appreciate; because they have been so indoctrinated into the intolerableness of any form of slavery. Obviously, without an understanding of the foundations of God’s world, one will simply reject anything teaching that is contrary to his or her innate bias. Remember, our Lord (Jesus Christ) was “the perfect Servant,” who so loved us that He would not go out free, but rather went to the cross of Calvary; in so doing, we should willingly choose to be His bondslaves,” and echo the words of C. G. Moule, the 18th century British scholar & Bishop of Durham: “Let me stay with thee to toil, endure and obey” — from his hymn, “My Glorious Victor, Prince Devine.”

Regarding this matter of the Institution of Slavery, let’s look at what Scripture has to say. Early on in the book of Genesis we read that “Abram (his name would later be changed to Abraham) took his wife Sarai (whose name would later be changed to Sarah), and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and set out for the land of Canaan” (cf. Gen 12:5). While in route to Canaan, the king of Elam (Persia) made war with a number of other kings, and conquered their lands and took for themselves all of their possessions; among those taken was Abram’s nephew, Lot (Gen 14:12). So Abram “led out his trained men, born in his house (318 of them), and in the night he and his servants defeated the enemy and brought back all of their goods and Lot, and also the women and other people” (Gen 14:14-16). So Abraham had a fairly large group of servants (slaves) in his household — 318 of them were tough young guys who fought for him; others obviously had to care for his flocks, tend to agricultural, and protect their children, the women, and the elderly; thus in all likelihood, Abraham’s family (including his slaves) probably numbered in excess of 2,500 (a good 1,500 of them were probably
children and women; another 500 of them would have been elderly; and another 300-500 would be tending to the needs of the family and livestock). It's quite possible the number of slaves (servants) in Abraham’s family were even larger than that.

The Bible contains numerous references to slavery, because it was a common practice in antiquity. The Bible stipulates the treatment of slaves, especially in the Old Testament (cf. Ex 21:2-6; Lev 25:39-55; Deut 15:12-18). There are also references to slavery in the New Testament (cf. Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-4:1; 1 Tim 6:1). Male Israelite slaves were to be offered release after six to seven years of service, with some conditions (cf. Ex 21:2-6; Deut 15:12-15; Jer 34:14). On the other hand, foreign slaves and their posterity became the perpetual property of the owner's family (cf. Lev 25:44-47). Conversely, we are told in Scripture that many of God’s choicest servants owned large numbers of slaves — Job’s possessions totaled 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and numerous servants (far more than the animals), and that Job was the greatest of all men of the east (cf. Job 1:3). Conversely, King Solomon said, “I bought male and female slaves, and I had homeborn slaves; also I possessed flocks and herds larger than all who preceded me in Jerusalem” (cf. Ecc 2:7) — according to Scripture Solomon had 40,000 stalls of horses for his chariots, 12,000 horsemen (cf. 1 Kg 4:12), 30,000 forced laborers, 70,000 transporters, 80,000 hewers of stone (cf. 1 Kg 6:13-15), and 700 wives, princesses, and 300 concubines (cf. 1 Kg 11:3). It is difficult to say exactly how many slaves he owned, because only certain numbers are mentioned, and the terminology differs. The point is, slavery was extremely popular among the extremely wealthy in Scripture.

When God’s people Israel turned away from Him, and turned to other idols, God judged them harshly and made them “captives” (slaves) of other nations. The Lord told Moses to speak to His people concerning blessings (cf. Deut 28:1ff) and cursings (cf. Deut 28:14ff) — should Israel fail to obey the Lord, He said “He would cause them to be defeated by their enemies” (cf. Deut 28:25), “and scatter them throughout the world, and make them serve other gods” (cf. Deut 28:36, 64) — that is precisely what happened when the northern kingdom of Israel was taken captive by the Assyrians in 722 BC (cf. Is 10:5-15), and when the southern kingdom of Judah was taken captive by the Babylonians in 586 BC (cf. Jer 25:1-29; also Is 14:1-7; Ezek 22-31); God subjected them to “foreign bondage” because of their idolatry and disobedience. Throughout Scripture, we read of numerous countries fighting against other countries and taking people into captivity; this was extremely common in the ancient world. Time does not permit to mention all of the nations that warred against one another in Scripture — they are numerous. Suffice it to say, well over half of the world lived in bondage to the rulers of other nations (remember, nations differed in size from just a few thousand to hundreds of thousands). As stated above, the children of Israel were “placed in bondage” (i.e., enslaved) time after time (cf. Jud 2:13-14; 4:1-2; 6:1; 10:6-7; 13:1; etc.), because of her incessant disobedience and her continuance in transgressing God's Laws. Four times God subjected His people to significant bondage in Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, and lastly Rome.

To accentuate the importance of slavery in the ancient world, consider the vocabulary used throughout much of the Old Testament — when Abraham arrived in Canaan after spending a number of years in Egypt, the Lord appeared to him and told him that “Sarah would have a son within a year” (even though she was ninety year old). Sarah referred to Abraham as “her lord,” that word in Hebrew is “aton” (it occurs 334 times in the Old Testament, and
is translated “master” & “lord” & “husband” – cf. Gen 18:10-12). Incidentally, related to that word is the term “Adonai” (note the spellings) which is translated “Lord” (Adonai is exclusively used as a divine name and occurs 439 times in the Old Testament – read Ps 16:2; 35:22; 38:22; 54:4; 77:2; 86:3). The primary name of God in the OT is “Yahveh” or “Jehovah” – this particular word occurs 6,828 times in the Old Testament, and is the proper name of the God of Israel. A significant passage pertaining to the name Yahveh is Exodus 6:2-8 — in it God tells Moses, “I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Elohim (God Almighty), but by My name Yahveh (LORD) I did not make Myself known to them. And I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan… [though My people (the sons of Israel) are in bondage in Egypt] tell them, I am the LORD (Yahveh), and I will bring them out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and will deliver them from their bondage…. I will take them for My people and I will be their God (Elohim); and they shall know that I am the LORD (Yahveh) their God…. [yes] I am the LORD (Yahveh).” Whereas God (Elohim) refers to the Ever-existent, Eternal, Righteous, All-powerful, All-knowing, Almighty God of Creation (cf. Gen 1:31)… Jehovah (Yahveh) refers to the Loving, Compassionate, Redemptive God (cf. Jer 9:24). So up until the exodus out of the land of Egypt, God had not yet revealed Himself to His people as Yahveh; He was only seen as the Creator of all things. Reflect upon that truth before proceeding.

REGARDING “DIVINE LORDSHIP”

The issue of “Divine Lordship” is foundational to understanding God’s creation… when it is applied to God in the Old Testament, it denotes the active exercise of His power over the world and men — both as the Creator and Ruler, and giver of life and death. Since God is self-existent,” He has no origins; He has always been — He is the Eternal One who simply “IS.” When Moses asked Him what His name is, He answered him saying “I am who I am;” tell the people of Israel, “I AM has sent Me to you” (cf. Ex 3:13-14). Because God is eternal and we are finite, He is unknowable to us — infinity cannot be understood by finite minds. Abraham and Moses both understood Jehovah to be the Everlasting God (cf. Gen 21:33; Ps 90:1-2). The book of Revelation describes God as “the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end” (cf. Rev 1:8; 21:6; 22:13). Due to the fact that God is the Eternal One, He is immutable and doesn’t change — “He possesses no variation or shifting shadow” (Jer 1:17)... therefore He can be trusted; we need not fear that He is going to change — “He is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (cf. Heb 13:8; Ps 102:25-28); thus He can be relied upon. Since God alone transcends the created order, and is the Never Changing One” who has declared the end from the beginning, and does all things after the council of His will (cf. Is 43:13; 46:1-10; 55:11; Eph 1:11), it is HIM” that we must worship. So “Divine Lordship” refers to the eternal sovereign authority of the Most High. The name “Adonai” signifies God’s position as the one who has authority over His people (He is our Master), both to reward obedience and punish disobedience (cf. Deut 28:1ff; 28:15ff). As Scripture states: “Ephraim provoked God to anger most bitterly because of his arrogance (past history should have produced a state of humility and submission in him before God, but it didn’t); therefore God will leave his blood upon him because of his guilt, and bring back his reproach to him (i.e., repay him for the his arrogant behavior)” (cf. Hos 12:14). God here is conceived as being the sovereign ruler and
almighty master of creation. The psalmist David uses the term “Adonai” to show his respect for the master-servant relationship he had with God (cf. Ps 8:1; 57:5; also read Ps 148:13; Ex 23:17 & Deut 10:12-22). The reality is, **God is LORD and MASTER of all things**, and is worthy of our worship (cf. Mt 4:10; Rom 1:21).

Even in the New Testament God the Father is addressed as the **Lord of heaven and earth** (cf. Mt 11:25; 9:38; Acts 17:24; Rev 4:11). While the New Testament term for “God” (theos) is a word of pure exaltation (used twelve times in Rom 1:18-30), the Greek term **Lord** (kurios) carries with it more expressly the idea of sovereign rulership in actual exercise (cf. Eph 5:10, 17; 22; 6: 1, 4, 7, 8), thus evoking obedient service. Conversely, the Greek term “despotes” (master) with its connotation of absolute ownership and unlimited power, and its strict correlatives “doulos” (slave), are used both of God (cf. Lk 2:29; Acts 4:24, 29), and of Jesus (cf. 2 Tim 2:21; 2 Pet 2:1; Jude 1:4) — **God is to be our Lord & Master, and we are to be His bond-servants** (slaves; cf. Rom 1:1; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1; Jam 1:1). Paul said, “**Let a man regard us as servants of Christ**” (cf. 1 Cor 4:1)… “**and in everything commending ourselves as servants of God**” (cf. 2 Cor 6:4). If Jesus is indeed our **Master**, then we must be His **servant**. Jesus said, “**Not everyone who says to Me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; only he who does the will of My Father — I will declare to those who do not obey Him, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness’**” (cf. Mt 7:21-23; 25:41-46) — all sin is lawlessness (cf. 1Jn 3:4), and all unbelievers “**live in sin:**” that is, it is the ongoing practice of their lives (the present tense verb focuses on the practice) of one’s life (cf. 1Jn 3:6-8); though all Christians stumble in life (Jam 3:2), they do not make it the practice of their lives. Back to the topic at hand: the human family is “**owned by God**” — He created it for Himself… how could one draw any other conclusion? Paul said, “**For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things**” (Rom 11:36); each of those words that are emboldened are “emphatic;” read that verse again with that in mind (cf. Jude 1:24-25). Even though we are fallen creatures, as believers “**we were bought with a price; therefore we are to glorify God in our bodies**” (cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20; 1 Pet 1:18-19) — thus, we are to obey our **Master**! Though rebellion is in the soul of every one of us (the root cause is our sin nature), we are to **perseveringly** put forth an effort to walk according to the Spirit and not the flesh (cf. Gal 5:16-17). As Paul puts it, “**The righteous live by faith**” (i.e., by believing and trusting and acting upon the Word of God; cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11) — “**without faith it is impossible to please God**” (cf. Heb 11:6). This is the essence of what it means to be engaged in spiritual warfare. Regarding this matter of “**divine lordship,**” you might want to reflect upon the following passages — cf. Ex 7:16-17; 10:7-8; 10:17; 11:1, 4-5; 14:16-18; 15:1-3; Lev 19:1-4; 20:7-8, 26; Deut 1:30; 5:6-7; 6:4-5; 10:12; 28:1ff; 28:15ff; Josh 24:14-15; 1 Sam 7:3, 10; 16:7; 1 Sam 28:15-20; Ps 18:1-2; 28:7; 34:8-10, 17-18; 37:4; 55:22; 86:11; 100:3; 103:1-5; Is 6:3-5; 43:13; 45:5; 55:8-11; Jer 31:31-33; 32:27; Mic 6:8.

**REGARDING “SAVATION”**

The metaphor of **redemption** in Scripture includes the ideas of… **loosing from a bond, setting free from captivity or slavery… buying back something lost or sold… exchanging something in one’s possession for something possessed by another… and ransoming something.** In the Old Testament, redemption involved deliverance from bondage based on the
payment of a price by a redeemer. The Hebrew word gaal is a legal term for the deliverance of some person or property that is achieved by a “redeemer” — this term is found 18 times in the OT (13 times in Isaiah). It was the duty of a man’s redeemer (usually his next of kin) to buy back the freedom that he had lost through debt — an example of this kind of redemption is found in Leviticus (25:47-49), where an Israelite who had to sell himself into slavery because of poverty may be redeemed by a kinsman or himself… likewise, property sold under similar conditions could be redeemed, thus keeping it within the family (cf. Lev 25:24-25; Ruth 4:1-6; Jer 32:6-9). As one who delivers His people, Yahweh is called “Israel’s Redeemer” (cf. Is 41:14; 43:1; 44:6; 47:4). Yahweh’s redemptive activity in the Old Testament is seen in His delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage and from Babylonian captivity. The redemptive activity of God is most often described in terms of physical deliverance… but these redemptive acts were not devoid of spiritual significance. The redemption of Israel from Egypt was but the foreshadowing in history of the great act of delivering us from our sins through the cross of Christ, and forever deliver us from the kingdom of darkness (cf. Rom 3:24; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14; Titus 2:14; Heb 9:11-12; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Fundamental to the message of the New Testament is the announcement that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic hope and that in Him the long-awaited redemption had arrived. Deliverance of humankind from its state of alienation from God was accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ (cf. Rom 4:25; 2 Cor 5:18-19). In the New Testament, redemption requires the payment of a price — humankind is held in the captivity of sin from which only the atoning death of Jesus Christ can liberate.

When reflecting upon the work of Jesus Christ, New Testament writers often utilized different images (e.g., atonement, sacrifice, justification). The concept of redemption is conveyed by the Greek words agorazo & lyo — these terms have in mind the context of a marketplace transaction with reference to the purchase of goods or the releasing of slaves; i.e., the deliverance from bondage or captivity by means of a ransom price that’s been paid. The noun “ransom” (lytron) only appears in three locations in the New Testament — in each case it is applied to Jesus’ death (cf. Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; 1 Tim 2:8). Paul’s usage of the noun “redemption” (apolytrosis) is limited and essentially conveys the meaning of deliverance (cf. Rom 3:24; 8:23; 1 Cor 1:30; Eph 1:14; 4:30); Christ’s blood is depicted as the means of redemption (Eph 1:7). Jesus conceived His mission to be that of the Son of Man come to this world to offer Himself in obedience to God’s redemptive plan (cf. Mk 9:31; 10:33-34; Mt 8:17; Act 8:32-33; 1 Pet 2:22-25). With regard to Jesus’ understanding of His redemptive work, He declared that His mission not only included self-sacrificial service, but also involved giving His life as a “ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Thus, Christ’s death is portrayed as “the payment price” for the deliverance of those held captive by Satan (the ransom metaphor must be understood in the light of Jesus’ offering Himself in obedience to the Father, not interpreted as a payment to Satan); Paul expresses it this way: “You were bought with a price” (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Rev 5:9). As the means of redemption, the death of Jesus provides a deliverance that involves not only forgiveness of sin (Eph 1:7; Col 1:14), but also newness of life (Rom 6:4). Even though Christ’s redemptive work is perfect (cf. Heb 9:25-28), its full expression will not be completed in us until the return of Christ (cf. Lk 21:28; Rom 8:23; Eph 4:30). The central theme of redemption is that God has taken the initiative to act compassionately on behalf of those
who are powerless to help themselves. Scripture clearly teaches that divine redemption involves God’s identifying with humanity in its plight, and liberating humankind through the obedience, suffering, death, and resurrection of His incarnate Son.

It is the issue of “slavery” that gives context and understanding to our salvation. According to Scripture, prior to being saved “we were enslaved to sin;” i.e., sin was our master — being enslaved to sin and its dominating influence meant “we were in bondage to it” (i.e., we were “enchained” to it). Our “innate sin nature” defines who we really are — “sinners” (Rom 3:9-10, 23; Gal 3:22; Lk 18:19). By definition, sin (harmartia) means to “miss the mark;” thus as sinners we fail to meet God’s standard of righteousness. If we think of sin as only being that which is “overtly evil” (lying, stealing, immorality, malice, anger), then we are simply relegating sin to expressed behaviors; but sin is far more than that — “it is an issue of the heart that is the very foundation of our being.” Regarding the heart, God Himself said, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; who can understand it?” (cf. Jer 17:9; Mt 6:21; 15:8, 18-19). So sin is the governing principle or power that completely dominates the unbeliever’s life. Essentially the reality is this — when we have a self-orientation in life, rather than a God-orientation, we are being ruled by sin instead of righteousness.

When we place our faith in Christ, we become “a brand new creation;” i.e., born again (John 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17). We are delivered from the domain of darkness (that diabolical realm to which we were enslaved), and transferred to the kingdom of God (cf. Col 1:13): He becomes our new Lord and Master (cf. Eph 5:8; Mt 4:10; 22:37; Ps 100:2). It is important to notice the unique distinction that exists for us as believers — “we are not enslaved to Christ” (that is, we are not in bondage to Him), rather, of our own volition “we choose to become His bondservants,” because of His incredible love for us (that’s the motivation factor). As Christians, “we have been set free to serve and love Christ;” we are not forced to do anything; we love and obey Christ because He graciously paid our debt on the cross that we might be delivered from death and the bondage of sin. Therefore our obedience to Christ is out of gratitude to Him for being merciful and extending grace to us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10, 19), not out of obligation. In the following passages, you will note that the apostles referred to themselves as “bondservants of Christ” (cf. Rom 1:1; Jam 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1; Rev 1:1); i.e., they chose to be His servants and be slaves of righteousness! and they did it from the heart! (cf. Rom 6:16-19; 2 Cor 9:7; Eph 6:5-6; 1 Pet 1:22). As Paul says, “We are not under law, we are under grace!” (Rom 6:14). “We have been set free from the Law of sin and death through the cross!” (cf. Rom 8:2); whereas we were in bondage to sin and death (i.e., enslaved to it) prior to salvation, that is no longer the case! As Jesus stated, “Those whom the Lord sets free are free indeed!” (Jn 8:36). Paul said, “It was for freedom that Christ set us free!” (Gal 5:1). Conversely, said Peter, “Use your freedom to be bondservants of God!” (cf. 1 Pet 2:16). Beloved, you are no longer a “slave of Satan!” You have been redeemed by the blood of Christ! (cf. Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19). I’m reminded of the lyrics to the chorus of, “Amazing Grace, My chains are Gone” — “My chains are gone, I’ve been set free: my God, my Savior has ransomed me.”

In his letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of “being a slave of righteousness” (cf. Rom 6:19), but he realizes that believers (i.e., those who belong to God) are NOT actually slaves (i.e., they
are not in bondage); he states in that passage that he was simply speaking in “human terms” in order to shed light on this spiritual reality. Remember, slavery was a very prominent issue in their first century world; it was not only foundational to their culture, it was foundational to their understanding several spiritual truths as well; without a fairly good understanding of the issue of slavery, one might struggle with many of the doctrinal precepts of the Christian faith. Keeping that in mind, Paul felt it was helpful to illustrate spiritual truth by utilizing the culture of slavery with which they were familiar. As unbelievers, they had surrendered their bodies as slaves of unrighteousness, but now as believers, they needed to present their bodies as slaves of righteousness (he was contrasting the two positions). The reality is, God has placed His Spirit in us so that we can “walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4) and no longer walk in darkness and sin. Though believers in Christ technically are not “slaves” in the strict sense of the word (i.e., they are not in bondage to God), they should of their own volition choose to be God’s servants in this world; that should be the natural outgrowth of experiencing God’s redemption. Being a servant of Christ has nothing to do with complying with some divine ordinance… it is the residual effect of realizing the magnitude of God’s love for us; obviously without a significant awareness of God’s kindness toward us, we will not be that motivated and inspired to serve and love Him. Truth realized is the only thing that is transformational; i.e., it is the only thing that truly affects a change in the way in which we live life (that’s how motivational & inspiring truth of God’s love is); thus the more one truly believes in God’s love for him, the greater will be his sanctification (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18; Jn 17:17). The reality is, one cannot have a shallow view of God’s love for him, and expect to experience a vibrant fruit-bearing life (Jn 15:5, 9-10); either God’s love for you is an incredible dynamic in your heart and faith, or you will simply be living much of your life in your own strength – as a believer, you must make Christ your life (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:1-2; Phil 1:21; Col 3:4). The Lord Jesus Himself said, “The greatest among you shall be your servant” (cf. Mt 23:11); i.e., they will submit to the lordship of Christ and obey & serve Him. “Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when He comes” (Mt 24:46). Undoubtedly the most poignant words any of us will ever hear in all of eternity are these: “Well done, good and faithful slave; enter into the joy of your Master” (cf. Mt 25:21) — those words are actually unfathomable. As Paul states, “You are no longer a slave, but a son” (cf. Gal 4:7); “You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons… you are children of God” (cf. Rom 8:15-16). The night before Jesus went to the cross He said to His disciples: “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I call you friends, because I have made known to you everything I heard from My Father” (cf. Jn 15:15). Until this point, Jesus had called His disciples servants (cf. Jn 12:26; 13:13-16) — a servant does what he is told and sees what his master does, but does not necessarily know the meaning or purpose of it; whereas a friend knows what is happening because friends develop strong intimate relationships with each other & fellowship with each another; they are always communicating with each other. Obviously servants don’t have an intimate relationship with their master’s like friends do; the slave’s task is to simply do what he is told; so the servant-master relationship is a far more impersonal relationship than that of close friends — close friends share a level of intimacy that servants do not. With that in mind, our relationship with Christ as believers is to be one with a high degree of “intimacy,” not one that simply has a “behavioral orientation.”
**REGARDING “SERVANTHOOD”**

The apostle Paul said to the believers at Colossae, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily as for the Lord rather than for men; knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve” (cf. Col 3:23-24). We are servants of Christ; our salvation was a matter of turning away from living for ourselves and this world, “to serve the living and true God” (cf. 1 Th 1:9)—again, that’s what servants do, they serve their master. Jesus expressed it this way in a parable—“The kingdom of heaven is like a man about to go on a journey, so he called his slaves over to him and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another two talents, and to another one talent (each according to his own ability), and he then went on his journey. Only the slaves who were given five talents & two talents were *faithful* with what their master had given them (i.e., they did well with all they were given); as such, they were well-rewarded. Only the slave that had been given one talent was *unfaithful* in his stewardship; thus even what he had been given was taken from him” (cf. Mt 25:14-30). Incidentally, the main point in this parable had nothing to do with “the ability” of each servant… instead it had to do with “each servant responding according to the ability that God had given him,” though some of God's servants have more ability than others, all of us as God’s servants have “some ability” — all God asks is that we respond according to our ability. Just because the servant who was only given “one talent” failed in his stewardship, had nothing to do with his having lesser ability. As Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians, “It is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy or faithful” (cf. 1 Cor 4:2). As God’s children we have all been endowed with “a measure of faith… and various gifts that differ according to the grace given to us…and we are to exercise them accordingly… as good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (cf. Rom 12:3-6 & 1 Pet 4:10). The message is this: we are God’s servants, and He is our Master… don’t try and wiggle out from the responsibilities that God has allotted to you (cf. Mt 25:35-46). The great commandment (it’s not merely a suggestion) is that “we love others” (read Mt 22:36-40 and Mt 25:31-46).

Servants have been a part of our world since the earliest civilizations surfaced nearly 5,000 years ago. “When Abraham was up in age, he said to the oldest servant of his household, that he was not take a wife for his son Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites… but rather from his own relatives” (cf. Gen 24:1-4) — that was quite a responsibility by the most honored servant in his house. Slavery was well-entrenched in the human family throughout the early years of world history. God told Abraham's son, Isaac, that He would bless him “for the sake of My servant Abraham” (cf. Gen 26:24). Again, believers have a master/slave relationship with God. When Israel saw the great power which Yahveh (Jehovah) had used against the Egyptians, “the people feared Yahveh and believed in Him and in His servant Moses” (cf. Ex 14:31; also Josh 1:2). Even in the Mosaic Law we read, “You shall not covet your neighbor’s wife, his house, his field, or his manservant, or anything that belongs to him” (cf. Deut 5:21). Servanthood was obviously a very significant reality in the ancient world — God did not denigrate it, but actually included it in the Law. Though that may be troubling to some of you at this point, continue reading. Remember, human beings are “fallen creatures” (i.e., self-centered sinful creatures); contrary to what you may think, every creature on this planet is a totally self-centered creature — thus every action of man
is rooted in his fallenness (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:10-18). Now it is because of man's fallenness that God established the “institutions” of government, slavery, and others. As you may recall, God destroyed the human family with a world-wide flood due to the totally corrupt nature of man (cf. Gen 6:5-7) — only Noah found favor before God (cf. Gen 6:8); thus the entire human family was blotted out (cf. Gen 6:17-18; 7:23). Following the flood God established the “institution of government” whereby He would rule mankind — government is not the innovation of man. Genesis chapter nine (w.1-17) contains the basic provision for human government among men, exercised on behalf of God — government is simply a means God established to rule His creation through human stewardship; public officials are obliged as “stewards” to rule according to the normative law of God… human societies are not to be “lawless.” Scripture tells us that “human government is under the authority of God,” and that man is to “submit to that authority” (cf. 1 Pet 2:13-3:17; 5:1-7). Regarding the matter of “servanthood,” you might want to reflect upon the following passages — cf. Ex 8:1; Deut 10:12; 11:16; 28:47-48; Josh 24:14-27; Jud 10:5-7; Ps 100:2; Is 41:8-10; 49:3; Mt 4:10; Lk 16:13; Jn 12:26; 1 Cor 4:1; Gal 5:13; 1 Th 1:9; 1 Tim 4:6; Heb 9:14.

