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The
Journey
Early Lessons

Daniel A. Brown, PhD

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THE JOURNEY

EARLY LESSONS

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

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THE JOURNEY

EARLY LESSONS

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INTRODUCTION

Walking with God and enjoying His nearness is supposed to be the most natural activity of your life. But in the beginning, it can feel unfamiliar and foreign. That's because He doesn't think like we do, and His ways take a bit of getting used to. No one naturally lines up perfectly with the spiritual life God wants to give to us. It takes time, and it is a process.

Throughout your journey with the Lord, you will feel His delight, His pleasure in being with you. At one time, you were lost to Him forever, and like a father who has only recently received back his ransomed child from the clutches of a kidnapper, He still has not gotten over the horror of being without you in His life.

He wants to teach you the themes and truths that form the very foundation of the cosmos. Though they are invisible and spiritual, His ways are interwoven into the fabric of our world, and no matter where you look—if you know what to look for—you will find them. Learning kingdom truths is not like learning facts from a textbook; rather, it is like hiking over the rise of a hill and catching, for the first time, a glimpse of a valley where you could gladly spend the rest of your life. With each new truth you grasp, you find yourself thinking, “This is the best yet.”

The simple topics in these booklets will become familiar places to which you will come again and again in times of realization, in hours of need and in moments of worship. They may be simple understandings, but they have a way of penetrating even the most complicated life situations. They are the earliest lessons, what some people refer to as the basics, a curriculum for new believers in Jesus. These landmarks have been, throughout the centuries, the timeless passage markers, the faithful signposts where generations of saints before you have paused, considered, wept and rejoiced.

One of the most astounding God-works (miracles) is captured in a simple phrase: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” That, of course, refers to Jesus, the Word of God, being born into flesh, so that we on Earth could make sense of God's message.

2 INTRODUCTION

This is called the Incarnation. The truth of God was embodied in the person, Jesus Christ. Incarnation is God's basic plan for communicating His ways to people.

Jesus invites each of us to participate in that communication pattern by explaining to other people the truths we have learned from God. We pass along lessons-learned so others can learn the same lessons more quickly. Because God made each of us unique and individual, the way we learn—and how we pass along what we learn—is also unique. Like a few drops of lemon in a glass of water, our lives give a faint flavor to the truth. We don't change the truth; we just explain it from a slightly different angle.

That is what I want to do in the four booklets of The Journey series. When I was approached to write something for newer believers, I immediately asked if I had to write what usually gets written, or if I could say what I wanted how I wanted. They told me to 'go for it' and give it my 'voice.' So, I did.

Rather than giving you facts to digest, like so many vitamin pills, these booklets give you a language, a vocabulary to make simple but profound sense out of walking with Jesus day by day. It's what I've learned—especially what has changed my life most dramatically. I believe it will radically change yours, too.

— *Daniel A. Brown, PhD*

#1 EXPERIENCING GRACE

People who are especially big and strong, like offensive linemen on a Super Bowl team, know what their size does to intimidate others. Without having to say or do much, they can make the smaller bodies around them do their will fairly easily. Their size and strength give their preferences and wants a bit more weight than if they were as small as the rest of us. Maybe it is a holdover from the days when “might made right”—when the guy with the biggest sword or fist was left standing—but our eagerness to comply with huge and powerful people comes from a basic reality: they can do whatever they want anyway. We couldn’t stop them even if we wanted to.

We’re happy to team up with big, strong or exceptionally talented people. Being on their side is far better than facing them across the field. In fact, when we line up behind them, they become our champions, and all the attributes of their gross frame that previously made us nervous, now become points of celebration with teammates, or taunting boasts flung at the opposition. We love “big” when it is on our side.

When we are around people who are bigger or more notable than who we think we are—in strength, intelligence, position, experience, talent, etc.—we eagerly search their voice or manner for clues about how they feel toward us. Do they act friendly? Are they gentle and patient with us? Are they selfish, or kindly disposed toward us? We want to know where we stand in their favor.

It brings such relief to learn that the huge guy whose paw nearly swallowed your entire arm as you shook hands is “really gentle.” You smile inwardly when someone tells you that the brainy co-worker asked to be assigned to your project. Few things feel better than knowing your boss’s boss has plans for your bright future in the company. Likewise, when you are facing a serious stomach operation, it’s comforting that your surgeon, who happens

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN . . .

- What grace is, and what grace does.
- Why God loves to be gracious.
- God wants to be your champion.
- What grace means for your eternity and for your daily life.

4 EXPERIENCING GRACE

to be head of the department, has been performing such procedures as routine for dozens of years—since she was in a residency.

Wanting the biggest and the best, the smartest and the strongest, the most powerful and helpful on your side is normal and very human. It is not an evolutionary expression of the survival of the fittest. The strongest and most able tend to outlive their weaker counterparts in the animal kingdom, but no animal ever hopes for a champion. Only people hope for a game-changer. Longing for someone bigger to be on our side is a uniquely human capacity—one placed in our hearts by God as a clue to what He wants to do for us. It is our earliest hint about one of God's surest and finest features: grace.

Questions:

Why do children boast in the size or strength of their dads—"My dad is bigger than yours"? Why do we want to be treated by the "foremost expert" on the medical condition we have? _____

Read 1 Chronicles 16:25 and Psalm 97:9. What do they say about our God? _____

Read Exodus 15:11; Psalm 35:10 and Isaiah 49:24-26. In what ways does the mightiness of God manifest itself on our behalf?

GOD AS CHAMPION

God's love compels Him to intervene on our behalf. As we learned in the previous booklet *THE JOURNEY: BEGINNING PLACES*, God is not distant and uncaring; He loves us completely. He is not content to let the world He created spin through eternity on its own skewed course. Instead, He is ever-present to put things back on course—to come to the aid of people for whom He made everything in the first place (Psalm 46:1).

God is our
refuge and
strength, a
very present
help in trouble.
—Psalm 46:1

Not surprisingly, therefore, one of the most consistent pictures you will find of the Lord in the Bible is that of a *Champion*—someone who uses his great strength and battle prowess to defend and fight for others. Jeremiah calls God a “dread [awe-inspiring, terror-striking] champion” who makes spiritual enemies go weak in their knees (Jeremiah 20:11).

On your journey with God, you will experience Him intervening in your life-situation many, many times as “Savior and a Champion” (Isaiah 19:20). In countless ways He will “rise up” to help you, as he did for King David when He took hold of shield, spear and battle-axe to meet those who were pursuing him (Psalm 35:2-3). God will deliver you from traps, save you from deadly infections—both physical and spiritual—and faithfully shield you from attacks (Psalm 91:1-4).

And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.
—Isaiah 45:21-22

God is the perfect Champion; He is all-powerful, and He can do anything He wants without anyone stopping Him (Isaiah 45:21-22). What could be better than being on the same side with God—not in anything so small and inconsequential as a football game, a legal dispute or a lottery—but in the whole of your life?

Take hold of buckler and shield, and rise up for my help... Say to my soul, “I am your salvation.”
—Psalm 35:2-3

For it is He who delivers you from the snare of the trapper, and from the deadly pestilence. He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.
—Psalm 91:3-4

Questions: Imagine, if God is for you and actively working as your defending Champion, does it really matter who is against you? Who is bigger than God? Read the following scriptures, and answer these questions.

Deuteronomy 4:35-39. What does it mean when God tells us, “There is no other”? How does God involve Himself on our behalf?

Joshua 5:13-15. What did Joshua discover about whose side is whose? _____

Romans 8:31-34. How has God demonstrated that He is for us?

How do we know that He wants to give and do good things for us?

Through Jesus, we overwhelmingly conquer every circumstance of this life. He has promised never to leave our side (Hebrews 13:5), never to push us away (John 6:37), and never to leave us alone or defenseless (John 14:18). The Lord God Almighty, Maker of the heavens and the earth bends down, the way that a towering adult stoops to speak affectionately to a child, and draws us close to His side. His loving, protective don't-even-think-about-messing-with-My-little-one posture sends an unmistakable signal throughout every realm of the cosmos: "I am this one's Champion."

God's intervention on our behalf is mostly to introduce good and well-being. He is, after all, a giver. That is the nature of His loving character. He gives life, hope and meaning. Like a happy parent taking his four-year-old son to the beach to play for the day (and dragging along the sand toys, extra towels, the change of clothes, the umbrella, and the folding chair), God is happily absorbed in being with us for the whole day.

Of course, God doesn't have to work at making the day work. But for a moment, just to get a sense of how God feels in relation to us, let me use this imperfect analogy. The dad just wants to enjoy the day with his son. He has little interest in anything else that may be happening in the water or on the sand. He's basically happy to share the beach with all the other beach-goers and their children. But, if an older kid, say eleven or twelve, comes up to his four year-old son and begins to grab at him, push him down and choke him, the dad will spring into action to stop the bully and protect his child.

It would be great if there were no beach thugs in life, if the water had no rip currents, if sand never got in anyone's eyes—but there are, and it does. Whenever anyone or anything messes with God's kids, He takes a keen interest. Throughout our lives, we want to

He Himself has said, "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you."
—Hebrews 13:5

The one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.
—John 6:37

I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you.
—John 14:18

know—to put it in the language of a four-year-old—if our God is bigger than all the others. Can He rescue us from the bullies and the tides? The answer? Most definitely yes.

GRACE DEFINED

Though we might not express it in these terms, our longing for a champion is a longing for grace. God adopts our cause and fights on our behalf as a Champion because He is full of grace (Exodus 22:27), so much so, in fact, that when He gave Moses the Ten Commandments, He named Himself, “The Lord God, compassionate and gracious” (Exodus 34:6). In order to understand who the Lord is, and what He is like—as opposed to what other gods are like—we have to focus on His graciousness.

So what is grace, and why is it so important in our spiritual growth?

Grace is what God does (accomplishes) without any regard for what we do. Think of grace as a condition, a situation you end up being in as a result of what someone did for you. What they did for you is something you could never do for yourself. For a homeless nine year old street urchin from Delhi, grace is like getting to go to Disneyworld; on his own, there is no way he could transport himself across the oceans to get there, and no hope of affording the entry fee once he arrived. Grace is the better standing a student ends up in after his professor “throws out” an exam the student had failed miserably; what would have lowered his overall test average is no longer a factor.

Over and over in the Bible and on your Journey with God, you will see God’s grace in action. If we do not understand how grace works, it can seem as though God enjoys making a big point out of the fact that we didn’t do such and such—He did. For instance, in Psalm 44:1–2, the writer acknowledges that God was the real reason behind all the victories his ancestors enjoyed in previous generations, and he concludes his summary by saying:

And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious.
—Exodus 22:27

Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, “The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth...
—Exodus 34:6

For by their own sword they did not possess the land; and their own arm did not save them; but Thy right hand, and Thine arm, and the light of Thy presence, for Thou didst favor them.

