THE ECONOMY OF GOD
IN OUR WORLD
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FOREWORD

Let me begin this study by reflecting upon some of the words of A. W. Tozer in his book, “The Pursuit of God.” Tozer was one of the great voices in the Christian world in the twentieth century. In his book he says “quietness of soul” (which is the foundation of what it means to genuinely seek after God) is seldom found in the Christian world today; many have fled their cities to cloistered retreats in the hope of finding this quietness, only to discover their hearts are still restless. Tozer came upon this closer walk with God in the hustle and bustle of the noisy city of Chicago… he never enjoyed the luxury of a cloistered life. In his book he says, “though there is no lack of teachers in the Christian community, there is a serious lack of God’s divine presence in their ministry.” He goes on to say that Milton’s grievous words apply to our day as accurately as it did to his: “The hungry sheep look up, and are not fed.” He goes on to say that though there are millions of Christians who hold “right opinions,” true spiritual worship is seriously lacking. It is a sad commentary that sound Bible exposition more often than not is devoid of any true spiritual nourishment, “for it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself.”

The night before Jesus went to the cross, he said the following in his high-priestly prayer, “This is life eternal, the they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom Thou hast sent” (Jn 17:3). Moses greatly desired to know God better (Ex 33:13, 17-18)… likewise, the life of David was a torrent of spiritual desire (his psalms clearly reveal that)… and Paul confessed that the burning desire of his life was to “know Christ” (Phil 3:10). It is one thing to know about someone, it is quite another to know them personally; conversely, it is also one thing to know someone, but quite another to love someone. Writes Tozer, “I want to encourage this mighty longing after God, because it is the lack of it that has brought us to our present low estate.” Complacency is a deadly foe to spiritual growth… acute desire is essential for experiencing the manifestation of Christ in one’s life. Sadly, the shallowness of our inner experience characterizes the vast majority of Christians in our world today.
INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to define God and give context as to how He functions and operates in our world. The title of the study might be a little misleading to some of you, because the word “economy” in many people’s minds refers to “the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services;” but that is not at all the emphasis what this study is all about. The Greek words translated “economy” is “oikonomia,” which is a derivative of two words: “oikos” (meaning “house”), and “nomos” (meaning “law”) — thus it refers to “the law of the house;” when used of God, it refers to “the law whereby He runs the universe.” So the economy of God is the law by which He administers and manages everything. The reality is this: the economy under which we all live is God’s economy, not man’s — though fallen man seeks to run the world by his own principles (wealth brings security, power is important, and this life is all there is)… little does he know, God is on the throne and superintending everything that transpires in this world. Contrary as to how things may appear to us, we will reap precisely what we have sown. It should be obvious to everyone of us, an infinite, all-knowing, all-powerful God can rearrange the entire cosmos whenever He chooses — God does what He wants.

In the Bible God reveals Himself as a holy, loving, all-powerful, all-knowing being who creates and controls everything that exists. The early theologian Augustine’s interpretation of the Bible was that God upholds creation and established laws that govern everything. Later in church history, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the unchanging God as the primary cause of all things. The reality is this: God transcends the created order and is neither part of it nor constrained by it — thus we can refer to Him as “the Transcendent One.” Obviously, understanding God in all His fullness is not possible — Job 36:26 says that God is infinitely beyond our understanding — being as God is infinite and we are finite, the two are not at all comparable. Yet despite the fact that God is infinite and transcends all creation, He has made many of His traits and attributes understandable to us as finite creatures. Following are some of the chief characteristics of God as seen in Scripture:

- God is Spirit (Jn 4:24)
- God is Holy (Ex 15:11; Is 6:3; 1 Jn 1:5)
- God is Love (1 Jn 4:7-8, 16)
- God is Eternal (Ps 90:2; Jn 1:1-3; Col 1:17)
- God is Omniscient (Ps 147:4-5)
- God is Omnipotent (Eph 1:18-23)
- God is Infinite (1 Tim 1:17; Heb 13:8)
- God is Sovereign (Is 46:9-10; 1 Tim 6:15)
- God is Unchanging (Num 23:19; Mal 3:6)
- God is a Triune God (Mt 3:16-17; 2 Cor 13:14)
• God is the Creator of all things (Jn 1:3; Col 1:16)
• God is the Sustainer of all things (Col 1:17)
• God does all things after the counsel of His will (Eph 1:11)
• Everything exists through God and for God (Rom 11:36; Col 1:16)
• There is only one God (Is 43:10-13; 45:5-7; 46:9)
• God does what He desires (Is 55:11)
• All the nations are as nothing before Him (Is 40:17)
• His wisdom is inscrutable and unsearchable (Is 40:28; Rom 11:33)

With the foregoing in mind, God rules His universe by law; *i.e.*, by His eternal, unchanging standards — our God is an unchanging God (cf. Num 23:19; Mal 3:6; Heb 1:12; 13:8). Nature itself operates under His providential government; the so-called laws of nature merely describe God’s normal way of ordering His universe. There are no rules independent of Him that He is obliged to obey — God is a law unto Himself. So God acts according to His own moral character; *i.e.*, His own absolute perfection. Since His nature is perfect, His actions are perfect; thus God is never arbitrary, whimsical, or capricious. As God’s creatures, we are also required to live according to His moral law, which He has revealed to us in His Word; God’s law is the ultimate standard of righteousness. Human beings never have the authority to set aside His law; we are not autonomous creatures who have the right to live according to our own law. The universe neither exists or operates by its own power; God upholds all things by His power (Col 1:17; Heb 1:3). It is in Him that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Since God is the eternal, sovereign ruler of all things, nothing ever happens beyond the scope of His providential government — He makes the rain to fall and the sun to shine... He raises up kingdoms and brings them down... He numbers the hairs on our head and the days of our lives. In the final analysis, God has a purpose for causing and allowing everything that goes on in our world; there are no blind, impersonal forces at work in human history — all is brought to pass by the invisible divine providence of God. In a universe governed by God there are no chance events — chance does not exist. Though we as His creatures have a will of our own and make things happen, God’s divine providence stands over and above our actions (cf. Ps 37:23; Prv 3:6; 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; Jer 10:23) — God works out His will through the actions of human wills, without violating the freedom of those human wills (cf. Gen 50:20). God’s redemptive providence can work through the most diabolical actions; the worst offense ever committed by human beings was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, yet His death was not only not an accident of history, it was in accord with the counsel of God and purchased our salvation (cf. Eph 1:11; Phil 2:6-8; Jn 3:16; Is 46:10). It is not fortuitous that we refer to that day in history as “Good” Friday, and that we “celebrate” the Lord’s Table (cf. 1 Cor 5:8). Reflect upon the following passages (Dan 4:34-35; Acts 2:22-24; Rom 11:33-36; Job 38:41).

According to Scripture, *God created both man and woman in His image* according to His likeness, and gave them the power and the wisdom and the responsibility to rule over everything that exists on the earth; they were to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth
and subdue it (Gen 1:26-28). So Adam was given the authority to preside over and admin-
istrate the earth’s entire created order so that it would be a beautiful sanctuary for the
people who would inhabit it (Gen 2:15); remember, Adam was immortal; death had not yet
entered into the human family. Furthermore, God had made man a holy creature who
would enjoy intimate fellowship with Him; conversely, God gave him a free will and a
mind capable of weighing choices. God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden;
a garden that possessed both the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and
evil (Gen 2:8-9) — ultimately the test was whether Adam and Eve would obey God or not.
The reality was, God gave man the volitional freedom to either obey Him and serve Him,
or not to obey Him and serve Him. The one restriction that God gave to man was that he
was not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17) — man ultimately
decided that his own thinking on the matter was superior to that of his Creator; that it was
better for him to eat of the forbidden fruit, in spite of the warning that he would die (Gen
2:17). One could argue that the ramifications of disobedience were not fully understood;
obviously they didn’t have a knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:16-17), so death must have
been a somewhat vague issue in their minds. It was Satan’s counterfeit plan that caused
Eve to question God’s restriction and offer a false hope that if she ate the forbidden fruit
she would be like God (Gen 3:1-6). One can almost hear the debate that must have gone on
in her mind: “Why would God forbid me to eat the fruit that is so beautiful to my eyes?
Surely He wouldn’t withhold something of such great desire from me?” Such rationaliz-
ing quickly overshadowed God’s command in her mind; so having justified what she was
about to do, she took the forbidden fruit and ate it. Again, it was human thinking that
ventured into the unknown… which is not at all atypical for any of us as human beings;
we frequently find a way to rationalize to the contrary.

The principle idea behind the concept of “death” in the New Testament language
of Greek (thanatos) is that of the separation of the soul (the spiritual part of man) from
the body (the material part of man) (cf. Jn 11:13; Heb 2:15; 5:7; 7:23). Thus man is not just a
physical creature, he is also a spiritual creature; remember, God is spirit (cf. Gen 1:2; 6:3;
Job 33:4; Ps 139:7; Jn 4:24; Col 1:15-16; 1 Tim 1:17), and we are created in His image (Gen
1:26). Our physical bodies are nothing but “earthly tents” that will one day be replaced with “im-
mortal heavenly dwellings” (2 Cor 5:1-6; 1 Cor 15:53; Heb 9:11); so rather than having “earthly
bodies,” we will be given “heavenly bodies.” The Hebrew word for “death” (mavet)
frequently occurs in Scripture as an antonym of “life” (hayyim: Deut 30:19) — unbelieving
man is “spiritually dead” because of his sin, but God being rich in mercy forgives him
and makes him “spiritually alive” when he places his trust or faith in Christ (cf. Eph
2:1-5; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8; Col 2:13). Death always involves separation — when Adam and Eve sinned
they immediately experienced spiritual separation from God (i.e., they were no longer
spiritually alive); in addition to that, they immediately began to experience the decaying
process of their bodies that ultimately resulted in physical death (Gen 5:5; Rom 5:12; 8:19-23).
The resultant curse of God upon the entire created order brought about the condition of
entropy (i.e., the second law of thermodynamics). The idea of “death / separation”
covers a number of aspects — there’s separation from God… separation from the world
in which one has lived… *separation* from one’s family and friends… *separation* from one’s body… *separation* from the life God to which God had called one as a believer… *separation* from one’s earthly existence… *eternal separation* from either the believing community or the unbelieving community… and *eternal separation* from the temporal realm and life as we know it. With the idea of separation in mind, death means one has completed his own preparation for his eternal destiny; life in the created realm has come to an end for him. So *physical death* brings about the natural end of human life on earth, and is a part of God’s judgment on fallen man (Gen 2:17). The *Fall* affected every human being (resulting in depravity and death), and it will always be the darkest hour of human history; yet as incredible as it may seem to you, where sin abounded, grace much more abounds — *the one who does the will of God abides forever* (Rom 5:20; 1 Jn 2:17). The most amazing thing for us as fallen creatures is that we can experience forgiveness and have intimate fellowship with God restored. Every believer has been delivered from *spiritual death* and made *spiritually alive* through the cross of Christ (cf. Rom 6:23; Eph 2:1-5), and has an *eternal home* awaiting him in heaven (cf. Mt 25:21, 34; Jn 3:16; 14:1-3). You’ll notice I have italicized, *emboldened* and *underlined* a number of words and phrases throughout this study… this was done to *give emphasis* to the various words and thoughts expressed, as well as to *give context* of what is being stated—in addition to that I have listed a number of *Scripture references* to help give definition to the various concepts expressed… so by all means take the time to read them.

**THE FALLEN NATURE OF MAN**

The wisdom of the ancient Greek world was summed up with this inscription: “*Know thyself.*” The 18th century English poet Alexander Pope later phrased it, “*the chief study of mankind is man;*” that is, man’s wisdom consists in the accuracy and depth of self-knowledge. The truth is, knowledge of oneself involves a corresponding knowledge of the God who made us — apart from God we cannot rightly know ourselves. That is why the neoorthodox theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said in his book *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, “Man has always been his own most vexing problem.” This renowned professor at New York’s Union Theological Seminary struggled through his entire life with the question, “*How shall he think of himself?*” It is the biblical perspective of the very make-up of the *inner core of man* that gives definition as to how he must view himself. The great American preacher James Montgomery Boice states in his book *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, “*In the modern world… man is viewed as essentially flesh or matter rather than mind or spirit; that is to say that the entire universe, including man, is mechanistic… that there is nothing apart from matter… that there is no universal mind or higher reason that gives form and direction to human life… Man is an animal — that is the argument — and an animal is only an exceedingly complex machine*” (pp. 191-192). Boice goes on to remind us what Scripture says — that we are more than matter… that we are creatures made in God’s image with the goal of being His companions… yet we have lost that image, and the bond that should exist between ourselves and our
Creator has been broken. Therefore if we are going to understand who we truly are, we must begin with the Bible’s analysis of the Fall of man: for there we see not only what man was intended to be, but also what he has unfortunately become because of sin.

According to Scripture, God placed man and woman in the Garden of Eden to rule the earth for Him (Gen 1:28), with only one restriction — they were not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 2:15-17). When they began to doubt the good will of God and His truthfulness, they chose to partake of the forbidden fruit in deliberate disobedience; as such, they lost their perfect estate and died both spiritually and physically. Ultimately Adam & Eve thought they knew what was better for themselves than God did; thus pride ruled in their soul. They were convinced by their own empirical observation that the tree would actually be good for them, and that God was mistaken. So man repeated the original sin of Satan, saying in effect, “I will cast off God’s rule. I am too great to be bound by it. I shall declare myself autonomous, and be like the Most High” (cf. Is 14:14). Pride underlies the problem of the human race; it is the root of every single vice. C. S. Lewis writes in his book “Mere Christianity” — “It makes us all want to be more than we are or can be and, consequently, causes us to fall short of the great destiny for which we were created” (p. 94). Thus, we did not improve our position or our condition… instead we completely destroyed it… and our only hope according to Scripture is the mercy and grace of God. Without a knowledge of our pride we will never come to know God in His greatness or experience His healing. When we suffer physically from some condition, we go to a doctor to get it taken care of… likewise, when we suffer spiritually, we go to God and accept His cure. If we think we are well (when we are not) we will never accept God’s cure, because we don’t think we need it. The reality is, it is by God’s grace that we become aware of our sickness (our fallen condition). Scripture describes the magnitude of our problem: our human nature is not just slightly flawed, we are dead spiritually; i.e., we have no relationship with our Creator; we are in a state of alienation from God (cf. Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:1-3; Col 1:21). Remember God said to Adam: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19; 2:7; Ecc 12:7). The tragedy of the human race is clearly evident to anyone who will simply take a serious look at our fallen world — it is filled with hatred, war, suffering, death, immorality, selfishness, covetousness, arrogance, dishonesty, cheating, lying, lust, profanity, and every other expression of ungodliness. God made man in His image (absolutely perfect), but man destroyed himself by demanding autonomy and rejecting God’s authority over his life: it is the “proud heart” that believes the lie that he is just fine the way he is (i.e., that he is not a totally fallen creature whose destiny is hell — cf. Mt 5:22; 10:28; 25:31-40; 25:41-46; Gal 6:8; Rev 20:11-15). If you really feel you are fine the way you are, wait until you’re a hundred years old and you’ve experienced the death of loved ones, as well as trouble in your little world, and you are now on your death bed — your thinking then will be radically different than it is now in your reasonably healthy state (by the way, you are reasonably healthy now simply because God has been merciful to you; cf. Jam 1:17); the problem is, your autonomy caused you to “exchange the truth of God for a lie, wherein you exalted yourself rather than your Creator” (cf. Rom 1:25).
long awaited Messiah, Jesus, expressed it this way in His high priestly prayer before His disciples the night before He went to the cross: “This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (cf. Jn 17:3; Jn 3:16). The reality is, outside of Christ one’s eternity is completely dark.

THE ISSUE OF BELIEVING

Throughout history believing in God and placing one’s trust / faith in God, has always been the means whereby one experiences God’s salvation; be it in the Old Testament or the New Testament (cf. Ps 37:3-5, 23-24, 39; 40:4; 62:1-2; Prv 3:5-6; Is 26:4; Mic 6:8 and Jn 3:16, 36; 6:47; 11:25-26; Acts 10:43; Rom 1:16; 1 Jn 5:1, 13) — the Old Testament uses the word “trust” (batach), whereas the New Testament uses the word faith” (pistis) — in a sense, the two words are synonymous; keep in mind, Hebrew is a picture language, thus it is good for telling stories, poetry, and giving a historical account of things; whereas Greek is a very exacting language, thus it is an extremely good language for describing reality and teaching doctrine. It is important to remember that God is the author of all languages (cf. Gen 11:1-9). The Hebrew word for “trust” means “to place all of your weight on something; to lean on it fully” (cf. Prv 3:5-6); conversely, the Greek word for “faith” means “to be firmly persuaded and have confidence in something” — thus faith is a firm conviction regarding God’s revelation and divine truth (cf. Jn 1:12; Rom 5:1; 2 Cor 5:7; Eph 2:8; 2 Thess 2:10-13; Heb 11:1). Though many people give mental assent to the existence of God, such an intellectual position involves no commitment by them, and doesn’t result in a transformed life. It is not enough to simply believe in the existence of God; though that is an essential part of faith, in and of itself it is not sufficient… as James states, “even the demons believe and shudder” (Jam 2:19), but they do not surrender their lives to His Lordship. When a person truly believes in God, he places his trust in Him as his Lord (i.e., Master) and Savior, and he obeys Him — “faith without obedience and submission is worthless” (cf. Jam 2:20; Deut 28:1; 28:15; Jer 7:23-24; 26:13; Jn 3:36; Rom 6:16); so genuine faith is not just a matter of intellectually accepting some theological proposition, it involves one’s heart and expresses itself outwardly in a changed life. Sadly, it is just such a disingenuous faith that characterizes the majority of those in the Christian world today; they hold to a few basic truths intellectually, but have no relationship whatsoever with the God they profess to believe in. True faith is a matter of trusting God for one’s salvation, and making Him the Lord (Master) of one’s life; so trust not only involves the mind, it also involves the will. Saving faith involves loving the truth of the gospel and the desire to live it out; though no one lives it out perfectly, the believer lives it out in a way that the unbeliever does not. So only when one truly believes does his faith become efficacious in his life — with that in mind, salvation is a dynamic reality, not just a forensic one. Perhaps one could compare the Christian life to a baseball player who never throws in the towel or gives up (because his coach is constantly working with him and encouraging him); thus he never stops working at improving his game. That pretty much describes our lives as genuine believers. It should be noted, only a few ballplayers make it to the major leagues; the
vast majority are in the minor leagues. Furthermore, only a very few ballplayers have a “300 batting average” (that is extremely rare — only one player on an entire team might be a “300” hitter; the vast majority of players only bat about “250”) — incidentally, that means the best ball-players in the world only get a hit one-third of the time… none of them come close to “battling 1,000!” One could apply those numbers to the believing community — none of us come close to “battling 1,000” in life; that won't happen until we are glorified in heaven. One could probably say, the best of us get a hit one out of every three times at bat, and the worst of us get a hit one out of every five times at bat; obviously there is no room for pride among any of us. Should you be proud of your “300 batting average,” keep in mind you strike out two-thirds of the time. 😊

The questions that often arise in people's minds are these: “I don’t think I’m that bad, so why do I need a Savior?” “How do I know that the Bible is true?” “Where is the unequivocal evidence that supports its claims?” “How do I know that Jesus Christ is God incarnate; that He really is who He says He is?” “Obviously Jesus was a nice guy, but isn’t claiming to be God a little much?” “How can I be sure that Jesus' claims are indeed true?” Obviously the questions go on and on… thus it is popular for many to claim that the salvation referred to in Scripture requires “a leap of faith.” But that does not coincide with what Scripture teaches. Such thinking was the product of the famous Danish philosopher, theologian and poet, “Soren Kierkegaard” (1813-1855); essentially he taught that “a leap to faith involved believing something that cannot be proved; thus it requires a significant leap of faith.” Again, that is completely contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Sadly, many in the Christian community embrace just such thinking — they are simply “hoping” that what they are believing is true… incidentally, that kind of faith is grounded more in their compliance with what Scripture (God) asks of them (hence, it makes the Christian faith more meritorious and less grace centered; i.e., more man centered and less God centered), than it is in what God has done for them and is doing in them. Obviously the more meritorious one's actions are, the better one may feel about oneself; thus those who believe in a leap of faith endorse the idea of working together with their friends and helping meet the needs of others through their mutual friendship and acts of kindness; so in that sense, the church becomes more of a social organization than a Christ-centered community that fully depends upon the presence of God in their lives. Incidentally, it is estimated that only about a third of the entire Christian world are truly Born-again Christians — those who are not, simply embrace those religious tenants that seem agreeable to them; it was the same in ancient Israel — though the majority of Jews participated in the ceremonial aspects of the faith, only a few were truly God-centered in their worship; that’s why they crucified Christ. The faith of the ancient Jewish world will become far clearer later in this study.

Let me expand upon the foregoing and give context to the Christian world here in our country. By the beginning of the 20th century the Enlightenment in Europe (Germany in particular) had impacted Christian thinking here in America, and gave birth to liberal theology. The Enlightenment emphasized “the all-sufficiency of human reason,” thus
liberal theology gave precedence to human thought over divine thought; that is, it rejected the doctrine that Scripture is infallible — instead, it held the position that though Scripture contains truth, not everything in it is truth… thus liberal theology denies that which is supernatural — it denies the deity of Christ, the atonement, miracles, prophesy and creationism (it embraces evolutionism). Liberal theology simply looks for the hidden truths that they believe Scripture contains, all the while denying that every single word of it is true; in other words it picks and chooses what it wants to believe; in short, it basically reduces the Christian faith to religious truths & moral values that they find acceptable. It was just such thinking that ultimately brought into question much of what the Bible really teaches.

According to Scripture, God is holy (cf. Lev 11:44; 19:2; Is 6:3; 1 Pet 1:16) and God is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8, 16; Ps 136:1-26); both are extremely significant doctrines. The problem is, people have a tendency to overemphasize one at the expense of the other — which is precisely what occurred in the Christian world here in America during the twentieth century. Due to the assault by the liberal world on the “moral standards of Scripture,” the issue of “holiness” became a more significant issue than “love” in most Bible-believing churches (i.e., those churches that embraced what Scripture teaches). The problem with embracing “holiness” at the expense of “love,” is that it results in egotistical pride, sternness and hardness, and essentially embraces this line of thinking: “Come what may, we are not going to compromise the righteous standards of Scripture!” As Francis Schaeffer stated in his book, The Great Evangelical Disaster: “Whenever it becomes necessary to draw a line in the defense of a central Christian truth it is so easy to be proud, to be hard…and to be self-righteous.” The holiness of God and the love of God are actually two sides of the same coin… you can’t overemphasize one at the expense of the other; yet that is precisely what the majority of the Christian world did during the 20th century — they overemphasized holiness. Because that line of thinking prevailed in much of the Christian world back then, there was too strong an emphasis on holiness (harshness) and not enough emphasis on love (gentleness and empathy). Think about it, if God gave greater emphasis to being holy vs. being loving, what kind of impact would that have had upon us as His children? Obviously, we would have developed a tough-minded approach as to the demands of God; thus we would have been riddled with guilt because of our inability to meet those demands, which would have caused us to despair… either that, or we would have had to lower the standards to relative goodness, so that we would have felt reasonably good about ourselves (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18).

Remember, the premiere command of God to the human family is that “we love God and love other people” (cf. Deut 6:5; Mt 22:36-39); not that we be holy. So believers need to love each other. Reflect upon Paul’s words: “If you have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if you have enough faith to move mountains, and give all your possessions to the poor, but have not love, you have nothing!” (1 Cor 13:3). Love is the only dynamic that effectuates a significant change in anyone’s life; just as Christ’s love transforms us as His children, so also does His love working through us effectuate a
change in other people’s lives (cf. Jn 15:12-17; Gal 5:6, 13, 22; Eph 4:16; Col 1:4; 1 Thes 1:3; 1 Tim 1:5; Heb 10:24; 1 Jn 3:18; 4:10, 19). Keep in mind Christian love is unselfish, patient, humble, tolerant, understanding, accepting, giving, and “covers a multitude of sins” (cf. 1 Pet 4:8; Ps 103:10). Hear me out—I am not berating the Christian community that existed in our country during the 20th century; due to the cultural attack by the liberal element of Christianity, many Bible believing churches simply focused on those behavioral issues that liberal theologians did not agree with (no smoking, drinking, playing cards, going to movies, gambling, swearing, wearing make-up, dressing provocatively, working on Sundays, hanging out with non-Christians, etc.)… as such, “holiness” took center stage in most Bible-believing churches… and liberal theologians continued to hammer away at them. It was this theological battle between the unbiblical liberal and the biblical conservative that gave emphasis to what was taught in many churches; therefore “holiness” was front and center in the minds of most Bible-believing Christians. By the way, it was the same thing in ancient Israel—they focused on external obedience to the Law, and dismissed the loving issues of the heart.

THE ISSUE OF “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 that “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 (Rom 1:28). It should be pretty evident, you cannot successfully argue the integrity of divine truth with a proud fool, because depraved minds are completely blind to the truth—as 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 brash statements that border on lunacy, while those with half a wit have tried to express 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 that we need to stop pretending to be the genius’ of the world.” Albert Einstein stated it this way—“The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation… His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all 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 cosmological professor at Cornell University) have loudly spouted off that “God doesn’t exist, because the universe has always existed!” With his depraved mind Sagan made a brash assumption that the universe has always
exists (sadly, that was the scientific assumption by many just a few years ago). His argument was this: “if the universe has always existed then it was ‘not created’ as the religious element claims”… yet just a short while later the entire scientific community confessed that “they were wrong,” that the universe is actually in a state of decline (i.e., it is dying); hence it has not always existed, or by definition it would be completely dead. By measuring the decline, science concluded that the universe exploded into existence 13.8 billion years ago; they refer to this explosion 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. According to Scripture, King Solomon was the wisest man who ever lived or ever would live (read I Kg 3:7-12); listen to what he 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 those in Scripture, does it not affect your thinking? Or do you arrogantly look at it as a bunch of ancient gibberish? Does it not give definition to this silly world in which we live? The ancient Greeks had a word for “the juvenile thinking of our world” — it was the word “sophomore;” a compound word that literally meant “wise fool” (sophos, meaning wise; moros, meaning foolish; from which we get our word “moron”); inherent in this word is the idea that “a little bit of knowledge can be 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 educational years when young people start to enter the world of knowledge on a deeper level… as you might recall, many kids when they are about fifteen years old actually think they are now smarter than their dad is! 😊

*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 cosmology. Incidentally, there is another “hot button issue” on the table in our world today — it is the issue of “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 all around the world 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 actually 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 80s the scientific world believed that “ulcers” were caused by worrying; that people simply needed to stop worrying (that was the primary emphasis of psychologists)... sadly, many people had to identify with their thinking in public… a few years later, however, a scientist with half a wit argued against that idea and was publicly criticized for his thinking by “the know-it-alls.” He said ulcers were not caused by worry but by some “bacteria” 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 one — that year he won “the Nobel Prize!” Keep in mind, this occurred in what we call “the genius century:” i.e., the 20th century! As Einstein stated over and over again, “We need to stop deceiving people by claiming to be brilliant, because we are 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 arrogant humanistic bias that actually hates divine truth; it is simply what their depraved minds want to believe. The problem is “arrogant man is easily deceived” — he hears something, and if it finds acceptance in his mind (i.e., his fallen mind), he embraces it, in spite of the fact that the integrity of his thinking is seriously lacking; in short, he is too quick to believe something — he is deceived (cf. Gen 3:13; Deut 11:16; Is 44:20; Jer 17:9; 49:16; Gal 6:3, 7; Col 2:8; Heb 3:13). I find it interesting, “the first temptation in the Garden of Eden was to be as God in knowledge” (Gen 3:5). Lord willing, that is not the altar at which any of you worship. Regarding this “cause and effect universe” in which we live, I expand on that subject in far greater detail in a study I did titled, “Enslaved to Christ;” should you care to read it, you can access it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

Reflect with me for a moment on the wisdom espoused by some of the most reputable people down through the centuries — the thirteenth century English Franciscan philosopher and scientist Roger Bacon said in his work “Opus Maius” (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 far greater… he is out of his mind who extols himself in regard to his own knowledge.” Likewise said 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 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 arrogantly claim to be so brilliant; it is the claim that makes us “fools!” As the Indian theologian Kahlil Gibran states in his book, “The Voice of the Master” (1958), “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?” Josh Billings said in his book, “Proverbial Philosophy of Wit and 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.” The apostle Paul stated it this way: “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 that had been offered to idols was not contaminated in some way, he told the knowledgeable Christians not to flaunt their enlightened point of view, and glory in their wisdom. Such
believers missed the point — they should have “loved” their fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, rather than boast of their own knowledge; the reality is, “only love edifies” (cf. 1 Cor 8:1). Paul followed up his argument by saying: “If one thinks he is smart, he does not yet know things as he ought… 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 that you love others (cf. Deut 10:12; Mic 6:8; Jn 13:34).