**REGARDING “SUBMISSION”**

It might be helpful at this point to address the importance of the master/slave relationship; by definition, the two central elements in it are “authority & submission” (cf. Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22-25; 1 Pet 2:18-20). Every institution in the human family is comprised of these two elements — be it a husband/wife relationship (cf. Eph 5:22-31; Col 3:18-19; 1 Pet 3:1-7)… a parent/child relationship (cf. Eph 6:1-3; Col 3:20-31)… a government/citizen relationship (cf. Rom 13:1-7; Titus 3:1; 1 Pet 2:13-17; Jn 19:11)… an employer/employee relationship… a teacher/student relationship… a general/soldier relationship… a pastor/parishioner relationship (cf. Heb 13:17; 1 Th 5:12-13) — obviously there are a number of other institutions in our world that possess these two elements (coach/player; boss/worker; police/citizen). God established institutions to teach us the importance of “authority & submission” — when we respect and submit to the various authorities in our lives, we will also submit and respect the divine authority whereby we are to live life. The concept of “authority & submission” didn't just come about by happenstance… God so decreed that these institutions exist to teach the human family about “authority & submission;” yet, man stubbornly argues to the contrary.

Over and over again in Scripture God teaches us to “submit to His authority;” in actuality, we are “commanded” to submit to His authority… should we refuse to do so, God says that He will deal with us accordingly. God has provided us with numerous institutions, all of which teach us these two important principles. Every human being is “subject to others” in some regard; as believers “we are to be subject to one another in the fear of God” (cf. Eph 5:21). Even the President of the United States isn’t free to “run red lights” (he’s going to get a ticket by some thirty year old cop if he is caught doing so), or go into some store and “take some items without paying for them” (he is going to be arrested, and maybe even sued by the store owner; and if some judge finds him guilty, he will have to suffer the consequences). In a courtroom, there is a judge, a jury, attorneys, and the accused — all of them must honor the legal protocol as set forth in the law — we must all submit to the law or pay the price for not
doing so. When the feminist movement took place in our country about forty years ago, it voiced anger against the Christian community for denigrating women, by demanding that they submit to their husbands. Here was a case in point where “personal freedom” was elevated to a status that God finds unacceptable & deplorable. The principle problem with the human family (in particular, here in America) is precisely this matter of “personal freedom” — you can hear the nonsensical world screaming, “No one is going to tell me what to do!” And then the nonsensical thinking of the liberal elite actually applaud it! The reality is this: godless lawless people absolutely hate submission! That’s why they hate Christianity. The only religion they will accept is one that corresponds with their fallen thinking, and values their fallen thinking; in other words, the only one they will submit to is “themselves!”

So here we are now, living in a world (i.e., the civilized western world) where authority and submission are despicable realities. If you were to present the foundational truth about the issue of “slavery” to many in our world, you would discover that they would go absolutely nuts, because it violates the foundation of their life: “personal freedom.” The vast majority of the unbelieving world has neither the patience or the ability to carefully consider anything that runs counter to their innate bias. Without a humble appreciation for “one’s own sinfulness” and the “eternity of God,” one will never embrace Him as LORD — temporal minds reject eternal truths because they refuse to humble themselves before their Creator. Regarding this matter of “submission,” you might want to reflect upon the following passages — cf. Rom 8:7; 10:3; 1 Cor 15:26-28; Eph 1:22-23; Heb 2:8; Jam 4:7; 1 Pet 2:13; 3:22; 5:5.

**REGARDING “STEWARDESHIP”**

The Greek word for “stewardship” is oikonomia — literally it means “management of a household or estate;” that is, the administration of duties or goods in one’s care. The person who administers the household is called a “steward” (oikonomos – “law of the house”) or an overseer. The concept had its roots in the institution of slavery, where the master appointed a slave to administer his household, which often included the teaching and discipling of the members of the house, especially other slaves and the children. A classic example is the position of Joseph in Potiphar’s house (cf. Gen 39:4); this involved the authority and trust as the steward of his entire estate (both his house and everything he owned). The essential criteria for his being appointed the steward of his house (other than the fact that he was very a competent and responsible person), was the fact that he could be “trusted” — obviously, the Lord was with Joseph and made him an exceptionally successful man (cf. Gen 39:2); “Potiphar saw that the Lord was with Joseph and caused all he did to prosper (cf. Gen 39:3), so he found favor in Potiphar’s sight (Gen 39:4). In spite of the fact that Joseph had unjustly been sold into slavery, and wrongly accused of sexual harassment and imprisoned for it, Yehveh was doing an incredible work in and through his life (cf. Gen 45:5; 50:19-21) — without understanding that GOD was in control of all that was going on in Joseph’s world (including his being sold into slavery and his being falsely accused of sexual harassment — imagine why God permitted all of that; what possible good could come from it? there is plenty of good that can come from it, but since that is not the purpose of this study, I won’t spend the time expanding upon it), one will completely misinterpret all that is going on in our present world. If you fail to see God as an integral part of all reality, you’re going to have a lot of disconcernption in your soul.
The ordinary idea of stewardship is found in several passages in the New Testament — in particular, the story of the unjust steward (cf. Lk 16:1-8; Mt 20:8; Lk 12:42); in this story the wicked steward used his master’s money to actually buy earthly friends. As just stewards of God’s possessions, we are not to use our Master’s money for our own selfish interests, but to use it to bring people to Christ that God might do a work in their lives. Jesus goes on to say that His stewards should actually be more shrewd than the unrighteous stewards, because heavenly matters are vastly more important than earthly matters. The implication is that righteous stewards need to do everything they can to advance the kingdom of God — it is important to remember that as Christians we are to be servants of the Most High… He is our Master. It is also interesting to note that “public officials” can also be referred to as stewards (cf. Rom 16:23) — though they may not be mindful of that fact, ultimately they are doing “God’s work” in our world, and it is God who has given them that responsibility. Says Paul, “Let every person be in subjection (emphatic!) to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except that which is from God… those which exist are established by God. Therefore he who resists authority has opposed the ordinance of God, and will bring condemnation upon themselves” (read Rom 13:1-7). The irony in all this is that men (including most believers) actually think it is their efforts that ultimately dictate reality — but such thinking is completely antithetical to what Scripture teaches. Beloved, don’t let the depraved thinking of men influence you to embrace humanistic thinking (Rom 1:28-32). As believers, it shouldn’t be difficult for us to accept the idea that God is “the sovereign ruler of the universe” (even evil serves a purpose in God’s economy) — though the unbelieving world cannot handle that truth, the believing world must embrace it, because the sovereignty of God is the foundation of the entire created order (cf. Is 46:9-11; 55:8-11; Rom 11:36; Eph 1:11; 3:11). If the “eternity of God” is a very troubling construct for you, I’m going to address that issue later on in this study. I have also addressed it in a number of other studies — “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” and “Ultimate Reality” and “Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose;” you can find them on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com under the “Additional Studies Link” on my homepage — if you click on the “icon” in the upper right hand corner of these studies, you can access a “printable pdf version” of them. If the “eternity of God” is not preeminent in your thinking, but is simply a “temporal God in the created realm in which you live,” your understanding of God is going to be extremely limited.

Regarding this matter of “stewardship,” man is actually a “steward of God” in his relation to the world, and his own life is inherent in the creation story (cf. Gen 1-3) — in that story, man was appointed “lord of everything” (with one exception, God Himself). In the New Testament, the Greek word oikonomia sometimes refers to the administration of the gifts of God; especially the preaching of the gospel (cf. Eph 3:8-11; 1 Tim 1:3-4; also cf. 1 Cor 4:1-2; 9:16-17; 12:7; Eph 4:11-16; 1 Pet 4:10). Remember, it is required of a steward that he be found “trustworthy;” i.e., worthy of that trust (1 Cor 4:2). As is the case with all stewards, one day they will have to “give an account” for everything (cf. Rom 14:12; Heb 13:17; Lk 16:2; 1 Pet 4:5) — the entire human family at the end of the age will have to “give an account” to God for everything they said and did (cf. Mt 12:36-37; Rom 2:5; 2 Cor 5:10) — it might be good to reflect upon what James, the blood-brother of Jesus, said in his letter to the twelve tribes that had been dispersed abroad —
“Let not many of you become teachers, because you are going to incur a stricter judgment” (cf. Jam 3:1) — essentially James was saying, “Watch your tongue!” One of the big problems of the human family is that vast numbers of people “like to hear themselves talk,” without the slightest concern about “the integrity of their thoughts.” The questions teachers must ask themselves are these: “Is what I am teaching really true? Does it conflict with divine truth? Or do I simply like being in a position of authority and have others listen to me?” Sadly, there are a number of “proud souls” in the Christian world that are leading people astray. Henry Adams wisely stated in his book, “The Education of Henry Adams” (1906), “A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.” That is precisely the issue, teachers strongly influence those who listen to them. Robert I. Gannon stated in a book he wrote titled, “God in Education” (1943) — “Too many have brought to their tasks spiritual ignorance, spiritual confusion, and spiritual revolt. Too many have been poisoned by drinking at poisoned wells. They have renounced their allegiance to God and have substituted a dedication to civil society.” Again, humanistic thinking is the principle problem of our world.

**REGARDING “HUMANISTIC THINKING”**

God calls humanistic thinking “foolishness” (cf. Job 5:13; Ps 94:11); conversely, the apostle Paul says the wisdom of this world is “foolishness” (1 Cor 3:19-21). Interestingly enough, the world actually thinks the things of God are “foolishness” (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). Remember, “the fool says there is no God” (cf. Ps 14:1; 53:1), and “the way of a fool is right in his own eyes” (cf. Prv 12:15); because man is a fallen creature and has an arrogant heart, he thinks he is right. Scripture tells us without humility, one will never come to know the truth; instead, God will give him over to a depraved mind because of his arrogance (cf. Rom 1:28). It should be pretty evident, you cannot successfully argue the integrity of divine truth with a fool, because his depraved mind is completely blind to the truth — as the Lord Jesus put it, “simply shake the dust off your feet and move on” (cf. Mt 10:14; Acts 13:51).

The world of “science” has been in a quagmire of thought for years — the most arrogant of scientists have made brass statements that border on lunacy, while those with half a wit have tried to voice things in a more sensible fashion. For years, the wisest among them have been telling their fellow-comrades to “let people know that our scientific understanding of the universe is extremely limited, and stop pretending to be a genius.” As Albert Einstein put it — “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 of the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection.” Yet, in spite of such integrity of thought, men like Carl Sagan (a renowned professor at Cornell University) have shouted with a loud voice that “God doesn’t exist, because the universe as always existed!” With his depraved mind Sagan made a brass assumption that the universe has always existed (sadly, that was the scientific assumption by many just a few years ago). His argument was, “if the universe has always existed then it was not created as the religious element believes;” yet just a short while later, the entire scientific community confessed that “they were wrong.”
that the universe is in a state of decline (i.e., it is dying); hence it has not always existed, or it would be completely dead. By measuring the decline, science has concluded that the universe exploded into existence 13.8 billion years ago — they refer to it as “the big bang.” The problem with so many arrogant minds in our world, is that they love to control the discourse on the world stage, and have the populous worship at their altar… in spite of the fact that they have absolutely “no evidence” to support their claims. King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (read I Kg 3:7-12), said, “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.” When you read “divine truths” like that in Scripture, does it not affect your thinking? Does it not give definition to this silly world in which we live? The Greeks had a word for the “juvenile thinking of our world;” it was the word “sophomore” — it is a compound word that literally means “wise fool” (sophos = wise; and moros = foolish; from which we get our word moron); the idea behind this word is — “a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, because you may be inclined to think that you know a whole lot more than you actually know.” So students in the tenth grade in high school have been called “sophomores” (as have those in their second year of college), because these are the two educational years when young people start to enter the world of knowledge… as you might recall, many kids when they are about fifteen years old actually think they know more than their dad knows!

**Albert Einstein** humbly accepted the truth that human beings aren’t nearly as knowledgeable as they like to think they are, where as **Carl Sagan** and his arrogant friends wanted the world to believe they were the final voice on human knowledge. Incidentally, there is another “hot button issue” on the table in our world today called “climate change” — and wouldn’t you know it, we now have a multitude of arrogant minds making all kinds of claims, and at least half the world now believes their claims; whether in fact their thinking is even close to the truth, remains to be seen… but many in the scientific community are questioning it. As I see things, the principle problem in our world today seems to be that “man now worships the world of science, rather than the God of the universe,” and many in the scientific world are rejoicing in that fact… in spite of the fact that much of their thinking is based on “mere speculation,” without the slightest degree of evidence. Back in the 1980s science believed that “ulcers” were caused by worrying; that people simply needed to stop worrying (this was the primary emphasis of psychologists)… sadly, many people had to identify with that line of thinking… a few years later, however, a scientist with half a wit argued against that idea and was publicly criticized for his thinking. He said ulcers were caused by some “bacteria” (or the like) that had gotten into their system… in order to prove the scientific world wrong, he digested a cup of whatever it was that causes ulcers, and he ended up getting an ulcer… and that year he won “the Nobel Prize!” Keep in mind, this occurred in what we call “the genius century” — i.e., the twentieth century! As Einstein stated over and over again, “We need to stop deceiving people by claiming to be brilliant, because we’re not!” The reality is: the arrogant purveyors of thought in our world will say “anything” to get you to believe what they want you to believe (that they are the geniuses of the world); yet their depraved thinking is nothing but humanistic bias that actually hates divine truth — it is simply what their depraved minds wants to believe. I find it interesting, “the first temptation in the Garden of Eden was to be as God in knowledge” (cf. Gen 3:5). Lord willing, that is not the altar at which you worship.
Reflect with me for a moment on the wisdom espoused by some of the most reputable people down through the centuries—the English Franciscan philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon said in his work “Opus Majus” (1267), “It is certain that never, before God is seen face to face, shall a man know anything with final certainty… And since, in comparison with what a man knows, those things of which he is ignorant are infinite, and beyond comparison greater and more beautiful, he is out of his mind who extols himself in regard to his own knowledge.” Likewise wrote Michel de Montaigne in his work “Essays” (1580), “The greatest part of what we know, is the least part of what we know not; that is, that that which we think to know, is but a parcel; yea and a small particle of our ignorance.” The reality is, we have only touched the tip of the infinite iceberg with what we profess to know, yet we claim to be so brilliant; it is the claim that makes us “fools!” As the Indian theologian Kahlil Gibran in his book, “The Voice of the Master” (1958) said, “Perplexity is the beginning of knowledge.” The renowned poet and critic Thomas Eliot said in his work “The Rock” (1934), “All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance… Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?” Writes Josh Billings in his work, “Proverbial Philosophy of Wit & Humor” (1874), “The trouble with people is not that they don’t know, but that they know so much that ain’t so…. I honestly believe it is better to know nothing than to know what ain’t so.” As Paul expressed it, “Knowledge puffs up” (cf. 1 Cor 8:1); i.e., knowledge has a tendency to make one arrogant; this particular slogan appears to have been used by certain believers in Corinth in the first century who arrogantly thought they were smarter than weaker Christians— the weaker Christians believed that eating food offered to idols was a sin; other Christians in Corinth thought that such concerns were ridiculous… though Paul agreed that the meat offered to idols was not contaminated in some way, he wanted the knowledgeable Christians to not flaunt their enlightened point of view, and glory in their wisdom. Such believers missed the point—they should have “only love edifies” (cf. 1 Cor 8:1). Paul follows up his argument by saying this: “If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know… take care lest this liberty of yours somehow become a stumbling block to the weak… for through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined… [beloved] by wounding the conscience of the weak, you are sinning against Christ!” (1 Cor 8:2-13). So what is really important in life? that you know God and love others (cf. Deut 10:12; Mic 6:8; Jn 13:34).

THE ETERNALITY OF GOD

As alluded to earlier, it is absolutely essential that the “Infinite Eternal God” be preeminent in your thinking; if He is not the “Reality” in your mind that transcends all things, then you will ultimately only embrace those constructs of thought that are nothing but the product of fallen human thinking. It is divine wisdom that is to govern our lives, not human wisdom—we are to have the mind of Christ, not the mind of men; that is the essence of what “faith” is all about. Yet the majority of people in the unbelieving world “worship at the altar of human thought, believing that it is the supreme wisdom of the universe,” which is about as foolish a deduction as one can make. Think about it, unbelievers bring together a group of people “of like mind,” and then collectively deduce that “they are right and everyone else is
functions. Let me compare this enclave in human and believe that “they are the answer” to the problems of our world. I am not stating this to make a political argument… I am stating to demonstrate how humanistic thinking would have it, one day his family took him away on a long trip, and his understanding was turned completely upside down… and he longed to go back home where he came from; he was not at all comfortable in that new environment. The message is this — when the small world in which we live gives definition to “the bigger world,” we will grossly misjudge the bigger world and the people who inhabit it. I raise this point because of the “narrow mindedness of humanistic thinking.” So when we insist that the small political world in which we live defines life, as well as the bigger world beyond our world, we are embracing some very dark thoughts — “since when is our limited thinking the standard bearer for other people? when in fact it has little or no understanding of what other people value and why they believe what they believe?” When all we do is let our little world dictate reality for us, we will naturally make some very brash deductions; essentially we are basing reality on fallen human thinking, rather than basing human thinking upon reality; as such, we are not seeing reality for what it really is — instead “belligerence & darkness” will rule in our soul. Since other people’s thinking is grounded in life-experiences with which we are not familiar (thus admittedly making it difficult to fully appreciate and respect their thinking), we may be inclined to judge them harshly for embracing different constructs of thought then we do — so we condemn them? It is precisely here where our political world fails so miserably… because they are unable to “argue succinctly” and expose the seeming lack of integrity of their opponents “message,” they attack the “messenger” — that’s the modus operand of the liberal elite; if they hate the ideal, they hate the person. All I have done here in this paragraph is try to give understanding to limited humanistic thinking (via the political world). The problem is man is simply too arrogant and too narrow-minded to deal with reality.

Scripture clearly teaches that without humility one will never come to a knowledge of the truth, because nothing in the entire world will cause them to turn from humanistic thinking. The truth is, “only God dictates reality” and sets the standard by which we’re to live. So is it any wonder that God calls man’s thinking “absolute foolishness” when it is antithetical to His? (cf. 1 Cor 1:19-20, 27-29; 3:19; Ps 94:11; Ecc 1:17). In the next few pages I want to expand upon “the eternality of God”… if some of the material is somewhat troubling to you, let me encourage you to read some of the works of the great philosophers and theologians down through the centuries, because they are ardent believers in “the integrity of true unabated logic;” thus they are thought of as being “logicians.” The reality is, true unabated logic
must have an eternal aspect to it (i.e., something that transcends the temporal order), if it is to logically give definition to that which is temporal. What is important here is that we not simply satisfy ourselves with extremely limited temporal thinking. I find it interesting that the blood-brother of Jesus, James, called God’s wisdom “reasonable” (cf. Jam 3:17); thus, it is extremely logical. Remember, it is God who has given us “minds” with which to think and process divine truth; but when we approach things with an arrogant heart, our minds cease to function as God designed them. According to Scripture, without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit divine wisdom cannot be understood by the human mind (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). Nevertheless, the human mind when it is humble, open and honest, can still reflect upon things at a provocative level. Let me share some of Albert Einstein’s most prodigious thoughts (at least from my perspective) — because of his respect for truth (the reality of what is) and the integrity with which he approached ultimate reality, I have always enjoyed reflecting upon his words; so let me state them again — “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.” Even though Einstein was not a believer in the strict sense of the word, his humility of thought was commendable.

To take the foregoing arguments a step further, and somehow conclude that all things are simply the result of “random chance” is also illogical, because it defies the very laws by which science operates. Science has demonstrated by the scientific method that random chance never results in order, design or function — therefore, there must have been something that “caused” these conditions to exist. The Second Law of Thermodynamics (i.e., the Law of Entropy) tells us that everything in the created order is in “a state of decline,” that nothing is improving (that’s a law of nature); since everything is in a state of degeneration, nothing evolves into something better; thus evolution is actually a non-reality, simply a suggestion that surfaced in our world in the 19th century by the naturalist Charles Darwin. Since then, science has discovered the Laws of Thermodynamics and the Law of Entropy; the Law of Entropy maintains that all matter in the universe is in a state of increasing disorder and degeneration; that everything will ultimately be in a state of inert uniformity (i.e., in a completely dead state). Therefore, by definition, where there is the slightest degree of order, design or function, there must have been a cause (a creator), and that is what science is all about — “essentially science is about discovering why things are what they are, and why things work the way they do.” Thus science believes in a “cause and affect universe.” In spite of that fact, we still have some scientists in our world who “insist” that evolution is still valid… yet “the laws of science” argue to the contrary. Sheer stubborn belligerence seems to reside in the souls of a lot of people, in spite of the fact “there is not one piece of evidence” suggesting that evolution is a dynamic reality. By the way, if you struggle with constructs of logic, let me encourage you to study the subject in detail, and not just settle for remedial answers pro-offered by some humanists who “refuse to even accept the possibility that there is a “God.” It should be remembered, all evidence points in the direction of a Creator… no evidence points in the direction of evolution.
Logic tells us that “when one excludes the possibility that reality may include a Supreme Being,” one doesn’t end up with one! Wow, what an amazing deduction! And then these humanists have the audacity to claim that one doesn’t exist! That’s how “circular reasoning” works — if one starts with the presumption that there is no God (i.e., one presupposes that no God exists); guess what? one ends up proving with circular reasoning that there is no God! It is such a juvenile way of “determining ultimate reality,” that most scientists in our world today are embarrassed by the narrow-minded thinking of their fellow-comrades in the scientific community (particularly here in America) who insist on approaching the subject with preconceived bias. The reality is, the bias with which they conducted their search, ultimately determined the answer that they arrived at (that is simply the way circular reasoning works). By the way, this is primarily the result of “leftist ideology” in higher-education here in America — I think it’s important for you to know, 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 the diabolical left in America “demanding a separation between church and state” — thus GOD is no longer an acceptable reality in the public arena in our country (including our schools) — that’s why it is no longer found in the text-books that are used in our public schools (it is actually forbidden); that’s how much “hatred” there is in the liberal element that essentially now controls the public arena here in the United States — the liberal elites have an intense hatred for “stupid white Christians” (I’m using “their terminology”). Let me repeat myself: such biased thinking is not prevalent in the scientific communities of Europe and the majority of other countries; it’s only prevalent here in “the land of the free!” — how’s that for an oxymoron?