—Psalm 44:3

Question: Is this a put-down? Is God just making sure He gets all the credit, and none of it goes to people? Why do you think God stresses His solo role so much? _____

Now read Psalm 44:4–8 and answer the same questions. _____

Grace is not only the act of kindness done to or for someone, but it is also the condition in which they are left—what is true about them or their now-changed situation. Grace does good to people and leaves them better off. It is both a favorable action and the well-being, delight or benefit produced by the action. For instance, as an act of grace, a complete stranger gives you their unused tickets at a theme park, and you end up being able to do lots more than your own budget would have allowed. A champion fights on your behalf against an opponent who is too strong for you, and that act of grace saves you from certain defeat. Grace is (1) someone fighting for you, as well as, (2) being victorious.

Question: Being a gracious hostess means doing for the guests what they cannot do for themselves. Think of some specific examples of what a gracious host or hostess does at a dinner party. In what ways can you imagine God being gracious? List three sorts of gracious acts He does in your life. _____

God “longs to be gracious to you” (Isaiah 30:18). Feats of grace are God’s favorite activity. A young mother of a nine-month old infant provides us with a glimpse of how God enjoys being gracious to us. At the least sign of the baby’s discomfort or need, mama sweeps into action to feed, cover, pick up or gently shush the little one. Though she might enjoy having others help her with the routine of caring for her baby once in awhile, she will not willingly let go of that special role. She would feel robbed if she were denied the opportunity to “take care of” her child. Taking care of one who cannot take care of himself or herself is the essence of grace.

GOD'S WORKOUT ROUTINE

God is strong in grace, and grace is one of His most distinguishing features! Take a look at the activity and “exercise routines” that gratify and satisfy Him the most (Jeremiah 9:23-24). He takes great delight in doing three sorts of repetitive exercises. Over and over again He looks for opportunities to “work out” in the world. He never grows weary of these practice sessions in our lives, and He is actually invigorated by them.

Throughout your journey with God, always remember what He most likes doing; He loves exercising:

<i>Lovingkindness</i>	<i>Judgment</i>	<i>Righteousness</i>
Being kind toward us	Pointing out root causes of trouble	Making things right for us
Extending mercy to us	Straightening out tangles	Fixing situations we broke
Treating us as favorites	Separating us from our sin	Scrubbing everything clean
Restoring our original beauty	Giving good and accurate directions	Bringing well-being into our lives

As humans, we like to boast or complain (the flip side of boasting) about how smart (dumb) we are, how capable (or inadequate) we are, and/or how much (little) resource we have. Wise people boast about the grace of God and how He more than makes up the difference for what we need in life.

FAVOR IN THEIR EYES

Grace, then, changes our end-condition by doing for us what we could not do for ourselves. Someone stronger, more powerful or more endowed with resource/authority voluntarily and willingly chooses to do good to someone less powerful or capable. Grace is never an obligation. We “find favor” with someone and receive special treatment for no other reason than their decision to pick us. Nothing

explains why they have chosen to benefit us, as opposed to someone else. Grace is granted and given—never earned or deserved.

We find favor in their eyes; they do not first spot something admirable in us, then grant us favor as a result of the potential they observe. In fact, grace usually comes as a surprise. We puzzle at why we find such favor with them because we find no reason in ourselves to justify the favor: “I can’t believe it, but I think it’s true—for some reason he really likes me.” The favor comes from them; the grace originates with them, and we merely receive that grace. When an adult catches a stray foul ball at the stadium, then offers it to a kid three rows up—one of several boys all around him—that is grace in action. Nothing in the boy drew the gift of the ball to himself; something in the heart of the man prompted him to give the ball to the boy.

This is why God says, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious” (Exodus 33:19). The emphasis is not on grace as a whimsical act, randomly and unpredictably carried out by a capricious God who just does what He wants to do. Rather, He wants

For though the twins [Esau and Jacob] were not yet born, and had not done anything good or bad, in order that God’s purpose according to His choice might stand, not because of works, but because of Him who calls, it was said to her, “The older will serve the younger.”
—Romans 9:11–12

The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the LORD loved you.
—Deuteronomy 7:6–8

us to know that He chose to be gracious to us long before we did anything worthy of favorable treatment (see Romans 9:11). It is His grace in action; it is not a result of our actions. Grace does not evaluate people and their behavior to determine whether or not they deserve grace. God does not choose His people because of the special qualities He sees in them, He chooses them because He loves them (Deuteronomy 7:6-7).

The Bible makes quite a big deal out of the fact that we are a “chosen people,” hand-picked by God before the worlds were even founded. Jesus told his disciples, “You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:16). That same gracious God, who chose Israel as His people, has chosen you! Because of His choice to favor you, He has changed your eternal condition (destiny), and He will constantly change your circumstances on your journey.

Read the following verses and write down what ends up being true of us as a result of what God (and God alone) does for us.

Ephesians 1:4. _____

Colossians 3:12. _____

1 Peter 2:9–10. We become “a royal” _____
 “a holy” _____; “a people for” _____
 _____; who have
 received _____.

His choice of us makes us special, not the other way around. Grace (favor) in the eyes of the Lord comes from Him—not from our (good) deeds.

UNACCOUNTABLE ACTS OF GOODNESS

As with His love for us, His choice of us is something we either accept or reject. But we cannot do anything to influence His choice by what we do—either good or bad. Some people struggle with God’s grace because they can’t imagine receiving something they didn’t earn. People’s pride can be quite subtle. Pride is what makes some people insist on contributing to their standing before God. But if you earn something by working, it is called a wage—a payment due to you—not grace (Romans 4:4). Throughout your walk with the Lord, you will find it challenging to accept God’s grace because you feel undeserving, unworthy and “not-good-enough.”

Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due.

—Romans 4:4

Not getting what we deserve is the essential promise of the good news in Jesus. God keeps no account of your wrongs or failings—regardless of whether they are willful or accidental. But neither does He tally up your good deeds and righteous acts then reward you like a frequent flier program. Grace frees you of a debt you have no hope of paying off on your own. But in exactly the same way, grace prevents you from “earning” points with God. He redeems you from your old life into your new life, but you cannot redeem spiritual coupons or scrip for additional life upgrades.

.....

*Not getting what we deserve is the essential
promise of the good news in Jesus.*

.....

Sadly, some followers of Jesus fall into a great confusion: they imagine that obedience gains them more favor with God. That is not true. Not now. Not ever. “Favor with God” is grace—two expressions for exactly the same thing. Grace is never earned or lost, increased or diminished as a result of what we do. God’s acts of grace, and where they transport us, are always unaccountable.

Oh, yes, there is a thing called obedience, and we will look at it closely in the next chapter. But you will never fully understand obedience until you understand the great grace of God. What He asks us to do for Him always comes after what He has done for us!

Read Isaiah 43:25 and 2 Corinthians 5:19. What act of grace does God do with regard to us and our sin? _____

What condition does that put us in? _____

Read Galatians 2:16. Can anyone be justified (i.e., made perfectly acceptable to God) by his or her own good deeds? _____

Read Ephesians 2:4–9. How does God demonstrate the wealth of His kindness, mercy and grace to all of Creation for all time? _____

LOVE AND GRACE

Love moved God to create us; love moved God to rescue us and forgive us; love moved God to save us. But love alone could not have done the job. Love was the motive, but grace was the means. Because of our sin, we were in a fix, cut off from God and His intended course for our life. Because of Adam’s original sin, and our continual disobedience, death reigned on Earth (Romans 5:17), and we were caught up in the “course of this world” like tiny twigs swept along by a flooding river (Ephesians 2:1-3). We were in a hopeless condition. On our own, we could do nothing about it, nothing to change it.

For if by the transgression of the one, death reigned through the one.
—Romans 5:17

The mounting interest from our sin-debt is so great, that even if we miraculously manage not to sin again for the rest of our lives, we can still never hope to pay for the wrong we already did. The sum total of our so-called “righteous deeds” amounts to the value of an old, dusty-smelling suit coat at a thrift shop (Isaiah 64:6). We have no righteousness in our account derived from keeping the Law (Philippians 3:9), and the certificates of debt, the spiritual IOU’s decreed against us, cannot be repaid with our own resources.

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.
—Isaiah 64:6

.....

*God will do anything to have us in His life forever.
He paid the highest possible cost for our rescue—
the life of His only Son.*

.....

That is when grace entered the picture. When we were dead in our transgressions, God made us alive, by canceling our debt, and nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14). God’s act of grace was to send Jesus, as the Atonement, to die in our stead. As a result of that act, we are now debt-free. He delivered from “the domain of darkness,” and transferred us to the kingdom of God. That gracious act changes our condition from ‘guilty’ to ‘forgiven’ (Colossians 1:13-14).

Why would God want to do something so extreme? Why would He willingly forgive such massive debts, and zero-out the balance sheet on the entire account of our life? What does it accomplish in His eternal purposes?

First, God will do anything to have us in His life forever. He paid the highest possible cost for our rescue—the life of His only Son (remember John 3:16). No matter what, He always wants us close. God’s grace has seated us with Him and with Jesus in heavenly places (Ephesians 2:4-6). Grace has taken care of our eternity—forever changing our condition from sinners to saints, from lost to rescued, from dead to alive.

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.
—Colossians 2:13-14

Second, God wanted to convince everyone beyond a shadow of a doubt that He has a mind-boggling wealth of grace. Eliminating all the sin-debt of all the people of all time wouldn't even put a dent in God's assets of grace. He always has enough to spare, plenty of grace left over. The enemy of your heart will try to convince you that God must ration His stores of grace; He can only afford to give you a limited amount of grace at set intervals (like an allowance). The devil wants to convince you that if you need grace too many times a week or a day, God will eventually tell you, "No more for now. You live without my grace for a while, and then maybe you will be more careful, and not waste it so badly."

READ ALOUD 2 CORINTHIANS 9:8 AND 1 TIMOTHY 1:13-16. One of the best ways to resist the lies of the devil is to quote scripture that directly counters his false claims. What can you now quote in order to answer the lie that says God must ration grace to keep from running out of it? _____

GRACE AS A DAILY PORTION

Your faith in Jesus—and the grace work He accomplished by dying for you on the cross—secures your eternity. The Atonement is complete, finished for all time. Nothing is bigger to us, or more impossible to accomplish on our own, than eternal forgiveness. If God gladly does that—has both the glad desire and the riches to forgive such debt—think of how much more He wants to do for us. He freely gave up His Son's life, so it makes no sense that He would tell us the rest is up to us (Romans 8:32). He doesn't say, "Look, I did My part—taking care of your eternal condition—now you've got to pull your own weight. Eternal life was on Me; daily life is your responsibility."