**THE FOUNDATION OF GENUINE FAITH**

The teachings of Scripture are troubling and perplexing to many people, because they are not able to reconcile what it teaches with their own personal perceptions of reality. That is not at all uncommon in our postmodern world — as the British writer G. K. Chesterton stated back in 1908, postmodernism hijacked the word “arrogance” and made it refer to conviction, and the word “humility” and made it refer to doubt; yet such deductions are completely contrary to divine truth. Chesterton states in his book *Orthodoxy* (1957; pp. 31-32) that man was meant to be **doubtful about himself**, but **not doubtful about the truth** — since these truths have been completely reversed, man is inclined to assert what he ought not assert — **himself**… and doubt what he ought not doubt — **divine truth**. So when man is confronted with **human thinking** and **divine thinking**, he has a choice to make when the two constructs of thought are in disagreement with each other — will he arrogantly embrace human thinking, or will he humbly embrace divine thinking? Carefully reflect upon that statement — when God's Word differs from your thinking, how do you handle that? Do you simply ignore it, or do you seek to justify the two positions? For instance, Scripture says that **“we are sinners”** (cf. Rom 3:23; 1 Tim 1:15), and that **“nothing good dwells in us”** (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18) — if those are difficult constructs of thought for you, you need to study the subjects as they are stated in Scripture; once you do, you will discover that those two constructs are indeed true. If you fail to consider the integrity of those statements, you will simply let your proud fallen mind dictate reality — obviously for one to quickly and recklessly pass judgment on divine truth is foolish; but that characterizes the majority of people in our world… they are highly reactionary and juvenile in their thinking.

You'll notice, there's something in the human heart that “hates” to deal with the negative issues that characterize who they really are; some people actually justify their thinking on that matter. There are those who **attack the messenger** when they don't like the message — that happened over and over again throughout history in Scripture; **the people of Israel frequently attacked God's prophets** (His spokesmen) because they hated their message (keep in mind, all the prophets were doing was sharing what God told them to share; yet they hated the prophets; cf. Jer 37-38). Jesus said, “A prophet is not welcomed in his home town; they will not honor him” (cf. Mt 13:57; Lk 4:24). Though most often a person is better
received at home than elsewhere, if he enjoys an elevated position, the reverse is true. Why is that? The more familiar a person is with someone, the less admiration they will have for him... people are more inclined to honor the esteemed in society if they don't know them personally, but knowing someone personally removes the adoration and the awe of fame. Obviously if the people of Nazareth didn't honor God's Son (Jesus), how in the world can we expect anything different? The reality is, all men are really equal; there really aren't any so-called “celebrities” in our world — we are all fallen creatures who put on our pants the same way; yet we have a tendency to idolize famous people we don't even know, as if they are truly of another stripe. According to Scripture, it is the proud people in our world who are the diabolical fools — little do they know, God is one day going to expose them for who they really are (that they are a people who have arrogantly embraced untruth) — and He will humble them before the entire created order (cf. Is 14:12-27; Mt 12:36; 16:27; Rom 3:19; 14:12; Jude 1:6; Rev 2: 23; 20:11-15). Can you imagine what it would be like “to be a fool who is stripped naked before all creation, and exposed for who he truly is, with nothing being concealed?” (cf. Is 14:16ff).

Should you struggle with what I have written in this study, keep in mind I am simply sharing with you what God's Word says; it is not just the thinking or the opinion of some wackoo who has lost his mind. Granted, it is easy for one to question the integrity of it, especially if one knows me personally. The reality is, when we know someone personally and read something they have written, generally our appreciation for what they have written won't be nearly as great as the appreciation someone has for the writings of a person they do not know personally — that's just the way the human family functions in this world. With that in mind, let me encourage you to reflect upon what I have written in isolation; i.e., just contemplate the thoughts themselves, and not insist on identifying those thoughts with me, because that will only lessen the integrity of what I have written to your mind. Beloved, if this indeed is the word of the Lord, you would do well to listen. Perhaps I could state it this way — “If there is indeed genuine substance to what I have written, then don’t simply think of it as feeble-minded bias or emotional rhetoric.”

Obviously from a human perspective it could either be divinely inspired, or nothing but human nonsense. So if you can let what I have written stand on its own (i.e., not associate it with me personally), that would be the most beneficial way to read it (if indeed there is substance to what I have written); but should you read it with me as its author in mind every step of the way, the integrity of the message will be lacking... so, to glean the most from what is written in this study, focus on what is written, not on who wrote it. In short, can you “listen” to what I have written without arguing against the integrity of it? Now with the foregoing in mind...

Let’s look at this matter of “humility” in more depth — Vernon Grounds states in the Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible that “Humility is the spontaneous recognition of the creature’s absolute dependence on his Creator... that humility is the logical corollary of sin-consciousness” (Volume 3, pp. 222-223). Stuart Scott stated it this way in his book From Pride to Humility, “When someone is humble they are focused
on God and others, not self” (cf. 2 Cor 5:15). And **C. J. Mahaney** in his book Humility: True Greatness, said “Humility is honestly assessing ourselves in light of God’s holiness and our sinfulness…without an honest awareness of both of these realities…we will fail to understand or practice true humility.” **Thomas Jones** says in the introduction to his book The Prideful Soul, “If there is anything God wants to call to our attention and have us think about, it is humility.” The 19th century Dutch Reformed leader **Andrew Murray** called humility “the cardinal virtue” and “the only root from which the graces grow;” so it is the one attitude of the heart and mind with which we must be most concerned about (no quality of the heart is more important to God than humility). The apostle Paul says, “We are not to be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rom 12:2) — this shows us that humility and pride are matters of how we think before God; pride & humility are patterns of thought: whereas proud thinking is at the root of all relational conflicts, humble thinking is the foundation of all loving relationships. The problem with man is that pride is endemic to the fallen human heart. One of the great preachers of our day, **John Piper**, in an article on humility identifies five truths about humility found in Scripture —

1. **Humility begins with a sense of subordination to God** (cf. Jam 4:7; 1 Pet 5:6).
2. **Humility does not feel it deserves better treatment than Jesus got** (cf. Jn 15:20).
3. **Humility asserts truth not to bolster one’s ego, but as service to Christ** (cf. 2 Cor 4:5).
4. **Humility knows it is dependent on grace for knowing truth** (cf. 1 Cor 4:7; Jam 1:21).
5. **Humility knows he is fallible and limited in knowledge** (cf. 1 Cor 13:12; Prv 12:15).

The first definition of “humble” in the Oxford English Dictionary is “Having a low estimate of one’s importance, worthiness, or merits.” In the Greek language of the New Testament, the word “humble” refers to something that is low, or made low; thus it means to acknowledge that we are lower than God, and such is expressed by a state of voluntary submission to His will. So godly humility starts when we see things as they really are (not how we want them to be), and realize that God is the Creator of all things and the standard by which everything is measured and evaluated. Because humility is always measured in terms of submission to God’s will, the clearest indicator of true humility is a person’s obedience to God. The humble person lovingly and honestly obeys God, unlike the Pharisees who simply made a proud show of obeying God; they omitted important parts of the Law such as love, mercy and justice (cf. Mt 6:1-6, 16, 18; 23:5, 23; 2 Cor 5:12). In contrast to humility “pride” is almost always an attitude of self-sufficiency, independence, and self-righteousness; **C. S. Lewis** called it “the Great Sin.” Pride is basically at the heart of all sin (cf. Ps 10:4; Prv 8:13; 16:5). Nothing comes to us more naturally than pride; our instinct is to think first of ourselves… so it not surprising that humility is rare, because it does not come naturally. The biblical story of the Prodigal Son (cf. Lk 15:11-24) helps give definition to this matter of pride — the Prodigal struggled greatly with pride; his focus was strictly on himself and what he wanted… ultimately, his waywardness cost him everything owned… in his humiliation he actually fed upon the food that was being given to swine (which is very reminiscent of what Nebuchad-
nezzar was forced to do because of his pride—cf. Dan 4:30-33)—when the Prodigal Son humbly came to his senses, he genuinely acknowledged the fullness of his sin to his father—in so doing, he was fully restored to his father’s good will.

The deeper reality is this: “There is a God, and we are not Him;” man’s problems stem from the fact that he wants to be like God, but man is not God (cf. Gen 3:5; Is 14:14). You might want to contemplate some of the questions that God asked Job (cf. 38:4; 38:12; 38:35; 39:26); as well as Job’s response (cf. Job 40:4-5). The most important truth any of us can ever know is that there is a God, but we are not Him—we are creatures, not the Creator. The humility of Jesus should speak volumes to our hearts: early in His ministry Jesus said to the people of Israel, “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (cf. Mt 11:28). “Jesus emptied Himself of His glorious nature, and entered into human history in the likeness of man…and humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross” (Phil 2:6-8). The reality is, Jesus voluntarily became totally dependent on God the Father. He said his food was to “do the will of Him who sent Him and finish His work” (Jn 4:34)…that he could “do nothing by Himself” (Jn 5:30)…that he had “come down from heaven not to do His own will but to do the will of His Father who had sent Him” (Jn 6:38)…He did not speak “of His own initiative, but what His Father who sent Him had commanded Him to speak” (Jn 12:49-50). Again, Jesus was totally dependent and submissive to the will of His Father; no one was ever more dependent on God than Jesus…He was humble in heart and saw His absolute need for God; He did nothing and said nothing apart from His dependence on God; He voluntarily took on a totally subordinate role to the Father. Though He was God truly God, He was man truly man; theologians refer to this as “the hypostatic union” (the union of deity and humanity). Jesus didn’t just “seem” to be human, He was fully human in every way—He had surrendered His omnipresence, His omniscience, and His omnipotence. So Christ’s humanity was like ours; He became a man “for our sake”—like every human being, He sweated, He hungered, He wept, He endured pain, He was tempted, He was mortal, and He was subjected to death…He didn’t walk by sight, He walked by faith (i.e., He trusted completely in the words of God to His heart); He knows full well what it means to “walk by faith” (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). Jesus genuinely took upon Himself our sins and suffered in our place—just as our sins were imparted to Him, so His righteousness was imparted to those of us who have placed our trust in Him (1 Pet 2:24).

Jesus modeled perfect humility for us. He showed humility by “serving others” and not being self-occupied: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a ransom for many” (cf. Mt 20:28; 8:20; 26:28; Lk 22:27; Jn 13:14-16; 2 Cor 8:9; Gal 5:13; Titus 2:14). Thus said Paul, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition, but in humility consider others as more important than yourself…do not simply look out after your own interests, but look out after the interests of others…your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (cf. Phil 2:3-5).
If Madison Avenue was trying to attract people to the Christian life, they would stress its positive and fulfilling aspects... they would speak of Christianity as a way to wholeness of life and all happiness. Regrettably, that kind of thinking has prevailed in much of the Christian world... so much so that we are almost shocked when we learn that the first great principle of Christianity is negative. It is the Lord Jesus Himself who said, “If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me; for whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?” (cf. Mt 16:24-26) — we are to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow Christ (cf. Lk 9:23)...

taking up the cross is linked to a denial of self. Jesus then goes on to say, “Whoever of you who do not renounce all that he has cannot be My disciple” (Lk 14:33)... “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains by itself alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit... He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life” (Jn 12:24-25); the words “alone” and “much fruit” are emphatic in Greek. This passage is the heart of Jesus’ message to us as His children — “we are not our own, we have been bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:19-20); let us therefore live for Him and die for Him... let His wisdom rule in our souls. The denial of self means being willing to say no to anything that is contrary to God’s will for our lives. This seeming paradox is at the very heart of the Christian life — we must die to self in order to live to God; obviously this is a difficult task for all of us as God’s children. Augustine said the following when he became a believer —

“There were now two wills battling it out inside me, one old, one new; one carnal, one spiritual; and in the conflict they ripped my soul to pieces... when I did things that I knew were wrong I did not act willingly, but just endured them; but habit had been reinforced by that part of my will that had deserted to the enemy, so it was by my own will that I found myself in a spot I didn’t want to be in... Messed-up creature that I was, who was there to rescue this doomed body? God alone through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Sherwood Eliot Wirt, “Love Song: Augustine’s Confessions for Modern Man; Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 108-109).

Augustine’s words are a classic statement of the divided will and of the difficulty of surrendering that will to God. On the other hand, Thomas a Kempis in his work “The Imitation of Christ” provides us with a classic statement of the blessing that one experiences when one denies oneself for Christ: “O Lord, Thou knowest what is the better way; let this or that be done as Thou shalt please... Do with me as Thou knowest, and as best pleaseth Thee... I would rather be poor for Thee, than rich without Thee... where Thou art there is heaven, and where Thou art not, there is death and hell” (Moody, 1958, p. 125, 213). According to the late James Montgomery Boice, we know we have died to self when we have stopped complaining and stopped murmuring. Said the apostle Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who lives, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and
“gave Himself for me” (cf. Gal 2:20). When we die to ourselves we bear much fruit; thus humility paves the way for God to use us powerfully.

*Jesus’ life clearly defines what “humility” really looks like* — you may need to re-read that last paragraph again to appreciate the fullness of its significance. The reality is, there is no true humility that is not rooted in a relationship with God — people who do not focus on God cannot be truly and thoroughly humble. Unless a person consistently stands in awe of God, his humility will be shallow and easily replaced by pride. The warning given to the people of ancient Israel is still needed today: “Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God… that you not become proud and forget the Lord your God” (cf. Deut 8:11-14). As Thomas Jones says, “Humility is an absolute requirement for the entire journey.” Andrew Murray reminds us, “we can never have more true faith than we have humility.” A revitalized faith always starts with a humble and contrite heart before God (cf. Ps 51:17; Is 66:2; Lk 18:13-14). All humble people know there is a great God; they know they are not that God, and they know they desperately need that God… as such, the humble are frequently on their knees before Him. The reality is, humility profoundly impacts one’s spirituality, because it leads one to obey God and surrender to His purposes, plans and providence in life (cf. Ps 18:27; 138:6). The humble man is confident that God’s way is better, and he surrenders his will to God (cf. Mt 6:10; Lk 22:42; Acts 21:14).

It’s interesting to note that *God places things in our lives to keep us humble* — spiritually minded people can very easily be tempted with pride, thus they are often given thorns in the flesh (2 Cor 12:7). You might want to reflect upon those things in your life that are very humbling to you (your body, your looks, your weaknesses, your lack of acceptance by others, rejection, failure, relational issues, physical issues, your skill set, etc.); do you struggle with seeing the positive side of them? Are you grateful for them? (cf. 2 Cor 12:8-10). Consider the man Joseph — he brought a bad report to his father Jacob about his brothers (Gen 37:2)… he tattled on his older brothers, the sons of slave women (not proper wives)… his father loved Joseph more than any of his other brothers; therefore they hated him (Gen 37:3-4)… he had a dream and told it to his brothers, and they hated him all the more (Gen 37:5)… he had another dream that really exalted himself and told it to his brothers, and they hated him exceedingly (Gen 37:9). His brothers had become so angry with him that they sold him into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37:27-28). When in Egypt Joseph was falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar’s wife and ended up being imprisoned — through it all God was humbling the young man in unjust situations, yet training Joseph to trust Him. By the time Joseph became the trusted aide of Pharaoh, he could see how God had been working in everything he had gone through in life. As Joseph’s father Jacob prepared for his own death, he gathered his sons together and gave each of them a prophet blessing… when he finally came to Joseph, he described the qualities that were now in his life that enabled him to learn from God’s humbling hand. Jacob’s comments give us three important insights into Joseph’s life: 1) *He decided to be a man constantly dependent on God* (Gen 49:22)… 2) *He decided to believe in God’s providence* (Gen 50:20);
when we fail to accept God’s humbling work in our lives, bitterness and resentment take over; it's at this point where we must humbly bend the knee before God and defer to His will (obviously that is not an easy matter)… 3) **He made the decision to be confident about the blessings that come from the Almighty** (Gen 49:23-25). Jacob honored his son for recognizing his need for God and allowing God to teach him His ways. God’s active process of humbling us is not to make our lives miserable, but to bless us and make us a blessing to others… we must be able to roll with the punches, confident that God’s blessings will eventually come. Like it or not, God does humble us; He uses the painful circumstances of life to train us… our role in it all is to humbly accept His work in our lives, and understand that it is truly a good work. The reason He allows us to experience many dilemmas and many tensions in life, is to cause us to depend upon Him. Though I have suffered in life on a number of different levels, and have been wrongly treated, betrayed and rejected by some people, I have had to work through all these things with God. The long and short of it is this, our suffering reveals that we are much more “**self-absorbed**” than we ever thought (that is simply what it means to be a fallen creature); nothing confronts us with our true selves like suffering — as Thomas Jones states it in his book, “**It exposes the self-righteousness, arrogance and ingratitude that has been lodging somewhere in the recesses of our hearts. Suffering does not produce these things; it only reveals what is already there.**” The truly humble person will make it through the tests of suffering and be stronger on the other side; though he may struggle and wrestle with God, ultimately he will come back to God in full surrender like Job did (Job 42:1-3).

**THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A HUMBLE HEART**

For those of you who question the significance of a humble heart, and its absolute necessity in experiencing the grace of God in your life… consider what Scripture says regarding its importance — the prerequisite for experiencing God's grace in your life is that you must humble yourself before Him; if you refuse to do so He will mount up in opposition against you (read Jam 4:6 and 1 Pet 5:5) — so either you are for Christ or you are against Christ (read Mt 12:30 and Mk 9:40); either you embrace Christ or you reject Christ. We do not determine the ground rules of life; that is God’s prerogative alone; only the arrogant refuses to “bend the knee and defer to His Creator in life.” Scripture has a lot to say regarding the issue of “**humility**;” carefully consider the following verses —

- **Exodus 10:3** — God said to Pharaoh, “How long will you refuse to humble yourself before Me? Let My people go, that they may serve Me.”
- **Leviticus 16:31** — The Day of Atonement “is to be a sabbath of solemn rest for you, that you may humble your souls; it is a permanent statute.” (cf. Num 29:7)
- **Leviticus 23:27-29** — The Day of Atonement “shall be a holy convocation to you, and you shall humble your souls and present an offering by fire to the LORD… if one will not humble himself on this day he shall be cut off from God’s people.”
• **Numbers 12:3** — The man Moses “was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.”

• **Deut 8:2, 16** — “You shall remember all the way which the LORD your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not… in the wilderness He fed you manna… that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do good for you…

• **Deut 8:14** — “But your heart became proud and you forgot the LORD your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.”

• **II Kings 22:19** — “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I spoke against the inhabitants of this place, and you have torn your clothes and wept before Me, I truly have heard you,” declares the LORD.

• **II Chron 7:14** — “If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and forgive their sin and heal their land.”

• **II Chron 12:6, 7** — “So the princes of Israel and the king humbled themselves and said, ‘The LORD is righteous.’ And when the LORD saw that they humbled themselves… He said He would not destroy them… and not pour out His wrath on Jerusalem.”

• **II Chron 28:19** — “The LORD humbled Judah because of Ahaz king of Israel… for he was very unfaithful to the LORD.”

• **II Chron 32:26** — “Hezekiah humbled the pride of his heart, both he and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that the wrath of the LORD did not come on them.”

• **II Chron 33:12-13** — “When Manasseh was in distress, he entreated the LORD his God and humbled himself greatly before Him… and God heard his supplication… then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.” (Amon did not humble himself as his father did – cf. 33:23).

• **II Chron 34:27** — “Because your heart was tender and you humbled yourself before God… and tore your clothes and wept before Him, the LORD said ‘I truly have heard you.’”

• **II Chron 36:12, 17-19** — “King Zedekiah did evil in the sight of the LORD his God; he did not humble himself before Jeremiah the prophet who spoke for the LORD… therefore the Lord brought up against him the king of the Chaldeans who slew their young men, and destroyed the city and its temple, and took all but the poorest into exile in Babylon.”

• **Ezra 8:21** — The prophet Ezra “proclaimed a fast… that we might humble ourselves before our God to seek from Him a safe journey for us, our little ones, and all our possessions.”

• **Job 22:29** — “The humble person God will save.”

• **Psalm 10:17** — “O LORD, thou hast heard the desire of the humble; Thou wilt strengthen their heart, Though wilt incline Thine ear to them.”

• **Psalm 25:9** — “God leads the humble in justice, and He teaches the humble His way.”

• **Psalm 31:23** — “The Lord preserves the faithful, and fully recompenses the proud doer.”

• **Psalm 34:2** — “My soul shall boast in the LORD; the humble shall hear it and rejoice.”

• **Psalm 37:11** — “The humble will inherit the land, and will delight in abundant prosperity.”

• **Psalm 76:9** — “God arose to judgment to save all the humble of the earth.”

• **Proverbs 11:2** — “When pride comes, then comes dishonor, but with the humble is wisdom.”

• **Proverbs 15:25** — “The LORD will tear down the house of the proud.”

• **Proverbs 16:5** — “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the LORD.”

• **Proverbs 29:23** — “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor.”
• Isaiah 2:12 — “The LORD will have a day of reckoning against every who is proud and lofty.”

• Isaiah 66:2 — “To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My Word.”

• Jeremiah 13:9 — Thus says the LORD, “I will destroy the pride of Judah and the great pride of Jerusalem.”

• Ezekiel 32:11-15 — Thus says the LORD, “The sword of the king of Babylon shall come upon you... I will cause the multitude to fall... they shall devastate the pride of Egypt... and all its multitude shall be destroyed. I will also destroy all its cattle and many waters... and will cause their waters to run like oil. When I make the land of Egypt a desolation... then they shall know that I am the LORD.”

• Daniel 4:37 — “Now I Nebuchadnezzar praise, exalt, and honor the King of heaven, for all His works are true and His ways just, and He is able to humble those who walk in pride.”

• Daniel 10:12 — In a vision Daniel was told, “Do not be afraid, for from the first day that you set your heart on understanding this and on humbling yourself before your God, your words were heard.”

• Hosea 13:6 — The LORD said, “As they had their pasture, they became satisfied, and being satisfied, their heart became proud; therefore they forgot Me.”

• Micah 6:8 — “The LORD has told you, O man, what is good... the LORD requires that you do just, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God.”

• Habakkuk 2:4 — “Behold, as for the proud one, his soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith.”

• Matthew 11:29 — Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and you shall find rest for your souls.”

• Matthew 18:4 — “Whoever humbles himself as a little child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”

• Matthew 23:12 — “Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled, and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.”

• Luke 1:46, 52 — Mary said, “My soul exalts the Lord... He has brought down rulers from their thrones, and has exalted those who were humble.”

• James 4:6 — “God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.” (cf. 1 Pet 5:5)

• James 4:10 — “Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

• I Peter 3:8 — “To sum up, let all be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit.”

• I John 2:16 — “All that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.”

As stated earlier, Jesus is the model of humility — our attitude is to be the same as His (Phil 2:5)... “He humbled Himself and became obedient to death; even death on a cross” (Phil 2:8). When we think of ourselves as lower than God, we will place ourselves in submission to Him and obey Him. Remember, three times Jesus prayed to the Father the night before He went to the cross to “take the cup from Me” (because of the incredible pain He would have to endure); nevertheless He said, “Not My will, but Thine be done” (cf. Matt 26:39, 42, 44). From His example we learn that humility is putting the will of God before our own (cf. Mt 6:10; 1 Jn 5:14). Jesus said, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from
me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Mt 11:29). I find it interesting that the Greco-Roman world in which Jesus and His followers lived extolled strong, self-willed people who pushed their way through life and came out on top — such is not much different today here in the Western world in which we live, in a sense, the proud are the most admired in our culture — how is that for an oxymoron? Though it is not like God’s will is always displeasing to the human heart… but when it is, we are to defer to the will of God. That is the internal war we must fight in our soul — it is a fight between our flesh (the term Scripture uses to define the sinful inner core of man) and the Spirit (the Holy Spirit’s presence in our life); these two entities are nearly always in constant opposition to each other (cf. Gal 5:17; Rom 6:12; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:1-2, 8-11) — though this battle doesn’t go on every waking moment, it is a far more frequent experience then most believers think. I cover this subject in a study I did on “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith;” again you can find it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

Because God is our sovereign Creator, He has absolute authority overHis creation, yet fallen man struggles with that construct of thought — man simply wants to be his own magistrate; he doesn’t want to submit to anyone other than himself; he wants to be his own master. The reality is, man does not have the power or the authority to make life work the way he wants it to work; God never gave him that capacity, and therein is the rub; either he submits to the one who made him, or he reaps accordingly. Remember, this is God’s world, not man’s world… man doesn’t dictate reality, God does; and no matter how obstinate and stubborn man is, nothing is going to change that fact — to insist that reality “not be what it is” simply shows how juvenile fallen man is in his thinking… try though as he may to control reality, he cannot; it is simply not in him to do so. Just take a look at this ugly world in which we live — no matter what our leaders do in this world, they can’t effectuate peace at any level. Why would God let man create a little utopia on this planet, when he ignores and defies his Creator? By the way, even though we live in a world that has gone amuck… contrary to human logic, God is still on the throne; though we may wonder why God tolerates sin and all of its horrific consequences, He is still ruling (cf. 1 Chron 29:11-12; Ps 24:1; 46:10); “God is the King of all the earth” (Ps 47:7). Man’s problem is this — because he is innately proud and can’t reconcile everything with his fallen human mind, he refuses to humble himself and bend the knee before his Creator. Obviously God permits godlessness (sin) for His own higher purposes, knowing that He will one day judge the waywardness (sinfulness) of man; meanwhile, He will not permit man’s diabolical ways (sin) to go beyond the boundaries that He has fixed for it. Though the ugly realities of this world seem to be antithetical to the sovereignty of God from our perspective, they are not from His perspective; what God decrees and permits is always established; carefully reflect upon the following passages in Scripture — cf. Is 14:24; 40:6-8; 40:13-17; 43:10-13; 45:5-7, 22; 46:8-11; 48:17-19; 55:6-11; 66:1-2; Job 23:13; Acts 4:28; Rom 8:28; Eph 1:11. As fallen creatures, we have a difficult time accepting things when they don't mesh with our fallen thinking. Remember, God is infinite and we are finite; to think we can wrap our minds around that which transcends human thought is absurd; that would be like trying to put the entire ocean in a thimble. Though God gives us as His creatures the grace to
understand some things, He obviously doesn’t give us the grace to understand everything. In the following passages I list a number of thoughts expressed by Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived on this planet (bar none) — said God to King Solomon: “Behold, I have given you a wise and discerning heart, so that there has been no one like you before you, nor shall one like you arise after you” (read 1 Kg 3:12 and Ecc 1:17; 3:14; 7:25-26; 8:16-17; 9:1; 11:5-6; Acts 1:7; 1 Cor 13:9-12; Jam 4:13-14). Hopefully you took the time to read the words of Solomon in his work, Ecclesiastes. The Westminster Shorter Catechism describes the decrees of God this way: “His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, He hath foreordained whatsoever comes to pass.” If “the eternality of God” is simply too perplexing a thought for you, let me encourage you to read a couple of studies I have done that help give definition to it — “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith” and “Enslaved to Christ” — you can access these studies on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

As previously stated, the problem with regard to the sovereignty of God from a human perspective, is “man’s basic rebellion against God is seen in his quest for autonomy;” i.e., man doesn’t want a sovereign God ruling over him. You can hear the argument in men’s souls: “Why can’t I just run my own life?” Little does man know, he is so corrupt in his inner core, his proud heart refuses to acknowledge it (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18). The reality is, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, they did not achieve freedom; they fell into bondage because rebellion is sin, and sin is a miserable tyrant. On the other hand, when men and women submit to God, they become truly free and become the unique beings that God created them to be (cf. Jn 8:31-32; Rom 8:2; Gal 5:1). Like most of you, I would like to live in a world where sin didn’t exist, and where only that which is good, loving, joyful, and peaceful existed — in a word, that would be utopia… but that isn’t going to happen until God fully judges sin at the end of the age, and closes the door on it forever, and then makes all things “NEW!” (cf. Is 55:17; 2 Pet 3:13; Rom 8:18-25; Rev 21:1, 5). Again, man’s problem is his unwillingness to accept reality for what it is, and insist that it be what he wants it to be. In a word, God calls the thinking of fallen man “foolishness” — wrote Solomon, “The foolishness of man subverts his way, and his heart rages against the LORD” (cf. Prv 19:3; Ecc 7:25; 10:2; Rom 1:20-22; 1 Cor 1:18; 2:14).

