

THE ETERNAL NATURE OF OUR FAITH

(The origin of our faith is eternity past)

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

This study is dedicated to my mentor in ministry, Dr. Guy Davidson, and the roughly 2,000 College Students I had the privilege of serving and ministering to over the years. Davidson was the founding pastor of Grace Community Church in Tempe, Arizona; that church in which I served during my first 19 years of ministry. During Guy's more than 20 years of ministry at Grace, the church grew to an average attendance of more than 5,000 worshippers every Sunday. Essentially, it was under Guy's tutelage and leadership where I learned the dynamics of effective ministry and the significance of loving people — his love for people not only impacted many in our congregation, but my life personally; needless to say, I greatly treasured his friendship.

PREFACE

Before I launch into the subject at hand, let me first state the following — though this is a study that ultimately deals with “The Eternal Nature of Our Faith” or “The Eternality of Our Faith,” I thought it best to first address some preliminary issues before delving into the main subject. In order to give context to what it is we ultimately want to cover, let's first take a look at the issues of feelings & emotions... then expand on the significance of faith... and then address the foundation of faith. All of this will make sense to you once you walk through the entire study. It is not very often that I preface a study by addressing a correlative of that subject, but in this case I felt it was wise to do so, due to the fact the related subject plays such a significant role in people's lives. Whereas “our faith” must be grounded in God's Word, “our feelings” often strongly influence our faith; hence, the need to address the matter of feelings and emotions as well. By the way, since this is a study, let me encourage you to deal with it as such, and not simply treat it as a casual read. As you work through this study you'll notice I have listed a number of biblical references — be sure to read those passages as well because they expand upon the issues under consideration. You will also notice, I italicize and embolden and underline numerous words and phrases; I do this for the sake of contextual emphasis. With that in mind, let me begin this study by stating the following — our present day Christian world finds it strange that not that many years ago “feelings and emotions” were essentially ignored by theologians; this is all the more perplexing to them because they are such “dynamic realities” in the our lives. Nearly every book on systematic theology ignored the subject of feelings and emotions; even Theological Dictionaries and Encyclopedias were relatively silent on the subject, yet if there is anything that confounds the believer's heart and his faith it is his feelings and emotions. A Professor of Philosophy Emeritus at

the University of Notre Dame, **Alvin Plantinga**, states in his book “*Body and Soul*” (Inter Varsity, 2000, p. 25) — “*The assertion that the God of the Bible experiences emotion would seem to go without saying, were it not for the early influence of Plato and the Stoics upon theologians.* The contrivance of an impassible, *unemotional God* stems from a pejorative view of emotions as inherently unruly and capricious; that was what the ancient Greek world believed; they viewed emotions as irrational and intemperate and as a sign of weakness, dependence, and contingency. As a result, *the Stoic ideal of apatheia became the ideal and this idea was imposed upon God.*” The Professor of Theology and Science at the University of Oxford in England, **Dr. Alister McGrath**, stated it this way in his book “*Historical Theology*” — “In order to preserve the divine attributes of transcendence, immutability & aseity, many of the patristic theologians believed it *logically necessary* to posit that God is impassible; *i.e.*, He is incapable of experiencing *passions, negative emotions* or *suffering*. [Though Scripture ascribes emotion to God, these men simply held that] God merely represented Himself with emotion in order to communicate meaningfully to emotional human beings” (Oxford, Blackwell, 1998, p. 15). If that seems a bit much to you, consider this: “*The Westminster Confession of Faith*” & “*The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England*” described God as “*without body, part, or passions.*” A Professor of Theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, **Dr. D. A. Caron**, says in his book, “*How Long O Lord?*” — The method used to buy into the doctrine of Divine impassibility was that of “selecting certain texts of Scripture, namely those that insist on God’s sovereignty and changelessness, constructs a theological grid on the basis of those selected texts, and then uses this grid to filter out all other texts; in particular those that speak of *God’s emotions*” (Baker, 1990, p. 186). It is precisely this kind of thinking that played such a major role in Roman Catholicism — human thinking frequently displaced biblical truth. When I reflect back upon what I had heard back in the 1970s, that was pretty much what I had come to understand. Due to the historic positions of some highly acclaimed theologians, error in judgment frequently made its way down through the ages. Yet as **Dr. Paul Fiddes**, a Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Oxford in England asserted 25 years ago in his work “*Divine Suffering*” — “nearly all Christian theologians *today* acknowledge that God indeed does experience *emotion*” (Blackwell, 1993, p. 634).

The reality is, *Scripture is replete with emotion, both God’s and man’s...* and since the Bible is the revelation of a personal God to human persons made in His image, and that emotions are an important component of personhood, the Bible is necessarily not only about doctrinal truth, but about emotion as well. **Dr. Sam R. Williams**, a Professor of Counseling at Southeastern Theological Seminary tells us that “*the Bible frequently reveals God’s emotions* so that our lives, including our emotions, might fully honor and glorify Him.” When Scripture speaks about the *wrath of God*, he says, the Lord not only wants us to understand what He *thinks* about sin, but how He *feels* about it — “this is so that we might know Him better and improve our understanding of His holiness and His love. We must apprehend (rationally and emotionally) our moral dilemma before His holy justice, that we might experience the depth of His love for us when He poured His righteous wrath out upon His Son instead of us” (*Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, Winter, 2003).

So the Bible itself is not just rational literature, it is emotional literature. Good theology should lead us not only to think *God's thoughts* after Him, but also to experience *God's affections* after Him. If Christlikeness is our goal, the Holy Spirit will bring fruit into our life that has significant *emotions* — love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, etc. (Gal 5:21-22). Jesus invites us into “*His Joy*” in the gospels (Jn 15:11; 17:13). In the Psalms God tells us, “*In His presence is fullness of joy... in Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore*” (Ps 16:11). Both Paul and David frequently enjoin their listeners to “*rejoice*” and “*be glad.*” Peter tells us to “*cast all our anxieties on Him, because He cares for us*” (1 Pet 5:7). “*Fear not*” is a frequent command in both the Old & New Testaments. Moses tells His people that they will be judged “*because they did not serve the Lord their God with joy and gladness of heart for the abundance of everything*” (cf. Deut 28:47). Emotions play a very critical role in our lives — by *anger* we move out to revenge; by *desire* we move out to obtain; by *love* we move out to enjoy; by *pity* we move out to relieve. *Our affections are the emotions of the soul, and are directly related to the apprehension of what is both good and evil.*

Alfred Rehwinkel, a professor of Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, states the following with regard to “*emotion*” — “Emotions are an aspect of the mind... and are experienced within the soul... Emotions, like sensations, elude precise definition... everyone knows what is meant by love, fear, anger, worry, etc. But it is most difficult to convey the meaning of any one of these emotions by an attempted definition. However, all *emotions* have in common the general idea of ‘*being stirred up*’ (the Latin word upon which our English word is built means precisely that), *excited, and perturbed*. Emotions are important factors in motivating human behavior; the reality is, *people are influenced more by their feelings than by reason*. **Dr. Ray S. Anderson** (1925-2009), a distinguished professor of theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, published a book titled “*Spiritual Caregiving as Secular Sacrament*” (Kingley Publishers, London, 2003), just a few years before he passed away. Anderson was a prolific author and a scholar of great faith who believed in and practiced a life of significant service on many levels. In his book he addresses the matter of “*emotion*” in the life of the believer. In it he states that “*one looks in vain through the standard textbooks in systematic theology for a discussion of the emotional life of the self.*” He concludes by saying that, “*Theologians have traditionally displayed an innate disregard for the theological significance of emotion, except to treat it as a relic of the ‘old self.’*” Probably the most common way in which emotions are viewed in the Christian community today is by the common slogan: “*Fact, Faith, Feelings.*” There is even a nice little graphic that depicts it —



The idea is that we should put *facts* first, then reinforce the facts with our *faith*, and then let our *feelings* tag along behind. The important thing this graphic picture illustrates is the importance of keeping our feelings at the end of the train; they'll tag along eventually (the important thing is not letting them be preeminent in our theology). Though sometimes our emotions are grounded in the *truth* of Scripture, sometimes they are ground in *falsehood* because they are based upon false premises. For example, if we falsely believe that *God is not in control of our circumstances*, we may experience the emotions of fear or despair or anger based on that false belief. It has been said over and over again, it is important that we learn to *manage emotions* rather than let them manage us. For example, when we feel angry, we need to *acknowledge* that we are angry, *examine* our hearts as to why we are angry, and then *move* in a divine direction. Foundational to what some may think, "*the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God*" (Jam 1:20). Since our emotions are influenced greatly by the fall, our emotions are tainted by our sin nature, and that is why they need controlling. We are to be controlled by *the Holy Spirit*, not by our emotions (cf. Rom 6; Eph 5:15-18; 1 Pet 5:6-11). We must recognize our emotions and bring them to God, and allow Him to do His work in our hearts and direct our actions. The *psalms* are excellent examples of managing our emotions and bringing them to God... many psalms are filled with *raw emotions*, but the emotion is poured out to God in an attempt to seek His truth and righteousness. Obviously, allowing our emotions to control us or justify them or deny them is not the road God would have us take... since we are transformed by the renewing of our minds (cf. Rom 12:1-2) and the power of the Holy Spirit, we need daily input of scriptural principles and a desire to grow in the knowledge of God, and we need to contemplate divine truth and meditate upon it.

Most of us have developed a *love-hate affair with our emotions*. We recognize, at least in part, that emotions are central to what it means to simply live life and experience reality. The truth is, our feelings and emotions play an extremely important role in our lives — nearly every circumstance is accompanied with a corresponding feeling... if the circumstance is "*positive*," so also will be the feeling; conversely, if the circumstance is "*negative*," so will be the feeling. Many of our "*thoughts*" also elicit feelings, so thinking plays a vital role in the believer's life. Over the years we have developed "*opinions*" on most things — some things we have come to *like*, and other things *dislike*. When our likes are being met, we are happy; when our dislikes take center stage we are not happy. Incidentally, our English word "*happy*" is a derivative of the old Norse word "*happ*," from which we also get our word "*happens*" — when what happens to us is positive, we feel happy... when it is negative, we don't feel happy. Hence, most of our circumstances elicit some kind of *feeling* — if the circumstance is perceived to be positive, we will be happy... if it is perceived to be negative, we will not be happy. Because this is true, as believers we need to carefully reassess our thinking when being confronted with "*highly emotional issues*" (our innate bias may be too strongly skewed). In addition to the foregoing, *every thought elicits some kind of feeling*... be it a significant feeling that energizes our inner core, or a fairly insignificant one that is simply processed without much emotion. If you were told that $11 + 12 = 25$, you would natur-

ally reject that claim — depending upon the significance of that error (*i.e.* the context), so would go your feelings. If it had to do with “*pennies owed*,” it wouldn’t have much effect upon your feelings... but if it had to do with “*thousands of dollars owed*,” your feelings would become far more significant. Regarding this matter of feelings, perhaps one could compare them to “*the ongoing current that takes place in the ocean*” — it is always being felt; *i.e.*, it is always moving. It is *storms* that cause the current (waves) to become violent; conversely, it is the storms of life that cause us to experience strong emotional feelings — without storms, the soul is relatively calm... but when storms do come, they have a tendency to govern the discourse that takes place in our minds; *the discourse only changes by intentionally redirecting our thinking* (cf. Phil 4:6-9). Emotion starts the ball rolling in our minds... when it is rolling in a wrong direction, we must then take steps to redirect our thinking. At every intersection of life, feelings immediately govern the discourse in our minds; thus it must be the practice of our lives to “*take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*” (2 Cor 10:5) — though some people think that’s making the Christian life a bit much; those who draw that conclusion are minimizing the centrality of the Christian life (don’t change the rules). If the feelings or emotions we are experiencing run counter to God’s will, the temptation to embrace the feelings makes it a sin. So if one is *conscious* that his feelings run counter to what God would have him think, he must immediately turn from those feelings (lusts, desires) or he will give birth to sin (Jam 1:13). The cries and demands of the soul (*i.e.*, our flesh) are defined by intense feelings, emotions, passions, anxieties, wants, frustrations & desires. *Angst in the soul and spiritual depression* are often the result of disturbing thoughts and our emotional inner core — disconcerting circumstances, unanswered prayers, and a lack of peace in the soul, can cause significant disconcertion in our inner core. God’s call upon our lives is that we *fight the flesh* and not let it rule in our lives (cf. Rom 6:12; Gal 5:17); we are not to let our feelings and fleshly inner core govern all that goes on in our minds. Though some believers may claim to never get “*angry*,” that is not at all possible for fallen human beings; if you make that claim, you are priding yourself in your own self-piety and are trying to delude others; you need to own up to your frailties and acknowledge the truth; it gets a little old hearing some of this self-righteous stuff from people — even *GOD* gets angry (Scripture identifies at least a hundred times when God got angry — cf. Ex 32:9-10; Deut 11:16-17; Josh 7:1; Jud 2:13-14; 2 Chr 25:14-15; Ps 78:39). Anger is simply an expression of the soul; sometimes it might be good, at other times it might be bad. Incidentally, I cover the subject of “*Feelings and Emotions*” in far more detail in a study I did on it that you can find on my website should you care to read it: www.thetransformedsoul.com You can access it under the “Additional Studies” link.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAITH

It should be obvious, we don’t dictate the course of events in our lives, so when things run contrary to *our desires*, life can become very disconcerting, discouraging and frustrating. Most of the *negatives* we experience in life are out of our control... when they come they

often affect us on a deep emotional level. The apostle Paul addressed the issue this way: *“Be **anxious** for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God. And the **peace** of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus”* (Phil 4:6-7). When faith rules in our soul, *anxiety* is dealt with, and *peace* displaces it. If our joy is not in the *Lord* (Phil 4:4), it is in the *circumstances* of life; which is precisely where it was prior to our conversion — with that in mind, true Christian joy is found in Christ, not our circumstances. Though faith may seem to be pretty easy without disagreeable circumstances... it is only when trials come our way that the life of faith becomes a little perplexing to us... it is at this point where our faith is *tested*, and it is the testing of our faith that *strengthens* our faith; without trials and tribulation, our faith would remain *very weak*. This doesn't mean that disagreeable circumstances are *enjoyable* — the author of Hebrews says they are actually *“very sorrowful and painful”* (Heb 12:11). Because of our own spiritual weakness, difficult circumstances may even cause us to question God and our faith: *“Why is God allowing this in my life?” “What did I do to deserve this?” “How come God doesn't answer my prayers?” “Why is He being so mean to me?” “Why doesn't He honor my faith?” “Why is my faith so weak?”* The reality is, *“the precepts of faith”* by which we have lived our lives are not perfectly accurate; in spite of the fact that we may have been raised in a Christian home and attended a good Christian church, does not mean our faith is absolutely biblical... somewhere along the line the vast majority of us developed a *“construct of faith”* that doesn't fully coincide with what Scripture teaches. By the way, I wouldn't go over the deep end over that; that essentially defines most of the Christian world. Yes, we agreed with God that we were sinners in need of forgiveness, and that Jesus paid the price for our sin on the cross, and that God made us one of His children when we placed our trust in His Son (cf. Jn 1:12; Gal 3:26; 1 Jn 5:13)... yet the *“sanctifying life”* to which God has called us, is not the joyful little life that we were led to believe; rather than being a life of *ease and positives*, the Christian life also involves *war and negatives*. The primary teaching of most Christian churches essentially focuses on the *positives*... so when the negatives enter our lives, our little book of faith (*i.e.*, what we have come to believe) becomes somewhat troubling to us... hence, all of the questions. Let me be very clear here; having a *“troubled faith”* does not mean we are displeasing to God or that we are not born again; every believer is troubled somewhat with his faith (cf. Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8; 26:31-35; Lk 22:31-34, 40, 46), that's why we are constantly exhorted to *“grow in our faith,”* and growing in faith is no simple little matter (cf. Jn 15:3-5; 17:17; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Pet 2:2; 2 Pet 3:18). God is well aware that no human being possesses *absolute goodness* (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 7:18)... He knows our frame and is mindful that *we are but dust* (cf. Ps 103:14)... that our hearts are *full of deceit* (cf. Jer 17:9)... that we are a people of *little faith* who have *significant weaknesses* (cf. Heb 4:15)... that we inhabit *sinful flesh* (Rom 7:14-24). Remember, *we are all fallen creatures*; for some reason, most Christians actually think that once they became a child of God they *became a significantly better person* (*i.e.*, that they now inherently possess a degree of goodness)... yet when this goodness doesn't seem to evidence itself in their lives, they become somewhat perplexed and begin to question the integrity of their faith and wonder why they are not better than they are — thus they ask God for it, and pray for

it; yet it ceases to be the reality they think it should be. Contrary to what anyone of you might think, that defines every one of God's saints (both during the biblical era, and in the present era); thus as a believer, you must embrace reality for what it really is, not simply what you think it should be or want it to be (those are violations of Scripture).

One might compare our innate sinfulness to a *terminal illness* that will one day result in physical death; no matter how proudly we may deny its debilitating presence in our lives, we all have the disease... yet we all like to think it is not as significant in our lives as it is in other people's lives; that we are actually better than the norm — that is how *proud* the human family is. *Many people live a life of denial* and walk through this world as if they don't even have the disease. *Accepting our innate sinfulness* is a major hurdle for the entire human family; even the believing community has a difficult time accepting their sinfulness — though we became *new creations* when we placed our faith in Christ (cf. Rom 6:4; 2 Cor 5:17), that did not mean our sinful flesh was removed from us or that it no longer has a significant presence in our lives. The apostle Paul struggled greatly with accepting his innate sinfulness. Here's what he said: "God's Law is *spiritual*, but I am *fleshly*, sold into bondage to sin... since I do the very things I hate, no longer am I the one doing it, but *sin* which indwells me. Though I want to do good, I do evil... since I do the very thing I do not want to do, I am not the one doing it, but *sin* which indwells me (i.e., evil is present in me). Though the Law of God is in me, likewise the Law of Sin in me" (Rom 7:14-25). With that in mind, Paul concluded: "I am a man of *flesh*, sold into bondage of sin... that I am not able to live life the way I want to live it... that I often do the very things I hate; that sin actually dwells in me." Thus he declared, "nothing good dwells in me" (i.e., in my flesh); though he desperately wanted to live a sinless life (just like you and I do), he simply was not able to do so (and neither are we)... the reality was, "he did the very things he did not want to do." If your faith has integrity, you will identify with what Paul has stated, because that defines every believer. So after struggling with his sinful self, Paul came to understand that "the principle of evil was present within him." It is this reality that defines each of us as Christians — the principle of indwelling sin in our members is constantly mounting a military campaign against our new nature trying to do whatever it can to win the moment (cf. Gal 5:17). Now it must be understood, in spite of the fact that we often cave into indwelling sin (i.e., our flesh), God is holding each of us *responsible* for doing so (cf. Jam 1:14-15); therefore we must acknowledge our sins and confess them to the Lord (cf. Jam 1:14-15; 1 Jn 1:9). As believers, Christ died for our sins; i.e., He died for both the *penalty of sin* (death), and the *power of sin* (sin no longer has absolute control over our lives) — as believers we now have the wherewithal because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to live a God-centered life by faith rather than a self-centered life. Our problem as believers is, we are not people of great faith; we are simply a people of faith in a great God.

Thus the question is, "Do we *have to sin*?" No, not at all, but due to the fact that we are not men and women of great faith, we will often capitulate and cave into our flesh. It is only by walking in faith and walking in the Spirit that we can put to death the deeds of

the body (cf. Rom 8:13; Gal 5:16; 1 Jn 5:4) — the reason we fail to put the deeds of the body to death, is our failure to exercise the faith God has given to us. That doesn't mean we are not children of God, it simply means we didn't live by faith in the moment. To help give definition to this thing called "*sin*," Paul said, "*That which is not of faith is sin*" (Rom 14:23); *i.e.*, when our thoughts and actions do not coincide with the divine will, *we are sinning* — sin is not simply *external* wrong behavior, it is also *internal* wrong thinking (with that in mind, "*sin*" is far more prominent in our lives than some believers may think; that's why Paul told us to "*take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ*" — cf. 2 Cor 10:5; Jam 3:2; Mt 5:27-28; 15:19; Heb 4:12; Ecc 7:20; Ps 73:26; Prv 23:7; 24:16; Jer 17:9); the reality is, *this battle of the mind is immense!* In his letter to the Philippians Paul said, "*Don't let anxious thoughts rule in your soul; prayerfully take them to God and let Him displace your anxiety with His peace*" (Phil 4:6-7); he goes on to say, "*Dwell on those things that are true and right and pure and good and lovely*" (Phil 4:8-9); remember, "*As a man thinks so is he*" (Prv 23:7). It is only when we walk in the Spirit that we are able to live a God-centered, holy life (cf. Gal 5:16-17; Rom 8:6, 13) — since we cannot overcome in our own strength, we must depend upon the Holy Spirit. As Solomon put it, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding*" (Prv 3:5-6); in other words, put all of your weight on God and divine truth, and don't trust your own fallen thinking. It is the Holy Spirit who empowers us to live a holy life when we turn the control of our lives over to Him and submit to Him — *righteous living is only possible when we live a faith-based, Spirit-controlled life* (cf. Rom 8:13; 1 Jn 5:4). Remember, faith involves *believing* what God says; "*without faith it is not possible to please God*" (Heb 11:6). It should be evident, only those people are occupied with the Word of God, prayer, worship, and Christian service, walk more uprightly in life; but due to the fact that none of us as believers live an absolute life of faith, sin often has a tendency to rule in all of our lives. Though there are times when we *feel good spiritually*, there are times when we don't; but the foundation of spirituality is faith, not feelings. Obviously this thing called "*faith*" is not at all easy, but it is the one thing we must *strive* for in life (cf. Col 1:29; 1 Tim 4:6-10; Heb 12:4; Lk 13:24).

Though each of us as God's children overcome the flesh more often than some people think (*i.e.*, all of us as believers at least have an elementary faith), no believer lives completely outside of faith; however, only those Christians who *diligently work at walking in the Spirit*, experience greater success when it comes to overcoming their flesh... yet no believer is so wonderful that he overcomes his flesh 90% of the time! Perhaps one could metaphorically compare living by faith to a "*batting average*" in baseball; though *less than 10% have a batting average of .300 or better* (remember, that's only three hits in every ten times at bat; in other words, two-thirds of the time they don't get a hit)... *more than 10% have a batting average of .200 or worse* (which is only two hits every ten times at bat) — by the way, those who bat .200 or less have a very low commitment to God; their flesh simply dominates their lives far too often. Because of Paul's imperfections and his frustration with sin in his life, he cried out: "*Wretched man that I am! Who will 'set me free' from the body of this death?*" Keep in mind, though Paul batted .300, he wanted to bat 1,000! But that is not at all possible for us a fallen creatures, be-

cause of the presence indwelling of sin (*i.e.*, our flesh), and the fact that our faith isn't that strong — *our problem is a weak faith*. For those of you who don't understand this baseball metaphor, don't worry about it, just continue reading. In frustration and grief, Paul lamented his sin (cf. Ps 38:14; 130:1-5), and longed to be rescued from his sinful flesh (Rom 8:23). The answer that finally settled the issue in his heart was this: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:14-25) — Paul finally came to the realization that Christ will eventually 'rescue him completely' from the presence of indwelling sin at the end of the age (cf. Rom 8:18, 23; 1 Cor 15:52-53, 57; 2 Cor 5:4); that's the wonderful *hope* that we have as believers. Obviously, Paul was no longer overwhelmed & supra-discouraged by the presence of indwelling sin in his life (*i.e.*, his flesh)... he now had come to fully understand its presence and everything God was doing in his life; this will make far more sense to you at the end of this study. Said the apostle John regarding this matter of hope, "It has **not** appeared as yet what we shall be... when Christ appears we shall be like Him! And everyone who has **this hope** fixed on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure" (1 Jn 3:2-3). To insist that we be heavenly creatures here on earth is completely outside the realm of reason, and contradicts what Scripture teaches. The reality is this: we have been called to war against evil in this life, and a significant part of that evil dwells in our very being (cf. Gal 5:17; Eph 4:22-24). The glorious future that awaits us will not occur until we enter into heaven; meanwhile, we have a war to fight! Though heaven will be glorious bliss, God never intended this life to be glorious bliss (cf. Jn 16:33; 1 Tim 6:12; Heb 12:11; 1 Pet 1:6; 5:10). If one can't see and accept this life for what it really is (it is not at all a pleasant little walk in the park), he is going to be very disturbed in himself, because he will insist that life be what he wants it to be, rather than what it is. Beloved, it is only when you understand "reality," that you will stop moaning and groaning and fight the fight of faith.

Regarding this matter of "*hope*," it should be a very significant reality in your life — read the following passages — cf. Rom 8:18-25; 15:13; 1 Cor 13:13; 2 Cor 1:10; Eph 1:18-20; Col 1:5, 27; 1 Tim 1:1; 4:10; Titus 2:13; 3:7; Heb 6:11; 10:23; 1 Pet 1:3, 13). Hope is what this thing called faith is all about. So what is it? Well, essentially hope is the ability to see beyond one's circumstances; it is not grounded in visible evidence (Rom 8:24-25) — though we hope in God, yet none of us have seen Him (Jn 20:29). Regarding this matter of hope, let's look at it metaphorically — let's say you are losing a baseball game three to nothing... it's the bottom of the ninth inning, and you already have two outs with nobody on base... yet you still have "*hope*" that you can win the game? Not likely. Why? because the visible evidence suggests otherwise. With that in mind, when circumstances are not encouraging, they generally destroy our hope; after all, the odds are, the physical evidence suggests that things simply aren't going to change that much. When the children of Israel exited out of Egypt into the wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula, it wasn't long until they saw the Egyptians marching after them, and "they became very frightened" (cf. Ex 13:17-18; 14:5-10). It made no difference what God had told them, the circumstances controlled the discourse in their minds. This kind of thing happened over and over and over again in Scripture. The reality is, visible evidence strongly influences the minds of men... so Paul wrote, "We don't walk by sight, we walk by faith" (2 Cor 5:7). Though the world walks by sight,

we as believers are not to walk by sight — if what we see differs from what God says, we are to embrace what God says, and reject what we see and feel; that is the essence of faith, and that is what makes faith so difficult (it frequently runs counter to what we see and feel). Again, are we going to obey God, or are we going to trust what we see and feel? That is precisely why Paul told Timothy that he needed to “*fight the good of faith*” (1 Tim 6:12); faith is a fight because it is not natural; it does not equate with the ways of this world, it is of supernatural divine origin. Sadly, it doesn’t take long for many believers to rely upon the visible evidence in their lives — when the visible evidence runs counter to what God says, however, we have a responsibility as believers to reject it and embrace what God says. The problem with us as fallen creatures is that physical evidence frequently influences our thinking. Without being grounded in the Word, we will often wander in our lives, because that which we see will strongly influence our thinking; remember, that is precisely how the unbelieving world lives. When our life as a believer seems to be nothing but negatives, it is not at all encouraging to us because we are also a people of flesh; and if there is anything that negatives do to one’s flesh, it is discourage them... in spite of that fact that we as believers are called to maintain our faith and trust God that He has a *positive purpose* for allowing everything we are going through. Our problem as human beings is that we often make mountains out of molehills; *i.e.*, we often completely misinterpret our negative circumstances... as such, they weigh very heavily on our soul, and have a significant impact upon us. It is here where we must have a firm understanding of *what is really going on in our life* — God is doing a significant work in our lives (that will make far more sense to you a little later in this study).