He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also with Him freely give us all things?
—Romans 8:32

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God.
—1 Cor. 2:12

Rather, God wants His grace to be our daily portion. He wants to keep giving to us; He loves to continue doing for us, by His grace, what we cannot do for ourselves (1 Corinthians 2:12). He wants to

fill our daily lives with His gracious acts. By grace, He will heal our sickness, supply our need, restore our family, and remove our pain. That is why most of the New Testament letters begin with the salutation, “Grace to you.”

Jesus teaches us to pray to God for guidance, for forgiveness, and for deliverance from evil (Matthew 6:9-13). Life is full of situations beyond our resource—money crunches, emotional devastations, family breakups, physical afflictions and diseases. We find ourselves in circumstances we wish we could change, but we have no power over them even though we scramble to do something about them. That is when grace comes into the picture.

Grace is absolutely counter to what this life teaches us—that we are alone, and must rely on our own resources: “Work hard. Invest wisely. Give it your best shot. Do all you can do, and be all you can be.” When there isn’t enough money for the mortgage payment; when the doctors diagnose you with Hepatitis C; or, when your heart is broken, seemingly beyond repair—these are times for grace.

Grace is like a lamp. When it is too dark for us to see, we can quit squinting and turn on the light. Grace teaches us to boast of our weaknesses instead of our strengths (2 Corinthians 12:9), to acknowledge that we are His workmanship, not our own (Ephesians 2:10), and, to make Him our Champion, instead of trying to fight the battles on our own.

God invites us to live in His grace. It is a daily—indeed hundreds of times daily—experience. Just as His loving kindnesses are new each and every morning (Lamentations 3:22-23), so His grace is ever fresh for the needs of our lives. As you journey with the Lord, your life will not magically become problem-free. The very nature of life on this planet means you will regularly encounter difficulty, pressure, need and helplessness. We are too poor, too weak to take care of the things life throws at us. But God’s power is perfectly suited for those situations; He is complete in our places of incompleteness and inadequacy (2 Corinthians 12:9). His grace is the perfect answer to our daily needs. The whole reason that Jesus

And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses.
—2 Cor. 12:9

But by the grace of God I am what I am.
—1 Corinthians 15:10

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works.
—Ephesians 2:10

willingly changed His own condition, by leaving Heaven to come to Earth, was to enrich our daily and eternal lives beyond anything we could do ourselves (2 Corinthians 8:9 and Philippians 2:5-8).

God is great; we don't have to be.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

What is a champion, and when and why does a champion fight for someone? _____

God wants to come to your aid. The Lord is loving, protective and gentle toward you, but He acts as a dread Champion intervening on your behalf. Are there any forces, tyrants or bullies in your life that you are struggling to overcome? _____

Define grace in your own words. How does that relate to doing someone a favor, or feeling favorable toward them? _____

Why is grace important in our spiritual growth? Can we do anything to earn God's grace? How have you tried to earn His favor or grace? _____

Grace changes your existing conditions by doing for you what you cannot do yourself. What acts of grace or gifts of kindness to change your life-situations have you received recently? _____

Give three reasons why God willingly forgave massive debts and zeroed-out the balance sheet on the entire account of our life. What does it accomplish in His eternal purpose? _____

YOUR TIME WITH GOD

Are there circumstances in your life that seem too big to handle? Call out for the grace of the Lord, and entrust yourself to your Father in Heaven, just as Jesus did while dying on the cross. Do not try to direct the grace of God according to what you think needs doing; rather, ask Him to do what He knows is best for you.

Are there situations beyond your resources such as money crunches, emotional devastation, a family break-up, physical afflictions and diseases? Are you in circumstances you wish you could change even though you have no power over them? These are times for grace. Grace takes you where you want to be but cannot get to on your own. Watch for God's grace in your life and thank Him for making up the difference for what you need in life.

PRAYER:

"Thank You God for loving me. Thank You Jesus for so willingly coming to my rescue. Your love inspires and comforts me through the ups and downs of my life, and in the peaceful times in between. I see Your love acting in grace, flowing in and through every one of my days. I believe that You love me, care for me, and guide me.

Thank You Lord that You are always there for me. The abundance of Your grace is far beyond anything I could imagine. The power of Your love blesses me in the most amazing ways. You love me unconditionally, and I want to do all that I can to honor Your gift of love and honor You, the giver and sustainer of my life.

Lord, thank You that there is nothing that will ever happen, and no situation I will ever face that is beyond Your touch.

Thank You that You love to extend grace to me.

Give me a heart that is always willing to receive from You.

Help me to put away my defenses and all the ways I think I can do things on my own.

Thank You that You do not measure my goodness, but You love to come into my life's circumstances and meet me exactly where I am.

Lord, I want to live today in the abundant grace You offer—Amen."

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#2 OBEYING GOD

Most of us have negative associations with at least some foods. They do not agree with us, either because our body lacks the enzymes to digest them, or because our stomach “just can’t handle them like it used to.” As youngsters, our dislike of everything from asparagus to mushrooms made us “picky eaters”—difficult to please, and even more difficult to keep nutritionally balanced. We tended not to like what was “good for us,” preferring to have deep-fried, rather than broiled, anything.

Fortunately, people do develop a taste for better foods. Now that we have discovered the marvelous flavor of mushrooms and asparagus, we cannot recall exactly why we did not like them. An expensive entrée of peppercorn steak, along with crisply steamed vegetables smothered in béarnaise sauce at a fine restaurant strikes us as an ideal meal, but when we were kids, our commentary would have been just the opposite: “Yuck, I hate pepper, and what’s this stuff on the carrots?” Sauces, spices and savors that would have turned our stomachs when we were six, seven or eight, now turn our heads.

It’s all about expectations. A kid who spots tiny bits of onion in the casserole is sure he is going to detect their terrible influence, no matter how much Mom says, “Just close your eyes; you won’t even taste them.” If you threw up after eating spinach, the two events became linked together in a subtle expectation that one event will more than likely follow the other. Just being told something is good for us, does not make it taste good. In fact, most of us believe that if it is good for us, it will not taste good. Vitamins and medicine taste bad, and we are slightly suspicious of anyone who really likes health foods.

So what happens? Why do we end up liking mushrooms? It’s usually by accident—we eat them without realizing it, and only later discover that they were ingredients in the dish. Our culinary

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN . . .

- What it means to obey the One who loves us.
- Why God wants us to obey His words.
- Why loving God and keeping His words are so closely connected.
- What sorts of things make it hard to listen carefully to God.

conversion begins with, “That’s not so bad after all,” and moves to an eager anticipation of the next time we can have sautéed mushrooms. What we did not think we liked becomes something we want to eat more and more.

A similar process takes place in learning to appreciate God’s counsel. In the early stages of your journey with God, you might not always think you “like” listening to God’s commands. That’s because we’re used to doing whatever we want, and when someone told us to “listen” as kids, it was just a way of saying, “You are about to get in trouble.” “Listen” meant, “You are not listening.” “Listen” usually preceded some sort of punishment, or at the very least it meant we had to stop doing or saying something we wanted. If words tasted like food, the taste of “listen” would be worse than liver; “listen” tastes boring, angry and “fun-stopping” to most kids—and to most adults. We want to get on with what we’re doing, not wait to have someone tell us what to do.

Questions: Why do you think people have a different interest in listening to someone in authority when they are going to be corrected (and punished), as opposed to when they need help and advice? To put it another way, why do the expectations we have about what we are going to hear change our attentiveness? _____

Read Isaiah 55:2–3. According to these verses, what four benefits come from listening to the Lord? _____

Read Jeremiah 13:11. This verse indicates another benefit from listening to God. What is it? _____

“LISTEN TO ME”

The loving, merciful and gracious God you are coming to know wants you to listen carefully to everything He says (Psalm 81:13). In the Bible, God admonishes us, more than almost anything else, to listen to Him. He wants us to listen to Him because it is the primary way He can bring blessing into our lives. The other voices we have

listened to—our natural inclinations, various temptations—have not been able to deliver the satisfaction they promised.

What God promises, He can deliver. He keeps His word, and even if we do not pay attention to His voice, He remains completely faithful to everything He has said. Just as He led His people to the Promised Land, so He leads us into good places through His promises. He wants us to know about His ways of life and how He has arranged life to work. He loves to share His truth with us just like someone might offer to shine a flashlight on the dark path in front of us (Isaiah 51:4).

Because of our experiences in life, and because of our “fallen nature,” our natural, almost instinctive reaction is to put our hands over our ears—trying to block out what we think we don’t want to hear. Rather than inclining our ears and leaning into His counsel, we tend to “stiffen” in anticipation of punishment or criticism (Jeremiah 7:26). Sometimes, like God’s people-of-old, we even close ourselves off from His words in outright stubbornness.

God is not mad at us when He says, “Listen carefully to Me.” He isn’t trying to steal away our fun or let us know how bad we have been. Rather, the Lord who forgives and frees us through the death of His own Son, simply wants to increase the amount of good we experience in the midst of this broken world. He instructs us carefully like someone giving directions to an out-of-town visitor. He wants “goodness and mercy” to be our portion all the days of our lives (Psalm 23:6, KJV). If God tells us how to get to a place of blessing, but we do not pay attention to or follow what He says, then despite His good intentions for us, we end up living in less than what He arranges for us.

Oh that My people
would listen to
Me, that Israel
would walk in
My ways!
—Psalm 81:13

Pay attention to
Me, O My people;
and give ear to
Me, O My nation;
for a law will go
forth from Me,
and I will set My
justice for a light
of the peoples.
—Isaiah 51:4

Yet they did not
listen to Me or
incline their ear,
but stiffened
their neck; they
did evil more
than their fathers.
—Jeremiah 7:26

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*God does not love us less when we disobey.
He doesn't change the level of His everlasting love for us
based on how well we listen to Him.*

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One of the most fundamental truths in the kingdom of God is that the more we obey God's words, the greater our joy and peace will be. God does not love us less when we disobey. He doesn't change the level of His everlasting love for us based on how well we listen to Him. We are already forgiven for the eternal consequences of sin, and disobedience has no impact whatsoever on the strength or the nature of our relationship with the Lord. Through His obedience on the cross, Jesus secured our unchanging relationship with God as His children.

But disobedience does rob us of the blessings that God intends for us. Your journey will be more difficult and less satisfying if you consistently disregard what God tells you. It will be hard for you to make much progress without obedience. By disobeying Him, we forfeit bits and pieces of His carefully designed scenario for our lives. And our rebellion against His ways causes us to "miss" some elements of bounty in our life, just as we miss seeing something of interest when a tour guide tells us to look to the left, and we choose to look the other way.