The supreme desire of man is that he “be happy,” but such is not the ongoing experience of any man (be one a believer or an unbeliever); we live in a fallen world, not some glorious little utopia. The reality is, we live in a world where there is conflict and war on nearly every level; be it relational, internal, financial, physical, psychological, political, or national. This world has been under the curse ever since the Fall (cf. Gen 3:14-19; Rom 8:20-22), and is not going to be righted until eternity future when God makes a new heaven and a new earth (Rev 21:1)... meanwhile, we are to place our trust in Him and embrace Him as our Lord (Master) and Savior, and walk through this world as one of His servants. Man’s problem is that he insists on enjoying the fullness of life on this planet, but God's will for man rules that out — He wants man to see himself as He really is (a fallen self-centered creature), and see God for who He really is (the sovereign Creator who made us in His
likeness) — due to the fact we fell, we destroyed our perfection and wandered into the dark. Much to our amazement, however, God entered into human history in the person of Jesus Christ to die for our sins that we might be forgiven and made into brand new creatures (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 2 Cor 5:17; 1 Pet 2:24). Though such love transcends human thought, God makes it a reality in the lives of those who will but humble themselves before Him. Incidentally, our English word “happy” comes from the old Norse word “happ.” The idea behind that word is this: when that which happens to us is pleasant, we are happy: so happiness is a byproduct of pleasant circumstances (it all depends on what “happens” to us); therefore, when life is pleasant we are happy… when life is not pleasant we are not happy. What is disturbing to most people is that “happiness” is not God’s supreme goal for man in this life; the supreme goal for man is to live to the glory of God and experience the joy of the Lord and live for Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:31; Phil 1:21; Col 3:4, 17; 1 Pet 4:11). It’s important to note, though “joy” and “happiness” are synonymous in English, they are not synonymous in Scripture — whereas happiness depends on one’s circumstances, joy does not… joy is an inner gladness that is given to a believer by the Holy Spirit when God’s love for him rules in his heart and he walks in obedience to Christ (cf. Gal 5:22; Ps 16:11; 51:12; Ecc 2:26; Is 35:10; 44:21-23; Jer 15:16; Lk 2:10; Jn 15:11; Rom 15:13; Jam 1:2). Though our eternal state in heaven is going to be glorious bliss, such is not the case for our temporal state on earth. With the foregoing in mind, our life here on earth is not an ongoing pleasant, happy experience, because adversity is continually knocking at the door; the reality is, trials & adversity are the tools God uses to teach us what is “true” and what is “not true” (cf. Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22; Rom 8:35-37; Jam 1:2-4; 1 Pet 2:21). For instance, how do you know that God really loves you? Other than what Scripture tells us, our continual experience of forgiveness when we sin and do wrong teaches us that God’s love is truly an amazing reality; so God actually uses our stumbling to confirm His love for us. No matter how often we stumble, God in His mercy forgives us — His grace is greater than all our sin (cf. Rom 5:20; 1 Tim 1:14). Said the hymn writer Charles Wesley — How Can It Be?” By the way, none of us are anywhere near perfect creatures… we all stumble over and over again in life (cf. Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20; Prv 24:16); it is only the incredible grace of God that lifts our souls out of the mud and washes us off. So none of us can brag about achieving some level of righteousness because we are such good people; such thinking is antithetical to Scripture. To claim anything to the contrary is absolute nonsense; that would be like a hundred year old man running a mile in two minutes, broad-jumping fifty feet, or pole-vaulting forty feet. Beloved, let your pretense cease… come down off your high horse. By the way, those little achievements I just attributed to a one hundred year old man are far more attainable then measuring up to God’s standards — God’s holiness transcends human thought — our level of holiness cannot even be measured in the light of God’s holiness (it would be like comparing a tiny birthday candle with all the stars of heaven; our little candle can’t even be seen a block away, let alone billions of miles away). Sadly, most human beings don’t even have a little candle (cf. Mt 5:14-16; Jn 8:12; 12:35-36; Rom 13:12; Eph 5:8-9; Col 1:12; 1 Tim 6:16; 1 Jn 1:5, 7; 2:10).
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF A PRIDEFUL HEART

Essentially there are two mind-sets by which man lives — either he lives according to the dictates of his own mind (that is defined as pride in Scripture)... or he lives in submission to the mind of God (that is defined as humility in Scripture). The apostle Paul exhorts us as believers to “do nothing from selfishness and self-centeredness, but with humility of mind regard others as more important than ourselves, not merely looking out after our own interests, but looking out after the interests of others... that is, have this attitude of the mind and the heart that was also in Christ Jesus” (cf. Phil 2:3-5). Obviously man is inclined to live by the dictates of his own mind; that is simply what it means to be a fallen creature — he insists on being his own man and being autonomous. The book of Judges gives definition to the autonomy of man — after being ruled by one divinely appointed judge after another for more than three hundred years, “all the people of Israel simply did what was right in their own eyes;” i.e., according to their own thinking (Judges 21:25)... which is precisely how the vast majority of people in our world live; they completely reject being lorded over by anyone (including God). Here in America we live in what is known as “the land of the free!” What originally was understood to be religious freedom, is now understood to be personal freedom (and religion is anathema to personal freedom). The reality is, we live in a consumer-oriented, materialistic, hedonistic society that is bent on pleasing self; with that comes the idea that happiness is the result of accomplishments, recognition, possessions, comfort, and the like — such chosen agendas are the product of the mindset of a Wall Street, Madison Avenue controlled society. The Lord reminded Jeremiah that “the heart is deceitful and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9); i.e., the heart, the conscience, the core of man's being is fallen and corrupt, and constantly causes us to be influenced by the sinful world around us (remember sin is rejecting divine truth and not embracing it — anytime our thinking is in conflict with God's thinking, sin is the result — the word sin (hamartia) literally means “to miss the mark” — when we sin, we fall short of God’s standard. Scripture states, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (cf. Rom 3:23); remember, we're not talking about “relative goodness,” we're talking about “absolute goodness;” and only God is absolutely good and pure (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:10-18).

Scripture clearly teaches us that the real issues of life are spiritual and are really matters of the heart, the inner man. The word “heart” is used about 900 times in the Bible, and most often it is used metaphorically of the inner man: i.e., it refers to either the mind, the emotions, the will, or to man's sinful nature... and strongly focuses on the importance of the spiritual life; which is central and vital to our existence. So the heart is extremely important because God is so deeply concerned about the inner man — the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (cf. 1 Sam 16:7). Why is the heart so important? Because the issues of life (our actions, works, pursuits, attitudes, etc.) all proceed from the heart (cf. Prv 4:23; Mt 6:21; 12:34; 15:18-20). What we do in word and deed is first of all a product of what we are on the inside. In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus spoke strongly
against the mere external, performance-oriented hypocrisy of the religious Pharisees; at least six times in Matthew 5 He contrasted the mere external understanding of the Old Testament (as it was taught by the Pharisees) with the true design of what God’s Word really teaches. He did this by saying, “You have heard…but I say to you…” (cf. verses 21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44); for instance, Jesus teaches us that adultery and murder begin in the heart. Though one may not commit adultery literally, to look upon a woman with that in view is to have committed it in one’s heart (cf. Mt 5:28). Whereas the Pharisees were simply concerned with their outward appearance, God focuses upon the heart; our walk with God is always a matter of the heart. That’s why Jesus said to the scribes & Pharisees, “Woe to you hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup…but inside it is full of things you got by cheating others and by pleasing only yourselves. Pharisees, you are extremely wealthy and outward compliances, but a heart that seeks after God.

Remember what Jesus said to the multitude in His Sermon on the Mount: “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:20) — incidentally, the words “surpasses” and “not” are emphatic in Greek. The reality was, the scribes and Pharisees were the most exacting and punctilious men in the entire religious world… yet Jesus was saying, “they were not good enough…that they had not come close to obtaining the absolute holiness that God demands.” Jesus then went on to expand upon absolute holiness in the following verses (cf. Mt 5:21-48). At another point, Jesus said to His disciples, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mt 19:24). That statement so astonished the disciples that they responded back, “Then who can possibly be saved?” In His message, Jesus was using a hyperbole to expand upon the impossibility of one saving himself, even if that individual is extremely wealthy and extremely generous; the truth is, it would be more possible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle! Because many in the ancient Jewish world linked riches with the blessings of God, Jesus addressed that subject. Remember, under the Mosaic code God promised prosperity to those who obeyed Him (cf. Deut 28:1-14; in particular v. 11). Nearly a thousand years before Christ the psalmist Asaph was greatly troubled because of the prosperity of the wicked — in his bewilderment he confessed that he came close to stumbling when he saw the prosperity of the wicked (Ps 73:2-3); he felt he had kept his heart pure in vain (Ps 73:13). This was common thinking in ancient Israel. Jesus went on to respond to the question His disciples posed saying: “Though it is impossible for men to save themselves, nothing is impossible with God” (cf. Mt 19:26; Gen 18:14; Job 42:2; Lk 1:37). The reality is this: only God can save a person; it has absolutely nothing to do with one meriting it (cf. Rom 3:28; Eph 2:8-9). Ultimately, the purpose of the Law was to show us our utter inability to fully comply with it, and to drive us to repentance and faith (cf. Gal 3:24).
A major problem with having a lot of wealth is that it generally has such a strong grip on a person’s soul, that they seldom love God more than their wealth; they would rather give up God than give up their money… they actually trust more in their riches than in the Lord… and as long as that condition exists in a person’s heart, he cannot be saved; so riches are a test of man’s devotion. The god of mammon (money) must be torn from the throne of his heart, and he must humbly stand before God as a pauper, not a prince; after all, everything he possesses is a gift from God to accomplish God’s purposes (cf. Mt 25:14-30; Lk 12:37, 42-48; 1 Cor 4:7; Deut 8:18; 1 Cor 4:2; 1 Pet 4:10). Let’s say God gives you a billion dollars—how much would that affect your life and your faith? Well, if we have never had such money, we really don’t know how it would affect us. Hence, it profits us to pay attention to the proverbial wisdom of Scripture: “Give me neither poverty nor riches… may I not be too rich that I deny Thee or too poor that I steal” (Prv 30:8-9). That has been my prayer since the earliest years of my faith. Guess what? God never blessed me with wealth or subjected me to poverty; even though I have had some troubling moments. 😊 So what was the Lord telling me with my tiny little bankroll? That I’m no different then nearly every other human being — I just need the basics, and not a whole lot more. In all likelihood, riches would have been too big a distraction for me, and consumed too much of my attention; thus, I would have given less time to the ministry to which God called me; it is highly unlikely that I would have spent nearly as many hours as I have “giving voice” to the Word of God both in the classroom and on my website (incidentally, I get upwards of a thousand hits a day on my website — though sometimes the numbers drop (for whatever reason), my prayer remains the same: that God will somehow use it to minister to the hearts and minds of people who are struggling in life and need encouragement in their faith. One thing I really found surprising was that people from countries all over the world have somehow stumbled on to my website, and many of them have asked permission to translate something I have written into their mother tongue; at the present time, my book “SOUL TRANSFORMATION” is being translated into Spanish down south of Mexico City, and is being preached in a number of protestant churches in that region. I had never dreamed anything like that — I had no idea my website would go worldwide. I would ask you to pray for those in Mexico who are doing this work, because it is a huge work that they have undertaken (the book is over 500 pages long), and some of you are examining and reviewing their work — let me thank those of you who are taking the time to assist in this work. Obviously the apostles caught the drift of what Jesus was telling them… they realized that Jesus’ message was this: “Forsake all and follow Me” (cf. Mark 10:28-30; Matt 10:38-39; 16:24-27; John 8:12; Gal 2:20; Phil 1:21).

One of the most important goals of the Christian life is the formation of Christlike character (cf. Rom 12:2; Col 3:1-4, 15-17; 1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:15; Jam 1:22; 4:6-10), and this is accomplished through the ministry of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:16-26), the truth of the Word (cf. Ps 19:7-14; 119:9-22; Jn 17:17), the trials & testings of life (Jam 1:2-4; Ps 119:67, 71), and the ministry of others as iron sharpens iron (Prv 27:17). For these tools to be genuinely effective, we need to honestly and diligently deal with the heart. Because the heart is desperately wicked, we each need to regularly do “open heart surgery” with the scalpel of the Word under
the guiding hand of the great physician, the Lord Jesus. This is accomplished through the teaching, guiding, convicting ministry of the Spirit. Sadly, popular religion today simply focuses on the outer self; i.e., on how one appears before others, how acceptable one is to others, and how much applause one gets from others (the list goes on and on); thus much religion is narcissistic and egocentric, and simply focuses on inner feelings and personal hopes and goals — God is simply deemed necessary to help us attain the desires of our hearts and find happiness in life. It is this man-centered spirituality that supplants God-centered spirituality in many churches and in many believer’s minds. The chief question we must all ask ourselves is this: “Is the condition of my heart my greatest concern?” It should be because “it is the wellspring of life” (Prov 4:23) — it determines not only our love for God and love for others, but who we are and what we do.

The proud heart is focused on “self” — proud people believe they deserve better than what life has brought them; they become sorrowful, resentful, and even jealous of other people who are more successful than them. Pride breeds self-pity, a major component of depression. According to The Biblical Counseling Coalition, typically people who struggle with pride will live life based on ‘how they feel’ and expect everyone else to accommodate them and adapt to their moods.” Two key characteristics of pride are autonomy and rebellion — the truth is, we all want our own way about things, and will usually do pretty much anything to get our way. It is our sinful nature that leads us to desire autonomy, and causes us to rebel at the thought of being under anyone else’s control or authority. In our hearts we echo the words of Pharaoh: “Who is the Lord that I should obey Him?” (Ex 5:2). Said the psalmist, “The wicked in his haughtiness does not seek God; in all his thoughts there is no room for God” (Ps 10:4). As Solomon said, “All who fear the LORD hate evil, pride, arrogance, the evil way, and the perverted mouth” (Prov 8:13). The prideful heart brings devastating consequences that God ordains, including a hardened heart and the consequences of one’s sin (cf. Ex 7:1-5, 13; 2 Cor 3:14; Heb 3:8-15; Prov 22:8; Gal 6:7-8). Scripture shows us the result of pride through the example of two extremely significant kings: King Nebuchadnezzar and King Herod — “When Nebuchadnezzar’s heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory… he was given the mind of an animal… and ate grass out in the field… until he acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over all the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone He wishes” (Dan 5:20-21). Nebuchadnezzar lived like an animal until he came to his senses and repented of his sin… it was then that God restored the kingdom to him. Though God doesn’t respond to every proud person the same way, of this we can be sure, He doesn’t overlook anyone who is proud. A second king the Lord dealt with was the first century king of Israel, King Herod: “He sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people, who shouted out, ‘This is the voice of a god, not of a man!’ Because Herod failed to give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down immediately, and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:2-23). Obviously Herod must have had an attractive personality & great communication skills, so the fallen minds of men bought into it hook, line and sinker (just as they will when the anti-Christ comes on the scene — cf. 2 Th 2:3-12; Mt 24:24); think of it this way, God gave
Herod a number of dynamic qualities that he felt were all of his own doing — that is precisely how proud people think. There are numerous other stories of King's in Scripture whose achievements made them proud; cross-reference Uzziah (2 Chron 26:16) & Hezekiah (2 Chron 32:25). Said Paul of the arrogant: “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (cf. 1 Cor 4:7 and Deut 8:18). By the way, such is no different in our modern day world; people are simply consumed with the arrogant diabolical thinking of men.

The reality is, pride brings opposition from God — thus Peter states, “Clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (1 Pet 5:5). That word “oppose” is a military term that expresses the idea of “mounting up in opposition against someone” — when arrogance runs the show in one’s life, God will actively oppose him at some level. The problem with man is that he is very easily deceived (cf. Gen 3:13; Deut 11:16; Jer 17:9; Gal 6:7; Eph 5:6; Titus 3:3-5) — the prideful person thinks very highly of himself, so much so that he thinks the world should revolve around him. The only thing important to prideful people is “getting their wants met.” As the Biblical Counseling Coalition puts it, “prideful people struggle with bitterness, revenge, conceit, self-pity, a competitive nature, gossip, slander, and vanity; they actually have a lust for attention, approval, and praise.” So what is the cure for the proud of heart? Confessing and admitting to God that you struggle with the sin of pride, and asking for the help of the Holy Spirit to change your heart, that you might consider the needs of others and have the grace to care for and serve them (cf. Ps 24:1-8; 51:10). Obviously, “denial of self” is a significant aspect of humility. Remember the words of Jesus — “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me… whoever loses his life for My sake, shall find the fullness of life” (Lk 9:23-24; 17:33). Jesus demonstrated true humility when He came to this world; He deprived Himself of heaven and all its glory for 33 years for you and me. Because our goal is to become like Jesus in character and attitude, we are to practice how Jesus lived in His life — “a gentle and quiet spirit is precious to God” (1 Pet 3:4). Obviously humbling oneself before God and others goes against the grain of our sinful nature, but that is God's call upon our lives. Reflect again upon the words of Paul, “Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought; rather think of yourself with sober judgment: do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Rom 12:3, 16). Pride begins to change to humility when we understand how despicable we actually are without Christ. Humility comes when we internalize the truth that nothing in the Christian life is “about us;” the Christian life is “about Christ.” We can't dwell upon what we want, and be able to serve others. Said Paul, “Do nothing out of conceit or selfish ambition, but in humility consider others as more important than yourself… so don’t just look out after your own interests, but look out after the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). By the way, the word “look” in Greek (skopeo, from which we get our English word “scope”) literally means to “scope out” the needs of others and keep your eye on them, so that we might be aware of how we can help them. The question is, are you sensitive to the needs of others? or are you so consumed with your own needs and wants that you don't even think about the needs of
others? Obviously if you are not concerned for the needs of others, you will never take the time to contemplate their needs. Remember the Great Commandment of the Lord to the entire human family: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind… and love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 22:36-39; Deut 6:4-9). The Biblical Counseling Coalition recommends the following four practical suggestions in learning to serve others —

1. Do one thing a day for someone you ordinarily would avoid.
2. Go out of your way to help another person.
3. Give up something you want to do for the sake of another’s pleasure.
4. Consider the opinion of a person you think is beneath you, and follow his suggestion.

After practicing these suggestions, you will find joy returning to your life. Your world will open up to others as your heart opens up. As you continue to place others above yourself, your desire to serve them will grow, and your life will become far more joyful. Remember, “love, joy & peace are fruits of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22); the Holy Spirit is the one who puts these things in your soul — as human beings we do the sowing, but God determines what we reap: “Do not be deceived… for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap” (cf. Gal 6:7; Lk 6:38; Jn 3:27; Acts 20:35; 1 Cor 3:8). From the beginning, God asked man to “not be self-oriented,” but to “be God-oriented & others-oriented;” yet man stubbornly puts himself first in life (even above God). God said this to ancient Israel: “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them… Will a man rob God? Yet you continue to rob Me by not tithing as you ought. Thus the whole nation of you are cursed for robbing Me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house… TEST ME IN THIS and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until there is no more need” (Mal 3:7-10). Since the very beginning God has blessed obedience and cursed disobedience (cf. Deut 28:1ff; 28:15ff)… yet time and again man has failed to obey God. As the LORD said to the people of Israel — “Test Me in this” (also cf. Ps 34:8-10).

THE ISSUE OF PRIDE

The book “Basic Christianity” by the British author John R. W. Stott was instrumental in the development of my faith back in the early 70s… that is the first book I read after committing my life to Christ. Amazingly years later I had the opportunity to meet Stott at Regent College & Seminary up in Vancouver, Canada, when I was pastoring a church just a few miles down the road from there; since then I’ve read a number of things he’s written. Dr. Thomas A. Tarrants, the Vice President of Ministry at C. S. Lewis Institute in Washington, DC, in an article he wrote on Pride and Humility, says that John Stott is a remarkably humble man of great accomplishments, and is believed by many to have made the greatest impact for Christ of anyone in the twentieth century. Having met him, and listened to him speak, and read his works, I can’t help but agree with that statement; he is an extremely kind and gentle and humble man. Should any of you be inclined to
buy any of his books, I would strongly encourage to do so — most of the material that is written in the Christian world today, is very shallow in substance... not so with John Stott. You will find both your soul and your mind greatly nourished by his writings. Stott makes a succinct statement about pride and humility that goes straight to the heart of what the Bible teaches about the deadly root of our sins and sorrows: **“Pride is your greatest enemy, and humility is your greatest friend.”** The reality is, **pride is the devil's most effective and destructive tool.** Sadly, what has been recognized throughout history as the deadliest vice, is now almost celebrated as a virtue in our culture. Pride is not only conspicuous among the powerful, the rich, the successful, the famous, and the celebrities of our world, it is also greatly present in the hearts of ordinary people. Pride is a universal human problem; everyone suffers from it to some degree. **Nothing hinders our intimacy with God and love for others more than pride.** Surprisingly, humility is often seen as weakness and incompetence and weak-mindedness — which shows how foolish and mindless our world has become.

Another top contender for having had the greatest impact for Christ in the twentieth century was **C. S. Lewis,** a professor of Medieval and Renaissance Literature at Cambridge University. Lewis calls pride “the great sin” and “the outmost evil” in his book *Mere Christianity.* He goes on to say that “unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, are mere flea bites in comparison: it was through pride that the devil became the devil... pride is a complete anti-God state of mind... and the chief cause of misery in every nation and every family since the world began” (pp. 109, 111). Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin and Luther each taught that pride was the root of sin — it’s the devil’s most effective and destructive tool. Pride first appears in Scripture in Genesis 3 where we see the serpent (the devil) using pride as the avenue by which to seduce our first parents. First, he arrogantly contradicted what God had said about eating the forbidden fruit (thus charging God with lying) — his intent was to arouse doubt in Eve’s mind about the truthfulness and reliability of God; next he drew her into deeper deception by contending that God’s reason for lying was to keep her from enjoying all the possibilities inherent in being Godlike — thus his aim was to undermine her confidence in the goodness and love of God, and arousing the desire to become as God. The desire to lift up and exalt ourselves beyond our place as God’s creatures lies at the heart of pride. As Eve reflected upon what the serpent had said, her desire to become Godlike grew stronger, and she began to look at the forbidden fruit in a new light, as something attractive to the eyes and pleasing to the touch. As her desire increased, she was weakened in what she had previously believed, and opted for autonomy and disobeyed God’s command. **So in just a few deft moves the devil was able to use “pride” to bring about Eve’s downfall and plunge the human race into spiritual ruin.** It is the same process that operates in us today — “Each person is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own desire; when his desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death” (Jam 1:14-15). Regarding the matter of “sin” and why it was all a part of God’s plan from eternity past, you may want to read a study I did on it titled, **“Sin & Man’s Eternal...**
Regarding the matter of "pride," there is obviously a difference between the kind of pride God hates (Prv 8:13), and the kind of pride we can feel about a job well done (Gal 6:4), or the kind of pride we express over the accomplishment of a loved one (2 Cor 7:4). The kind of pride that stems from self-righteousness or conceit is sin, and God hates it because it is a hindrance to our seeking Him and placing ourselves in submission to Him. Basically, being proud means to have a grossly exalted view of oneself. The psalmist explains that the proud are so consumed with themselves that their thoughts are far from God (Ps 10:4). The exact opposite of such pride is a spirit of humility—in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:3). The word “poor” is commonly used of a beggar who is exceedingly poor, and has absolutely nothing to meet his needs. In similar fashion, the “poor in spirit” are those who recognize their utter spiritual bankruptcy and their inability to come to God except by His grace alone. On the other hand, the proud are so blinded by their pride that they think they have no need of God, or that they actually merit His acceptance. It is pride that keeps people from accepting Christ as their Savior; admitting one’s sinfulness and acknowledging that one does not merit God’s acceptance is a major stumbling block for the proud. Why is pride sinful? Because it takes the glory that belongs to God alone and keeps it for oneself—essentially pride is self-worship. Solomon sums it up with these words: "The fear of the Lord is hatred of evil; pride and arrogance and the evil way and perverted speech I hate" (Prv 8:13)… “Pride goes before destruction” (Prv 16:18; 29:23). From the beginning of Adam and Eve, men and women have come crashing down from their pedestal of pride—either we voluntarily humble ourselves before God, or He will ultimately humble us; that’s a given (Mt 23:12; Jam 4:6)—to think that God is stupid and blind, is about as mindless a deduction as one can make.

As people suppress the knowledge of God, spiritual darkness grows, and God becomes smaller in their thinking and they become larger: the center of gravity in their lives shifts from God to themselves… they become the center of their world, and God is moved to the periphery; the resultant effect is, self-importance and self-confidence grow stronger… when pride increases, abusive behavior ensues, and people suffer. In the eighth century BC, prideful leaders in Israel embraced a corrupted view of God; as such, they trusted in their own wisdom & power, oppressed their people, ignored God’s call to repent, and thereby invited His judgment; which fell upon them with disastrous results (cf. Prv 16:18; Is 5:1-25; 9:8-21). There are numerous examples of pride and its consequences in Scripture; to list just a few, take the time to read and meditate on Uzziah’s story (2 Chron 26), as well as Haman’s (Esther 3-7), and Nebuchadnezzar’s (Daniel 4). An instructive lesson on "religious pride" from the New Testament is found in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk 18:9-14). Then there’s the religious pride of the apostles themselves—they were infected with pride and disputed with one another about who was the greatest (Lk 22:24-27)—sadly, the same thing exists in many churches today: many in ministry pursue
self-promotion, a good reputation, more notoriety, more applause, more influence, more recognition, and more success. In short, pride can be summarized as an attitude of self-sufficiency, self-importance, and self-exaltation in relation to God. As Thomas Tarrants puts it, “If your pride causes you to exalt yourself, you are inviting God to open fire on you, and He will.” He has emphatically declared His determination to bring it low wherever He finds it. It was pride that caused Lucifer to be cast out of heaven… and pride that caused Adam and Even to be cast out of Eden… and it is pride that will be our undoing if we tolerate it in our lives. Should it exist in our lives we are best off to earnestly seek God in prayer and ask Him to reveal it to us so that we can repent and forsake it (cf. Ps 139:23-24). One of the great puritans of history was the seventeenth century English devotionalist & writer, William Law — in his work “A Serious Call to a Devout & Holy Life” he states, “There can be no surer proof of a confirmed pride than a belief that one is sufficiently humble” — the reality is, the humble person is only too mindful of the pride that wages war in his soul. The truth is, none of us are completely absent of pride. That is why Paul could say this: “Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus… I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do — forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12-14).