Though Paul’s innate sinfulness was very significant in his mind (just as it is in ours), he makes the following emphatic declaration — “*There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus!*” (Rom 8:1). Paul had absolute assurance that no sin that he or any other believer would ever commit would *reverse the divine verdict of God* that He accomplished for us through the cross of Christ. The reality is this: “*God has set us free from the law of sin and death*” (Rom 8:1-2); we are no longer under the sentence of the law (*i.e.*, *death* is no longer an issue for those who are *alive* in Christ — cf. Eph 2:1-5; Col 2:13); instead, we are empowered by the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit to live for Christ. Though all of us as believers hate the fact that we frequently cave into the flesh, that’s what it means to be a fallen creature with little faith; though we are saved creatures, we are still fallen creatures — it is this dichotomy that is so troubling to believers; when we came to faith in Christ, we simply didn’t realize that this sin problem was still such a significant reality in our lives. It is our unredeemed sinful humanness (*i.e.*, the sinful physical body of death with which we live; which is one day going to be completely destroyed) that is ever waging war against our new inner self (cf. 2 Cor 5:17; Gal 5:17). **St. Augustine** (354-430) has been regarded by both the Roman Catholic and Protestant worlds as being the greatest theologian in Christendom since the first century — he described the struggle that went on in his soul as follows:

*The new will that had begun in me... was not yet strong enough to overpower the old will that had become tough with age. So 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. From my own experience I know, therefore, what Paul meant when he said, “The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (Gal 5:17). I was on both sides, but mostly I was on the side that I approved in myself, rather than the side I disapproved. 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.... I perceived that there was in my bodily members a different law fighting against the law that my reason approved and making me a prisoner under the law that was in my members, the law of sin. Messed-up creature that I was, who was there to rescue this doomed body? God alone through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7:14-25) – (Sherwood Eliot Wirt, *Love Song: Augustine’s Confessions for Modern Man*; Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 108-109).*

Following Christ doesn’t mean we don’t enjoy life, but neither does it mean that everything in life is pleasant and problem free. It is here where the believer struggles in life. The author of Hebrews says “the discipline we go through in life, does not appear to be joyful, but sorrowful” (cf. Heb 12:11; 1 Pet 1:6) — that word “discipline” needs to be defined; the Greek term “*paideuo*” is used of “*training, educating and correcting children*,” as God’s children, none of us are perfect creatures (not even close) — we each still have a long way to go. If you think “*you have arrived spiritually*,” consider the following: how much do you think you resemble Christ? That’s a very sobering question, because we are a long way from being like Christ. Remember, when we get to heaven God is going to complete our transformation... as the apostle John says, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is” (1 Jn 3:2) — the emboldened words in that verse are “*emphatic*” — we are children of God who will one day be exactly like Christ! The sober reality is this: we are not going to completely reflect the image of Christ until we are transformed in heaven — the war in our members is a far more significant one than most Christians believe it is. The apostle Peter put it this way: “After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you” (1 Pet 5:10; Phil 1:29); incidentally, that work will be done by God alone. Until the day of the Lord, none of us will remotely reflect perfection — that just happens to be the economy under which we as believers live. Thus, “we are all in the process of being conformed to the image of Christ” (Rom 8:29); furthermore, that aspect of it that is accomplished here in this life is done through trials, adversity & suffering — such are God’s most effective teachers for us as believers. **Dr. Leslie Weatherhead** says in his book “*Prescription for Anxiety*” (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1956), “The trying things (i.e., those things that overwhelm us and upset our pride), do more good than all that which excites and inspires us.” The British

preacher Charles Spurgeon expressed it this way in his book, "The Treasury of the New Testament" (Pub: Marshall, Morgan & Scott), "All the grace I have got out of my comfortable and easy times [is very little in comparison to] the good that I have received from my sorrows and pains and griefs." The truth is, all of the divine discipline and training we undergo as God's children is not pleasant while it is in process; "it is not until later that it brings forth the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Heb 12:11). Just as "physical surgery" is not an enjoyable experience, neither is "spiritual surgery" — but when one truly understands the benefits of such surgery, obviously such surgeries are much easier to accept; think about it, if you didn't know the benefit of some physical procedure that you were being subjected to, calmness would not rule in your soul. To the dismay of most of us, there's no "spiritual sedative or anesthetic" that we can take to put us to sleep so that we don't feel the pain of surgery; in that sense, it differs from medical surgery. Spiritual surgeries must be accepted and endured "by faith" (i.e., by assurance & conviction — and that only comes about by meditating on God's Word). Remember, faith is grounded in the truths of Scripture, not in some ethereal experience; we do not walk by sight (2 Cor 5:7) — God's call upon our lives is that we would "believe His Word" (i.e., "walk by faith"); naturally there is going to be a counter-argument in your mind that you must reject.

Now, "the reason we can rejoice when we encounter various trials" is that discipline is purifying in its aim (cf. Jam 1:2) — if trials had no positive transforming purpose in our lives, that would be one thing, but God has so willed that "through trials & tribulations we are being transformed into the image of Christ by the Holy Spirit" (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Rom 5:1-5; 1 Pet 5:10) — that is what is going on in every believer's life... we are all in the process of being transformed; that verb in Greek (metamorphoo) is in the present tense, meaning this action is a continual ongoing action... and it is in the passive voice, meaning that it is an action that is being done to us (read 2 Cor 3:18) — in short, the Holy Spirit is continually at work transforming us into the image of Christ; furthermore, being as it is expressed in the indicative mood in Greek, it is "a definite reality," not simply a "maybe." As believers, we must believe the truth of God's Word and not play around with it and distort its meaning; in the end, God will not tolerate that... so build your faith on the truth of His Word. Thus says Peter, "If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?" (cf. 1 Pet 4:18; also 4:1, 12, 13). The reality is, the Christian life is not simply a fun little life (as many want to make it out to be)... there is also the training side to it that is not at all pleasant; nevertheless, we can enjoy life when it is lived in context to the ways of God; i.e., by faithfully aligning ourselves with God's ways — be it studying Scripture, eating, working, doing our chores, dialoguing with others, attending to the needs of our family, loving and serving others, being generous, and being Christ-centered and not self-centered... when we are Christ-centered, rather than self-centered, the trials of life will be significantly less disturbing and more understandable and acceptable to us. Though pain is "not pleasant," pain without knowledge is far less pleasant. With the foregoing in mind, determine to live your life by the simplicity of faith, rather than continually arguing against it.

Sadly, many of you may have come to Christ “believing that all your troubles will melt away” — that the good life is not only for the hereafter, but for now as well... that was a common teaching in many Christian denominations; but that does not correspond with what Scripture teaches. As **Dr. Jerry Bridges** (one of my seminary professors) states in his book, “The Gospel for Real Life” — “Most professing Christians actually know very little of the gospel, let alone understand its implications for their day-to-day lives” (Nav-Press, p. 15). He goes on to say, “Without some heartfelt conviction of our sin, we can have no serious feeling of personal interest in the gospel. What’s more, this conviction should actually grow throughout our Christian lives. In fact, one sign of spiritual growth is an increased awareness of our sinfulness” (p. 18) — that thought is very commonly expressed by the great saints of the church down through the centuries. The typical believer contents himself with avoiding major outward sins and performing accepted Christian duties — the problem is, if we limit our attention to “single sins,” to the neglect of our “sinful nature,” we will never discover how deeply infected with sin we really are. Says Bridges, “It is a continuing sense of the imperfection of our obedience, arising from the constant presence and remaining power of indwelling sin, that drives us more and more as believers to an absolute dependence on the grace of God given to us through His Son” (p. 30). We will only see ourselves for who we truly are when indwelling sin manifests itself in our lives; with that in mind, “sin” does serve a higher purpose — God permits it to keep us humble and see reality for what it really is (cf. Rom 7:18; Jam 4:6). As fallen human beings (in spite of the fact that we have placed our faith in Christ), we do not understand absolute holiness. Why is that? because absolute purity transcends human thought; how can we understand that which transcends us? God is holy; absolute holiness defines Him; there is nothing in Him that is not holy; He is absolutely pure, in Him is no darkness at all (1 Jn 1:5; Jam 1:17), but we are not holy either in our inner core or in our behavior (cf. Rom 3:10; 7:18; Mk 10:18). Bridges goes on to say, “Indwelling sin is like a disease that we can’t begin to deal with until we acknowledge its presence” (p. 180) — the reality is this: when we see ourselves for who we truly are, humility will reign in our souls, and we will experience God’s peace and the enabling power of the Holy Spirit to wage war against our fallen inner core (i.e., indwelling sin). Above everything, God requires that we see ourselves as we really are, and that we see God for who He really is. If you don’t know God for who He really is, you need to take the time to enlighten your heart as to His essence, that you might embrace Him for who He really is — as believers we do not have the option of distorting reality; we must see things as they really are. I cover this issue in depth in the last two chapters of this study, so patiently wait until you read them before arguing to the contrary. Beloved, truth is extremely liberating (cf. Jn 8:31-32); since that is true, prayerfully and humbly contemplate divine truth, that God might enlighten you to the truth (only God can do that — Acts 16:14). Life is not about believing what we want to believe, it is about believing the truth, and when we believe the truth, we will experience a radical change in our hearts; it comes no other way. As Jesus said, “If you abide in My word... you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (Jn 8:31-32); i.e., if you obey God’s Word, the truth of it will set you free from the bondage of sin. You cannot ex-

perience soul transformation simply by *praying for it*; your “*faith*” (i.e., what you truly believe) must be grounded in the truth.

The idea of “*dying to self*” & “*death in Christ*” & “*suffering*” is widely taught in Scripture (cf. Jn 12:24-26; Mt 10:34-39; Mk 8:34-38; Rom 6:3-11; 12:1-2; Heb 12:1-2; 1 Pet 4:1-3). Self-denial should not be difficult for any Christian to understand, because this is what it means to be a Christian (cf. Mt 16:24-25) — to experience death and denial means we must be willing to say “*no*” to anything that is contrary to God’s will for us. The first commandment was this, “*You shall have no other gods before Me;*” as such, we are to say “*no*” to anything that would take God’s rightful place in our lives. Is this hard? Absolutely, it is extremely hard. It’s hard for the strongest saint as well as the weakest one. Augustine’s words are a classic statement of “*the divided will*” and of the difficulty of surrendering that will to God. Obviously, Jesus asked the fullest possible measure of devotion from those who followed Him. They were to give up *everything* (cf. Mt 16:24-25; Lk 14:25-35). Said Jesus, “*No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon*” (Mt 6:24). If God is your person of choice, He must have “*all of you,*” not just a part of you. When we give up trying to run our own life (which requires seeing ourselves for who we really are; totally sinful) and give up that which seems so precious and indispensable to us, it is then that we start experiencing true joy; this only occurs when our lives are freed from all obsession. **Dr. James Montgomery Boice**, one of the greatest preachers of the 20th century, states in his book “*Foundations of the Christian Faith*” — “*This is the primary difference between a joyless and a joyful Christian.*” He describes the difference as “*death and resurrection*” (p. 467); in an abstract sense, joyful Christians have *died and risen* with Christ — they find satisfaction in whatever God gives them... they reject the self-centered life... they reject the values of this diabolical world; the reality is, they have risen to new life in Christ.

“*Though we all stumble in many ways*” (cf. Jam 3:2; Ps 38:1-22; 40:12; 73:26; Ecc 7:20; Prv 24:16), as believers we need to be ever mindful that God redeemed us through His Son, and is “*ever at work in us both to will and to do His good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13), and has promised to “*complete what He has begun in us*” (cf. Phil 1:6). Though the process is not at all easy, “*after we have suffered for a little while, God Himself will perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish us*” (cf. 1 pet 5:10; Phil 1:29). As Paul writes, “*Hold fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ you have cause to glory because you did not toil in vain*” (Phil 2:16) — “*Work out your salvation with fear and trembling (i.e., with honest reverence before God); knowing that God is at work in you, both to will and to work His good pleasure*” (Phil 2:12-13); the reality is, our sanctification is a “*cooperative effort*” (Rom 6:19, 22; 2 Cor 3:18; 1 Th 4:3-4, 7; 2 Th 2:13; Heb 12:14; 1 Pet 3:15). Because of the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we cannot experience *God’s peace and joy* without fighting the fight of faith (peace and joy are fruits of the Spirit – Gal 5:22). Now should a believer decide to walk in sin... *because he is one of God’s children, God will place His hand heavily upon him until he becomes contrite in heart and confesses his guilt* (cf. Ps 32:3-5; 51:17; Prv 18:14); i.e., his soul will become very painful and grievous. God’s call upon our

lives as believers is that we “fight the fight of faith” and “walk in the Spirit” and “war against the spiritual forces of darkness” and “not let sin reign in our mortal bodies” (cf. 1 Tim 6:12; Gal 5:16; Rom 6:12; Eph 6:10-18) — without being significantly conscious of God’s incredible love for us, however, one will be inclined to make his life a religious one rather than a grateful one (this will make far more sense to you toward the end of this study); if God’s love for a person isn’t supra-significant, his sinfulness will overwhelm him and cause him to despair — it is all a matter of “focus” — “fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith” (cf. Heb 12:2; Jn 15:5; 1 Jn 4:10, 18). I cover the significance of God’s eternal love for us in depth toward the end of this study; having a contextual understanding of His love is critical, but don’t jump ahead and read it at this point. Little do most believers know, their entire life is to be one of “dying to oneself and one’s inherent sinfulness” (i.e., dying to one’s sin nature — cf. Mt 10:38-39; 16:24-25; Rom 6:12; 8:13; 1 Cor 15:31; 1 Pet 2:24). Remember the words of Paul, “Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God” (cf. Acts 14:22; also Jn 16:33) — the purpose of “tribulation” is to cause us to “die to ourselves.”

Remember, the absolute foundation of the Christian life is believing that “God really loves us” (again, the last portion of this study deals exclusively with that issue). When trials come, however, we often find ourselves questioning God: “Why this?” “Why me?” Noah, David, Jeremiah, Job, Daniel, Paul and others took many hits; they probably faced moments when they wondered if it was worth it (many of them asked God to take their lives), but they all survived their times of testing. The prophet Isaiah gave us words to live by: “Those who wait upon the Lord will gain new strength; they will mount up with wings like eagles, they will run and not get tired, they will walk and not become weary” (Is 40:31); there’s a general principle here that patient praying believers are blessed by God with strength in their trials (cf. 2 Cor 12:8-10); without being strengthened in the inner man, we will despair and become depressed — it is only when we humbly wait upon the Lord that He gives us strength... and when God strengthens our inner man we will then praise Him for who He is, accept what’s happening in our life, surrender ourselves to His will, and expect God to show us something great in the midst of the storm. True genuine faith means “letting God be God”... “putting self aside”... “trusting God when things don’t make sense”... “knowing that God is at work doing something”... “resting in God,” and “realizing that our faith is being tested” — with that in mind, “we need to take our eyes off of the **problem** and focus on **Christ**” (Heb 12:1-2). Faith must fix its attention on the providence, the power, and the promises of God alone; it is here where we struggle: “we all frequently wrestle & struggle with life in our own strength, rather than resting in God’s omnipotence.” When we are hurting (feeling bad), we look for pleasure in something — anything positive to nullify a negative. Remember what Abraham and Sarah did: rather than waiting for God’s timing, they caved in to their own flesh and conceived a child with Hagar; such unbelief ultimately caused significant heartaches, and is still a monumental problem in our world today. The same is true for you and me — when we go through a trial, our faith is being tested (i.e., strengthened). We can talk about our faith all we want, but until our faith is tested we don’t know the depth of our faith. Until we have thrown

ourselves on God’s mercy and seen God in the storm, we haven’t looked with the eyes of faith. Said the great reformer **John Calvin**, “*Our faith is really and truly tested only when we are brought into very severe conflicts.*” Each of us are continually being given a choice to *trust our flesh* or *trust Christ*; we must learn from Abraham and not trust in ourselves. As **Michael Catt** states in his book “*Fireproof Your Life*,” we don’t simply go through one or two or three trials in life, “*we are either in the midst of a trial, coming out of one, or headed for one;*” in short, “*faith is the capacity to live through hell here on earth*” (CLC Publications, 2008, pp. 51). As stated earlier, anything we do apart from faith is sin (Rom 14:23). Life here on earth for us as believers is “*learning to live above the circumstances of life.*” It should be clear, there is no such thing as a “*perfect life*” – perfection won’t happen until our flesh is extracted from us and we are glorified in heaven; meanwhile, we must learn to live with our “*imperfections.*” One of the main problems for us as believers is that we all struggle with the truth that God really loves us; we doubt God’s love for us for numerous reasons:

- Because of Difficult Circumstances – that’s Trials issue.
- Because we are Undeserving – that’s a Law issue.
- Because we Don’t Feel Loved – that’s a Flesh issue.
- Because we are too Sinful – that’s a Grace issue.
- Because our Performance is Lacking – that’s a Perfection issue.
- Because we Fear it is not so – that’s a Love issue.
- Because we are Being Persecuted – that’s a Belief issue.
- Because we Lack Assurance – that’s a Faith issue.
- Because we think Our Actions Deserve a Positive – that’s a Merit issue.

The reality is, *God cares infinitely about us* – the lovingkindness of the Lord is *everlasting* (cf. Ps 106:1; 107:1; 36:1-26)... He will *never* leave us or forsake us (cf. Heb 13:5)... so great is His love for us, *nothing* will ever separate us from His love (cf. Rom 8:35-39); the truth is, *we simply cannot fathom the depth of God’s love because it surpasses all comprehension; it is infinite in scope*... He simply asks us to “*believe in His love*” – without believing God we cannot please Him (cf. Heb 11:6). The first step in walking by faith is *being willing to listen to God*; without listening to what He has to say, our faith will be governed in large part by humanistic thinking (not divine thinking). We all experience difficulties in believing – sometimes we are simply overwhelmed by our circumstances, but ultimately we must take the time to prayerfully stop and listen to what God has to say; when we prayerfully humble ourselves before the Lord and contemplate what He has to say, He will open our heart to the truth and displace the anxiety in our soul with His peace – this is what it means to “*fight the good fight of faith*” (1 Tim 6:12). Though most believers are familiar with many of the foregoing passages, the reality of them is seriously lacking because of their inability to see them from an *eternal perspective* – it is not until the final chapters of this study that I expand upon the eternal aspect of God’s love for us; so don’t throw in the towel yet. Over and over again in Scripture,

we are enjoined to “consider or reckon things as being true;” there are two Greek words that are translated *consider, reckon, count & regard*: **logizomai**, which means “to take into account” (cf. Rom 6:11; 8:18; 2 Cor 3:5; 10:7)... and **hegeomai**, which means “to lead before the mind” (cf. Phil 2:3; 1 Tim 6:1; Heb 11:11; Jam 1:2). So this matter of faith involves reflecting upon the truth and reckoning it as indeed being true; obviously some issues of faith are more difficult than others and require more thinking — without contemplating the truth, one might easily reject a particular construct. If you treat divine truth as questionable knowledge, you will seriously struggle with your faith — God gave you a mind with which to *think*, and a written revelation of divine truth that you are to contemplate; with humility of thought God will affirm those truths to your heart and give you a deep abiding conviction as to the integrity of them (cf. Jam 1: 21; 1 Pet 2:2) — the word “*humility*” in Greek literally means “lowliness of mind;” it implies having an honest evaluation of oneself and seeing oneself for who he truly is (cf. Phil 2:3; 1 Pet 5:5) — if one has an elevated view of himself, he will not possess humility; instead, he will be a man of pride. By the way, affirming truth doesn’t necessarily happen in a minute — oftentimes it may take ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour (depending upon the significance of the issue). The question is, are you willing to humble yourself before the Lord and give careful consideration to His word? Remember, “without faith (i.e., without believing what God’s Word says) it is not possible to please God” (cf. Heb 11:6; 10:5-8; Hosea 6:6; Mt 9:13); that should be very obvious — if we don’t believe someone we are not going to please them; if you call your spouse a *liar* (i.e., you don’t believe him or her), obviously you are not going to please him or her... the same goes with God — you cannot reject or disavow what He says and please Him, which is pure unabated logic.

The problem with *proud* people is that “they are stupid and devoid of knowledge” (Jer 10: 14); contrary to what some might think, “the thinking of men is foolishness to God” (cf. 1 Cor 3:19; Prv 1:7; 10:21; 14:8; 19:3). By the way, exercising faith is not automatic for anyone of us; it requires understanding and *intentional affirmation*... it is not a feeling but a construct of thought that one *embraces* because of a deep inner conviction (cf. Heb 11:1). Never forget, “your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor 15:58); faith is not a walk in the park; oftentimes it takes a lot of *hard work* (cf. Ps 1:2; 2 Tim 2:15; Acts 17:11). Essentially, it is our “*thought life*” where we need to discriminate; “*negative thoughts*” are the germs of the spiritual life that destroys our soul’s health; all forms of fear, doubt, worry, morbidity, neurotic emotion, unwholesomeness, vulgar tendencies, as well as moods, trials and whims that endanger our spiritual vitality must be shunned; when they appear they must be counteracted with “*positive thoughts*” (cf. Phil 4:6-9). Just as Israel experienced a powerful deliverance from Egypt, it didn’t take them long to “*forget*,” and they turned away; they doubted and complained — they did not “*guard their hearts;*” as such, they became *idolaters* (the consequences of which was *death*). Since all men are *idolaters at heart* (i.e., they place a greater premium on things other than God; Jer 17:9), they have a tendency to make fame, fortune, power, pleasure, comfort and possessions their gods; seeking pleasure or delight in anything other than God is idolatry (but only God alone is worthy of worship). In short, idolatry is a heart issue — when we begin to covet or love

something other than God in the heart, the mind goes to places it should not go. Because Israel stubbornly rejected what they were told for forty years, God judged their guilt and denied them access to the Promised Land. One reason why people crash and burn today is that they want to be self-pleasing rather than God-pleasing... entertained rather than enlightened. Regrettably, happiness and pleasure is more important to the majority than a deeper walk with God. As a result of numerous studies on this matter, following are the top ten temptations (in order of priority) that people succumb to:

- Materialism, Pride, Self-Centeredness, Laziness, Anger
- Bitterness, Sexual Lust, Envy, Gluttony, and Lying

The biggest problem we face as believers is not that we don't know what is right, but being willing to do what is right. Satan has three predictable methods of attack, which John summarized: "the lust of the flesh... the lust of the eyes... and the boastful pride of life" (1 Jn 2:16). These are the same tactics he used in the Garden of Eden, and they have proven successful ever since. Satan says, "You have a right to be happy; there is nothing wrong with satisfying your desires." He goes on to say, "It is okay to be attracted to something beautiful." Lastly, "It is okay to impress other people with your greatness." What are the premier desires of your inward self? Which ones do you find the most difficult to resist? Obviously there are a number of things that we may desire or delight in, but is the Lord the most significant one to you? Can you clearly identify what it is that sits on the front-burner of your life? What are the premiere desires of your heart — Comfort? Pleasure? Success? Health? Happiness? Wealth? Position? Property? Possessions? Esteem? Respect? Honor? Friends? Fun? a Trouble-free life, or simply a desire to "make life work" the way you want it to work? The reality is, there isn't one of us who is not attracted to things like these... but "where is God in all this?" Is your relationship with Him of supreme importance, or is it the things listed above? If you are a child of God, in all likelihood, God is going to deny you many of the foregoing perks; in so doing, He is going to be "testing your faith." Of the "sixteen" things I listed, which "three" are the most important to you? You need to know that it is very unlikely that God is going to pass over the biggest ones — without a doubt, God is going to test your faith; in so doing it will become a far more mature faith; as James says, "the testing of your faith produces endurance" (i.e., perseverance; the Greek word "hupomeno" literally means to "remain under" a trial when it comes, and not capitulate or cave into it or get angry or do something wrong — Jam 1:3). The purpose of testing is not to destroy or afflict, but to purge and refine (i.e., to remove the dross from our faith and make it stronger & better). When our faith is being tested, the goal is that we tenaciously withstand the pressure of a trial, until God removes it at His appointed time. Some of you might question, "Why is it necessary that we have such a strong faith? Why isn't our weak faith sufficient?" The reason is, that is the economy that God has established for us as His children — rather than expanding upon the "reason" why that is the case at this point (I will do so later on), let me encourage you to read a study I did titled, "Sin and Man's Eternal Purpose;" you can find it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com —

it is not a super long study, so take the time to read it... you can make a “pdf copy” of it by clicking on the “icon” in the upper right hand corner of the study. For your information, that particular study was the most significant one I have ever done as a Christian; it is the one study that revolutionized my faith and my thinking. To continue...

We must realize this life is preparation for eternity — “the judgment seat of Christ” will be a day in which every believer will stand before God and give an account for all that transpired in his life. At that time, our works will be judged in light of eternity, and each of us will be rewarded accordingly, and given a position in God’s eternal heaven. Our true motives will be revealed and our true character will be examined. As Paul stated — “Each man’s work will be revealed with fire” (1 Cor 3:13). Anything fleshly, selfish, ego-centric or petty will be burned up; the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. Paul says, “Each one of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom 14:12). The emphasis is placed on “motives,” not achievements — numerous impressive resumes will be burned up that day. Titles and Degrees will count for nothing; my doctorate will be absolutely worthless; only that which brings honor and glory to Jesus Christ will survive. Though we are not saved by works, we are rewarded for them; yet none of us simply “do to get” (that is to completely misunderstand God’s call on our lives) — we “do” because it is a “passion” that God has placed in our hearts; our desire is to genuinely please Him. I didn’t write this study to get some little reward; nothing could be further from the truth. Think of it this way: do you do nice things for your spouse so that he or she might give you a gift? Obviously not... so that issue is not worth commenting on further.

Though salvation is not the result of our works, the life of the believer is one of works; whereas Christ accomplished our salvation through the work of the cross, the life to which we have been called does involve works — as Paul writes, “We are God’s workmanship, created us in Christ Jesus for good works” (cf. Eph 2:10; 4:1; 1 Tim 5:10; 6:18; Titus 2:14; 3:1, 8, 14); remember the words of James, “Faith if it has no works is dead” (Jam 2:17, 20, 25); essentially works is simply obedience to God; without obeying God one obviously cannot please Him. It is at the end of time that God will “judge our works” and “reward us accordingly.” The apostle Paul compares the works of believers to either being “gold, silver & precious stones” or “wood, hay & straw” (1 Cor 3:12) — the difference being this: only the works of gold, silver & precious stones have eternal value; all other works are completely worthless. The word “reward” is found over a hundred times in Scripture (four Greek words and several Hebrew words are rendered by this one word). In present day usage, a reward is a gift given in recognition for some service rendered; its biblical usage is quite varied, including such ideas as a bribe, punishment, or a gift — therefore, it includes the punishment one experiences in this life for evil deeds (cf. Mt 6:5), as well as future retribution (Ps 91:8). Christ often used “rewards” as an incentive for service. As the influential German Protestant New Testament critic Bernhard Weiss (1827-1918) stated in his work, “Biblical Theology of the New Testament” — “[Rewards are the result of human effort by a believer] for the fulfillment of the demands which are made upon him in virtue of his being a disciple” (Vol 1, p. 144). So for the Christian, rewards have an

eschatological (future) significance. As previously mentioned, every believer will have to appear before *the judgment seat of Christ for the judgment of his works* (cf. Rom 14:12; 2 Cor 5:10). Whereas *salvation* is a gift (Eph 2:8-9), *rewards* are earned (1 Cor 3:14). All human beings will be “*rewarded*” according to their deeds; *i.e.*, they will reap what they have sown — the *wicked* will be recompensed for their unrighteous deeds (Ps 91:8)... and the *righteous* will be rewarded for their obedience and service. Furthermore, whereas the *unbeliever* goes before the “*Great White Throne Judgment*” and is recompensed accordingly (cf. Rev 20:11-15)... the *believer* goes before the “*Judgment Seat of Christ*” and to be rewarded (2 Cor 5:10). Though *unbelievers* are *judged* for their sin; *believers* are *forgiven* for their sins because of the redemptive work of Christ on the cross (He bore our penalty for us). Whereas *salvation is a gift* to those who believe (Eph 2:8-9; 1 Pet 2:24), *rewards are earned* (1 Cor 3:14). The two chief passages that discuss “*rewards*” at length are found in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 3:9-15 & 9:16-27). Again, the “*quality*” of all of our works as believers will be revealed by “*fire*,” and rewarded accordingly (cf. 1 Cor 3:12-15); unacceptable works will be burned up and he shall “*suffer loss*,” even though he himself will be saved (1 Cor 3:15). According to Scripture, apparently it is possible for a believer to live a fairly *self-oriented life*... so much so that “*when God appears some believers will shrink away in shame at His coming*” (1 Jn 2:28); those words “*shrink away*” actually imply “*not being able to look Christ in the eye when He comes*,” instead they will turn away from Christ in shame because they neglected to live a Christ-centered life — the message is this: either one *humbles himself* in this life and makes Christ his life, or he will *be completely humbled* at Christ’s presence when He returns; it is difficult to fathom *the shame and humiliation* one will experience for not living the *Christ-life* (cf. Mt 10:38; 16:24; Eph 2:10; Phil 1:21; Col 3:4)... with the foregoing in mind, let’s put forth every effort to be the people God wants us to be; let us serve Him faithfully. Remember, there is no *glorification* for the believer without *humiliation*, so either we humble ourselves in this life, or God will humble us prior to our entering into His eternal presence. Keeping all of that in mind, remember, it is possible to serve in some capacity and receive *no rewards* at all (cf. 1 Cor 3:15; 9:27) — so true genuine works must involve love for others and a humble heart that seeks to do what is pleasing to God (that’s the motivation). Again, without a *heart for God*, one will never please God; *genuine love is a heart issue, not simply outward compliance to some particular commandment* (that would be nothing but sheer religion — cf. Mt 9:13; Hos 6:6). Rewards are depicted as *crowns* in several passages (cf. 1 Cor 9:25; Phil 4:1; 1 Th 2:9; 2 Tim 4:8; Jam 1:12; 1 Pet 5:4; Rev 2:10; 3:11). The question is often raised, “*So what will we be rewarded for?*” Scripture identifies at least nine things for which God will reward us —

- Overcoming and Enduring Temptation (Jam 1:12).
- Diligently Seeking God (Heb 11:6).
- Dying for Christ (Rev 2:10).
- Performing Pastoral Duties (1 Pet 5:4).
- Doing God’s Will & Loving His Appearing (2 Tim 4:8).
- Soul Winning (1 Th 2:19-20).