You would think “The Second Law of Thermodynamics,” and “cause and affect logic;” and the thinking of the great philosophers of history would move the scientific world in America in another direction, but many of them refuse to even acknowledge that such a Transcendent Reality might exist. History reminds me of the words of the world’s self-acclaimed “cosmological genius,” Carl Sagan — a distinguished professor of evolution at Cornell University (one of the bastions of the liberal elite), he mocked and berated the thought that there was even the possibility that there was a God, and the leftist ideologues cheered him on. If you mentioned the word “devil or satan,” he would simply laugh at you and say, “How can you, an educated man, be so stupid so as to think that there is actually a devil?” Before his death in 1996, Carl Sagan said to the world just ten years earlier that “evolution is a proven fact!” The evolutionists and liberal elites in America roared their approval exclaiming, “the case is closed! God doesn’t exist!” as if Carl Sagan was the final word on “cosmology” (space and mass). By the way, it’s almost impossible to “prove a negative;” thus for Sagan to say that “God doesn’t exist,” is about as mindless a statement as has ever been voiced by a member of the human family (cf. Ps 14:1). In case the foregoing argument is a little puzzling to you, reflect upon this question: “How can one know that God doesn’t exist?” i.e., “How can one know what he cannot know?” You would have to know “all things” to know that there is no God: if indeed there is none. So to make a brash statement like Sagan without the slightest bit of evidence essentially is beyond stupid: to think that some reasonably respected thinker would ever make such a claim is somewhat “befuddling;” how in the world did modern man ever reach this level of madness? Such postulations actually makes one question whether or
not modern man is “the least intelligent creature” who has ever occupied this planet — remember, we all begin life with a completely “empty head” (no knowledge); we end up becoming the totality of what we learn to accept as true; in that sense, we’re no different than primitive man; just because we’re born in the 20th century doesn’t mean we’re smarter than those who went before us (that’s a favorite little didactic of evolutionary thinking — those before them were “uneducated midgets”). Today, this sorrowful, arrogant bumbling fool (Carl Sagan) is in Hades awaiting his final judgment (cf. Ps 14:1; Lk 16:19-31; 2 Tim 4:1-5; 1 Pet 4:5; Rev 20:12-15). The picture really isn’t that difficult a one to draw: arrogant fools love to be objects of worship in our world and highly respected for their wisdom; obviously, for such a person to admit anything to the contrary (i.e., that God might exist), he would have to “humble himself” before the entire world and all of his colleagues… think about it, that can be a very self-denigrating experience; you’ve written textbooks and lectured all over America, and have adamantly, emphatically & arrogantly declared to the populace that “evolution” is a proven fact! And now you have to eat crow and stand up before the world and admit that you may have been wrong? Proud men don’t do that. I wouldn’t have come down this hard on Sagan if he had simply given “his opinion” (as many others have), because that indeed is all it was — opinion — instead, he violated one of the premiere tenets of science (making a declaration without having evidence to support that claim), and then he proceeded to violently attack those who disagreed with him, as if “his loud screaming voice” actually gave him credibility and established him as the ultimate determinant of cosmological truth — it would be like claiming that it is not possible for a person to live beyond the age of 150 years; if you have no evidence to support such a claim, you cannot make that claim.

Such diabolical human thinking always causes me to reflect upon the eternal future of such individuals “when they will have to stand before God and give an account of their mindless words” (Mt 12:36-37). To believe anything to the contrary is just more diabolical nonsense (i.e., absolute foolishness; that’s the way God describes it, and if anyone has the authority to make such a statement, God does). The questions that beg asking are these: “Why is there such an animus against religion here in America?” Scripture says that “men love darkness rather than light,” since America seems to be the epicenter of Christendom in our world, it is here where Satan is doing his most profound work, and this he does through the unbelieving world. A second question that needs asking is this: “Why do so many American scientists argue so vehemently in defense of evolution?” The answer to the question is the same as the preceding: because America is the center of evolutionary thought in our world. Incidentally, some thirty-five 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’s leading scientific journals, “Nature” (a 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.” Some of you may not appreciate the significance of that critical editorial — remember, many in the scientific world here in America think they are the premiere scientists in the world; the reality is, contrary to what you may think, that is not at all the case — that is simply the “extreme arrogance” of many people here in America (for those of you who have been indoctrinated into believing such nonsense, that may be a very difficult construct for you to believe). Regarding the critical editorial by the journal “Nature,”
two weeks after the article was published, twenty-two members of the museum’s disting-
uished staff of biologists wrote the following letter to the editor of *Nature* —

>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 of America’s liberal elite 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 so-called facts one should fear, are those that are “arrived at with dishonest intrigue;” it is these purported facts that distort reality; this has happened several 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 and more scientists are coming out of the closet and abandoning evolutionary thinking; because the evidence continues to embarrass its adherents, it moves scientists in the direction of “creationism.” If evolution were indeed true, it would be extremely easy to prove, because all the evidence would logically point in that direction; but since it is not true, it can't 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. Just a few years ago I was invited to present a “creationist view” to a college science class that included a few visiting college professors (including a couple from Arizona State); the teacher was an ardent evolutionist; he not only denounced much of what I had said to the class, but proclaimed to have “proof” that evolution was the process whereby humanity came into existence. Obviously, he must have felt ashamedly diminished and humbled in the presence of his students because of what he believed and taught, so he stood up and tried to embarrass me by making some “brash statements;” so rather than entertaining the thoughts that I had shared with his class, he attacked them without the slightest degree of any evidence (he simply claimed to have evidence)... again, that seems to be the way in which the man-centered liberal establishment responds when it is backed into a corner.
I find it interesting that the common message that is being promulgated in the scientific world today 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.” I find that statement interesting as well, because they (i.e., Carl Sagan and his cohorts) use to “appeal to scientific evidence” as proof that the God of the Bible does not exist. The underlying animus that still characterizes the spirit of many in the American scientific community, is that “there is still a disparagingly, fervent heat boiling in many scientists souls, because religion is absolutely repugnant to them”—they not only hate the fact that parents teach their children that God exists, but they refuse to let our schools teach their kids that God might exist. One can’t help but wonder 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.” You can hear God saying, “You told the world that I didn’t exist… I’ve got three questions for you:

1. Why did you make such a foolish claim?
2. Why did you believe such a foolish claim?
3. Why did you denigrate those who believed in Me?

“As such, you are now going to suffer the eternal consequences of your arrogance” (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 in the created realm, judgment appears to be a big joke to many people (in particular to the liberal elites), but a day is coming when our Creator is going to look them in the eye, and there will be no place to run or hide… contrary to what some think, the price they are going to pay for their arrogant proclamations is eternal damnation; I’m well aware that that is a difficult construct for temporal human minds, but that is what Scripture teaches. Since all of us are temporal finite creatures with temporal finite minds, it is not possible for us to understand the concepts of heaven and hell or eternal damnation and eternal glorification… those concepts transcend human thought. I cannot even fathom what those realities are like. Augustine in his work, “City of God” (written in 426 AD) described heaven this way: “The peace of the celestial city is the perfectly ordered and harmonious enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.” His emphasis on peace is very significant; I can't imagine what perfect peace is going to be like, especially in my grossly imperfect state. Furthermore, I can't imagine what heaven is going to be like — as the apostle Paul said, “It has not entered into the hearts of men all that God has prepared for those who love Him” (cf. 1 Cor 2:9)… heaven, obviously, is going to be so glorious it is going to transcend human thought. Paul was caught up to the third heaven (theologians believe that is the ultimate heaven where God dwells; that place of unparalleled bliss that we will one day call home) — “so Paul was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak” (cf. 2 Cor 12:2-4). It should not be surprising that what Paul experienced was inexpressible. Remember, the omniscient, omnipotent, eternal God will have designed this glorious domain; keep in mind, His genius is billions of times greater than the totality of all His creatures combined. Heaven is going to be so glorious I don't think we will ever be able to fully comprehend it, or cease being in awe of it (cf. Jn 14:2; Rev 21:2, 10-27). What else would you expect from the Infinite One? Just a little mud hut? Sometimes it's fun to reflect upon the unknowable, but that’s all we can do at this point. Just as eternal glorification is incomprehensible, so also is
eternal damnation. T. S. Eliot describes it this way in his book, “The Cocktail Party” — “In hell, man is alone; there is nothing to escape from and nothing to escape to.” In the minds of some of the greatest theologians in history, the difference between heaven and hell experientially seems to be this — absolute peace vs. absolute turmoil. What is your destiny?

Regarding “truth” in the human soul, it is important to remember that God only communicates it to the humble; so if you desire to know the truth, you must humble yourself before the Lord (your Master). As the prophet Micah stated: “What does the Lord require of you? that you do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God” (cf. Mic 6:8; Deut 10:12; Jam 4:6). The principle problem of humanistic ideologues is that they view humility as stupidity; thus when they look at Christians they see a “stupid people”… a mindless people; a people who haven’t enough sense to think; a people who have thrown their brains away; a people who simply follow some stupid religious thinking. Now, with those thoughts in mind, apply such thinking to the absolute fallenness of the Evil One himself, Satan (cf. Gen 3:1-5,13; also 2 Cor 11:3). Obviously, the liberal elite hates humility; in their fallenness they see it as a weakness, feebleness and incompetence… little does the liberal elite know “that therein is the beginning of wisdom” (cf. Ps 25:9; Prov 1:7; 11:2; 15:33; Is 66:2; Dan 4:37; Zeph 2:3; Jam 1:21; 1 Pet 5:5). So when you look at Christians, don’t look at them as being “the morons of the world”… look at them as having the integrity and the honesty to admit their deficient nature, and their desire to be the people God would have them be. The question is this: What are the stupid morons (i.e., the liberal elites) going to say when God undresses them on the last day and discloses their perverted thinking? Beloved, humanity doesn’t determine the economy of God, so don’t foolishly use fallen human logic to argue to the contrary. It is actually very interesting to think that a human being can argue convincingly to his soul with untruth, and then ardently believe that his thoughts are absolute truth. I almost wonder if that even possible; that is, do they really believe what they say they believe? or deep down do they actually question what they profess to believe? Scripture seems to suggest that the unbelieving world is really “sold out” to what it professes to believe; that they are “truly convinced” of the integrity of their diabolical thinking (cf. Rom 1:25,28,32; Is 44:20; Jer 13:25). Keep in mind, there will come a day “when every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is LORD, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2:10-11); there is no escaping this reality. The reality, God is LORD… He is LORD over all creation… the question is, “Is He your LORD? Your MASTER?” As Jesus said, “No man can serve two masters” (cf. Mt 6:24).

Another extremely important reality is this — “when one dismisses that which is Eternal from his thinking, as if it is not that significant, he is completely distorting reality.” It’s the “small temporal minds of men” that mess everything up — their minds are not only small, they are fallen & perverse, and 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 belligerently arrogant and downright stupid. Some of you might be offended at how often I have been using the words “foolish” and “stupid” — if they offend you, take it up with God, because He is the one who has made that judgment. To make oneself “the god of one’s little world” is undeniably the most irrational thing one
could possibly do (because you cannot effectuate your deepest desires). However, the reality is, it is just such thinking that often controls the discourse that takes place in the minds of every human being… like everyone else, I constantly find myself interpreting reality from my vantage point; in spite of the fact that my temporal mind is always guilty of 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 think and argue sensibly. Though that didactic is a difficult one for any of us to fully wrap our minds around, it will make considerably more sense to you after you read the following paragraphs. To somehow conclude that the God of creation removed His hand from the created order (which in itself is beyond reason; remember, He is all that existed), and let things happen as they may (whatever that may mean), without in any way effectuating the result, simply defies logic. Let us attempt to define the essence of that which is “eternal”—if you were the Eternal Creator, by definition you would transcend everything else that exists, because all that exists would have come into existence through you… therefore should you decide to create something, its essence would naturally be temporal, rather than eternal, because only you as “Creator” possess eternity — 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 exists outside of the created order (i.e., space, mass and time) — He transcends the created order.

Keeping that in mind, I frequently refer to God as “The Transcendent One or Transcendent Reality.” Now, due to the fact He transcends all things, He naturally sees the End from the Beginning—though that may be a difficult construct for you at this point, it will become far clearer shortly when I give a graphical depiction of it. By the way, the foregoing is precisely the way the Bible defines the God of creation (cf. Is 46:10; 14:24; 25:1; Ecc 3:11; Rom 11:33-36). Perhaps what disturbs me more than anything else is the number of professing Christians who argue against the eternality of God—I don’t see how that is possible for one who is truly born-again, but apparently it is; so it must be the stubborn humanistic thinking of someone to actually make God coalesce with the human family.

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—hence he simply wound up the clock and left everything alone); is another construct that defies logic and reason. Many people in our world actually see God in that light (He is simply a distant reality), and believe 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 antithetical to 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 less than who He truly 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 couldn’t do so because numbers just continue on ad infinitum (they never end). It’s at this point where the temporal 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 now have 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 us are no doubt aware of the fact that there is “no end” to space; it just keeps going and going, etc. Obviously the created order in some way reflects the glory of its Creator (i.e., the eternality of God), and it is just such dynamics that transcend human thought. For some reason, even some believers have a difficult time seeing God as “relevant” to all that is going on in our world… as if He’s a non-player; so they relegate Him to mere deistic status who simply exists in the heavenslies, thus minimizing His involvement in the created order… but that does not at all correspond with what Scripture teaches — God not only transcends the created order, He is actively orchestrating all things after the council of His will (Eph 1:11) — though man plans his way, it is God who directs it; though man sows, God determines what he reaps; to think anything to the contrary is sheer arrogance… man isn’t the one who ultimately determines what goes on in this world; he doesn’t have the capacity to instill his will in this world; remember, this is God’s world, not man’s (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; Is 45:5-7; 46:9-11; 55:8-11); thus man’s focus is to be on God and what He is doing in this world, not on man and what he is doing (that is, we are to focus on God’s will, not man’s will — cf. Mt 6:10). Ultimately, God has given us an “eternal hope,” not a “temporal hope” (cf. Rom 8:18-25; 12:12; 15:4; 1 Cor 13:13; Col 1:5, 27; 1 Tim 4:10; Titus 1:2; 2:13; 3:7; Heb 3:6; 6:18-19; 10:23; 1 Pet 1:3, 13; 1 Jn 3:3); so try though as we may (and we all do) to make our world a pleasant little utopia, that is not going to happen. Again, life is not about us and what we want… it’s about God and what He wants (cf. Mt 6:10; 16:24; 26:39). Are you going to defer to Him and His will, or insist on doing your own thing in life? Beloved, reflect upon the words of the psalmist David, “The Lord will accomplish what concerns me” (cf. Ps 138:8) — “faithful is He who called you; He will bring it to pass” (1 Th 5:24). Remember, we live in a fallen world; as such “we are to fix our hope on the living God” (cf. 1 Tim 4:10).

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 so, 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 define 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 are no limits 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, nor does it exist in the eternal realm); 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. If you did not graphically depict this on a piece of paper, you may struggle with understanding that which is eternal — when you reflect upon this graphic depiction, things should start to become a lot clearer. 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 eternality 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; thus the two cannot even be compared (again, the biggest number you can come up with is totally insignificant when compared to numerology that is infinite; 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 two to the number five 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 attempting to define reality and the cosmos (as Carl Sagan did); 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, fallen man simply operates in the “small circle” that you drew on the paper… yet he somehow concludes that “therein” is the answer to everything that exists. In so doing he passes judgment on things that require an understanding of that which is “outside of that circle” (i.e., that which is eternal). I mention the foregoing to simply help you see God as the GOD who really is — He is LORD of everything. Satan refused to make Him “his lord,” so he started a war in the heavenlies… but as fate will have it (by the way, God is the author of fate), eternal damnation awaits him.

THE TRUTH IS, “GOD IS A MYSTERIOUS ENIGMA”

Since God transcends the created order (space, mass and time), He is an enigma in the sense that He transcends human thought. As temporal creatures we are quickly confounded when we seek to plumb the depths of God, because no mortal can exhaustively comprehend God; that which is finite cannot come close to understanding that which is infinite — that would be like placing the entire ocean in a tiny little thimble… the problem is, proud man likes to think He is brilliant enough to do so. Though Scripture reveals things about God that we know are true, because God's Spirit has revealed them to our hearts, we cannot say that we
fully understand those truths — that simply is not possible. Paul rightly said in his letter to the Corinthians, “we have limited knowledge” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12)… that God has a triune nature, yet is one in essence, is beyond human understanding… that Christ was both human and divine is also beyond human thought. These truths simply transcend the human mind. As Zophar the Naamathite said to Job, “Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? It is high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than Sheol, what can you know?” (cf. Job 11:7-8). We face very similar problems in the natural world; we know that gravity exists, but we do not understand it. Likewise, everyone agrees that motion is an integral part of reality, yet it has perplexed philosophers and scientists for millennia. There is much that is “mysterious” about reality, and much that we do not understand; nevertheless as R. C. Sproul puts it in his book “Essential Truths of the Christian Faith,” that does not warrant “a leap into absurdity.” Though there are extremely deep mysterious aspects of reality (and rightfully so, our Creator isn’t just some little temporal being… so how in the world can we expect to wrap our minds around His genius?), Scripture tells us that God will one day further enlighten us regarding those things we do not now understand (cf. 1 Cor 13:12; 1 Jn 3:2; Rom 16:25-27; 1 Cor 2:7).

Skeptical thinkers like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris have vigorously stated that belief in God is “irrational;” even “dangerous.” Sadly, the so-called New Atheism has attracted millions of young people, thanks to bestselling books such as “The God Delusion” and “God Is Not Great.” The truth is, God is SPIRIT (cf. Jn 4:24), not flesh, and fallen man is “spiritually dead” (cf. Eph 2:1; Col 2:13)… so to conclude that man in his fallenness is able to navigate through the reality of “the divine presence” is ludicrous. Furthermore, only God can communicate divine truth to man, and He only does it to those who are “humble before Him.” It should not be surprising that proud men think that this thing called God is a delusional precept, because God has given them over to a “depraved mind” (Rom 1:28); hence they are “haters of God” (Rom 1:30). Obviously, there are numerous arguments one can make for the existence of God, even using human logic, but unless God “opens the mind to believe,” no man will believe — faith is a gift that God gives to the humble of heart, not the proud; furthermore “He doesn’t give what is holy to dogs, or throw his pearls before swine” (cf. Mt 7:8); if He did, the proud would simply trample on them, because they have no ability whatsoever to understand them — to them it is childish nonsense. The reality is, God won’t permit the diabolical world to trample on His Word; that’s why divine revelation is so perplexing, confusing and confounding” to unbelievers — they don’t even know what to think of it. For those of you who struggle with this construct, keep in mind that diabolical hearts belong to Satan and his minions, and along with them they are also destined to eternal damnation — they are simply self-centered creatures without the slightest chance of rejecting their self-centeredness; they are completely sold out to diabolical thinking. Paul expands upon this concept in his letter to the Corinthians when he says, “God has revealed truth to us through the Holy Spirit — not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit who is from God… These things we speak, not in words which man’s wisdom teaches, but which the Holy Spirit teaches, and none of the rulers of this age can understand it…. The truth is, the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God — such things are foolishness to him” (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-14).
As Paul states in his first letter to the Corinthians, “We now see in a mirror dimly... we now only know in part” (cf. 1 Cor 13:12). That word dimly in Greek is “ainigma,” and is actually better translated “enigma.” It is unfortunate that most translations avoid the word enigma, because it speaks volumes about God and His Word. Most all translations use the words darkly, cloudy, blurred, obscurely, puzzled, or similitude; however, the Concordant Literal New Testament actually uses the word enigma. The Greek word ainigma in Strong’s Concordance is described as being “an obscure saving; i.e., abstract obscurity.” According to the New Englishman’s Greek-English Concordance & Lexicon, ainigma is “a riddle; an obscure thing, dimly perceived.” Webster’s Dictionary states that “enigma comes from the Greek ainigma, to speak in riddles,” and defines it as “a perplexing statement; a baffling or seemingly inexplicable matter or person,” and is synonymous with “mystery.” The word riddle is defined as “a problem or puzzle, so formulated that some ingenuity is required to solve or answer it; hence it is a perplexing conundrum.” Keeping these definitions in mind, it seems like the word dimly and the other words used by most translations do not sufficiently depict what Paul has stated. The words enigma, riddle, mystery imply something much greater than something that is simply obscure, dim or dark. In addition to the foregoing, most contemporary renderings regrettably seem to suggest that we can never understand or discover the deep things or mysteries of God in this life, so there is no sense in trying... but that is not at all what Scripture teaches. King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived (cf. 1 Kg 3:12) said of wisdom, “those who diligently seek me will find me” (cf. Prv 8:17). “If you cry for discernment, lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the LORD and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom, knowledge and understanding” (Prv 2:3-6). The Lord said to Amos, “the LORD reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets” (cf. Amos 3:7)—in other words, God loves to reveal His secrets to His people, especially to those who diligently seek Him in His Word. Though God may appear to be a mysterious reality in the minds of sophisticated thinkers, that is not what Scripture teaches; God’s nature can be known... though not fully known.

The problem most believers have is that they insist on knowing the unknowable—it should pretty obvious, some things simply transcend human thought (cf. Is 55:8-9). As the eighteenth century English hymn writer “William Cowper” wrote: “God moves in a mysterious way His glorious wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon the storm.” King Solomon shares some divine wisdom in the Book of Ecclesiastes—“What is crooked cannot be straightened... what is lacking cannot be counted” (1:15)... “I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind” (2:27)... “Consider the works of the Lord, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other so that man may not discover anything that will be after him” (7:13-14); i.e., God has so decreed that man is not able to determine his own destiny; that fully lies in God’s hands (cf. Deut 8:17-18; Jam 4:14-16). “Man plans his way, but God directs the outcome” (cf Prv 16:1,9). It is when life doesn’t go the way we want it to go, that we experience anxiety in the soul... and when we insist that God conform to our thinking, our anxiety launches into the stratosphere and becomes extreme anguish! The psalmist Asaph “came close to stumbling when he saw the wicked prosper... that they
didn't seem to experience difficulty like other men; they even set their mouth against the heavens... and are always at ease, and just keep on increasing in wealth.” Said Asaph, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure... for I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning.” As believers, we all like to think that we have merited some positives in life; we believe it so much, we work very hard and are diligent in our efforts; yet when they don't come, we are perplexed and discouraged — but that is not the way God designed the economy under which we live. That word “economy” is an interesting one — it is made up of two words: “oikos” meaning “house,” and “nomos” meaning “law;” hence it means “the law of the house” — man doesn't determine the law of house under which the universe operates — God does; that's His prerogative. You can argue to the contrary until your head falls off, but that isn't going to change it one iota. We live in God’s world — that is simply the reality; deal with it. As Asaph said, “When I pondered to understand the prosperity of the wicked, it was troublesome in my sight... it wasn't until I came into the sanctuary of God, that I perceived their end” (Ps 73:1-17). Again, without an eternal perspective in life, we will struggle with reality.

When God led the children of Israel out of bondage in Egypt in 1441 BC, He promised to “take them to the Promised Land; a good and spacious land flowing with milk and honey” (cf. Ex 3:8; 6:8; Gen 12:7; 15:12-21). The land of Canaan would sustain God's people well — with some sections given to agriculture and others for herds and flocks. Under God’s blessing, milk and honey would seem to flow. God was well aware of the troubles that His people had been going through, but now He would act on their behalf. Due to the fact the children of Israel were very slow in learning to trust God, their journey to the Promised Land was a long and difficult one — they had wandered in the wilderness for forty years. According to Scripture, when God orchestrates His plan for His children in life, He takes them through great and terrifying wilderness (cf. Deut 1:19; also Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22; 1 Th 3:3; 1 Pet 2:21). There is something about the heart of man that has a difficult time submitting to the Lord when his life is full of negatives — the interior of his being actually rebels against God (Gal 5:17), thus creating the need for chastening and discipline. This has been the path God's children have traveled down throughout the centuries. As the author of the book of Hebrews states it — “The Lord scourges all of His children (not just some) ... and this discipline is not at all an enjoyable experience, but a painful and sorrowful one” (cf. Heb 12:4-11; also 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12; 5:10). Just as the journey for the children of Israel in the wilderness was a taxing one... so also is our journey as Christians a taxing one. In order for God to accomplish “His transforming purposes” in our lives, we must traverse difficult mountains and valleys — as Paul worded it, “it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (cf. Phil 1:29). The three terms that are emboldened are very significant—the words believe and suffer are both “emphatic!” The word “granted” is actually the word “grace;” We have been given the privilege to not only believe, but the privilege to suffer for Christ's sake... so suffering is actually a gift from God... and a blessing because it brings eternal reward (cf. Mt 5:1-2; 2 Cor 4:17; 2 Tim 2:2; Rev 22:12), and enables us to be glorified with Christ in the future (cf. Rom 8:17). God counts those blessed who enter into His suffering (cf. Mt 5:10-12; Phil 3:10; 1 Pet 4:13-14; 5:9-10). The Christian life is not a comfortable little easy journey like some pulpiteers like to make it — suffering and sacrifice are foundational elements to the Christian life. When the children of Israel were out in the wilderness, they rebelled and
grumble against the Lord, thus concluding that “God actually hates us; that He had simply brought us out of Egypt to destroy us at the hands of the Amorites” (Deut 1:26-27). That’s an interesting deduction — “all God’s people saw were the debilitating obstacles before them, rather than God”… they simply saw big intimidating people, and high walls, and large cities that were well-fortified (Deut 1:28). When the circumstances of life are contrary to our hearts desire, we’re going to have trouble in the soul if we don’t quickly resolve the matter before the Lord (cf. Phil 4:6-9) — naturally, our flesh will argue to the contrary, and therein is the battle we must fight (cf. Gal 5:17)… and that battle is “a faith battle” (cf. Rom 1:17; 1 Tim 6:12; Phil 1:28; Jam 1:3; 1 Pet 1:6-7) — that means you’re going to have to learn to accept the difficulties of life, and not fight them as if they must be removed from your life; “again this is a faith battle” — so what is it that you are going to believe? Sadly, the voice that most Christians listen to is the voice of their flesh, and the voice most often ignored is the voice of God, because negative circumstances most often dominate the discourse in their minds. One thing is certain: whenever we encounter a negative situation, our stubborn flesh will immediately voice its opinion (obviously, that’s a sinful option); that is simply the way the human soul works; so immediately upon recognition, believers must challenge those thoughts with divine thoughts (cf. Phil 4:6-9). Is that easy? No, not at all… but that is “the road we are to travel — “we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5) — that’s what it means to “walk by faith” (remember, believing divine truth is the foundation of faith).