The Issue of Humility

Numerous times in Scripture, God says “humble yourselves and I will exalt you.” It is not God’s desire to punish us and bring us low, but rather to forgive us and restore us. God takes pleasure in our efforts to humble ourselves, that He might bless us and exalt us — He desires so much to do so that He sent His Son to this world to die for us that we might experience His healing and His grace… His love for us should give us great hope and encouragement. Once we place our faith in Christ we become children of God (Jn 1:12), and as His children we all stumble far more than we care to admit; remember, we still inhabit sinful flesh, and it often expresses itself in our lives (Rom 7:18; Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20). Sometimes we screw up terribly, but God never abandons us as His children (cf. Heb 13:5); nothing can separate us from His love (Rom 8:31-39). John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople back in the 4th century, has been referred to as “golden-mouthed” in the Christian world, and is regarded as the most distinguished of Greek patristic preachers; after Augustine, none other was so popular with the Reformers. Well just as pride is the root of all sin, Chrysostom said “humility is the root, mother, nurse, foundation and bond of all virtue.” Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), the greatest philosopher and theologian in American history said, “We must view humility as one of the most essential things that characterizes true Christianity.” If we will but reflect upon the humility of Jesus, who left heaven and came to earth to serve us and take on the form of a man, and give His life as a ransom for us (cf. Phil 2:6-8; 1Pet 2:24), we will begin to see the incredible significance of humility. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give His life a
ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). Said Jesus, “A slave is not greater than his master” (cf. Jn 13:16; 15:20); “Blessed is that slave whom his master finds faithful when He comes” (cf. Lk 12:42-43); “great is your reward” (cf. Lk 12:44, 48; Mt 25:21, 35). The night before Jesus went to the cross, He met with His disciples in the upper room… during that time with them He took a towel and a basin and washed their feet, instructing them to follow His example of serving one another (Jn 13:1-17); not long before “there arose a dispute among the disciples as to which of them was the greatest” (Lk 22:24), and Jesus told them “the greatest among you shall be your servant” (Mt 23:11). The apostle Paul urged the believing world to “have this mind in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus… who humbled Himself to the point of dying on the cross for us” (cf Phil 2:5-8). Apparently there was a measure of sinful pride in the hearts of some believers at Philippi that Paul felt the need to address, so he told them to reflect upon the attitude and actions of their Savior, and follow His example. Just as God highly exalted His Son for His incredible humility (Phil 2:9-11), so He promises to “exalt those who humble themselves” (cf. Mt 23:12; Jam 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6).

In order to “put on the mind of Christ,” Thomas Tarrants reminds us that we will need to make a firm decision to ponder, understand, and adopt Jesus’ way of thinking — His values and attitudes must become ours; we must admire His humility and want it for ourselves. For this to happen, we need to earnestly and regularly pray for the Holy Spirit to change our hearts, because it is not possible to do it in our own strength. The Greek word for “humility” that Jesus and the apostles used was “tapeinos,” which conveys the idea of “having a right view of ourselves before God and others.” If pride is having an exalted view of oneself, humility is having a realistic view — so we must be honest and realistic about who and what we are… “we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought, but think with sober judgment” (Rom 12:3). So humility is having a right view of ourselves in relation to God and others and acting accordingly (Rom 12:4-8). If we are going to have a right view of ourselves, we will see ourselves as creatures who are small, finite, dependent, limited in intelligence and ability, prone to sin, and soon to die and face God’s judgment (Heb 9:27)… yet as believers we must also see ourselves as God’s children, loved and redeemed by grace alone, and gifted with certain unique gifts, abilities, and resources which are to be used for His glory (cf. Col 3:17; 1 Pet 4:11). Paul reminds us that “everything we have is a gift from God;” everything! be it ability, wealth, looks, smarts, or position (1 Cor 3:7; Jn 3:27). Obviously having a right view of God and ourselves will have a profound impact upon our relationships with others. Paul writes, “Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly” (Rom 12:16). “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourself. Don’t simply look out after your own interests, look out after the interests of others” (Phil 2:3-4). Thomas Tarrants points out that by refusing to be preoccupied with ourselves and our own importance, and by seeking to love and serve others, it will reorient us from self-centeredness to other-centeredness — to serving & caring for others just as Jesus did for us. In this diabolical narcissistic culture in which we live, such actions will be a particularly powerful countercultural witness of Christ’s presence and His lordship in our lives.
WITH THE FOREGOING IN MIND…

The question many people have is this: “How do I know that Scripture is indeed true?” Two people hear the same message — one believes it… the other does not. Why is that? According to Scripture, “God is the one who opens the door of the heart to believe divine truth” — it is not in man for him to do so on his own; as fallen creatures we simply do not have the ability to correctly judge divine truth. Here’s the argument: Scripture is not just a collection of forensic truths that one can humanly evaluate on his own, and then make a decision as to the integrity of those truths (but that is precisely what religious critics do in our world) — divine truth is infinitely greater than that, and requires divine enlightenment… if God does not enlighten the mind, one will never come to a proper understanding of it; thus he will reject it and think of it as “foolishness” (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-21; 1 Cor 2:5, 14; Prv 9:10; Ex 31:3; 1 Kg 4:29-34; Is 29:14; Dan 2:20-23; 3:18-20; Acts 6:8-10; Rom 11:23; Jam 3:17). Scripture says that divine truth must be spiritually appraised (1 Cor 2:14); i.e., it requires the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit to understand. King Solomon expressed it this way: “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom” (Prv 1:7; 9:10; Ecc 12:13-14); when one fears the Lord, he “stands in awe” of Him, and submits to His Lordship (cf. Ex 14:31; 20:20)... only the humble stands in awe of the Lord. The reality is, man becomes wise when he humbly acknowledges his sinfulness and bends the knee before God. The book of Acts tells us the story of a woman named Lydia who was listening to the teaching of the apostle Paul, “and the Lord opened her heart to respond” (Acts 16:14). Since truth is not just forensic in nature, but living and active (Heb 4:12), it must be administered to the heart by God’s Spirit. Paul states in his first letter to the Thessalonians, “The good news of the gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thes 1:5). Only the Spirit of God can enlighten the soul of man and convict him of divine truth (Heb 11:1); such conviction does not come simply by reading a book or studying Scripture itself; God must open a person’s eyes to the truth (that was the prophecy of Isaiah — cf. Mt 13:10-17; Is 6:8-10). As a person humbly listens to the truth (or reads the truth of God Word), the Holy Spirit convicts the heart as to the reality of what it is he or she is hearing or reading… in so doing, that individual believes the substance of the message (Heb 11:1).

Paul writes in his letter to the Corinthians, “No one can say the ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 12:3; 1 Jn 4:1-5, 13-15; 6:10-12). Paul goes on to say, “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because these things must be spiritually understood” (1 Cor 2:14); divine truth is withheld from the proud and the arrogant — that’s why Jesus said the following to His disciples regarding why He spoke in parables: “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted” (Mt 13:10-11). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said “He does not cast His pearls before swine (under Mosaic Law swine were unclean animals; Jesus used this term to depict the enemies of the gospel), lest they trample the truth under their feet (i.e., treat it with contempt)” (Mt 7:6; 15:
14). The message is this: there are those in this world who will never believe the gospel because of their stubborn, diabolical arrogance. The question that is commonly asked is this: “Whose heart does God open?” Scripture tells us that “God only gives grace to the humble of heart” (cf. Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5; Prv 3:34; Ps 138:6); that He actually mounts up in opposition against the proud, and gives them over to a depraved mind (cf. Rom 1:28; Eph 4:17-23); so God does not disclose the beauty of divine truth to the proud and the arrogant. James, the blood-brothers of Jesus, said: “In humility receive the word implanted” (Jam 1:21); whether one is a believer or not, he must humble himself before the Lord, or God will not minister the truth of His Word to a person’s heart; thus humility must be the ongoing characteristic of the believer’s life — we must be constantly mindful of “who we are” and “who God is” when we approach His Word. If one will humble himself before the Lord and seek His face, God will open his heart to divine truth (cf. Is 66:2; II Kg 22:19; II Chron 7:14; 34:27; Job 22:29; Ps 10:17). Now if you have not embraced Christ as your Savior at this point in your life, and you would like to, then simply “humbly ask God to become real in your life,” and He will. That is precisely how I came to faith in Christ; after years of walking up and down the various roads of life, and experiencing some ups and downs along the way, I felt a strange emptiness in my soul and was not at all at peace with myself, so I humbly turned to God and prayed — “God if you really exist (I wasn’t really confident that He did, though I thought He did) I want you to become real in my life; I don’t care what it takes, because I don’t want to continue living if this is all there is to life… if You will become real in my life you can use my life in whatever way You choose; I simply ask that You become real to me.” The long and short of it was, the Lord opened my heart to His loving presence in just a few short months, and placed an incredible hunger in my soul for divine truth… and the rest is history. If God is not real in your life, and you have an inner desire to know Him, I would suggest that you prayerfully read the Gospel of John and ask God to open your heart to the truth of who He is — when you humbly contemplate the truth of God’s Word, He will give you a deep conviction as to the integrity of it (cf. Heb 11:1), and your understanding of reality will be utterly transformational. Obviously it is very difficult to imagine knowing something that is completely life-changing when you don’t know it; yet that is precisely what occurs when God enlightens the heart. Beloved, God is very gentle, tender and compassionate to the humble of heart (cf. Mt 11:29; Lk 6:36; 1 Th 2:7; Jam 5:11; Deut 4:29-31; Ps 103:8, 13) — He knows our weaknesses, and is mindful that we are but dust (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15-16).… if you will draw near to Him, He will draw near to you (Jam 4:6, 8). You don’t have to worry about “being too unworthy or too unmeritorious,” none of us merit God’s unconditional love… that’s why salvation is by grace alone (Eph 2:8-9).

Humility is really our greatest friend, because it is an expression of God’s work in our lives that results in love, joy and peace; such fruit can be found in no other way (Gal 5:22). If you want to experience the fruit of the Spirit in your life, you must walk humbly with God (cf. Micah 6:8). It should be noted, humility increases our hunger for God’s word and opens our heart to His Spirit, and leads to intimacy with God — “He dwells with those who are contrite and lowly of spirit” (cf. Is 57:15; Ps 51:17), and imparts the aroma of Christ to all those we encounter. Obviously developing the identity, attitude, and conduct of
a humble servant doesn't happen overnight — as is the case with all growth, it happens one step at a time. As we forsake pride and seek to humble ourselves by making daily deliberate choices, humility grows in our souls. As the 17th century French ecclesiastic Fenelon said, “it is the work of a lifetime.” Likewise, the 17th century English preacher and writer John Flavel said, “They that know God will be humble; they that know themselves cannot be proud” (that is so true). Let me close this section with the words God shared with the prophet Jeremiah (Jer 9:23-24) —

“Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things.”

THE ANCIENT JEWISH WORLD

Following the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the mighty empire of Babylon in 586 BC, and the exile of the Jewish people to Babylon as God’s judgment against them for their stubborn disobedience and disloyalty (cf. Deut 28:1f; 28:15f; Jer 15:1-4; 25:7, 11-12; 29:10; Ezra 1:1-3; 2 Kg 24-25). . . God used the king of Persia (Cyrus) in 539 BC to conquer and destroy Babylon because of its arrogance (cf. II Chron 36:22-23; Is 13:19; 45:1-4; 47:1-3; 48:14; Jer 50:2, 31; 51:41) — incidentally, Babylon is known as “the greatest world city of antiquity” (the size of the city was about 175 square miles; it was double-walled and built in a square with each side being more than 13 miles long). Herodotus described the city as overwhelming in size & magnitude (Bk. I, 178-186). Regarding Babylon’s ultimate destruction, the Lord told the prophet Jeremiah that it would become plunder (Jer 50:10), and completely desolate; so much so that everyone who passes by it will be horrified (Jer 50:13), and it will never again be inhabited (Jer 50:39). Said the Lord, “I will repay Babylon for all their evil that they have done in Zion” (Jer 51:24). . . “for the LORD is a God of recompense” (Jer 51:56); “thus Babylon shall sink down and not rise again because of the calamity I am going to bring upon her” (Jer 51:64); though many have tried to rebuild it (including Alexander the Great), none have been able to do so; thus God’s Word stands. Ultimately, God returned His people to their homeland 70 years after they were placed in captivity; as was prophesied (cf. Jer 25:11-12; 29:10-11; Dan 9:2) — they returned under the leadership Zerubbabel (the head of the tribe of Judah). . . the priestly scribe Ezra . . . and the cupbearer to Artaxerxes (of Persia), Nehemiah. The suffering the Jewish people endured while in captivity in Babylon is vividly portrayed in Psalm 137.

After the destruction of the temple and the exile of Judah in 586 BC, the religion and culture of the Jewish people underwent a significant change; no longer would they fall prey to the temptation of worshipping other gods: something they had done repeatedly throughout their history, until God finally placed the entire nation in captivity in Babylon
has remained rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures (cf. Ex 32:1-9; Judges 2:11; 4:1; 6:1; 8:33; 10:6; 13:1; 21:25; 1 Kg 9:9; 11:33; 16:31; 22:53; 2 Kg 17:16; 2 Chron 7:22; 25; 35:12-17; Ps 106:19-27; Jér 1:16; etc.). The first 1500 years of her existence (2000-500 BC), Israel fell into idolatry over and over again... the last 2500 years (500 BC to the present day), the Jewish people in large part have forsaken idolatry and have remained monotheistic (cf. Ex 20:3-5; Is 42:8; 45:21; Jér 11:10; 35:15). While living in Babylon, the Jewish people no longer had a Temple in which to worship, so they built “synagogues” (i.e., “gathering places” or “houses of instruction”) — they virtually built them in every community where Jewish people lived; the synagogues were known as “Jewish houses of assembly, study, and prayer.” By the first century (the time of Christ), the synagogue had become a well-established institution that had been in existence for over 500 years — it had become the center of religious and social life for the Jewish world; in addition to that, it had a significant impact on Christian worship & church government (the term elders is associated with the scribes and chief priests in the first century — cf. Mt 16:21; 27:1; Acts 11:30; 15:2, 6, 23; 16:4; 21:18). After the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 AD (remember, it had been rebuilt by Ezra in the 5th century BC after the return of Jewish exiles from Babylon), the synagogue emerged as the central institution in Jewish life; it is mentioned more than sixty times in the New Testament (cf. Mt 12:9; 13:54; Lk 4:20; 6:6; Jn 12:42; Acts 14:1; 15:21; 18:4). By the way, the Scripture was read in the synagogue from a standing position, but explained from a sitting position — Jesus Himself followed this pattern (Lk 4:16-27).

Though the Babylonian exile brought about certain modifications in Jewish religious life, the essence of the religious teaching of Judaism has remained remarkably constant, and has remained rooted in the Hebrew Scriptures (i.e., the Old Testament) — however, with the absence of a temple in Babylon, Judaism began to adopt a non-sacrificial religion... and the Jewish people began to gather in homes for the reading of Scripture, prayer, and instruction; soon after the synagogue became the center of both religious and social life. The one thing the Jewish people carried with them to Babylon was “the Torah” (i.e., the Scriptures); though the word Torah originally just referred to the first five books of Moses, later on it embraced the entire body of the religious literature of Judaism), for by it Israel was assured of its divine calling & mission. In the 5th century BC, “the father of Judaism” (the priest & scribe Ezra) enacted religious reforms by appealing to the Torah; ultimately, scribes became the priestly interpreters of the Torah, setting forth their own authoritative teachings. In the 4th century BC (just a hundred years after the rebuilding of the Temple), Alexander the Great (king of Macedon) conquered most of the civilizations of Europe, Asia and Africa, and influenced the spread of Hellenism (Greek culture); thus uniting these civilizations (including the Jewish world as well) by making Greek the language of education and commerce. By the 3rd century BC, the Hellenized Jews no longer understood Hebrew, so seventy-two Jewish scholars from Jerusalem went to Alexandria, Egypt (the intellectual center of the Western world) to translate the Bible into Greek — ultimately this translation became known as the “Septuagint” (that’s Latin for “seventy;” the ancient world frequently rounded off its numbers). The Septuagint made it possible for Greek-speaking Jews to study God’s word in the vernacular of the day. On several occasions, Jesus actually quoted from the Septuagint. By the way, the New Testament
Legalism was written in Greek; so the entire Bible in the first century AD was Greek. By the fourth century AD, the Roman language of Latin became the language of liturgy (replacing the language of Greek), and at the urging of Pope Damasas, the Greek and Hebrew scholar Jerome used his linguistic skills to translate the Bible into Latin; it became known as the Latin Vulgate — this translation was the premiere text that was used throughout the middle ages until the Reformation in the 16th century. Catholicism continued to use it through most of the 20th century. John Wycliffe translated the Bible into English in the late 1300s. William Tyndale did as well in the early 1500s, and Martin Luther translated it into German in 1525. The King James Bible was completed in 1611 at the request of King James in England. When the printing press came into existence around 1450, the Bible started getting translated into several languages (including English and German) and spread throughout all of Europe. Let’s return again to the Intertestamental Period for a moment; *i.e.*, that period of time when the Old Testament came to a close (ca 400 BC) and that period of time when New Testament events began (ca 30 AD).

By the 2nd century BC, the Pharisees taught that the oral law carried the same authority as the law of Moses. Jesus, however, denied that the traditions of men were equal in authority to the written law (cf. Mk 7:1-23). Following the destruction of the temple in 70 AD, the Jewish people were scattered all over the Roman world (it is referred to historically as the Diaspora; *i.e.*, the dispersion), and that resulted in the sudden demise of the priesthood, which ultimately led to installing rabbis as the keepers and legislators of the Torah. Well, the rabbis passed on their teachings from generation to generation until the oral law (Mishnah) was written down in 200 AD. By 500 AD the Talmud was completed with a rabbinical commentary on the Mishnah; thus the Talmud is about 6,000 pages long, and gives reference to more than 2,000 scholar-teachers. The Talmud became the basic document of rabbinc Judaism and still holds a major place in shaping Jewish thought; in short, Judaism has become a religion of “ethical monotheism.” According to the teaching of Judaism, there is no set of beliefs whereby a Jew may find salvation; as such Judaism has historically placed more stress upon the deed rather than the creed; nevertheless, from Talmudic times Judaism, as a way of life, has been distinguished by giving special emphasis to certain beliefs and ethical values. In the Mishnah (Abot 1:2) one sees the broad philosophical thinking that governed the minds of the early rabbis: “By three things is the world sustained — by the law, the temple service, and deeds of lovingkindness.” By the way, orthodox Jews today refer to their houses of worship as “temples,” whereas reformed Jews refer to theirs as “synagogues.”

It was the “legalistic thinking” of the ancient Jewish world that often prompted Jesus to do things as He did; for instance, He could have healed people any day of the week, but He often did it on the Sabbath; thus provoking the legalistic Pharisees. The question is, what is this thing called “legalism”? Though some erroneously say it has to do with obedience, that is not at all the case — every book of the Bible teaches that we are to obey God; thus being under grace doesn’t mean that we are free to disobey God. So legalism is an attempt to gain favor with God, without regard for the condition of one’s
**heart before God** — therefore, at the root of legalism is the *sin of pride*; the legalist invariably only looks at *the externals*, rather than *the internals* (*i.e.*, *the heart*). So legalism denies *human depravity* and exalts *human ability* — that’s why both Jesus and Paul clashed with the legalists (cf. Lk 11:37-54; Mt 23:13-36). In contrast to Judaist thinking (which focuses on one’s behavior), Christianity is primarily a matter of “*the heart.*” Though the vast majority of Jewish religious leaders seemingly sought after God, essentially they were simply “*self-seeking;*” *i.e.*, they didn’t see themselves as *sinners in need of a Savior* (as Isaiah and others did – cf. Is 6:5), instead, they saw themselves as *good people because they kept the Law*: the truth is, they really didn’t keep the Law because they didn’t apply it to themselves on the heart level (cf. Dn 8:5). Jesus metaphorically said to them: “You *clean the outside of the cup, but inside you are full of robbery and self-indulgence*” (cf. Mt 23:25). Legalism emphasizes *the external* to the neglect of *the internal* (cf. Lk 11:37-41). In Jesus’ day, the Pharisees devised and added hundreds of manmade laws in an effort to keep God’s Law, but in doing so they shifted the focus from the heart to the outward man… this included elaborate rituals for *washing themselves before meals*, and cleansing their dishes & utensils, etc. (cf. Mt 15:2; Mk 7:3; Lk 11:38). While there was a basis for these practices in the Book of Leviticus (cf. 11:33-34; 15:12), the Pharisees had taken them far beyond what God intended. The reality is, religion apart from the ways of God always tries to make the *outer man* look good (*i.e.*, the visible part of man), and neglects the fact that the Lord looks upon *the heart* (cf. 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kg 8:39; 1 Chron 28:9; Lk 16:15).

**The Law in the Old Testament** is spoken of as a gift from God, a guide to life, something to be cherished, something to delight in, something to be enjoyed, as well as something to be obeyed under penalty of punishment for disobedience. *In the New Testament*, the apostle Paul reminds us that *the Law is good* (cf. Rom 7:16; 1 Tim 1:8); the idea of obedience is continually highlighted (cf. Acts 5:29; Rom 6:16; Phil 2:5-8) — *so the Law itself is not bad; it is the “misuse” of the Law that is bad*. The Law of Moses was part of a covenant that God made with Israel some 3500 years ago (during the time of Moses); with the coming of Christ, the *New Covenant* (prophesied by Jeremiah) has come into effect and we are no longer under the *Old Covenant* (cf. Jer 31:31-34). The fact is, for the past 2000 years (*i.e.*, since 70 AD) it has been impossible to observe all the commandments of the Law of Moses because so many of them depend upon the existence of a Temple, a priesthood, animal sacrifices, and living as a theocratic nation within the Land of Israel. **Orthodox Judaism** recognizes this; when the Temple was destroyed in 70 AD, Judaism was reconstructed as a religion without a Temple or a priesthood; as such, it became a religion dependent on the authority and decisions of the rabbis. **Reform Judaism** is a recent movement that dates back to the 1700s; though it views the Law as antiquated and outdated, nevertheless it sees it as a useful reminder of their history, and a symbol of their people and a source of ethics. It should also be noted that no where in Scripture is the *Christian community* mandated to keep the 613 Laws of Moses (that is the traditional rabbinic number), because we no longer have a Temple, a priesthood, or live as a theocracy in the Land of Israel. By the way, since the Temple and priesthood are gone, and the vast majority of Jews live in the *Diaspora* (they have been dispersed outside the land
of Israel), even the festivals must be observed differently than they were in biblical times; thus it is often hard to separate cultural from religious expressions. For the *Orthodox Jew*, celebrating Passover is a fulfillment of a divine command, and is done in accordance with all of the rabbinic writings over the past 2000 years, as well as rabbinic law. Conversely, for a *Reformed or secular Jew*, celebrating Passover is often just an opportunity to enjoy doing something Jewish — having a get-together with the family, going through a few traditions familiar from childhood, and sharing a meal. So, is Passover then a cultural expression or a religious one?

**Christianity and the Law**

As J. A. Motyer of Trinity College in Dublin says, “From the very beginning in the Garden of Eden God’s Law lays at the center of His dealings with man… numerous trees were there for his enjoyment, and only a single tree was forbidden; yet in that single tree was enshrined the principle of law; obedience safeguarded the enjoyment of the life that was life indeed, and disobedience not only forfeited that life but replaced it by a death-bearing opposite” (Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, Walter Elwell, 2001, p. 674). The rest of the Old Testament perpetuates the view that only by obedience to God’s Law can one prosper and live successfully in God’s world; the Law is given to direct human life (all other life is subhuman), thus Law has the function of liberating humans to live according to their true nature. The Old Testament asserts that *the Law was given for our good; not to lessen & diminish life, but to enhance & fulfill life* (cf. Deut 4:1; 5:33; 8:1). A life based upon the Law of the Lord is constantly under the blessing of God (cf. Ps 1:1-2), for by His Law the Lord has made His people secure from bondage (cf. Ex 20:2) — the way of obedience is the way of true liberty (cf. Ps 119:45). The problem with fallen man is that he is not able to obey the Law as God intended — “his heart is deceitful and desperately sick” (cf. Jer 17:9; Ecc 9:3; Rom 1:21) — he simply satisfies himself with a modest degree of outward compliance, and hopes that God will forgive him of his misgivings. Though he obviously doesn’t see himself as perfect, neither does he see himself as bad — the problem is he sees himself as reasonably good, but he only understands “relative goodness,” not “absolute goodness;” and therein is the root of the problem — relative human goodness is not acceptable to God… He demands absolute perfection. The reality is, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (cf. Rom 3:23; 3:9; Lk 18:9). So what is the resolution to this dilemma? Is there no way for us to resolve our sin problem? What is the answer? How can we possibly become people who are acceptable to God? Obviously we need to have “the problem of our sinfulness” resolved. What are we to do? Well, since the fall of Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden, God has had a plan for resolving it; a plan that will ultimately abolish sin in the universe and destroy the father of sin (i.e., the serpent, the devil — cf. Gen 3:14-15; Mt 25:41; Jn 8:44; Rev 20:1-10), and come to this world in the person of Jesus Christ and atone for our sin (cf. Jn 3:16; 1 Pet 2:24), and then ask us to place our trust in Him as our Savior and Lord (cf. Jn 1:12; Rom 10:4-17; Gal 3:26; Eph 2:8-9).
Whereas the people of God in the Old Testament era looked forward to that day when God would fulfill His promise to establish a New Covenant with them (cf. Jer 31:31-34)... the people of God during New Testament times look back on that day when God established the New Covenant through the death and resurrection of His Son (cf. Mt 26:26-28; Heb 8:6, 8; 9:15)—though God’s plan of salvation was a future reality in the Old Testament, today it is a historical reality that took place 2000 years ago in Jerusalem. The apostle Peter described it this way—“As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, made careful search and inquiry about what God was telling them, seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow... he goes on to say: these were things into which even the angels of heaven desired to look” (1 Pet 1:10-12). Though many Old Testament prophets did not fully understand everything they were prophesying... they were told by God to write down what He was telling them, “because the fullness of His message was closed up and sealed until the end of time” (Dan 12:8-10); so when Daniel expressed his continued failure to understand the vision he was given, God told him it would not be completely clear until it occurred. Remember, the prophets foretold an even greater manifestation of grace than what they had known (cf. Is 45:20-25; 52:14-15; 55:1-7; 61:1-3; also Rom 9:24-33; 10:11, 13, 20; 15:9-21). The salvation of God is portrayed in the Book of Isaiah (read the following fifteen verses—Is 52:13-53:12); these verses contain incontrovertible evidence that Jesus is the fulfillment of messianic prophecy; this section of Scripture clearly refers to “the Messiah Jesus” as the New Testament attests (cf. Mt 8:17; Mk 15:28; Lk 22:37; Jn 12:38; Acts 8:28-35; Rom 10:16; 1 Pet 2:21-25); it is often alluded to without being quoted (cf. Mk 9:12; Rom 4:25; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 1:19; 1 Jn 3:5). The details stated in Isaiah cover the work of Christ in His substitutionary death, His burial, His resurrection, His saving of sinners, His intercession, and His kingdom. Beloved, take the time to prayerfully reflect upon those fifteen verses in Isaiah (cf. Is 52:13-53:12).