- Being Faithful in Stewardship (1 Cor 4:1-5).
- Serving by Acts of Kindness (Gal 6:10).
- Being Hospitable (Mt 10:40-42).

The Patriarchs of old experienced much to discourage them (trials, hardships, beatings, pain & ridicule), but they **endured** because they not only looked forward to receiving a reward, but also doing that which was pleasing to the Lord” (Heb 11:26); they knew their response to all they would go through in life would count after they died, that they would be recompensed accordingly. Above everything, they wanted to hear their Master say to them, “Well done good and faithful servant” (cf. Mt 25:21, 23; 24:45-47) — it is extremely difficult to imagine that some might not hear those words from God... it is not as if any of us are incredibly great creatures (none of us are), but that we didn’t take Christ seriously and honor Him by giving life our best, is a difficult construct to handle. There are several passages that deal with this matter of “reward” (cf. Mt 5:10-12; 16:24-27; 1 Cor 3:12-15; 2 Cor 4:16-18; 2 Tim 2:11-13; 1 Jn 2:28; Rev 22:12). The reality is, such a perspective can strengthen our perseverance. It is also important to remember, “to whom much is given, much is required” (cf. Rom 7:23; Gal 5:17; Jam 4:1; 1 Pet 2:11); our God is not a mindless God... He knows full-well what He is doing. According to Scripture, we are to present our members (*i.e.*, our lives) as “slaves to righteousness” (Rom 6:19), “and fight the good fight of faith” (1 Tim 6:12), “and not war according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (2 Cor 10:3-5); we fight by trusting in God, and praying and obeying His Word, and by fighting with the “Sword of the Spirit” (*i.e.*, the Word — cf. Eph 6:10-18; 1 Tim 1:18; 2 Tim 2:3-4; 4:7); only the truth of God’s Word can defeat the falsehood of Satan; that is true spiritual warfare. Obviously there is a war going on in our soul that we must fight (cf. 1 Tim 1:18; 6:12); “we are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:5), and assault error with the “truth” (Heb 4:12) — that is our battle. Just as there was war in heaven (Rev 12:7-9), so there is war on earth (Rev 12:17; 13:7-10; 17:14; 19:11, 19; 20:8). Paul compares this battle to “a good soldier, a highly competitive athlete, and a hard working farmer” (2 Tim 2:3-6). Says Paul, “Run in such a way that you may win... buffet your body and make it your slave” (1 Cor 9:24-27). Unless we are sold out to Christ, our lives will bear very little fruit; Christ must be our life (cf. Mt 6:19-24; 10:38-39; Mk 8:34-38; Jn 15:5; Col 3:4); if He is not, we will simply cave in to our flesh. Perhaps the questions you need to ask yourself are these: “Why did I become a Christian?” “Why isn’t He my Lord (Master)?” “What makes this world so attractive to me?” “What is the supreme goal of my life?” “Is it worth dying for?” “What is it that is holding me back from being the person God wants me to be? — can you actually define it?” Are you giving serious consideration to this subject, or are you just treating it lightly? To the regret of many, such questions define them — the reality is, if Christ is not your life, then this sensual world is your life; those are the only two options. Let me remind you again to go off somewhere where silence rules, and prayerfully contemplate some of the issues I have addressed; in so doing God will minister to your heart (this is what the psalmist David did over and over and over again) — God ministers grace to the humble heart.

One further note — *we are in a war against Satan and the forces of darkness; i.e., against the forces of wickedness in the spiritual realm* (cf. Eph 6:12). Contrary to the actions of the majority, life is not about creating a pleasant little utopia for ourselves... we are called to serve Christ in this world; to abrogate that responsibility will not only result in a life of distress and despair, it will be a life without peace or joy — God only gives peace and joy to those who walk with Him in obedience. The supreme enemy of God is the Devil, “*Satan*” — “*he is the highest of all angelic creatures*” ... “*the god of this world*” ... “*the prince of darkness*” ... “*an angel of light*” ... “*the father of lies and deception*” ... “*the enemy of God*” ... “*the cause of the fall of man in the Garden of Eden*” ... “*a roaring lion who walks about seeking someone to devour*” ... and “*the governor of the satanic world system*” (cf. Dan 10:13; Eph 6:12). Satan’s present work is widespread and destructive; essentially, those who are not saved are under Satan’s authority; *he rules them through the evil world system over which he is head and of which the unregenerate are a part* (cf. Is 14:12-17; 2 Cor 4:3-4; Eph 2:2; Col 1:13). *As far as believers are concerned, Satan is in continual conflict with them, and seeks to corrupt and destroy their faith and their testimony and even their physical life* (cf. Eph 6:11-18; 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Jn 5:16). Let me again mention the “*eternal perspective*” on all that is taking place in our world — as previously stated, it is only after one has read the last couple of chapters that most of these passages will shine “*exceedingly bright*” in one’s soul... the truth is, after reading this entire study, many of you will be inclined to read it again (*i.e.*, study it in its fullness) — it is amazing how “*contextual understanding*” opens one’s eyes to the depth of truth. The believer’s most significant battle is not against atheists, agnostics, or false religionists... “*it is against the demonic spiritual forces of wickedness that is working through them;*” though we can’t see them, we are constantly surrounded by wicked spirit-beings (take a moment and contemplate that thought wherever you are at this moment; and reflect upon the various strategies the forces of darkness are using to cause you to turn from this study and move you to do something else). Again, life is not just about being reasonably good and enjoying life, *it is about aligning our lives with God and being His servants and ambassadors in this world;* if you are one of His children, you have an assignment to fulfill, and that assignment involves warfare; in the end you will stand before God and hopefully here Him say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant...* I was hungry and you fed Me... I was thirsty and you gave Me drink... I was a stranger and you invited Me in... I was naked and you clothed Me... I was sick and you visited Me... I was in prison and you came to Me — in as much you did all of this to these brothers of Mine, *you did it to Me*” (Mt 25:14-40); remember, God identifies with the human family, and He desperately wants you to identify with it as well. The greatest of all the commandments is that “*we love God and love others*” (Mt 22:36-40) — incidentally, we love God when we obey Him and love others (Mt 25:40; Jn 14:15). “*Love*” must be the chief characteristic of our lives... when we love God we align our thinking with His thinking, and embrace His will for our lives; “*without doing so demonstrates that God is not our Lord & Master*” (cf. 1 Jn 4:7-8). I find it interesting that “*other people*” are to play an extremely important role in our lives; that we are to “*care about them as much as we care about ourselves*” (that’s what it means to love them — cf. Phil 2:3-8). Jesus left no middle option for people; since there only two roads that people can travel in life,

“either they are **for** Christ or you are **against** Christ” (Mt 12:30); there’s no middle ground; either you are obeying or not obeying, either you are serving or not serving... there is no such thing as neutral, middle ground — either you are going up or you are going down. Beloved, don’t let Satan and this world deceive you.

Christian love is an *attitude of the heart* that has God as its premiere object; conversely, self-will is self-pleasing and is the negation of love to God (one cannot love self and love God; cf. Mt 16:24-25). Jesus said, “**He who loves his life loses it; and he who hates his life in this world shall keep it to life eternal**” (cf. Jn 12:25; 2 Tim 3:2-4). Remember, “**Without believing and obeying God (that’s faith), it is not possible to please Him**” (cf. Heb 11:6). The reality is, “**it is only by faith in Christ that we overcome the world**” (*which is completely in opposition to God*)” (1 Jn 5:4-5); “**those who love the world do not know God**” (1 Jn 2:15-17). The world system under which we live is an immense scheme of temptation, that is always trying to drag us away from God and that which is eternal, and seeks to occupy our thinking with that which is temporal & sensual. Unbelievers are completely taken up with the things of time & sense; the temporal realm governs their lives (cf. Mt 19:16-26; Lk 14:26-35). Keeping that in mind, either God is our master or self is our master — since every child of God has made Christ his Lord (Master) and Savior, he is constantly at war with the powers of darkness; though he stumbles often (cf. Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20; Ps 73:26), he always gets back up on his feet again (cf. Prov 24:16; Ps 32:3-5; 1 Jn 1:10-2:1). With all of the foregoing in mind, the question is...

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Nearly all of the “negative feelings” in our lives are the by-product of our fallen inner core, Satan, and the spiritual forces of wickedness that are relentlessly trying to bring us down (cf. Eph 6:11-113; Jam 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8-9; Mt 4:1ff; Lk 22:31; Job 1:6-12; 2:1-6). Though negative emotions can be extremely troubling and disconcerting to us... God permits them that we might “engage them with divine truth;” to not engage them is to let them rule in our soul in the moment. Many believers struggle with the idea that Satan can place a thought in their mind that their flesh fully embraces; thus he is able to ignite one’s flesh and cause war in their soul — the question is, are you willing to wage war against him and the spiritual forces of wickedness... or are his thoughts so overwhelming to you that you simply contemplate them? This matter of “sin” in the world is a bewildering construct for many believers; they not only don’t understand why it exists, they don’t know why God would make it a significant part of the economy under which we live. If that subject is a bewildering one to you, again let me encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose;” you can find it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com For your information, that was the most important study I have ever done; it completely revolutionized my theological thinking and gave me a clear definition as to why I exist; nothing else has even come close to doing that; again, that statement will make sense to you after you read the last couple of chapters. When negative feelings (sin) rule within

us, we must pour out our soul to God and prayerfully contemplate the truth of God; *divine truth must rule in our soul, not diabolical emotions* (cf. Phil 4:6-9; Eph 6:18). Depending on the emotion and the depth of that emotion, spiritual warfare can be very challenging; sometimes the emotions refuse to be quieted, and insist on ruling in our minds; it's not like we can just push a little spiritual button and all is well; that's why it is described as a "*war!*" and a "*fight!*" Only when a believer fights against the enemy of his soul will he experience the positive emotion of *divine peace* (only God can give us peace – cf. Gal 5:22). By definition, "*temptation is a powerful emotion that finds great support in the interior of our soul*" (i.e., our flesh) – if the flesh didn't "*desire*" to embrace the temptation, the spiritual life would simply be a walk in the park; but since the flesh is sold out to the world and the diabolical forces of darkness, *the war in the interior of our being involves strong denial and the refusal to cave in to temptation*. Incidentally, since we were all raised differently, and wrestled with different issues in life (for whatever reason); we don't all have the same psychological foundation – some people actually have more psychological deficiencies than others; i.e., some may be more psychotic or schizophrenic (more psychologically disordered regarding reality) – just because all of us may be believers doesn't mean we all now have the same mindset; though none of us are perfectly healthy psychologically, some are far less perfect than others. With that in mind, we need to be very sensitive to the needs of others and not to be harsh in our judgment or treatment of them; just because you may have been raised with a gold-spoon in life, others may not have been, and your insensitivity to that fact can be very harmful to others in the Christian community. The reason I address this issue is because of the "*emotional pain*" that some believers have to live with – they may have been seriously abused in some way as children, and its effects may have produced a very low level of self-esteem; as such, it has destroyed their self-image and has had a very negative effect upon their lives. For some reason, God has called us to live with the body, the mind, the aptitude, and the circumstances of life to which He has called us; often times the experiences of life are not even known to one's parents... thus it can be very difficult to judge. I state the foregoing because many believers have a tendency to judge all Christians equally – though there may be a "*norm*" that characterizes the majority of us, there is no "*norm*" that defines all of us.

Because "*the fight of faith*" is an ongoing fight in our lives, "*spiritual depression*" can characterize a believer's life – the fight simply overwhelms him... in so doing, he even becomes angry with himself and feels like throwing in the towel. The truth is, "*negative emotions*" frequently frustrate believers; they so much want to destroy the ugly emotions that rule in their soul, but the emotions seem to rule in them; they feel so weak the negatives in their soul overwhelm them. They desperately want a joyful, peaceful life... but such simply seems other worldly. Being as we are constantly "*being tempted*," we will constantly "*wrestle with our feelings*" – that's a given for all of us as believers. Incidentally, that is not necessarily the case with unbelievers; their feelings frequently govern their lives. As Paul taught, "*We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God*" (Acts 14:22) – with all of the dangers and temptations that beset us as Christians, it is only a miracle of *divine grace* that preserves us for the heavenly kingdom (that will make

far more sense to you toward the end of this study). Peter states, “*If it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved, what will become of the godless man and the sinner?*” (cf. 1 Pet 4:18; Prv 11:31). It is in the here and now that the believer undergoes a level of judgment for his sin, and suffers for it (cf. 1 Pet 4:17; Ps 32:3-5); as believers we are called to “*contend with our sin*” (i.e., deal with it), and not simply disregard it as unbelievers do (remember unbelievers will be judged for their sin at the end of the age; whereas they will suffer the consequences of it at the end of life, the believer must suffer and deal with it in this life). So if it is difficult for us as believers in this life, what will it be like for the unbeliever in the eternal state?” Though there is *no condemnation* for us as believers (Rom 8:1), we are to purge and renounce our sins in this life (cf. Rom 6:12; Gal 5:16; 6:7; Col 3:25; 1 Pet 3:17; 1 Jn 1:9; 1 Cor 9:26-27; 1 Cor 10:12-13; 2 Cor 4:8-11; 7:8-10; 10:5; Col 3:5-10; 1 Tim 5:1-11; 6:12; Heb 12:10-11; 13:20-21; Jam 1:14-15; 2:20). Remember, Jesus exhorted people to “*strive to enter through the narrow gate*” (cf. Lk 13:24) — His message was this: one does not enter salvation on his own terms; he enters on God’s terms (cf. Mt 16:24). In like manner, our sanctification is also to be done according to God’s terms (cf. Rom 6:19; 1 Th 4:3-8; Heb 12:14). Beloved, I have alluded to the following chapters several times — they are “*the game changer*,” so let me encourage you to prayerfully reflect upon what they say.

THE FOUNDATION OF FAITH

With all the foregoing in mind, *the foundation of true genuine faith is the fact that God loves us. The reality is — if our appreciation of God’s love is shallow, so also will be our faith.* Obviously most people don’t place all of their weight on God’s love, instead they lean in large part upon their own human understanding of things (cf. Prv 3:5). If God’s love, however, is *not far and away* the most significant thing in your life and heart, as a believer your faith will be *very weak* (if indeed you have any faith at all) — it should be noted, the vast majority of believers have a “*very weak faith*” (that is simply the norm). Before we go further, let’s look at this thing called “*love*” — the New Testament Greek word for love (agape) refers to “*an attitude of the heart that seeks the other person’s welfare and highest good.*” Just as *God* seeks our highest good, so *believers* are to seek the highest good of other people; especially members of their family and fellow brothers and sisters in Christ; if they don’t, they are not loving them. It should be obvious to most of you, loving fellow-family members is not as easy as some people think — most families are not nearly as wonderful and charming as they may appear; frequently, there is division and disunity in the home... so keep in mind, God’s commandment to “*love*,” is often no walk in the park — sometimes it requires significant prayer and boldness of faith. Conversely, the greatest commandment of all is that “*we love God with all our heart and soul and mind*” (cf. Deut 6:5; Mt 22:37); that means we are to love God with the totality of our being, and in so doing we will yield to Him and obey Him (cf. Jn 14:15, 21, 23; 15:10; 1 Jn 5:3) — by the way, *if we don’t obey God, we don’t love God.* The reason we don’t love God as we should is because of our flesh; it is a very poignant reality in our lives. Hopefully you are beginning to see *the profound nature of your sinful flesh*; just

because you are a believer doesn't mean your flesh is less offensive today than it was before you became a Christian; your flesh, like everyone else's, is in *a state of decline* where it is getting worse and worse (cf. Eph 4:22) — I address that issue in more detail later. The night before Jesus went to the cross He gave His disciples a *NEW* commandment: *“they are to love one another, as He loved them”* (Jn 13:34). Most of you are mindful of the fact that early on in Israel's history, as well as in Jesus' ministry, God had told His people that the *greatest commandment* of all is that *“we love God and love our neighbor as ourselves”* (cf. Deut 6:5; 11:13-21; Num 15:37-41; Lev 19:18; Mt 22:37-40) — this is referred to as the *“Shema”* in the Jewish world, which is Hebrew for *“listen, hear & obey;”* the Shema has been recited daily by devout Jews for more than 3,000 years. The apostles Paul and John said, *“If you have not love, you have nothing”* (cf. 1 Cor 13:2; 1 Jn 4:7-8). Said John, *“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren; those who do not love abide in death. Everyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and no murder has eternal life abiding in him”* (cf. 1 Jn 3:14-15); note the strong *“equations”* John makes — to not love is to murder and to abide in death (not life). It is important to note, the premiere verification of the genuineness of our faith is the fact that we love the brethren; if one doesn't, his faith is highly questionable. You might recall the words of Cain to God, *“Am I my brother's keeper?”* (Gen 4:9); that's the way the diabolical self-centered mind thinks — his autonomy is all about himself, and has nothing to do with God or others. Incidentally, the answer to Cain's question is this: *“Yes we are our brother's keeper... we are not to be indifferent to the needs of others; instead, we are to bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ”* (cf. Gal 6:2; Rom 15:1; Lk 10:30-37).

John goes on to say, *“Love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God; those who do not love do not know God, because God is love”* (1 Jn 4:7-8; also v. 16). John wraps up his argument by saying this: *“If someone says he loves God, yet hates his brother, he is liar; for the one who does not love his brother (i.e., seek his highest good) whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen”* (1 Jn 4:20). Before we go any further, it is critically important that the issue of *“love”* be the most significant aspect of your faith — without making it so, your faith will be extremely feeble, because it will rest upon your own fleshly thinking rather than what God says. Obviously the Christian life is no walk in the park; frequently it involves *“dying to oneself,”* and it is here where we must humbly and prayerfully wrestle with divine truth. I keep stressing this, because many Christians don't fully understand what it means to be *“a follower of Christ;”* for some reason, they think it is simply a matter of being in a little *“Christian social club”* (i.e., a little happy, friendly community) — though that obviously exists to a degree, *“fighting the good fight of faith”* is far more prominent; the pleasantries of life are not to be the primary focus of one's life, obeying God is to be the primary focus; so keep your priorities straight. Keep in mind, *“God's love has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit”* (Rom 5:5), thus God's divine presence in our lives makes us a people of love who have a heart for God and others; if the Holy Spirit did not dwell in us, we would not be a people of love — God's love needs to abide within us if we are to love one another... *“love is from God, and everyone who loves is born of God”* (1 Jn 4:7). Obviously, none

of us love perfectly and always seek the other person's highest good, yet "loving others" is far more common to us as believers than "not loving others" – though perfection is the goal, our sinful inner core often controls the moment; and it is at this point where heart-felt confession plays an important role... God forgives us and we move on. So the ultimate test of our profession of faith is this matter of loving one another – though orthodoxy is critical for us as Christians (*i.e.*, what we believe), loving one another is crucial (no love, no faith; cf. 1 Cor 13:1-2). Obviously, we must believe the right things, because apart from that we have nothing at all... yet when we come to the realm of experience & self-examination, the great British preacher **Martyn Lloyd-Jones** reminds us that "loving one another is the ultimate test" (*Life in Christ*, Crossway, p. 421). So it is possible for one to be interested in theology and intellectually align his thinking with biblical thinking, yet be utterly devoid of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God in his heart (cf. 2 Tim 3:7); this was the problem the Pharisees had; they were fervent in their knowledge of God (*i.e.*, Scripture), but they were not at all a people of love (cf. Mt 6:5, 16-8; 7:3-5, 12; 12:1-7; 15:8-9; Lk 11:39-42, 46). Remember the words of Paul – "Though we have **faith** so as to remove mountains, but do not have **love**, we are **nothing**" (1 Cor 13:2ff; also Gal 5:6). When Jesus taught people about judgment, He said if one did not live a life of loving others, they would be accursed and thrown into the lake of eternal fire (cf. Mt 25:31-46), in spite of the fact that many will say to Him on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast our demons, and in your name perform many miracles?" Nevertheless, God will declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Mt 7:22-23); *i.e.*, they practice a religion that does not conform to the love that God requires. One cannot have genuine faith without morality, or have a faith that simply gives lip service; faith must be grounded in love, submission and obedience (cf. Lk 6:46; Eph 2:10; Jam 2:17-20); there's a big difference between "claiming something" and "demonstrating something"... between "saying" and "doing" (cf. Mt 21:28-31a).

Now in order to get a good understanding of this thing called love, one must see God for who He truly is – Scripture tells us that the very nature of God is that "He is love" (1 Jn 4:16); *i.e.*, that God is at work in us as His children seeking our highest good (Phil 2:13). God loved us so much He sent His Son to this world to die for us that we might share life with Him in heaven forever (Jn 3:16)... God was rich in mercy because of His great love; thus it is by grace that we are saved (Eph 2:4-8). Remember, "in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8)... "and nothing can separate us from God's love" (Rom 8:39). The most significant truth of all is the fact that "God loves us unconditionally," that He is ever seeking our highest good – God emphatically declares in Scripture that "He will never, ever leave us or forsake us" (those two emboldened words are emphatic in Greek; cf. Heb 13:5; Gen 28:15; Deut 31:6, 8; Josh 1:5). In like manner, Jesus said this about His followers, "I give eternal life to them, and they shall never perish; no one shall snatch them out of My hand" (that is also emphatic in Greek – Jn 10:28-29). Said Jesus, "This is the will of My Father who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I shall not lose one" (Jn 6:39). Conversely, the psalmist David declared, "The Lord will accomplish what concerns me; His lovingkindness is everlasting" (Ps 138:8); likewise said Paul, "Faithful is He who calls you,

and He also will bring it to pass” (1 Th 5:24). If you were able to look at the “*grammatical construction*” of each of those statements in Greek, you would see that those statements are ***absolute realities***, not maybes! When God declares something or makes a promise it is an absolute that He keeps! He doesn’t secretly hide a bunch of caveats from us; if He makes a statement, *that is reality!* All of this will make far more sense to you when you reflect upon *the eternal aspect of God’s love*; I cover it in depth toward the end of this study, so bare with me momentarily. By the way, every promise God makes to us is grounded in ***His unconditional eternal love for us***; if God does not *love us as we are* (fallen sinful creatures), there is no hope for us whatsoever. Now I am making declarations that Scripture *emphatically* states; these are not just a bunch of human thoughts... sadly, *human thinking* often controls the spiritual discourse in many believers minds. God’s love is not at all a co-equivalent of human love — according to Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, “*love is a strong affection for another person arising out of kinship or personal ties.*” We say we love other people when we are *attracted* to them and when they make us *feel good*; in short, we love someone because they fulfill a condition that we require — we choose to love someone because they are attractive, nice, sweet, caring, pleasant and enjoyable to be around; so our love is based on feelings and emotions that can change from one moment to the next; people divorce because they no longer “*feel*” love for their spouse. It should be obvious, human love is “*conditional*,” but God’s love is “*unconditional*,” thus it is very hard to comprehend (impossible to fully comprehend). God’s love is not based on feelings or emotions — He doesn’t love us because we are lovely little creatures or because we make Him feel good; He loves us because “***He is love***” (love is a fundamental attribute of God’s character). Now since divine love *always* looks out for the interests of others, its focus is on *others*, rather than *itself* — therefore human beings have a very difficult time loving those who are unlovely. According to Scripture, “agape love is patient, kind, not envious or boastful or proud, not rude or self-seeking or easily angered, it doesn’t keep a record of wrongs; it doesn’t delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth; in addition to that, it always trusts, protects, hopes and perseveres” (1 Cor 13:4-8) — because *God is love* (1 Jn 4:8), that is what He is like. Though every Christian believes that God personally loves him or her to some degree, the depth of that love is often questionable... sadly, most Christians simply believe that they will get to heaven one day because of God’s love; other aspects of His love are simply too ethereal and too vague to them; thus many Christians simply “*hope*” that heaven is their eternal destiny. Again, without understanding *the eternity of God’s love*, one will not have a good grasp of His love (again, we’ll be covering that shortly).

The truth of the matter is, no human mind can comprehend God, because “*God dwells in unapproachable light*” (1 Tim 6:16)... and since God is incomprehensible, so also is His love. In spite of the fact we may speak truthfully about His love, we cannot fully fathom it... just as *divine love* is different from human love, so *His being* is different from our being. Though we cannot fully define God, nevertheless we can describe Him truthfully, because He has partially made Himself known to us in His Word — He opens our eyes to the Word by His Spirit. The reality is this: God only makes Himself known to humble

subordinate creatures; without humbling ourselves before Him, we would never come to know Him. Again, since God is eternal and we are finite, we can only know God as He reveals Himself to our hearts — we cannot know Him in His fullness... only to the extent that He reveals Himself can we know Him (cf. Ex 33:18-23). With that in mind, we obviously have a very limited understanding of Him — though He has revealed to us a number of constructs that define Him, our understanding of those constructs are extremely limited; for instance, that God is “eternal and omniscient and omnipotent” is beyond human comprehension; though we can grasp it somewhat, our understanding is extremely limited. The same goes for God’s love and holiness — it is only in a very limited way that we can understand such character qualities. Let me emphasize again, our understanding is **very limited** — though we have some level of understanding, it is **extremely limited** — yet that is precisely what God has purposed (again, that will make more sense to you shortly).