After Israel arrived in the Promised Land, she continued to struggle with her faith; i.e., she would disobey God). Time and time again she would wander away from the Lord, and time after time God would use other nations (godless nations) to discipline her (read Judg 2). God’s discipline would cause Israel to repent, and after doing so He would raise up a “judge” to rule over them and deliver them from the painful bondage God had subjected them to; this occurred seventeen times over a period of 325 years (fourteen judges are listed in the book of Judges, and three in the book of First Samuel). The point is this — God is very active in the lives of His people; though they stumble often, He disciplines them to bring them back to Himself… the reality is, there’s nothing He can’t do to bring about a change in the hearts of His people; that’s how effective He is as our Father (cf. Heb 12:5-11; Rom 8:28-30; Phil 1:6). When God’s people were enslaved in Egypt, and Pharaoh was told to “let God’s people go,” he refused to do so, “so the Lord hardened his heart” (cf. Ex 4:21) — in so doing God performed great signs before His people (cf. Ex 10:1; 11:9-10; 14:31). Some seven hundred years later the children of Israel began worshipping other gods, so the Lord raised up Assyria (a godless nation) to be “the rod of His anger and wrath against His people” (cf. Is 10:5)… now because of “the arrogance of the King of Assyria and his haughtiness… God destroyed Assyria after He used her to discipline His people” (cf. Is 10:25). The Lord compared Assyria to an “axe,” saying: “Is the axe to boast itself over the one who chops with it?” (cf. Is 10:15). A little over two hundred years later, God used another godless nation to discipline His people, Babylon. In like manner, the King of Babylon (Nebuchadnezzar) boasted of his own greatness and achievements (cf. Dan 4:30), and God humbled him to the point where He made him eat grass like an animal in the field (cf. Dan 4:33)… after seven years Nebuchadnezzar raised his eyes toward heaven “and blessed the Most High and praised and honored Him who lives forever: for His dominion is an everlasting dominion… He does according to His will… and no one
unto Himself (cf. Dan 4:34-35). Beloved, the message is this: “God, not man, rules in our world,” no matter what you may think; even Nebuchadnezzar acknowledged that… so how is it that even some in the Christian world have simply made God out to be nothing more than a temporal reality? Perhaps they are not truly God’s children?

Though we know that God is “holy” (cf. Is 6:3; Ps 99:3, 5; Jn 14:26) and “good” (cf. Lk 18:19), we do not fully understand what it means to be holy or good. When God is said to be holy, it signifies His being separated from, and His being transcendent over all His creation; i.e., His absolute purity, supremacy, majesty, and awesome glory. As His children, “God has made us holy unto the Lord” (cf. Deut 7:6; Ex 19:6; Lev 20:26; 2 Tim 1:9); that is, He has set us apart unto Himself. Ultimately as God’s children, we will dwell with God in heaven as perfectly holy creatures; but in this world we will struggle intensely with our “unholiness” – the truth is, we can’t even imagine what “absolute holiness” is going to be like. Regarding the fact that God is “good,” is a construct of thought that we often struggle with, because of all the inequities that we see and experience in life. As believers we all question, “If God is truly good, why does He subject me to these things?” That’s been the cry of God’s people down through the ages: “Lord, why do you hurt me? Why do you suffer me so? Why are you not kind to me? Why do you ignore me? Why don’t you help me?” (read Ps 10:1; 13:1; 22:1-2; 42:3; 44:24; 55:1; 77:7-10; 88:1-4; 89:46). Obviously, there are numerous ways to express such lament. The reality is, life is not about things going the way we want them to go… it is about what God wants to do in and through our lives (cf. Mt 6:10; 16:24-25; 26:39; Jam 4:15) — that is a very difficult construct for fallen creatures to accept… very difficult! Life is oftentimes very disconcerting… frustrating… unpleasant… distressing… disappointing… bewildering… and troubling — and God is good? The truth is…

- Sometimes things go in a positive direction… sometimes they go in a negative direction.
- Sometimes things are pleasant… sometimes they are unpleasant.
- Sometimes things are very encouraging… sometimes they are very discouraging.
- Sometimes it rains… sometimes there are blue skies.
- Sometimes the light shines in our lives… sometimes we experience darkness in our souls.
- Sometimes there is peace in our hearts… sometimes there is war in our souls.
- Sometimes our faith is strong… sometimes our faith is extremely weak.
- Sometimes we win… sometimes we lose.

As the good book says, “There is a time for everything in God’s economy — a time to give birth, and a time to die… a time to plant, and a time to harvest… a time to kill, and a time to heal… a time to destroy, and a time to build up… a time to weep, and a time to laugh… a time to mourn, and a time to dance… a time to throw stones, and a time to gather stones… a time to embrace, and a time to not embrace… a time to search, and a time stop looking… a time to keep, and a time to throw away… a time to tear apart, and a time to sew together… a time to be silent, and a time to speak… a time to love, and a time to hate… a time for war, and a time for peace” (cf. Ecc 3:1-8). I can hear some of you mumbling to yourself as to the integrity of those statements. If that is the case, you are simply trying to shove God into a “smaller space,” i.e., into a temporal space, because your human thinking can’t reconcile
such thoughts. The reality is, in God's economy there is room for “everything” you see in this world (that's right, even all of the diabolical behaviors)... and it is here where “God is an enigma to the human family” (both the believing community as well as the unbelieving community). In short, this passage means that “all events are in the hand of God;” nothing occurs in this world that God does not “sign off on” (cf. Job 1:1, 6-12); He is in total control of everything that happens in this world. Again, if you don't understand the eternality of God, you will have a very difficult time appreciating precisely who God really is — without an understanding of His eternality, you will be putting God into “a very small box” (which would actually make Him far more human than divine). If this issue is still a little disconcerting to you, re-read the previous section of this study, and be sure to carefully reflect upon all of the biblical references provided. For those of you who might be a little agitated by anything I may have said, this isn't some heretical nonsense from Ekstrand... this is what Scripture teaches. Maybe it's time to rethink your theology.

Now, with the foregoing in mind, you must remember that God is GOOD — only good — there is nothing in Him that is not good (cf. Jam 1:17; 1 Jn 1:5; 1 Tim 6:15-16; Mal 3:6). The difficulty for us as fallen creatures (saved creatures yes, but fallen creatures nonetheless), is that “we are not able to reconcile apparent incongruities;” i.e., we cannot identify God with something that seems to be contrary to that which we understand to be good... so it's our human understanding of reality that makes it impossible for us bridge the gap between that which is finite (man) and that which is infinite (God) — the capacity to do so is simply not in us; thus God is an enigma in our minds. In short, God said to Isaiah, “Don’t try to figure me out, because you don’t have the capacity to do so” (cf. Is 55:8-9)... “simply believe what I say, and obey Me” — that is the essence of faith — faith doesn't mean we understand everything that God says; rather it means that we believe what God says, and trust what He says, and obey what He says (cf. Heb 11:6). It is the Holy Spirit who “convicts us of the truth” (that it is true), and this He does when we “humble ourselves before Him and listen to what He has to say” (cf. Acts 16:14). The Holy Spirit is the one who instructs us in the truth — that is why He is called the “Spirit of truth” (cf. Jn 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13 and Jam 4:6). God is able to give us “an assurance of what is true,” regardless of whether or not we are able to fully understand what is true. The unbeliever knows nothing of the “confident assurance” that the believer has in Christ... because such is from God.

How many times have you heard someone say, “I just can't believe in a God who would permit little children to suffer?” or “I can't believe in a God who would say that slavery has an upside to it?” or “I can't believe in a God who would send someone to hell?” Common sense embraces that kind of logic; that’s why many Christians struggle with such constructs — they have a difficult time reconciling a God of goodness with perceived injustice; genuine virtue and such actions appear to be a contradiction to them. Regarding the matter of “slavery,” it appears to be one of the ugliest realities in modern thinking... the primary reason for that is, “the human family values ‘personal freedom’ above everything else... that they have the right to govern their own lives — to deny them that right [from their perspective] is wrong” — but such thinking really has no foundation in divine virtue at all. It is man's insistence on being “the captain of his life” where the problem lies; remember,
man is a creature who was created, and it is His Creator who owns him (cf. Is 64:8)... man is not his own master. The Lord said to Isaiah, “Shall the potter be considered as equal with the clay; shall that which is formed say to Him who formed it, ‘He has no understanding’?” (cf. Is 29:16). “Woe to him who quarrels with his master” (cf. Is 45:9). As the apostle Paul said, “Does not the potter have a right over the clay?” (Rom 9:21). Since when is the creature his own master? Yet, the human soul “boils” at the thought of not being at the controls — it immediately claims to have been “wronged & abused” — “I have a right to be the captain of my own soul; anything else is morally wrong!” “The human family argues vehemently in defense of their right to be their own master” — every human being has the capacity to make that argument, and does from time to time. It is going to be interesting to hear God's final word on it on the last day when we are exposed to the fullness of our diabolical nature. Remember, as human beings we're self-centered fallen creatures without the slightest bit of virtue (Rom 7:18); thus we argue furiously for our perceived rights. The reality is, we are very stubborn diabolical animals — we no more appreciate the glory of God's virtue, than we do the decadence of our unvirtue — that is, we no more appreciate how wonderful God is, than we do how despicable we are. Our problem is, we actually think there is a measure of good in us (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:10-12; Rom 7:18).

My wife and I pretty much “lost everything we owned” back in 2008 when our nation’s economy took a drastic nose-dive — we lost our home, our cars, and our life’s savings. Naturally, that was not a very enjoyable experience... and, yes, it did cause a lot of disconcertion in my soul. I’m not tooting my horn (that's not the intent regarding what I’m about to say)... but when you have been fairly faithful in your giving, and a committed servant of the Lord and His people, you naturally question the Lord as to “why” you were undergoing such a difficult experience. “What had I done to deserve it?” It should be noted, when you are sixty-five years old, your income producing years are behind you... realistically speaking, in that sense, the game of life was over. So here we were, believers who had diligently served for thirty-five years, and had been faithful in our stewardship, pouring our hearts out to the Lord. Perhaps the most difficult thing in all this was, we didn’t get a response back from the Lord... in that sense we experienced darkness in the soul — we had a very pressing need, but God wasn't taking any action to make the circumstance more acceptable or more pleasant. I write extensively on this subject in a study I did on “My Journey of Faith” — I’m very transparent in that study — you can find it on my website should you care to read it. Suffice it to say, this was a very long, painful journey for us... as much disrespect as I have for “the legal world,” I had to deal with them for nearly three years. By the way, the number one problem in the Jewish world during the time of Christ was “the legal world” (i.e., the Pharisees), and times haven't changed a lick. It seems like we can't live without them, and we can't live with them; how's that for an oxymoron? I can almost hear people saying, “Don & Barb must have done something wrong, or God wouldn't have done that to them;” once again, silly human logic. That has been “the school of thought” since the beginning of time (cross reference Job and his friends: read Job 8:1-22; 11:1-6; 15:1-9; 18:1-4). Remember, when the apostles were confronted by the man who was blind from death, they questioned Jesus, “Teacher, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born blind?” (cf. Jn 9:1-2)... Jesus answered them saying, “It was neither that this man sinned, nor his parents; but it
was in order that the works of God might be displayed in him” (cf. Jn 9:3; also Jn 11:4). Keep that teaching on the front burner of your life; in all probability, you're going to need it.

The reason we are subjected to some very painful realities in life, has to do with something GOD is doing… and you may never know what that something is. Even though you don't understand exactly what He is doing, the reality is, God is doing something in and through your life! The question is this — can you let God be GOD without understanding all He is doing in your life? Do you insist on knowing everything? That was a road I was forced (if you will) to travel… and travel it I did… it was on that road that my eyes were opened to some incredibly important truths taught by the Puritans in a bygone era — why these teachings were ignored in the Christian community here in America during the 20th century, I'll never know (many of my colleagues have asked the same question). The reality is, GOD in His wisdom let that be the case in the western world… we probably won't know exactly why He permitted that until eternity. I learned things from the Puritans I had never even “heard” in my graduate studies (which made it even more astonishing); incidentally, I have eleven years of college under my belt, and I was privileged to attend two of the most respected graduate schools of theology in the world — I was tremendously blessed through those seminaries, and wouldn't have chosen any other schools. The issue is, everything we go through in life comes from the Lord's hand — whether or not we understand what we are going through, is not the point; it is from the Lord, and we must accept it as such, including all of the perplexing unpleasanties of life (many of which we may never understand until we enter into glory). That statement reminds me of a motto we were to live by when I was an infantryman in the Army back in the 1960s — it went like this: “Yours is not to reason why, yours is but to do or die.” Though as humans we oftentimes demand to know “why” things happen; life frequently teaches us that we are not going to find out why things are as they are until the last day… so what are we going to do? Accept it? Or Fight it? If we stubbornly choose to fight it, and no answer comes, then what are we going to do? Let me suggest to you that you learn to trust the Lord and rejoice that He is the master of all that is going on in your life, and not jump to the conclusion when a negative surfaces that He is simply chastening you for not being good enough; that is a dead end street that essentially will destroy your faith. Though you may not understand that didactic at this point, hopefully you will when you have finished reading this study.

Here is something to ponder: Job of old feared God, was blameless, upright, and turned away from evil; God called him “the greatest of all men of the east” (Job 1:1-3)… yet God subjected him to some of the most difficult circumstances ever experienced by a human being. Why was that? Are you going to erroneously respond like his three friends did? (read their responses in the book of Job). The truth is, man believes in a “cause and effect universe”, where good causes yield good effects, and bad causes yield bad effects; that is, where doing good results in positive consequences, and doing bad results in negative consequences. Yet the truth of the matter is, good people oftentimes suffer terribly in our world, and bad people often live a life of ease. Does that bother you? It did Asaph (cf. Ps 73). We see incongruities like these all the time in our world, yet continue to apply this maxim to our juvenile thinking. There is something in man that wants to believe that “he can effectuate the conditions of his life, by doing what is commonly referred to as good;”
this attractive little truism has even been taught in the Christian community down through the centuries—though this axiom may be true three-fourths of the time, it is not an absolute truth. When we do things right like pay our bills on time, keep gas in our car, change the oil regularly, wash our clothes, attend to all the chores around the house, and are honest with others in life, generally we experience positives to some degree…but that is not always the case. So what we do when we experience something we would call an “undeserved negative” in life?” It is interesting to note, when you live life according to the foregoing maxim, you basically have “SELF” on the throne (which is the norm for the human family), but God wants us basically to have “HIM” on the throne, because life is not about us, it is about God (cf. Rom 11:36; 1 Cor 8:6; 10:31; Phil 1:21; Col 1:16; 3:4); yet we struggle with that construct of thought and insist on making most of our life about us. Again, that’s a difficult construct for even the Christian world to accept, because we (like the world) are very self-centered creatures (read Matt 16:24-25; 6:10; 25:31-46; 26:39), and it is precisely “our self-centeredness” that God is asking us to die to (cf. Rom 8:13, 36; 1 Cor 9:27; 15:31).

Over the years we have all been subjected to that line of thinking…back in the 20th century, there were numerous Christian radio and television shows that propounded such thinking—they would share one story after another about how God had miraculously delivered them from their problems and ills…and time after time, how God positively responded to their prayers. Now whether in fact all they were saying was “true,” is not the issue…the reality was, all they were talking about were the prayers that supposedly were answered….they never even mentioned all of the prayers that were not answered. So the “silent message” was this: “God positively answers the prayers of His people”…“and if He does not, then there must be sin or unbelief in their life.” Once again, the believing world was traveling down the “same old roads” that God’s people had traveled down thousands of years earlier, in spite of the fact that they had “Scripture” to read that clearly exposed such erroneous thinking. The sad reality was this, these were extremely popular teachers of the Word who should have known better—remember the words of James (Jesus’ blood-brother): “Let not many of you be teachers, because you are going to incur a stricter judgment” (Jam 3:1); yet time after time after time in our world, men and women in the Christian community have been promulgating erroneous doctrine. Beloved, this is not a funny matter; this is a very weighty matter that has far reaching ramifications—it can destroy a believer’s faith. The reality is, “Human thinking” strongly influences the entire human family (believers and unbelievers alike) — we make logical deductions that are simply not grounded in biblical truth. Perhaps the saddest aspect of this entire problem, is that many preachers don’t take the time to properly address the problem associated with these issues; instead they actually contribute to such erroneous thinking. The twentieth century here in America was so consumed with “the positives” in the Christian life, that it ignored “the negatives.” The reality is, the Christian faith is like a coin with two sides: there are heads & and there are tails—though there are incredible positives that the child of God must learn, there are also a number of very difficult negatives which he must deal, and contrary to what anyone might think, we don’t have the option to ignore the “difficulties” of the Christian life…should we choose to do so, our spirituality will end up being self-centered; exactly the opposite of what it should be—God-centered. When you only tell people what they want to hear, you are feeding their flesh and giving voice to their self-centeredness. This is not some strange
“new revelation” from God; this is precisely what Scripture teaches. Let me explain: the two principle issues with which every believer struggles are “sin” and “suffering,” yet the teaching on these subjects is horribly deficient and inadequate in the vast majority of our churches here in America. The question the Christian world must ask itself is this: “Do we want to believe the truth? or do we simply want to believe what we want to believe? Incidentally, that last statement is what defines the unbelieving world; they simply believe what they want to believe — why not? why would I believe what I don’t want to believe? It was on the two issues of sin and suffering where I found the “Puritans” to be extremely transparent, open, honest & helpful; they didn't skirt these issues, or ignore them (as most of our modern-day churches do)... they addressed these issues exactly as Scripture does. I wrote on some of this in a study titled, “The Game Changer!” You can find it on my website if you should care to read it. The reality is, I chose that “title” because that is exactly what the Puritan teachings were in my life — a game changer!

**Regarding the Believer's Sinfulness**

The book of Psalms is filled with “psalms of lament,” yet such teaching is ignored in most of our churches... as if some of the thinking in the psalms was simply grounded in human thought. I have actually heard some preachers say, “I agree that David (or whoever) said that, but that doesn't make it right; as Christians, we are not supposed to be saying things like that.” Due to the fact some of the teachings in the psalms did not correspond with “the positive message they were bent on teaching,” they simply didn't deal with these issues as they should have. Don't get me wrong, Scripture presents a number of incredible positive messages that need to be taught... but that is only one side of the coin — you can't ignore the negatives simply because you aren't comfortable with them. Regarding some of the lamenting that is expressed in the psalms, let me encourage you to just read a few verses from some of those psalms, so that you can at least appreciate the thoughts of the psalmists: Read Psalm 10:1-2... 13:1-2... 22:1-2... 44:24... 55:1-2... 77:1-10... and 89:46. Another problem in the Christian community is that many believers are extremely pre-occupied with “the various sins they commit”... though a believer's sin may be very significant, it is the believer's attitude about his sin that is far more significant. Stop and consider the following statement — if the “sinful action” (which includes thoughts as well) dominates the discourse in your mind, you are going to be wallowing in the mud for a bit; as such, you will probably come down pretty hard on yourself because of your sin (that should be pretty obvious)... on the other hand, the believer that makes light of his sin, is in a far worse condition. The believer isn't to dwell upon his sin, or be consumed with it and grieve and grieve and grieve over it; instead, he is to concur with God that “his innate sinfulness” (i.e., his sin nature; his flesh) is exactly what it is — totally sinful... corrupt to the core... completely destitute of any good... and despicably ugly. This will make far more sense shortly. The problem with some believers is that they actually think that sin should no longer be present in their life as a born-again Christian... or that there should be very little sin in their life; that they should be able to live a fairly virtuous life because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit — that is pretty common thinking by most believers, but such thinking ignores the “sinful reality” that still exists in the believer's life. Simply wishing and praying that indwelling sin (i.e., the
flesh) would go away, or cease to be such an ugly reality, is not going to make it go away… that’s not going to happen. Though we became saved creatures when we placed our faith in Christ, we never stopped being sinful creatures; the difference is, we are now saved sinful creatures, not just sinful creatures. God never removed our sinful nature (our flesh) from us when He brought us into His family — for some reason, many believers have never been taught that truth. Again, more on that later.

Let’s return to the significance of our sin. Though no sin we commit is an insignificant sin, neither are the sins we commit so significant that we’re to go out and destroy ourselves. It is here where the believer must reflect upon the words of Paul that he might see his sin in a proper light. In his letter to the believing world in Rome, “Paul acknowledged his innate problem with sin;” even though he was a highly committed Christian, “his unredeemed humanness did not possess the slightest degree of virtue;” i.e., his innate humanness was completely lacking in virtue, just like yours and mine. Paul humbly admitted that “his flesh” was a beast over which he seemed to have no control, that when it reared its ugly head, it just brought him down (cf. Rom 7:18-20). It wasn’t a matter of Paul overcoming the diabolical monster in his soul and killing it; that is not possible… our flesh will not be eradicated from our lives until that day when we enter into Paradise — obviously, if Paul could have killed it, he would have killed it; but since he couldn’t… he didn’t! So what was Paul’s answer to this conundrum? How did He respond to it? He began by acknowledging his sinful inner self (i.e., his sinful nature, his flesh, his old self, his unredeemed humanness, his sin disposition — those are a few of the expressions that are used to describe it), and the fact that he didn’t have the wherewithal to overcome it. Essentially, he expressed his dilemma this way: “I do the very thing I do not wish to do… I sin, but I don’t want to sin… obviously, in my flesh dwells no good thing; the wishing to do good is present, but the doing of the good is not; as such, I practice the very evil I hate… hence, I find the principle that evil is present in me, waging war against my members… Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” At this point I want you to stop for a moment and reflect upon what Paul has said, so that it truly gets imbedded in your mind. If you can’t walk through his argument, and hear the angst in his soul, you are going to cheat yourself, and in all likelihood end up embracing a theology of thought that is foreign to Scripture. Once you have grasped the significance of Paul’s initial response… then read the answer to Paul’s dilemma: “Thanks be to God,” he said, “through Jesus Christ my Lord, there is no condemnation for me, because I am in Christ Jesus… He has set me free from the law of sin and death (cf. Rom 6:23); i.e., sin is no longer the overriding operative of my life, and death is no longer my destiny — even though I ashamedly sin more that I care to admit, sin is no longer the governing force of my life; as such, my self-centeredness does not control every waking moment of my life; though it frequently gets its foot in the door, it is no longer the dominating passion of my life 24/7 — God has delivered me from the domain of darkness and transferred me into the kingdom of His beloved Son (cf. Col 1:13), and His Spirit now dwells within me (Rom 8:9)… and He is constantly guiding me & prompting me to follow Him, and constantly cleansing me as I walk through this sinful world (1 Jn 1:9). I wish sin would never rear its ugly head in me again, but such will not be the case in this life” (cf. Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20). Essentially, that is the way Paul described his condition.
Before pressing on to the next issue, let's give a little more definition to Paul's experience. When he realized he couldn't overcome his innate sinfulness, he ultimately concluded “that he simply did not have the wherewithal to defeat it.” So Paul concluded that his flesh was completely sinful, and that there was nothing good in it whatsoever (Rom 7:18). Though that was a very humbling acknowledgement for him, acknowledge it, he did. The second principle (which is a corollary of the first one), was a fresh understanding of the incredible nature of God’s love for him—in spite of the fact that “sin” had a significant presence in his life. God loved him with an everlasting love… and nothing in all creation could ever change that fact (cf. Rom 8:39). It was this consummate truth that Paul finally arrived at, that supplanted all of the troubled thinking that had gone on in his soul; and that every believer must arrive at—though our flesh is sinful to the core, God loves us with a love that actually defies human logic: “Only God loves the unlovely!” As we walk through this world, if there is anything we learn, it is this—the entire human family possesses an innate sinfulness. Because older believers have walked through this life a lot longer than younger believers, they are more sensitive to the internal nature of man’s soul, and are far less apt to see themselves in a wonderful light; they have simply lived too long and have experienced too much to be duped by pretense and fallen human thinking… in that sense, “age” is a very sobering reality. Though God has made us “righteous” (i.e., justified us) through the death of His Son on the cross… and has begun a “good work” in us… He is not going to complete that work until the day of Christ’s return (Phil 1:6; 2:13); meanwhile, He has asked us to live with our sinful flesh. One of the positive benefits of living with our sinful nature is this—even though our stumbling is often a very painful experience, it does have a positive side to it in God’s economy: it keeps us mindful of how weak we are, and keep us “humble”—it is only when we are humble, that God ministers a significant level of grace to our lives. As Paul stated, “wherein sin abounds, does grace much more abound” (cf. Rom 5:20; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). The big question is—How do you really view yourself as you walk through life? Do you see yourself as being a pretty good person? one who is actually happy with himself? or do you have a commanding respect for the presence of sin in the interior of your being; that you are only “an inch” away from sin at any given moment? Beloved, that is the reality for every believer. If you can develop a “humble attitude” about who you really are, and let that attitude give understanding to all you experience in a day, God will be able to use you each day as one of “His servants” in a very significant way. When you couple your innate sinfulness with the fact that God loves you with an everlasting love, you will experience a level of peace and joy in your life you never thought was possible, and you will grow immeasurably in your faith… and as incredible as it may seem to you, “you will actually sin less.” If you can't handle this idea of humility, you have a lot of opposition in your soul that you are going to have to learn to battle with” (cf. Gal 5:17); that is just the way the Christian life works. Here’s a paradoxical thought to consider: “You will never be proud of your humility.” There is no room for any level of pride in the Christian life (cf. 1 Cor 1:26-31; Gal 6:14; Eph 2:9).