As has been the case from the very beginning, salvation results when man places his trust in God—“Abraham believed in the LORD, and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (cf. Gen 15:6). Scripture clearly teaches that righteousness is only achieved by trusting in God (i.e., having faith in God), and has nothing to do with the works of man or obedience to the Law; remember, Abraham lived 500 years before Moses received the Law from God... so Faith predates Law. The apostle Paul quoted these words as an illustration of faith over and against works (cf. Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jam 2:23); he stated it thus: “No one will be justified by the works of the Law” (Rom 3:20); “Man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law” (Rom 3:28); “The promise to Abraham was not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith” (Rom 4:13). God “reckoned” Abraham’s faith as righteousness (Gen 15:6)—the word “reckoned” is often translated “counted” or “imputed;” it is a banking term that means “to put to one’s account” (that word is used eleven times in Romans 4). So Abraham didn’t work for his salvation; he simply trusted God’s Word—it was Jesus Christ who ultimately did the work on the cross, and it was His righteousness that was placed on Abraham’s account. By the way, the word dikaios in Greek is translated “justify” & “righteous” in English—to be justified before God is to
have a “righteous standing” before God. Sinners are declared righteous because of the work of Christ on their behalf; so justification is something God does — no sinner can make himself righteous or justify himself… only God can do that; all we can do is place our faith in Him and believe in Him (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11). “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (cf. Gen 2:17; Deut 30:19-20; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:1-5). Remember, Abraham is the father of all believers, both Jews & Gentiles; the reality is, Abraham has a spiritual family (all true believers) as well as a physical family (nation of Israel); “God made him a father of many nations” (Gen 17:5). It is also important to note that “God justifies the ungodly” (Rom 4:5); the reality is, there are no godly people for Him to justify – “there is none righteous, not even one” (cf. Ps 14:1-3; 53:1-3; Rom 3:10); we are all sinners who fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). God placed all of our sins on Christ’s account that He might put Christ’s righteousness on our account (1 Pet 2:24). God justifies the ungodly (sinners) because they believe His gracious promise (cf. Mt 9:12-13), not because they obey His Law. The Law was not given to save men, but to show them that they are lost and need deliverance (cf. Rom 4:15; Gal 3:19, 24) — “All we like sheep have gone astray: each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on Him (i.e., to fall on the Messiah Jesus at the cross)” (Is 53:6). The good news of the gospel is “the power of God unto salvation” (Rom 1:16). Said the LORD to the prophet Hosea, “I want faithful love more than I want animal sacrifices, and I want people to know Me more than I want burnt offerings” (cf. Hos 6:6). Said Jesus in his high priestly prayer the night before He went to the cross: “This is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent” (cf. Jn 17:3; Jer 24:7).

The main problem with all men is their continual desire to be autonomous creatures; i.e., their desire to run their own life and not be in subjection to anyone other than themselves. That was the problem with Adam, and it is still the problem today; even believers have a difficult time completely surrendering to the lordship of Christ (due to their sin nature). Many believers in the church of Galatia redefined the Christian life and made it a “works oriented life,” as if their compliance with the Law resulted in a level of righteousness before God (Gal 2:21). While the law demands works, grace requires faith, and those are two very different suppositions — works focuses on one’s own efforts, whereas faith focuses on the work of Christ. Faith is a difficult construct for many believers, because it is man’s nature to constantly focus on himself and his actions rather than focus on God and His actions. To believe that “our works” are somewhat meritorious before God, is to believe that “a measure of good actually dwells in us” (Rom 7:18); and that God is pleased when we embrace a certain lifestyle and obey certain precepts (be it circumcision, acting piously, disassociating from certain individuals, keeping the Sabbath, attending church, adhering to various ritualistic obligations, etc.); incidentally, that would be akin to believing that we are “transformed” (sanctified) by our own works. Listen carefully, we didn’t become children of God by anything we did (i.e., by our works)… and neither will we be “sanctified” (transformed) by anything we do (i.e., by our works — Gal 3:1-3). When “our behavior” is the supreme issue that governs our lives, our “focus in life” is completely misdirected—rather than focusing on Christ we are focusing on ourselves, but the Christ-
ian life is not about “our works,” it is about the “works of Christ” who is both “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2); so the Christian life is not only about what Christ did to make us His children, but what He continues to do in our lives to bring about our sanctification. The word “sanctified” in Greek (hagiasmos) literally means “to be separated unto God and be separated from all that is evil” — thus it means to “be holy” (hagios); anything that is separated unto God and separated from that which is evil is holy (cf. Lev 11:44; Is 57:15; 2 Cor 7:1; 1 Pet 1:16). Ultimately, the work of sanctification in our lives is the work of God (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2), not something of our own doing; it is God who makes us holy and transforms us into the image of Christ — think about it, how can we possibly make ourselves pure and holy? By performing some simplistic little works? Paul calls that nonsense (Gal 3:3). If God doesn’t make us holy, we will never become holy. The wonderful truth is, God is doing a transforming work in us! (cf. Phil 1:6; 2:13; 2 Cor 3:18). The means God uses to accomplishes His transforming work in us is His Holy Spirit and His Holy Word; i.e., the Word of truth (cf. Jn 17:17; 2 Cor 3:18) — remember, God’s Word is living and active (Heb 4:12); it is a living dynamic, not just a collection of forensic truths & divine precepts. As we place our trust in God and cooperate with Him and strive to walk in righteousness (that’s our part), God by His Spirit effectuates a change in us (cf. 1 Cor 1:30; 3:6; Rom 6:12-22; Eph 6:14; 1 Tim 6:11-14; 2 Tim 2:22; 3:16; 1 Pet 2:24; 1 Jn 3:6-10; Phil 2:12-13) — where there is true born-again faith, there is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit disciplining us and moving us in a godly direction (cf. Phil 2:12-13; Heb 12:4-11; Ps 25:8-10; 32:8-9; 33:18; 37:23-25). Just as it was by His Word that God spoke all things into existence (cf. Gen 1:3. 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29), and by His Word that we were born-again and became new creatures in Christ (cf. 1 Pet 1:3, 23; 2 Cor 5:17)... so it is by His Word that He is transforming us into the image of His Son (cf. Jn 17:17). It is here where most believers become somewhat confused.

As fallen creatures, we have a tendency to separate God Himself from His Word, as if they are two distinct realities... in so doing we make God a more distant reality and His Word just a collection of divine thoughts and spiritual truths. The reality is, Scripture is God’s self-revelation to man — not just a book about Him, but the very voice of God Himself. Not only is God “holy,” so also is His Word; not only is God “living,” so also is His Word; the two realities are one, just as the Trinity is one. Jesus referred to Himself as “the truth” (Jn 14:6), and to His Word as “the truth” (Jn 17:17), and to the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:13) — the reality is, there is only one truth, and truth does not reside outside of God Himself, as if truth is a separate construct unto itself — Just as God is alive & holy, so is His Word alive & holy — again, they are one. So when you humbly study God’s Word, you are experiencing the very presence of God. Now since God is Spirit, the physical Bible that we hold in our hands is not holy (the physical written Word of God is something that a publishing company made; some of its workers may not have even been believers), so we don't treat our physical Bible as if the pages themselves are of a holy nature that need to be revered; it is the invisible, intrinsic Word itself that is of God and is holy... keeping that in mind, we refer to Scripture as “the Holy Bible” because the content itself is indeed “holy.” As the Bible proclaims, “all of Scripture is God-breathed” (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21)… it is the very Word of God
When studying His Word, God who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus, saying, humble himself & diligently seek to understand exactly what it is that God is saying to him (cf. 2 Tim 2:15), and not simply conclude that “God’s Word doesn’t speak to my heart.”

When studying God’s Word it is important to first determine what God is saying, before determining what His message means — if one doesn’t accurately determine what God is saying, one will never fully grasp what God’s message means. Let me illustrate it with the words of Paul to the believers at Philippi — “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6). Do you know what Paul is saying in this passage, as opposed to what he is not saying? He is saying that God will perfect the work He began in those of us who have been born-again as a result of placing our trust in Christ... he is not saying that He might perfect that work. Additionally, He is saying that God started a work in the believer’s life, and that He is going to complete that work — the word translated “perfect” (epiteleo) literally
means “to bring through to an end;” it is commonly translated “complete, accomplish, finish” (cf. 2 Cor 8:6, 11; 1 Pet 5:9; Rom 15:28). Before going any further, we need to first define what “that good work is” that Paul is referring to; it is the “divine work of regeneration;” i.e., the new birth that is effectuated in us by the Holy Spirit, whereby God makes us a new creation in Christ (cf. Jn 3:3-5; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 2:4-5; Col 2:13; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:3). Whereas regeneration is the “birth” by which this work of new creation is begun, sanctification is the “growth” by which that work is completed (cf. Jn 17:17-19; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). The reality is, the regenerate person has forever ceased to be the person he or she was — the old life is over and a new life has begun; they are new creatures in Christ, buried with Him and raised from the dead with Him to a new life of righteousness (cf. Rom 6:3-11; 2 Cor 5:17; Col 3:9-11). You’ll notice, Paul said God “will” perfect and complete the work He has begun; that verb in Greek is in the “indicative mood” (that is the mood of reality in Greek; the grammatical way in which one can state something as “being a fact;” i.e., “reality;” the English language doesn’t possess that unique characteristic; it would have to express it with additional words). Thus Paul is saying that this is a certain reality in the lives of believers; now contrary to what one might be inclined to think, this will occur. Paul prefaced his comments by telling the Philippian believers that he was absolutely confident that God will finish the work He began in them — why was he confident? their participation in the work of ministry evidenced the fact that they were truly born-again, and that their faith was indeed genuine (cf. Phil 1:3-11; Lk 6:43-45; Mt 5:16; Jn 5:36; 13:35; Eph 2:10; Jam 2:17, 19). With the foregoing in mind, every believer can be absolutely certain that God is at work in them transforming them into the image of Christ (cf. Rom 8: 28-29; Phil 2:12-13); again, it is not something that God does instantaneously — our transformation (i.e., sanctification) will not be fully completed until we enter into the eternal state (heaven; cf. 1 Jn 3:2; Rom 8:18-25, 29; 2 Cor 3:18; 2 Pet 1:4). If there is something confusing or disturbing to you about a particular passage you are reading, take the time to wrestle with what it says, and then apply it to your life. Obviously, many passages in Scripture contain a lot of significant information (as does Phil 1:6); as believers we need to work at determining exactly what it means (cf. Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 2:15; 1 Pet 1:10), and not simply insist on understanding everything with just a cursory reading. The truth is, these words of Paul to the Philippian believers are some of the most inspirational words in all of Scripture to the believing community; many believers have made Philippians 1:6 their favorite verse because of the incredible assurance that it gives to them as God’s children. Learn to study Scripture with integrity, and not just casually read it. Keep in mind, “Scripture is God’s Word to your heart!”

It should be noted, context is generally foundational to a proper interpretation of what Scripture is saying; without understanding the context, one can easily misinterpret the message — by dealing with the contextual setting, you will understand “why things are stated as they are.” So every aspect of Scripture needs to be studied in context — both the immediate context (i.e., the chapters that surround the passage you are reading), and the broader context (i.e., the entire book one is reading). The reality is this: if you are studying a book that deals with events that occurred in the year 2,000 BC (the time of Abraham), or 1,400 BC (the time of Moses), or 1,000 BC (the time of David), or 600 BC
(the time of Daniel), you need to have a little understanding of both the historical and cultural setting that existed then). In similar fashion, if I wrote a letter to someone that you happened to read… if you did not know the person to whom the letter was written, or why the letter was written, it is highly unlikely that you would understand much of what I wrote — the reality is, it could have been written to my wife, a relative, a friend, a person I had only met over the internet, or a friend of a friend I was simply trying to help who was really struggling. Now depending on the situation that existed between me and the individual to whom the letter was written, that information would be very important for you to understand why things were stated as they were. So determining “why” a passage says what it says is extremely important in understanding the message. Though some select passages don’t require a significant amount of contextual understanding, many passages demand a complete understanding of the context. Regarding the context of what Paul had said to the Philippians, as previously mentioned, he had become convinced of the genuineness of their faith because of their participation and dedication to living and proclaiming the truth about Jesus Christ, and helping Paul in his ministry (cf. Phil 1:3-4). Thus the truth of what Paul said can be applied to every born-again believer in Christ. Now once a person determines the contextual meaning of a passage, he then needs to affirm the truth of what God’s Word says (i.e., believe it) and act upon it as it applies to him (i.e., obey it). By way of application, the words of Paul in Philippians 1:6 should be a great encouragement to every believer, because their sanctification and their destiny are certain! As believers we need to fully embrace that truth as God’s voice to our soul, and reflect upon it often; and not just “hope it is true.” It is the same with the concept of heaven — is it too surreal a thought to you, or is it a dynamic reality in your heart? (cf. 2 Cor 5:1-8; Col 1:5; 3:1-4; 1 Pet 1:4; 2 Pet 3:10-13; 1 Jn 3:2-3). The reality is, you ultimately need to treat Scripture as God speaking to you through a contextual situation that may be very different from yours; when you come to understand God’s message to those individuals in the ancient world, you will then be able to determine its application to your life in our present day world.

It is also important for believers to understand that they are not insignificant creatures to God, who is very intolerant of them when they stumble in life — God is not some rigid deity who has very little patience with His children — He is a God of unconditional love who exercises extreme patience; unlike anything that we can imagine (cf. 2 Pet 3:9; Rom 2:4; 1 Tim 1:15-16; 1 Pet 3:20). As Scripture says, “love is patient and endures all things” (cf. 1 Cor 13:4, 7; Gal 5:22; Eph 4:2; Col 3:12-14; 1 Th 5:14; 2 Tim 2:24); grace is greater than all our sin (cf. Rom 5:20). God sent His Son to this world to die for us and atone for our sins and redeem us from the domain of darkness (Col 1:13), and He wants to speak to our hearts through His Word. God is fully mindful of our spiritual condition; He knows we are but dust, and that we are extremely weak creatures who stumble often — that defines all of us; none of us walk on water (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15; Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20). Let me direct this message to you personally — God made you in His image and gave you a mind with which to contemplate Him. Use it! Learn to humbly mediate on His Word (regardless of how unworthy you may think you are) that He might speak to your heart (read Ps 1:2; 4:4; 63:6; 77:6; 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99, 148).
Remember, we are all fallen creatures; in spite of the fact that we are God's children, we are still fallen creatures with a truckload of foibles (Rom 7:18). You may need to prayerfully reflect upon the last few paragraphs several times in order to grasp the incredible reality of God's Word — you were not only created by it... you were born-again by it... you are being transformed by it... and you will ultimately be glorified by it! I can't overstate the importance of prayerfully contemplating and meditating upon divine truth. Remember, it is living and active, and is the voice of God to your heart! (cf. Heb 4:12). The more you contemplate God's Word, the more significant it will be to your heart and mind. When a believer humbles himself before the Lord and contemplates His Word, it warms his heart... it encourages his soul... it inspires him... it gives him confidence... it convicts his heart... and it gives him assurance. That is the essence of FAITH — only the voice of the living God to your soul can accomplish such things in your heart. Remember what Paul said: “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom 10:17); simply wishing and praying that your faith would be greater than it is, isn’t enough. By the way, being as God’s Word is written, it’s an eternal unchanging divine reality (cf. Mal 3:6; Heb 13:8); God isn’t going to send us a revised version of it at some later point — as Jesus Himself said, “Make disciples of all people everywhere, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you... even until the end of the world” (Mt. 28:19-20). By the way, it has been over 1900 years since God spoke to the world; never before did He wait that long. Down through the ages He periodically spoke to man through a number of His servants and prophets... and then came “His final revelation” through the Lord Jesus and His apostles (cf. Mt 21:33-46; 23:37-39; 25:31-46). Jesus finished the work of God in our world (cf. Jn 17:1-4; 19:30; Heb 1:2; 1 Pet 1:5, 20-21; 2 Pet 3:3-9); there are no more words to be spoken. There will be no special dispensation given to man at some point in time in the future — only judgment awaits us (cf. Acts 2:17; 2 Tim 3:1-5); this is God’s eternal word to man... walk in it.

Beloved, prayerfully reflect upon these truths for an hour or so and see how significant they become to your heart. By the way, I’m not some mystic who is trying to get you to wander into the realm of the unknown, that you might have some ethereal experience. Though one may be inclined to embrace such thinking, that is not at all the experience of the believer; “we don’t walk by sight, we walk by faith” (2 Cor 5:7). The reality is this: the reason believers struggle with their faith, is that they spend very little time studying and humbly reflecting upon God’s Word. Consider what the book of Hebrews says — “By this time many of you ought to be teachers; instead you have need for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God” (Heb 5:12). By the way, faith is not just about “knowing” God’s Word, it is about “believing” it! Though one must know something before he can believe it, believing is the game changer; and it only comes by giving serious prayerful consideration to divine truth (cf. Jam 1:21)... and that only happens to the humble heart that contemplates God’s Word. Keep in mind, God’s Word defines reality for us, and that is the “perspective” with which we must approach it. Scripture not only defines who God is, it defines who man is and why he is the way he is... it (i.e., God) tells us why things are the way they are... what is going to happen in the future to this world in which we live... and how He functions and operates in this
fallen universe—such things are not just “opinions,” they are “reality.” The problem is, man thinks his opinion defines reality, but Scripture (God) calls such thinking absolute foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:18, 20; 2:14; 3:19). James Montgomery Boice, one of the world’s premiere preachers in the 20th century put it this way in his work, “Foundations of the Christian Faith”—“Without the Scriptures our imagined wisdom runs to foolishness. With the Scriptures and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we are able to learn who God is, what He has done for us, and how we can respond to Him and live our lives in fellowship with Him” (p. 38). It goes without saying, “fallen man is a very proud beast, who isn’t going to cow tail it to anyone: not even God.” His fallen thinking is seriously deficient, yet his proud heart embraces it thoroughly; thus it is just such thinking that governs his life. Conversely, the premise problem the believer has is that his fallen fleshly thinking constantly seeks to control the discourse in his mind— which is completely at odds with divine thinking” (cf. Gal 5:17). . . and therein is the war that believers must fight every waking moment until their lives on this planet are over (cf. 1 Tim 6:16; Heb 12:4-13; 1 Pet 5:6-10). Says Paul, “Brothers, I’m not close to having achieved perfection, but one thing I do, I forget what lies behind and reach forward to what lies ahead; I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (cf. Phil 3:13-14). That must be your goal as well; don’t let your stumbling cause you to stop fighting the fight! Though most believers insist on making the Christian life a pleasant little experience (regrettably, that teaching characterized the majority of churches in the 20th century), that is not at all God’s plan for His children—“believers are to complete the sufferings of Christ in this world” (cf. Mt 16:24-25; Col 1:24; Phil 1:29; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1-2; 4:12-13, 18; 5:6-11), “and put on the armor of God and stand firm against the devil” (cf. Eph 6:11).

Because such thinking is a difficult construct for many believers, they must give themselves to studying what Scripture (God) teaches us, and not simply defer to humanistic thinking. One of the questions God is going to ask His children at the Judgment Seat of Christ (that’s the judgment to which every believer is going to be subjected; cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 5:10) is this: “Why did you treat My Word so lightly? Why did you disregard so much of it? Why didn’t you seek My face and prayerfully contemplate My Word?”

THE BELIVER’S LIBERATION

Early in His ministry, Jesus entered the synagogue on the Sabbath in Nazareth where He was raised… He stood up before the people and read these words from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me… He has appointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor… to heal the brokenhearted… to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind… and set free those who are oppressed” (cf. Is 61:1; Lk 4:18) – the words “liberty” & “sight” are both emphatic in Greek (i.e., strongly emphasized); you may want to read the words of Jesus again with that in mind. By the way, these prophetic words by the prophet Isaiah were spoken 700 years earlier. The long and short of it is, the Messiah’s mission was to deal with the enormous problems that have afflicted mankind throughout history—bondage, suffering, poverty, sorrow, ignorance, blindness,
and oppression — and deliver him from them. The reality is, the Lord Jesus came to this world to proclaim the dawning of a new era for the oppressed and the down-trodden, and present Himself as the answer to all the ills that torments man. The issue of “freedom” is a difficult one for most Christians, so let’s take a look at it in more detail. A corollary of freedom is “liberation,” and this concept is approached from a number of different perspectives in our world — the problem is, most of these perspectives are simply the product of fallen man, and have no merit at all with God. Many in the Christian world actually embrace a type of liberation that is not at all taught in Scripture — we see it principally in Roman Catholicism in Latin America… and Black Liberation Theology here in the US. Since “liberation theology” differs significantly from what Scripture teaches, it is a spiritual construct that does not coincide with divine truth.

Jesus said, “I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life”… “Unless you believe in Me you shall die in your sins”… “If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free…. and those whom the Lord sets free shall be free indeed” (cf. John 8:12, 24, 31, 32, 36). A disciple of Jesus is one who “follows Him;” i.e., abides in His Word and continues in His teachings. In contrast to the followers of Christ, the Jewish people at the time of Christ lived in bondage to the Law & Sin — though the leaders of Judaism were very religious, their proud religiosity was not acceptable to God… their religiosity actually led them to kill the Messiah, though there was no guilt found in Him; cf. Mt 27:19, 23-26; Lk 23:41; Jn 18:38; 19:4, 6); so being religious & living by some strict rules has nothing to do with having a righteous standing before God — proud man-made religion is worthless in God’s sight. Down through the ages, men have invented all kinds of religious ideals; many have even invented their own version of Christianity, but since it is not grounded in the truth of Scripture, it is not acceptable to God — thus He will say to them at the end of time, “Depart from Me, I never knew you” (Mt 7:21-23). A “works-oriented life” is completely unacceptable to God because there isn’t an ounce of true goodness in it; though man is capable of relative goodness, he is not capable of absolute goodness (i.e., absolute holiness), and that’s the requirement (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18); the best actions of men are all tainted with evil (i.e., pride, self-centeredness, and self-righteousness). Now just because one makes Jesus a part of his or her religious thinking, and adopts some of His teachings, doesn't make him or her a “follower of Christ” — we are not free to pick and choose what we want to believe, and somehow conclude that we are “followers of Christ.” Having a “humble heart” is foundational to genuine faith — without humility, one's faith is completely bogus… why's that? because a proud heart has a “self-orientation,” and such is completely sinful to God.

In the 20th century we saw the development of something known as “liberation theology;” it was a movement in Latin America that attempted to unite theology and sociopolitical concerns; as if the political world needed to be an integral part of their theology. Though the world in which we live can be a very troubling one, “we are not free to change the discourse of Scripture and make Christianity into something it is not.” Because many
people in south America believed they were the victims of colonialism and economic exploitation, and since Jesus was for “the poor” in this world and hated these things (cf. Mt 11:5; 19:21; Lk 6:20; 14:13), they made their struggle for a new socialist society and being liberated from such evils the foundation of their faith; so they believed God was on their side and would deliver them from these things — thus the premiere focus of their faith was being liberated from the corrupt world in which they lived, rather then experiencing God’s forgiveness for the corruptness that existed in their own soul. The reality is this — liberation from the ugly tenants that characterize our world cannot become the premiere message of Christ to our fallen world. To make political ideals a part of our faith is to impose our own thinking (i.e., man's) on what Scripture (i.e., God) clearly states. That doesn't mean that Christians don't care about the poor, the downtrodden, and those who are being exploited; the truth is mistreatment of the poor is a gross evil that should bother all of us… it is the ugliest characteristic of sinful man down through the ages. Jesus expressly had a heart for the poor. In the ancient world when He entered into human history, “hate” characterized much of the human family; so much so that many Christians were tortured and murdered for their faith in Christ, but that didn't mean they made their political ideals the foundation of their faith; spirituality and politics are not interrelated. God's goal for His children in this life is not to remove all of the negatives from their lives, and make it nothing but a bunch of positives; i.e., keep us healthy, keep our bank account full, and make our life a pleasant little utopia — that would be akin to liberation theology. Sadly, many Christians in our world believe in a kind of prosperity doctrine; i.e., a name it and claim it doctrine, where God gives one pretty much everything they ask for — should they not receive it, they believe they are simply not exercising enough faith; likewise, should they not experience healing from some condition that they are suffering from, they believe the problem is with their faith (not with God). Obviously there is a lot of heresy being propounded in the Christian world. In the Sermon on the Mount 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… Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” (Mt 7:21-23); all sin is lawlessness and rebellion against God (1 Jn 3:4). The message of Jesus is this: “We must humbly comply with the teachings of God’s Word, and not change the discourse and make it say what we want it to say;” the truth is, “reality is what it is, not simply something we want it to be” (Jesus referred to that as “lawlessness”). Down through the centuries the teaching of men has distorted the teaching of Scripture. After the fall of Rome, the Christian world back then began to politicize Christianity; the church at Rome became the governing power that controlled the western world — it was then the Roman Empire became the “Holy Roman Empire;” but that was not at all of God. Rather then “love” being the chief characteristic of the church, “war” became its dominant characteristic — thus there were the Crusades and Inquisitions (clearly these things were not of God). As believers we are not free to “add anything” to our faith in Christ; when we do, we are mixing “human ideals” with “divine ideals;” and those two ideals do not coalesce. No matter how virtuous one might
think his beliefs and ideals are, they are not to be connected to God and made an integral part of the Christian faith.

A corollary of liberation is the issue of “deliverance” — as believers, we all pray for deliverance from things… be it deliverance from physical infirmities, adversity, trials and tribulation, temptation, the guilt of sin, pain in the soul, frustration with life, loneliness, family matters, help in overcoming, relational problems, financial difficulties, sickness, unemployment, terminal illness, even the matter of unbelief and the seeming ineffectiveness of our faith; the reality is, there’s nothing we don’t pray about. It’s by prayer that we commune with God and express our reverence and adoration for Him… that we bare our souls in contrite confession before Him… that we pour out our gratefulness and thanksgiving to Him… and offer our petitions and supplications to Him. Obviously “faith” is an integral part of prayer — it sees God for who He is, and humbly sees oneself for who he is, and ultimately places oneself in willful submission to the will of God (cf. Mt 6:10; 26:39; Acts 21:14; 1 Jn 5:14). Now aside from the fact that we bring our needs before God, does not mean that He will respond to our requests as we would necessarily like Him to — tribulation, suffering and temptation play significant roles in our lives (cf. Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22; 1 Cor 10:13; Jam 1:13-15; 3:2; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:12-13; 5:7-10). The reality is, God has a purpose for them; it is through them that God transforms our lives into the image of Christ (cf. Rom 5:3-5; 8:18-30; Jam 1:2-4; Deut 4:20; Is 48:10). Sadly, there are many in the Christian community who believe that people don’t get what they ask for simply because they don’t have enough faith… thus they make their faith the game changer; but that is not what Scripture teaches; as stated earlier, we are not a people of great faith (not one of us walks on water), we are a people of faith in a great God (cf. Mk 9:24; Rom 3:3; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 13:5; also cf. Mt 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). It should be remembered, Jesus often healed men of little or no faith (that’s His prerogative; don’t put God in box and limit Him to human thinking; God can do as He pleases — if it serves His higher purposes, there is nothing He can’t do; remember the words of Jesus, “God causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” — cf. Mt5:45). With that in mind, “unanswered prayer” (i.e., not getting what we ask for) can produce a lot of consternation in our soul; after all, much of what we ask for coincides with divine truth — we ask that we would not gave in to temptation… that we would not experience turmoil in our soul when things go awry in life… that the trials of life would not overwhelm us and cause us to despair… that we would respond to some particular matter the way God would have us respond — yet our prayers frequently do not result in what we ask for. So this thing called “prayer” and this thing called “faith” isn’t exactly what we are inclined to think it is. Due to the fact that we often make ourselves the center of our little world (that defines all of us; that is simply the way our inner core functions), life can be an extremely challenging predication for us. Think about it, when life doesn’t go the way you want it to go, or the way you think it should go, or the way you pray that it will go… your little world is turned upside down rather than right-side up in your mind, leaving you in a quandary that can be very perplexing; by the way, that is not at all unusual; that characterized the lives of all the prophets.
It is our insistence on simplifying the ways of God in our world that lays at the root of our problem. I am no more a genius in this area than you are… frequently life doesn't work the way I think it should work or the way I want it to work. It is here where we must bend the knee and defer to the words of God to the prophet Isaiah — “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts” (Is 55:8-9). Yet here we are insisting that life make sense to us, and that it be a somewhat pleasant little experience; after all, are we not God’s children whom He loves unconditionally? (cf. Mt 7:11). The inherent argument in our minds is this — “love and suffering don’t coincide — how can God say He loves us when He permits us to suffer terribly?”

It is when we insist on simplifying everything, including our faith, that we begin to question everything — that was precisely where the prophets of old ended up (read the books of Job, Jeremiah & Ecclesiastes). According to the word of the Lord, God made Solomon the wisest man who ever lived or who ever will live (read 1 Kg 3:3-14; especially verse 12) — why some believers argue with that truism is beyond me, but they do. Listen to Solomon’s words: “The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: Fear God and keep His commandments; this applies to every person. God will ultimately bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil” (cf. Ecc 12:13-14).