Dr. Garry Williams is the director of the John Owen Centre for Theological Study at London Theological Seminary; he is also a visiting professor of historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia. In his book, “His Love Endures Forever,” he reveals how we often confuse God’s love with human love... as such, Dr. Williams looks to the Bible to explain God loves, helping readers understand that God is fundamentally a God of love. In his book he says it is only by humble meditation on the authoritative self-revelation of God that one ultimately experiences rest in his soul. He goes on to say, the contemplation of divine love in its biblical fullness always leads us out of ourselves toward God and toward others. Near the end of his life the renowned Swiss theologian, **Dr. Karl Barth** (1886-1968), was asked what the greatest thought was that ever passed through his mind — he paused for a moment and then responded with childlike simplicity: “Jesus loves me! This I know, for the Bible tells me so.” I find it amazing that in spite of Barth’s intellectual genius he answered the question in the most simplistic way — after years of study and reflection, he came all the way back to where life began for him: “Jesus loves me!” That God loves us is the most astounding reality in all creation — how can God possibly love sinners? How can He love people who are completely unlovely and in rebellion against Him? For those of you who are inclined to think that you are a somewhat lovely creature (*i.e.*, someone who is somewhat deserving of God’s affection and love), you are completely blind to reality and what Scripture teaches: “there is none righteous, not one... there is none good but God... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (cf. Rom 3:10, 23; 7:18; Lk 18:19) — again, those are emphatic statements in Scripture; thus, there is no room for arguing against them. If you have a hard time accepting the corruptness of your nature, prayerfully humble yourself before God and ask Him to make you sensitive to divine truth (cf. Jam 1:21); incidentally, this is a foundational principle of the gospel (the reality is, the inner core of every human being is totally sinful and totally corrupt – Rom 7:18). Yet, “God loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son to redeem us and give us life everlasting” (Jn 3:16). “He who loves us has freed us from our sins by His blood” (Rev 1:5) — without the cross, we are dead in our sins (cf. Eph 2:1; Col 2:13; Heb 9:22). Again, how can it be that God loved us so much as sinners in complete rebellion against Him that He would die for us? As the old English

hymnwriter Charles Wesley states it, “Amazing love, how can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?” That’s the question. Now if your sinfulness isn’t that big a deal in your mind, neither will God’s love for you be a big deal to you — to gain better insight into this issue, read what Jesus had to say about it (cf. Lk 7:40-50 — the woman loved much because she had been forgiven much; the reality is, all of us have MUCH that needs to be forgiven; we are not lovely creatures; the sad part is most people put on a mask and try to impress others with their loveliness and spirituality; it’s called “false piety” (it seems to dominate the thinking of some believers — cf. Acts 10:25-26; Rev 19:9-10); those who claim to be a cut above others have been duped by the evil one, and have let their pride rule in their soul. By the way, as Christians we are all still sinners . . . the difference is we are now saved sinners; for some reason this is a difficult construct for some believers to understand; apparently they were taught or led to believe that once they became a Christian, their innate inner core actually became better; as such, they are now no longer as sinful as they were when they were an unbeliever, but that is not at all what Scripture teaches — our flesh today is as sinful as it has ever been; according to Scripture, our flesh is not only not better, it is in a “constant state of decline;” that it is increasingly getting worse and worse, not better — as Paul says, “Our old self is continually being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22); it’s the Greek’s present tense verb that emphasizes that fact. By the way, that should be pretty obvious to everyone — our flesh today is far more sinful than it was when we were ten years old; our flesh has been going down hill from the very beginning. Since we each live with our flesh, it should be easy to see the truth of that statement — our fleshly thoughts and feelings evidence themselves many times throughout the course of a day, and oftentimes it really frustrates us as believers; but that’s the war we are called to fight — God’s call upon our lives as believers is that we not let our sinful inner core [i.e., our flesh] reign in our life; instead we are to reject it and fight against it; again, that’s the war God has called us to fight (cf. Rom 6:12; 17:18; Gal 5:17; Jam 1:14-15).

It is natural for us as fallen creatures to focus on the object of God’s love (sinful self) rather than the lover Himself (God); in so doing we will either doubt God’s love for us (because of our unworthiness), or we will lessen His love for us (because of a degree of self-virtue); whatever the case may be, if self is the object of our focus we will have a very shallow appreciation for the significance of God’s love; it is precisely here where the vast majority of believers stumble in their faith — their “self-view” consumes them; as such they experience very little peace in their soul. The believer’s focus must be on Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith (Heb 12:2), not on one’s sinful self. When we focus on ourselves rather than Christ, we will either become a spiritual wreck (because of our inability to measure up) or a proud fool (because we are self absorbed with our own goodness). Humility of heart must lead us to focus exclusively on God’s love for us — it is only then that we experience God’s incredible grace in our lives (*i.e.*, where we experience love, joy & peace; Gal 5:22); though we may be believers (*i.e.*, children of God), “our spiritual experience” can be very dry and lacking. To think we must merit God’s love in some way is a dead-end street; conversely, to think that we do merit God’s love

in some way is sheer folly (none of us do) — as believers, we are to glory in the cross of Christ (*i.e.*, the love of Christ) and nothing else. Incidentally, when Christ is our focus, His love will consume us, and it will be manifested in and through our lives — with that in mind, carefully reflect upon all of the passages I list below and the significance of agape love (without a firm understanding of agape love, one can easily fail to see its significance; therefore when reading these verses substitute the definition for the word “love,” rather than just using the word “love” itself... remember, agape love means to place the other person’s highest good [*i.e.*, his welfare] before you) — with that in mind, regarding God (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 8:39; Eph 2:4-5; 1 Jn 4:16; 4:7-8)... regarding us as believers (cf. Matt 5:43-44; 22:37-39; John 13:34-35; 14:15; 15:9-13; 17:23-24; Rom 5:5; 8:28; Gal 5:6; 5:22; Eph 5:2; Col 2:2; 1 Tim 1:5; Heb 10:24; 1 Pet 1:22; 1 Jn 2:15; Jude 1:21... regarding its Old Testament usage, read the following verses (by the way, their collective message is the fact that “God is gracious, compassionate, forgiving, and always abounding in love” (cf. Neh 9:17; Ps 103:8; 136:1-26; Joel 2:13). The question is, “Do you really believe that?” or “Do you doubt it?” What is it in your life that keeps you from believing it? Obviously, we all inhabit sinful flesh, and it is our flesh that constantly argues against divine truth (cf. Gal 5:17); our problem as human beings is that our flesh is a very strong presence in our lives (it is not something that anyone has ever conquered; not even the apostle Paul); thus we must fight the good fight of faith, which involves daily fighting against Satan’s lies and the diabolical nature of our flesh (which is constantly telling us that either we are too bad for God to love... too good to need much of God’s love... or that the foregoing teaching is not something we had been led to believe — Satan attacks us on both sides of every issue; if we go one way, he’ll attack us there... if we go the other way, he’ll attack us there — regardless of where we go he will be there to attack us. It is only the unconditional eternal love of God that is too much for him to handle (cf. Rom 8:31); so either we learn to fully embrace that truth, or the spiritual forces of darkness will cause us to wander (cf. Eph 6:10-17; 1 Pet 5:6-9).

The reality is, every believer needs to affirm God’s unconditional love for him every day (theologians refer to it as “preaching the gospel to oneself every day”), because only God’s unconditional love for His people is too much for Satan to deal with (remember, Christ defeated Satan at the cross; that place where God loved us and laid down His life for us). Because some Christians actually think they are so mature in their faith that they are beyond the need to reaffirm God’s love for them every day, they are delusional and are completely unaware of the powers of darkness that are influencing their thinking. If the great saints of history needed to humbly reaffirm God’s love for them, then you and I also need to do so. Now, by reflecting upon all the passages listed in the previous paragraph, “agape love” will become more significant to you. The problem with most Christians is that they don’t give serious consideration to divine truth; they don’t take the time to contemplate divine truth and meditate upon it — they simply casually read a few verses and call it a day. It should also be remembered, Christian love is the fruit of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22), that it is produced in and through us by the Holy Spirit, it is not the product of self — self-will (*i.e.*, self-pleasing) is actually the negation of love to God. So Christian love is not an impulse that results from feelings; instead, it is an attitude

of the heart that oftentimes goes contrary to our feelings, and seeks the welfare and goodness of others (cf. Rom 15:2). Since “*divine love*” is such a profoundly deep issue, it requires significant contemplation; *that is the economy God has ordained for us* — life is not simply about doing what feels good to us, “*it is fighting the good fight of faith*” (i.e., believing and abiding in the truth). The problem with liberal Christianity (which essentially constitutes about half of all those who call themselves Christians) is that it rejects any teaching that does not coincide with *human thinking*; i.e., it makes human thinking the ultimate determinant of what is true and what is not true — essentially, here is how it argues: “*No god would ever ask his creations to believe something that runs counter to their thinking; he gave us our brains and we are using them*” — that’s how arrogant and stupid the liberal world is; it completely denies its fallenness, therefore it glories in who he is. So liberal Christianity rejects any biblical teaching that does not conform to human thinking — therefore it is basically secularistic in its thinking... it rejects the divine presence of God in their life, the sovereignty of God, supernatural miracles, prophecy, and the inerrancy of Scripture — since it doesn’t have much respect for Scripture, essentially it is a humanistic religion; but God comes down *very hard* on humanistic thinking; He actually calls it *absolute foolishness* and says He will judge it accordingly. So the question is, “*Are you going to believe what God says, or are you going to redefine what He says and make it correspond with your own human thinking?*” Incidentally, God gives you the right to reject His thinking and believe what you want to believe, but should you do so, *He will hold you responsible for doing so* (there are several passages in Scripture that address this issue should you feel the need to study it). I emphatically cover this issue, because of its prominence in the Christian world — regrettably, more people *redefine* God’s Word than *believe* God’s Word.

The greatest theologian since the first century, ***Augustine*** (354-430), saw the cross as “*a pulpit*” from which Christ preached *God’s love* to the world. When he reflected upon God’s love for us, he concluded that nothing we could say or think could exhaust the full measure of His love. As the great Presbyterian preacher, ***Dr. James Montgomery Boice*** (1938-2000), said in his book “*Foundations of the Christian Faith*” — “*God’s love is always infinitely deeper than our awareness or expression of it*” (p. 333). The Bible is clear in its declaration of the greatness of God’s love — “*God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ*” (cf. Eph 2:4-5). God’s love is not only holy & righteous, but gracious & everlasting — God told the prophet Jeremiah, “*I have loved you with an everlasting love*” (Jer 31:3; cf. Ps 136:1-26); God’s love for us never ceases, no matter how big a mess we might make of our lives. Let me remind you again to substitute the definition of the word love for the word “*love*” itself — when words are used over and over again, they frequently lose some of their meaning; such can easily be applied to the word “*love*” — we love our spouse, we love hamburgers, we love sports, we love our dog, we love our kids, etc., but what does it really mean to love and be loved? Is it just a positive way of expressing something, or is there something far deeper involved? The songwriter ***Frederick M. Lehman*** (1868-1953) expressed it this way in his hymn

“The Love of God” — “The love of God is **greater far** than tongue or pen can ever tell; it goes beyond the highest star, and reaches to the lowest hell.... Could we with ink the ocean fill, and were the skies of parchment made; were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade; to write the love of God above would rain the oceans dry; nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky.” The message is this — God’s love is infinite, and being as we are finite creatures we don’t have the capacity to fully grasp its significance; yet by contemplating it, we can make it a transforming reality in our lives — in spite of the fact we can’t fully grasp it, to a degree we can experience its positive effect upon our lives (cf. Ps 1:2; 63:1-8; 139:1-6 Jer 15:16; Ezek 3:3; Rom 11:33; Eph 5:1-2; 1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22; 1 Pet 2:2). By the way, don’t excuse yourself of contemplation by saying, “Such thinking is too ethereal for me; so I’ll just continue to walk down the same road I have become accustomed to.” The following paragraph is a fairly provocative one, so take the time to read it carefully.

Let me begin this paragraph by saying this: “Only a ‘contextual understanding’ of why everything is as it is in your life, will alleviate the consternation and turmoil that exists in your soul” — if one sees no divine purpose for all that transpires in his life, God will be a very distant reality in his life. The reality is, nothing in one’s life is simply the product of mere happenstance — if you are one of God’s children, He is doing an eternal work in you, and it is all being done because of His great love for you. As the psalmist David said, “In Thy book are written all the days that are **ordained** for me, when as yet there was not one of them” (Ps 139:16) — the message is this: God sovereignly ordained our lives in eternity past (prior to our being conceived), so our lives, and the meaning of our lives, was all established from the beginning by God... and God doesn’t make mistakes. The truth is, “we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps 139:14); we are not simply a by-product of chance, and anything that happens in our lives is not mere happenstance. Carefully contemplate the following passages — cf. Job 10:8-13; Ecc 11:5; Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 12:6; 15:10, 28; Eph 1:3-14; 2:1-10; 4:6; Phil 1:6; 2:13. For those of you who are fast readers, that’s a real negative when it comes to divine truth — divine truth must not be casually considered, but humbly contemplated so that God can make it a reality in your life; furthermore, without humility of heart, human thinking will control the discourse in your mind. Remember, God only gives grace to the humble (cf. Jam 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5); thus Scripture says, “in **humility** receive the word implanted” (Jam 1:21; also Acts 16:14; 1 Th 1:5). Numerous passages were listed above — again, humbly contemplate them, or this matter of God’s sovereignty in your life will not be very significant; in all likelihood it will be doubted. As one of God’s many spokesmen in this world, like others, I’m very much aware of the deficiencies that exist in fallen man — one of the great weaknesses of fallen man is his inability to appreciate the integrity of the words of someone he knows well. As human beings, we don’t revere the thinking of people we know nearly as much as people we don’t know; that is simply a common malady of the human family. When Jesus went to his home town to teach them in their synagogue, “they took offense at Him” — so Jesus said to them, “A prophet is not without honor **except** in his home town, and in his own household” (cf. Mt 13:54-57; Mk 6:4; Lk 4:24; Jn 4:44; also Acts 7:51-53). Remember, not even Jesus’

ten or so brothers and sisters believed in Him until after the resurrection (cf. Jn 7:5; Mt 12:46; 13:55-56; Mk 6:3; Acts 1:14). According to Scripture, after the resurrection Jesus appeared to over 500 believers including His mother & His brothers James, Joseph, Simon & Jude, and no doubt all of his sisters (cf. Acts 1:14; Mt 13:55), and all of the apostles (1 Cor 15:5-8)... apparently it was at this time when some or all of His brothers and sisters came to believe in Him; His blood-brother "James" ultimately became the leader of the Church at Jerusalem, and was president of the first church council (cf. Acts 15:13ff; 21:18; Gal 1:19; 2:9, 12); in addition to that, James was the author of the epistle that bears his name. Regarding the matter of Jesus not being honored in His own home town, the principle is often expressed this way — "Familiarity breeds contempt." Obviously, if familiarity was a problem for Jesus, it is a problem for you and me; that is just the way fallen man thinks (his flesh renders a person he knows well "unworthy of great respect"). The oxymoron here is that "he has tremendous respect for someone he doesn't know personally." To give personal application to this issue — my ministry is having a far greater impact on those people who do not know me personally, than it is on those who do know me personally; this isn't a matter of tooting my own horn, this is simply the way things are in this world. Years ago Guy Davidson (my mentor in ministry) and I discussed this issue; he said people are inclined to listen more attentively to someone they don't know personally, then someone they do know personally; that the congregants of any church would be far more inclined to carefully listen to a guest speaker rather than their own pastor — for instance if a guest speaker preached the same identical message as their pastor, the guest speaker would have a greater impact upon the congregants — that's just common sense. So this principle Jesus identified for us is very true. Why did I say this? Well if it is at all possible, try and reflect upon everything I have written here without identifying it with me personally — if I am an integral part of all your thoughts, this study won't have much of an impact upon you; so try and let the words themselves stand on their own that they might minister to your heart. Again, humbly contemplate all of the verses I have listed above — remember, those are not my words, those are God's words (cf. 2 Tim 3:16). The following paragraphs are extremely important regarding "God's unconditional love;" without seeing the eternal aspect of God's love, one will simply minimize it and fail to see its contextual significance. Again, let the words stand on their own.

According to Scripture, God's love is a "sovereign love;" *i.e.*, God providentially determined to accomplish His eternal purpose through His unconditional love. Because God is GOD and is under obligation to no one other than Himself, He is free to love whomever He chooses (*i.e.*, seek the highest good of certain people that He might accomplish His eternal purposes through them). Contrary to human thinking, God was not demonstrating some kind of ugly bias in His selections and non-selections; though we cannot fully grasp the reason for all of His choices, of this we can be sure, they governed by both His holiness and His love. The problem with fallen man is that He insists on reconciling everything with his own mind; but some things simply transcend human thinking — obviously in eternity future we will be able to contemplate the infinite wisdom of God, and why all things happened as they did... until that day, we must simply defer to the

mind of God & exalt in His sovereignty. Remember, everything that exists (other than God Himself) was created *by Him, for Him, and to Him* (cf. Rom 11:36; Col 1:16-17); that is simply what it means to be the God of creation; that should not be a difficult construct for one to rationalize — only God is infinite; everything else is the product of His hands, thus in comparison to God all that exists is almost meaningless (cf. Is 40:17-18); to embrace any other line of reasoning is to make God a being who is neither eternal, omniscient, or omnipotent — if the foregoing is troubling to you, study the two contrasting concepts of *infinity* vs. *finiteness* and *eternal* vs. *temporal*. As God said to the children of Israel following the exodus from Egypt, “It was **not** because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set His love upon you and chose you — [the truth is] you were the fewest of all peoples — instead it is because the LORD loves you, and is keeping the oath which He swore to your fathers” (Deut 7:7-8). Again, the question arises, “Why did God love them?” Obviously without an understanding of *eternity past* before the created order came into existence as it is described in the book of Genesis, one can jump to a number of erroneous conclusions; to think that God created all things *without a purpose in mind* is beyond logic and not worth commenting on. Keep in mind, *God chose us before the foundation of the world*; i.e., He chose us to be *His servants* prior to our existence in eternity past (it was all a part of *His eternal plan*), and He gifted us with special gifts that we might be His servants; God does nothing without reason. So God’s actions weren’t something He decided to do after viewing what was happening in the world; the reality is, all that happens in our world is also a part of God’s plan from eternity past (cf. Eph 1:4; 2:10; 2 Th 2:13; Mt 25:34; Heb 4:3; Rev 13:7-8; 17:8). God is not *deistic*; i.e., He didn’t create everything and then simply sit back and watch things happen as they may — God is not some distant “*inactive reality*” in our universe; as Scripture emphatically says, “In Him all things hold together” (Col 1:17); i.e., Christ is actively sustaining the entire universe, maintaining the power and balance necessary to life’s existence and continuity — were God to remove His hand from it, it would all cease to exist. God not only created everything that exists (cf. Gen 1:3, 6, 9; 2:7; Job 4:9; 26:13; 32:8; 37:10; 41:21; Is 11:4; 30:33; 40:7; Jn 20:22; Acts 17:25; 2 Th 2:8), He is now the sustaining all that exists; should He remove His hand (i.e., His divine will) from it, it would cease to exist. *Everything is fully dependent upon God*; again, it is important to note that the word “*Him*” in Col 1:17 is *emphatic* in Greek grammar; *Christ [God] is actively making all things work*; it is not the *impersonal laws of thermodynamics* that is governing all that is going on in the universe (as most scientists like to think); though God functions in “*reasonable ways*” that have been attested to by the scientific world, *GOD HIMSELF is the ultimate cause of everything that takes place in our universe, either because of His permissive will or because of His ordained will* (cf. Heb 1:3) — collectively, everything that transpires in the universe fulfills His higher purposes (all of which were determined in eternity past). Nothing that happens is mere happenstance; the laws of thermodynamics are simply the actions of God, not actions independent of God.

The reality is, we live in a “*cause and effect*” universe; nothing happens without a cause (that is the foundational principle of science; they are always searching for the “*cause*”),

but little does the scientific world know (for the most part) that “GOD” is on the throne governing all that exists; though the scientific world can see the importance of things in the universe, they don’t know “why” things work as they work; they simply attribute it to these impersonal laws — so the problem with fallen man, is that he credits impersonal laws as governing everything; yet if you ask him “why these so-called impersonal laws operate as they do,” they don’t know why... “nor do they know the ultimate cause.” Regarding this thing they now believe in called “the Big Bang,” they don’t know what caused it; all they believe now is that it happened. The reality is, GOD is on the throne governing all that exists; yet some believers really struggle with that truth (probably because they have been listening too attentively to the scientific world; *i.e.*, they have too much admiration for human thinking). Without a grasp of this thing called “infinity,” one will have an extremely difficult time properly judging anything that is “finite.” The most renowned scientist in the 20th century was Albert Einstein; in my mind he might be the world’s most respected scientist. I quote him frequently because he was so transparent, open and honest; the approval of others and arrogance did not at all characterize him. The quote I have come to love is this one — “The scientist is possessed by the sense of universal causation... His religious feeling takes the form of a rapturous amazement at the harmony of natural law, which reveals an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection” (Ralph Woods, *The World Treasury of Religious Quotations*; New York, Garland books, 1966, p. 839). The reality is this — the entire created order is so brilliantly constructed, it is absolutely mind-boggling to those who carefully study it; in reality, it completely transcends human thinking; *i.e.*, what we as human beings know only scratches the surface. Think of it this way — our knowledge is only an inch deep, yet reality is billions of miles deep; *i.e.*, it is endless. Man’s problem is that he arrogantly thinks he is incredibly smart, when in fact he is grievously lacking in intelligence (cf. 1 Cor 3:19; Rom 1:22; Prv 19:3; Ecc 10:2). Every believer should contemplate what Einstein had to say. Remember, “In GOD all things consist” (cf. Col 1:17) — the Latin word consisto is the exact equivalent of the Greek word sunistemi; essentially it means “to stand with or stand together” (*i.e.*, the entire universe is being upheld by the Lord; it doesn’t exist independent of Him). By the way, any other thinking is not only foreign to Scripture, but is completely illogical. If God is the eternal, omniscient, omnipotent, HOLY GOD of the Bible, to think that He would allow the diabolical world or happenstance to dictate reality (*i.e.*, determine what is and what is to be), would be completely antithetical to who He is.

If God is truly GOD, He is the one who dictates reality; any other conclusion is completely lacking in integrity of thought — to believe that God is not the one who dictates reality is akin to having a “mouse” control every creature on our planet; in short, it is mindless & illogical to believe anything other than divine truth. I find it interesting that fallen human beings actually think they are smart and capable of making this world into a pleasant little utopia, wherein the entire human family is happy and at peace; yet if there is anything human beings are not it is that; they are actually the antithesis of that; they are extremely self-centered war-mongers in desperate need of humility, divine

guidance and divine leadership. Whereas God called the wisdom of men “*foolishness*,” (completely unreasonable), James called the wisdom of God “*reasonable*” (by the way, a corollary of reason is “*logic*”); “*genuine truth*” is not at all “*unreasonable*.” If there is anyone who has “*sense*” it is God, and if there is anyone who is seriously lacking in sense it is man — it is amazing at how destructive “*arrogance*” is to the minds and hearts of men. It might be good at this point to stop and consider the following — at the end of the age God is going to question every individual and have them give an account of everything they did in life, and ask them why they promulgated and believed *the foolish thinking* that they embraced? They will embarrassingly have to own up to their mindless stupidity before with the entire created order; the truth is, there is nothing the entire created order will not ultimately come to know after all is said and done; incidentally, those who “*arrogantly led other people into darkness*” will be judged extremely harshly. The message is: “Don’t arrogantly mislead people with diabolical thinking; should that be the case, you are going to pay a very steep price for having done so. *Arrogance is the mother of all evil, and God comes down very hard on it.* By definition, arrogance or pride means “*thinking more highly of oneself than he ought*” — when we think we are smarter than we are, we are letting our proud heart govern our thinking; Adam and Eve thought they were smarter than they were, and it cost them their lives. Pride lies at the head of all sin. **C. S. Lewis** in his book “*Mere Christianity*” says, “*It is the center of immorality, the utmost evil, and leads to every other vice*” (p. 94). It is pride that causes us to fall short of the great destiny for which God created us; as such, rather than being on our way up, we are on our way down.

The reason this world is going to completely self-destruct is because of the pride of men; they simply refuse to bend the knee to God (which is the essence of genuine humility). *Man’s autonomy* is grounded in his proud heart, and his refusal to defer to God — man simply will not reject his own right to rule over himself; every believer knows how difficult it is to surrender to God; that’s just what it means to be a fallen creature. Another important point to remember is this: “*To whom much is given, much is required*” (Lk 12:48) — if God gives someone a significant position of leadership, he better take that responsibility seriously or decline it, because he is ultimately going to reap exactly what he sows. Furthermore, at the end of the age God is going to ask people why they arrogantly rejected the *moral laws* that He had placed in their hearts? Keep in mind, “*all of the books shall be opened*,” and every wrong shall be judged — even the careless words that people spoke shall be judged (cf. Mt 12:36; 16:27; 25:41-46; Jn 5:28-29; 12:48; Rom 2:5, 12; 3:19; 1 Pet 4:5; Rev 20:11-15). Obviously, that is not going to be a pleasant moment for those who did not embrace the mind of God (cf. Mt 12:36; 16: 27; 25:41-46; Jn 5:28-29; 12:48; Rom 2:5; 3:19; Rev 20:11-15). Some of you may be thinking “*the final judgment isn’t going to be that radical*,” by the way, even the present day Pope would agree with that statement, but to reject such thinking is to reject what God says, not what I say — it is amazing how stubbornly stupid and arrogant fallen man is (keep in mind, we are all fallen creatures). So what’s the point in stating all of the foregoing? Unless one has a great appreciation for *the eternity of God* and *the temporality of all other things*, his faith will not possess the

rationality or the integrity that it should. To make light of the eternity of God is a significant detriment to a person's faith; if one cannot believe what Scripture (God) says, he is really going to struggle with his faith. By the way, the foregoing arguments are simply the beginning of this issue; they will become far more clear shortly.

The transcendent omnipotent, omniscient Creator obviously had a **plan** in mind when He created things; any other deduction is senseless and beyond reason. Contemplate for a moment what it means to be eternal, all-knowing & all-powerful; irrationalism, mindlessness and diabolical thinking would never characterize a loving, holy God (cf. Jam 3:17); everything He would do would correspond with His character. Regarding the Israelites, God didn't choose them to be His people because they were a good people, a great people, a powerful people, or a wonderful people (goodness has never been a characteristic of any people; all people are fallen creatures); God's choice of them had nothing to do with who they were in and of themselves. In like manner, God didn't choose you and me to be His people because of any quality we possess — incidentally, should we have been born with some wonderful quality, that quality would have been placed there by God and not something that was the product of our making... nothing happens that is independent of God; *i.e.*, nothing happens without His consent or without Him being the cause of the action — everything ultimately is approved by God that His eternal purposes might be accomplished; even the diabolical work of the cross was approved by God; cf. Acts 2:23; 3:18 — likewise, even our fallenness was a part of God's eternal plan; cf. Ps 51:5; Rom 3:10-18, 23 — again, that will make more sense to you momentarily. Regarding this matter of God being sovereign, David expressed it this way: “The LORD has established His throne in the heavens; and His sovereignty rules over all” (Ps 103:19); in short, the ruler of all things is GOD (to think anything else is foolish). As the apostle Paul stated it, “God works all things after the counsel of His will” (Eph 1:11). I keep making this argument, because Scripture makes it over and over and over again; if it wasn't supra-significant, Scripture wouldn't place such strong emphasis upon it... yet many believers tend to rationalize something else. Some believers actually think it was “their wisdom and choice” that made them believers, “that they chose God, rather than God chose them” — that their salvation was the result of their thinking about everything and placing their trust in God... little do they know, it was God who precipitated their believing in Him by opening their heart to the truth; thus it is a work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts (cf. Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Th 1:5). If one is going to simply make salvation an intellectual decision, he needs to remember that God is the one who “made him” and “gave him his brain” and “placed all of the qualities in him that define him” — man is not a self-made creature; *i.e.*, he is not the product of his own doing. As David said, “Thou didst form my inward parts; Thou didst weave me in my mother's womb... I am fearfully and wonderfully made... Thine eyes have seen my unformed substance” (cf. Ps 139:13-16; Ps 119:73; Is 44: 24). Since all of us as believers chose to believe the truth of the gospel, we need to be mindful of how that transpired — God humbled us and opened our heart to the truth and confirmed it to our spirit (cf. Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Th 1:5) — it had nothing to do with the superiority of our thinking; to make our thinking the supreme reason for our salvation

is foolish; but such is the thinking of men (cf. 1 Cor 2:14; 3:19). By the way, to believe that it was *our intellect* that caused us to place our trust in God, would mean that *unbelievers* don't have the same intellectual capacity that we do to make such a choice, *but such thinking does not at all coincide with what Scripture teaches*. It is only when we humble ourselves before God that He opens our heart to believe (cf. Jam 1:21; 4:6), and it is God who humbles us (*i.e.*, convicts us of our own limitations and innate sinfulness). One of man's biggest problems (including believers) is that he insists on making God the person he *wants* Him to be, not the person *He is*.