So God in His wisdom permits the presence of sin in our lives to keep us mindful of our inherent weaknesses, but to keep us humble before Him, and keep us ever mindful of His incredible love for us (that our stumbling in life does not separate us from His love—cf. Rom
7:14-8:2; 8:31-39; Gal 5:16-17; Jam 3:2; 4:6; 1 Jn 1:9). Thus “sin” has a very distinct purpose in God’s economy in the believer’s life — if God didn’t want it to exist in our lives, it wouldn’t exist; He would have eradicated it from our lives. Another aspect of its presence is this: if we didn’t sin we would become very proud people. Sin is very humbling. I hate the fact that I sin; I wish it was a bygone issue, but it is still present in my life; just as it was in Paul’s life. Incidentally, it is not a matter of “excusing sin” because of our innate sinfulness; it is a matter of seeing ourselves for who we really are: “sinful creatures.” If we attempt to “justify our sinning” in order that we might feel good about ourselves, that is simply not going to work, because sin produces “strong feelings of guilt in the soul” (i.e., the Holy Spirit brings “deep conviction to the soul”) regarding our sin)… and the only answer to our stumbling is “confession” (going to God and agreeing with Him about our sin). Confession (homologeo) literally means “to say the same as” — thus when we go to God and confess our sin, we are fully agreeing with Him about it: that’s the only way we can restore our fellowship with God.

Imagine your own little child doing something wrong, and then coming to you and being completely open and honest about what he had done, and that he knows it was wrong — that humble acknowledgement can only cause you as his mom or his dad to put your arms around him and forgive him. When we fail to humbly confess our sinful behavior, “God’s hand is heavy upon us” (cf. Ps 32:4). Furthermore, just because sin is inevitable in this life (cf. Jam 3:2), doesn’t mean we need to let it run rampant in our life; “we are not to let sin reign in our lives and obey its lusts” (cf. Rom 6:12) — though it is not to “reign” in us, it will have a very sobering presence in us. As Paul writes, “we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), “and think godly thoughts” (Phil 4:6-9). Is that a tall order? Sure it is, but that is the life to which God has called us. We are “fighting a war against evil;” and war is no childish little matter, so “put on your armor and fight!” (Eph 6:11ff). To somehow think that there is an easy way around this sin issue is silly… the long and short of it is, we have a war going on in our members,” and we must fight that war to the glory of God (cf. Gal 5:17; Eph 6:10ff; Phil 3:12-14; Col 3:1-4).

Because so many believers only see sin as “an overt evil” (swearing, cheating, lying, hurting others, bragging, stealing, being ugly toward others, being dishonest, etc.), they actually see themselves in a fairly good light; but sin is far more than that — the Greek word translated “sin” (hamartia) literally means “to miss the mark” — when your thoughts and actions don’t correspond with God’s thinking (that’s the mark!) you have sinned. So any thought that is derogatory, judgmental, spiteful, degrading, fleshly, groaning, whining, ugly, lustful, pitying oneself, being anxious, being angry, being jealous, and being critical… is a “sinful thought.” Paul said, “that which is not of faith is sin;” i.e., any thought or behavior that is not acceptable to God is sin (cf. Rom 14:23). So it ought to be pretty clear — we all sin, and we all sin often. As we reflect upon Paul’s life, it should be pretty evident, the “sins” that were so troubling to him were reactionary sins, not intentional sins — obviously, his flesh controlled much of the discourse that took place in his mind (that is simply the way the flesh operates in the human family… negative feelings, anxious feelings, angry feelings, critical feelings, impatient feelings, stressful feelings, lustful feelings, discouraging feelings, were probably the continual ongoing feelings that seemed to have a strong presence in his life… as such, he continually had to do battle with them, just like you and me. By the way, intentional sins are often pre-
planned things that we do deliberately — cheat on our taxes, gossip with others, spread lies, embrace ungodly behaviors, watch porn, connive, distort, brag… these kinds of behavior didn’t characterize Paul’s life, and neither should they characterize yours and my life. With the foregoing in mind, it ought to be pretty obvious — we all have a very serious problem with “sinning.” The truth is, “the only problem we have is a sin problem;” other than that, we really don’t have any problems — the little unpleasantries of life are not truly problems; they are just little negatives that awaken us to the presence of indwelling sin. So what are you going to do about your sin problem? Go bonkers over it and beat yourself up? or deal with it as the Lord would have you deal with it: “fight the good fight of faith!” Let’s say you stumble one million times in life, and on the last day the Lord says to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master” (Mt 25:21). “How in the world is that possible?” Well, you not only stumbled one million times, you got up one million times! — in other words, one million times you denounced your sin! And every time you did that, all the angels of glory rejoiced! Once again, here was a fallen creature agreeing with God about the wickedness of evil and glorying in the cross of Christ! How many times every day do you think the Christian world “agrees with God about its sinning?” Countless billions! Though Satan thinks he is winning the battle against God in our world, every so-called “win” is actually a crushing defeat for him!

If I were to give definition to us as “believers,” I would describe us as a “dichotomy” — an amalgamation or composite of “flesh” (cf. Rom 7:14, 18; 13:14; Gal 5:16-17) and “spirit” (in which dwells the Holy Spirit — cf. Rom 1:9; 8:9-10; Gal 6:18; Phil 4:23; 1 Pet 3:18; 4:6). Though as believers we are “a new creation in Christ” (which is our new permanent identity — cf. 2 Cor 5:17), the “old unregenerate self” still has a dynamic presence in our lives, and continue to be an integral part of who we are until that day when we shall be glorified; i.e., until we enter into Paradise.

“Though our old self was crucified with Christ on the cross, that our body of sin might be done away with, and that we would no longer be slaves to sin (i.e., that we would no longer be in bondage to it)” (cf. Rom 6:6; Gal 2:20; 6:14), our old self still has a presence in our lives that seeks to bring us down and gratify its innately sinful desires (cf. Jam 1:14). “our flesh and the Spirit that indwells us are in opposition to each other, so that we may not do the things that we please” (cf. Gal 5:17) — life is not just about doing those things that are pleasing to us, or doing those things that we necessarily feel like doing. If we let the flesh reign in our life, it will direct our choices, and make us do what we know we should not do. Though the tyranny of sin over us was broken at the cross, and our flesh was rendered inoperative at the cross as the absolute governing authority of our lives… yet we can still listen to and yield to its diabolical voice; thus Paul exhorts us to “lay aside the old self and its ways… and put on the new self, which has been made in the likeness of God” (cf. Eph 4:22-24); clearly, there are choices that we must make as believers, and actions that we must take in this life. As such, Paul says, “we are to be renewed in the spirit of our mind” (cf. Eph 4:23) — obviously as believers our mental perspective in life is radically different from what it was when we were unbelievers. The reality is, “we will experience a greater measure of transformation when we focus on renewing our thinking” (cf. Rom 12:2). Spiritual transformation starts in the mind and the heart — a mind dedicated to the world and its concerns will produce a life that is strongly influenced by the currents of culture… but a mind dedicated to divine truth will
produce a life that not only succeeds in accomplishing God's purposes, but effectuates are being transformed into the image of God. With the foregoing in mind, it is the following dualistic entities that describe our composition as believers —

Flesh vs. Spirit
Old Man vs. New Man
Evil vs. Holy
Sinful vs. Righteous

Thus we are a mix or blend of each of these two dualistic realities — they are the sum total of who we are in this life… there is a negative side to us and a positive side to us… a corrupt side and a truthful side… an earthly side and a heavenly side… a bad side and a good side… a wicked side and a saintly side… a diabolical side and a godly side. And much to our dismay, both sides have a dynamic presence in our lives… so we must strive diligently in life “not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our mind” (cf. Rom 12:2); thus the battle essentially is fought in the mind (cf. Phil 4:8; Col 3:16); both sinful & righteous actions begin in the heart and the mind (cf. Prv 23:7; Is 26:3; Mt 12:34; 15:18-19; 22:37; Rom 8:6; Col 3:2). So it is your thinking that needs to be aligned with divine truth, and that can't happen if one neglects spending time in God's Word — to apply that didactic to the world of golf, “if you don't spend time practicing your game and studying the course, you're going to lose!” Incidentally, there are a lot of “losers” in life.

Now here's another thought for you to consider: How do you know God really loves you? Other than the fact that Scripture tells you that God loves you, what other “evidence” do you have that tells you that He loves you? The reality is, every believer has experienced it practically — no matter how much you screw up in life, God has not stopped forgiving you! That is an incredible reality that gives evidence to the fact that God really does love us… in spite of the fact that we sin over and over again. God keeps on forgiving us over and over again! Though we know God loves us because Scripture says He does, we also know God loves us because we experience His forgiveness times without end — due to the fact that God has never stopped forgiving me, I am far more confident of His love today then I was twenty years ago. So we not only know God loves us because His Word tells us He does, we know it by experience… and when our experience meshes with what Scripture teaches, that didactic becomes even more dynamic in our life. At one point, Peter asked Jesus, “How often should he forgive a brother who sinned against him — seven times?” Since the traditional limit was three times (cf. Amos 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 2:1, 4, 6), Peter was actually being pretty generous. But Jesus responded, “No, not seven times, but seventy times seven” (cf. Mt 18:21-22); the point Jesus was making was that he was not to keep count, but always be willing to forgive; to never stop forgiving! By the way, when you've been forgiven a million times, you will stop questioning God's love for you. One of the things I found particularly difficult in ministry was the seeming unwillingness of some believers to forgive — if you make a little mistake of some kind, some people will really judge you harshly… they'll not only tell others, they'll throw you under the bus and stop submitting to your authority (I'm not talking about some horrible sin that may deserve a smack in the head, I'm talking about some sin, that many people would not even regard as sin). Even though a number of years have past, some people still harbor
resentment; whatever it was that bothered them seems to still be on the front burner of their lives. That seems to be one of the “issues” that God subjects a person to if he or she is one of His servants in ministry; apparently, it is just a part of “the training ground” for effective ministry: “if you can’t take a hit, you’re not fit to lead — you can’t be pre-occupied with injustice, because it will damage your effectiveness in ministry.” By the way, it happened to Paul and probably every other leader in the Christian community down through the centuries, so why should we be exempt from experiencing it here in the 21st century? Ministry is not the pleasant little work that some people think it is; the reality is, some people can get downright nasty and ugly and harsh with their pastors — I have not only seen it against others, I’ve also experienced it myself. The truth is, I never expected anything like that early on in ministry; for some reason I just imagined ministry to be a wonderful, glorious work that transcended our evil world… but man is “man” (sinful) and his sinful nature sometimes gets the best of him. So not all congregants “submit to their pastors;” some of them actually “rebel against them,” even with a significant degree of self-piety (how’s that for an oxymoron?) — submission seems to be a foreign concept to them (cf.Heb 13:17; 1Th 5:12-13). Though the majority of God’s people submit to those in a leadership position; sadly, some do not… the truth is sinful man (even as a believer) can be a pretty stubborn beast at times.

Most people can probably remember early on in life as a believer when they would screw up, and then promise God that they wouldn’t do that again; perhaps fearing that God might take some drastic action against them, or possibly even reject them. Yet time and again they would stumble and fall, and time and again they would promise God that they wouldn’t do that anymore… but as fate would have it, it wouldn’t be long until they would be back in the mud again! Now, after years of wallowing in the mud and “making all kinds of promises to get their act together,” they noticed they weren’t able to do that! Listen up: that should be a wonderful lesson for you — you simply don’t have “the wherewithal” to be the person you want to be. Keep in mind, the apostle Paul didn’t either; and he is the one God chose to give definition to the vast majority of theological issues that are covered in the New Testament. The question is: “Are you now ready to learn the truth?” You are a “fallen creature” just like everyone else — the difference between you and an unbeliever is that you are a “saved fallen creature.” You still have a sin disposition (i.e., a sin nature) that you were born with, and according to Paul, “your sin nature is in a constant state of being corrupted with the lusts of deceit” (cf.Eph 22)— that verb tells us two important things: 1) That this is an ever present ongoing process; i.e., your flesh is in a constant state of decline, and is getting worse and worse — it’s not improving! Who among us would not agree that our flesh is actually worse today than it was when we were ten years old? Every one of us would have to agree with that (whether or not we were a believer or an unbeliever at the age of ten); that is simply the reality of our flesh — it is in a constant state of degeneration… yet it is our diabolical flesh that God asks us to live with and say “no” to; and “therein is the ongoing spiritual war that takes place in our members.” Beloved, that essentially is what much of the Christian life is all about (cf. Rom 6:12; 8:13; Gal 5:17; Eph 4:22-24; 6:10ff; Col 3:16-17). 2) The second thing this verb tells us is that the ongoing corruption of our old self is being caused by the lusts of deceit; i.e., by the deceitful evil cravings in our hearts. It ought to be very evident to the believing world — our flesh is not improving, but is getting worse and worse and far more stubborn.
Therefore, the apostle Paul exhorts us to “be renewed in the spirit of our mind, and put on the new self, which was created in righteousness” (cf. Eph 4:23-24; Rom 4:3; 12:2; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:10); hence, it is “our thought-life” that is the foundation of our transformation — if we simply listen to our flesh, we will wallow in sin (cf. Phil 4:8-9; 2 Cor 10:5; Prov 23:7).

Now “because we all stumble often,” it is critical that we as believers truly believe that God loves us no matter how much we may stumble. So it is by experiencing God’s continual forgiveness over and over again, that we come to know that God loves us “unconditionally!” But due to the fact our flesh argues to the contrary, we often question “God’s unconditional love” (it simply seems too extravagant and too unrealistic to be true). When we stumble in life, both our flesh and the devil start insisting that we must measure up to God’s love; i.e., “that we must merit it and deserve it, by being reasonably good... and demonstrate our allegiance to God by obeying Him” — after all, no one loves the unlovely. Obviously, if we think we need to merit love, we are going to be troubled in our soul because of our inability to do so; this is just one aspect of the “spiritual war” we are called to fight. For man to think that God loves people unconditionally transcends human thought (i.e., it’s outside the realm of human reason). Incidentally, this was a “major issue” in the church at Galatia in the first century: “surely God cannot be that loving and that forgiving;” thus they added “a degree of merit” to the gospel; interestingly enough, the same thing happened in Rome a few hundred years later — they insisted that “works” be a part of salvation (read Gal 1:6; 3:1, 3; 4:9; 6:14)... it was that action that precipitated the Reformation. The problem with man is that he lets his fleshly mind influence his thinking on spiritual issues, in spite of the fact that Scripture is very clear. Think about it — why do you struggle with believing that God loves you unconditionally in spite of your sinfulness? Because it simply doesn’t “fit” any human paradigm... people just don’t love other people unconditionally — they love nice people, not bad people. With that in mind, here’s a little thought for you to reflect upon — how many times must God forgive you for you to believe that His love for you is both everlasting and unconditional? (read Psalm 136). By the way, you do understand that word “unconditional,” do you not? It means there are “no conditions” to God’s love, other than being one of His children — no matter how undeserving you may be, and you are undeserving. God will “NEVER” stop loving you! Now, since sin is an integral part of who you are, it is naturally going to strongly influence your thinking; to the point where you are going to have to reject it & refuse to consider it. With the foregoing in mind, consider the following: if you never sinned again... how much time would you spend with the Lord? how often would you dialogue with Him? what would be the driving force in your life? how much time would you spend in His Word? what would push you toward the Lord? why would you even need the Lord? After reflecting upon your answers — can you now see “the incredible wisdom” in God’s permitting you to sin & suffer in life? Both sin & suffering play extremely important roles in the lives of God’s children — sin keeps us humble, and suffering (trials & affliction) grows our faith (cf. Jam 3:2-3; 1 Pet 1:6-7). Obviously, when we get to heaven, we will no longer be subjected to sin and suffering (those painful realities will be removed from the universe, and no longer exist); but in this life down here, these two didactics are extremely significant elements in the economy that God is using to bring about His purposes and our transformation.
As believers, we are enjoined to “abide in the truth” (cf. Jn 8:31-32); that is, we are to let the truths of God’s Word be that which governs our thinking and gives definition to our lives. The principle problem in the Christian world, is that we have a tendency to only “learn” these truths in a forensic sense, but not in a dynamic sense. Let me explain the difference between a forensic truth and a dynamic truth—a forensic truth comprehends the logic, the legitimacy, and the legality of a particular issue; whereas a dynamic truth, sees the significance of that truth to their life and its incredible impact upon their faith. Foundational to “dynamic realities,” is that they possess “energy”—if the energy is not experienced, then one is simply grappling with the forensic nature of that truth. Let me illustrate a dynamic truth by comparing it to a “top fuel dragster”—when you see a dragster at an auto show, in all likelihood, you will ooh and awe over it because of the amazing beauty of its construction; quite frankly, they are an incredibly mesmerizing vehicle, but that is only seeing it in a forensic sense. Now, when you see that top fuel dragster on a drag strip, and watch it explode into action for a quarter of a mile (it’ll be going over 300 miles an hour in a little less than 4 seconds!), you will not only be shocked by its power, but you will see it in a totally different light! Well, it’s at this point where you will see that dragster in a dynamic sense; i.e., you will see the incredible energy that a top fuel dragster possesses—and that is the difference between a forensic truth and a dynamic truth; one focuses on understanding the external beauty, whereas the other not only understands that aspect of it, but the internal energy of it as well. To apply that understanding to God, you need to see Him as not just a pleasant, sweet God who lives in distant space; but as one who transcends the entire created order, and possesses such power that He merely needs to think or speak something into existence. According to Scripture, God’s glory is not only displayed in all that exists, but in all that occurs in the created order—nothing occurs in all of creation without His superintendence. In short, He is that DYNAMIC REALITY that is actively involved in all that is going on in the universe. Paul stated it this way: “In Him all things consist or hold together” (Col 1:17)—Christ is the one who sustains the universe (it doesn’t just continue to exist in and of itself, as fallen humanistic thinking likes to believe), and maintains the power and balance necessary to life’s existence and continuity (Heb 1:3); if God took His hand off of the created order, it would no longer exist… remember, “God spoke everything into existence!” (cf. Gen 1:1-31; Is 46:11; 55:11)—“and just as God has willed all things into existence… so when He wills it out of existence, it will no longer be;” as Paul said, “God works all things after the counsel of His will” (cf. Eph 1:11). I can almost hear the madness of some people arguing—“What is ‘IS!’—one can’t just make it disappear!” That may be true for man, but it is not true for God. Just as He created everything out of nothing, so He can make it all nothing.

Again, who is your God? Does He transcend the created order? or is He simply the supreme temporal reality in the created order? If you’re a believer, you don’t have a little temporal actuator for a God, you have a GOD of such glorious stature that “the entire temporal order and all that exists within it is as nothing before Him! Less than nothing! Meaningless!” (cf. Is 40:17). So great is GOD, if He opened the heavens and revealed Himself, every creature would be blinded and die instantly; as God told Moses, “No man can see My face and live” (Ex 33:20). Obviously, Scripture has to employ language that our little minds can understand, so the question is, does your God transcend the created order… is He infinite in every way?
If you are truly a believer, don't make God just a pleasant little temporal reality whose happiness depends upon His creatures; let Him be who He is: “the only Infinite Transcendent Reality in existence—the one who planned the end from the beginning!” (Is 46:9-10). Nothing happens in the universe that God does not oversee… absolutely nothing, including all of the ugly stuff that you and I can't even imagine as being done according to His will! (cf. Is 45:5-7; Eph 1:11). The problem with many theologians is that they actually try to “humanize” God; i.e., make Him compatible to human thought. Just because we're not able to reconcile everything with our temporal minds, doesn't mean it is not true — beloved, we have very small minds, so don't disregard divine truth because you can't logically make it an acceptable didactic of human thinking. He is the LORD of all creation; He doesn't play games — if He says “He loves you!” HE LOVES YOU! If He says “He forgives you!” HE FORGIVES YOU! Stop listening to the fallen voice of your flesh. Time and time again, Jesus prefaced His teachings with these words — “Truly, truly, I say to you!” The redundancy of that word “truly” is incredible — essentially, when Jesus employed that grammatical construction, He was emphatically stating something this way: “Let there be no mistake about it: what I am saying is the unequivocal truth! Believe it!” Jesus didn't teach anything that lacked absolute certainty or that was not emphatically emphasized — everything He taught was stated in the “indicative mood in Greek,” meaning that everything He said was unequivocal fact! Remember, the Greek language was designed by the Lord for the expressed purpose of declaring divine revelation to the human family — and it does that in no uncertain terms. If that is a puzzling concept to you, study the “indicative mood” in Koine Greek.

Let's return to the original argument that precipitated this last discussion — every believer knows that God loves him in a forensic sense, but sadly, God's love for them is not merely as significant & dynamic as it should be; i.e., the reality of God's love for them simply doesn't overwhelm their soul; it's just a forensic truth. They correctly understand various aspects of God's love, but its impact upon their faith and their thinking simply isn't that formidable… though it is embraced, it is not an overwhelming reality in their life. In order for a believer to experience the fullness of God's love, he must see the significance of “his sinfulness” — to the degree that his sin is significant in his mind, to that degree will God's love for him be a significant reality in his life. Let's apply this rationale to two people owing a person some money… to help make the point, let's assume that all things are equal regarding these two individuals; the only difference between them is the amount of money owed: one person owes $1,000, and the other owes $500,000 — now if the lender “forgave the debt” of both people, would not the one who was forgiven the bigger debt, be more grateful than the one who was forgiven the smaller debt? (cf. Lk 7:41-43). Well, in that same light, if the significance of what God has done for you isn't that overwhelming (i.e., you were simply forgiven a debt of $1,000), then His gracious acts of kindness to you won't be that significant either; after all, you've only been forgiven a debt of $1,000 — the reality is, the extent of God's love for you simply isn't overwhelmingly significant to you. The fact is, you had an insurmountable debt; one you couldn't pay in a million years; it was so significant the entire human family could not make adequate reparation for it. Therefore if you fail to see the malfeasance of your debt, likewise you will fail to see the benevolence of God's kindness. It is here where the absolute significance of this issue comes into play; without an overwhelming appreciation of all God
has done for you, your life will evidence that fact; so there's no skirting this issue. Jesus said, "**He who is forgiven much loves much, and he who is forgiven little loves little**" (cf. Lk 7:47); i.e., our lives will demonstrate the significance of God's forgiveness in our hearts. The truth is, there is an **extremely strong correlation** between the believer's gratitude for God's love, and how the believer lives his life. Carefully reflect upon John's line of reasoning: "**We love, because God first loved us**" (1 Jn 4:19); "**if we say we love God, yet do not show love to others, how does the love of God abide in us?**" (1 Jn 3:17); the reality is — "**the one who does not love does not know God, because God is love**" (1 Jn 4:8; also read Mt 25:41-46)... "**if God loved us, we ought to love one another**" (1 Jn 4:11)... "**and thus fulfill the command of Christ that we love one another**" (cf. Jn 13:34; 1 Jn 3:23; 1 Jn 4:7; 2 Jn 1:5). The foundational truth of these constructs of thought begins with **"humility"** — we must see ourselves as **being completely unworthy of God's love**; thus we must humbly see ourselves for who we truly are (cf. Rom 7:18). It was this sense of unworthiness that inspired Charles Wesley to write the words to one of the greatest hymns of the Christian faith, "**How can it be that Thou my God should'st die for me?**" Beloved, to the degree that you glory in the love of God, to that same degree you will see the magnitude of your sinfulness. It has been my experience that “age” plays a very strategic role in one ultimately seeing **"the depth of one's depravity"** — there is something about **"life"** (i.e., a long life) that is a very sober teacher (cf. Job 12:12; 32:7). Understanding the foregoing argument is absolutely essential for a person to be the person God wants him to be. So let me summarize it this way —

To the degree that you see your innate sinfulness (i.e., that your fallen, self-centered sinful nature)… to that degree will you see God’s incredible love for you (He actually died for you on the cross)… and to that degree you in turn will love God and others — these three constructs of thought are not just independent didactics, each one is relative to the other (cf. Rom 3:23; 6:23; 8:35-39; Jn 13:34; 14:15; 15:9-13; Gal 5:13-14) — that is a summarization of the Christian message. Foundational to your understanding it, you must humbly see yourself for who you truly are (a fallen, self-centered sinful creature)… which in turn will give you the ability to see the significance of God’s unconditional love for you… which in turn will give you the motivation needed to love God and love others. In order to affirm your understanding to these constructs of thought, let’s reverse the argument — one will not love God or love others, if he does not know how much God loves him, and one will not know how much God loves him until he humbly sees how completely unworthy he is of God’s love. Prayerfully consider these thoughts.