"MUST WE" OR "MAY WE" OBEY?

It was Adam and Eve's disobedience that introduced death into the world in the first place, and only Jesus' ultimate obedience to His Father saves us from those consequences (See Romans 5:12–19). As we learned earlier, our culture is a poor teacher about the things of God. This is especially true when it comes to the concept of obedience.

We have an image of obeying that looks like an unhappy soldier saluting stiffly and going off to do some unpleasant Christian duty. Or we think of a harried servant ordered to add another impossible task in an already full schedule. Perhaps worse than that, we sometimes feel that obedience means doing things just because God says we must—as though He lays out an obstacle course filled with arbitrary and unpleasant "have-tos" to see who is really committed to His cause.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Though obedience does usually call for some action or response from us, its primary meaning—the heart of obedience—is simply listening and paying attention to what God says to you. Literally, "to obey" means to listen attentively and carefully so that you really hear what is being said.

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Must we obey the Lord, or is it our great privilege to obey Him?

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Are we required to obey the Lord, or is obeying Him one of the greatest privileges and benefits on your journey? The better you understand God's counsel—and pay attention to what He says—the more you will see obeying as an advantage for your life. Job, a man who endured tremendous affliction in life, never forgot that God's counsel is part of His great "wisdom and might" (Job 12:13). In other words, God's power isn't just that He can do anything He wants (i.e., perform miracles to change our situation); His miraculous power-to-rearrange-life often comes through what He directs us to do!

The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart from generation to generation.

—Psalm 33:11

You have worked wonders, plans formed long ago, with perfect faithfulness.

—Isaiah 25:1

His words aren't just temporary bits of fleeting advice; they are as eternal as He is (Psalm 33:11). This will sound strange when I tell you that even God follows His own counsel! Everything He does—and tells us to do—is part of His great plan; in fact, God "works all things after the counsel of His will" (Ephesians 1:11). God's plans and His advice are both part of His faithfulness toward us (Isaiah 25:1). Because God knows exactly where He is taking us on our journey, He knows exactly when, where and how we're supposed to step, turn and move.

God's plea for our attention is another of the ways in which He seeks our best. Though everyone in the world can "hear" about the Lord when they listen to the majesty of creation, and even "hear" from Him in their conscience, for the most part, only His children get to receive specific words. It is one of our great privileges as His children.

But He answered and said, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God.'"

—Matthew 4:4

Jesus reminds us that the best source of life—the way by which we revive, recover and come into wholeness—are the words and counsel of God (Matthew 4:4). He also tells us that "the mouth speaks from that which fills the heart" (Luke 6:45). Since God's heart is completely full of love and affection for us, what He says to us in

His Word and by His Spirit is an expression of that love. God tells us what He tells us because He wants the very best for us.

Depending on how you understand God's favor and love for you, as well as His total commitment to your well-being and joy, your heart will answer this most important question on your journey: Must we obey the Lord, or is it our great privilege to obey Him?

Read Psalm 81:8-16. When we don't keep God's words, what spiritual influence are we likely following (v. 9)? _____

What has God done for us, and what does He promise He will do for us if we listen to Him (v. 10)? _____

Why are we sometimes left to our own devices and choices? _____

If we merely follow ourselves, how likely are we to be better off (v. 12)? _____

If we obey God, what does He promise to do to the things in life that oppose us (v. 14)? _____

PARENTAL ADVANTAGE

Throughout your journey, God's secret counsel is available to you, giving you true insider's information about what choices to make (Psalm 25:12-14). This secret counsel is what fellow believers refer to as being led by His voice and Spirit, and it will become one of the most distinguishing marks of your life. When people observe the way you live and the decisions you make, they will know there is something different about you. You have a perspective and a slant on life that they lack. You know things they cannot know because you are one of God's children—walking in His ways and listening to His counsel (Jeremiah 7:23).

Who is the man who fears the Lord? He will instruct him in the way he should choose. His soul will abide in prosperity, and his descendants will inherit the land. The secret of the Lord is for those who fear Him, and He will make them know his covenant.
—Psalm 25:12-14

Certainly that means you will have a different sense of right and wrong than others, but the main point of listening to God and obeying Him goes far beyond having a higher level of morality. Look at what happened to the disciples who spent lots of time listening to Jesus' instruction. Even though they were unsophisticated and uneducated, people who watched them were struck by their wisdom and "confidence" (Acts 4:13). The disciples had a quality that did not come from their natural abilities or worldly training. It was the result of following the Lord.

God instructs and trains us with His words, the way that a good father does—"for our good" (Hebrews 12:9–10). Of course, good parents talk to their children about right and wrong; they pass along values and the proper way to behave. But far beyond merely a code of ethics, loving mothers and fathers instruct their children about life and how things work: "This is how to draw an 'f' in longhand"; "Share your toys"; "Look both ways before crossing the street." And such parents also pass along invaluable lessons about relationships, how to handle money, the meaning of trust, how to treat others, etc.

To provide their children with the ultimate advantage for life, parents talk to their kids about life from a far more experienced and knowledgeable vantage point. Wise daughters and sons listen and take the words to heart, where they supply an endless stream of wisdom and counsel for the whole course of the children's lives (See Proverbs 3:1–2; 4:1–4; 20–22).

But this is what I commanded them, saying, "Obey My voice, and I will be your God, and you will be My people, and you will walk in all the way which I command you, that it may be well with you."

—Jeremiah 7:23

Now as they observed the confidence of Peter and John and understood that they were uneducated and untrained men, they were amazed, and began to recognize them as having been with Jesus.

—Acts 4:13

KNOWING GOD'S "SECRETS"

God is a “revealer of mysteries” (Daniel 2:47). He brings to light things that are normally out of sight to human perception and natural knowledge. As Moses puts it, “The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever” (Deuteronomy 29:29). As believers in Christ, we are “stewards of the mysteries of God” because we have been entrusted with His words for humankind (1 Corinthians 4:1).

The Lord does not reveal Himself and His plans to everyone. Consider Jesus’ teaching when He was on the earth. The multitude received parables and proverbs, but Jesus’ disciples heard the meaning of those parables. Only His disciples got to hear the “mysteries of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:11). By mysteries, Jesus did not mean strange or bizarre doctrines; rather, He meant secrets that are known only to those who have been initiated into the kingdom of God by being born again. (See John 3:3–7). In fact, God hides some truth from people who think they are so smart, and actively discloses truth to people who come to Him in simple, childlike trust (Luke 10:21).

This is one of the most incredible facets of your relationship with God—you get to receive from Him all sorts of instruction about the things of life. His words will fill your mind with wisdom. They will warn you of false and treacherous ways. They will comfort and secure you; they will lead and guide you.

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

—1 Corinthians 4:1

Jesus answered them, “To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.”

—Matthew 13:11

“I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight.”

—Luke 10:21

To obey God's words, to keep His counsel, simply means to pay very close attention to what He says, and to treasure His words in your heart, guarding them carefully lest they get stolen or misplaced. You will discover that the enemy of your heart, as well as your own fallen nature, will do everything possible to steal away the treasure-laden words God deposits in your life.

The more attention you give to the Lord's words, the more spiritual, emotional and personal abundance you will experience. The devil has always called God a liar, and his foremost ploy for getting humans to accept that accusation has been to convince us that God only gives commandments to withhold good things from us (See Genesis 3:5). The enemy says, "God's words deny you full fulfillment and pleasure." The truth is that there is no wisdom, no counsel, no understanding that goes against the leading and prompting of the Lord (Proverbs 21:30).

There is no wisdom and no understanding and no counsel against the LORD.
—Proverbs 21:30

THAT IT MAY GO WELL WITH YOU

As you are getting used to reading your Bible, try to get in the habit of looking for promises God makes to you. There are so many of them in the Scriptures, you almost cannot read even a short passage without encountering them. But when promises to us come right after commands for us, we tend to overlook them. The instruction—what God tells us to do—sometimes obscures the promised blessing, just as the taste of mushrooms obscured everything else when we were kids. Stated or implied with every command from the Lord is a blessing for our happiness and well-being.

The promise that most often follows commands is, "That it may go well with you." God wants us to obey His voice so that we receive our full inheritance. Just like personal lessons from a guitar teacher enable us to play better and with more confidence, instructions from God help us get better and better at living life. Why try and figure everything out on our own when God offers lessons for free?

QUESTION: The Promised Land was, of course, an actual country where the tribes of Israel lived, but it also represents the full measure of spiritual life God wants us to enjoy. He delivered us out of captivity in Egypt, and transferred us into the “kingdom of His beloved Son,” the Promised Land (Colossians 1:13–14).

Read Deuteronomy 4:39–40; 6:3, 18. Put into your own words what advantages we gain by being obedient to the Lord’s counsel.

When a friend with a green thumb tells us which plants will do well in that dry, sunny corner of our garden, our friend is not trying to shame us or to point out the barrenness in that part of our garden. The friend simply wants our yard to be as beautiful as possible. The same is true with God. Just as we enjoy conversation with close friends and loved ones, so God loves to talk with us. But He also wants to give us careful prompting for how to navigate our way through life with the least possible trauma and the greatest possible delight.

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*God counsels us so that we enjoy blessing
we might otherwise miss, but also so we miss a
terrible consequence that might otherwise come our way.*

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In the midst of a dangerously shattered cosmos that resembles the mangled insides of an earthquake-broken building, God gives detailed instructions for how to find our way safely out. He is like an air traffic controller talking us down for a safe landing after we discover both the pilot and copilot unconscious in the cockpit—and we are the only ones available to fly the plane. Not listening to the control tower has consequences for our safety and well-being, but that should not be misinterpreted as an angry threat from the controller. If your friend is the only one who knows the directions to get to the stadium, it only makes sense to pay attention to those directions. Follow them and you get there; don’t, and you won’t.

In a sense, then, everything God tells us comes with consequences—either giving us advantage or putting us at great disadvantage. God counsels us so that we enjoy blessing we might otherwise miss, but also so we miss hurtful consequences that might otherwise come our way (Deuteronomy 30:19). We enjoy the suspense in a movie when a character is trying to diffuse a time bomb. The big question is which color wire should be cut? The guessing and half-remembering are all part of a good plot. But what makes a good movie makes a lousy life. Having God whisper in your ear to cut the red wire is a lifesaver—unless you disregard His counsel and cut the blue one.