To help resolve this construct in your mind, think of yourself as being *all knowing, all powerful* and *the only thing that exists* (nothing but you exists — no space, no time, no substance; nothing but you — *NOTHING!*). Now should you decide to "*make or create something*," would it not be the product of your desires, and be completely in subjection to you? Of course it would; how could it not? Regarding He who is "*the Most High*," it was the King of Babylon, *Nebuchadnezzar*, who said the following to the Lord after He dealt harshly with him because of his pride: "*God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone He wishes*" (cf. Dan 4:17, 25, 34; 2:21; 5:21; 7:14; also Rom 13:1; Jn 19:11). Remember, the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty is also echoed in the Lord's prayer: "*For Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever*" (Mt 6:13). God rules the destiny of men and nations (Acts 14:15-17; 17:24-28); all things, including the crucifixion of Christ and all other events are a part of God's providential rule (cf. Acts 2:23; 4:27-28); He is "*the only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords*" (cf. 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 19:16). God uses human means in history to accomplish His purposes, yet such means do not involve coercion on His part. God even effectuates His will through the sinful, disobedient actions of men (cf. Gen 45:5-8; 50:19-20). The reality is this — for men to be *autonomous creatures*, they must be a law unto themselves where there is no binding authority or power that restricts them from exercising whatever options they might choose. But due to the fact that *man is not an autonomous creature*, he does not have the ability to effectuate anything that does not correspond with divine providence. Since God is sovereign, *no creature is autonomous*, because to be autonomous is to be a law unto oneself wherein someone else is not sovereignly reigning over them; though God permits men to exercise their will in limited ways, everything they choose to do corresponds with God's permissive will... men are not free to exercise their will however they may choose (cf. Dan 4:28-37). The reality is, though man often determines what he *sows*, it is God who determines what He *reaps* — man is not a robot, but neither is he autonomous; he doesn't control reality (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21; 20:24; 2 Cor 9:6; Gal 6:7-9). Over and over again we read in Scripture that "*God hardened certain people's hearts because of their arrogance and unwillingness to do as He requested*" (cf. Ex 3:19; 4:21; 5:2; 7:3, 13, 22; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 14:4, 8, 17; Deut 2:30; Mt 13:14-15; Jn 12:40); it ought to be clear, there is nothing God can't do to accomplish His purposes. It makes one wonder, how many millions of proud fools in our world today have experienced the hardening of the Lord? Obviously, there are a lot of proud fools in our political world who have experienced God's hardening; that is simply what God does to His enemies. One thing is absolutely sure, *God is going to accomplish His will in and through*

it all (cf. Eph 1:11). Incidentally, a part of *His will* includes the complete destruction of this world and placing every diabolical creature in the lake of fire. Again, this will make far more sense to you momentarily. It is difficult for me to imagine any believer thinking that *God's eternal purposes* are not the order of the day, because to embrace such thinking is to make God out to be a contradiction of who Scripture says He is. By the way, should you differ from what I have written, you not only need to *support* your contrary view with Scripture, you need to *justify* your argument against the teachings of Scripture that differ from what you say you believe. Again, half of the Christian world does not embrace the teachings of Scripture, which is simply the work of Satan in our world. It happened over and over again in the Old Testament, and that is why God came down so hard on the nation of Israel. My plea is that you will align your thinking with what Scripture teaches, rather than with what your flesh is inclined to believe. Regarding *God's Word*, reflect upon the following passages (cf. Ex 9:20-21; Num 15:31; Deut 5:1-7; 1 Sam 15:26; Ps 33:6; 119:11, 89, 160; Is 40:8; 45:23; 46:9-11; 55:11; Jer 8:8-9; 23:25-32; Mt 4:4; Jn 5:24; 8:31-32; 17:17; 1 Cor 1:18; Col 3:16; 1 Tim 3:15; 2 Tim 3:16; Heb 4:12; Jam 1:21; 1 Pet 1:25; 2:2).

According to **God**, the *wisest* man whoever lived or ever will live (past, present or future) was **King Solomon** (read 1 Kg 3:12) — though some people who claim to be believers question whether in fact that is true, to do so is to argue against what God declared. Keep in mind what God said and don't change the discourse — God said that He made Solomon *the wisest man* who ever lived; *not the sweetest, the most wonderful, or the most godly*; clearly that did not define Solomon, but such does not at all invalidate anything he wrote. Remember, all of Scripture is "*God-breathed*," so everything Solomon wrote ultimately came from the mind of God; thus to argue against anything that he wrote is in fact to actually argue against God. With that in mind, consider the words of Solomon (*i.e.*, God Himself) to the human family: "*The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord*" ... "*The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps*" ... "*Many are the plans in a man's heart, but the counsel of the Lord will stand*" (cf. Prv 16:1, 9; 19:21). Solomon also stated, "*Consider the work of God... who is able to straighten what He has bent?*" ... "*Just as one does not know the path of the wind... so one does not know the activity of God who makes all things*" (Ecc 1:13; 11:5). I find it interesting that all of the prophets who lived after Solomon (which is over 90% of them), contemplated his words; *hence the prophetic teachings of the prophets were grounded in the absolute sovereignty of God*. The prophet Isaiah said, "*All flesh is grass, and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it... the grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of God stands forever*" (Is 40:6-8). Did you notice that the grass withers and the flower fades *WHEN* the breath of the Lord blows upon it? The message is, **GOD is the one who determines reality**. The Lord told His people Israel through the prophet Isaiah, "*You are My witnesses and My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me, and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.... from eternity I am He; there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?*" (Is 43:10-13). Likewise the prophet Jeremiah said,

“I know, Lord, that a man’s way is not in himself; nor is it in man who walks to direct his steps” (Jer 10:23) — obviously, he had read the words of Solomon (*i.e.*, divine truth). Since there are numerous passages like this throughout Scripture, what is the message? We don’t run this world, God does! He occupies the supreme seat of cosmic authority, and whatever does not mesh with His will cannot be accomplished (cf. Job 1:8-12). Though the kings of this world and all secular governments may ignore this reality, they do not have the wherewithal to override it. Years ago I wondered if Satan had ever read the Scriptures, and if what he read ever influenced his actions... and then it dawned on me, that his ability to understand divine truth was no greater than the unbelieving world; in spite of the fact that God’s Written Word defines reality, only those who have been enlightened can understand it — God does not permit His Word to be trampled upon by the godless, unbelieving world; though they can read it, they do not understand the intrinsic truths that it teaches. God hardened the heart of Pharaoh because he refused to do as God instructed... in so doing, God accomplished His own perfect will (cf. Ex 3:10; 4:21; 5: 2; 7:3, 13, 22; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 14:4, 8, 17; also cf. Mt 13:14-15; Jn 12:40). Obviously, all of us are free to draw any conclusion we want when reading Scripture, but there is only one interpretation that coincides with divine truth... and either we humbly align our thinking with divine truth, or we are going to destroy our life. By the way, it is not possible for a proud person to align his thinking with divine truth; divine truth is of divine origin and can only be divinely transmitted to one’s heart by our divine Creator; and according to Scripture, that can only occur when one humbles himself before the Lord; it is only then that God will open his heart to the truth. As Jesus told His disciples — “Don’t give what is holy to dogs or cast your pearls before swine” (cf. Matt 7:6); *i.e.*, don’t share the fullness of the truth with our enemies... God doesn’t let proud individuals treat divine truth with contempt; only those who are genuinely humble before Him and open to the truth are enlightened. God doesn’t play games with human beings.

Let’s say that particular statement by Jesus is troubling to you — if that is the case, then you need to prayerfully & humbly study the issue until God convicts your heart as to the integrity of it. Would you share an incredibly intimate thought with someone who hates you beyond measure? Heavens no; well, neither does God. Though some proud people actually think they are brilliant enough to understand everything that is written in Scripture, the truth is their thoughts are seriously deficient and grossly lacking in integrity. Remember, I didn’t invent the truth, I am simply declaring what God Himself has stated: “all of the words of Scripture are God breathed” (2 Tim 3:16). This universe in which we live is no democracy; it is a monarchy that is ruled by God... even Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon (perhaps the greatest empire the world has ever known), agreed with that (read Dan 4:34-37). The kingdom of Babylon is considered by many to be “the greatest kingdom” in the history of the world; it was that kingdom that God used to defeat Judah and destroy Jerusalem in the 6th century BC. Because of Babylon’s arrogance (remember, God had given her great power & extreme wealth) she rebelled against her Creator; thus the Lord prophesied that He would completely destroy Babylon (the world’s greatest city) to the point where “it would never again be inhabited or lived in” (cf. Is 13:20).

Incredible as it may seem, within a couple of hundred years this “*incredible city*” was deserted and became nothing but a place of ruin... it’s ruins are still evident to this very day. To help describe the city, **Hammurabi** (around 2,000 BC) encircled the city with a huge wall... and then **Nebuchadnezzar** (around 600 BC) fortified the city with three rings of walls that were 40 feet tall and each one 20-25 feet thick. The city inside the walls occupied an area of about 200 square miles, which is roughly the size of present day Chicago. *Babylon was by far the largest most revered city in the ancient world... yet God turned the city into ruins to the point where it has been completely re-taken by the desert* — the ruins of this ancient city stand as an eloquent testimony to the passing of proud empires and to the providential hand of God in history; the city was to be stripped of her immense glory and completely overthrown, never to rise again; God would judge her haughty and arrogant spirit (cf. Is 13:17-22; 14:11-23; Jer 50:29-32). Sometimes it is helpful to reflect upon the prophetic actions of God; in so doing, we can see how He evidences Himself in this world — obviously, **God is true to His Word**. The ultimate reality is, at the end of the age, “*every knee will bow before Christ [willingly or unwillingly] and declare that Christ is LORD (i.e., the eternal Master and Ruler of this entire universe) to the glory of God the Father*” (Phil 2:9-11). By the way, it makes no difference whether one believes that or not, that is the reality... reality is not a matter of human consensus; our believing something does not make something “*true*,” that which is true is “*true*” whether we believe it or not. **GOD** determines reality and what is true (cf. Ecc 1:14-15; 7:13-14; 8:17; 11:5; also Ps 37:23; 40:2; 66:9) — if we have any sense at all, *we will align our self with divine wisdom*, and not keep questioning it & doubting it & arguing against it; yet that is what the ancient world did time and time again; much like our present day world, it simply refused to bend the knee before God. With that in mind, the following section deals with an incredibly critical issue — “*the eternity of God.*” My prayer is that you will prayerfully contemplate what is written; keeping in mind, I am not the author of divine truth, I am simply articulating it as Scripture and the greatest Bible theologians of history have stated it.

CAN YOU LET GOD BE “**GOD**”?

As stated, “Can you not let God be **GOD**, and let Him run His own creation, without arguing against Him?” Remember, **GOD is ETERNAL, OMNISCIENT, OMNIPOTENT and ABSOLUTELY SOVEREIGN**; as such, all creation can be regarded as **NOTHING** in comparison to Him — that should not be difficult to understand when one compares He who is *infinite* with everything that is *finite*. To help give definition to He who is infinite and that which is finite, perhaps it is best to *graphically depict it* — with that in mind, I want you to *draw a small circle* on a piece of paper, and inside that circle write the words “*space, mass & time*” — and outside that circle write the word “*God*,” in order to differentiate between the two. You’ll notice God is not limited, that He transcends the circle and the piece of paper on which you drew the circle. God transcends space, mass and time; He is infinite, endless, eternal; He cannot be placed in a box no matter how big

it is, because any box would be limited in scope... just as there is “no end to numbers” (they go on adinfinitum; they never cease – there are always trillions & trillions more numbers that can be added to any number the entire finite world can come up with), likewise the parameters of God are endless (again, finite minds cannot conceive of anything that is infinite). It is amazing at how many Christians see God as being incredibly big, but not infinitely big... they see Him as One who is somewhat removed from His creation to a degree, but not one who is its infinite ruler. The reality is, God is not finite or limited in any way; that’s why I had you graphically depict Him (once you are outside the circle, infinity never stops; it goes on and on adinfinitum. Though the created order is temporal and limited (*i.e.*, the entire created order is inside the circle), the Creator Himself is eternal (*i.e.*, He completely transcends the circle); were the circle to disappear (*i.e.*, cease to exist), God would remain completely unchanged; He is not at all affected by the temporal world – He is GOD! To add one more dimension to what you have drawn, also place the word “temporal” inside the circle, and the word “eternal” outside the circle – it is important for you to contemplate the differences between these two realities. I find it interesting that certain aspects of creation actually reflect the eternity of God in some way – be it things like numbers or distant space; when one looks into space one might be inclined to think that it ultimately comes to an end (that seems to be what the scientific world believes), that there must be some kind of border out there somewhere that defines the created realm; but if that is the case, then what is on the other side of that border? More space! So here we have the temporal realm reflecting the eternal realm to some degree; again, it is here where finite minds have to shut down, because they can’t fathom something that is not temporal; by the way, though space may continue to go on and on adinfinitum, space is still temporal – how’s that for an oxymoron? Logic tells us, that which is temporal cannot be compared to that which is eternal; Scripture states that time and time again. The Lord said to Isaiah (the prince of prophets), “It is GOD who reduces rulers to nothing, and makes the judges of the earth meaningless.... To whom then will you liken Me?... The Everlasting God, the LORD, the creator of the ends of the earth does not become weary or tired. His understanding is inscrutable” (Is 40:23-28). “I am the LORD; there is no savior besides Me.... I am God, from eternity I am He, and there is none who can deliver out of My hand; I act and who can reverse it?” (Is 43:11-13). “I am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake; and I will not remember your sins” (Is 43:25). “Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer... the one who formed you from the womb, I, the LORD, am the maker of all things.... causing the omens of lying prophets and boastful magicians to fail, making fools out of diviners, and turning the knowledge of wise men into foolishness” (Is 44:24-25). “I am the LORD... there is no other, the One forming light and creating darkness, causing well-being and creating calamity; I am the LORD who does all these things.... Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker.... will the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you doing?’... It is I who made the earth, and created man upon it. I stretched out the heavens with My hands, and ordained all their host” (Is 45:6-12). “Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.... the word has gone forth from My mouth in righteousness and will not turn back, that to Me every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance”

(Is 45:22-23). All I did in the foregoing was quote a few verses from Isaiah chapters 40-45 to shed a little light on the eternity of God as it is expressed in Scripture; obviously, there are numerous passages throughout Scripture that make similar statements; the important thing here is seeing God for who He truly is, and not in any way minimize Him and make Him less than He is. Furthermore, since God has no limitation whatsoever (*i.e.*, since He is the essence of eternity; there is nothing eternal outside of Him), trying to make Him fit into tiny little brains is a little silly. Beloved, at least be fair to yourself when contemplating “ultimate reality” (*i.e.*, GOD), and let God be GOD.

With the foregoing in mind, since God is sovereign in all things (*i.e.*, since He is the eternal magistrate of all things), He is also sovereign in His love (*i.e.*, in how He chooses to respond to those whom He has created); keep in mind, God is holy & God is love — thus His holiness and love are the chief governing characteristics of everything He does — to minimize either His holiness or His love, is to misinterpret who God really is. Because God is perfectly holy, He is totally separate from anything that is not perfectly holy; that is what it means to be holy — it is because of His holiness that God is completely intolerant of sin and judges it severely; the most emphatic statement in the entire Bible is this: “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts” (cf. Is 6:3; Rev 4:8); so first and foremost above everything, God is HOLY! (cf. Lev 19:2; 20:26; Deut 14:2; Ps 47:8; 2 Tim 1:9; 1 Pet 1:16; Ps 9:7-9; 50:6; 75:7; Ecc 3:17). Secondly, God is LOVE! (cf. Jn 3:16; 1Jn 3:16; 4:7-12, 16; 19). In love, God has chosen a number of fallen creatures to be His servants in this world; just as God chose Jonah to do a particular work (the evangelization of Nineveh), so God has chosen you and me as well (*i.e.*, if we are truly believers). Remember the words of Jesus to His disciples — “You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should remain;” *i.e.*, have an effect unto all eternity (Jn 15:16). Likewise, Abraham was called (he did not choose God)... Moses was called even before he was a baby floating in the Nile in a basket — God said, “I am going to deliver my people from Egypt, and I am going to do it by means of this baby.” It was the same with everyone else in Scripture, be it David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Danial, the Prophets, Mary, John the Baptist, Paul and all of His disciples. Though the idea of divine election transcends human thought (that expression is another way of stating it — cf. Mt 24:24, 31; Mk 13:20, 22, 27), that is the determined reality of God as it is expressed in His God breathed Word (cf. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:20-21). Though many people insist on arguing against such thinking with human thought, that does not negate the truth of it — at some point, we as believers must let the eternal One be GOD, accepting the fact that “His ways are not our ways, nor are His thoughts our thoughts” (cf. Is 55:8-9); again, there comes a point in life where we must acknowledge our finiteness and defer to God’s infiniteness — insisting that divine truth coincide with human thinking isn’t the answer; some things we are simply not going to fully understand. As Solomon expressed it, “I have observed a wealth of wisdom and knowledge, and I set my mind to know it... yet I have come to realize that this is simply striving after wind” (cf. Ecc 1:14-18; 7:13; 8:17). Keep in mind, this was the wisest man who ever lived, or who ever will live (1 Kg 3:12). Now, since God is absolutely sovereign (*i.e.*, He is the supreme ruler of all things — cf. Ps 50:1; 66:7; 93:1; Is 40:15-17; 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 11:17), His

love is not influenced by some act of the creature (remember, God *made* the creature; cf. Ps 139:13; 119:73; Is 44:24); the reality is, *in eternity past God determined to “love certain creatures” He would make to fulfill His higher purposes* — as Paul stated in his second letter to Timothy, “*God saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity*” (2 Tim 1:9); by the way, you’ll notice this happened from all eternity; furthermore, the two emboldened words (*holy* and *own*) are emphatic in Greek. It is also important to note, *not a single creature merited his love...* He simply chose a relatively small number of creatures to be *His servants* long before they ever came into existence; remember, God *planned* the end from the beginning (cf. Is 14:24, 27; 43:13; 46:9-10), and a part of that plan was having some creatures align themselves with Him and be *His servants*. The question that begs asking is this: *Why did all of this happen?* Elementary thinking often concludes that “*God was probably bored or lonely, and that is why He created the human family;*” but such thinking does not at all equate with what Scripture teaches.

So, why did all of this happen? The reality is, *something occurred in eternity past that precipitated the creation of “man;” in eternity past Lucifer and one-third of all the angels “rebelled against God” and were thrown out of heaven* (keep in mind, the entire angelic realm beheld all that transpired)... but rather than immediately destroying Satan and all the angels who sided with him, *God chose to “put sin on trial” before the entire angelic world — in so doing, He brought about a brand new creation called “man;” He created a creature (i.e., man) in His own image* (Gen 1:26); though man is a spiritual creature like God, he is also a physical creature. Incidentally, nothing else was ever created in *the image of God*. Again, keep in mind, it was the issue of “*sin*” in eternity past that brought about the creation of man; were it not for sin, man would not have been created. By the way, though this new creation is *a little lower than the angels at this point in time* (cf. Heb 2:5-18), *one day it will be glorified and raised above the entire angelic realm and actually be its judge* (1 Cor 6:3), *and then become fellow-heirs with Christ, and reign in heaven with Him forever* (cf. Rom 8:17; 2 Tim 2:12; Rev 22:3-7) — those realities are so incredible they can’t even be comprehended at this point in our existence. Now, since God is *GOD*, He does everything after the counsel of *His will* (Eph 1:11); obviously God knew full well that His new creation would succumb to the temptation of Satan — it was not at all an accident that “*Satan*” happened to be in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve when they were created (think about that); that was all a part of the eternal plan of God... though man would “*fall*,” that was all a part of God’s plan — that is why Scripture tells us that the Lamb of God was slain before the foundation of the world (cf. Rev 13:8; 17:8; Eph 1:4; Heb 4:3; Lk 11:50); in other words, the crucifixion of Christ was God’s plan from the very beginning. Remember, since God is eternal all that exists or ever will exist in the temporal realm is known to God; there is nothing He doesn’t see or know; all “*time*” is known to God from beginning to end (look at the little circle you drew on a piece of paper; time is temporal, not eternal). One cannot say that the future is not known to God because it has not yet happened — that can only be deduced with temporal thinking... because God is eternal He sees the end from the beginning (*i.e.*, He sees the entire circle; He is not temporal, He is eternal!); furthermore, “*God has*

planned the end from the beginning” (cf. Is 46:9-11); that essentially is what “*prophesy*” is all about (the plan of God); it is the foretelling of the future; there is no such thing as mere happenstance in our universe; the eternal God of all creation is on the throne... to say that the eternal, transcendent, omniscient, omnipotent God “*is not the cosmic authority over all things, is not only illogical but foolish*” — though human thinking insists that it is autonomous, God calls all such thinking absolute nonsense/foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-20; 2:14; 3:19). Man is not the ultimate determinant of reality, God is. By the way, the older I have gotten, the more clear God’s divine sovereignty has become to me; though each of us can *control* things in very limited ways, only God can effectuate *genuine change* in our world or in our lives. Metaphorically speaking, I have walked a million miles down this street, so I am pretty confident in the truth of that statement; like many of you, there is not much I have not done to try and effectuate significant change in my life and in my world, but only God has done so. Though those of you who are younger have not yet been convinced of that truth, eventually you will be; there is something to be said about growing old — we obtain a level of wisdom that escaped our notice when we were younger (cf. Prov 16:31; 20:29).

Nothing that happened in all of Scripture was outside of God’s will; nothing was mere happenstance — *NOTHING!* In eternity past God *planned* the end from the beginning (cf. Is 46:9-11), yet due to the fact that few people believe in the “*eternality of God,*” they really struggle with such thinking; their humanness insists on man being the sole determinant of all that transpires on this planet... that *reality* is simply the product of chance, and in part is of man’s doing (that is the essence of temporal thinking; after all, temporal minds cannot think anything else). Temporal minds believe that if God is involved at all, it is only momentarily in certain situations; but even that they often question (this God thing is simply too ethereal to them). However, as stated earlier, numerous passages in Scripture attest to the absolute sovereignty of God, but fallen human thinking has a very difficult time accepting that as being the case. Regardless of what it was that transpired down through the course of time, it all occurred according to the fore-plan of God — be it the fall in the garden of Eden, the death of Able, the building of the Ark by Noah, the building of the tower of Babel, God’s choice of Abraham, the births of Ishmael & Isaac, the births of the twelve sons of Jacob, the selling of Joseph into slavery in Egypt (cf. Gen 50:20; also Gen 25:21-24; Rom 9:14-33), the miraculous birth & life of Moses, the refusal of Pharaoh to listen to God (cf. Ex 3:19; 4:21; 5:2; 7:3, 13, 22), the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea, the idolatrous obstinacy of Israel in the wilderness, the giving of the Ten Commandments and the Law, Israel’s entrance into the Promised Land, the ongoing fall of the Israelites during the period of the Judges, God’s giving the Israelites a “*king*” to govern them, the subsequent fall of the nation of Israel and its being divided into two nations (Israel and Judah), as well as the raising up of prophets (*i.e.*, God’s spokesmen) to share God’s will with His people, the enslavement of Judah into captivity in Babylon, and the destruction of every nation that tried to bring Israel down (cf. Is 10:5-16; 45:1-7, 9, 13; 47:1-11)... I mention each of these things because they each played a prominent role in Scripture. The reality is, *NOTHING* happened in the Old Testament that was not a part of God’s plan from all

eternity... conversely, nothing happened during New Testament era that was not a part of God's plan... and nothing has happened since, or will happen in the future that is independent of God's plan; even the *antichrist* is a part of God's plan. Again, without understanding "*the eternity of God*" that will be a very difficult construct for people to grasp and accept; the problem is, they are simply sold out to *temporal human thinking*; to them God is nothing but a redeemer and a savior who is inviting people to become one of His children, that if they will simply place their trust in Him, He will make them one (though that is true, that is nowhere near the fullness of what is true; the *contextual understanding* is almost completely lacking).

Said Paul to the church at Corinth: "I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses... Nevertheless, *with most of them* (that's emphatic in Greek) God was not well-pleased, so they were laid low (*i.e.*, He let them die) in the wilderness. *Now these things happened as examples for us* (that is also emphatic in Greek; that is the principle reason "*why*" they happened), that we should not crave evil things as they also craved (*i.e.*, we are not to let idolatry or immorality rule in our soul, and not put God to the test or grumble as many of them did). *Thus these things happened to them as "an example for us," and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come*" (1 Cor 10:1-11); by the way, I abbreviated some of the foregoing verses. *Now, these things happened for our benefit and had nothing to do with mere happenstance*; perhaps you need to ask yourself this question: What if it had not occurred? What lesson would we not have learned? By the way, what if Noah had caved in to satanic rule like the rest of the human family did? Was God simply "*lucky*" that He still had *one person* left who had not yet caved in to the devil? Incidentally, that would be a temporal understanding of what happened; but that doesn't define reality. Remember, if Noah had not rejected the rule of Satan, God would not have had a person with which to rebuild His human family — everything that occurred was all a part of God's plan. It is also important to remember that everything that has taken place in biblical history has happened "*for our benefit as God's people*" — "*to teach us divine truth.*" There is no such thing as happenstance in God's economy; it should be noted, that word translated "*economy*" is a compound word in Greek — the word "*oikos*" means *house*, and "*nomos*" means *law* — the reality is, **GOD** is "*the law of the house*" (*i.e.*, it is **GOD** who sovereignly rules this universe; not man). The Word of the Lord didn't come into existence only after He thought about the deplorable behavior of man; His word just didn't pop into existence sometime after Israel became a nation; *His Word is eternal and is forever settled in heaven* (read Ps 119:89, 160; Is 40:8, 21; 46:9-11; 55:11; 1 Pet 1:25; also Ps 89:11; 90:2; 102:25; Is 40:21; 42:5; 45:18; Acts 17:24; Heb 11:3; 2 Pet 3:5); though He used His servants to put it in writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, His Word is eternal and has always existed; there is nothing new under the sun to God. The reality is, God is constantly directing our lives as His children to accomplish His purposes (cf. Ps 37:23-28; 147:6; Heb 13:5), which were determined in eternity past; though God gives us freedom of choice as His children, He lovingly moves us in a divine direction. By the way, if God's planning the end from the beginning is an eternal reality

that is highly questionable to you, your *contextual understanding of reality* will be very deficient; if you do not take the time to *humbly contemplate the eternity of God*, He will only be a shadow of Himself to you.

Keep in mind, the liberal Christian world simply cannot fathom the *eternity of God*, therefore it refuses to accept miracles, the foretelling of the future (*i.e.*, prophecy), the inerrancy of God's Word, and any negative that does not correspond with human thinking (including hell, divorce, sex outside of marriage, homosexuality, eternal judgment, etc.); in other words, they insist on defining this person called "*God*" from a temporal perspective (*i.e.*, a human perspective), in spite of their own juvenile finite nature; probably the most stupid thing of all is that they actually think they are "*smart*." Though all of the foregoing might sound a little strange to some of you, keep listening and try not to argue against it. *The reality is, all that has transpired down through the course of time has happened to instruct and teach us everything God would have us to know. Keep in mind, one of God's best teachers is "the historical realities of this world," because man can best relate to such things; if all God did was teach abstract truths, we would have a much more difficult time understanding them. The truth is, all that has transpired down through the ages teaches us the fullness of truth that God would have us know* (nothing has happened in this world that is insignificant nonsense; everything that has occurred, happened for a reason — "*to teach us*" — keep in mind, if something else needed to be taught to us, God would have included that in His eternal plan... He doesn't make mistakes); thus He will never one day say, "*Oh, I forgot to tell you that!*" So one cannot say that *anything* that occurred down through the course of time and was recorded in His Word is *irrelevant or meaningless*; since that is the case, we can study every word of Scripture and learn something about God and His economy in our world that He would have us to know; *every word of Scripture is inspired by God (i.e., God breathed)* — since everything that has occurred was a part of *God's plan* from the beginning (Is 46:9-11), we are to study the totality of Scripture with that in view... every word is important. For someone to conclude that there are *errors in Scripture*, and that not all of Scripture is divinely inspired, he has a very significant hurdle to cross over because "*he is making himself the final authority of what is true & what is false;*" furthermore, he cannot *prove* that his assumptions have any integrity whatsoever. It shouldn't take much reflection to conclude that that is a very dangerous road to go down (in particular because of his own fallen nature); incidentally, no man of faith would ever embrace such thinking. Regarding another aspect of God's Word — *it is not stagnant & lifeless, instead it is living and active and capable of penetrating our innermost being and producing a change in us* (Heb 4:12); remember, it is "*God breathed;*" as such, His Word is a "*Living Reality*" — Jesus said to His disciples, "*The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life*" (Jn 6:63); the words *spirit* and *life* are "*emphatic*" in Greek — in contrast to that which is merely physical, God's Word is spiritual and living; it is not just forensic truths. The reality is, God's Word ministers *absolute truth* to a person's soul that he might be *alive* in Christ; cf. Eph 2:4-5; Col 2:13; 3:4). His Word is so powerful and efficacious,

it can completely transform us as sinful creatures into the very image of God; remember the words of Jesus to His Father, “Sanctify them in the truth; Thy word is truth” (Jn 17:17).