Obviously there is a time to argue and complain to God about all that is going on in our lives, but there is also a time to shut it down and submit to Him and His will for our lives; it is here that the “psalms of lament” play an important role in the believer’s faith (cf. Ps 142); God understands how difficult things can be in our lives, and how irreconcilable they can be in our minds… as such, He wants us to pour out our unedited reactions to life, and not coat them and try to make them more acceptable to Him (cf. Ps 32, 51)… He is well aware of all the angst in your soul, so tell God your doubt, your anger, your fear, and your deep sadness. Do you not want your children to be open and honest with you? or do you prefer that they hide their thoughts from you? Our God is not some narrow-minded deity who can’t handle reality — “He loved us in that while we were yet sinners, He died for us… how much more now does He loves us as His children?” (cf. Rom 5:8-11; 8:31-37; 2 Tim 2:13; Heb 13:5). The reality is, God wants you to be exceedingly truthful to Him about everything that is going in your life… even the anguish and the anger that you feel; why would you think otherwise? Only those who believe God is exceedingly rigidly and strict, would fear being open and honest with Him… but such is not our God.

Year’s ago a friend of mine’s little boy was killed in a terrible accident… his son was the joy of his life; he meant more to him than anything in the world… as a result of his son’s death he became extremely distraught, and became angry with God for taking his son’s life (cf. Ps 139:16; Ecc 11:5). Obviously God never answered “the ‘why’ question” that constantly occupied his mind; ultimately, darkness filled his soul for an extended period of time… apparently the pain in his soul simply seemed too much for him to bear. Many people thought he might actually commit suicide. Whether or not he reconciled everything with God before he died (about fifteen years later), I don’t know — my thinking is, he probably
did; because sometimes believers hold on to things until they reach the end of the road in life. I only knew this man for a few years; it wasn’t until about ten years later that he passed away. Many of us learned some very poignant truths through the death of his son. Obviously there are times in our lives when God subjects us to some very difficult circumstances… some of us undergo far more painful ones than others; regrettably, there are some in the Christian community who actually measure other people’s faith by the problems in their lives — i.e., if their life is filled with negatives, they must be guilty of something before God… on the other hand, if their life is filled with positives, God must be pleased with them (read Psalms 73 & 142; Jer 15:15-18); such thinking shows how juvenile, warped and heretical the minds of men can be. It might also be helpful to remember that some believers are actually martyred for their faith in Christ, though the vast majority are not. By the way 45 million Christians have been martyred for their faith since the first century; statistics tells us that some 90,000 Christians are being martyred each year in our world today. Why do some of us get an easy road and others an extremely difficult one? Only God knows that. Many of God’s choicest saints in Scripture suffered terribly… it appears that God subjects many of those who serve Him faithfully and diligently to some very painful trials, and to something known as “darkness in the soul” — i.e., “a crisis of faith” whereby life’s circumstances produce such an extreme level of consternation in the soul, that it causes one to question and doubt his or her preconceived beliefs. Ultimately a crisis of faith demands that one reconcile or reevaluate that particular tenet of faith, before he can continue believing in it or continue in the life path in question; thus he either reconciles the cause of doubt with the belief in question, or he drops that belief. When believers carefully think through their faith, it would be very naive of them to think that their “theology of thought” is without problems; after all, the things we believe to be true about the Christian faith obviously stretch the human mind and heart — in reality, we only scratch the surface of our understanding of the Eternal, Transcendent One — GOD (cf. Is 55:8-9; Rom 11:33-36). The psalmist said, “It is good for me that I was afflicted, that I may learn Thy statutes” (cf. Ps 119:71; also 119:67, 75; Heb 12:5-11).

In his book “Abandoned to God,” Oswald Chambers states, “The mystics used to speak of ‘the dark night of the soul’ as a time of spiritual darkness and dryness, not the direct result of sins committed, but rather a deep conviction of sin itself that dwells in the heart and mind (cf. Rom 7:18). It is at just such a time that ‘a person is being brought to the end of himself,’ and made aware of the utter worthlessness of his own nature when he is stripped of all religious pretensions.” During a dark night of the soul, God initiates a purging, a cleansing, and a purifying of our souls from everything that is not of faith. It is at this time, God crushes our self will, so that He can merge it with His own. In other words, this is our own private Gethsemane. As Jesus cried in the garden, "My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death… nevertheless, not what I will, but what Thou wilt" (Mk 14:34-36). During this dark season of the soul, God teaches us to respond as Jesus did, “Not my will, but Thine” (Mt 26:39). So the dark night of the soul is simply the transition we make from depending upon ourselves and our own thinking to a total dependence upon Christ and His faithfulness. Thus through the dark night we enter into a new way
of knowing God. The dark night of the soul is a phenomenon that describes a malady which the greatest of Christians have suffered from time to time. It was the malady that provoked David to soak his pillow with tears. It was the malady that earned for prophet Jeremiah the nickname, “The Weeping Prophet.” And it was the malady that so afflicted Martin Luther that his melancholy threatened to destroy him. Nothing gets the believer’s attention more than the dark night of the soul… the reality is, it must not be seen as just some ordinary depression, but a depression that is linked to a crisis of faith, a crisis that comes when one senses the absence of God or gives rise to a feeling of abandonment by by Him — it was just such a condition that prompted Moses, Elijah, Job, Jeremiah, and Jonah to ask God to take their lives. Regarding darkness, Job said this: “God reveals mysteries from the darkness, and brings the deep darkness into light” (Job 12:22). Said Jeremiah, “Why has my pain been perpetual and my wound incurable, refusing to be healed? Lord, will you indeed be to me like a deceptive stream with water that is unreliable?” (Jer 15:18). He went on to say, “LORD, Thou hast deceived me… Thou has overcome me and prevailed. I have become a laughingstock all day long; everyone mocks me… it becomes like a burning fire in my heart… I cannot endure it… cursed be the day when I was born” (cf. Jer 20:7, 9, 14). Again, I stress this because of the wayward thinking of those who possess a significant degree of “self-piety” — they make light of difficulties in the soul, as if those who experience them suffer from some spiritual mental neurosis… sadly, this was very common thinking in 20th century America. The truth is, those who make such deductions have a very immature faith; should you hold to such thinking, then you better throw the majority of the prophets under the bus also, because that is what they experienced.

Though this friend of mine may never have reconciled the death of his son with the Lord, does not mean that God excommunicated him from His family as if he had committed the unpardonable sin; God doesn’t do that. Though we are redeemed creatures, we are not able to pass judgment on such matters; that is something that God alone does… yet many believers came down very hard on this man, and took the position that his faith must not have been genuine… the man that I knew stayed inside his house and rarely interacted with others — the grief he had experienced had simply overwhelmed him. It should be noted, none of us as God's children walk through life “highly victorious;” many believers seem to struggle all the way to the grave. The reality is, everything we go through in life isn't easy; sometimes it can be very disconcerting and painful — though like you I wish that was not the case, sometimes it is. Said the apostle Paul: “For Thy sake we are being put to death all day long: we were considered as sheep to be slaughtered; but in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us” (Rom 8:36-37). As believers we have to endure tribulation, distress and persecution; obviously some of these tests are very hard to bear; in spite of that fact, NOTHING can separate us from the love of Christ! Through Christ we are actually more than conquerors! (cf. 1 Pet 1:6-7; 4:1-3, 12; 5:10). The “key” to a transformed life is “keeping our eyes on Christ” (Heb 12:2); though all of us are inclined to place them on “ourselves and our painful circumstances,” we must fight the fight of faith to do otherwise — we must daily affirm God’s unconditional love for us, no matter
how unworthy we may see ourselves, or how ugly our world may be to us. Many of us have traveled a very difficult road in life… some excruciatingly so; yet we are still hanging on to our faith — beloved, that in itself speaks volumes for your faith! God hears your angst! He’s not upset with you because of your troubled soul! Don’t make light of your fallenness — though you are a saved creature, you are still a fallen creature; and if there is anyone who knows how fallen you are, it is God. Consider the following — if God answered all of our prayers the way we wanted Him to answer them, our lives would not only be sinless, they would be little trouble-free, spiritual utopias! and we would be extremely happy creatures! Beloved, that’s what heaven is all about… that is not what life on earth is all about. The reality is, if you take certain verses out of context, you could arrive at a utopian theology of thought… but you would have to “ignore” what a lot of other passages say on the matter; such heretical thinking is the product of very shallow biblical understanding. As stated earlier, don’t make “your faith” the supreme issue in life, make “Christ” the supreme issue — none of us have enough faith to ooo & ah over or walk on water! Rather than addressing this subject further, let me encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith;” again, you can find it on my website under the “Additional Studies Link” — www.thetransformedsoul.com

As Christians, “we have been set free from the law of sin and death” (cf. Rom 8:2); i.e., sin and death no longer have jurisdiction over us. You’ll notice it is referred to as “a law;” the law of sin is this — “sin results in death” (Gen 2:16-17). Paul said, “the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord” (Rom 6:23). As believers in Christ we have been set free from the law of sin (death), and now have life in the Spirit; i.e., we have moved into a new sphere in life now that we are in Christ. The Law of sin and death is described in Romans chapter seven (vv. 7-25); conversely, the Law of the Spirit is described in Romans chapter eight — Paul contrasts these two precepts in chapters seven and eight. As believers in Christ, the Law no longer has jurisdiction over us; we are dead to the Law (Rom 7:4) and free from the Law (Rom 8:2). As Paul states, “There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1), because Jesus bore our condemnation on the cross for us (1 Pet 2:24). That doesn’t mean we don’t stumble and sin in life, but sin is no longer the practice of our lives (that is a present tense verb that defines the ongoing behavior of someone); in other words, sin is the mainstay of his life; as believers, we now fight against sin continuously — that’s the spiritual war that we as believers fight (Gal 5:17). The good news for us as believers is that we have been set free from the law of sin and death, and made alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-5) and transferred into His kingdom (Gal 1:13). By the way, the death being emphasized here is “spiritual death,” not “physical death;” all unbelievers are spiritually dead; conversely, all believers are spiritually alive in Christ (Eph 2:1-5). Paul put it this way, “Through Christ we have been freed of all things from which the Law of Moses could not free us” (Acts 13:39). The reality is this: God sent His Son into the world to save us and do what the Law could not do (due to our sinful flesh; cf. Rom 8:3). The essence of “faith” is believing what God says, and placing our trust in Christ and His atoning work on the cross — unless our sin problem is resolved, there is no way we would ever have “a right standing before God;” thank God
He sent His Son to this world to resolve our sin problem. Though none of us as believers have a perfect faith, we are all growing in our faith to some degree; sadly, some believers are mixing a lot of their own thinking with the teachings of Scripture, thus causing them to believe some erroneous teachings that are deterring their growth and having a negative impact upon their faith.

Paul reminds us that growing in our faith takes place through the study of God’s Word (Rom 10:17); i.e., through contemplating the truths of Scripture. Peter said, “Long for the pure milk of the Word that by it you may grow with respect to your salvation” (1 Pet 2:2); salvation and faith are correlatives of each other. Though we are not a people of “great faith” (faith is a difficult issue for us), we have faith in a “great God.” Can you imagine what it would be like to have such a dynamic faith that we could actually walk on water? Imagine it! We would be competing with each other as to which of us was really the greatest! And the entire world would be ooing and aching over us! Beloved, we could no more handle that kind of notoriety and praise, than broad jump the Grand Canyon or swim from Los Angeles to Tokyo in 24 hours! (read 2 Cor 12:7-10). We would become so arrogant, the Lord would have to do us what He permitted Satan to do to Job! Should you not be able to identify with this, either you are spiritually retarded, or the pride that exists in your soul is so monumental it has completely led you into the wilderness of unreality. Beloved, it ought to be very clear, we are men and women of “little faith” (cf. Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 17:20; Jn 13:33; 1 Jn 3:18); yet our faith is in a “great God.” So faith is more about the object of our faith, than it is about the potency of our faith; we are not to boast in our faith… we are to boast in the cross of Christ (Gal 6:14); Christ is not only the object of our faith, but the author and perfecter of it as well (Heb 12:2). Though we as believers are sometimes bound up in our sin and deeply troubled in our hearts, we only need to humbly turn to Christ and experience His unconditional love, forgiveness and peace; in spite of the fact that we don’t merit one ounce of it, God graciously grants it to us when we humble ourselves before Him; that’s what makes our salvation in Christ such an incredible reality. By the way, it is not just 99 percent His work; it is 100 percent His work! If you insist on making your part really significant, consider this: “What do you bring to the table other than your sin?” Beloved, even your faith is a gift from God.

Let me share a few more thoughts on this matter of “liberation” — as unbelievers we were enslaved to sin; i.e., we were in bondage to ignorance, error, superstition, darkness, Satan, legalism, prejudices, self-centeredness, fear, pride, lusts and earthly pleasures… and we were under the curse and penalty of sin (we were “dead” in our unrighteousness; Rom 6:23; Eph 2:1; Col 2:13). The word “sin” (hamartia) literally means “to miss the mark,” as unbelievers we simply didn’t measure up to God’s standard of “absolute holiness;” not one of us did, because we are fallen sinful creatures (cf. Rom 3:10-20). When believers place their trust in Christ, God delivers them (i.e., sets them free) from the curse and the penalty of sin through the cross (John 3:16; Gal 3:13; Eph 2:2; Col 1:13) — “and those whom the Lord sets free are free indeed” (Jn 8:36). The reality of the cross is this: Jesus liberates us from the tyranny of sin and its bondage. “By abiding in His Word (i.e., by believing it) we come
to know the truth and are set free & delivered from the domain of darkness” (John 8:31-32; Col 1:13). True genuine “liberation” is only found in Jesus Christ; “there is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). If you want to study this matter of “faith” in more depth, let me encourage you to read a study I did on it: “The Dynamics of Genuine Faith.” You can find it on my website — www.thetransformedsoul.com — under the “Additional Studies Link” at the top of the Homepage; click on the “Spiritual Life Studies” and scroll down until you find it. If you would like to make a printable pdf version of it, simply click on the “icon” in the upper right hand corner of the first page of the study. My prayer is that you will find it a great encouragement to your heart and faith… it was to mine; that’s why I wrote it.

THE BELIEVER’S TRANSFORMATION

Let’s return to the issue of “the believer’s transformation” – though God is the one who transforms sinful man into the image of Christ (Rom 8:28), the believer’s part is to believe the truths of Scripture and practice walking in them; i.e., turn from immorality and love others (read 1 Th 4:3-12) – as we do, we will increasingly grow in our faith and more reflect the image of Christ because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Just because we as believers are to exercise faith by obeying, does not mean that we are the ultimate cause of either our salvation or our sanctification – God is the cause… He simply asks us to trust Him and cooperate with Him. Perhaps one could liken it to a poor baseball player being coached by one of the greatest players ever… after years of training and coaching, this young ballplayer starts demonstrating a fairly significant skill-set and starts reflecting much of what he has been taught; the truth is, without undergoing the training and discipline of his coach, he never would have amounted to a hill of beans. Keep in mind, as believers we are not the product of our own doing; we didn't give ourselves the brains or the skill-set we possess; they are all gifts from God (cf. Jn 3:27; 1 Cor 4:7; Eph 2:8-9).… God is simply asking us to employ our God-given skill-set to His praise and glory. Paul put it this way: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth” (1 Cor 3:6; 15:10). In short, “we are to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (i.e., with great reverence & awe of God; cf. Prv 1:7; 9:10; Is 66:1-2), yet work with the realization that we work not alone, God is at work in us, both to will and do His good pleasure” (cf. Phil 2:12-13). To logically reflect upon the issue of growth (be it physical or spiritual), it should be pretty obvious as to WHO really effectuates that growth — GOD DOES. Though we as men may argue to the contrary, it is God who sustains the entire universe and keeps it functioning as it does; “in Him all things consist” (Col 1:17); remember, He is the only eternal reality in the universe… He created everything… to somehow conclude that He is not superintending everything He made would be absolute foolishness, and make Him a distant God rather than the eternal reality He is. Yet fallen human thinking still claims that accidental happenstance is the cause of all things; that order sprang out of disorder… that life sprang out of inorganic dormant matter, and that the human mind is the premiere source of all wisdom and knowledge in our world; so fallen human thinking believes the
uncontrolled evolutionary process is the ultimate cause of order, wisdom and life — that is the most irrational, unintelligent construct of thought anyone in the human family has ever believed; reflect upon the foregoing for a moment to see how innately stupid it really is. Quite frankly, it is astounding at how many people embrace the evolutionary system of thought, when in fact it runs completely contrary to the second law of thermodynamics (i.e., the law of entropy, which maintains that all things are in a state of decline and not making any advances whatsoever) — this is an unambiguous, unequivocal law that God let the scientific world discover in the 20th century — every physicist believes it, yet the evolutionist believes that 13.8 billion years ago the absolute dominion of this law (i.e., the second law of thermodynamics) was interrupted by an extreme explosion of energy in the universe (in spite of the fact that they have no explanation at all as to the cause of that explosion), that resulted in the incredible order that now underlies our universe — again, think about it: order sprang out of disorder, and life sprang out of inorganic matter — that is how the evolutionist views this thing called “the big bang theory.” That is simply how foolish human thinking becomes when it removes God from the equation (cf. Psalms 14 & 53); it will subscribe to absolute stupidity. Keep in mind, here was a lifeless universe in a permanent state of decline, somehow giving birth to the genius of life and to an immaculate order that transcends human understanding.

It’s amazing the lengths to which fallen man will go to keep himself in the drivers seat of life (cf. Rom 1:18-32). Though such thinking is complete nonsense… that defines our world. The truth is, if God were to remove Himself from the created order, it would not only completely collapse, it would cease to exist! Everything exists because of God and for God, and is being sustained by God (cf. Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17); there is no reality in all the universe that came into existence outside of God. Remember, God created everything out of nothing: He simply spoke everything into existence (cf. Gen 1:1-31; Ps 33:9; 148:5; Is 40:28; 42:5; 45:18; Mk 13:19; Rev 10:6; Heb 11:3); obviously, our little rinky-dink heads can’t get its mind around such things — is it any wonder why human thinking embraces the concept of evolution? The created order isn’t some self-operating order that fallen man thinks it is; it is an order that is being controlled and superintended by God (that is precisely why this universe in which we live possesses “order”). Yet here we have the insanity of man claiming otherwise — that reality (which is infinite in scope) is nothing but accidental happenstance. The truth is, God is not only the source of all things, He is the power that sustains all things. So don’t think of God as just a little insignificant presence somewhere out there in distant space (another juvenile thought of fallen man); He is the source of everything in all creation, including everything we possess (cf. Deut 8:18; Hos 2:8; Jn 3:27; 1 Cor 4:7; Ecc 7:13-14). He gave us our minds, our athleticism, our parents, our possessions, our bodies, our looks, and even so willed that we live in the culture in which we were raised (cf. Eph 1:11). The reality is, God had a higher purpose in making us the persons He made us, and giving us everything that He gave us. Keep in mind, you are God’s property, and a steward of His — and one day you’re going to have to “give an account” for all He entrusted to you and everything you did with the life He gave you (cf. 1 Cor 4:2; Rom 14:12; Mt 12:36; 16:27; Lk 12:16-21; 1 Pet 4:5). I state the foregoing “very firmly”
because some of you are so stubborn “you refuse to bend the knee and acknowledge reality for what it is.” Regarding God’s judgment of the believer before he enters into the eternal realm, read what Paul had to say about it in I Corinthians 3:10-15. Though fallen creatures like to think they are the product of their own doing, and take the credit for everything in their life, including their genius, their physical appearance, and their accomplishments, God tells us “that is not the case!” It simply shows us how proud, stupid and stubborn sinful man really is. As Paul stated, “What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?” (1 Cor 4:7). It might be helpful if you took the time to write down everything you possess (both seen & unseen, external & internal), and then verbally identify everything you possess as being God’s property and given to you to accomplish His higher purposes; obviously He wants you to enjoy what He has given to you, but He also wants you to use it to His glory… in so doing you will look at everything in your life very differently. By the way, I have done this with several items in my life, and it has radically impacted my thinking; though it requires serious contemplation, it helps one see things as God sees them; failing to keep things in their proper perspective adversely affects your faith. Let me suggest that you do it with the five most important possessions you have, with your children, and your physical body — articulate it out loud and give careful consideration to what you’re saying. Somehow you need to see everything as “being owned by God” rather than yourself. This isn’t just silly human thinking, this is divine reality. Make a little sign that says “God’s property” and affix it to some valuable thing He has entrusted to you… and put a little sign on the bedroom door of your son or daughter that says “God’s child” — in so doing you will be continually reminded of God’s goodness and your gratefulness to Him for His kindness to you. You might be shocked at its impact upon your thinking.

The reality is, God asks us as believers to pursue our sanctification (i.e., the change in our life that God so wills) earnestly and undeviatingly, with the understanding that our sanctification is not instantly achieved or something that is imputed to us; it is built up little by little as the result of our being obedient to the Word of God; i.e., God Himself (cf. Mt 11:29-30; Jn 13:14-17; Phil 2:5); He is our master. Remember, it is the Holy Spirit who makes all of our efforts efficacious (cf. Rom 8:12-15; Eph 3:16), and moves us in a godly direction and inspires our sanctification — He may use a sermon to motivate us, the words of a friend, a book we may be reading, or Scripture, as well as adversity, trials and tribulation; whatever it is, it is the work of God in our heart (cf. Rom 15:16; Eph 1:5, 11; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2; 1 Cor 6:11; Heb 12:1-11; 1 Pet 1:6-7; 5:9-10; 2 Tim 4:7-8). To somehow understand “our part” as being the premiere part would be to misunderstand the process; without the ministry of the Holy Spirit to our heart, absolutely nothing would occur! Claiming to be the one who effectuates growth would be like taking the credit for making a tree grow when all you do is water it, in spite of the fact that you frequently abrogate that responsibility, thus causing the owner to step in and do it for you. The truth is, not many human beings even understand how a small microscopic mass of protoplasm and the nuclei operates and stimulates growth; yet even if they did understand it, they would not be able to directly effectuate the growth;
by the way, “the sun and the atmospheric conditions of our planet” are also foundational to life on our planet — without these things life would not continue to exist on the earth. **Albert Einstein** expressed it thus: “the harmony of natural law reveals an intelligence of such superiority, that all the systematic thinking of men is but insignificant reflection.”

The reality is, human beings cannot comprehend the intrinsic aspects of our physical universe. Why? because we have extremely small minds (cf. Job 38:1-4ff; 40:1-8; 42:1-6; Ecc 1:13-18; 11:4-5; 12:13-14). Though the average person may understand the depth of things to about one foot, and the wisest of us to a depth of three feet… reality is thousands of feet deep — to Einstein’s credit, he was well aware of the fact that human beings only scratch the surface of reality. The problem with proud man is that he thinks he has a reasonably good grasp of reality, when in fact he hardly understands it at all… as fallen creatures we grossly overestimate & underestimate things, which simply evidences how immature and fallen we are as creatures. Now by applying this construct to our salvation, that would be like placing greater emphasis on our faith (as weak as it is) rather than on Christ and the cross; i.e., on what we did more than on what Christ did. By the way, it wasn’t because of our marvelous wisdom that we came to believe in Christ; even that was “a gift from God” (cf. Eph 2:8-9; 1:4; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Th 1:5). Let me illustrate it — if you were to go and view one of the most incredibly beautiful buildings in the world that was nearing completion, and you met a man who was installing some window-shades that had been chosen and purchased by the chief-architect, would you ooo and ah over “this laborer and his work?” or over the one who designed and superintended the entire project? To focus on someone who was simply doing some blue-collar work would be a little foolish — the truth is, he had nothing at all to do with the design. In like manner, we need to focus on the Master Designer of our lives rather than all of the subordinate stuff that seems to dominate our thinking and cause us to distort reality.

Here’s another significant point we need to address — obviously there is a big difference between what we know and what we do... it is one thing to know something, it is quite another to do what we know — as believers we all know we are to love others, but loving others can be very difficult when things aren’t going the way we want them to go; being kind, being patient, being others-oriented, bearing all things, and enduring all things isn't always easy; sometimes it's almost impossible (cf. Rom 7:14-25). James writes, “to him who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it — that is sin” (Jam 4:17). So this thing called “faith” is no walk in the park; the truth is, perfection is completely outside the realm of possibility for any of us. The reality is, faith must be built on a right understanding of the truth, and a commitment to walk in the truth. Paul told Timothy, his young cohort in ministry, “to fight the good fight of faith” — genuine faith involves “spiritual warfare,” where the believer not only wrestles with the truth and his inner core (i.e., his flesh), but obeys the truth. Our flesh constantly contends with the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, so obedience to the truth is oftentimes very difficult (it's our old sin nature that makes it so). Though James says “knowing what to do and not doing it is sin;” he also says, “we all stumble in many ways because of our sinful inner core” (Jam 1:14; 3:2). It ought to be clear to everyone of us, our sin nature is a very strong presence in our lives, and
is something with which we must continually contend (Gal 5:17); and therein is the battle. For one to conclude that his flesh doesn't have a significant presence in his life, is to be completely fooled by the evil one; one would have to drastically lower the absolute holy standards of God to arrive at such a conclusion. The wonderful truth for us as believers is that God keeps on cleansing us of all our sins. Sadly, there are many in the Christian community who possess a significant degree of “self-piety” — i.e., they act in such a way so as to convince others that they are something they are not (i.e., righteous); this characterized several people I have known in my life. It is one thing to perform acts of righteousness, it is quite another to want others to believe that you possess a significant degree of righteousness — that's a spiritual sickness grounded in a very proud heart.