“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants.”
—Deuteronomy 30:19

KEEPING THE WORDS OF THE ONE WE LOVE

Jesus says, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15). Some Christians have missed God’s heart in what He says. Missing His promise, they misunderstand His words. They see “keeping” God’s words as proving our love, or even more tragically, they misread the verse to say something like, “If you want Me to love you, you better keep My commandments.” Such an understanding flies in the face of God’s proactive love for us—a love that leaves little for us to do except to accept it. To feel that we must do things (obey) for His love (rather than as a response coming from gratitude for His love) eliminates the marvel and joy of inexplorable grace.

Whenever you feel that God is trying to take something from you—as proof or penance or payment—you can almost always count on the fact that you have misunderstood something. Jesus’ words are a good case in point—first of all, they are a promise, not a demand. In effect He is saying, “Because of your love for Me, you will end up keeping My words.” In the final analysis, our love for Jesus tethers our heart to what He wants for us, even though, like Peter, we might periodically deny Him by choices we make (See Luke 22:54–62). We are flesh and blood, and we are still learning how to see things correctly. So, there will be times when

Jesus' penetrating truth confronts and challenges what we want (our desires) or our natural understanding (what we think).

Ultimately, His love for us—and the responsive love we have for Him—will carry the day. As hard as it may be, and as long as it might take, eventually our love for Him wins out over our love for wrongs in our life.

Read John 6:66–69. What made some people stumble over Jesus' words? _____

Why did the disciples choose to stay with Jesus? What can you learn from that? _____

When we are sorely tempted to reject Jesus' instruction, our love for Him offers extra incentive and determination to keep His words. It is like a small girl trapped in a dangerous spot as a result of a landslide; if she tries to move too quickly or in the wrong direction, the precarious ledge she is on will give way and hurl her to her death. Panic seizes her; the many voices and noises disorient her. Finally, a father's calming voice tells her exactly what to do. He guides her one step at a time because she is used to fastening onto his voice. She can focus on his words because of the loving connection they have shared from their history.

THE MEANING OF DISOBEDIENCE

The connection between listening to God and loving God is so significant that we find it virtually everywhere in the Bible. Never forget that His words—including His commands—are expressions of His love. They are not arbitrary, uncaring orders spoken harshly because He is irritated. His words are a manifestation of tender regard and affection for us. Since only His people are afforded the privilege of hearing His words, listening to Him and obeying Him identify us as His people (Deuteronomy 4:7).

“For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as is the Lord our God whenever we call on Him?”
—Deuteronomy 4:7

Does that mean that whenever we disobey the Lord and fall prey to carnal desires, we no longer love Jesus? No. Does He stand over us with a

measuring stick, evaluating the quality and extent of our love for Him on the basis of our sinlessness? Absolutely not.

People who do not know the Lord do not care about what He says. We who love Him do care. Even in those times when we disobey His words and go against His counsel, we are very aware of His words. We know we are doing wrong because it contradicts God's word. We are mindful of our guiltiness because we acknowledge the truth of what He has said to us. If we did not "keep" Jesus' words, we would not acknowledge our sin as wrong, or we would not even care that it is wrong.

The sin that "indwells" each of us will do many wrong things. We know they are wrong, and we try our best to resist them because we do "pay attention to" God's word. We have all broken the law by speeding (doing 45 miles per hour in a 35-mile-per-hour zone), and the whole time we are driving too fast, we know it (which is why we keep a vigilant eye out for patrol officers). We half expect to get caught, and we are prepared, ahead of time, to accept the consequences because we accept the authority of the speed limit sign. Violating the posted speed is very different from refusing to accept the speed limit: "I know I'm 10 miles per hour over the speed limit" is not the same as "Nobody can tell me how fast to drive."

DOING WHAT WE KNOW IS WRONG

Read Romans 7:14–8:1. As strange as it may sound and as easily as it can become a license for unrepentant hearts to do whatever they want to do, it still must be said: When we do what we know is wrong and end up practicing the very things that we know we should not do, we are, in a profound way, agreeing with the word of God, "confessing that it is good [right]" (Romans 7:16). The reason that we know the activity is wrong is because the Bible says it is wrong. It correctly identifies our behavior or thought as sin.

As Paul experienced firsthand, our flesh is in bondage to sin—our natural inclinations are to go against the very truth of God. No matter how spiritual we ever become, our flesh will always be fleshly, and capable of "ordering us around" like a cruel taskmaster. Our inner person, the part of us that has been regenerated and born again in the Spirit, detests sin. It hates the sin that drags us around. Our inner self agrees with God's word. Rather than dismissing God's commentary, our spirit wants to "keep" His word, and resist the wrong behavior.

We wish we were stronger to resist sin's temptation, and many times we are. But on those occasions when we are not able to say no, we can see the evil that still resides in our flesh. Our flesh exerts its influence to get us to do something that we fully agree is wrong. It is disillusioning to discover just how carnal we can be at times. Though we try to deny our fleshly longings, we do not always succeed, and that simply proves that there is a huge war going on inside of us.

If we just surrendered to our flesh and didn't care whether or not we were doing wrong, there would not be a battle raging between our conscience and our lust. If we did not pay attention to His word that tells us the activity is wrong, we would not be troubled by doing it. But we do care, and that is why we feel so badly about doing wrong. How torturous it is to still be so bound by sinful desires even while we are so in love with Jesus.

How does He view us? As hypocrites? As liars and spiritual con artists? No! He knows that we cannot save ourselves, and neither can we keep ourselves. He came to set us free for eternity, and He is pleased to be able to grant us forgiveness and freedom each day. Because of His grace, "there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." Whereas we condemn ourselves for being such weak followers of Christ, He shifts the blame and elects to condemn the sin that tries to pull us from Him (Romans 8:3).

Throughout your walk with the Lord, you will feel like a divided person—your heart and mind want to keep God's words, but your flesh wants to follow the whispers of sin. Here the path gets very narrow, with steep and deadly drop-offs to either side. The falsehood on the left says, "You can do anything you want to do as long as you feel badly about doing it." The lie on the right declares, "If you sin, you obviously do not love God." The devil delights in human hearts that are (1) hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, and/or (2) pummeled by feelings of unanswerable guilt.

THE SOWER'S WORD SEEDS

Jesus' ultimate purpose for coming to Earth was to be the sacrifice that enables all of us to be forgiven for our sins, and freed forever from their power to sentence us to eternal death. Jesus knew that freedom would only be accomplished by His death. After He was

gone, His disciples would remain on Earth to carry out His ministry of hope and good news. Therefore, Jesus spent lots of time teaching His disciples about the kingdom of God—the rulership, dominion and authority of God reasserting itself in the midst of this rebellious planet.

The Lord wants us to function effectively in His kingdom. Doing so is our earthly destiny and the source of our greatest fulfillment. That is why He wants us to listen to Him: He gives us careful tutoring about what to do or say in order to change the broken people and circumstances around us. When Jesus explains the sower and the seed parable to His disciples, He impresses upon them that if they “do not understand this parable,” they will not “understand all the parables [the rest of what He says]” (Mark 4:13). Why?

This parable lays out another vital aspect of obeying God on your journey—holding on to what you hear, guarding it and watching over it lest His words get stolen away in the shuffle of life. What sorts of things make it difficult for us to keep holding on to what He says?

BIRDS

First of all, if you do not really hear what the Lord says, or pay attention to it, the enemy will snatch His words away before they have a chance to sink down into your heart. Since God’s words are small compared to all the other messages coming from the world, it is easy to overlook them or to think that they are too small to make a big difference (Mark 4:31).

If you attach little significance to what He says, His message will quickly disappear from your awareness, and you will be denied the benefit it would have brought you (Mark 4:15). It is like hearing about an easy-to-miss, out-of-the-way

And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, “Listen to this! Behold, the sower went out to sow; as he was sowing, some seed fell beside the road, and the birds came and ate it up. Other seed fell on the rocky ground where it did not have much soil; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of soil. And after the sun had risen, it was scorched; and because it had no root, it withered away. Other seed fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. Other seeds fell into the good soil, and as they grew up and increased, they yielded a crop and produced thirty, sixty, and a hundredfold.” And He was saying, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”
—Mark 4:2-9

Italian restaurant, but not paying close attention to how to get there. When it comes time for dinner, you can't recall the directions, so you have to settle for a fast-food burger instead of cannelloni.

ROCKS

Similarly, when you merely enjoy God's words only so long as they are easy to accommodate—when nothing in your life circumstances challenges their truthfulness—they will evaporate without leaving any lasting fruit. It is easy to get excited about what God promises to do for you when you are in a church service surrounded by enthusiastic friends and good music. God's word sounds great! But all alone, in those seasons of testing when there is a price to pay for holding to His word, you discover how deep the roots of His counsel have been allowed to go in your heart.

Rocks and roots do not do well together. Almost always, God's words bring about change in our life. Consequently, His words bump up against hard places in your life. For instance, He will tell you to forgive someone, and it will not be easy—for any number of reasons (they are not sorry, they keep doing wrong, they aggravated an old, unhealed wound). Since the rocks in our soul, the hard, unmovable, impenetrable spots, are mostly made up of our conclusions about life, our heart will come up with many legitimate-sounding reasons why we cannot follow God's counsel.

That is when the rubber meets the obedience road. That is what faith is all about. Our loving Father will never ask us to do anything that jeopardizes us. His words lead only to life and fulfillment. Obeying Him means that we choose to believe what God says even in the face of contrary statements uttered by our own perspectives or by the world around us. God's words are meant to develop healthy root systems that tap into a deeper water supply than just what is on the surface in our situations (Mark 4:17). Words that bear fruit must have roots. Either the roots will weed out the rocks, or the rocks will disallow the roots.

WEEDS

Even when you recognize a whisper from the Lord and let it develop deep roots in your heart, remember that there are other very strong plants growing in that same heart. Just like in your garden outside, incredibly hardy weeds compete for the same moisture and

nutrients needed by the planting of the Lord. If those other words are not pulled out from your heart, they will “choke the word” from God, leaving it emaciated and “unfruitful” (Mark 4:18–19). Every gardener knows that if you want to plant a new lawn from grass seed, you better fumigate the soil and treat it with weed killer. Otherwise, no matter how many grass seeds you sow, the weeds will seize the moment and hijack the moisture and fertilizer for their own purposes. In this broken world, weeds have the advantage.

In other words, what you and I do in response to what the Lord says to us determines what those words do to us. Since God’s words are usually faint, small or seemingly unrelated to the “big” need we face, it is easy to overlook or disregard His instruction. If we are not careful to give His words the weight they deserve in our lives, those words will not have the impact on our situation that God intended them to have. On the other hand, when we do pay attention to His whisper to our heart and follow His counsel, we will experience tremendous benefit and breakthrough. If we value God’s words, they will enrich us. If we cultivate them, they will grow us (Mark 4:24). God’s words produce good fruit in our lives.