My prayer is, I hope you’re getting the picture. If we simply see ourselves as being “**pretty good people,**” our understanding of God’s love isn’t going to be that significant to us. If all we do is use fallen human thinking (i.e., humanistic thinking), we will never see things accurately or see things the way God wants us to see them; our thoughts will always be distorted if they are of a fleshly orientation — that’s why the world cannot discern the truth, because it must be **“spiritually appraised;”** without the Holy Spirit that is not possible (cf. 1 Cor 2:14). Though we all possess a degree of **“relative goodness”** (i.e., goodness from a
human perspective, and in comparison with what we observe in the human family), that is not how God defines it. God defines “goodness” in an absolute sense and compares it with the perfection of divine holiness; so in that sense “we have no goodness whatsoever” (read Luke 18:29 & Rom 3:10-12). Again, if we actually see ourselves in a fairly good light, essentially we will see ourselves as being somewhat good; thus the fact that God loves us will be somewhat meritorious… which is completely antithetical to what God has declared. This construct of thought should be pretty clear — everyone naturally loves the lovely (the good), but no one loves the unlovely (the bad). If you think about it, we saw this truth manifested by the Pharisees — they didn’t see themselves as being in “need” of a Savior… why? because they didn’t see themselves in a negative light, so they felt their righteousness merited divine acceptance (cf. Mt 12:2; 15:1-2; Mk 2:16; Lk 11:37-41; Mt 5:20ff; 7:3-5; Lk 18:3-14); they actually thought they were “good,” and relatively speaking they may have been good (cf. Jn 9:40-41; 15:25; Mt 25:41-46; Mt 23:2, 13, 14, 15, 16, 23, 25, 27, 29); but their goodness was seriously lacking when exposed to divine light. The self-righteous Pharisees at one point questioned Jesus as to “why He eat with the tax-gatherers and sinners?” (Lk 5:30). Jesus told them, “He had not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Lk 5:32); unless one acknowledges his innate sinfulness, he will never repent or glory God’s mercy & love. The reality is, fallen human thinking possesses no integrity. Without “humility” man will never identify with the truth, because his “proud heart” will keep him blind to the truth (cf. Mt 13:10-15; Jn 8: 43-47).

REGARDING OUR SINFULNESS & GOD'S LOVE

The two most significant “spiritual realities” the believer needs to understand and embrace are these: we must see ourselves for who we truly are (self-centered sinful creatures), and see God for who He truly is (one who loves us unconditionally). Again, if our sinfulness isn’t that significant in our mind, then God’s love for you will not be that significant either…the logic is this — if the object of His love thinks he is somewhat worthy or deserving of His love, then God’s love for him will be less significant than it really is. It is only when we see ourselves as being completely unworthy of God’s love, that His love becomes an overwhelming reality in our life. There is another scenario that occupies the thinking of many believers, it is this — “they struggle with believing that God loves them, because there are so many negatives in their life.” They express it this way to themselves: “If God loves me, why are there so many negatives in my life?” Obviously that’s a question that must be answered, because every believer asks that question in some way. With that in mind, let’s begin by giving definition to the God of heaven — according to Scripture: “God is holy” (i.e., He is absolutely pure; the triple redundancy of that reality as expressed in books of Isaiah and Revelation makes it the most emphatic statement in the entire Word; so foundational to all thoughts about God is the fact that He is HOLY, and man is totally unholy: cf. Is 6:3; Rev 4:8)… “God is good,” but man is not good; he only posses relative goodness, not intrinsic goodness — thus he is not innately good (Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18)… “God is love.” (1 Jn 4:16)… “anything that is truly good comes from God” (Jam 1:17)… “there is no darkness or evil in God whatsoever” (1 Jn 1:5; 1 Tim 6:16). So closely linked is goodness to God that even pagan philosophers such as Plato equated ultimate goodness (the highest good) with God Himself; thus equating God’s goodness to both
His character and His behavior. The apostle Paul stated it this way: “God causes all things to work together for ‘good’ to those who love God and are called according to His purpose” (Rom 8:28); that is how Paul and John define a true believer: “one who loves God and is called according to His purpose” (Rom 5:5; 1 Jn 4:7-8). Because God is “causing” all things to work together for our good, [ultimately] there are no tragedies in a believer’s life because the providence of God works for our benefit. Now if one is so consumed with the negatives in his life, and is going ballistic over them, it should be very obvious, he has some thinking and praying to do, or he’s going to off the deep end and come unglued (which we all do from time to time); it is only when we go into God’s presence, that He opens our eyes to the truth, and displaces our anxiety with His peace (cf. Phil 4:6-7 — those two verses have monumental significance).

The believer is always enjoined in Scripture to “get God’s perspective” on all that is going on in his life… though some things can be extremely painful and very disconcerting, that doesn’t mean God doesn’t love us or that He is angry with us. The word “love” (agape) in Greek is “not a warm fuzzy feeling,” it is an action that is taken for another person’s good — if you truly love someone, “you take action to seek their highest good” — if your little five year old boy screams & rants & raves because he wants to go swimming in crocodile water, and you keep saying “NO!” that doesn’t mean you don’t love him; it means you do love him! Conversely, if you subject him to some surgical procedure that he needs, and he goes bonkers over it, that doesn’t mean you don’t love him! The reality is, little children simply can’t handle anything that is “not to their liking,” in spite of the fact that it may be for their good; pain is actually a great learning tool in life, whether we like it or not. It is here where the immature believer (i.e., the believer who hasn’t experienced significant growth in his faith) really struggles in life. It should be clear to everyone, none of us as believers “waltz our way through the trials of life;” none of us! So the question is: “Can you accept the negatives in your life as ultimately being for your good?” The truth is, pain and sorrow play significant roles in the lives of God’s children; ultimately they are the spiritual surgeries whereby God transforms them into the image of Christ (cf. Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22; Heb 12:5-11; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4: 12-16; 5:10). To wrap up my thoughts of this topic, let me share some of the reasons believers doubt God’s love for them:

1) They don’t understand this thing called love; to them it is only a positive quality.
2) They have a difficult time seeing anything good in pain; to them it is too negative.
3) They have a difficult time accepting pain, because it just hurts too much.
4) They can’t stop focusing on their pain; it is simply too overwhelming to them.
5) No matter how many times they ask God to deliver them from something, He doesn’t.
6) They insist that God show them that He really cares for them; they demand evidence.
7) They insist on feeling good about life, but pain removes that as a possibility.
8) They see their faith as totally inadequate to effectuate a positive change in their world.
9) They see God as too distant a reality to be a dynamic presence in their life.

Obviously, there are not “easy answers” to some of the foregoing… it requires that one humbly delve into Scripture and get God’s viewpoint on them. Sadly, most Christians are simply too lazy to do what needs to be done; their flesh is just too dominant in their life. One of the
principle problems of the human family (including believers), is that we often let our feelings dictate reality in our minds… and we do this despite the fact that the source of most of our feelings are of the flesh. With that in mind, we need to be very careful about letting our feelings control the discourse in our minds; that’s even a common construct of thought by secular psychologists — their primary course of action is to get people to think right thoughts.” The fact is, every thought elicits some kind of feeling, be it a significant feeling that energizes our inner core, or an insignificant feeling that is simply processed without much reflection. Our feelings basically express what is going on in our inner core; though all of us differ on how strongly emotion controls the interior of our life, some people have a far more difficult time dealing with their emotions; as human beings we each have weaknesses that differ (we’re not all the same); for some people their emotions can be very overwhelming. Remember, we are fallen creatures, and our fallenness has unique expression in each of us. I expand on this subject in a study I did titled, “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” (you can find it on my website). Regarding our feelings, I liken them to the “current” in the ocean — it is always moving; it is never completely still. Just as storms cause the waves to become violent, so also the storms in our lives can cause our feelings to become highly emotional; without storms, the soul can be relatively calm, but with storms, our inner core can become very troubled and anxious. Obviously, the trials we experience in life can be very perplexing, thus this is an extremely difficult subject… and compounding the problem is the fact that our feelings significantly impact our attitude & view of God; therefore we must spend significant time with the Lord in His Word when life deals us a difficult hand, if we’re going to grow in the grace and the knowledge of Christ” (2 Pet 3:18). What’s important is that we not beat ourselves up because we can’t completely reconcile a particular issue — the truth is, we will not understand many of the things we go through in life until we enter into Paradise, yet we can still have an attitude toward those things that doesn’t leave us discombobulated and despairing. Since none of us have a perfect understanding of reality, there’s plenty of room for growth in every believer’s life on this subject.

The night before Jesus went to the cross He said to His disciples, “Abide in My love that you may experience the wonder of My love in your life” (cf. Jn 15:7:11). Think about it, that was His last instruction to His disciples — nothing is more significant for the believer than to abide in Christ’s love.” If God’s unconditional love for you is not the consummate foundation of your life, then your peace and your joy will be seriously deficient — with that in mind, every believer must make GOD’S LOVE FOR HIM the premiere didactic of his life. Paul’s prayer for the Christian community at Ephesus was this: “May you be strengthened in the inner man, that you, being rooted and grounded in love (that’s emphatic! in Greek) may be able to comprehend what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ’s love, which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to the fullness of God” (Eph 3:16-19); beloved, note the purpose: “that you may experience the extravagant dimensions of His love” — to be filled up to the fullness of God means “God’s love will be a dynamic reality in your life.” Again, believing that God truly loves you, begins with a proper understanding of your sinfulness; thinking that you’re “a pretty good person,” when in reality “you’re not truly good” (no man is — cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18), is to actually be somewhat pharisaical in your own self-evaluation. The truth is, minimal acknowledgement of one’s sinfulness, results in minimal appreciation of God’s love.
(read Luke 7:47). To experience the “dynamic significance” of God’s love in your life, you must see the “dynamic nature” of your sinfulness. Remember, inherent to anything “dynamic” is that it possesses significant energy; i.e., it is not just cold, stagnant reality. If these truths strike a chord in your heart, so also will the following message — essentially, this is God’s fivefold message to you as one of His children:

1. **Nothing** you do will ever separate you from **My love**. (cf. Ps 100:5; 106:1; Jer 31:3; 33:11)
2. **You are going to stumble often** in life — that takes “merit” off the table. (cf. Jam 3:2)
3. **You need to understand and humbly accept your innate sinfulness**. (cf. Rom 7:18)
4. **It is only by abiding in My love** that you will increasingly overcome your flesh; but you will never overcome it completely in this life. (cf. Jn 15:9-11; Jam 3:2)
5. **This is the life I am asking you to live**… should you struggle with any of the foregoing, return to the first precept of My message. (cf. Jn 15:5ff)

Incidentally, the strength of your faith is determined by how much you believe God loves you — if you just believe it in a forensic sense, His love for you won't be that significant; it must be a dynamic reality in your life for it to have a great impact upon your faith. The five precepts presented above adequately define “the primary precepts” that the believer must embrace… first and foremost, the believer must understand that God loves him with an everlasting love, and that NOTHING will ever separate him from His love — there is no sin, no stumbling, no action, no laziness, no unfaithfulness, no ugliness of heart, no lack of understanding, no anger, no cursing, no power in the entire universe that can separate him from God's love (cf. Rom 8:35-39); that is the incredible nature of “God's unconditional love.”

So once again, imagine being counseled by God in His office, and Him sharing those “five constructs” with you — is there something about any of them that you do not understand? If there is, you need to study that particular issue in depth. Though those are five difficult didactics, they must become the foundation of your faith… that means, you must humbly strive to let them give definition to your life — and this is a life-long exercise.

As a believer, you need to affirm the truth of your innate sinfulness every day (i.e., your sin nature), with the understanding that God fully knows your frame, and is mindful that you are but dust (cf. Ps 103:14), and that He sympathizes with your weaknesses (cf. Heb 4:15)… He knows who you are and accepts you just as you are… the question is, do you? Don't try to change the rules of the game; they are what they are, and you are who you are — a fallen, sinful creature whom God has saved! Perhaps much to your chagrin, God lets the believer's sin disposition (i.e., his flesh) rear its ugly head in his life every day, and not just a couple of times a day. The truth is, we have a “war” to fight, not just a spiritual game of dominos. For those of you who have never been in a fist-fight with a pretty tough opponent, you need to know, you will not only smash your opponent, but you will get smacked you as well… that's just what happens when you fight. Well, you have an incredible battle to fight — far tougher than a little human fist-fight (cf. 2 Cor 11:23-28; 1 Pet 4:13; 5:10): your enemy is a beast, and God knows how terribly “weak” you are! (cf. Heb 4:15). The problem with many believers in the Christian world, is that “they seem to have been duped as to the spiritual war that is going on in the spiritual realm” (cf. Eph 6:10-17; 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 2:1). Beloved, we don't change the template just because we don't like it — reality is what it is. Now, aside from affirming the
truth of your innate sinfulness every day… you need to affirm the truth of God's unconditional love for you every day. The reality is, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, and no longer loves you, then your faith is worthless (1 Cor 15:17, 19); if God be not GOD, then simply eat, drink and be merry because the game of life is over. Thus those are the two didactics that must govern the foundation of your thinking as a believer — you must see yourself for who you are, and you must see God for who He is; if you distort those two realities, you will be basing your faith on that which is not true. Never compromise the truth of God's Word… prayerfully wrestle with it until God makes it a “dynamic” aspect of your faith… and only God can do that. As you humbly wrestle with the truth, God will make it real in your life; that's how He opens the hearts of His children to the truth (cf. Acts 16:14; Jam 1:21).

Because “the sin problem” has two sides to it, we need to address it from both sides. All of us as believers struggle with our innate sinfulness, though “the perfectionist” really struggles with it — the perfectionist see his innate sinfulness as a hindrance to his faith, because he thinks he should be a lot better than he is (so he doesn't have a proper understanding of his sin condition). In a sense, the perfectionist is a “legalist;” he thinks he must “measure up” to God's standards; thus he is inclined to think that God is disappointed with him because he never measures up; therefore, he sees God's love as being “somewhat meritorious.” So this particular person somewhat distorts the foundations of the Christian faith. This is exactly the deduction that many in the church at Galatia made, as well as the Church at Rome years later; thus the legalist and the perfectionist struggle with accepting God's unconditional love for them, because they don't feel they merit it. So this “sin problem” has two sides to it — some see their innate sinfulness as being a deterrent to God's love, because they simply aren't good enough… while others don't see themselves as being that sinful, therefore they don't struggle with the fact that God loves them (“after all, everybody loves a good guy!”). So some accentuate their sinfulness, while others minimize it. Regardless of what side of the equation you are on, you are going to minimize God's love for you; either you are going to insist that you need to merit it… or you are going to insist that you do merit it. Both positions are wrong and distort the truth. So what's the answer? You must humbly delve into God's Word and ask the Lord to open your heart to the truth of your innate sinfulness, and the truth of His love for you — the reality is, God's UNCONDITIONAL LOVE has nothing to do with your behavior, and only God's Spirit can make that a dynamic reality in your life.

If the foregoing discussion is somewhat troubling to you, read it over and over again until the realization of God's love for you is so dynamic that it overwhelms your soul; because if it does not overwhelm your soul, at best, you'll simply understand God's love as a forensic truth. Even though you're a believer, you still need to grow substantially in the knowledge of God's love and grace (cf. Eph 3:16-19; 2 Pet 3:18). Again, only God can convict your heart that He truly loves you; so humbly & prayerfully delve into His Word and ask Him to make His love real in your heart. When you reflect upon what God's Word says, affirm what it says, don't simply read it like a doubting skeptic — your heart must “be open to the truth;” if it is not, you will not come to know the truth in a dynamic sense (cf. Mt 13:13-15). By the way, you can't disregard God's Word and simply pray that He will give you understanding — this is a very common error by Christians; simply praying and not exposing oneself to the teachings
of Scripture is problematic; what are you going to understand? where's the substance? As believers, we must diligently reflect upon what God's Word says, and in so doing, let Him enlighten our hearts to the truth by the Spirit of Truth (cf. Rom 10:17; Acts 16:14; Jn 14:26; 16:13) — obviously, if you're not reflecting upon His Word, how is He going to enlighten you? Just give you thoughts out of the blue? or communicate to you in a dream? Where is the substance? Remember Paul’s words, “Faith comes via the Word of God” (Rom 10:17). God has revealed truth to us in Scripture (that's His revelation to man); to ignore it is foolish — what is God going to say to you on the last day: “Why didn’t you read My word? Why did you treat it so lightly?” Peter enjoined believers to, “Long for the pure milk of the Word that by it you may grow with respect to your salvation” (cf. 1 Pet 2:2). Conviction & Assurance (that is, knowing & believing the truth with confidence) are essential ingredients to an effective faith (Heb 11:1), as is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts; they are a “gift” from God (Eph 2:8-9). Man cannot conjure up great faith (i.e., which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”) (cf. Phil 4:6-7). So when there is war in the soul, there is no peace in the soul. Now, a frustrating reality for us as believers is that “God's peace” often doesn't rule in our soul. God's peace isn't some flippant little thing that we can just plug into at any given moment… if we are experiencing war in the soul (hence, anxiety in the soul), we must take it to the Lord in prayer, and wrestle with it before Him — that’s “the process” that we must go through if we are to experience “His peace.” Incidentally, there is no such thing as a believer continually experiencing the peace of God — it comes and goes, because the flesh is ever at work in us trying to upset the applecart and produce significant anxiety in the soul. By the way, that word “anxious” (merimnai) literally means “to be drawn in a different direction; to have a distracting care or distracting thought” (cf. Mt 6:25, 28) — when anxiety rules in the heart, disturbing feelings control the discourse in our minds. The reality is, feelings dominate much of what goes on in the human soul (be it love, hate, fear, guilt, pain, depression, failure, jealousy, lust, envy, frustration, and a host of others); thus they give definition to the climate of the soul… and some people experience far more anxiety in the soul than others. The psalmists frequently expressed their feelings to the Lord in the psalms (cf. Ps 3:1; 4:1; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; 10:1; 13:1-2)… so follow their example. I only listed a few verses — read them.
Anxiety is a common reality in every believer's soul — every believer! It is all a part of “the war within” that we are called to fight. Beloved, if I could have plugged my soul into a spiritual outlet whereby I would have continually experienced the peace of God in my soul, *I would have done that in a micro second!* Believe me, I tried to do that — just as the apostle Paul did! — but there is no such “spiritual outlet” available to us.

**Regarding Feeling Good About Life**

Perhaps the main problem believers have in this life is that “they are preoccupied and consumed with feeling good about themselves, and living a pleasant, joyful life;” that actually characterizes the life of both the unbeliever and the believer (the entire human family). There seems to be some inherent thinking in the Christian world that “believers should feel good about themselves and about life — after all they’re believers! and surely God doesn’t want His children to not feel good!” ☺ *Though there’s some truth to that line of thinking, it ignores a lot of what Scripture teaches.* Obviously we should feel good about being one of God’s children, feel good about being forgiven of everything we have ever done wrong (or ever will do wrong), feel good about the ineffable privilege that is ours to be one of His servants, and feel good that our eternal destiny is heaven… but that doesn’t mean we can see ourselves as being sinless creatures, or that the life God has called us to live is a pleasant, joyful life — just because we are God’s children doesn't mean that life is supposed to be a pleasant little utopia. *Misunderstanding occurs when the negative elements of sin and suffering are taken off the table…* to minimize them is to insist that reality be what it is not — there’s no such thing as heaven on earth for the believer; to think that is to grossly misunderstand the conditions of life. Essentially the life God has called us to live is that of dying to self (i.e., the old life)… and living for Christ (i.e., the new life; cf. Mt 16:24-25; Eph 4:22-24) — dying to the old life (i.e., the flesh) involves something known as “spiritual warfare” (cf. Gal 5:17), and that is not a pleasant little experience (cf. Rom 8:13; 1 Cor 9:27; Eph 6:10-13; 1 Tim 6:12; 1 Pet 4:1-2; 4:12-13; 5:8-10). Let me try and give a little more understanding to this subject. As mentioned earlier, *our feelings are the product of our thinking, and every thought elicits some kind of feeling;* our feelings may range from pleasant to unpleasant… peaceful to stressful… encouraging to frustrating… happy to sad… and some of our feelings are just neutral (neither positive or negative — like eating something that is neither great nor awful; it's just okay). Regarding our thinking, it is usually the situations and conditions before us *that influences what goes on in our minds,* and it is here where we often lose control over our feelings… when the circumstances of life are “negative,” so also (at least in part) will be our thinking and our feelings… though we may earnestly put forth an effort to overcome the negative that is before us, the dialogue that takes place in our mind is strongly influenced by the negative. Why? “Because the flesh and the Spirit are in opposition to each other, and our flesh never capitulates; it demands a hearing, and there-in is the problem… therefore it's time to battle against it! and you're not going to feel good while fighting!” (cf. Gal 5:17). So overcoming negative feelings isn’t just a pleasant little walk in the park; you've got to do some fighting and spend some time with the Lord. Though there are moments in the Christian life when we experience positive feelings, that is not the ongoing experience of any believer, because faith involves “fighting” (1 Tim 6:12). It is the common experience of every believer to
go to God often **and pray for peace in the soul**, because we all experience **anxiety in the soul** (Phil 4:6). In addition to that, most believers take actions to put themselves in a more positive situation, if for no other reason than to eradicate themselves from the negative. The reality is God never suffers us beyond that which we are able; i.e., He never just lets the storm go on add infinitum — ultimately, He shuts it down — He seldom lets the trials of life remain permanent realities in our lives (you would have to reflect upon all of the more significant trials you have been through in life). Again, the Christian life is a life of conflict and “**faith**” (Rom 1:17), because for faith to grow it must be challenged over & over again by difficulties & trials (cf. Rom 5:3-4; Jam 1:2-3; 1Pet 1:6-7); that’s the number one tool God uses to bring about our transformation, and it is not a pleasant one (cf. Heb 12:11). Consider the words of the psalmist: “**It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes**” (Ps 119:71); beloved, to argue to the contrary on this subject is foolish.