In addition to the foregoing, Jesus Himself is *the truth* (cf. Jn 1:13, 17; 8:45; 14:6; Jam 1:18). Our problem as fallen creatures is that we are inclined to disassociate *God Himself* from *His Word* (which is the essence of who He really is); we see Him and His Word as *two distinct realities*, when in fact they are “*one reality*” – just as the Triune God is *ONE*, God and His Word are *ONE*. Just as God is “*truth*,” we cannot separate Him from His Word (*i.e.*, His written Word). So we cannot differentiate between God and who He is in all His fullness; just as God is living & powerful, so also is His Word, because He is His Word (cf. Jn 1:1, 14; Col 3:16; 1 Pet 1:23, 25; 1 Jn 1:1, 10; 2:14; Rev 19:13). Though the foregoing may sound a little strange to temporal minds, that is the essence of our eternal, unchanging God; just as God Himself is eternal, so also is His Word (cf. Ps 119:89, 160; Is 40:8; Mt 24:35; 1 Pet 1:25). Because of God’s *eternality*, we cannot satisfactorily define Him for ourselves. When Jesus was teaching about the necessity of eating His flesh and drinking His blood, many of His disciples said, “This is a very difficult statement” (that’s emphatic in Greek) – “as a result, many of His followers withdrew and no longer walked with Him” (cf. Jn 6:60, 66); thus causing Jesus to say to the twelve, “You do not want to go away also, do you?” To which Peter responded, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life” (those words are also emphatic in Greek – cf. Jn 6:67-68). To once again quote the great scientist **Albert Einstein** – “All the systematic thinking... of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection [on reality].” God is so immense, our minds simply cannot fathom Him. Another difficult precept for us to accept is this: “God is Spirit and He is only knowable to us spiritually by faith” (He is not a physical reality).

With the foregoing in mind, there are many in our world who express themselves this way: “I just can’t believe in a God who would permit sin, pain, death and hell to exist;” these are statements that we hear time after time – once again temporal human reason launches into the unknown and makes a brass statement that is completely devoid of knowledge (because it is fully grounded in temporal human thought); he doesn’t know why things are as they are, yet he foolishly judges reality without knowledge (cf. Job 38:2; 42:3; Ps 92:5-6; Prv 1:7, 22; 2:6; 15:14; Hos 4:6; 1 Tim 2:4; 2 Pet 3:18); this is extremely common in this world of fallen creatures. The truth is, at the end of the age, God is going to completely destroy the powers of darkness and evil that had become so significant in the angelic realm; that is His eternal plan, but it won’t occur until “sin has completely demonstrated itself for what it really is;” totally corrupt, without a single ounce of goodness. The reality is, God’s plan is now in the process of being effectuated, and those creatures whom He chose to be His servants, are now on the grand stage of the universe participating in a cosmic battle between good and evil; fighting against the powers of darkness and Satan, to the glory of God and His Son Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 5:9-10). Today there are just over one-billion born-again Christians in the world fighting against darkness and the powers of evil... daily they are all renouncing their sin and embracing Christ, much to the amazement of the angelic realm in heaven (cf. 1 Tim 3:16; 1 Pet 1:12); as they look down

upon the earth they are astounded at what they see; you can almost hear them saying to each other, “How can such fallen creatures renounce their sinfulness and die to themselves to the praise and glory of God?” How is this possible, they ask? God has loved them (i.e., us as believers) with an unconditional love; as such, He is at work in them “seeking their highest good” – it is God’s unconditional love that has caused them to turn from their sinfulness and embrace Christ... remember, God chose them before the foundation of the world to be Christ’s servants (cf. Jn 15:16, 19; 13:18; Eph 1:4; 2 Th 2:13; Jam 2:5; 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 17:14). So God is unconditionally loving those whom He chose in eternity past; regardless of how sinful they may have been, God loved them into His kingdom (that’s the incredible reality and power of His love; not a single man is worthy of His love). The reality is, God loved us to Himself, and is now at work transforming us into the image of His Son (cf. Rom 8:28-29; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21; 2 Tim 1:9; Gen 1:26) – something that is completely unfathomable to anyone either here on earth or in heaven; think about it, God is turning decadent sinful creatures into the image of Christ! (i.e., the character of God!). Again, such completely transcends both human and angelic thought; only the God of creation understands how decadent sinful creatures can be made into creatures that bear His image and actually become fellow-heirs with His Son – keep in mind, not even the greatest sinless angels of heaven will be fellow-heirs of Christ! Yet here we are, horribly sinful creatures being transformed into the image of Christ! We have not only done nothing to merit it, we have done much to not merit it! As long as you insist on “possessing some merit,” you are completely in the dark theologically (cf. Rom 3:20, 28; Eph 2:9; 2 Tim 1:9). The reality is, God’s unconditional love transcends all finite understanding.

By the way, it is also true, there are billions of people (actually just over six-billion) who are self-righteous children of their father the devil, who actually hate God and His people (children of darkness hate the light – cf. Jn 3:19-20; 7:7; 8:43-45; 15:18-19; 2 Tim 3:12; 1 Jn 3:13; 1 Pet 5:8); literally that means “they want nothing at all to do with this religious stuff, because to them it is nothing but a negative that paints them with a bad brush and removes their rightful autonomy from them.” In spite of this, in the end righteousness and God’s people will prevail, and the master deceiver (Satan) and his cohorts will be thrown into the lake of fire and tormented forever and ever (cf. Mt 25:41; Rev 20). Once again, you’ll notice God chose a small number of people (relatively speaking) to do His bidding in the world (cf. Judges 7:2-7, 22)... only about 13% of the human family today is spiritually combating the diabolical self-righteous world of Satan and a host of fallen angels, which constitutes about 87% of the world’s population; to the dismay of many, some of them are actually bogus Christians (i.e., not genuine Christians) – though 33% of the world’s population professes to be Christian, only about 13% are true followers of Christ. The truth is, many professing Christians don’t believe a number of things that are written in Scripture. The Pope and many professing believers don’t believe in “hell,” but little do they know, they don’t determine whether or not hell is a reality; so once again, fallen man uses his own fallen thinking to make a judgment concerning what is true and what is not true. This happened over and over again in ancient Israel; the majority of their leaders defined reality on their own terms; in the 1st century Jesus constantly rebuked them for doing so.

Though the vast majority of Jewish people were “*religious*” during the time of Christ, those who were truly men and women of faith probably amounted to no more than 5-10% of the Jewish world. Beloved, *there is no merit whatsoever in human reasoning* — if it rejects what Scripture teaches (*i.e.*, what divine revelation teaches), it does not embrace the truth; just because one can’t wrap his mind around a divine truth, doesn’t mean it is okay for him to change reality and make it correspond with his humanistic thinking; by the way, all such thinking is the result of a *proud mind*. As stated earlier, *humility* is essential for one to experience the truth of God’s Word — without humility one would never come to a knowledge of the truth; God only opens the heart of the humble to the truth (cf. Jam 1:21; Acts 16:14). *Ultimately, the reason you and I are true, genuine believers is because God in eternity past chose us to be His humble children, and that choice was effectuated by His unconditional love* (*i.e.*, He loved us to Himself); *it is the holy, omniscient, omnipotent God of all creation who chose to love us with everlasting love* (*i.e.*, with a love that will never cease); because God purposed to love us, He humbled us by letting us see ourselves as we truly are, and opened our heart to the truth (cf. Acts 16:14; 1 Cor 12:3; 1 Th 1:5), thus causing us to place our trust in Him; the truth is, God’s love is so powerful and efficacious that it completely overcomes our self-centered sinfulness (cf. Rom 5:20; 1 Tim 1:14). *Because God loved us, He died for us* (*i.e.*, for our sins); *i.e.*, He loved us so much He paid the penalty for our sins that He might make us one of His children. Imagine loving some despicable little creature so much, that he ultimately runs into your arms and embraces you fully; the reality is, it was the love of God that moved us to embrace Him and place our trust in Him; we were *not forced* to believe in Him... His love for us simply overwhelmed our soul and we ran into His arms. As the old hymn puts it, “*Marvelous grace of our loving Lord, grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt! Yonder on Calvary’s mount out-poured — there where the blood of the Lamb was spilt. Grace, grace, God’s grace, grace that will pardon and cleanse within; Marvelous grace, infinite grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin!*” The truth is, Jesus eradicated our sinfulness by redeeming us with His blood (cf. Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19; Jn 1:29), and prior to entering into the eternal realm, He is going to completely remove it from our lives; until then, He wants us to crucify it and live to the praise of His glory — how can we not? Thus the message is this: “*God’s love and grace is greater than all our sin!*” (cf. Rom 5:8; 5:20; 8:35; 1 Tim 1:14; 1 Jn 3:16; 4:16).

God’s children are not self-made creatures... they are who they are simply because of God’s unconditional love for them (cf. Eph 2:4-5; Titus 3:4-7; 1 Pet 1:3); the fact that *God seeks our highest good at all costs* (that’s agape love), ought to speak volumes to your heart. Beloved, right now at this very moment God is seeking your highest good through everything He is subjecting you to in life — though we may not understand all that is going on in our life, God may disclose it to us later in life, or wait until the life hereafter (cf. Mt 24:36; Mk 13:31-37; Acts 1:7). Whatever the case may be, God is doing a work in us that is *transformational* (be it through trials or temptations); granted, everything God is doing in our life is not a pleasant work, but both trials and temptation are needed to build our faith. If you think about it, God is subjecting us to things our inner core *likes* (temptation) and things it *hates* (trials); that is how diabolically corrupt our inner core is (*i.e.*, our flesh) — it *loves*

temptation and *despises* negative circumstances. By the way, the words translated trials and temptation are both “*peirasmos*” in Greek; obviously with every trial there is temptation — the word itself can refer to exterior circumstances that not only try our faith, but are designed to strengthen it (cf. Jam 1:2; 1 Pet 1:6). Though God does not tempt us, He gives Satan permission to do so (*i.e.*, to challenge our faith). Remember, Paul recognized that “*his thorn in the flesh*” was under God’s sovereign control, even though it was given to him by a messenger of Satan (2 Cor 12:7-9). Though enticement to sin and impatient rebellion is the work of Satan (cf. 1 Pet 5:8-9; Rev 2:9; Jam 4:7; 1 Th 3:5), God subjects us to it to accomplish *His and our higher purposes in and through us*. Of this we can be sure — “*God knows everything that is going on in our lives; He is working out His will for us through it all, and what it is He wants to accomplish in and through us*” (cf. 1 Cor 12:4-11; Eph 4:11-12; Lk 12:48); and if we are true born-again believers, *we can rest on the fact that God is actively doing a work of grace in and through us by His unconditional love*. What makes trials and temptation so difficult for us are the passions, emotions and feelings that are rooted in our soul (*i.e.*, the invisible, immaterial part of us; our flesh) — all trials and temptations are accompanied with emotions & passions; thus our feelings play a very significant role in our lives. It is man’s impulses & feelings in his soul that often cause him to run amuck (cf. Ecc 5:2; 11:9; Acts 7:57; 2 Tim 3:6). When *trials* come our way, our inner core wants to get it out of our lives; on the other hand, when *temptation* comes our way, our inner core wants to embrace it (cf. Jam 1:14-15); as stated earlier, the difference is this — our flesh *hates trials* but *loves temptation*.

Beloved, as God’s children *we have the privilege of living our lives for Christ!* Even though passages like John 21:18-23 can be a little troubling to us, living for Christ is an incredible honor. The good news is, “*Though we don’t know what the future is... we know who holds the future! If the God of all creation loves us so much that He would die for us, how can we possibly doubt Him or be afraid of Him? Yet whether we are thrilled with that or not, He is the one who is governing all that transpires in our lives. Conversely, if God for us, who can possibly (effectively) be against us? The truth is, we have a God who tells us in no uncertain terms that “He will complete the good work that He began in us!”* (cf. Rom 8:31; Phil 1:6). Again, we must have a contextual understanding of all that is going on in our lives that we might be the men and women of faith that God has called us to be — “*the eternal God of heaven laid down His life for us;*” He is not just some insignificant human creature. Though such love is not comprehensible, yet because He does love us unconditionally, *the wonderful things He purposes do come to pass* (cf. Is 41:9-10; 43:10-13; 45:5-7; 46:9-11; 55:11). Though most Christians are not familiar with the eternal plan of God for His people, that is “*the essence of ultimate reality for us as Christians.*” By the way, whereas a *temporal level* of understanding God’s love is sufficient for salvation, an *eternal level* of understanding God’s love is far more significant; it not only helps us *see ourselves for who we really are* (fallen creatures whom God has actually made His children), and *see God for who He really is* (an eternal holy God of unconditional love)... it also answers many of the questions that surface in our souls, and gives us far greater assurance of faith (Heb 11:1). If you have never heard such

foundational truths before, let me encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “*Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose*,” you can access it under the Additional Studies Link on my website – [www.thetransformedsoul.com] – simply click on the *icon* in the upper right hand corner of the study to print a *pdf version* of it. As stated earlier, it is this study that completely transformed my faith and my thinking with regard to *my reason for living*. Incidentally, as a result of my website, this study is now being used by numerous believers all over the world— be it India, Europe, Canada, Australia, Africa, Asia, Mexico & South America. As I have stated in several other studies, I never *imagined* that my website would have gone worldwide; I never even *thought* about it being accessed by people in other countries (obviously I’m not a high-tech guy); I simply thought it was an American website. What I learned from all this is the significance the “*English Language*” has on those involved in Christian ministry in foreign countries – since the vast majority of Christian literature and books are written in English, many people involved in Christian ministry all over the world access English material. Let’s return to the subject at hand...

Everything I stated above is *a very short description of God’s plan from all eternity...* you will need to read the study on “*Sin & Man’s Eternal Purpose*” to understand it in its fullness, including all of the *biblical references* that are listed in it; this will also help you see *the incredible significance of those people God chose to be His servants long before they were created*. The gospel of John expands upon the concept that all of us as believers are “*chosen*” by God; said Jesus, “*All that the Father gives Me shall come to Me; no one can come to Me unless the Father draws Him*” (cf. Jn 6:37, 44, 65). If you do not have a firm understanding of *your reason for existence* (God’s reason for choosing you is to be one of His servants), in all likelihood you will simply go through life hoping that you are doing all of the right things; yet you will be completely oblivious to God’s incredible plan for your life. I guess one could say it this way – if your theology doesn’t incorporate the fullness of what Scripture teaches, you are changing the discourse regarding biblical truth and ignoring the most dynamic truth in the entire Bible. Once you read the study I just mentioned, you will think completely different about God’s plan for your life and what He is doing in your life. The truth is, *if you are a true genuine believer in Christ, you happen to be someone God has chosen to serve Him in this world to accomplish “His purposes”* (not your own); *all the while He is in the process of transforming you into the image of Christ, and will one day make you a fellow-heir with Him, if indeed you suffer with Him* (read Rom 8:15-17; Gal 4:7; Jam 2:5; and Rev 21:7) – notice the caveat, “*if indeed you suffer with Him*,” all genuine believers have been called to “*suffer*” for Christ; that is just a part of God’s call upon our lives as Christians (*i.e.*, as Christ followers – cf. Acts 9:16; Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 1:5-7; Phil 1:29; 1 Th 3:4; 2 Tim 2:3; 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1; 5:9-10); in short, we are to lay down our life for Christ. The Greek word for “*suffering*” is the word *pascho* – it appears 42 times in the NT, and is used mostly of unpleasant experiences and afflictions. Just as Christ “*suffered*” for us, so we must suffer as well (cf. 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1) – due to the fact this life is about fighting against the forces of evil, we will experience “*suffering*.” Trials, temptation and persecution are all forms of suffering to which we as believers are subjected. Regarding this matter of suffering and the world’s hatred for God and Christians, let me

encourage you to read a study I did on it titled, “*Why the World Hates Christians*” — you can access it on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com By the way, the world’s hatred for Christians is now once again launching into the stratosphere; for years Satan was simply putting together the governing forces in our world to prepare it for war against God and His people; his preparation is just about complete, so the world’s hatred for us is now going to escalate substantially (on a scale that our world has never seen; the anti-Christ has probably already been born... so it is just a matter of double-digit years when this diabolical world will enter into its final stage). Though it is not possible for any of us to fully imagine what that timeframe is going to be like, neither is it possible for us to imagine what it will be like to be fully conformed to the image of Christ, or what eternity is going to be like; all we know, is that it is going to transcend anything finite man can fathom (cf. 2 Cor 12:1-10); and we shall ultimately reign with Him forever. At the end of the study I did on “*Sin and Man’s Eternal Purpose*,” I state the following —

***Beloved, God has placed YOU on the grand stage of the universe
to be a participant in the cosmic battle between good and evil!
Rejoice in that honor! and fight the good fight of faith
until God brings you into the eternal state
to reign with Him forever and ever!***

Remember, no one is worthy of God’s love. Without a knowledge of the foregoing, the sovereignty of God can be a very unpopular teaching even among genuine believers; few doctrines spark as much controversy or provoke as much consternation as this doctrine, but it is the only way things can be if God is truly the infinite God of creation; Scripture makes that claim over and over again — the grammatical construct of these declarations emphatically supports this truth... though English grammar does not have a way of expressing things emphatically, the ancient Greek language does — by the way, God is the author of all languages (cf. Gen 11:9), so He knew what He was doing when He constructed the ancient Greek language — whereas the Old Testament language of Hebrew is a picture language, and was a wonderful language for describing historical events and stating things poetically... the New Testament language of Greek is an exacting language that served God’s purpose in giving definition to doctrinal truth (*i.e.*, doctrinal absolutes)... no other language in existence possesses the qualitative expressions that ancient Greek does; it ought to be clear to everyone — we have a God who not only knows what He is doing, but one who has enough smarts to accomplish His eternal purposes (contrary to the wayward thinking of fallen man). Do you actually think when Jesus returns that He is going to apologize for not wording things properly in Scripture? That if He had thought about it more carefully, or had a better understanding of what was going on in the world, or had more time to think about it, He would have worded things better? There is not a chance in the entire eternal order that that will happen. Remember, “All Scripture is inspired by God (i.e., God breathed) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work... that no prophecy of Scripture was ever made by an act of human

*will, but men moved by **the Holy Spirit** spoke from God'* (cf. 2 Tim 3:16-17; 2 Pet 1:21). *In a word, God's Word is **absolutely perfect!*** There will never be a time in the future when He will forward an edited version of it to us! (contrary to what some cults have taught). The reality is, *there is not a single error in His Word!* If there is, then God wasn't in absolute control when it was being written — but that is not at all possible for an Eternal, Infinite, Omniscient, Omnipotent Magistrate! Either you are going to worship God as **GOD**, or you are going to make Him significantly less in your mind than He is. Let me suggest that you go for a walk in the woods somewhere (or some other place that is very quiet), where it is just you and God... and *humbly contemplate His sovereignty* (i.e., be open to the truth of who He is); talk to Him as you walk and share your thinking with Him as well as what His Word says. Above everything, you must *desire* to know the unadulterated truth, even if it strongly conflicts with what you might now believe. Many Christians wonder why "*God's Word*" is so big (i.e., why it contains sixty-six independent books and over 31,000 verses)... and why it is so complex and deep in thought... and why God conveyed His Word to us through other human beings... and why God didn't just send us a small 25 page book directly from heaven? Obviously, there are a number of questions that one can ask. The reality is, God chose the *process* as well as the *content* — He chose to communicate divine truth through His own creatures, and give contextual understanding to everything He had to say. Due to the fact this fallen world is not a simple little world, there was much that needed to be addressed... and since His creatures of choice were used to communicate His Word, it should be clear, *man has the capacity to understand His written Word* — it is not some strange ethereal work. The question is this: *Is man willing to **wrestle** through it to the praise and glory of His creator, or is he going to abrogate that responsibility and stubbornly give little credence to the integrity of it?* Why would God's children spend far more time watching television than studying God's Eternal Word? At the end of the age, God is going to have us give an account for everything we did in life... and studying His Word is going to be at the top of the list — you can almost hear God say: "*Why did you spend so little time studying My Word? Why wasn't it more significant to you than it was? Why did you question some of what I had written?*" Obviously, Satan had controlled much of the discourse that went on in their minds (remember, this life is spiritual warfare).

Most of you are probably not aware of how God sovereignly worked in my life; here's my story — back in 1972 when I was attending graduate school at Arizona State University (where I was working on an MBA) my prayer to God was this: "*God, it seems no matter how hard I have worked at trying to make life work, it hasn't worked; the truth is, life is a great frustration to me and not at all pleasant. Good grades, hard work, and athletic accomplishments are basically meaningless (obviously I was looking for satisfaction in all of the major things that this world values). Though I can't say I know that You exist, for some reason I have always believed that You do. Why I feel so empty & discouraged, after working hard to achieve things and accomplish things in life, I have no idea; the truth is, I don't see life as something that is worth living. God, if You really exist I am simply asking You to become real in my life, no matter what it costs me... if You will*

become real in my life and open my heart to the truth of who You really are, I will give You my life, and You can use me in any way that You choose.” Essentially, those are the thoughts I shared with God. Though I was raised in a Christian home (we attended a strong evangelical church), and tried to connect with God on a personal level numerous times as a youngster, God always seemed to be a very distant reality in my life... thus causing me to question His love and wonder why He was ignoring me. It was during my high-school years that I basically started giving up on this thing called faith, and simply live life to the best of my ability. Though this may sound a little strange to some of you, I ultimately concluded that God must not have chosen me to be one of His children; though I had begged Him over and over again to do so, it just never seemed to happen; ultimately, I concluded that I must not have been worthy of His choice (even though I was taught that one cannot merit it), or that God simply had not written my name in His book; it wasn't as though I was completely unversed as to some of what Scripture teaches... but for some reason spiritual truth didn't fully mesh with what I was experiencing... so I simply set out to live life as best I knew how; after all, what else could I do? Though that may sound a little illogical to some of you, that is the road I traveled as child. Obviously my thinking today is radically different then it was back then, because I know things now that I did not know then; the reality is, “indwelling sin caused me to question God's love and His divine choice of me.” Remember, pretense characterized the vast majority of the Christian world back in 50s and 60s; the believer's behavior was the order of the day in the Christian community back then — you didn't smoke, drink or chew, you didn't go to movies or play cards or go to bars or bowling alleys, you didn't wear make-up (most Christian women wore very little if they wore any), you didn't dress provocatively, you didn't swear or hang around people who did, you attended church every Sunday, and you always walked around with a smile on your face; thus the believer's life was more a religious one than a relational one. With the foregoing in mind, one's observation of other believers weighed heavily upon one's thinking (especially that of children) — many believers back then simply pretended to be persons of virtue; thus sending a very deceptive message to the masses (the truth is, “no one is good but God alone;” Lk 18:19). Though believers admitted to occasional sin, sin was viewed as being something that was very rare in the believer's life. Now just as indwelling sin was extremely troubling to the apostle Paul, so it was to me (it alienated me from God). The Christian world back then didn't preach the issue of indwelling sin, most preachers simply thought the subject was too controversial (that there was no majority opinion on the matter); thus they didn't feel comfortable teaching it; yet here is a subject that is extremely important to the entire believing world. Now due to the fact that I had also experienced some very difficult things in my childhood that caused me to question God, I finally decided to simply make life work as best I could.

It wasn't until I served a stint in the Army back in the 60s, and had pretty much completed five years of collegiate study, that I once again began to seriously reflect upon this thing called “life.” I was now 28 years old, but for some reason life just seemed very empty to me; it was not at all satisfying... no matter how hard I would work to make life work, it didn't (at least not to my satisfaction). So life to me was more a negative than a positive.

*In hindsight, God had obviously been **sovereignly working in my life** all these years to bring me to the end of myself, where I was humble before Him and ready to listen to everything He had to say.* There wasn't much I had not experienced in life, yet all the positives that I thought were worth pursuing, were not at all what they were cracked up to be; so nothing else mattered to me now, but understanding the ultimate goal of this thing called *life*. As some of you may recall, it was only a matter of a few months that I gave my life to Christ and started serving in ministry part time while working on my MBA — the ministry I headed up was a “*sports ministry*” at Grace Community Church in Tempe, Arizona, where we ended up having more than twenty teams in our basketball leagues, twelve teams in our softball league, and twelve teams in our volleyball league; some of you may have participated in those leagues. Incidentally, within a few months of heading up the sports ministry, the senior pastor at Grace, **Guy Davidson**, asked me to head up his “*Junior High Ministry*,” so that I did... and just two years later I headed off to “*Talbot Seminary*” to get trained in ministry and educated and grounded in the truths of Scripture — it was the words of James that moved me to make sure that what I was teaching was right... he said, “*Let not many of you be teachers knowing that you will incur a stricter judgment*” (cf. Jam 3:1); that verse was very sobering to me, and still is to this day. By the way, if you are teaching God's Word to others in some capacity, make sure you are teaching it precisely as Scripture states it, and not give some humanistic interpretation of it. As I reflect back on all that transpired during my early years of ministry, it amazes me at how *rapidly* things happened in my life... within six months of committing my life to Christ, here I was heading up a Junior High Ministry in a large church. Six years after committing my life to Christ and graduating from Talbot Seminary, I returned to the same church in Arizona to start a “*College Ministry*,” ultimately that ministry grew to about 400 college students (and some of you were a part of that ministry). I share this with you, because that is how God did His sovereign work in my life; once I turned to Him and cried out to Him, *things happened extremely fast... apparently everything that God had **subjected me to** early on in my life was sufficient to pretty much bring me to the end of myself and help prepare me for His service.* Obviously God honored my commitment to Him and immediately got me involved in ministry; keep in mind, I was just about ready to graduate with an MBA, and was already interviewing with some big dollar companies — *Westinghouse Electric Corporation* made a very attractive offer to me... I remember meeting with the man who was about to hire me — during our meeting, another man came into the office and told him that another fellow-employee needed his input on something... so he excused himself and left the room for about 15 minutes. At that point I started giving serious consideration as to what I should do; should I take the job or not? Since I really didn't know what to do, I started praying to God about what I should do. The position Westinghouse wanted me to fill was right down my alley; nevertheless, I told God that I didn't want to take the job if it wasn't what He wanted me to do, so I worded it this way: “God, obviously I'm not the smartest guy on the planet, so You need to *make it very clear* exactly what it is that You would have me do” — not long after that the man came back into his office *really angry* because of what had transpired with this other employee... in his anger he started taking the Lord's name in vain over and

over again as he continued to dialogue with me... within a few minutes, this extremely desirable job became an undesirable one. So God's message to me became very clear, "No, you don't want that job!" Thus I declined their invitation. Keep in mind, I had a very elementary faith at that point, but the faith I had was a genuine faith — faith is a heart issue; God simply asks us to follow Him and obey Him, regardless of our level of understanding.