FOLLOWERS OF GOD’S WORDS

When you received Jesus Christ as your Savior, you became one of His followers; you follow His teaching and way of life. You are trained and shaped by His words. You cannot follow Him like the multitudes of old who physically followed Jesus, even into the wilderness, to be touched and taught by Him. The only way you can meaningfully follow Jesus on your journey is to follow His instructions for life in general and His specific promptings for your individual life. That’s what it means to follow in His way, what Jesus meant when He said that His sheep hear and know His voice (John 10:4–5).

That sounds easy enough in some ways, but more often than not, Jesus’ words and counsel run exactly contrary to everything we have ever been taught. To a natural person, the “things of the Spirit of God... are foolishness... and he cannot understand them” (1 Corinthians 2:14). What God says rarely lines up with how we are used to thinking. Thus, if we want to follow the Lord, we must get used to turning a deaf ear to our old ways of thinking in favor of the new ways He offers us through His words (Mark 8:34). That is what

Jesus means by “denying” ourselves. He says if we want to come after Him—line up and fit in with where He is going—we must deny and contradict the mental presumptions and patterns that have navigated life for us thus far. Over and over, the Lord says, “Trust Me, this is how things really work: The last end up first. Give, and you end up with more. Greatness comes through servanthood.”

The more you listen to the Lord, the more you will realize the huge contradiction between His words and the words you are accustomed to hearing. It is impossible to listen to both. It would be like trying to hear what is being said if two teaching CDs were accidentally dubbed over one another. Jesus tells us to pay attention to His words, not to the instructions that come from our own heart.

The conclusions we come to about what to say, think or do in life will be based either on our natural thoughts or on God’s everlasting words (Matthew 24:35). The only sure foundation—the one that will stand up to the storms and pressures of life—is the words of the Lord (Luke 6:47–49). His words prompt us to act in a particular way; they direct us to adopt a posture toward things that face us; they align the details of our mind and heart to best fit in with what God wants to do for us and through us in every situation.

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*We are safe in His counsel, and even in those times
 when His love causes Him to correct us, what He says
 will produce good fruit in our future rather than shame about our past.*

That is why one of the main jobs of the Holy Spirit is to “bring to your remembrance all that I [Jesus] said to you” (John 14:26). Jesus’ words act as pathways to guide our steps. As you grow in the Lord, you will become better and better at hearing His voice and following His promptings. But for now, remember that listening to God involves two basic choices that you will make over and over—(1) how eager and welcoming are you to hear what He is saying; and, (2) how closely will you follow what He says?

All His words are spoken out of love and compassion and kindness. His words are for our advantage and blessing. We can trust everything He says and believe that His instructions really work—even when our natural thinking tells us they won’t. We are

safe in His counsel, and even in those times when His love causes Him to correct us, what He says will produce good fruit in our future rather than shame about our past (Hebrews 12:11). His voice can become the focal point for our attention in the midst of great stress or danger. And no matter how lost we have become, the Lord is always happy to hop in the car we're driving so He can give us detailed directions for getting back on track.

What an incredible privilege—to know the God of creation so intimately that He counsels us and guides us with His words (Psalm 73:24).

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

What does it mean to obey God and keep His words? _____

How has your understanding about obedience changed as a result of reading this chapter? _____

Why does God want us to listen to His words? What can we learn from God's secret counsel? _____

Why is loving God so closely connected to listening to God? _____

Recalling what God said in the past strengthens our ability and confidence in hearing His voice. Think of specific things God has said to you recently. How did you hear His voice in those situations? _____

What makes it hard to listen to God's words and hold on to what He says? _____

What does it mean to follow in Jesus' ways? What did Jesus mean when He said that His sheep hear and know His voice? _____

What does Jesus mean by denying ourselves? What is the difference between Jesus' understanding of denial and what others or society say about denial? _____

YOUR TIME WITH GOD

Amazing—we get to receive counsel, instruction, advice and warning from the Creator of the universe. He instructs in the way we should go in order to bring more bounty and blessing into our life. Can you think of specific points of counsel Jesus has given you recently? Have you been following what He said? If you have, what blessing or good have His words brought into your life? If you have not been following His advice, will you acknowledge that to Him and ask Him, using your own words or those that follow, what you should do now?

Prayer:

“Help me, Father, to be a better listener. Open my ears to Your voice only. I do not want to follow my own counsel, or that of any false influence. Help me listen to You and to the wise counsel of others. The other whispers—my own thoughts and desires, things I hear from the world around me—sometimes drown out what You say to me. I want to be a more active listener and more responsive to what You say.

How often have I heard You speak but refused to listen, refused to acknowledge what You said and refused to obey and act upon it? Forgive me for turning a deaf ear to You so many times. I know You love me and only want the best for me. Forgive me for the times I have let myself think You were trying to withhold something good from me. That is a lie I do not want to listen to.

Plant Your seeds of life in my heart; let me recognize Your voice better and better. I do love You, Lord, and I want Your words. I welcome Your counsel and the sound of Your voice. Teach me from Your Word and alert me to Your truth for my life. Speak to me, Savior. Thank you, Lord, in Your name—Amen.”

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#3 CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

When we first start our journey with God, lining up the particulars of our life with His ways is like learning a new language. It doesn't seem like we're making much progress in the beginning as we concentrate on simple vocabulary and basic phrases. And since the new language is so opposite from our natural language, we have to remember to think "backwards"—like putting adjectives behind the noun as the French do, instead of in front of the noun as the English do (i.e., le tricot rouge not the red sweater). Of course, once you learn a language, such things make much more sense. So it is with the ways of the Lord: the more of them we learn, the more each of them makes better sense.

Unfortunately, some of the most important understandings for your walk with the Lord are difficult to understand because people explaining them sometimes use religious language. Since many of those religious words aren't commonly used in everyday conversation, it's doubly challenging for people new to the journey to grasp what God wants them to know. It's troublesome enough for us to embrace spiritual truth because even on the best day, we only

When I was a child, I used to speak as a child, think as a child, reason as a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.
—1 Corinthians 13:11–12

see dimly into the realm of the spirit (1 Corinthians 13:11-12). We are like young children trying to understand concepts too advanced for our limited vocabulary. That's why it helps so much to have our Bible as the map for our journey with God.

But even with it in hand, we will not always clearly discern what the Lord is trying to say to us about His way of life. Some Bible words have been loaded down with impressions we have picked up from society or religious people. Those associations and connotations overpower the words' spiritual meanings. One of the best examples I can give you

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN . . .

- Why repentance has such negative connotations.
- What it means to repent.
- Why repentance is the beginning of the "Good News."
- How repentance is a process, not a one-time act.
- Why God's kindness, not His wrath, calls us to repentance.

of our distorted perspective about life-giving, spiritual truth is the word “repent.” That’s what this chapter is all about. Frankly, the title of this chapter doesn’t contain “repent” because your vague thoughts about it would probably have put you off from reading about repentance. If you want to make good progress on your journey, repentance is essential. Repentance enables you to get turned back around whenever you get lost or off track—regardless of whose fault it might be that you ended up where you do not belong.

Sadly, the world at large has been left with the idea that God still holds people in disdain, and that He disapproves of almost everything about us. Unintentional religiousness (either in us or in others) wrongly communicates God’s displeasure with our race, and our need to make things up to Him. Because religion misses the whole point that God, by His grace and His work (alone), has done all that needs doing to fully restore and assure relationship between Him and us, it tries to yoke us back up to “have-tos,” “musts,” “shoulds” and “you-betters.”

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*Repentance enables you to get turned back around
whenever you get lost or off track—regardless of whose fault
it might be that you ended up where you do not belong.*

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There is, as we have seen, a dynamic interplay between forgiveness and obedience. Because we are forgiven (for everything for all time), we want to be more responsive to what the Lord tells us, but being more (or less) obedient does nothing to affect how forgiven we are. As simple and as redundant as that may seem, it holds the key to understanding many of the tools God offers to us for making our journey through this broken world. For instance, the Lord encourages us to (1) give preference to others, or (2) turn the other cheek. Sounds crazy and backwards, but He instructs us in such ways in order to shower us with more blessing!

Religion distorts the equation, and tells us to do what God says, “or else!” Instead of gratitude, excitement and anticipation of future blessing, religion leaves us with feelings of guilt, shame and unworthiness. You will encounter fellow-travelers on your journey

who are driven and motivated by guilt and shame for what they have done, instead of celebration for what God has done for them.

The balance between obedience and forgiveness shows up again and again in the Bible.

Read 1 John 1:10 through 2:2. Does God gain from our obedience, or lose from our disobedience? What motivates Him to forgive us?

In light of His great mercy and love for us, why do you think He wants us to pay close attention to His words? _____

Read Romans 6:16 and Galatians 5:1. What slavery did He free us from? _____

Why does He want us to obey Him? _____

On your journey, always interpret God’s words on the basis of what He wants to do for you, instead of what He wants you to do for Him. Otherwise, you will miss what He has in mind. He never commands or instructs out of frustration or exasperation. He is completely against anything that might ruin His children or His Creation, and even when He gives stern words to us, He’s doing so in order to preserve us—not hurt us.

His commands contain the built-in trailer, “...that it may go well with you” (Deuteronomy 6:18). Because we don’t see the whole picture or understand the depth of His plans, we are sometimes tempted to view God as a demanding and exacting Judge. We can be sidetracked by fear of being punished, rather than hope of being blessed.

You shall do what is right and good in the sight of the LORD, that it may be well with you and that you may go in and possess the good land which the LORD swore to give your fathers.

—Deuteronomy 6:18

REpent FOR YOUR SAKE

Some of the terms people use to speak about the ways of the Lord get mired in half-truths and give the mistaken impression that God is less than kind—or, at least, not interested in abounding toward us. Cultural definitions and connotations do not always match what the Bible means. As you travel this journey and read your Bible, be watchful for words whose natural definition may not adequately express what God means when He uses them.

Repentance is a perfect example of this discrepancy. Our culture views repentance as a terrible-tasting medicine, an uncomfortable and humiliating experience we're supposed to periodically endure, like spending an entire day in the hospital, undergoing a complete physical examination dressed in a hospital-gown (that's missing one of its ties). We view repentance with as much anticipation as a root canal.

Being told to repent feels like being caught and sent to our room until we can admit that we misbehaved so badly. The tone of voice we hear when we think of repentance is angry, stern and hostile. We associate it more with browbeating than with anything uplifting. Repentance conjures up images of doomsday prophets carrying placards that announce the end of the world, or, of frustrated instructors who have nearly run out of patience with our persistent inability to perform adequately. When we think of John the Baptist, the primary biblical character associated with repentance, we picture a burly, bearded, caveman-looking person in animal skins, wagging his finger in people's faces, yelling, "Repent!"