Because the Christian life is not just a **pleasant, joyful experience**, many believers struggle with their faith... the reason is, **they insist** that their life be a successful, happy experience, because **that is God’s will for His people**. They believe it so strongly they question God as to why they’re not experiencing it. That line of thinking prevailed in many churches during the 20th century — beloved, just because their message was “**a positive one**” didn’t make it “**a legitimate one**.” As believers we have to build our theology on the totality of **what Scripture teaches**, not simply on **what we want it to say** or what we have erroneously been taught. Because much of the Christian world is not well-grounded in Scripture, this has been a common problem for many Christians. The truth is, many of you while reading this study may be wondering just how you can **escape** having to travel a difficult road — “**surely there must be a pleasant little highway somewhere that has not been addressed?**” If that defines you, I would suggest that you study all of the “**passages on suffering**” in the New Testament before you reject what I have stated above. If you’re committed to making **“feeling good”** the goal of your life, at some point you’re going to be **forced** to stop and rethink that construct of thought — because you can’t keep living in dream land when your dream is never fulfilled... sooner or later **“reality”** is going to come knocking. Let me state it again, I’m not saying that the Christian life is a “**joyless life,”** I’m saying the Christian life is filled with a number of very challenging situations that are not at all pleasant (cf. Heb 12:11; 1Pet 1:6; 5:10), and that require fighting the fight of faith. The truth is, the life Jesus lived was an **“extremely difficult one,”** yet the “**eternal joy that lay before Him**” moved Him to endure the cross (cf. Heb 12:2; Mt 26:39) — so the life Jesus lived here on earth wasn’t a **fun experience** (in particular during His ministry years). Peter confirmed this when he said, “**Just as Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same purpose**” (that’s “emphatic” in the Greek language), and no longer live life according to the **desires of men**, but for the **will of God**” (1Pet 4:1-2). It might be helpful to look at that word **“joyful”** — it differs from its counterpart, **“happy,”** which is often associated with it. The English word **“happy”** comes from the old Norse word **“happ,”** from which we get our word **“happen”** — the idea being, when that which **happens** to us is positive, it makes us **happy**; so happiness depends upon what happens to us; positive circumstances make us **happy**, and negative circumstances make us **unhappy**. Not so with **“joy”** — we can actually experience joy (chara) even in the midst of sorrow and difficult circumstances (cf. Jam 1:2-3; Heb 12:2), provided we don’t let the nega-
tive side of an issue control the discourse in our minds; obviously if we focus on the problem, we will not experience God's joy; so we must focus on God's promises to experience His joy; because joy is a fruit of the Spirit it is produced in our hearts by the Spirit (Gal 5:22). We don't produce joy, we experience it when we walk in the Spirit rather than in the flesh; it is then that the Holy Spirit fills us with His joy (cf. Gal 5:16, 22); remember, the life we are called to live is “a life of faith” (Rom 1:7). So joy doesn't rely on positive circumstances like happiness does; it relies on God's goodness. Because of the tendency to associate “joy” with “emotional ecstatic happiness,” we need to look at it in a little more depth. The Greek word for joy (chara) is often translated “delight” — it is a delight that runs deeper than pain or pleasure; it is a quality of life, not simply a fleeting emotion… furthermore, it is grounded in God Himself and flows from Him (cf. Ps 16:11; Rom 15:13; Gal 5:22). So joy is an integral part of one's relationship to God… the fullness of joy comes when there is a deep sense of the presence of God in one's life. In the New Testament joy is often contrasted with weeping and sorrow (cf. Jn 16:20, 22; Rom 12:15)… in the Old Testament it is frequently associated with God's mighty saving acts (cf. Ps 5:11; 9:2; 16:9; 32:11; 63:11), as well as with the truths of God's Word (cf. Ps 119:14; Jer 15:16); so joy is a calm pleasant peace in our soul.

I find it interesting, that nowhere in Scripture is the believer ever commanded to “feel” anything — he's commanded to “do” something & “think” something, but not “feel” something. Why? because we can't control our feelings — I can command you to “feel good,” but if you don't feel good, you can't just drink a glass of spiritual whiskey and start feeling good! Psychologists commonly address the “feelings” of those they are counseling, and try to change the “constructs of thought” that so strongly influence the negative feelings that they are experiencing… the reality is, our feelings are subordinate to our thinking; therefore we must give primacy to our thought life. Interestingly enough, that's the answer to the majority of our problems (cf. Prov 23:7; Phil 4:8); remember, as believers “we are transformed by the renewing of our minds” (cf. Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23). You'll notice James doesn't tell believers to “be happy when they encounter various trials” (Jam 1:2) — instead, he says “consider it joy when you encounter them”… he then goes on to give them the reason for doing so: “because the testing of their faith produces endurance in the soul.” So the message is — trials ultimately strengthen us so that we will hang in there when the going gets tough (Jam 1:3-4). Since that's the case, we can experience joy when we see our suffering as having a redemptive purpose. From a psychological perspective one cannot experience joy while being preoccupied with one's self-interests… freedom from inhibitions comes when one is caught up in something greater than one's self-interests; instead, he is caught up with something that gives meaning and purpose as to what the Lord (His Master) is doing in his life. God alone must be the epicenter of our lives if we are going to experience it with joyful spontaneity. The Greek word hegeomai (“consider”) primarily means “to lead the way; hence, to lead before the mind;” elsewhere in Scripture it is translated “regard” (cf. Phil 2:3, 6; 2 Th 3:15) and “counted” (Phil 3:7-8; 2 Pet 2:13); so we are to consider, regard, count trials “joy” (rather than “gruesome conditions”) because of the benefit we derive from them.

The reality is — when we experience trials & difficulties in life, we need to stop and think about “why” we experience them; they are not just random, meaningless, antagonistic har-
assments; they are placed in our life for a very significant purpose, and that is to “produce endurance in us,” so that we are not easily defeated by all that goes on in our world. The Greek word for endurance (hupomeno) literally means “to remain under;” i.e., not abandon the ship when the pressure gets too great in your life (Mt 10:22; Mk 13:13) — this term is also translated “persevering” (Rom 12:12). So trials produce a strength of character that hangs in their when the storms of life come… and over time they effectuate an attitude that doesn’t give up. Now, is that not reason enough to consider trials “joy”? (i.e., is that not reason enough to consider trials as not being a super-negative?). This principle was expressed this way by sergeants when I was in the Army back in the 1960s: “We’re going to make men out of you!” How do you think they did that? Hold our hand and sing kumbaya around a camp fire? No, of course not; they did it by subjecting us to some very tough training! Obviously it was no picnic in the park. Can you fathom what it would like to be engaged in combat and not be prepared for it? Well that is precisely what the Army and the Christian life is about — it’s no walk in the park, so don’t insist that your life be a pleasant little peaceful utopia. The challenge for the believer is that he stop focusing on the problem, and moan and grown over it, and start focusing on the solution — Christ (cf. Heb 12:2). When I was an infantryman in the army we would commonly go on something known as “reconnaissance missions” (i.e., spy missions or information gathering missions), and sometimes these missions were actually quite difficult; they were generally long, tough, demanding, and not at all comfortable little exercises. On one particular mission I was seriously injured while trying to scale a steep mountain… when the ground gave way under my feet, I fell and a broken branch penetrated my leg (it went in about three inches)… it took a number of fellow comrades about five hours to get me off the mountain and into a hospital, where I ended up staying for the next 22 days. I was very fortunate in that I didn’t damage an artery, or I would have lost my leg (because we were not close enough to any kind of medical assistance)… I was also fortunate in that I didn’t get gangrene (or so I thought) because that also would have meant the amputation of my leg; interestingly enough, I was informed the day I was released from the hospital that that was their number one concern: apparently gangrene had set it, but after two weeks of treating it, they were surprisingly [by their admission] able to successfully remove it; they told me they didn’t think they would be able to do that because it was fairly significant… but God must have gone before them). I find it interesting that it was that same leg that I ultimately used for “place-kicking” when I played football just a few years later; perhaps that was one of the messages God intended for me to reflect upon: “Ekstrand, I have been there all along for you” (yet, back during my Army days I was not aware of that). So in spite of the pain, the fear, and the difficulty that I was subjected to, I had a lot to be grateful for — I still had my leg. Complaining and grumbling and wallowing in the mud wasn’t the answer to my problem, nor is it the answer to any of the problems that we all go through in life; that should be clear to everyone.

Sadly, there are times when we become so consumed with a “negative” in our life, that we don’t take the time to resolved it with the Lord (cf. Ps 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; 10:1; 11:1; 13:1). The truth is, none of us have a great faith… we simply have faith in a great God — beloved, there is no room whatsoever for any of us to boast of our faith, because our faith is very feeble. Because we are a people of little faith, like Peter we frequently focus on the waves
due to the incredible influence our flesh has on our thinking; instead we're to get our eyes off of the waves (i.e., the problems) and focus on Christ (cf. Mt 14:29-31). So our problem as human beings is “our flesh” — it garners our attention and drags us down... because it interjects sinful thoughts into our minds, like Paul, we often end up reflecting upon the very evil we hate (cf. Rom 7:18-19; Jam 3:2); as such, anxiety often rules in our soul. Let's say you are really distressed by some issue (some trial, some problem, even some remedial situation that is simply getting under your skin and getting the best of you) — in the real world, what does the believer's response look like? Following is how many of the saints of history and Scripture have responded (read their laments) —

Lord, I’m losing it! This stuff is driving me nuts! And it’s winning the war in my soul! God, I need help, because my flesh is dominating my thought-life right now... and the more I think about what’s going on, the more aggravated it is making me. Lord, give me the grace to see this issue for what it really is, and stop dwelling on the dark side of it... help me to know “Your way of escape” (1 Cor 10:13) that I might not let darkness rule in my soul. Thank you God that You care about what’s going on in my life, and that you want to bring me into the light, and give me Your peace. The anxiety in my soul seems so overwhelming... Lord, hear my cry, and give me the grace to turn from my sin, and walk in the light. You alone, Lord, are my strength and my shield... lead me in the way everlasting.

Read some of the “psalms of lament,” so that you can identify with plight and thinking of the psalmists (cf. Ps 3:1-2; 4:1; 5:1-2; 6:1-2; 7:1-2; 10:1-12; 11:1-3; 13:1-3; 16:1; 17:1; 22:1-2; etc.) — we are all made of the same stuff, so we share a lot of commonality with the psalmists (that’s why the Book of Psalms is the most read book by far in the entire Bible — because it speaks directly to the hearts of God's people). Aside from reading Scripture, oftentimes, the best way to deal with a difficult negative in your life, is to simply “walk away from it” — if something is really agitating you, and you can get out of its presence... get out of its presence! (Prv 5:8)... and for crying out loud, “don't feed your flesh!” You can't entertain your flesh and not suffer the consequences. Your flesh is far stronger than you are! If you even try to argue against that with some scriptural truth (like Phil 4:13), you are going off the deep end; you really don't understand the dynamic presence of your sinful flesh in your life. My prayer is that your theology is much better than that.

Let’s return to the topic at hand — in short, it is “what we focus on” that gives definition to the life that we live. So the question is, what is your chief focus in life? Is it indeed God, or is it this stupid world? (cf. 1 Jn 2:15-17). Remember, Jesus said, “You cannot serve God and money... you will hate one and love the other, or you will hold to one and despise the other” (Mt 6:24); that word hate means “to not have relationship with.” thus, if your relationship with God is of secondary importance in your life, you are making it subordinate to that which is temporal and earthly... the problem is, the demands of these two masters are antithetical to each other... so either we focus on present enjoyment or eternal enjoyment. Yes, that is a monumental demand, so either you “deny yourself, and take up your cross and follow
Christ... or you choose to compromise your allegiance to Christ and live for yourself” (Mt 16:24-27)—the question then is this: are you truly born-again? Saying “I think so” isn't good enough; actually that should be very troubling to you. The apostle Peter said, “Be diligent to make certain about God’s call upon your life” (2 Pet 1:10). All I can say on this issue is this: if walking with God is not your daily practice, you will never have assurance of your salvation (cf. Heb 11:1; 3:14) — God can’t be a distant reality in your life, and yet have a dynamic presence in your mind and heart… that is just not possible. If you are really troubled about your relationship with the Lord, get away for a couple of days and prayerfully delve into His Word, and tell God you want Him to be a significant presence in your life. That is the one absolutely sure way of experiencing the presence of God in your life; all the demons of hell can’t defeat you on that road. The premiere issue for the believer is that “he love God;” that is, that he submit to Him and His authority over his life, and give Him first place in his life (Mt 22:37). John put it this way, “the one who does not love does not know God, for God is love” (1 Jn 4:8); obviously if we don’t love God and His children, we will have no confidence (i.e., no assurance) whatsoever that we are His children (cf. 1 Jn 3:14-19; 4:7-8; Heb 11:1). Again, this is the work of the Holy Spirit in the mind and the heart of the believer — it is not the work of human effort; though we may plant and water, it is GOD who causes the growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:6); everything we do in life is subordinate to the work of God.

Regarding life, “You are going to reap what you sow” — that’s a divine degree of God. The prophet Hosea said to the northern kingdom of Israel prior to its being taken into captivity by Assyria in the 8th century BC, “Sow with a view to righteousness, reap in accordance with kindness; break up your fallow ground, for it is time to seek the Lord until He comes to rain righteousness on you. You have plowed wickedness, and have reaped trouble... because you have trusted in your way and in your warriors. Hence a tumult will arise among you, and all of your fortresses will be destroyed” (Hos 10:12-14). Likewise Obadiah said to God’s people, “As you have done, it will be done to you; your dealings will return on your own head” (Oba 1:15). There’s no skirting this issue… as Paul put it, “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (Gal 6:7). Conversely he said, “He who sows sparingly will reap sparingly; and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully” (2 Cor 9:6). One of the problems with this didactic is that many believers try to apply it to their immediate earthly circumstances, as if all they experience in life is directly related to everything they do in life — in other words, they work hard and are faithful in their giving, so that they can enjoy financial success; thus they give to get? (sadly, that’s a common teaching in many churches). Why do so many Christians ignore God’s teaching on this issue? especially because it is so clear! The Lord told His people, “I am the one who gives people the power to make wealth” (Deut 8:18)... much to the dismay of many is the truth that “it is the wicked who frequently prosper” — this was a very disturbing thought to the psalmist Asaph (cf. Ps 73:1-17). The problem with some believers embracing this kind of thinking is twofold — first, it takes eternity off the table (in spite of the fact that the vast majority of what we sow in this life will be recompensed to us in the life hereafter)... and second, it makes our own selfish gains a significant motivating factor for us in this life — yet those were not the intended purposes of that maxim. Many Christians apply this truism to “their health” as well — you eat a good diet, exercise regularly, and get eight hours of sleep every night, and you'll reap accordingly.
Interestingly enough, there's some truth to that line of thinking... but one cannot apply it in an absolute sense. As Solomon said, God works all things after the council of His own will, "so that man may not discover anything that will be after him" (cf. Ecc 7:13-14; also Eph 1:11); in other words, there is nothing that we can do that will insure what we reap in this life — God doesn't give us that prerogative; that is His and His alone.

I find it amazing at how strongly people try to "influence" all that goes on in their life "by abiding by these kinds of maxims." What if God had chosen to make you a poor disabled servant of His, who suffers from a number of ailments? Man's problem (including that of most believers) is that they insist on "life working the way they want it to work," i.e., that life be a pleasant, joyful experience — obviously, that would be nice; but that may not be God's will for your life — if it is not God's will for your life, would you question His love for you? By the way, nearly every believer is ultimately stricken with some ailments or difficult conditions in this life, for the expressed purpose of "growing his faith" — that's just the way God's economy works in our lives (cf. Jn 16:33; Rom 5:3-4; Jam 1:2-3; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:10). Should you be stricken with a terminal illness, or the death of a loved one, or significant financial loss, or very painful ailments, how would that affect your attitude toward God? Though many of you may proudly claim that "it wouldn't affect your attitude toward God," unless you have undergone such an experience, you really don't know how it would affect your faith. Let me assure you, though it is common for most believers to really struggle with a painful reality in their life at some point, God ultimately moves them in a positive direction, to the point where they "genuinely accept" God's will for their life (despite the fact that none of as Christians deal with our plight as commendably as we could or should; indwelling sin has a very powerful presence in our lives). Obviously, these are "not easy issues" for any of us, because of the presence of our unredeemed humanness (our flesh). The truth is, God understands our weaknesses and more often than not moves us in a positive direction, even in spite of our imperfect faith — to insist that we merit God's kindness in some way is foolishness... so this is how loving and gracious God is. As Jesus said, "God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Mt 5:45); such is God's prerogative; God extends kindness to the entire human family, and oftentimes answers the cries of anyone in the human family; don't limit God to humanistic thinking.

Ultimately, almost every one of us as God's children, will have to travel some very difficult roads in life; and it is then that you will cry out to the Lord, and wrestle with all of the fleshy thinking that takes place in your soul that's related to that issue; it is then that you will need to remember that "God understands your frame... and is mindful that you are but dust" (Ps 103:14). It'll also be important for you to ultimately remember that God is your Master and you are His servant. One of the incredible realities you will learn during the most painful, perplexing time in your life, is that you will exercise a degree of faith — you will go to GOD with your frustration and anxiety and hopeless feelings... not some clairvoyant mystic or psychic palm reader — by definition, going to God means you will be demonstrating a serious degree of faith... crying out to the Lord, even in anger and frustration is "an exercise of incredible faith!" If you didn't believe in Him, why on earth would you go to Him? It is because you are one of God's children that you run to Him in time of need. Ultimately,
it will be in God's presence (when you are pouring your heart out to Him), that you will experience His unconditional love and peace; though it seldom happens instantaneously, God moves in our hearts in a reasonably short period of time… the important thing is that you prayerfully spend significant time with Him in His Word, so that the Holy Spirit can encourage you in your pain. Sadly, some believers hardly spend any quality time at all in the Word, and their faith demonstrates that fact. Remember, “faith comes by hearing the Word” (Rom 10:17); if His Word is seldom read or studied, your faith will reflect that — since faith means “believing what God says,” how can you come to believe what He says if you don't listen to what He says? The reality is, when you humbly reflect upon the Word the Holy Spirit will make it a dynamic reality in your mind and heart (Acts 16:14; Jn 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). Other than being called “the Spirit of Truth” in Scripture, He is also referred to as our Helper’ (cf. Jn 14:26) — the Greek term “paraclete” literally means, “one called alongside to help;” and that is precisely what we need when we are at the end of our rope and hurting; but keep in mind, the principle means by which He helps us is God's Word — don’t simply look at God's Word as a collection of forensic truths; “His Word is living and active!” (cf. Heb 4:12). The Spirit makes it a dynamic reality in our hearts and minds when we humbly consider what it has to say; so it is the Holy Spirit who makes God’s Word a significant spiritual energy (not just a dry reality) in our soul; only God's Spirit can make it dynamic.

Regarding this matter of “humility” in Scripture — literally, it means “to become low; to think lowly or modestly of oneself, rather than highly of oneself.” As the Lord told Isaiah, “I shall humble the haughty and the lofty” (Is 10:33)... “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain shall be humbled” (cf. Is 40:4). When the Lord comes in judgment, He will have no toleration for the proud — those who are proud and lofty shall be brought low (cf. Is 2:12). As Solomon said, “A man’s pride shall bring him low; but honor shall uphold the humble in spirit” (Prv 29:23). Pride & self-exaltation have no place in the life of the godly; be it a person, a city, or a nation, the Lord will bring low those who exalt themselves… “the Lord is the one who bringeth low and lifteth up” (cf. 1 Sam 2:7)... so either we humble ourselves or God will humble us. God will do a wonderful work in the humble heart, but nothing at all in the proud heart — He actually “opposes” the proud; i.e., he mounts up in opposition against him (it is a military term — cf. Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). “God teaches the humble His way” (cf. Ps 25:9), “but will bring low and punish the proud” (cf. Prv 16:5; Is 2:11-12). Said Jesus, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 14:11). Beloved, there is no skirting this issue, either we humble ourselves now, or God will humble us… either we see ourselves for who we truly are (and experience God's grace), or we walk proudly through this world and experience His opposition. Jesus said of Himself, “Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you shall find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). If the Lord Jesus could humble Himself to the point of death on the cross (cf. Phil 2:8), how in the world can we not walk through this world with a humble heart? What does the Lord require of us? That “we do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God” (Mic 6:8). If there are two highly significant didactics that need to be the foundation of our lives, they are these: we need to have a humble heart (i.e., see ourselves exactly as we are; cf. Rom 12:3), and believe that God loves us unconditionally (nothing in all creation can separate us from His love;
Far and away the most brilliant mind of the Christian era was the apostle Paul — he was a Jew, born and raised in one of the most significant cities in the ancient world — Tarsus of Cilicia (the southeasterly province of Asia Minor on the Mediterranean Sea; Acts 21:39; 22:3); it was not only a famous trade center, but a significant place for education in the Roman world along with Athens and Alexandria. Paul was educated under Gamaliel, perhaps the most esteemed and respected teacher in the first century (Acts 22:3; 5:33-40). Paul was not only a Pharisee, but the son of a Pharisee (Acts 23:6)... he had advanced in Judaism beyond the vast majority of his contemporaries, and was extremely zealous for his ancestral traditions (Gal 1:14). It was this incredibly proud Jew (a Jew of Jews) who was persecuting the followers of Christ that God chose to be “His premiere servant” to the unbelieving world (Acts 9:1-8). Though Paul was widely known for persecuting Christians (Acts 9:13), God declared him to be, “a chosen instrument of Mine to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; one who would suffer for My name’s sake” (Acts 9:15-16; 26:14-18). So God in His wisdom chose a brilliant devout Jew, highly educated in Jewish tradition, to be His servant to our fallen world — Paul’s understanding of Judaism was unparalleled, thus he was “highly qualified” to address all of the various issues that divided the Christian and Jewish worlds in the first century. It should be noted, following his conversion Paul spent upwards of twenty years preaching in various localities and studying Scripture, before he was sent on the first of his three missionary journeys (cf. Acts 13:1ff; 15:36ff; 18:23ff). As brilliant and knowledgeable as Paul was, he knew he still had a lot to learning to do (cf. Gal 1:18-4:2) — he knew he needed to understand every aspect of the Christian faith, because his voice would be a “strategic one” to help others come to a proper understanding of theology in the Christian world. Sadly, there are many in the Christian world today who are listening to the liberal element in the Church that promulgates the understanding that “Pauline theology” is a theology all its own, and isn’t something that believers need to embrace; which is nothing but diabolical heresy! This same nonsensical reasoning occurred in the early church; some would say, “I’m of Paul,” or “I’m of Apollos,” or “I’m of Cephas,” or “I’m of Christ” (1 Cor 1:11-17; 3:4)... beloved, don’t buy into that line of reasoning, because you are rejecting “GOD’S WORD!” rather than the humanistic thinking of men — if that’s the road you're traveling, you need to know that is dangerous territory; completely unliblical (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:20-21). I have actually heard some people in the churches I have attended say “they disagree with Pauline theology,” as if it is simply some “radical opinion of man, and not God;” it should be pretty obvious to the majority of Christians that “fallen human thinking” is nothing but foolish nonsense! To even entertain “the thinking of ‘man’ on spiritual issues” is downright madness — God Himself calls it absolute foolishness (cf. Rom 1:22; 1 Cor 1:18, 20; 2:14; 3:18-19; Prov 1:22; 14:8-9; 15:2; 18:2; 24:7; 26:12; Ecc 10:2). With that in mind, let’s return to God’s servant “Paul.” For those of you who are students of the Word, no doubt you are aware at how often the Old Testament is quoted or expanded upon in the New Testament, and how significant Old Testament teaching was to the Christian world — the reality is, much of what the Old Testament teaches is “enlightened” in the New Testament. Obviously, connecting the two Testaments...
required a very significant understanding of them, and this is where Paul really excelled. Ultimately, God used His servant Paul to write the majority of “the New Testament letters;” he personally authored fourteen of the twenty-two letters. By the way, if you question the “divine inspiration of Scripture” at any point, there is a strong possibility that you are not truly a believer (unless you are super young in the faith and extremely uninformed); to deny its divine authorship is to make “human thinking” the foundation of your faith; which is completely antithetical to what Scripture teaches.