It should be noted, sin obviously has a purpose in God's economy for the believer — if God didn't have a purpose for it, it would no longer exist in our lives; it would have been eradicated from us when we were born-again. Obviously, this thing called sin is a very humbling reality in our lives; how else would we cease being the proud creatures we are were it not for our sin? Remember, we are proud fallen creatures. Since sin is very humbling, it keeps us mindful of our inward condition, and our need of Christ. The reality is this — since Christ forgives us over and over and over again, we become more and more conscious of His unconditional love and ever mindful of the cross; that's the reason why believers celebrate Communion (the Eucharist, the Lord's Table). However, should the believer just focus on his sinfulness, it can be overwhelming and nearly destroy him… God's intent is not that His children be consumed with their sinfulness. When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, He does so that we might run into the arms of Jesus and experience His forgiveness and be renewed and restored to fellowship with Him. Yet many believers are so distraught by their sinfulness (for some reason they have a difficult time coming to a full understanding of their inner core; they think it should somehow become less offensive than it is), that they simply wallow in it and start thinking that God's forgiveness and deliverance is now something that is questionable — when one insists on merit the forgiveness, he is traveling down a wrong road — the problem is that his faith is more “works-oriented” than “grace-oriented;” if you don't understand the difference between those two constructs, you need to humbly study this matter of grace. Regarding God's purpose for “sin” in His economy, let me encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “Sin and Man's Eternal Purpose” — that particular study was a life-changing one for me and many others; you can access it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

Take a moment and reflect upon the following words to the early Jewish converts who were being harshly treated by those in ancient Judaism: “Run with endurance the race that is set before you, fixing your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of your faith” (Heb 12:1-2); the words “endurance” & “Jesus” are both emphatic in Greek. The Christian life is a life of humility that focuses exclusively on Christ — He is not only our salvation, He is our life (cf. Gal 2:20; Col 3:4). Without immersing ourselves in God’s Word, human thinking will dominate our lives; don't lose sight of the fact that “we are transformed by the renewing of our minds” (cf. Rom 12:2; Prv 23:7), and only the divine presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives can cause the Word of God to renew our minds and our thinking.
The two main dynamics of the Christian life that need to define the believer are “faith” and “love” — one cannot please God without faith (cf. Heb 11:6), and to the degree that one’s faith expresses itself in love, to that degree is one exercising genuine faith (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8; Jam 2:17-20). Paul put it this way, “In Christ, nothing matters but faith working through love” (Gal 5:6); the emboldened words “through love” are emphatic in Greek — likewise wrote Paul: “LOVE is the fulfillment of the Law” (Rom 13:10), and “The whole Law is fulfilled in one word, LOVE your neighbor as you love yourself” (Gal 5:14)… said James, “If you are fulfilling the royal law of LOVE, you are doing well” (Jam 2:8)… conversely, John wrote, “If you have not love you do not know God, because God is LOVE” (1 Jn 4:8) — LOVE IS SIMPLY FAITH AT WORK! Aside from grace, if there is anything the believer must understand about the Christian life it is “faith and love;” these are the premiere elements of the Christian life. If these two dynamic realities do not characterize your life, humble yourself before the Lord and ask Him to forgive you of all your sins and become real in your heart and life, and give you the faith to be the person of love God wants you to be; that is the whole message of Christianity. That shouldn’t be surprising to anyone; remember “the greatest commandment” has always been that “we love God and love others” (cf. Mt 22:36-40; Deut 6:4-9; Lev 19:18) — when we have not love, we have nothing but a proud self-centered life; i.e., we simply live for ourselves. Our part as God’s children is to take our eyes off of ourselves, and place them on Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2), constantly rejoicing in His unconditional love & grace. Should we insist on having a self-focus, we will become extremely exasperated with our faith, because it will have a self-orientation rather than a God-orientation. Beloved, we are not under Law, but Grace; i.e., the love of God (Rom 6:14). Though both Law and Grace “demand obedience,” the perspective is radically different for the person who is under Law, as opposed to the person who is under Grace. The person under Law lives as though his compliance with the Law essentially determines his acceptability before God (i.e., that his behavior is actually somewhat meritorious and righteous); on the other hand the person under Grace walks in obedience to God because of God’s unconditional love for him and his desire to please Him; we obey God out of gratitude, not because of fear. Those are two extremely different constructs — can you imagine earning your parent’s love and acceptance as a child; that if you fail to abide by all of their rules they will “excommunicate and banish you from their family”? Well to live under such “fear” is completely contrary to the love God has for you (1 Jn 4:18-19). As Paul stated, “You have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons” (cf. Rom 8:15). I can almost hear someone saying, “I can understand God accepting me if there is just a modest degree of sin in my life… but there is too much sin in my life for me to be comfortable with my faith in His love” — let me say it one more time, “sin has a significant presence in all of our lives as believers; none of us are anywhere near perfect.”

As long as you are preoccupied with your sinfulness… God’s love for you will be of secondary importance in your mind — of this you can be sure, Satan will constantly remind you of your wayward soul (i.e., indwelling sin); at some point on your journey of
faith, you are going to have to stop making your sinful inner core (i.e., your flesh) the premiere focus of your life, and stop identifying it as “the real you” — the “old you” is no longer the real you; the “new you” is now the real you. Said Paul, “In reference to your former manner of life, lay aside the old self, which is constantly being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit;” i.e., it is getting worse and worse (your flesh was far less corrupt as a young child than it is today as an adult) — that's what our flesh does; it simply gets worse & worse (to think one can actually make it better is sheer madness). Therefore Paul said, “Be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness & holiness of the truth’ (cf. Eph 4:2-24). Obviously, salvation involves “the mind” (cf. Mk 1:15; Jn 1:12; 6:29; 14:1; 20:30-31; Rom 10:9; 12:2; 2 Cor 10:5; Col 3:1-2, 10); when we became Christians, God gave us a completely new spiritual and moral capacity that a mind apart from Christ could never achieve (cf. 1 Cor 2:9-16). It is the new self with which we are to be occupied, not the old self — when the Holy Spirit takes up residence in our lives at salvation everything becomes new (cf. 2 Cor 5:17) — we see things we never saw before, and understand things we never understood before… we now look at things through the eyes of faith, and it is this new perspective on life with which we are to be occupied. We are to have the mind of Christ (cf. Phil 2:5-8; also Rom 8:6-7; 12:2).

When the believer understands and believes God’s unconditional love for him, he will strive to please Him out of gratitude and start experiencing a transformed life, and become more conformed to His image (cf. Phil 3:13-14; Rom 8:28-31; 2 Tim 1:9; Col 1:29; Heb 12:4-13; 1 Jn 4:18-19). It should be clear, without a significant appreciation for God’s unconditional love, gratitude will not be a significant part of our faith — thus, we must see ourselves for who we truly are (sinful), and see God for who He truly is (one who loves us unconditionally in spite of our sinfulness)... if our sinfulness isn’t that big a deal to us (i.e., we don’t see ourselves as being that sinful), then God’s unconditional love for us simply won’t be that significant to us. If you think you’re a lovely creature, then you’ll think you are somewhat deserving of God’s love. If you need convincing as to the depth of your sinfulness, then humbly study the matter and take it to the Lord, and tell Him exactly how you feel... and ask Him to give you eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to understand; only God can give us the grace to see reality for what it really is, and God only gives that grace to the humble of heart. Obviously growing in Christ and growing spiritually doesn’t just happen because one wants it to happen and prays that it will happen; it requires these five things — Humility, Scripture, Prayer, Faith and Obedience (cf. Jam 1:21; 2:17-20; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). Since that is the case, “can you not spend a good thirty minutes every day humbly & prayerfully contemplating God’s Word?” Because some believers actually think that “God honors their little devotional time in the morning,” and will bless them accordingly that day, “they feel really guilty” when they neglect that responsibility; as such, they think their lives are going to be filled with a lot of negatives that day. However, that kind of thinking is very “legalistic,” and keeps one in bondage. As God’s children we should have a strong desire to grow in our love for Christ and have fellowship with Him — which is radically different than somehow thinking that a little
devotional time will suffice and get one through the day. Beloved, don't place yourself in such bondage, because it is the antithesis of what it means to walk with Christ in life; if you make your relationship with Christ a legal one rather than a loving one, you will make it something God never intended it to be. If you really don't desire to commune with God and hear His voice, your fellowship with Christ will be seriously deficient — should that be the case, come clean and pour your heart to the Lord, and draw near to Him, and He will draw near to you (Jam 4:8). Now when studying Scripture, first seek to understand it, and then affirm it to your own heart and apply it as God would have you do so; that's the essence of genuine faith. By the way, “taking notes” is oftentimes very helpful in building your faith and experiencing a transformed life... because when you can articulate things, you'll discover a deeper level of understanding, and find it much easier to apply. The key to “being a person who loves others” is to consciously look for ways to express love to others — love doesn't just happen, it requires intentionality. As you practice loving others in every possible way, it will soon become a more natural expression of the heart. Keep in mind, you are not obeying a law, you are responding to God's love. In order to see this as a dynamic reality in your life, prayerfully and intentionally show love to others at least five times every day; the result will astound you! As John said, “Let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 Jn 3:18).

**REGARDING BIBLICAL FAITH**

Now just as we became children of God by “faith” in the work of Christ on the cross (thus experiencing the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit; Titus 3:5), so we experience a transformed life by “faith” under the inspiration and work of the Holy Spirit. Paul put it this way when addressing the church at Galatia: “Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” (Gal 3:3); i.e., having become a child of God by the Spirit of God, are you now going to perfect yourself by obeying the Law? True, genuine, efficacious faith is the distinguishing characteristic of the child of God; as Scripture repeatedly tells us, “the just shall live by faith” (cf. Hab 2:4; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11).

In his letter to the church at Philippi Paul said, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:6) — it is God who not only began the work in those of us who believe, it is God who will perfect and complete that work. The reality is, when God begins a work of salvation in a person, He finishes and perfects that work; “thus as believers we are eternally secure in Christ;” that's a given (cf. Rom 8: 29-39; Eph 1:13-14; Heb 7:25). Since Christ fulfilled the Law for us, we don't have to worry about fulfilling it (cf. Mt 5:17; Rom 8:3-4); after all, what more could one possibly add to the work of Christ? The notion that sinful, weak, fallen human beings (cf. Mt 26:41; Heb 4:15) could actually improve on the saving work of the Holy Spirit was absolutely ludicrous to Paul. God’s message to us is this: “We not only become children of God by faith, we grow in Christ by faith: i.e., we trust Christ not only for our salvation but also for our growth... with that in mind, faith is a monumental issue regarding our relationship with God; both our salvation and our sanctification are faith issues. So
what is this thing called “faith”? “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, and the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Thus in a word, faith is an “unseen hope” that has no physical evidence (cf. Rom 8:24), and involves the most solid conviction possible—God assures our soul of definite realities; since it is not based upon empirical evidence, divine assurance is a gift of God to one’s soul (cf. Eph 2:8). When we humble ourselves before God, He gives us the grace to believe; thus James says, “in humility receive the word implanted which is able to save your souls” (Jam 1:21). So we are not only regenerated through the power of the Word (cf. 2 Cor 6:7; Col 1:5; 1 Th 2:13; Titus 3:5; 1 Pet 1:23-25), we are transformed by the power of the Word. Remember, “we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7); i.e., we don’t walk by some empirical evidence that exists in our lives (our circumstances aren’t the measuring stick for us; God’s Word is—that’s faith!). Obviously when our circumstances run contrary to our heart’s desire, “faith is not an easy didactic;” that’s why Paul urged Timothy “to fight the good fight of faith to which he was called” (1 Tim 6:12). Again, the life of faith involves warfare against the world, the flesh, and the devil (cf. Gal 5:17; Eph 6:11-12; Jam 4:7; 1 Jn 2:15-18); this battle is a “fight of faith” that involves wrestling with the truth of God’s Word, and giving oneself to that task. God has called us to a life of faith (believing the truths of God’s Word, and rejecting our fallen human thinking), and foundational to that life is humility of heart (seeing our inward selves for who we really are—fallen sinful creatures); as we grow in our faith we will become far more aware of the corruptness and the deceitfulness of our inner core (cf. Ecc 9:3; Jer 17:9; Mk 2:17; Rom 7:18; Gal 5:17; Eph 4:22). Contrary to the thinking of what many Christians believe and preach, we will not see our humanness in a better light later in life; our humanness (i.e., our flesh) is in “a constant state of being corrupted by the deceitfulness of its own desires” (cf. Eph 4:22; Heb 3:13; Jam 1:14—also Gen 3:13; Jer 17:9; 37:9; 49:16; Ob 1:3; Gal 6:3, 7; Col 2:8; 1 Jn 1:8; 3:7-8). The reality is, when we take our eyes off of Christ we are easily deceived. God never redeemed our sinful flesh (cf. Rom 7:24; 8:23); neither did He remove it from us when we became His children; as such, “we are to die to it daily!” (cf. Mt 10:38; 16:24-25; Lk 14:25-35; Rom 6:11-23; 12:2; Gal 2:20; Eph 4:22-24; 5:15-21; Phil 3:17-21; Col 3:1-10; Heb 12:1-14).

Why the Christian world makes light of one’s sinfulness is beyond me; all they want to do is make the believer’s life a joyful little experience—though there is peace and joy when we walk in the light, there is no peace or joy when we walk in the darkness of our flesh. Joy is a by-product of experiencing God — it is instilled in the soul by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22); as the psalmist David said, “In Thy presence is fullness of joy” (cf. Ps 16:11; 21:6). Only God can make the heart joyful (cf. Jn 17:13; 15:11; 16:24; Lk 6:20-23; Rom 14:17). The reality is, joy depends on our disposition, not on our circumstances (cf. 1 Pet 1:6-8; Jam 1:2-4; Heb 12:11). What one believes in the moment, and why one believes it is the issue. It is here where God’s Word plays an extremely important part in our lives; the foundation of that which governs our lives is to be the Word of God. The question is, are you willing to humble yourself and cry out to the Lord and seek His face when your world isn’t super pleasant and you are struggling with fleshly thoughts and feelings? Are you willing to humbly draw near to God so that He might draw near to you and give you His peace? (Jam 4:8-10), or do you simply let the issue at hand dominate the discourse in your mind? As every
mature believer attests, **spiritual warfare** is far and away the premiere issue with which we all struggle in life (bar none!)… and that fight is “**a faith fight.**” Never lose sight of the fact that the foundation of our faith is **Christ** and the absolute assurance that He is true to His Word — when that reality drifts from your mind in the midst of the fight, you will struggle terribly with your faith (obviously that is not uncommon for any believer; every believer struggles with the fight of faith). Again, **we are not under the Law** (whereby our actions control our focus), **we are under Grace** (wherein God’s love for us is our focus; thus the incredible **conviction of faith** is the channel whereby we receive God’s grace). Think of God as the supreme energy that governs the universe, and your faith as an electrical cable that gives you access to God’s divine energy — obviously if your faith is not plugged in to divine truth, your faith will prove deficient and not give you access to God’s divine current — “**without a humble heart and true faith you cannot please God and experience His grace**” (cf. Heb 11:6; Jam 4:6); if you are not plugged in to God’s divine current (i.e., believing Him), you won’t experience His grace. So “**humility of faith**” is foundational to experiencing God’s grace. Though sinful man can demonstrate a limited degree of **external compliance** (as the Pharisees did), he cannot achieve **internal compliance** (because his flesh is corrupt to the core; cf. Rom 7:18; Jer 17:9) — only the arrogant deny that reality. So either you learn to live with reality (i.e., divine truth) or you are really going to struggle. If there is one thing you must give prominence to as a believer, it is this: “**Fix your eyes on Christ, the author and perfecter of your faith**” (cf. Heb 12:2) — that is emphatically stated in Scripture… that Christ loves us “**unconditionally**” is the game changer. Though our feelings and our circumstances oftentimes control the discourse in our minds, we must continually fight against those things that distort the truth, and affirm God’s unconditional love for us.

Regarding the matter of “**faith.**” it involves having a right understanding of three things: 1) **Who we are,** 2) **Who God is,** and 3) **What God would have us believe and do.** By the way, if we get the first two constructs right, the last one won’t be nearly as difficult… if we misconstrue the first two, the last one will simply be a collection of cold, hard facts. Having a proper understanding of these three constructs is “**the unseen substance of our faith**” (Heb 11:1); remember, faith has nothing to do with what we “**see and feel;**” it is “**the reality of what really is the case**” i.e., what is really true, and truth is liberating (cf. Jn 8:31-32); that which is not true keeps us downtrodden and in bondage. Regarding this matter of truth, carefully reflect upon the following verses: cf. Ps 25:5; 43:3; 51:6; 86:15; 117:2; 119:160; Prv 3:3; 23:23; Jn 1:14, 17; 4:24; 8:31-32; 14:6; 16:13; 17:17; Rom 1:18, 25; 1 Cor 13:6; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:15). It should be noted, only the proud reject the truth (cf. Rom 1:18-25; Jer 13:25); why is that? because they must place themselves in submission to God and His will for their lives (but that is the one thing they simply will not do — they simply insist on autonomy). Because **many believers don’t take the time to prayerfully contemplate the truths of Scripture** (that seems to be the norm) some of you might skip over the verses I just listed… beloved, my prayer is that you won’t do that, because there are no shortcuts in the Christian life; you must contemplate God’s Word. If you are not really serious about your faith and reconciling the truth, you are going to struggle with it all the way to the grave… though that
doesn't mean you are not a child of God, you won't experience much peace and joy in your life, and neither will your faith be very pleasing to God (cf. Heb 11:6); you will simply have an immature faith. The more stubborn you are, the more chastening you are going to experience (cf. Heb 12:5-11); God chastens His children because He loves them. As Peter said, “Long for the pure milk of the Word that by ‘it’ you may grow in respect to your salvation” (cf. 1 Pet 2:2; Rom 10:17; Col 3:16; Jer 15:16;); by the way, the word “if” is emphatic in Greek; either you humbly devour the Word, or your faith will never become the dynamic reality in your life that God wants it to be. At some point in your walk with God, you need to start taking your faith very seriously (if you have not already done so); that's the road everyone of us must travel as His children—none of us get a special dispensation (i.e., an easy road); if one existed, I would have discovered it a long time ago. When you prayerfully and humbly seek God through His Word, it'll have a significant impact upon your life… however, should you simply read it lightly, it will have very little effect upon your life (cf. Ps 1:1-2; 119:11; 119:105, 114, 133, 148, 160, 169; 130:5; Jn 8:31-32; Heb 4:12; Jam 1:21; 1 Pet 1:23; 2:2). Let me take a moment and list some constructs of thought that need to define your faith; though this is not an exhaustive list, it covers the bigger issues of life — you may want to study the various issues listed below, so that they will become more meaningful to you and more significant to your faith. I have tagged on a verse or two for each of the constructs listed to help get the ball rolling for you; I would encourage you to write your thoughts down on each of them—that will help you give voice to them, as well as clarify them in your mind. Don't be afraid to “ask questions” when reflecting upon a particular thought — that is exactly how the prophets and the apostles wrestled with divine truth, and that is exactly what I do.

- The foundation of faith is believing the truth about oneself and God (1 Pet 1:3; 2:24).
- Faith sees God for who He is; the sovereign God of all things (Is 14:24; 43:13; Eph 1:11).
- The wisdom and knowledge of God is not unreasonable (Jam 4:17).
- Faith believes God and trusts in the integrity of His Word (Prv 3:5-6; Jn 1:16).
- Without faith it is not possible to please God (Heb 11:6).
- Justification depends on a faith that leads to obedience (Rom 3:28; 5:1).
- True justification always results in the process of true sanctification (2 Cor 3:16-18).
- Living faith results in good works (Jam 2:17-20; 1 Jn 4:7-8).
- We are transformed by the renewing of our mind (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23).
- Faith puts no confidence in the flesh; instead it embraces divine truth (Phil 3:3).
- Faith involves repentance and the acknowledgement of one's sinfulness (Is 30:15).
- Faith believes in the trustworthiness of God; that He is a God of truth (Jn 14:6).
- The object of faith is Christ; that means knowing Him (Jn 1:1; 17:3; Rom 3:22; 5:1, 8).
- Genuine faith moves the heart (Rom 5:5; Eph 3:16-19; Heb 11:1; Jer 31:33).
- Faith trusts in God rather than oneself (Prv 3:5-6; 2 Cor 1:9).
- One grows in faith by humbly and prayerfully studying Scripture (1 Pet 2:2; Jam 1:21).
- As one grows in the grace and knowledge of God, his faith will grow (2 Pet 3:18).
- The economy under which we as believers are to live is “faith in Christ” (Gal 2:20).
Thus, the Christian life has nothing to do with “keeping the Law to earn God’s favor” (we obtained God’s favor by trusting in the work of Christ; we are now His children and nothing will ever change that — not even the ugly sins we commit — cf. Rom 8:1, 31). Life for the believer is about “fighting the fight of faith by walking in the Spirit (i.e., walking with Christ) through all the ups and downs of life” (cf. Gal 5:16; Col 2:6; Rom 6:4; 8:4; Eph 5:8; Col 1:10; 1 Jn 1:7). The truth is, there are a lot of ups and downs in life — there are temptations at every juncture in life, and there are trials and tribulations that constantly beset us and challenge our thinking; it is the presence of indwelling sin (i.e., our flesh, our sin nature) that makes the life of faith such a challenge and produces so much anxiety in the soul (Rom 7:18; Gal 5:17). The Christian life is not about experiencing some glorious little utopia here on earth… it is a spiritual war against your flesh, the world, and the devil.

Now should you minimize this warfare, your perspective on the life of faith will not correspond with the life God has called you to; instead, you will make your wants and wishes the premiere issues of life (and find a hundred ways to justify that thinking). Remember, “Your sin nature (your flesh, your unredeemed humanness) sets its desires against the Spirit: it is in opposition to the Spirit, so that you may not do the things that you please” (Gal 5:17). When you became a child of God, you became a brand new creation (cf. Jn 3:3; 2 Cor 5:17), but God did not remove your sin nature from you: he left it in you and has asked you to die to it and no longer let it reign in your life (cf. Rom 6:12; Mt 16:24; Eph 4:22-24); again, that is the war we are called to fight. Study the following passages: Jn 16:33; Rom 7:18-25; 8:1, 18, 28; 1 Cor 10:12-13; 2 Cor 1:3-5; 10:3-5; Gal 2:20; 5:18-17; Eph 6:10-18; Phil 1:6; 2:12-13; 3:13-14; 4:6-8; Col 3:1-4; 1 Tim 1:5; 6:12; 2 Tim 2:15; Heb 4:15-16; Heb 10:23-25; 12:1-2; 5:11; Jam 1:14-15, 22; 4:8; 1 Pet 5:10; 1 Jn 2:15-17; Jude 1:18-21). Obviously I listed a number of passages there; take the time to prayerfully think through them, and write down your thoughts & questions — in so doing you will be “doing an inductive study” (i.e., you will be employing logic in your search to understand the ways of God; obviously as one grows in his faith, he will grow in his reasoning capacity & understanding. When one humbly reflects and meditates on God’s Word, the Holy Spirit opens his heart to the truth (cf. Jn 14:16-17, 26; 16:13; Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Th 1:5; 1 Jn 2:20, 27). This is precisely the way the prophets of old and the apostles studied the Scriptures. God gave us minds with which to think; we can’t abrogate that responsibility as believers and expect to grow in our faith (that is not possible; cf. Rom 10:17; 1 Pet 2:2). Incidentally, “we are transformed by the renewing of our minds” (cf. Rom 12:2); should we fail to give careful attention to the Word, we are violating the command of God (cf. Deut 6:5-7; Ps 1:2; 25:4; 119:15; Phil 4:6-9; Col 3:16). To make an excuse for not putting forth a reasonable effort to grow in Christ, is a sad commentary on the control your flesh has over your life. All of us can spend thirty minutes a day prayerfully wrestling with the truths of Scripture; as is the case with pretty much anything in life, it takes about thirty days to develop a pattern of living for it to become more habitual. Remember, as a believer, you have a responsibility to grow in your faith, and live a fruitful life (cf. Jn 15:7-8; 1 Pet 2:2). To the degree divine reality (truth) and your thinking correspond, to that degree will you experience transformation in the inner man (cf. Rom 12:2; 2 Cor 3:17-18; Gal 5:17).
The economy under which God willed us to live is that we wrestle with and obey the truth, and that we ultimately reject what is not true. As stated earlier, *this is not a simple little life to which we have been called* — many in the heavenly realm in eternity past (including Satan) *rejected the truth and fought against it*; as such, one third of the angels were cast out of heaven for rejecting the truth (cf. Rev 12:4-5, 9, 13, 17; 20:10; Mt 25:41). In like manner, those who reject the truth here in the newly created order in which we live will receive the same judgment as those who rejected the truth in eternity past (cf. Rev 20:11-15; Mt 25:41). Beloved, please don't make light of truth. Sadly, the majority of those in the Christian world “*are really not followers of Christ*” — as is the case with most religions, people identify with it because that's the religion they were raised with or because of some of the advantages it provides for them; it gets God on their side (or so they think) — to them life is not about God and His will, instead it is about man and his will & what he wants; but that is not at all what Christianity teaches. The Christian faith is not a smorgasbord faith, where one picks and chooses what he wants to believe, and ignore what he doesn’t want to believe — man does not determine reality... so on the last day Jesus will say to them, “*Depart from Me, I never knew you*” (Mt 7:21-23; 25:41). The wonderful thing about being a true child of God is this — God has imputed the righteousness of His Son to us and guaranteed our eternal destiny; since it is absolutely certain, we don't have to fear *not measuring up* (the fact is we can't measure up because we don't have the capacity to do so; hence Christ measured up for us; *i.e.*, fulfilled the law for us — cf. Mt 5:17; Rom 8:3-4). Therefore salvation is completely the work of Christ (Mk 10:27), and our destiny is as sure as the cross (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 8:29-30; Phil 1:6; Col 1:13-14; 1 Th 5:24; 2 Tim 1:12; 2:13; Titus 3:5; Heb 7:25; 12:1-2; 1 Pet 5:10; 1 Jn 5:4). Therefore we can fight the good fight of faith with *confidence*, even though we stumble over and over again, knowing that there is *no condemnation* awaiting those who are in Christ (cf. Rom 8:1; Heb 4:15-16; Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20; Prv 24:16). One could describe God’s charge to us this way: “*Your future is in the bank, it is absolutely sure... so go out and fight the war of faith... though you will stumble often on your journey, never let it deter you... always remembering I will never leave you or forsake you... after you have suffered for a little while, I will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you. May My grace and peace sustain you through all the ups and downs of life*” (cf. Heb 13:5; Mt 28:20; 1 Pet 5:10; 2 Pet 1:2).

As the apostle John said, “*Those who walk in the light have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus cleanses them from all sin*” (1 Jn 1:7). All genuine Christians walk habitually in the *light* (truth), not in *darkness* (falsehood) — the result is, the Lord continually forgives them and cleanses them from their sin; the present tense verbs describe “*continual action*;” true born again Christians live in the light, not in the darkness (cf. 2 Cor 6:14; Eph 5:8; Col 1:12-13); though they stumble often in life because of indwelling sin (*i.e.*, the flesh, the old man within, their old sin nature), that doesn’t change who they now are in Christ. Just as immature children stumble, so also do God’s children; thus, God disciplines them (as all parents do), but He never abandons them (cf. Heb 12:4-11; 13:5). To expand upon what the apostle John said, the true Christian participates in the cleansing process by “*confessing his sins to God*,” *i.e.*, “*by saying the same thing about them that
God says,” in so doing he experiences God’s cleansing and forgiveness (1 Jn 1:9), and his fellowship with Christ is restored (1 Jn 1:3-7). It is the Holy Spirit who convicts us of sin (cf. Jn 16:8, 13; 1 Th 1:5; Heb 11:1); we simply affirm the truth of that conviction. Without being in agreement with God as we walk through life, we won’t enjoy His peace, His intimacy, or His fellowship; the barrier of unconfessed sin will keep us at bay. The reality is this—which or not our sin is an outward act or an inward thought, we must deal with it or God’s hand will weigh heavily upon us (cf. Ps 32:3-5; 38:2; Prov 28:13). As the psalmist David put it, “God desires truth in the innermost being” (cf. Ps 51:6; 15:1-2). So rather than letting the flesh run the show in our lives, we must deal with it quickly when it gets in the driver’s seat, and submit to the lordship of Christ. Obviously as believers we don’t achieve some remarkable level of perfection in this life; though we live in the kingdom of light, we are constantly dealing with the presence of indwelling sin (cf. Col 1:13; Jn 3:19-21; 8:12; 12:36). True, genuine faith is not simply a mental, theological position, it involves obedience as well; James put it this way, “faith without works is useless” (Jam 2:14-20). Let me illustrate true faith: If you were to say you didn’t believe in running red lights, yet you constantly ran them, your testimony would be without merit… if you said you believed in serving others, helping the poor, and tithing, yet those things didn’t define you, your testimony would be false — at some point your life must correspond with what you say you believe, because your life testifies to what you really believe. Though obedience isn’t a piece of cake for anyone, as believers in Christ we are to constantly hammer away at dealing rightly with all the issues of life — that is what true believers do (they never give up); the Holy Spirit just keeps pushing them. If everything in life was just left up to us, ultimately we would throw in the towel… but thankfully, “God is at work in us, both to will and do His good pleasure… and He will accomplish what concerns us” (cf. Phil 1:6; 2:13; 1 Th 5:24; Ps 138:8); so foundational to the Christian life is the grace of God (cf. Eph 2:7-9; Rom 3:24; 5:20; 6:14; 11:6; Jn 1:17; 1 Cor 15:10; 2 Cor 12:9; Gal 2:21; Eph 1:7; Titus 3:5-7; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 1:13; 2 Pet 3:18). Obviously, we are not men and women of great faith… we are men and women of faith in a great God.

In Conclusion…

Three times in the New Testament we are told that “the righteous shall live by faith” (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38); these authors were quoting the words of the prophet Habakkuk (cf. Hab 2:4). So as believers we are not only “justified by faith,” we are to “live by faith” (cf. Rom 3:28; 5:1). Faith is the principle which motivates the whole life of the believer — “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Heb 11:6). Just as Abraham was “reckoned righteous before God by faith” (cf. Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3), so are we. With all of the foregoing in mind, let’s briefly summarize the issues of Law, Heart, Obedience, and Faith.