Most of us have seen someone on a street corner or at a public gathering telling everyone else to repent. Those real-life examples have not helped us embrace this most-marvelous provision of the Lord. Their call to repentance and angry demand to reform is shame-based; they want us to realize how bad we are—and admit to it. Such a notion of repentance focuses on our failures and shortcomings, as though the main point is to put our wrongs on display like so much dirty laundry. No wonder we feel like crossing the street to get away from their strident cries. Those who point out and damn everyone else's sin communicate an "(I am) holier-than-thou" attitude that is completely out of sync with the gracious mercy of the Lord.

QUESTIONS: Read the following passages and ask yourself if they “sound” like your impression of repentance. Answer the question after each verse:

Isaiah 55:3. What two things does God want to do for those who return to Him? _____

Matthew 11:28. What does Jesus want to give to those who return to Him? _____

John 5:40. What do people miss out on if they are unwilling to return to Jesus? _____

John 6:65. Is coming to the Lord a required obligation, or a granted privilege? _____

John 7:37. Is Jesus extending an invitation, or issuing a demand? _____

THE BEGINNING OF GOOD NEWS

Our impression of repentance is far from favorable or inviting. And yet, the Bible tells us that repentance is the starting point for the good news (See Mark 1:4). The gospel message is that our life and, thereby, our hope are not finished. God has an extraordinary future for us, so where we are now, and what is true of our life at this point, is not the final story. Today is not forever; change is possible. Broken relationships, huge debt, dogged depression, hidden cravings, raging tempers, foul language, choking bitterness and paralyzing fears—all can be changed in the name of Jesus. That is the good news. Our sins can be forgiven; our brokenness can be restored.

And that’s where repentance comes in. It surprises most believers to discover that repentance is so central to what God promises to do to transform us. For instance, the Lord, our Shepherd, “restores [repents] our soul” (Psalm 23:3); the perfect word of God does likewise (Psalm 19:7). Repentance is a

John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.
—Mark 1:4

The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring [repenting] the soul.
—Psalm 19:7

spiritual activity that miraculously sets our face toward a future other than the one we are doomed to get if we stay on our current path. Repentance is not a tool to condemn us for where we have been, but an instrument of blessing to get us where God eagerly wants us to end up.

Read Luke 24:46-47. Jesus said this to His disciples just before He ascended into Heaven. How do you think the message of repentance would sound if Jesus had not died and been resurrected—if there was no forgiveness available to us from God? _____

John the Baptist, a messenger sent by God, alerted people to the unimaginable opportunity Jesus offered. John was like an amnesty announcement from a government—telling everyone who is in the country illegally they will be exempt from prosecution, and receive their citizenship simply by coming to Jesus and admitting that they have been in the country illegally. The Lord does not want anyone to miss the opportunity to be recovered and restored, so He sent a messenger ahead of Jesus to get everyone ready to receive Him.

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*Repentance is not a tool to condemn us for where we have been,
but an instrument of blessing to get us where God wants us to end up.*

.....

John was excited, not angry, when he exclaimed, “Prepare the way of the Lord.” It wasn’t a threat telling kids they better straighten up their room or they won’t get dinner, but an announcement that Grandma and Grandpa are coming to take everyone to dinner—so come inside and get ready. John did not come to tell people how bad they were; he came to tell them how different they could become. Jesus was coming to turn everything around, and to put things back into their intended place.

Restoration is one of the most central themes of repentance; in fact, “repent” [the Hebrew word *shuw*] is translated “restore” in many verses in the Old Testament. The point of repenting is to “return” things to their original order and condition.

QUESTIONS: As a forerunner (like Elijah), John the Baptist went before Jesus to “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Jesus calls him “Elijah who was to come” to restore all things (Matthew 11:14). Here are some examples of repentance and promised restoration. Read them, and answer the questions.

Deuteronomy 30:3. In compassion, God gathers us to Himself, in order to relieve us from what through repentance? _____

Psalms 80:3. When we get turned away from the Lord, what turns us back around toward His shining face? _____

Jeremiah 15:19. When we repent to the Lord, what does He do to us? _____

Jeremiah 29:14. Put the promises in this verse into your own words for your own life. When you repent, what does the Lord do?

Jeremiah 30:18. Since our repentance leads to our restoration, do you think it is God’s compassion or His anger that leads us to repentance? _____

For the most part, we do not need anyone to tell us how bad we are. Even though we try not to sin, we keep doing it. Awareness of our failures stares us down day after day. Repentance is not God’s way of rubbing our faces in our stuff to be sure we acknowledge its existence. Rather, repentance is the kingdom way of asking God to fix what is wrong in our lives—as opposed to trying to fix those things in our own strength.

The call to repent is not a warning to fix ourselves quickly before the Lord comes, but an opportunity to acknowledge where we are wrong and lost, where we desperately need His intervention and rescue. Repentance is our opportunity to send out a distress signal when our boat is taking on water and sinking; it is not a frantic redoubling of effort to bail the rising water more quickly. Repentance is for real people with real shortcomings who long for full restoration.

FETCHED HOME AGAIN

When we read about the throngs of people who eagerly traveled into the wilderness to repent and be baptized (Mark 1:4-5), we have to ask ourselves why? Why would so many people go through the hassle and inconvenience of traveling all that distance if they were going to get yelled at and shamed? It makes no sense; people avoid censure, they do not seek it out. If John's call to repentance was an angry, threatening shout, it is unlikely that anyone would have been interested and drawn to the opportunity. Our cultural image of a soapbox doomsayer and the feelings we have about repentance are completely inconsistent with this scene of swarms of folks racing to get a chance to repent.

What did they experience that is different from what we associate with repentance? Why were they so eager to repent, whereas we are so reluctant to do so? Perhaps some were just curious (about the details of their neighbors' public confessions), but curiosity alone or just "going along with the crowd" are not enough to explain why people went out of their way to repent.

The multitudes came from miles around because they heard from John a message of hope and forgiveness quite different from the religious condemnation they usually heard from the Pharisees. It is no accident that John "appeared in the wilderness." Instead of being written off as hopelessly lost sinners who were not good enough to worship in the city temple, normal people like us heard, for the first time, a message from God directed to people's wilderness places. God willingly visits the areas in our lives where things are wrong, where they are crooked, where things are out of control.

DESERT PLACES

The Bible is full of vivid imagery that communicates profound realities in our lives. Among the most telling of such pictures is an analogy of desert places—dry, desolate regions that drain away life rather than support it. In the Middle East there is quite a contrast between well-watered gardens and open stretches of rocky waste, between rivers and streams and dry canyons. No one survives long in the desert.

The wilderness, parched and empty, portrays a spiritual condition into which people fall because of their rebellion against the ways of the Lord (Psalm 68:6). Think of the contrast there must have been in the minds of the people of Israel, between the Garden of Eden, out of whose headwaters flowed four major rivers (see Genesis 2:10-14), and the vast stretches of desert all around them. They were led through the wilderness to the Promised Land—a land that drank “*water from the rain of heaven*” (Deuteronomy 11:11), and was personally watered by the Lord (Psalm 65:10). They were told that if they walked in disobedience to Him, He would withhold the rains and the land would be unable to produce life-sustaining fruit (Deuteronomy 11:17).

One of the common phrases believers use to describe their spiritual condition on their journey—especially after making mistakes or getting caught up in the swirl of life on Earth—is “dry.” By “dry,” they mean they do not feel close to God. Even though He is always with us, and never deserts us, rebellion and mistakes sometimes enable desert sands to encroach on our lush garden. David felt like that at times:

“O God, Thou art my God; I shall seek Thee earnestly; my soul thirsts for Thee, my flesh yearns for Thee, in a dry and weary land where there is no water.”—Psalm 63:1

In His mercy and grace, God converts our desert places into pools of water; He changes the empty, dry points in our lives into rivers and streams:

“He changes a wilderness into a pool of water, and a dry land into springs of water;” —Psalm 107:35

“I will open rivers on the bare heights, and springs in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land fountains of water.” —Isaiah 41:18

God’s nearness is often described as rain coming to water and to refresh (Hosea 6:3). His righteousness rains down on us (10:12). The Gospel message promises to restore our righteousness by pouring out His Spirit: *“For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out My Spirit on your offspring, and My blessing on your descendants”* (Isaiah 44:3). The Lord comes into our rebellious, dry places and fills them with rivers of His Spirit.

Foolish, short-sighted choices we make get us lost in the wilderness. Those bad decisions are followed up by several missed opportunities to get back on the path. Whether it is one or a string of a dozen wrong steps we take away from God’s best plan for us, we end up feeling guilty. Not surprising, since we are guilty of missteps. Be careful, though, on your journey. That sense of guilt can mislead you into trying (hard) to find your own way back home. By yourself. Anything spiritual we do on our own, without God, is dangerous.

He doesn’t want you to fix things on your own. Trying to do it all yourself is like being lost in the mountain forest and, instead of collecting wood to light a signal fire on a mountaintop to call for help, you chase another rabbit trail hoping it will get you back where you belong. Repentance calls for rescue while we are lost, while we are still in our out-of-control state, while we are helpless to help ourselves. It is a flare we send up so the search party can find us and return us to where we belong. One of the literal meanings of repent is to “fetch back home.”

God uses our repentance to bring us home. People who misunderstand repentance wrongly conclude that they are supposed to wait until they have stopped sinning before they repent. They think they must wait until they’re out of the woods for good before they can legitimately ask for forgiveness and rescue. Instead of sending up the flare, they tell themselves, “You got yourself into this mess; you’re going to have to get yourself out.” Or, they take it one step further and conclude the only way to prove to God that they are deeply sorry for what they have done wrong (again) is to

somehow find their way home without His help: “Don’t bother God with your excuses and your whining, just turn your life around now.”

QUESTIONS: Read 2 Kings 5:1-14. This is the story of Naaman the Leper. As a mighty general, Naaman was prepared to do any feat of strength or valor to gain God’s favor and healing. When the prophet told him to do a simple, easy thing in order to have his flesh restored (repented back to its intended condition), Naaman was furious. Why? _____

Why do you suppose God invites us to obey His simple way, rather than requiring big things of us? _____

The simple, easy things are usually the means by which God accomplishes His desire in our lives. Repentance is one of those easy-sounding activities, and our own pride will try to prove our valor and sincerity to God, just like Naaman did. Try to remember the words of Naaman’s servant: “My father, had the prophet told you to do some great thing, would you not have done it? How much more then, when he says to you, ‘Wash, and be clean?’”

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast.

—Ephesians 2:8–9

Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?