There is a lot written about the apostle Paul in the New Testament, so one could spend a tremendous amount of time discussing it, but that is not the purpose on this study… so let me encourage you to read some of the following passages to increase your understanding of him (cf. Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-22; 2 Cor 11:18-33; 12:1-6; Gal 1:11-24; 2:1-10). According to Scripture, Paul was “given a revelation” that in all likelihood transcended anything that any other individual had ever been given — “he was caught up to the third heaven (i.e., Paradise)… and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak (i.e., unspeakable words)” (2 Cor 12:14); thus God took Paul to heaven and gave him visions and revelations, that apparently completely overwhelmed him; there is no doubt that this vision of God's glory was one of the sustaining powers in Paul's life and ministry. So exceedingly great was the revelation, God needed to humble him;” i.e., “give him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from exalting himself” (2 Cor 12:7). Obviously, such an honor as Paul received would make any man very proud, so God in His wisdom permitted Satan to “buffet Paul” (i.e., to beat him) in order to keep him from becoming proud… so his thorn in the flesh was given to him to keep him from exalting himself. Now whatever the thorn in Paul's flesh was (it is not specifically identified in Scripture), it was a “physical affliction” of some kind that brought pain and distress to Paul. The point is — God permitted Satan to afflict Paul, just as He permitted Satan to afflict Job (cf. Job 1-2) — contrary to what some may believe, Satan cannot do a work against a believer without the permission of God… and all that God permits, “He causes to work together for our good” (Rom 8:28). Whatever the pain was that Paul kept on experiencing, “he entreated the Lord (i.e., pleaded with Him) three times to have Him remove it from him… but God did not” (2 Cor 12:8-9). Obviously, what Paul went through was very painful and agitating… thus Paul went from paradise to pain, from glory to suffering, from ecstasy to agony. He tasted the blessing of heaven and felt the buffeting of Satan. Because of the presence of “indwelling sin” in Paul's life (i.e., his flesh, which is a significant part of all of our lives), God knew it was necessary to counter it with a humbling affliction; though Satan thought he was causing Paul's demise, God knew otherwise — Paul's humbling affliction actually enabled him to access the power of God. God's message to Paul was this: “In spite of the discomforting thorn in your flesh, My grace is sufficient for you” (incidentally, those emboldened words are emphatic in Greek — cf. 2 Cor 12:9). It's important to remember, God only gives grace to those who are “humble,” not to those who are proud (cf. Jan 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). There is nothing God can't do through us when we are humble before Him… yet there is nothing He will do through us when we are proud. God told Paul: “My power is being made perfect in your weakness” (2 Cor 12:9) — God displays His power through the humble (i.e., the weak), not through the proud. When Paul “accepted” his affliction as a gift from God, this made it possible for God's grace to do its incredible work in and through his life.
God's grace enabled Paul not only to humbly accept his afflictions, but to humbly glory in them (2 Cor 12:9-10) — thus his suffering was not a tyrant that exacerbated him, but a servant that worked for him. Though Paul gloried in his infirmities, that did not mean that he preferred pain to health, or negatives to positives; rather it meant that it pleased him to suffer for Christ’s sake, because in so doing God could do a great work in and through his life.

Due to the fact that there is a serious misunderstanding about the true essence of “sin,” let’s examine it in a little more detail. Scripture emphatically teaches us that sin is an inherent aspect of the human condition — we are not simply born into a sinful world; we are born with a propensity to sin (cf. Ps 51:5; 58:3); thus we all have fallen sinful flesh (i.e., a sin disposition). That man is totally sinful has commonly been referred to as “total depravity,” the Greek word adokimos means “not standing the test” (cf. Rom 1:28)… our English word depravity means a perverted or crooked; so depravity means that man by nature fails the test of pleasing God. The reality is, man’s corruption extends to every facet of his nature and faculties — there is nothing in him that can commend him to a righteous God. Total depravity must always be measured against God’s holiness, because “relative goodness” exists in all people; all human beings can do relatively good works that are appreciated by others, but no man’s behavior can merit salvation or favor before a holy God. It is this matter of “relative goodness” that has deceived man, because man in his fallen state cannot appreciate the significance of that which is absolutely pure (holiness), thus everything is weighed and judged by him according to his fallen imperfect mind. In spite of the fact that all men know that they sin (God makes them aware of that fact, so they are not able to somehow justify their depraved thinking; cf. Rom 1:19-32; Jer 5:20-31; 17:9; Is 44:18-20; Eph 4:17), they don’t see themselves as being creatures who are totally unholy & sinful. When depraved thinking is the foundation of your thoughts, it’s impossible to think what you are not capable of thinking; that would be like an illiterate person questioning the grammatical construction of material written in several languages… or a person without any knowledge of arithmetic questioning some geometric equation — you cannot extract something from nothing, anymore than you can extract wisdom from a fool; temporal minds cannot fathom that which is eternal (it simply transcends human thought). Therefore, as human beings we need to humbly see ourselves for who we really are (extremely deficient creatures) and not mindlessly argue to the contrary. The testimony of God to the human heart is that we are totally depraved creatures… it’s not a matter of whether or not we like that divine appraisal, that is the reality. So as human beings, it ought to be pretty clear – we are completely at the mercy of God in life (cf. Rom 9:15-16; Eph 2:4; Titus 3:5). Thank God He is merciful.

**Regarding the Delusion of Good Works**

Let’s look at this issue of being morally good in a little more depth. Being “morally good” refers to various aspects of personhood that includes deeds, character traits, motives, intentions, and desires. “Relative goodness & Absolute goodness” clash when we compare the two, because there is temporal goodness & eternal goodness… apparent goodness & real goodness… lesser goodness & higher goodness… material goodness & spiritual goodness, objective goodness & subjective goodness — with that in mind, theologians down through
the ages have postulated that there are “grades of goodness,” with God being the highest good. Declarations that God is good, that He acts with goodness, and is the source of all that is good abounds throughout Scripture (cf. 2 Chron 5:13; 7:3; Ps 25:8; 100:5; 106:1; Jer 33:11; Nah 1:7; Mk 10:18; Jam 1:17). To seek God is to seek the good (Amos 5:4, 6, 14). Jesus taught that God is perfect goodness, and that He alone decides what is good (cf. Mt 19:16-22; Mk 10:17-22). The tragic fall of Adam & Eve in the garden had to do with their rebellious attempt to assume God’s prerogative of determining what is good and what is evil (Gen 3:4-7). Despite the fact that we now live in a fallen universe, there are still residual affects of God’s goodness in the created order; even though all creation has been cursed, it has not yet been destroyed. The fact that there is still significant beauty in the created order attests to the majesty and glory of its Creator (cf. Ps 19:1; Rom 1:19-20)... nevertheless all that exists is seriously tainted by sin (death), and is in a state of degeneration (cf. Gen 3:17-19; 5:29; Rom 8:20-25); that has been attested to by the law of entropy (the Second Law of Thermodynamics). Remember, when God created everything, He said it was “very good” (cf. Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31)... well, the entire created order still mirrors that goodness to some degree. Sadly, fallen man sees the created order as “the most grandiose thing in all the universe” (that’s why the scientific community is now seen as the “supreme reality” in our world); conversely, fallen man sees himself as “good enough” or “reasonably good” or “essentially good” (i.e., that he is basically not evil); and therein is the foundation of man’s problem (Rom 7:18). So man worships the created order and science and the creature, rather than his Creator (cf. Rom 1:21-32;Jer 16: 19-21;Is 45:5-7; Ecc 12:13-14). Again, his judgments are grounded in depraved human thinking. With that in mind, God calls the wisdom of men “absolute foolishness/stupidity” (cf. Ps 14:1; Prv 1:7; 13:19; 14:8-9; 15:2; 15:14; Jer 10:6-8; Rom 1:21-22; 1 Cor 3:19; 1:20; 2:14) — the heart of the wise understands this... the heart of the fool does not; to even talk about this stuff to a fool is a complete waste of time, because fools are so arrogant they will not even consider or contemplate what you are saying. That’s why Jesus told His disciples to not present that which is holy to those who are enemies of the gospel: “Do not give what is holy to dogs, or throw pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet” (cf. Mt 7:6). This is the reason Jesus was silent before His accusers (cf. Mt 26:63; Mk 14:61; Is 53:7), and didn’t perform miracles before unbelievers (cf. Mt 13:58).

The vast majority of the human family is “godless;” i.e., there is no reverence in their heart for God — Scripture identifies the godless as being wicked and evil (cf. Ps 1:1-6; 10:3, 13; 36:1; 50:16; 119:155; 34:14; 52:1-4; Prv 2:1, 5, 9-15; 8:13; Ecc 9:3; Mic 3:2; Rom 1:18; 5:6). Though that may be a little perplexing and troubling to some of you, consider the following: godlessness takes on many colors in our world — it embraces abortion, cohabitation, profanity, pornography, adultery, pre-marital sex, homosexuality, perverse lifestyles, divorce, alcohol, drugs, anger, envy, greed, malice, gossip, strife, slander, deceitfulness, evolution, hypocrisy, self-pride, pretense, and agnosticism & atheism (i.e., the belief that God cannot be known, or that no God exists)... on the other hand, those who are godless hate humility, divine truth, virtue, godliness, Scripture, God’s people, and refuse to see themselves as sinful, fallen creatures. The political left in our country has expressed extreme hatred for the religious right; thus suggesting that “ungodliness” is now reaching into the stratosphere of our world. Most people “behave in a culturally acceptable manner,” since that is what is rewarded; if you
want to be liked, you need to behave in a likeable fashion; that is the norm of all societies, hence there is **relative goodness**. But our world is becoming so corrupt today, that even that truism is being questioned. Obviously there are a number of people who claim to be **religious** (though not true followers of Christ), thus they pride themselves on being good, being righteous, and being virtuous. Yet on the last day the Lord will say to them, “*I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness*” — the reality is, all sin is lawlessness and rebellion against the law and mind of God (cf. Mt 7:21-23; 13:41; Phil 3:9; 1 Jn 3:4). For a person to actually think he is “**good**” (i.e., virtuous) when he is not, is the pinnacle of arrogance.

The **works of man** are given prominent attention in the Bible… they are increasingly seen in the Old Testament as being marked by **vanity and sin**. This negative attitude toward the actions of man was accentuated by an emphasis in the opposite direction in late Judaism, when they embraced “**the righteousness of works and their deserving a reward.**” The New Testament teaching on works must be seen against this background; it is here where **human works** are generally characterized as being of the devil (Jn 8:41; 1 Jn 3:8), of darkness (Rom 13:12), of man’s sinful nature (Gal 5:19), as ungodly (Jude 15), lawless (2 Pet 2:8), and dead (Heb 6:1; 9:14). The only works that will stand the scrutiny of God are those affected by the Holy Spirit and **grounded in faith** (cf. Jn 3:21; 6:29; Acts 26:20; Rom 2:6-7; 1 Th 1:3). The chief work that God insists upon is **the obedience of humble belief** (Jn 6:29), which ultimately begets a life full of good deeds (cf. Eph 2:10; Titus 3:14). Soon after the apostolic age (probably during the 3rd century), the Christian world began to drift with regard to what Scripture teaches on “**good works.**” Whereas the New Testament taught that the kingdom is built on **God’s grace** (not human merit), and that God rewards according to His grace (not merit; Mt 20:1-16)... some in the church began to teach that believers must obey the commandments, and when they do God will reward them. Don’t jump to a **wrong conclusion** regarding that statement — so the idea began to spread that **God commands, and when we obey we obtain merit;** so salvation was not only seen as grace, but as something that was actually merited at some level. Ultimately, the “**Council of Trent.**” held by the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century, decreed that **there is a congruence between the passion of Christ and human merit;** that is, that there is **a harmonious union** between the passion of Christ and human merit... that the passion of Christ “**imparts to our good actions the quality of meriting the rewards of eternal glory.** This unbiblical teaching, combined with the doctrine of **free will** and **human ability,** was the fundamental reason for the Reformation.

Before **Martin Luther** and others discovered the true essence of the gospel, he struggled greatly with his **acquiring merit** by good works; as a monk, he had embraced the idea that **he could expiate his sins with good works,** so he and numerous other monks tried the impossible by nearly martyring themselves to death with vigils, prayers, readings, and other works. This unbiblical doctrine was radically changed when the Reformers came to the realization that “**man is justified by faith in the meritorious work of Christ alone,**” and not at **all by the merit of his own good works — this is precisely what Scripture teaches.** Ultimately, this understanding spread through a very large segment of the Christian world. When one thinks about it, **it is amazing how deplorable and foolish the minds of men are when God’s Spirit is not dictating reality in their minds** (cf. Jn 16:13; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 2:12; 12:3; 1 Th 1:5)... obviously,
many in the Christian world had not humbled themselves before the Lord and experienced His incredible presence in their lives. So here was a group of men who had spent much of their life reading & studying the Bible, yet came up with a completely bogus understanding of what Scripture teaches on salvation. Again, the reason being, “they were not a humble people,” and where there is no humility, there is no inspiration by the Holy Spirit — God doesn’t work in the minds of the proud; He doesn’t cast His pearls before swine. By the way, only the unbelieving element in the Catholic Church today still struggles with what Scripture teaches; there are a number of Catholics who embrace justification by faith in Jesus Christ alone (even Pope John Paul II said those protestants who had truly placed their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ would go to heaven; I don’t believe the present pope believes that, but that is just my opinion). The Reformers declared that “the only righteousness” which can stand before the judgment of a holy God is one which is absolutely perfect and fully in conformity with the divine law; for even the best works of men in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin (that essentially is how it is stated in the Heidelberg Catechism). For those of you who are a little unfamiliar with that concept, take the time to read it over a few times and reflect upon what it truly says. This is the foundational teaching of Romans chapter 4: “If God marks iniquities, who can stand? But He forgives and declares sinners righteous simply because of their faith” (Rom 4:3). The reckoning or imputation of the righteousness of Christ does not mean that God observes how well the sinner has done and then declares him fit for His kingdom — that is not at all what Scripture teaches; it emphatically declares that God justifies the ungodly (cf. Rom 5:6-10, 16-21). Christ did not come to call the righteous to repentance, but sinners to repentance (Mt 9:13; Lk 18:14) — all sinful man contributes to his salvation (if indeed you can call it that) is “humbly acknowledging his sinfulness & believing on the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Jn 1:8-10; Rom 3:9-12, 23-24; 4:1-8, 16; 5:1; 6:23; Acts 4:12; 16:30-31). Sinners are justified freely as a gift through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. The wages of sin is death, the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (cf. Rom 3:24-28; 6:23; Eph 2:8-9). My heart goes out to those of you who were never taught the truth of what Scripture really teaches about salvation; Many Christians have suffered due to wrong teaching, and have even questioned the genuineness of their salvation. Beloved, let me encourage you to prayerfully reflect upon this section several times (including the references that are given) until the Lord makes it a living dynamic in your life; this is a very liberating doctrine (cf. Jn 8:12, 31-32, 47).

Regarding Righteous Living

Now, salvation freely given does not mean that “good works” are unimportant. They are “commanded” and are the fruit of faith (cf. Mt 5:16; Eph 2:10; Titus 2:14; Jam 2:14-20). The Heidelberg Catechism was a profession of faith by the German Reformed Church in 1563 (and was ultimately adopted by many Reformed Churches) — it explains good works this way: “Just as Christ has redeemed us with His blood, He renews us through His Spirit according to His own image, so that by our lives we may show ourselves grateful to God for His goodness, that He may be glorified through us… and that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits, and that by our reverent behavior we may win our neighbors to Christ.” James, the blood-brother of Jesus, said: “Good works are an essential characteristic of genuine faith, that good works demonstrate that our faith is real; that faith without works is dead” (Jam
2:14-26). For instance, if you said you believed in stopping at red lights, yet constantly did not stop at red lights, your claim would be bogus — the way we live actually gives witness to what we truly believe; though we may frequently stumble and violate our convictions, as God's children we will not continually walk in sin hour after hour. If you're a believer, you'll notice that when you do sin, you experience the conviction of the Holy Spirit regarding your sin (you feel the conviction of guilt) and start the process of confession (i.e., agreeing with God about your sin). The reality is, no believer walks through life without stumbling time after time (cf. Ecc 7:20; Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10-2:1), but as believers “we don't dwell in sin” (i.e., it is not the practice of our life). John expressed it this way, “No one who abides in Christ sins” (i.e., “no one who is a born-again Christian practices sin” — 1 Jn 3:6); due to the fact “sins” is a present tense verb, the emphasis is on continual action; believers don’t constantly live a life of unfaith and ongoing sin… though they stumble often (cf. Jam 3:2; 1 Jn 1:10), they don’t walk in darkness and disregard God’s presence in their life — that is not the practice of the believer’s life. In order to give understanding to the matter of “sin,” keep in mind what Paul said: “that which is not of faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). Therefore living outside of the bounds of faith is sin — if trusting God in life does not characterize who you are, you are living a life of sin — “all unbelievers live a life of sin — Christ is not their life.” If you simply understand “sin” as some overt evil (swearing, stealing, hurting someone, cheating, etc.), your definition of sin is not a biblical one; it is way too narrow of a definition; you are simply making sin ugly behavior. But sin is an attitude of the heart that controls much of the discourse in your mind, so you can be sinning simply by what you are thinking about (as previously discussed). The believer’s mind frequently thinks about God and communes with Him; God’s presence in his life isn’t just a one day a week occurrence — obviously, as we grow in our faith, God is a prominent presence in our lives… as such, we will find ourselves thinking of Him often… that doesn’t mean every thought will be a wonderful, glorious thought, because we inhabit sinful flesh; oftentimes we will find ourselves ruminating over some difficulty we may be experiencing. We don't live in a pleasant little utopia; we live in a fallen world that can be very exasperating at times, and that frequently gets us on the phone to God.

With the foregoing in mind, what really matters in life is “who we are” — if we possess the righteousness of Christ (cf. Rom 4:2; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 11:8) our lives will reflect that righteousness to some degree, because God’s Spirit has taken up residence in us (cf. Rom 8:9; Jn 14:17; 1 Cor 2:14; 1 Jn 4:6); as such, He is moving us in a godly direction (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 2:13). Conversely, if we have not been made righteous in Christ (i.e., we have not placed our faith in Christ and become a child of God), we simply will not reflect His righteousness in life — rather than walk in the light and live a life of faith, we simply will walk in darkness and live according to the dictates of our own fallen self-centered nature. So it is one’s nature that determines the foundation of his life (cf. 2 Cor 5:17) — unbelievers walk in darkness and do not live a life of faith (i.e., they do not trust in God and His will for their lives); conversely, believers walk in the light and live with a God-orientation in life. Again, John is not saying that one with a new nature does not sin (remember, he still has his old nature in him as well), but that one with a new nature will not make living in the dark the constant practice of his life — why? because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't permit His children to simply live
a life of sin; He loves them too much to let them live in sin (cf. Ps 32:3-5; Heb 12:4-11). As He told David, “My eye will continually be upon you, and I will instruct you and counsel you in the way you should go in life. Don’t be like the horse or the mule who has no understanding, whose trappings include a bit and a bridle to hold him in check,” because if I have to put a bit or a bridle on you so that you will walk uprightly, I will (cf. Ps 32:8-9; 138:8). So what is the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian? The “foundation” of their lives is completely different — the believer hates sin and the fallenness of his old nature… whereas the unbeliever embraces the self-life and does not see his fallen nature as that bad or unrighteous. The whole tone and attitude of life for the believer is very different from that of the unbeliever, and it is in that sense that he does not continue to reject the light and walk in the dark. Regarding our works and the way in which we live life, all of that is known to God and will be taken into account when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ (cf. Rom 2:6; 1 Cor 3:14; 2 Cor 5:10; Mt 16:27; 1 Pet 1:7; Rev 22:12). Since the days of Vatican II (1962-65) many Roman Catholic theologians have been rethinking the significance of “works” regarding God’s plan of salvation — many have actually concluded that Luther in principle may have been correct… that good works and the institution of the church have nothing to do with salvation; that it is simply a matter of a person placing his trust in God for salvation… that salvation is by faith in Christ alone. However, no official statements have been made by the Roman Catholic Church on these issues as yet, so it remains to be seen how willing they are to revise their time-honored definitions regarding faith and works.

REGARDING GOD’S TRANSCENDENCY

As God’s servant Job said, “The Lord gives and the Lord takes away…. Shall we accept good from God and not accept adversity?” (cf. Job 1:21; 2:10). In her song of thanksgiving, Hannah (the mother of Samuel) said, “The Lord kills and makes alive… He brings low and He exalts… He makes poor and makes rich” (cf. 1 Sam 2:6-7). Solomon wrote, “What is crooked cannot be straightened, and what is lacking cannot be counted” (cf. Ecc 1:15). “I hated life, for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is nothing but futility and striving after wind; so I hated all the fruit of my labor” (Ecc 2:17-18); Solomon could not accomplish in life that which he truly wanted to accomplish; so it became very apparent to him that he was not the final word on what went on in his life. He then said: “Consider the work of God, for who is able to straighten what He has bent? In the day of prosperity be happy, but in the day of adversity consider: God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not discover anything that will be after him” (cf. Ecc 7:13-14) — God doesn’t give man the privilege of dictating his own destiny in life; that is God’s prerogative. Solomon states in Proverbs: “The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord… conversely, the mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps” (Prov 16:1,9) — men insist on the running the show in their life, but the Lord overrules everything man says and does to accomplishes His purposes. Contrary to what any man may say, God is on the throne. He told Isaiah, “I am the LORD; there is no other… the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these things” (Is 45:6-7). He then told him, “Don’t try to figure Me out; My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways…”
as high as the heavens are than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). “[the reality is] the words that go forth from My mouth shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and succeeding in the matter for which I sent them” (Is 55:11). Obviously some of the foregoing thoughts are “very troubling” to some of you, because that is simply the way the human heart sees things.

Many believers really struggle in identifying God with “the negatives” in their life; so they exclude them from their theology of God — for them it is simply not possible to associate a loving God with something that is painful and troubling. Apparently it doesn’t matter what Scripture says, if it doesn’t fit their paradigm of thought, they simply won’t accept it; so they pick and choose what they want to believe. It is not at all uncommon to hear Christians say things like, “God had nothing to do with that” (be it cancer or whatever) — since humanistic thinking has its own definition for what is good, many people simply incorporate that definition into their theology. Though Scripture addresses this matter over and over again, some people simply won’t accept it. Since God is the only “eternal” reality, it begets us to defer to Him and not insist that He be what our temporal minds want Him to be. For those of you who really struggle with the presence of sin in the created order, read a study I did on “Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose” (you can find it on my website); it will help shed light on the eternal purposes of God in our world. Incidentally, the worst sin ever committed was “the crucifixion of Christ” — nothing else comes close to that horrific act; yet it was through that godless act that God reconciled us to Himself; “accomplishing the greatest good.” Sin has a diabolical presence in our world; yet “God willed it to exist” for an extremely significant reason (cf. Is 55:8-11). As stated earlier, without understanding that which is eternal, one will never come to understand that which is temporal.

Due to the “religious teaching” that we have pretty much all heard both in the pulpit and on radio and television, these particular perspectives may seem a little too strongly emphasized. So some of you may be saying, “Yes, God is GOD, and there is nothing He can’t do, but I believe He is a far more congenial God than you have made Him out to be.” Should you embrace that line of thinking too strongly, you are giving too much credence to “human thinking” and not enough to “divine thinking” — the reality is, there’s a sense in which God truly is an enigma; someone we are simply not able to get our minds completely around. Since human beings only have a 150 IQ at best (by-the-way, that is a very generous number, even for the most astute among us), their understanding of GOD is extremely remedial; rather then speak of someone who transcends the created order (i.e., who is “infinite”), they speak of someone who is “finite,” thus seriously negating the integrity of their thinking. As believers we should glory in the wonder of God’s transcendent love and majesty, and not satisfy ourselves with a mere humanistic understanding of our Creator. The questions are these — “Is GOD indeed ‘Your Life,’ or is He simply one who comes to your aid when you are in need? Is GOD ‘Your Master,’ or does He simply serve your higher purposes? Are you indeed ‘God’s Servant,’ or do you simply serve yourself in this world?”

Note Some of the various New Testament Passages that Use “Slave” Terminology
(see the next page)
Various New Testament Passages that Use “Slave” Terminology

* A slave is not greater than his master – John 13:16
* Who is the faithful and sensible slave? – Matt 24:45
* Well done, good and faithful servant – Matt 25:23
* Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all – Mark 10:44
* Blessed is that slave whom his master finds so doing when he comes – Luke 12:43
* By your own words I will judge you, you worthless slave – Luke 19:22
* Everyone who practices sin is the slave of sin – John 8:34
* He who was called while a free man, is Christ’s slave – 1 Cor 7:22
* I buffet my body and make it my slave – 1 Cor 9:27
* You are no longer a slave, but a son – Gal 4:7
* You have not received a spirit of slavery, leading to fear again – Rom 8:15
* All creation will one day be set free from its slavery to corruption – Rom 8:21
* It was for freedom that Christ set us free – Gal 5:1
* No longer do I call you slaves… I now call you friends – John 15:15
* As believers we should no longer be slaves to sin – Rom 6:6
* You are slaves of the one you obey – Rom 6:16
* Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness – Rom 6:18
* You formerly presented your members as slaves to lawlessness – Rom 6:19
* You were bought with a price, do not becomes slaves of men – 1 Cor 7:23
* Be slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart – Eph 6:6
* We are servants of God – 2 Cor 6:4
* You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only – Matt 4:10
* No one can serve two masters (i.e., God and mammon) – Matt 6:24
* Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve – Matt 20:28
* We serve in newness of the Spirit, not oldness of the Law – Rom 7:6
* Through love serve one another – Gal 5:13
* If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me – John 12:26
* Serving the Lord with all humility – Acts 20:19
* I am of flesh, sold into bondage to sin – Rom 7:14
* We were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world – Gal 4:3
* Be fervent in spirit, serving the Lord – Rom 12:11
* Employ your gifts in serving one another – 1 Pet 4:10
* Whoever serves, let him do so by the strength which God supplies – 1 Pet 4:11
* Serve the Lord with gladness – Psalm 100:2