Interestingly enough, within a week Guy Davidson asked me to head up his Junior High ministry, so I told him I would go home that night and pray about it, which I did... and I essentially prayed the same prayer that I had prayed the previous week: "Lord, what do You want me to do? As I stated before, I'm not the brightest guy on the planet, so You need to make it very evident to me as to what it is You would have me do." The next morning I woke up extremely confident that God was calling me to serve Him in this ministry that Guy had offered me; though I had gone to bed the night before without the slightest degree of confidence, I woke up with a deep conviction that this indeed is what God wanted me to do. To add another element as to how I made the decision... a couple of weeks earlier I attended a seminar on "Burning Your Bridges" — the message was this: when negatives occur in your life, it is not at all uncommon for people to resort back to something they may have been doing earlier... so in order to protect oneself from going back down that same old road, burn the bridge so that you will continue on the path God ordained for you. Keep in mind, it had only been about six months since I had committed my life to Christ, and here I was now making a decision on God's plan for my life (I find it interesting that God had prepared me for this decision through that seminar). So here's what I did: the next morning I went into the Administrative Office at ASU and "checked out of the MBA program that I was enrolled in" (remember, I was only a few months away from graduating). Immediately after that, I went down to the church and went into Guy Davidson's office, and told him what I had just done, and that I was ready to start the work of ministry that he had offered me — the look on Guy's face was really funny, because he couldn't believe what I had just done, and the rest is history. Obviously God doesn't work the same way in every one of our lives; sometimes there are delays in life, yet sometimes there are not... sometimes decisions are very clear, sometimes they are not. But my experience early on in ministry was one that was very quick and very clear; not at all like it is now that I am much older in my faith — by the way, there is much to be said for waiting upon the Lord and contemplating divine truth; but my faith early on was a very simple heart-felt faith that God fully honored. Though I had questioned whether in fact I was really qualified to serve (cf. Ex 3:11; 4:10; 6:12), I did not at all doubt God's call upon my life. With that in mind, should you humbly go before God in just such manner, He will open your heart to divine truth, if you are truly open to it — the message I would share with you is this: if you are truly open to what it is God would have you do (yet not knowing what that is), should He open the door and go before you, you will follow Him; God doesn't give us the option of "reconsidering His will" after He has disclosed it to us; if one is truly committed to doing the work of God (whatever that may be), He will reveal it to him, and when He does one needs to immediately go forward and embrace the work

God is calling him to do; obviously *God knows* whether in fact we are *truly committed* to Him, so if one is not truly committed, He won't disclose His will to him (God doesn't play games; there is no such thing as *reconsidering everything* when it comes to serving God... either we are His servant or we are not His servant; either we obey Him or we do not obey Him — it's not a matter of responding to God, "*Well, let me think about it;*" such thinking simply shows an uncommitted heart. With that construct in mind, God will not withhold significant truths from those who are *really serious about life*; as such, His love for you will overwhelm your soul... that is how God works in the hearts of His people. Though I could claim that much of the foregoing was all of my own doing, that does not in any way describe what happened; if you only understood the "*pain and the anxiety*" that was in my soul prior to His enlightening my heart, you would not question what I have written; when I cried out to God, I was at the end of myself and very serious about everything I said to Him — if God was going to speak to my heart, I was completely willing to follow Him and embrace Him as my Lord; it was never a matter of considering the options that He might present to me, and then make a decision. Since life to me was empty and almost meaningless, my plea with Him was very genuine, in spite of the fact that I did not know that He would enlighten me. By the way, I am not a fan of appealing to *experience* to support things that I write, however in this case I thought it just might be best to do so; every believer who is genuinely doing the work of the Lord, is simply following God's call upon his life. In a word, the foregoing is my testimony — I am no great saint with great faith, I simply serve a *great God*. By the way, aside from numerous authors and theologians down through the centuries (in particular the Puritans), following are the eighteen individuals God used to strongly influence my life and faith; essentially they are the professors and Christian leaders God placed in my life at various junctures that I had the opportunity to associate with and serve at some point —

<i>Dr. John R. W. Stott</i>	<i>Dr. Charles Feinberg</i>	<i>Dr. James Rosscup</i>
<i>Dr. Guy Davidson</i>	<i>Dr. Mark Bailey</i>	<i>Dr. Josh McDowell</i>
<i>Rev. Arvid Carlson</i>	<i>Dr. Dan Baumann</i>	<i>Warren Thompson</i>
<i>Dr. Francis Schaeffer</i>	<i>Dr. Ronald Youngblood</i>	<i>Dr. John MacArthur</i>
<i>Dr. W. A. Criswell</i>	<i>Dr. Luis Palau</i>	<i>Dr. David Walls</i>
<i>Dr. Jerry Bridges</i>	<i>Dr. J. Vernon McGee</i>	<i>Dr. Earl Radmacher</i>

It wasn't until after serving in various churches for about 30 years, that the Lord led me to teach the subjects of World Religion and Christianity in both secular and Christian colleges for about ten years. During that time, I developed a paradigm for teaching Christianity that differed from the norm — most of the textbooks on Christianity that are used in secular colleges are not written by Christians, thus they distort many of the doctrinal teachings of Scripture; they not only deny the supernatural and the integrity of Scripture, some of them even accuse Jesus of being homosexual... on the other hand, those textbooks that are written by Christians are basically oriented toward the Christian world, not the non-Christian world. Let me explain it this way: nearly all textbooks on Christianity that are written by Christians, begin with "*Jesus Christ*," not with the

“Creator” (which is where Scripture begins). Though starting with Jesus Christ may work reasonably well with Christians, it is a very awkward place to begin with non-Christians; imagine starting a dialogue on Christianity as follows with people who are completely in the dark spiritually: “God entered into human history in the person of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago.” Though that may be a wonderful place to begin with people of faith, that statement raises all kinds of questions in the minds of those who are not people of faith — number one, many in the secular world are completely in the dark when it comes to the idea of “God,” as well as the idea of “religion,” though that was not the case 50 years ago here in America, it is not at all uncommon today to be completely ignorant of this thing called “God” and the essence of “religion.” The point is, anytime someone teaches a particular subject, he needs to begin by giving definition to the underlying subject itself, that they might have a contextual understanding of that particular subject that you will be teaching them; for instance, if you are teaching something like Freudianism, you need to begin by first defining the underlying subject of psychology, and not simply assume that everyone has a firm grasp of the foundational subject involved. It was this paradigm of thought that inspired me to write a textbook on Christianity for a secular audience; incidentally, the writing of this textbook was an integral part of my doctorate. The title of the textbook I wrote was this — “Christianity: The Pursuit of Divine Truth.” Remember, the Bible does not begin with Jesus, it begins with God and creation; with that in mind, I began my study by looking at this thing called “religion,” and then took a look at “the cosmos,” and then examined “the scientific evidence regarding its origin,” and then launched into “the existence of God.” With an understanding of the foundational truths of Christianity, it was then fairly easy to introduce them to the God of the Bible. If you’re interested in reading it, you can go online and check it out on my website: www.thetransformedsoul.com

In addition to all of the foregoing, let me update you on the latest thing God has done in my life. After 35 years of doing “expositional study” (*i.e.*, teaching biblical truth in accord with the grammatical constructs of Scripture), God moved me into the realm “theological study” about 12 years ago; though theology has always been a very important subject to me, it wasn’t until about 12 years ago that it began to dominate much of my time. In Seminary you are taught to identify what a passage “says,” and then give a contextual understanding as to what it “means,” obviously if one does not accurately interpret what a passage says, in all likelihood he is going to err somewhat on defining it to those whom he is teaching. That’s why one studies the biblical languages of Hebrew and Greek in Seminary, so that he can accurately define what Scripture says. Now if one is not sensitive to the “context” of a passage, he will also often misinterpret its meaning. In contrast to doing expositional study, the theologian goes a step further and asks all of the “why” questions; in so doing, he gives careful consideration to the totality of what Scripture teaches on a subject. In short, theology is the science of God (theos); *i.e.*, it is the logical, philosophical wisdom and knowledge of God as it is revealed to us in God’s self-revelation (Scripture) — as the brother of Jesus (James) said, “The wisdom of God is reasonable” (Jam 3:17); *i.e.*, it is extremely logical and not at all unreasonable. The logic

of God ought to consume all of us as believers. The author of Hebrews says, “Because of God’s mercy to us (that’s the foundation of his reason), we must present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our **reasonable** service of worship” (Heb 12:1). By the way, Paul in his ministry “**reasoned with the Jews in their synagogues**” (cf. Acts 17:2; 17:17; 18:4, 19; 19:8-9). The theologian always insists on seeing the bigger picture, and it is this bigger picture that has occupied my thinking now for the past twelve years. Years ago I never would have imagined I would have become a theologian of sorts, but such is the way God has now wired me; essentially all I do now is wrestle fulltime with the various theological issues that God places in my heart. Obviously, the theologian must first determine what a passage *says and means* before he can delve into it on a still deeper level; most of the studies I have placed on my website will attest to that. Now, as we examine the subject at hand (*God’s love for us*) you will see the importance of theological significance and its relevance with regard to God’s love. With that in mind, let’s return to this subject...

Now if God’s love is regulated by something other than His sovereign choice, He would be under the power of something other than Himself (*i.e.*, that which transpires would be the supreme determinant of reality); yet any such thinking is completely devoid of logic and contrary to the teaching of Scripture. Beloved, your “*theology of thought*” must be grounded in what God’s Word says; nothing else is acceptable to Him; it is one thing to be ignorant of divine truth, it is quite another to outwardly reject divine truth. *If we are going to call ourselves believers, we must **believe** what Scripture teaches — it is God’s Word, not human thinking, that needs to define reality and our faith.* The fact is, “*no cause for God’s love other than **His own choice** is ever given in Scripture;*” it is always that “***He destined us in love to be His sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of His will, to the praise of His glorious grace which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved***” (Eph 1:5-6). As God told the greatest of all the prophets, Isaiah: “*My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways... as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts*” (Is 55:8-9; Prv 14:12); the message is this: “*Let divine thinking rule in your mind, not human thinking;*” remember, “*we are transformed by the renewing of our **mind***” (Rom 12:2). The problem with fallen man is that he insists on using his finite reasoning capacities to determine ultimate reality — he simply cannot in and of himself defer to a higher level of reasoning that doesn’t mesh with his thinking; thus in his proud heart he denies the fact that he is totally corrupt and in desperate need of a Savior. As the popular 20th century theologian, **J. I. Packer** states in his book “*Knowing God*” — “*God’s purpose of love, **formed before creation*** (Eph 1:4), *involved the choice and selection of those whom He would bless. The exercise of God’s love toward individual sinners in time is the execution of a **purpose to bless** those same individual sinners which He formed in eternity past*” (pp. 112-113). Because we are *finite creatures* we obviously don’t have the capacity to fully understand that which is *infinite* in scope — we can express our limited understanding of things, but that is it; we cannot understand the depth of infinite truth. Thus we must defer to the “*Infinite, Transcendent Magistrate*” (GOD) who rules over all and embrace His divine

wisdom; when we do, He gives us great assurance and a deep abiding conviction of the truth (cf. Heb 11:1); only God can do that — as such, we can live with great confidence in the fear of God (*i.e.*, respecting Him above and beyond anything that results from humanistic thinking). To insist that we have the capacity to fully understand divine wisdom is like putting the entire ocean in a thimble; the long and short of it is, we are extremely limited in our capacity to comprehend the wisdom of God. That’s why the wisest man whoever lived, Solomon (1 Kg 3:12), said: “I set my mind to know wisdom... it is a grievous task... and is but striving after wind” (Ecc 1:13, 17). Conversely the prince of the prophets, Isaiah, said, “The nations of the world are as **nothing** before God; actually less than nothing; **meaningless**.... It is God who sits above the vault of the earth... its inhabitants are like **grasshoppers**.... He is the one who reduces rulers to **nothing**, who makes the judges of the earth **meaningless**. Scarcely they have planted, but God **blows** on them and they wither. To whom then will you **liken** God?” (Is 40:17-25). The two most significant things believers must understand if their faith is to reflect God are these — they must see themselves for who they really are, and see God for who He really is. If one lets humanistic thinking distort either of these two realities, he will not be a person of faith, or his faith will be a very deficient faith. It matters not what our church or denomination or pastor or parents or friends say, it only matters what GOD says; *i.e.*, what Scripture says (which is God’s divine revelation to man — cf. Acts 17:11).

Surely none of us are so arrogant so as to reduce God to a finite creature, who thinks like a human being. If you are going to declare that “you believe in God,” do not reduce Him to something He is not — whether in fact you think you are a creature of great wisdom, don’t venture into the unknown and make God out to be something less than He is. To the regret of many (including myself), “the eternal love of God” is rarely addressed at much depth by most theologians and authors — check it out for yourself — yet it is this incredible reality that is the foundation of our existence, salvation and faith (cf. Jn 3:16; Rom 5:8; 8:35). It is because of our shallow understanding of God’s eternal love for us that we tend to focus on ourselves and justify our own thinking — God’s eternal love for us is simply too other worldly for us to fully buy into; therefore we are inclined to protect our own standing before Him with our own works and thinking (which is completely ludicrous). That God loves us unconditionally is way too much for us to fathom, therefore we are inclined to stand to a degree on our own self-virtue, in spite of the fact that our own foibles weigh very heavily upon us; thus we turn reality into something that is simply humanly reasonable. In spite of the fact we desperately want to be wonderful creatures, we are constantly made aware of our sinfulness and shortcomings — the truth is, if there is anything we are not, it is good (cf. Lk 18:19; Rom 3:10). Contrary to what some insist on believing, sin does have a very significant purpose in the lives of believers — it humbles them and causes them to look to God rather than themselves (cf. Lk 15:18-24; Ps 32:1-5; 103:10-14; 139:13-16; Prv 17:22; 18:14); thus our sinfulness keeps us mindful of our innate fallenness, and the wonder of God’s unconditional love. For arguments sake, let’s say we happen to be sinless or almost sinless; if that were the case pride would reign within us, and cause us to rejoice in ourselves rather than God; in other words, humility would

no longer characterize who we are. Beloved, *sin does serve a very significant purpose*; if it didn't, God would *remove it* from our lives. Another problem for us as believers is that we focus far more on *our love for God* than on *God's love for us*; we actually think God's love for us depends upon our deserving it in some way (*i.e.*, that we measure up to some standard) — after all, if we are *totally undeserving* of it, how can He possibly love us? (that thought rules in almost every believer's soul). Furthermore, as believers we grieve over our shame and inability to be the kind of people we believe God wants us to be — again, our focus is upon *ourselves*, not God... rather than glory in God's love, we moan over our sinfulness. Beloved, you and I are *sinners!* Saved sinners, but sinners none the less; thus it is *God's unconditional love for us* that must be our focus!

As you wrestle through this issue, keep in mind *God's unconditional love for us is far and away the most significant thing in all the universe* — it is not only the most significant thing to *us as believers*, it is the most significant thing to *God Himself*, who sent His Son to die on the cross to redeem us unto Himself; hence, *it must be the foundation of our thinking and our faith*... it must *dominate* the discourse that goes on in our mind; nothing comes close to the significance of God's unconditional love for us; the reality is there is absolutely *NOTHING* we can do to make God love us "*more*" or make God love us "*less*" (*NOTHING!* reflect upon that truth). So when you are tempted to focus more on yourself than on God, you're going down the wrong road, so get off that one and get on the right one. The truth is, a *self-focus* is very deprecating and destructive — only a *God-focus* is encouraging, assuring and transformational — as the author of Hebrews said, "*Fix your eyes on JESUS, the author and perfecter of your faith*" (cf. Heb 12: 2-3). Remember, "*we are transformed by the renewing of our mind*" (Rom 12:2); *i.e.*, by what we *think and believe!* Beloved, when you are troubled in your heart (regardless of the reason), *reflect upon God's love for you* — no other construct of thought compares with this one; nothing even comes close to it. Don't make God some distant ethereal reality in your life. Though we are to live by "*faith*" (Rom 1:17), faith that is not rooted in God's unconditional love is a very weak faith; all contrary faith places far too much emphasis on *oneself*. Our problem as fallen creatures (even though we are believers) is that we want to *feel good about ourselves*; but as believers we are to *feel good about God and His unconditional love for us*. Life cannot simply be about *liking* and *disliking* things in the created order — we must contemplate *ultimate reality* every day (*i.e.*, contemplate God's unconditional love for us). I find it interesting, we can have a dozen positives in our life, yet if we have one negative, it will dominate our thinking. All of us experience the negative of a *self-focus*; hence the need to have a *God-focus* in life; again, that means focusing on *His unconditional love*. Is that difficult? Absolutely it's difficult, because of the war in our soul that is caused by Satan, our flesh, and the spiritual forces of darkness; such diabolical entities will do anything they can to get us to *look at ourselves and the negatives in life* rather than Christ. Though it is a difficult war, it is one we must fight — that's the economy of God for us as His children. One more thought regarding *God's unconditional love for us* — believing in God's unconditional love is a "*faith issue*," not a feeling issue; and faith requires *constant contemplation* (cf. Ps 1:1-2; 63:6; 119:16; 1 Pet 2:2),

because our *feelings* will always be present trying to influence our thinking; again, the believer has to be committed to arguing against the lies of Satan and fleshly thinking — incidentally, there is no such thing as a believer reaching a particular level of maturity and understanding where he no longer caves into to his feelings and diabolical thinking. Every time we sin we cave in to diabolical thinking (we are not men & women of *great faith*; instead we are men & women with faith in a *great God!*). By the way, I decided to close this study by focusing on the most difficult problem that we as believers have; *that of dealing with the negatives of life*. As you grow older you will discover that they *increase significantly* (nearly the entire ancient world of scholars and theologians have attested to this fact; by the way, I'm now 75 years old and I can attest to it as well; I just came down with another form of cancer and will be operated upon shortly). The reality is — toward the end of your life *God wants your full attention* — you have lived a number of years, and now He wants you to reflect upon how you have lived your life. Keep the following in mind — you began life completely dependent upon others... then you began to rule your own life... and now as you enter into the last chapter of your life you will once again have to depend upon others; this has been God's plan from the beginning for the entire human family. One of the ways of motivating man to reflect upon how he has lived life is by placing unpleasant circumstances in his life... growing old often brings an abundance of unpleasanties into one's life — the truth is, these negatives are often very challenging and very sobering (you young bucks probably won't know that until God makes it plain to you in the latter years of your life). Likewise, when one's eternal destiny is not far off, God will subject you to a number of very serious issues; contrary to what some think, this life was never meant to be a little utopia (cf. Jn 16:33). It is the negatives that play a very important role in our lives; in short, it is the negatives that refine and purify our faith, and prepare us for our eternal home in heaven. So take the time to prayerfully reflect upon all the spiritual dynamics that are expressed below.

HOW TO DEAL WITH FRUSTRATING NEGATIVES

When you are *disturbed* in your inner self, for whatever reason, the emotions of anger, discontent and frustration will more often than not rule in your soul (that is simply the *norm* for the human family)... so what do we do? Remain angry? Plead with God to change our circumstances? Let God know we are not happy with what is going on in our life? Ask God why He is subjecting us to such things? Or do we just try to ignore the circumstance as best we can and find something else to do that is more pleasing to us, knowing that nothing is going to change reality? Whatever one's response might be, consider the following: *according to God's divine will, the Christian life is full of problems and unpleasant circumstances* (cf. Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22)... *they don't happen for no reason, and they are not the result of mere happenstance* — God is subjecting us to them so that we might *rightly deal with our sinful inner core* (i.e., our flesh), and work on developing a stronger faith. Incidentally, the word "*anger*" is defined as "*a strong feeling of displeasure*;" it is found 133 times in the OT and 20 times in the NT — in the

Greek world anger was known as the strongest of all passions. In spite of the fact that the negatives of life seem to *make us less like Christ*, God is using every negative in our lives to *make us more like Christ* — it is the breaking down of the wall of the flesh in our soul (*i.e.*, quelling its influence in our lives) that builds our faith. So what's the answer? Well, we can get angry, we can rebel, we can question God's love for us, or we can deal with reality as God expresses it in His Word. **Three extremely significant steps stand out:** first, we must **acknowledge** before God exactly how our inner core (*i.e.*, our flesh) is responding to this displeasure — think about it, you are angry, and you go to God and let Him know exactly how you feel (obviously this may take more than a few seconds). Because you need to share the fullness of what you are feeling, it might be best to call this a counseling session with God (your Lord) — such involves your being completely straight forward and honest with Him by calling an ace an ace, and a spade a spade... in so doing, you need to admit the wrongness of your emotional response; which in a word is "*confession*" (the Greek word "*homologeo*" literally means "*to say the same thing about it that God says about it;*" thus you are agreeing with God about your emotional fleshly response). Remember, it is the Holy Spirit who guides and leads us into all truth (cf. Jn 16:7-11, 13; Rom 8:9, 14, 23; Eph 2:18; 5:11; 1 Jn 1:9). By the way, every believer has a few counseling sessions with God *every day*; that is simply what it means to inhabit sinful flesh.

The second step occurs after we have calmed down a bit; it is this — we must then come full circle and **accept** the negative situation that is disturbing us, and that includes all of the pain that is associated with it; *i.e.*, in the midst of the storm God wants us to look at the problem with a *different mindset*, and not simply see the problem as nothing but a negative that we will not tolerate; thus we must *consciously* think about the problem and not simply let our *emotions* control the discourse in our minds. Life is full of negatives that are not at all pleasant (cf. Heb 12:11), but if we are to live a disciplined life (*i.e.*, a life of faith), we must learn to deal with negatives and not just let them overwhelm us — such is God's training ground for believers. None of us were born-again with great faith (cf. Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8), and none of us walk on water now; the reality is, *we all need significant trials to build our faith, and quell our flesh*; anyone can love the lovely and feel good when everything is going the way they want it to go; even unbelievers can do that (cf. Mt 5:43-48; Lk 6:32). It is only when things don't go the way *we want* them to go that our faith is being *seriously challenged* — by the way, it is at this point where the depth of our faith is made very evident to us; obviously we are not as grand & glorious as we had hoped or thought — none of us have a *great faith*; we simply have faith in a *great God*. Though a negative is "*not pleasant*," we must feel the fullness of the pain and *see it for what it really is*, and not simply stay mad and angry. Due to the nature of our flesh, the process itself involves suffering, frustration & perplexity — that is simply the economy of God for us as His children (cf. Jn 16:33; Acts 14:22). Christian character is not developed by a bunch of pleasant experiences; it involves trials & tribulations of all kinds. The problem for us as fallen creatures is that we simply want to "*feel good*" in life and not be subjected to a bunch of negatives; from our flesh's perspective, negative feelings are completely unacceptable and intoler-

able. However, if we are *committed to living a life of faith* (i.e., believing what God says), *we will fight the good fight of faith* (notice “*faith*” is a fight)... but if our feelings are the most important thing in our life, *we won’t fight the good fight* (1 Tim 6:12); we will simply moan and groan. Now to accept a negative, we must feel the fullness of its pain, *all the while knowing that God is subjecting it to us to refine and purify our faith* — if that is not how you see the problem (i.e., if it is not a God related issue in your mind), you will simply keep arguing against it and refuse to accept it. To help give definition to this — let’s say you fall and hurt your body... or notice that your car has been damaged... or that someone has stolen some cash you had hidden away... or that water has spilled into your house through your roof during a significant rainstorm... or that your air-conditioner has stopped working... or that your car won’t start... or that you have lost your wallet; obviously, there are a thousand unpleasant things that we can experience, none of which make us feel good. On a far more serious level, you might lose your job... a loved-one may pass away... you might become terminally ill... you might be subjected to significant cruelty and persecution. The question is, can you take it to the Lord and actually *thank Him* for what it is you are being subjected to, in spite of the fact that it is not at all something that is pleasant? Regardless of what the issue is, the less you see the *positive* in it, the more you will *struggle* with it. With that in mind, let’s take a look at the third step. By the way, I will expand more on “*the thankfulness issue*” in just a few moments — being grateful for negatives is an immense hurdle for all of us, especially when our emotions are controlling all that is going on in our mind.

The third step is this: we must *account* for the problem (i.e., see it for what it really is) — it is a *positive* in our life that God is using to refine and purify our faith; *every trial we go through in life is a test of faith that is designed by God to strengthen it*. The word “*test*” (*doximos*) is used of boiling metals to remove the dross and impurities from it; that in part is what trials do to us — they purify our faith. It ought to be pretty clear, going bonkers over trials shows us how immature & deficient our faith is; keep in mind the divine didactic by which God’s people are to live: “*the righteous are to live by faith*” (Rom 1:17). It is here where the believer’s “*reckoning*” is critical. James states it this way — “*Count it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance, and let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*” (Jam 1:2-4). The first thing that jumps out at us regarding that statement is the need to *count trials joy*, which seems completely beyond reason — again, we’ll deal with that issue shortly. Let’s first note the emboldened word “*knowing*,” *if we don’t know the reason for the trials we may be going through in life*, or could care less about the reason for them, we will really struggle with them because the only thing that will be pleasing to us will be their removal. The reality is this, *we as believers have to learn to deal with the negatives of life the way God instructs us*. So when negative circumstances agitate us, we must refuse to go off the deep end and go bonkers... instead we must *acknowledge* the flesh’s strong disapproval, yet consciously *accept* the problem and not just run from it, and then focus on the *reason* for the problem (again, it is to make our faith stronger); since trials often cause consternation in our soul, such demonstrates

that our faith is not nearly as grand and glorious as we may have thought; it is actually a pretty weak faith; thus the purpose of the trial is to grow our faith; now if one's *faith* is not that big deal to him, his *emotions* will run the show in the moment. It is in the midst of the pain where "*our thinking*" is crucial — we must *refuse* to go bonkers and go off the deep end, and *reflect* upon what God is doing in our lives. To fight the fight of faith, one must *focus* on the *purpose* of the trial in his life (*i.e.*, we must *articulate* it to ourselves). Since it is only by trials that our faith is refined and purified, *we must be committed to consciously bearing the pain, knowing that God is doing a "faith work" in our life.* Keep the following in mind — it is because of God's unconditional love for us that He *disciplines us* to be men and women of faith (cf. Heb 12:4-11); He knows *trusting Him* in the midst of the storm is no easy matter for us — *He knows we are extremely weak creatures, and He empathizes with us* — Heb 4:15). In short, *difficult trials are placed on our plate to remind us of the eternity of God and His unconditional love for us.* Again, God knows we don't possess a great faith (at salvation it was extremely small), so He is working in our lives to build our faith and make it a stronger faith (*i.e.*, increase our confidence in God and trust Him more with regard to His will for us), and this He does by subjecting us to trials. Obviously being *grateful* to God for a negative isn't easy; especially if one is not consciously aware of *God's unconditional love* and how He works in our lives.

There are several passages by the apostle Paul wherein he enjoins believers "*to always give thanks for all things*" (Eph 5:20). Again, if we are not mindful of God's unconditional love and His sovereign work in our life, we will really struggle with being grateful and being thankful when difficulties come. Said Paul to the Thessalonians: "*In everything give thanks, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus*" (1 Th 5:18). Likewise, he told the Philippians: "*Rejoice in the Lord always.... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus... so dwell on the truth and the God of peace shall be with you*" (Phil 4:4-9). Letting the negative emotion control the discourse in your mind, will only intensify the problem, and keep you disappointed and frustrated; on the other hand, when you *wrestle through things rightly*, you will experience God's positive response — He will quiet the anxiety in your soul and give you peace; it's important to note that "*peace follows praying and being thankful; it doesn't precede it.*" By the way, what we have just stated in the previous paragraphs is precisely the road that Jesus went down the night before He was crucified on the cross — *He acknowledged* what was going on in His inner core (cf. Mt 26:39b), and I don't think He did that in 60 seconds (remember, Jesus was tempted in every way we are — Heb 4:15)... then *He accepted* what was about to occur, knowing full-well what was about to happen (cf. Mt 26:39c); by the way, He experienced horrific anguish — "*He pleaded with God to remove this cup from Him... He prayed fervently... and His sweat became like drops of blood*" (cf. Lk 22:42-44; Heb 5:7)... and lastly *He accounted* it joy (Heb 12:2). If you do not understand the fullness of what God is doing in your life, you will make very little progress in your faith; if you do understand what God is doing, you will make significant progress. If *feeling good* is the most important

thing in your life, your faith will remain very deficient. The truth is, you need to take the time to *contemplate all three of these steps*, and see the significance of them; in so doing, you will be preparing yourself to respond as God requires — by understanding the *process of growth* by which God rules in your life, you will grow in your knowledge of what God is doing in your life... and you will grow in your ability to deal with the negatives when they come — I am not in anyway implying that you won't have the slightest difficulty dealing with them; that's why Scripture refers to this as a "*war*," and war is never easy... furthermore, some trials are very difficult because they attack us at the most significant level; nevertheless, that doesn't change the spiritual strategy that we must embrace as believers. Though the Christian life has pleasant moments of joy and happiness, it also has difficult moments of pain, sorrow and unhappiness. I state this, because most believers really go off the deep end when life is disconcerting and frustrating — beloved, that is often the "*norm*" for every one of us as believers (God simply lets *our flesh* control the moment, and none of us have wonderful flesh); though a lot of people declare else wise, what I just stated is the case... those who *pretend* else wise are simply deceiving you. Regrettably, many believers "*live a life of pretense and self-piety*," but God is not at all well pleased with that; *genuine humility* must characterize our lives as God's children; by the way, without humility one is neither being true to himself or to God.