1. **Law** — The Law seems to be a somewhat confusing issue in the minds of most people; a typical view of the Law is that its purpose is to teach us how to be good, but that is not the emphasis in Scripture… the purpose of the Law is to teach us what is good. Obviously God is GOD… the Creator of all things, and the ultimate standard of all
things… “for from Him and through Him and to Him are all things” (Rom 11:36); so God is the source, the sustainer, and the rightful end of everything that exists. God’s actions are perfect because His nature is perfect, and everything He does is done in accord with His nature. In short, God always does what is right, and as God’s creatures we are required to do what is right as well; as such, **He demands that we live according to His moral law**, which is revealed to us in the Bible. **God’s Law is the ultimate standard of righteousness** and the supreme norm for judging right & wrong; when we violate God’s Law, He deals with us accordingly. Since we are not autonomous creatures, so we are subject to the Law of God. The primary means by which **God reveals sin to be sin** is the **Law of God** that is contained in the Scriptures; **thus the primary purpose of the Law is to humble us and reveal our utter sinfulness, that we might turn to God and seek His forgiveness** — the Law came because of sin; were there no sin there would have been no need for the Law (Gal 3:19). The prophet Isaiah said, “All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way” (cf. Is 53:6); that has been the rule of life for the human family since the beginning (cf. Gen 6:5; Judges 17:6; 21:25). It is because man is a sinful creature (i.e., one who refuses to submit to the ways of God), that God introduced His Law to man and administered it (cf. Gal 3:19, 24). Scripture emphatically teaches that “all people are sinful” (cf. 1 Kg 8:46; Ps 143:2; Prv 20:9; Ecc 7:20; Is 53:6; Rom 3:9-23; 11:32) — As Paul put it, “Scripture has shut up (i.e., confined) all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (cf. Gal 3:22; 3:18; Rom 11:32). Contrary to the thinking of the ancient Jewish world, the Law was not given so that one could **obtain righteousness**; it was given to **reveal one’s unrighteousness** (cf. Rom 3:20; 7:7; Gal 3:19). As Paul stated, “**By the deeds of the Law shall no man be justified**” — i.e., no man will be declared righteous by God by obeying the Law (Rom 3:20). The argument should be clear — we are already **unrighteous sinners** who do not have the capacity to obey the Law (Rom 7:18; 8:3), so how can the unrighteous obtain righteousness through the Law? James reminds us that if a person stumbles in just one point, he is guilty of breaking the entire Law (Jam 2:10). **So righteousness is imputed to those who believe the promises of God** — that has been the means by which men have been saved since the beginning of time (cf. Gen 15:6; Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6; Jam 2:23); all the Law does is show man how incredibly sinful he is (cf. Rom 3:20). Said Paul, “**I would not have known about coveting were it not for the Law**” (Rom 7:7).

Christ did not come to abolish the Law, but to **fulfill the Law** (Mt 5:17); and He fulfilled it completely. Said the Lord Jesus, “Truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law until all of it is accomplished” (Mt 5:18). Though no man truly understands everything about God’s Law (that has been attested to by theologians down through the centuries), what we do know is that it reveals the absolute perfection of God’s holiness (a level of holiness that transcends human thought); so no man can walk around claiming to understand the fullness of God — as stated earlier, that would be like putting the entire ocean into a little thimble; compared to God we are extremely small creatures. I’ve always liked
the words of Albert Einstein: “The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation... His religious feeling rakes 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.” Those words in and of themselves are pretty profound; yet they only see things from a human perspective. Though Einstein was not a man of faith, one cannot help but admire his humility of thought. Ultimately, the reality is, as God’s children we are not under the Law but Grace (Rom 6:14); therefore we are not to subject ourselves to the Law (i.e., the Mosaic Law)... furthermore, we are not under the Old Covenant but the New Covenant (for a more definitive understanding of the New Covenant and Old Testament Law, take the time to read & study Hebrews 8-10; these three chapters contrast the differences between the two). To provide a little contextual understanding to the Book of Hebrews, it’s important to remember that Christianity in its earliest years was completely Jewish — Gentiles didn’t become a significant part of the Christian community until the apostle Paul started his missionary journeys (which was about twenty years after the resurrection of Christ). So keep in mind, Jesus was a Jew, His disciples were Jews, and the first converts were Jews. There first meetings happened in synagogues, and their first controversies concerned adherence to Jewish laws. The first critics of Christianity knew it as “a Jewish sect.” Now for the first Jewish believers, believing in Christ raised many questions — What about the Law of Moses? What about the temple and animal sacrifices? Did believing in Christ negate much of what they had grown up believing? Was it really enough to trust in Christ? Answers to these questions were needed right away for those who lived in the earliest years of Christianity. Jewish tolerance would soon give way to torture and executions — believing in Christ would be a life-or-death proposition, and the temptation for Jewish believers to go back to their old ways would be irresistible for many converts, unless they could know for sure they had made the right choice.

When the Lord Jesus affirmed the great commandment of the Old Testament regarding “loving God and loving others” (Mt 22:37-39; Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18), He said, “On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets” (Mt 22:40); hence Jesus was stating that the entire moral duty of man lay under these two categories. When Paul was on his first missionary journey in Galatia, he compared the advantage of Christ to that of the Law; he said, “Through Christ everyone who believes is justified (i.e., declared innocent, acquitted; the death of Christ was the payment of our sin debt, so that we might be forgiven; on the other hand, one is not freed from his sins through the Law” — cf. Rom 3:28; 1 Cor 1:30; Gal 2:16; 3:11; Phil 3:9)... thus through Christ we are set free from the Law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). That’s why the apostles reminded us time and again that “we are saved by the grace of the Lord Jesus, not by trying to keep the Law” (cf. Acts 15:11; Rom 3:24; 5:15; 6:14; Eph 2:8; Titus 3:7; 1 Pet 1:10-11; 5:10-12)— Paul emphatically said, “By the works of the Law no one will be justified in God’s sight” (Rom 3:20); the reality is, “all men are under sin” (cf. Rom 3:9ff), so if we are all sinners how can we possibly keep the Law? — that is akin to saying that evil people can do good, or that illiterate
people can read, or that a one year old child can argue against the law of entropy (incidentally, an evil person is one who does not trust in God, not necessarily one who commits acts of overt evil). Furthermore, how can one fulfill the law if he has already broken the law? As stated earlier, James said, “by breaking one law, one becomes guilty of breaking the entire Law” (Jam 2:10).

Since the tyranny of “works” has always been a major problem in the religious world, men simply lower the standards of the Law to make obedience to it more attainable. The problem with “faith” in the minds of men, is that it is too ethereal to them; they don’t see how embracing constructs of thought in and of themselves can be that significant—they simply can’t get their minds around this thing called faith; since works is an easier construct of thought for them than faith, people are far more likely to embrace the idea of works rather than faith. The night before Jesus went to the cross He gave His disciples a brand new commandment — “that they love one another as fellow-members of the family of God” (Jn 13:34; 15:12). Paul defines loving one another as “the law of Christ,” where we are called to bear one another’s burdens as fellow-believers (Gal 6:2); he goes on to say, “do not lose heart in doing good, for in due time you shall reap” (Gal 6:9). Paul reminded believers that “the whole Law is fulfilled in one word — loving your neighbor as yourself” (cf. Gal 5:14; 6:2; Mt 22:40; Rom 13:8; 10; Mt 7:12). James refers to loving others as “the royal law” and “the law of liberty” (cf. Jam 2:8, 12). Since “the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit” (i.e., He gave us a heart of compassion), we can humbly fulfill God’s command to love others because of His indwelling presence in our lives (cf. Rom 5:5; Gal 5:22); Paul describes it as “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6) — i.e., “love is the expression of true faith.” The apostle John in the final years of his life lived on the Aegean island of Patmos… the Roman government used that island as a place of banishment for criminals — they were forced to work in the mines. Emperor Domitian banished the revelator St. John to Patmos in 95 AD (cf. Rev 1:9). Historians tell us that when John was old, people would daily carry him into the sanctuary where Christians would gather, and in so doing he would simply say to the people, “Love one another.” Finally one person asked him why he always said that to them when he came into their presence; to which John replied, “If this alone be done, it is enough.” LOVE is the premiere construct that needs to define the life and faith of the believer (cf. Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:14; 6:2; Mt 22:40; 1 Jn 4:7-8).

2. Heart — It is important to note that love is a “heart” issue, not an action devoid of wisdom and compassion. Throughout Scripture the heart is described as the seat of emotion, desire, knowledge, conscience and moral character. Since the heart stands for the inner being of man (i.e., the man himself), it is the fountain of all he does (Prv 4:4). The intrinsic aspect of man that defines him is his heart; thus the heart is the most important part of man… it is the quintessence of who he really is. The heart is used figuratively for the hidden things of one’s personal life — all one’s thoughts, desires, words and actions flow from deep within. So it is the heart that defines man; i.e., the real man (1 Pet 3:4). Scripture describes human depravity as in the “heart.”
therefore sin is a principle that is rooted in man’s inward life (Mt 15:18-19). As man stubbornly goes his own way in life, his heart becomes harder and harder; and God alone is the answer to his hardened heart. The Bible regards the heart as the sphere of Divine influence (Rom 2:15; Acts 15:9)—the LORD prophesied to His people through Ezekiel, “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will remove the heart of stone, and give you a heart of flesh... and I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances” (cf. Ezek 36:26-27; Jer 31:33). When David fell and sinned against the Lord, he asked God to “create in him a clean heart” (Ps 51:10). The problem with man is, “his heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; man cannot even understand it” (Jer 17:9); nevertheless, it can be cleansed & renewed (Ps 51:10; Ezek 36:26). The LORD told Samuel, “God does not see as man sees; man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Sam 16:7). It’s the “heart” that defines man, not his perceived behavior. So the heart is not only the seat of one’s moral and spiritual life, it is the seat of grief (Jn 14:1); joy (Jn 16:22), affections (Lk 24:32), conscience (1 Jn 3:20), thoughts (Heb 4:12), understanding (Mt 13:15), reasoning (Mk 2:6; Lk 24:38), the will (Rom 6:17; Col 3:15), obedience (Eph 6:6), and faith (Mk 11:23; Rom 10:10). Incidentally, the word “heart” appears more than 800 times in Scripture; take a moment and reflect upon the twenty selected verses I have listed below —

- God saves those who are upright in heart – Ps 7:10
- The fool says in his heart there is no God – Ps 14:1
- My heart trusts in the Lord, and I am helped; therefore my heart exalts – Ps 28:7
- Create in me a clean heart – Ps 51:10
- A broken and contrite heart, Thou wilt not despise – Ps 51:17
- The righteous are not shaken; their heart steadfastly trusts in the Lord – Ps 112:7
- How blessed are those who seek the Lord with all their heart – Ps 119:2
- Thy word I have treasured in my heart that I may not sin against Thee – Ps 119:11
- God, search me and know my heart; lead me in the everlasting way – Ps 139:23-24
- Trust in the Lord with all your heart... and He will direct your path – Prv 3:5-6
- As you forgive others from heart, so will God forgive you – Mt 18:35
- Because of the hardness of men’s hearts, God permitted divorce – Mt 19:8
- Love the Lord your God with all your heart – Mt 22:37
- As Lydia listened to Paul, the Lord opened her heart to respond – Acts 16:14
- Because of a stubborn unrepentant heart, one experiences God’s wrath – Rom 2:5
- With the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness – Rom 10:10
- Do the will of God from the heart – Eph 6:6
- Beloved, put on a heart of compassion – Col 3:12
- Draw near to God with a sincere heart with full assurance of faith – Heb 10:22
- Love one another from the heart – 1 Pet 1:22
In view of modern trends in psychology, it is instructive to note this emphasis on the heart in early Hebrew and Christian literature. The prophets of old saw clearly that it is in the heart of man wherein moral and spiritual battles must be fought and won... thus the psalmist David prayed, “Who can discern his errors? Acquit me of hidden faults; also keep me from committing presumptuous sin; let them not rule over me... Let the words of my mouth & the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer” (Ps 19:12-14). The perfection demanded by the Law led David to consider his own imperfection: he was made aware of both hidden faults as well as deliberate impetuous sins, so he asked God to deliver him from both.

When we consider our fallenness and the imperfection of our inner being, it becomes quite clear to us that it is a painful weighty issue. When the cumbersome nature of anxiety weighs heavily upon us, it can cause us to despair and cause depression in the soul; it is at this point where we must pour our heart and emotions out to the Lord if we are to experience His peace — only God can administer genuine peace to the soul of man (cf. Phil 4:6-7; Gal 5:22; Heb 12:11). Obviously pouring one’s heart out to the Lord requires humility and sharing the depths of one’s anguish; it is not simply a matter of just scratching the surface of the problem, and then expecting God to give you peace that overwhelms the soul — ruminating over the depth of our anguish means dealing with the fullness of our pain, and crying out to the Lord with humility of heart. God wants us to look at the fullness of our inner being, and not just scratch the surface; our sinful inner core is not just a minor issue — it is so significant, it took the death of Christ to resolve... and He asks us to deal with it our entire life and see it for what it really is (cf. Ecc 9:3; Jer 17:9; Mt 16:24-25; Rom 6:12-23; Gal 5:17). In spite of the depth of one’s despair, God replaces it with peace; He not only quiets the soul, He fills it with peace. All of us as believers experiences some level of anxiety in life; some far more than others. Anxiety is an emotion characterized by uneasiness, dread, concern, tension, restlessness & worry... and often accompanies depression. The anxious individual often anticipates misfortune, danger, or doom... so anxiety is the underlying cause of many psychological problems. Though there is a healthy side to anxiety (it can increase efficiency and one's concerns; cf. 2 Cor 11:28; Phil 2:20), when anxiety takes on the form of fretting and worrying, it is not healthy (cf. Phil 4:6; 1 Pet 5:7). The learned responses that we have accumulated in life over the years (some go all the way back to our childhood), are often aroused by the stress we are undergoing in our life today. According to the Neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, “repressed emotions are frequently experienced in current situations” (The Mystery of the Mind; Princeton University Press, 1975); thus we are not only reacting to the current stresses, but also to the repressed emotions of our childhood — which explains the reason why we often overreact the way we do to current situations. Just because we are believers does not mean we have an exceedingly healthy inner core — our inner core is the product of all our life experiences.

Scripture says there's nothing good in the interior of our being (Rom 3:12; 7:18; Lk 18:19), and of this we can be sure — it is going to express itself in our life (Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20).
Essentially “anxiety is a strong feeling;” sometimes it can be very strong. The word anxiety refers to the perception of one’s state as either being pleasant or unpleasant; thus there are two categories by which feelings may be classified: “good” & “bad.” As Dr. Jay Adams says in his book, “The Christian Counselor’s Manual” — “the problem comes when people reduce their feelings to thoughts and beliefs.” Many counselees say “they feel inferior” (or stupid, or inadequate); but that deduction is grounded in a judgment they have made regarding their own behavior. The reality is, one cannot “feel inferior” because inferiority is not an emotion; inferiority is a judgment based upon some deductions. The question one needs to answer is this — “What reasons do you have for concluding that you are inferior or inadequate?” One might also say, “I don’t feel saved” or “I don’t feel loved” — those are common reactions by many in the Christian world, but the conviction that one is truly saved or loved is not an emotion; assurance is not a feeling. Though our relationship with Christ affects the emotions, it is not in itself a feeling. Distinguishing between the emotion and the conviction that triggers it is often fundamental to discovering the solution to one’s problem. Regarding our salvation, assurance first depends upon the promises of God in His Word, and then upon our dependence on Christ and the evidences of salvation in our life. So feeling is not the basis of our salvation, but the fruit of our salvation — it arises out of assurance and enhances it, but assurance itself has a more objective foundation. The Christian life is not a life based upon “how one feels;” it is based upon “what one believes” — Scripture repeatedly tells us that, “the righteous live by faith” (Rom 1:17), “not by what is seen” (Rom 8:24-25; 2 Cor 5:7). When we let our feelings dictate reality to us, we will only love others when we feel like it… or be kind when we feel like it… or go to work when we feel like it… or cut the grass when we feel like it… or go to church when we feel like it… or abstain from fleshly desires when we feel like it — should we let our feelings run our lives, we will find ourselves in an extremely deep psychological quagmire that will ultimately destroy us. It should be clear, the reason we sin is because “we feel like it,” i.e., we capitulate to our feelings. The reality is, the more mature we are in our faith, the more we will live above our feelings and see things for what they really are — the mature believer learns to live responsibly in spite of his feelings; yet frequently his feelings do get the better of him — obviously the passions of our inner core can be very strong at times (Rom 7:18; Jam 2:3). By the way, the more we discipline ourselves in life (cf. 1 Cor 9:27; Phil 3:13-14; Heb 6:1), the more we will reflect the presence of Christ. Regarding “discipline,” read the following passages: cf. Ps 50:16-17; Prv 12:1; 15:32; 23:12; Col 2:5; 1 Tim 4:7. With the foregoing in mind, as believers we must be committed to doing the following five things: obey God (Rom 6:16).… pray earnestly (Eph 6:18).… study the Word diligently and believe what it teaches (Rom 10:17; 2 Tim 2:15; 3:16-17).… guard our thought life (Phil 4:8)… and be confident in the fact that God is at work in us transforming us into the image of Christ (Phil 2:13-14; Rom 8:29; 2 Cor 3:18).

3. Obedience — Since the very beginning the Lord has instructed men as to what they were to do; failing to do that would bring punishment. God commanded Adam and
Eve “to be fruitful and multiply... to fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over every living thing” (Gen 1:28); thus God gave man the authority to exercise dominion over all the earth. He told them, “they could eat of any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good & evil; that if they eat of that tree they would die” (Gen 2:16-17).

So “obeying God” has always defined the economy of God for man. Time and time again God instructed man as to what he needed to do, yet time and time again man failed to do what God told him to do. Pharaoh responded to God’s servant Moses with these words: “Who is the LORD that I should obey His voice?” (Ex 5:2). Not long after, the LORD said to His people in the Sinai wilderness, ‘If you will obey Me... you shall be My possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine” (Ex 19:5). “If you do not obey Me... I will punish you for your sins... and destroy your pride” (Lev 26:14-19).

“If you diligently obey Me, I will bless you... if you do not obey Me, I will send many curses upon you” (cf. Deut 28:1ff & 28:15ff). “If you will obey the Lord with all your heart, I will prosper you” (Deut 30:2, 9). Throughout Scripture we constantly see God blessing those who obey Him (cf. Gen 26:12-13; Deut 28:1ff; 1 Chron 4:10; Mt 5:3-10; 11:6; 16:17; Lk 11:28; 12:37; Jn 13:17; Acts 3:26; Gal 3:8-9; Eph 1:3). The reality is, all legalistic religions obey their gods in order to gain their favor and avoid being punished; incidentally, that’s the essence of every religion except Christianity — either they are earning God’s favor or disfavor. The true believer in Christ doesn’t obey God to earn something or get something from Him; he obeys God out of gratitude for His unconditional love for him. So we are not saved by good works, we are saved for good works; i.e., loving others (cf. Eph 2:10; 1 Jn 3:16-19; 4:7-11, 19).

When King Saul disobeyed the command of God (he had actually redefined what God had said, and did what seemed best in his own eyes), he made a show of repentance with an elaborate burnt offering when the prophet Samuel confronted him about his disobedience. As a slam on his arrogant action, Samuel said to him, “To obey is better than sacrifice and burnt offerings” (1 Sam 15:21); thus emphasizing that sincerity and obedience were the prerequisites for worship that pleases God: man doesn’t have the option of changing the standard. The reality is, only an obedient disposition of the mind is truly good — when such a disposition is lacking, so also is moral value. Thus said Peter, “God has given the Holy Spirit to those who obey Him” (i.e., to those who believe on His Son; Acts 5:32). We are not free to change the rules of life simply because they don't mesh with our thinking (remember, we have fallen minds). Sadly, many in the Christian world insist on redefining what Scripture says, to make it correspond with their own paradigm of thought; if something seems unreasonable to them, they will choose not to believe it... thus they will develop their own theology of thought. Essentially that defines the path liberal theologians have traveled in our world; they reject the supernatural and the claim that Scripture is the infallible, inspired word of God (they claim it is nothing but the product of men). Because there are certain ugly realities in the world (death, murder, sickness, disease, floods, hurricanes, war, earthquakes, etc.), they feel such things are irreconcilable to a God of love; thus they refuse to believe in a God who would allow such things — as such, they define God
on their own terms, and arrogantly reject anything that does not coincide with their thinking, passions, or autonomy (not at all mindful of the fact that they are grossly fallen creatures with very deficient minds). Obviously when one embraces such a position, he foolishly makes fallen human thinking the ultimate measuring stick of what true reality is; in spite of the fact that his brain is incredibly small and deficient; remember, man’s IQ is 150 at best, and is not even capable of discovering the vast majority of things that are under the sun (cf. Ec 1:14; 7:13-14; 11:5; 12:13-14); yet he insists on judging reality at the highest level (both moral and spiritual) with his tiny little brain. The problem is, he has a very proud heart; one that will submit to nothing or anyone other than himself. From the beginning of time sinful man has always questioned the integrity of divine truth; i.e., what God says. The apostle Paul described it this way: “You are a slave of the one you obey: either of sin (i.e., that which doesn’t correspond with the expressed thinking of God), or of obedience (i.e., what God says)” (Rom 6:16). The question is, what is the source (the foundation) of your thinking? Without humility of thought one will not embrace divine thinking… remember God only convicts the humble heart of divine truth; thus to the proud heart, “it is foolishness” (cf. 1 Cor 1:18; 2:14; 3:18-19; Rom 1:21-22).

4. **Faith** — Faith is the foundation of “obedience;” without it one cannot rightfully obey, because true obedience is a corollary of faith (i.e., it must be inspired by faith, and be the outgrowth of faith). Remember, faith is the substance of divine thought; not the substance of human thought. Regrettably, faith is often mistaken for a blind belief in something that is unreasonable… to call the Christian faith a “blind faith” is an outrage to God, because it is the wisdom of God administered to man’s heart by His Spirit. Thus true faith is the by-product of divinely inspired wisdom and empirical evidence (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-24; 2:6-10; 2 Pet 1:16). Christianity does not rest upon myths and fables, but on the testimony of those who saw with their eyes and heard with their ears (cf. 1 Jn 1:1-3; Jn 1:14; Jn 20:24-29). The truth of the gospel is based on historical events. The book of Hebrews defines faith this way: “Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Obviously there is a substantive reason for the hope that is in us who believe. The fullness of biblical theology is centered on the notion of divine revelation and the receptive response of man — God speaks His word, and man hears it and is required to obey it. In the Torah, the theme of responsive obedience is underscored (cf. Ex 19:5, 8; 24:7; Deut 28:1; 30:11-14). The concept of faith in Scripture conveys the thought of a movement of trust going out to and laying hold of the object of its confidence; thus it is an attitude of the heart that involves a self-renouncing, trustful reliance upon God (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38) — self-renouncing is very clear to the believer; humility of thought cannot deny it because it is so convincing to the heart. So the nature of faith means to live by the truth God conveys to the heart by the Holy Spirit — be it through the spoken or written Word (cf. Acts 16:14; Rom 10:17). The Bible views faith’s convictions as certainties because they rest upon the testimony of a God who does not lie (cf. Titus 1:2; 1 Jn 5:9-12), and equates them with knowledge (cf. 1 Jn 3:2; 5:18-20).
Abraham was blessed because he *heard* and *obeyed* God’s voice; *i.e.*, *believed* what God said (Gen 22:18). *Disobedience is being unattentive to the voice of God* — “having *ears, but not hearing*” (cf. Ps 115:6; Jer 3:13; Is 6:9-10). According to Scripture, believing and obeying God is “faith;” without faith one cannot please God (Heb 11:6). The New Testament brings out this Old Testament construct when Jesus said, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear*” (cf. Mt 11:15; 13:9, 15-16; Mk 4:9, 23; 8:18; Lk 14:35). Then there is this exhortation of Christ, “*Why do you call Me ‘Lord, Lord,’ and not do what I say?*” (cf. Lk 6:46-48; Mt 7:21-27). Another proclamation by Jesus is this: “*Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it*” (cf. Lk 11:28; Jn 10:16, 27; 15:5, 10). Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the 20th century German pastor and ecumenist who was outspoken against Hitler, in his famous work *The Cost of Discipleship* commented on the previous verse saying, “*It is only to this obedience that the promise of fellowship with Jesus is given.*” As Jesus’ brother stated, “*faith without works (obedience) is useless / dead*” (Jam 2:17, 20).

Claiming to believe something without demonstrating it is nothing but a sham (cf. 1 Jn 3:7-10; 17:18; 4:7-8). By the way, *the heart is a correlative of faith — the heart is the interior of our being that believes, and faith is the expressed position of the heart (i.e., what a person truly believes).* If a person really believes something, it will be evidenced by the way in which he lives (Mt 7:15-23; Jn 13:35). That truism reminds me of the words of Tertullian (ca. 160-220), the African moralist, apologist & theologian, who was known as “The Father of Latin Theology” — being reared in cultured paganism in Carthage, he knew well the hatred and brutality that the pagan world had for one another… pagan philosophy was filled with errors and was at odds with Christianity. In his earliest writings Tertullian defended Christian beliefs & practices that pagans often misunderstood; one of the pagan quotes about Christians that he mentions in his writings was this, “*See how they love one another* (for they themselves hate one another), *and how they are ready to die for each other* (for they themselves are readier to kill each other)” — Apologeticum, chp 39, p. 7. It’s hard to imagine the incredible hatred that existed in the first to the third centuries. One of the most profound comments made regarding the early Christians came from the lips of a man named Aristides, who was sent by Emperor Hadrian around 135 AD to spy out those strange creatures known as “Christians,” having seen them in action Aristides reported back to the Emperor, “*Behold! How they love one another.*” True born-again Christians reflect the love of Christ in their world in some measure; *i.e.*, they evidence it by the way in which they live, because God by His Spirit is doing a work in and through them (cf. Phil 2:13; 1 Jn 4:7-8). The Christian apologist Justin Martyr (100-165)… and the Christian scholar Clement of Alexandria (155-220)… and Cyprian (ca. 200-258), the Bishop of Carthage, all made very similar statements. The greatest of the Latin fathers was Augustine (354-430) — his voluminous writings massively influence almost every sphere of Western thought down through the ages; both the Reformers and Catholics claim his patronage; in his writings Augustine frequently quoted Tertullian.
Let me bring this study to a close with an Old Testament quote — the LORD said to His people Israel through the prophet Isaiah: “You honor Me with your *lips*, but your *heart is far from Me; your reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote” (Is 29:13). Jesus said the same thing regarding the Pharisees in the gospel of Matthew (Mt 15:8). Sin and Satan have so blinded fallen human beings (cf. Eph 4:18; 2 Cor 4:4) that they cannot see and comprehend the realities of divine truth (cf. Jn 3:3; 1 Cor 2:14), or come to “a self-renouncing trust in Christ” (Jn 6:44, 65) — as mentioned several times, it is only the “humble heart” that the Holy Spirit enlightens and does a work of grace in his life (cf. 1 Th 1:5; 1 Cor 12:3; Titus 3:5; Heb 10:15-16; Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). May the prayer of A. W. Tozer, as it is stated in his book, “The Pursuit of God,” be your prayer and my prayer as well:

* * *

O God, I have tasted Thy goodness, and it has both satisfied me and made me thirsty for more. I am painfully conscious of my need of further grace. I am ashamed of my lack of desire. O God, the Triune God, I want to want Thee; I long to be filled with longing; I thirst to be made more thirsty still. Show me Thy glory, I pray Thee, that so I may know Thee indeed. Begin in mercy a new work of love within me. Say to my soul, “Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.” Then give me grace to rise and follow Thee up from this misty lowland where I have wandered so long.

In Jesus’ name. Amen.