Obviously, even though we are believers this issue is not easily understood, especially when our flesh is arguing against it (remember, our flesh is a very loud voice in our lives that is not easily quelled), so we must patiently *wrestle* through the totality of the issue. Let's press on and take a deeper look at this matter. James says, "***Consider it joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance***" (Jam 1:2-3). The question is, what is it precisely that we are to "*know*"? — "***that the testing of our faith produces endurance***." That word endurance is *hupomone* in Greek, and literally means "*to remain under*;" it is often translated "*perseverance*" (cf. Rom 5:3; 2:7; 15:4-5; 2 Cor 12:12). By the way, the word "*produces*" (*katergazomai*) literally means "*to work out*;" *trials work out endurance and perseverance in our faith*. It should be noted, that statement here is *not a maybe*... since it is in the indicative mood in Greek, it is a *definite reality*; *i.e.*, it is a given that is not to be interpreted else wise — for some reason many preachers *misstate* what verses like this teach, as if the reality being expressed will only occur if one deals with the situations rightly (*i.e.*, that it is fully dependent upon the believer himself) — for instance, it is often stated that God only forgives us when we are *truly repentant* (cf. 1 Jn 1:9); but that raises another question: How do we know if we are being truly repentant? Does that mean God doesn't forgive us if we continue to struggle with that problem? ***No! Contrary to what some preachers preach, that is not what the Bible teaches!*** Believers are *not* to occupy themselves with being truly repentant, knowing that if they are not they will not be forgiven; that is precisely what the devil teaches! The truth is, one could never be sure that he indeed is being fully repentant, because he may struggle with certain issues his entire life; which is simply what it means to inhabit sinful flesh (cf. Jam 3:2; Ecc 7:20; Prv 24:16; Ps 38:1-22; 40:12; 73:26). The reality is, ***God's Spirit convicts us of our sin, and in-so-doing He moves us to genuinely confess it*** (*i.e.*, to say

the same thing about it that God says about it); yet it isn't many miles down the road that we often fall again, and guess what? **God keeps on forgiving!!!** If God wanted to include a number of caveats with regard to such teachings, He would have stated them very clearly — what bothers me on this issue, is the tendency for many preachers to make statements that do not fully coincide with the grammatical constructs of Scripture (which are very clear). Remember, it is God Himself who convicts us of our sins and moves us to rightly acknowledge our wrong-doing... when we as believers sin we experience the pain of guilt; it is not just a matter of being intrinsically aware that we did something wrong — the Holy Spirit causes us to feel the pain of that wrong... sometime it requires that God place His heavy hand upon us that we might deal with things rightly (cf. Ps 32:1-5); that's how much God loves us. Incidentally, those who are older in the faith experience greater pain when they sin than those who are younger in the faith — that is just a logical progression that takes place in the life of a believer... now that I am 75 years old, I can attest to that fact; sin is far more painful to me now than it was 25 years ago; that is simply how God operates (He deals much more severely with adults than He does with children; the logic of that should not be difficult for any of you to accept). Conversely, those who are older in the faith are far more conscious of their sinfulness than those who are younger in the faith — again, this is how God works in the believer's life; old age isn't easier, it is actually far more difficult... God is in the business of growing our faith, and that's a life-long process. By the way, conviction is God's work in the soul; not something we contrive on our own. To somehow deduce that God is not the one who convicts our hearts of sin, is to radically change what Scripture teaches — beloved, don't go down that road.

Regarding the surety of God's love for you, think of it this way: how do you know God loves you? Well, we know God loves us because His word tells us He loves us, but we also know God loves us by experience! And the experience we are talking about is not one that many believers have come to fully understand. The fact that God forgives us over and over and over and over again, ought to speak volumes to your heart! It is precisely this truth that has overwhelmed my soul — as incredible as it may seem to us as believers, God never stops forgiving us!!! There is no limit to His forgiveness!!! It is precisely this issue that prompts some pastors to incorrectly teach this biblical truth! The reality is, we don't have a right to change and misinterpret the doctrinal truths of Scripture — they are absolute truths!!! Yes, we can all question how God can keep on loving us when we are so undeserving, but that is the reality!!! It is the unconditional love of God that must occupy our minds!!! The reality is, God knows our frame and is mindful that we are but dust, and full of weaknesses, and that we are men and women of little faith (cf. Ps 103:14; Heb 4:15; Mt 6:30; 8:26; 14:31; 16:8). The truth is, if everything depended on "our efforts," we may as well throw in the towel, because we are not men and women of great faith; we simply have faith in a great God!!! As long as you focus on yourself, and not Christ, you are going to really struggle with your faith, "because you will be making much of what happens in your life dependent upon you," and that is a dead end street! I don't mean to attack your preacher, if that is what the foregoing statement has done; I simply want to make you aware of "the greatness of God!" not the greatness of

yourself (you have none). Beloved, please don't change the discourse of what Scripture teaches — it states things **emphatically**... the good news is, **the foregoing is true!!!**

Let's return to what James had to say — contrary to what some may teach, God's trials **do produce endurance in us**; though God continually subjects us to trials in order to get our attention and get us to cooperate with Him, He understands the significance of them, and our need for His being patient with us and loving us in spite of our foibles. States Paul, "Momentary light affliction is **producing** for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17)... in Romans he says, "We exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation **brings about perseverance**" (he uses the word *katergazomai* in both passages; Rom 5:3). The long and short of it is, God subjects us to trials that we might learn to persevere through them; *i.e.*, "remain under them," and not simply try and wiggle out of them — we are to "bear trials," and not run from them... yet we frequently do run from them. James follows up his statement by saying, "Blessed is a man who **perseveres** (*hupomone*) under trial; once he has been **approved** (*dokimos*; *i.e.*, once he has undergone the **testing of trials**), he will receive the crown of life" (Jam 1:12); the words approved and testing are the same word in Greek (*dokimos*) — trials test our faith or they **prove** our faith; the word "dokimos" literally means "to be approved by testing, or to be tried and true;" if our faith is genuine it will demonstrate itself to be so when it is tested — if it never demonstrates itself to be genuine, it is not genuine; no believer constantly caves in to his flesh. So it is the testing of our faith by trials that reveals its genuineness — just as hard work makes a man, so trials builds our faith. The wonderful news is, God patiently works in our lives to demonstrate the genuineness of our faith; though we often stumble and fall, He keeps working in us until He accomplishes His goal (cf. Phil 2:13; Rom 12:3; 1 Cor 12:6; 15:10; Heb 12:20-21) — the reality is this: He never gives up on us!!! (cf. Heb 13:5; Ps 57:2; 138:8; 1 Th 5:24). Keep in mind, "the **testing** (*dokimos*) of our faith does produce **endurance** (*hupomone*)" — that is simply what trials do in a believer's life. Though some people teach that trials only produce endurance in the lives of those who deal with things the way God tells them to, that is **not** what Scripture teaches — every time someone takes that approach, they are placing the weight of everything on the believer himself, as if he is the one who makes everything efficacious in his life — by overemphasizing the work of the believer, it is easy to distort what Scripture teaches; to somehow think that God is not super-active in our lives as believers, is to completely misinterpret numerous passages; the problem for most believers is that they over-emphasize the work of the believer, and under-emphasize the work of God — incidentally, that doesn't mean one is an awful Christian and needs to be barred from the church; it simply shows how fleshly oriented most of us are as Christians (*i.e.*, our flesh causes us to overemphasize our part, and minimize God's part; which is all the work of Satan in our lives). Since God is such an ethereal reality to most believers, they focus on that which they know best — themselves. Again, we are not the primary mover and shaker in our lives, GOD is — He is the ultimate cause who is continually moving us in a godly direction... He is the one who convicts and transforms our lives. As Paul stated, "GOD is at work in us, both to will and to work for His good pleasure" (Phil 2:13); though Scripture emphatically describes GOD as the primary mover and shaker in our

lives, many pulpiteers place more emphasis on *the believer* than they do on *God Himself*; thus causing believers to deduce: “Well, God doesn’t seem to be doing much in my life, so He must not be very pleased with me; so I better put the peddle to the metal and work a lot harder at changing my life.” Is it any wonder why so many believers are frustrated with their faith? How can they not be, if they are the ones who must run the show in their life to make transformation a reality? Obviously, if God is not *super-active* in our lives, we would have reason to be *super-concerned* because our flesh can easily cause us to wander from Him; the reality is, our flesh is a very strong presence in our lives (it is constantly at work arguing against God and what He is doing in our lives – cf. Gal 5:17), *but since GOD is at work in us, our own shortcomings should not disturb our confidence or our peace* (but due to the fact that *God’s eternal love for us seems a little bit much to us*, we resort back to our own efforts because of our need to somehow satisfy God — keep in mind, our guilt should not only cause us to see our unworthiness, but see how incredibly wonderful and unconditional His love is for us!). Let me state it one more time — Satan will always try and get us to focus on ourselves and not God; if there is anything he wants to do in our lives, it is destroy our faith in God (Satan has operated that way from the very beginning)... so if there is anything you must fight for, it is *believing God* (cf. Rom 1:17; 1 Tim 6:12; Heb 11:6). Remember, “*If GOD is for us, who can possibly be against us?*” (cf. Rom 8:31). I state this *very firmly* because of the erroneous teaching that exists in the majority of our churches. As Scripture teaches, “*tribulation worketh perseverance, endurance, and patience*” (cf. Rom 5:3; 1 Jam 1:3); by the way, those are all the same word in Greek; all of these qualities characterize genuine faith... again, *this is not a maybe, this is an absolute that God causes in our lives*. Therefore, our part as believers, first and foremost, is that *we believe God* (i.e., that we believe the truths of Scripture; that’s faith), and put forth every effort to walk in the truth (i.e., embrace the truth and obey the truth) — again, it is at this point where many believers stumble... they simply focus on their obedience rather than God’s unconditional love for them; thus their work transcends God’s love for them. As the writer of Hebrews says, “*Run with endurance... fixing your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of your faith*” (Heb 12:1-2). We must “*know that GOD is at work in us both to will and to do His good pleasure*” (Phil 2:13); without being confident that God is doing an incredible work in our lives because of His eternal love for us, we will simply wander in our faith thinking that we are the ones who are responsible to make the transformational changes in our lives.

The apostle Paul said to the church at Corinth, “*There must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved (dokimos) may become evident among you*” (1 Cor 11:19) — true genuine faith manifests itself in the midst of trials and difficulties, whereas bogus faith does not. Says Peter, “*God by His great mercy caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable... In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials, that the proof of your faith... even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*” (1 Pet 1:3-7). The long and short of it is: the more

we understand the purpose of trials in our life and see the positive in them, the more it will please us to remain under the trial (i.e., persevere and endure it when it comes); in so doing our faith will be strengthened... “we will become perfect, complete, lacking in nothing” (Jam 1:3); the word “perfect” in Greek (*teleios*) literally means “having reached its end,” and is often translated “mature” (cf. 1 Cor 2:6; 14:20; Heb 5:14); *teleios* doesn’t imply absolute perfection as our English word sometimes does; so don’t interpret it that way; absolute spiritual perfection won’t characterize us until we enter into God’s presence in heaven. The goal for us as believers in this life is that we be men and women of mature faith, that we remain under when being confronted with various negatives in life (our faith needs to show itself in the midst of trials). Obviously, this matter of sanctification is a two-way street – it involves us as believers and it involves God (the premiere operative in our lives; He is the spiritual mover in our lives – Phil 2:12-13; 1 Cor 12:6; 15:10; Eph 1:11). Consider the words of James: “You have heard of the endurance of Job and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings with him” (Jam 5:11). Said Peter, “When you do what is right and suffer for it you patiently endure it, and this finds favor with God” (1 Pet 2:20). Said the author of Hebrews, “You have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Heb 10:36)... in addition to that he says, “Run with endurance the race that is set before you” (Heb 12:1)... and, “It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons” (Heb 12:7); the discipline or the training that we undergo as God’s children is brought about through our enduring trials (God obviously knows how to move us in a right direction; without subjecting us to trials, this would not happen – the truth of the matter is this, if there is anything that gets my attention in life, it is the presence of negatives; they serve a significant purpose, even though they are frequently painful and not at all pleasant). Perhaps the most poignant verse of all is this one – “Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross” (Heb 12:2); just as you and I are to count it all joy when we encounter various trials, so did Jesus – because of the joy set before Him, endured the cross; by the way, it is not as if the cross in and of itself was a joyful experience to Him (Mt 26:39)... the truth is it was extremely painful and unpleasant; thankfully, Jesus focused on the joy the cross would bring (yours & my salvation) as a result of His enduring it – so Jesus modeled the behavior we are to also embrace – cf. 1 Pet 2:21; 4:1; Acts 14:22); you’ll notice, Jesus didn’t focus on the pain of the cross, but on the joyful results of the cross. As believers we can all thank Jesus for not opting out of the cross! One more phrase jumps out at us in Hebrews: Jesus is identified as both the author and perfecter of faith (Heb 12:2); i.e., He is not only the originator (archegon) of our faith, but the completer (teleiotes) of it – by enduring the cross He blazed the trail for our faith... and by sending us the Holy Spirit to work in our hearts, He is helping conform us to His image... and by sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God, He is ever making intercession for us, (cf. Heb 2:10; Jn 14:26; Rom 15:13; 1 Cor 6:19; Titus 3:5; Mk 16:19; Rom 8:34; Col 1:13-14; 3:1; Heb 7:25-26; 9:24); He is ever at work in us transforming us into His image (cf. 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 1:6; 2:13) – as previously stated, our transformation depends far more on the work of God in our lives than our own work; if there is one thing you don’t want to minimize, it is God’s work! Since percentages are not stated in Scripture, it is difficult to know

exactly what they are — though some theologians might choose to say that at least 75% of everything is being done by God, it is far more likely that at least 90% of the work is being done by God. So if GOD is not the primary mover and shaker in your life (*i.e.*, according to your understanding), you are grossly underestimating His significance in your life. As a believer you need to verbally say the following to God at least five times every day — “God, thank you for the work you are doing in my life... Lord, whatever that work is, give me the grace to **respond** accordingly;” merely thinking such thoughts is often times not sufficient, so give voice to those thoughts; *i.e.*, verbally express them to Him. By the way, the crown of life that James refers to (Jam 1:12) is not only reserved for us in all its fullness in heaven, but can also be partially experienced here in this life through the indwelling presence of the Spirit.

One more time let me say this: if you are a believer, the trials that God subjects you to, are producing endurance in your faith (that is not a maybe that totally depends upon you and how you respond to the trial), that is an absolute reality in your life (just as it is in every other believer’s life); the reality is, none of us respond perfectly to trials... in spite of that fact, God is still working in us making us grow in our faith — it is not as if our weakness impedes the work of God in our lives (though that happens in a human family, that does not happen in the divine family)... it is not as if God lacks the ability to “move some of the more stubborn believers” in a right direction; clearly He does... yet some of us as believers are not as involved in the process as other believers; hence, there will be degrees of rewards on the last day — some will receive greater rewards than others. The believer’s responsibility is “to work out his salvation with fear and trembling, knowing that God is also at work in him, both to will and to do His good pleasure” (Phil 2:12-13) — as stated earlier, the Christian life is a two way street; it involves us (that’s a given), and it also involves God (which is far more significant than anything we might do); though we play a role in everything that goes on in our lives, God plays a much greater role — the reality is, the Christian life is a “cooperative,” and depending upon the degree of our cooperation, so we will be rewarded (cf. 1 Cor 2:12-15). Should you decide to walk in sin or sit back and ignore your responsibility as a believer, God will place His hand upon you heavily, until you acknowledge before Him your waywardness (read Ps 32:1-5); God will not permit you to skirt the issue; remember, He is GOD! — the only sovereign in all the universe. The one thing every believer must be completely confident of is this — “God will ultimately perfect the work that He began in you” (Phil 1:6); if there is anything the believer must be confident about, it is the fact that God loves him unconditionally, and will complete the work He began in him; always keep in mind, “God knows how to move us in a godly direction, and He will accomplish what concerns us” (cf. Ps 138:8; 1 Th 5:24). God said to David, “Don’t be like a horse or mule who have no understanding, whose trapping include a bit and a bridle to hold them in check” (Ps 32:9); in other words, God is going to complete the work He began in us (our transformation), even if it means putting a bit and bridle on us to move us in the direction He is asking us to go — it should be obvious, there is nothing that God is not capable of... if it means bringing some very painful realities into our lives, He’ll do that... whatever it takes, He will do. If Satan knows how to get

a bunch of negatives into your mind and cause a disruption in your soul, you don't think God knows how to do that? There is nothing He can't do! ***Beloved, that's great news! not bad news!*** The wonderful truth that underlies all this is that we can't screw things up so badly that He will dump us; though that may be difficult for you to accept, that is the truth (cf. Jn 6:37, 39; 18:9; Phil 1:6; Heb 13:5). *God knows how to deal with us in our waywardness* (just as you do with your own little children), and He knows the actions that are necessary to get you to walk in His way. Lord willing, you will start embracing the *eternal, unconditional love of God*, if you have not already done so. Though it is somewhat understandable why some preachers preach another doctrine (because of humanistic thinking), it is not biblical to preach something to the contrary. As believers, our primary focus must be on ***God's unconditional love for us***, and not our own efforts (those will simply leave us defeated). Beloved, if it is *not necessary* to make God's unconditional love the premiere thought in our minds, Scripture would have stated things very differently; and such would have made Christianity a *religion* instead of a *relationship* with the loving God of heaven.

The foregoing reminds me of the great hymn, "*It Is Well With My Soul*;" the context is this: the author ***Horatio G. Spafford*** (1828-1888) was a wealthy landowner in Chicago who enjoyed a very close relationship with ***D. L. Moody*** and several other evangelical leaders. In 1871 his son died... a short while later the great Chicago Fire destroyed his holdings... desiring a rest for his wife and four daughters, as well as wishing to join and assist Moody and Sankey in one of their campaigns in Great Britain, Spafford planned a European trip for his family in 1873 — due to a last minute business development, he had to remain in Chicago, but sent his wife and four daughters on ahead as scheduled; he expected to follow in a few days. On November 22, the ship his wife and daughters were traveling on was struck by another vessel and sank in twelve minutes... several days later the survivors finally landed in Cardiff, Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband, "*Saved alone*." Just days later, Spafford left by ship to join his bereaved wife, and while on the ship it is believed that when it approached that part of the sea near the place where his daughters drowned, he penned the text to this incredible hymn —

*When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul.'*

*Though Satan should buffet, tho trials should come, let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate, and hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

*My sin – O the bliss of this glorious thought – my sin – not in part but the whole,
Is nailed to the cross and I bear it no more, praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!*

*And, Lord, haste the day when the faith shall be sight, the clouds be rolled back as a scroll,
The trump shall resound and the Lord shall descend, 'Even so' – it is well with my soul.*

It is extremely difficult to fathom such loss, yet here is a man who has modeled for us what it means to *accept God's will* for his life. Though it unlikely any of us will ever

suffer such loss, it could happen, and should it happen God will give you the grace to endure it – without God’s manifest grace in our lives, we could not endure such suffering; it is simply not in us to do so. Said Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13). As incredible as it may seem, Spafford didn’t dwell on the life’s sorrows and trials, but focused his attention on the redemptive work of Christ and His glorious second coming. Obviously, it is amazing that one could experience such tragedies and sorrows, and still be able to say, “It is well with my soul.” As the psalmist wrote – “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble” (Ps 46:1). Though none of us will ever handle every negative in life perfectly (which simply shows how incredibly weak we are), that obviously is the goal.

Now with all of the foregoing in mind, can you say the following to God right now – “God, thank you for **choosing me** to be Your child... for **loving me** with an everlasting love... for **dying for me** that my sins might be forgiven... that You love me unconditionally, and that Your love is **greater** than all of my sin. Thank you that you know **my frame and my foibles**... that my weaknesses and shortcomings are not a deterrent to your love, and that I am not a person you are disappointed in or ashamed of or angry with. Thank you for **everything** I am going through in life, knowing that it is all **Your will**, and is not at all mere happenstance... and that all of the **difficulties** I am experiencing are not only for my benefit, but serve your higher purposes. Thank you that I have the privilege of **servicing** You in this world and sharing Your love with others. Thank you for the incredible work You are doing in my life, whereby you are **transforming** me into the image of Christ, and that one day I will be **glorified** and taken into Your eternal presence to reign with You in heaven forever – Lord Jesus, how I long for that day.” Take a few moments and reflect upon everything that was just stated. Do you truly see your unworthiness and your lack of merit? Do you truly appreciate God’s unconditional love for you in spite of your sinfulness? Are you truly grateful for all of the negatives that you are experiencing in life? Can you thank Him for everything He has subjected you to in life? (not just being thankful by verbally stating so, but being thankful in the deep recesses of your heart?). Knowing that God is not only the Author of your life, but the Eternal Magistrate who is working all things after the council of His will to the praise of His glory, ought to bring great comfort to your heart; especially when you consider that God, above everything, is good and holy and loving, and the only sovereign in all the universe; *i.e.*, He is the One who determines reality (no one else does – cf. 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 19: 16; Is 43:13; 45:5-7; 46:9-10). As the words to the old hymn by Dallas Holm wonderfully expresses it –

*Jesus got a hold of my life and He won't let me go!
Jesus got into my heart and got into my soul!
I used to be oh so sad, but now I'm just so free and glad,
Cause Jesus got a hold of my life and He won't let me go!*

Though all of us **struggle with negatives in life** (because of our fallenness), the goal is to consider them joy when we encounter them because of the **positive impact** they have

on our faith (i.e., our relationship with God; as we grow in faith we grow in our love for Him), and not simply complain and moan and groan when we experience trials. Dealing rightly with our problems doesn't mean we "like" them — in and of themselves negative circumstances are anything but likeable. Like surgery for some physical problem that one has, it is not as if the surgery is a fun experience, but it is something that one is grateful for; in that sense we can actually rejoice over what we are experiencing and see it as a positive — that is precisely how we must respond to the negatives we go through in life; we must see them for what they really are, not simply as agitations that we can't tolerate. Now regarding the dialogue with God I expressed in the last paragraph, I would strongly encourage each of you to "contemplate it twice every day for one month," and see the impact it has on your faith; the long and short of it is, "this is a faith issue." By the way, psychologists and Christian counselors often encourage people to take certain actions for "thirty days;" because in so doing such action will begin to root itself in one's soul. One can apply this same strategy to one's faith — when we spend significant time reflecting upon God and our relationship with Him in the midst of all the storms we go through in life, He cements divine truth in our soul (cf. Ps 1:2; 63:6-8; 119:11, 16). With the foregoing in mind, it should be noted, faith is not simply a religious feeling divorced from the objective truth of God's revelation; at its root, it means "to trust" the object of our faith (Jesus Christ)... furthermore, it is not simply a matter of agreeing with Him intellectually, it is a matter of placing all of our weight upon Him (Prov 3:5); that's what genuine faith implies. Though faith involves "firm persuasion and a deep abiding conviction" (Heb 11:1), the main element of faith is its relation to the invisible God, and a personal surrender to Him (Jn 1:12). Everyone of us would probably do pretty well in a true/false or right/wrong exam, but checking the right box and truly understanding and embracing the significance of the various issues are two very different realities. Beloved, our lives are to be grounded in God's unconditional love for us; that must be the foundation stone upon which we build our lives, and judge everything that we go through in life. By contemplating the dialogue with God I stated in the previous paragraph "twice a day for a month," it will soon become obvious to you that you will have to think about each aspect of that message in context to all that you are going through in life; i.e., you will have to view the negatives in your life through the eyes of faith, rather than impulsive fleshly thinking. After doing so for thirty days, you will see an incredible change in your thinking regarding the life God has called you to; no longer will a "self-focus" dominate your thinking, instead a "God-focus" will begin to supplant the self-focus. The apostle John addressed a corollary of this subject saying, "Everyone who has their hope fixed on the eternal love of God and the fact that He will one day make us like Christ, purifies himself just as He is pure" (cf. 1 Jn 3:1-3) — the reality is, this realization is critical in helping us pursue purity. As John MacArthur puts it in his study Bible, "Living in the light of Christ's return makes a difference in a Christian's behavior."

If we falsely believe that God is not in control of our circumstances, we may experience the emotions of fear or despair or anger based on that false belief. It has been said over and over again, it is important that we learn to manage emotions rather than let them

manage us. For example, when we are disturbed and angry in our inner core, we need to acknowledge that we are angry, and examine our hearts as to why we are angry, and then move in a divine direction. Sadly, many professing Christians refuse to believe that God is the author of most of the negative circumstances they experience in life — that is how uninformed and misled many Christians are; they simply have not been taught the truth of Scripture — for some reason many Christians refuse to associate negatives with God; they insist that God is only positive, and that all negatives are of the devil... yet they fail to realize that the devil can only do to us what God permits him to do (Job 1:8-12), and that God only permits him to do those things that fulfill His and our higher purposes. Again, if God is not the GOD of this world we are without hope; the wonderful news is God is GOD! And everything that happens to us happens for a reason (God is never sleeping on the job), and being as God is on the throne that reason is a very positive one (not a negative one). Years ago I had the privilege of sitting down and talking with one of the great Christian voices in our world (I would rather not mention his name); he had contracted cancer, and had only a few months left to live — for some reason, I asked him “Why he thought God had subjected him to it? & What God’s purpose must have been?” To my amazement he said, “God had nothing to do with it... it is simply the result of living in a fallen world.” That viewpoint probably characterizes the majority of Christians in the world — it is extremely difficult for them to associate “negatives” with God; therefore, they simply make them the product of our fallen world; yet that does not fully coincide with what Scripture teaches — God has a purpose for causing or permitting everything we go through in life; He isn’t simply sitting on the sideline and letting happenstance dictate what goes on in our world. Regrettably, there are many in the Christian world whose faith is simply “belief in the cross,” and basically nothing else; in other words, they believe (hope) they are forgiven and will go to heaven when they die. If that is the case, it is quite unlikely that they are truly born-again, because there needs to be more depth to their faith than that; they need to be confident in God’s presence in their life and the work He is doing. God has revealed divine truth to us in His Word, and it is the responsibility of the church to teach the Word, and it is our responsibility as believers to align our thinking with it — that’s what this thing called “faith” is all about. Are we going to live by the Word, or are we going to simply satisfy ourselves with human thinking? Beloved, let me make one final appeal — unless one can associate God with all that is going on in his life, God will be a very distant reality in their life. On the following page I have given you a “copy” of the prayer that I have encouraged each of you to pray twice a day for thirty days. Let me encourage you to make a copy of it and keep it in your possession so that you have easy access to it.

Beloved, God loves you unconditionally.

He has loved you from all eternity.

Serve Him with all your heart.

Fight the good fight of faith.

Listed below is a copy of the prayer that I have encouraged each of you to pray twice a day for thirty days — make a copy of it and keep it in your possession so that you have easy access to it.

*“God, thank you for **choosing me** to be Your child... for **loving me** with an everlasting love... for **dying for me** that my sins might be forgiven... that You love me **unconditionally**, and that Your love is **greater** than all of my sin. Thank you that you know **my frame & my foibles**... that my weaknesses and shortcomings are not a deterrent to your love, and that I am not a person you are disappointed in or ashamed of or angry with. Thank you for **everything** I am going through in life, knowing that it is all **Your will**, and is not mere happenstance... and that all of the **difficulties** I am experiencing are not only for my benefit, but serve your higher purposes. Thank you that I have the privilege of **serving** You in this world and sharing Your love with others. Thank you for the incredible work You are doing in my life, whereby you are **transforming** me into the image of Christ, and that one day I will be **glorified** and taken into Your eternal presence to reign with You in heaven forever — Lord Jesus, how I long for that day.”*