—Romans 2:4

KIND CALLING

Activities and prerequisites that sound noble or religiously correct often miss the heart of God. Remember that we are saved by grace, not by our own goodness or by our own effort (Ephesians 2:8-9). It is the “kindness of God” and His patience—not His anger or frustration—that lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4). If we do not remember how fondly He thinks of us and that He wants us to be with Him all the time—no matter what we have done, or how badly we have gotten ourselves lost—we will fail to make use of this wonderful gift called repentance.

Since He made such gracious provision for our eternal salvation, it makes no sense for Him to shift and require us to make our own way day to day. Repentance is as gracious as salvation!

In fact, repentance is mostly pictured in the Bible as a gift, a mercy, a boon “granted” by God (Acts 5:31). It is not a line He draws in the sand; it is not a precursor to the punishment. Neither is repentance a chance to prove ourselves to God: even though we have done wrong, we’re going to try to “make it up to” Him by showing Him how disgusted we are with ourselves. Repentance is a spiritual dynamic, a means by which God rescues and restores His people.

He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.
—Acts 5:31

This is the only thing I want to find out from you: did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?
—Galatians 3:2-3

A subtle temptation we all face in our spiritual life is to try to “take over from here”—to appreciate what God did for us prior to today, but to assume the burden for keeping ourselves straight from this point forward. We try perfecting ourselves “in the flesh,” rather than continuing on in the Spirit (Galatians 3:3). In other words, we attempt to behave well enough, in order to be considered good enough to repent enough of the bad things in our lives. It feels dishonest to tell the Lord about our wrongs before we correct them. We mistakenly presume that we should wait until we’re out of the woods—no longer lost—before we repent about being lost.

We get trapped by an incorrect conclusion: only after we have successfully resisted the temptation to rage, covet or drink is it legitimate and acceptable to repent of our deep anger, covetousness or problem with alcohol. Can you see how that misconception keeps us from wanting to repent? Repentance draws attention to various habits, thoughts, behaviors and attitudes that do not belong in our life. They aren’t what we know they should be (our clue for repentance), and we have already tried as much as we know how to stop them—without lasting success. If we wrongly believe that repentance is our promise never to do again what we have been doing wrong, we must wait until the temptation has been fully conquered

before we can legitimately repent. We do not want to bring the sin to His attention until we have it under control.

.....

*God doesn't say, "Change! Then you can legitimately repent."
No, He says, "Repent. Then you will be able to change."*

.....

But that is like waiting until you have recovered from an illness before visiting the doctor, or like finding your way in a strange city before you ask for directions. That is backwards. Like the Sabbath or the Bible, repentance was designed to serve us, not the other way around. God doesn't say, "Change! Then you can legitimately repent." No, He says, "Repent. Then you will be able to change."

MERCIFUL CONVERSION

Repentance is a process of conversion, exchanging one reality for another, converting something into another thing. When you travel to a far off country, your first order of business, after you collect your luggage from the carousel, is to convert your money to the currency of the nation you are in. Otherwise, your money is worthless—not accepted. The exchange process is fairly simple: place as much money as you want to convert on the bank counter, and the teller will replace it with Swiss francs, Norwegian kroner, etc. Any money you leave in your wallet and choose not to put on the counter doesn't get converted.

God's ways and thoughts are not like ours; our two worlds operate under two completely different governments and economies. Earthly money will get us nowhere in God's kingdom. But repentance takes the currency of the world—wrong thoughts, feelings, desires and actions—and exchanges them for the currency of the kingdom. In the same way we convert dollars for Thai Baht, repentance converts our sin; it exchanges our unrighteous deeds for the righteousness found in Jesus (1 Timothy 1:14).

All along your journey, you will find God so willing to make that exchange. He waits eagerly for

...even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are found in Christ Jesus.
—1 Timothy 1:13-14

us to bring Him wrong thoughts or behaviors, so He can convert them. Without provision for conversion, our thoughts and ways will not be able to match up to His. Our iniquities are like filthy garments, but the Lord graciously offers to exchange our rags for rich raiment (Isaiah 61:10; 64:6). He takes our sins away, and clothes us in “festal robes” (Zechariah 3:4).

Of course, the ultimate and eternal conversion of our life happens when we accept Jesus’ sacrificial atonement for our sins, and it is not as though unrepented sins withstand His forgiveness and remain as a blot on our record. The point is to see the parallel between ongoing repentance in your daily life, and the once-for-all-time conversion you experienced when Jesus initially came into your life. That eternal conversion transformed you into a new person, completely freed from the power and consequence of sin (2 Corinthians 5:17). Ongoing repentance speeds up the change process here on Earth, and makes your journey easier, as well as more enjoyable.

Questions: Repentance is like a great head start on the big change that will happen to you when your earthly life is over (1 Corinthians 15:51-52; 1 John 3:2). If you are going to get changed, anyway, before you end up with your eternal reward in Heaven, what do you think is the point for changing before then? _____

He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness.

—Isaiah 61:10

For all of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment.

—Isaiah 64:6

Therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.

—2 Corinthians 5:17

A CHANGE PROCESS

This is why repentance is so useful in our walk with the Lord—and why the enemy of your heart wants to discourage you from repenting. Repentance and change go hand in hand; the more that we repent of wrong attitudes and behaviors, the more they will change. The process is not always instantaneous. In other words, the self-pity or covetousness you acknowledge and repent of today may show up again tomorrow, and the next day, and the next...

As you continue to repent, time and time again, it can almost feel like hypocrisy—“I continue committing the very sin I supposedly repented of yesterday (or a few moments ago).” Feeling guilty for your sin and for your hypocrisy, you will be tempted to stop repenting; at least then you will only have to feel guilty for your sin. You don’t want to be a hypocrite as well as a sinner.

This is when we must follow Jesus’ encouragement to keep on repenting, and put our confidence in what God can do for us, not what we can accomplish ourselves (Mark 1:15). The Gospel is an incredibly simple message: any time and every time you realize that you are doing something wrong, and confess it to the Lord, He forgives you. Absolutely. Without question or hesitation.

Though He tells you not to repeat your sin (John 8:11), He does not insist on your assurance that you will never do that wrong again. In fact, since He knows your future, He knows you will commit the sin again—just like Jesus told Peter he would—even though your honest sincerity wants to protest that you will always remain faithful and dedicated (John 13:37-38). Jesus forgave Peter, and He forgives us. Absolutely. Without question or hesitation.

“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe [put trust] in the gospel.”

—Mark 1:15

A COMPASS

Every time we repent, we receive forgiveness. God never reaches His limit of tolerance. We cannot exhaust His supply of mercy. In exactly the same way, every time we repent, we get changed—even if only slightly. Imagine a man who has no sense of direction whatsoever, and who continuously heads the wrong way while trying to cross a desert. Each time that lost soul pulls out a compass and reorients himself in the proper direction, he is repenting. The more times he reads the compass, the sooner he will find his way across the desert. While it is frustrating to discover that, according to the compass, he is heading southeast (again) when he should be going north, the alternative—not reading the compass—almost guarantees he will remain lost. After having to turn around perhaps hundreds of times, thanks to the compass, his sense of direction will improve and he will come to the end of the desert.

The devil wants to make you feel guilty about needing to check

your compass so often. He will chide you for pulling it out: “Didn’t you just repent about your lying yesterday? Do you think God will let you repent again so easily and so soon?” Remember, even if you had to use it just twenty minutes ago, the compass will still give you a true heading.

QUESTION: Jesus told us to forgive our fellow humans for any and every offense they commit against us—not just once or twice, but over and over again. What does that tell you about God’s willingness to forgive your repeat offenses? _____

DIFFERENT CONCLUSIONS

Repentance is not a pledge we make to never do something again. It is, instead, a straightforward acknowledgment that what we have done (or are doing) is wrong. When we repent, we reconsider the course of life we have been following; we concede that we have come up with the wrong answers. It is like getting back a math test along with the invitation from our teacher to correct our work for full credit. By reworking the problems the teacher has marked wrong, we have the opportunity to end up getting everything right on the test. That was the point of spelling pre-tests in elementary school: by showing us which words we spelled incorrectly, the pre-test brought us to repentance, and changed the way we spelled those words on the test that counted for a grade.

All of us believe that how we think is the right way to think; if we thought we thought incorrectly, we would change our thinking. What we do and how we behave usually have their own kind of logic: we are unforgiving toward someone because they deserve it after what they did to us; we worry about money because we need more; we watch a nasty movie because it will satisfy us; we make a joke at someone’s expense because it will make us popular; etc.

We sin because of what we think it will do for us—how it will advantage, fulfill, protect or empower us. Almost no one does wrong just to do wrong, and even if their only goal is to “be bad,” it is usually because they perceive such behavior will give them an identity or something they can use to gain something for themselves.

Repenting is coming to the realization that our thinking has been backwards. Instead of giving to us, our sins have been stealing from us.

Rather than offering us more and better bits of the “good life,” they have been killing us. Realization is at the root of repentance. We repent when we realize the death-dealing patterns in our life. Or putting it another way, the opposite of repentance is telling God He should change His ways or His word to line up with how we choose to live.

An unrepentant heart insists that God is wrong, and that it knows a better way to live. A repentant heart confesses that we are wrong. You may not be able to accomplish the complete change in your thoughts or actions just yet, but the process of repentance begins with a humble and needy admission that you, not God, are out of line.

CONFESSION AND REPENTANCE

So how do we repent? What does it mean in practical terms? Confession is an important aspect of repentance. To confess essentially means to openly agree with someone. We confess to (agree with) the Lord that His way is right, and that our way is wrong. When you come to the realization that you are doing something wrong—in your heart, mind or actions—bring that realization and openly declare to God:

1. *I am doing it*—no one else is responsible for making me do it;
2. *It is wrong*—there is no justification that can make this wrong right; and,
3. *I do not want to keep doing it*—I want to live another way than I have been living.

Jesus did not come to congratulate people who had managed to keep themselves from getting lost in sin. He came into the world to invite sinners to repent (Luke 5:23). If we pretend that we have no sin in our life, we are deceiving ourselves and calling Jesus a liar (1 John 1:8, 10). Of course, we are supposed to resist sin, yet when we do sin, Jesus is there for us as our Advocate (remember 1 John

“Which is easier, to say, ‘Your sins have been forgiven you,’ or to say, ‘Get up and walk’? But, so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins,” He said to the paralytic, “I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher and go home.”

—Luke 5:23-24

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

—1 John 1:8-10

2:1). When we confess our sins, His faithfulness prompts Him to forgive us—to separate us from (1) the power those sins have to manipulate us, and from (2) the penalty those sins justly deserve (1 John 1:9). His faithfulness neutralizes our unfaithfulness, and His righteousness washes away our unrighteousness.

The forgiveness and cleansing He does in our life is complete with each confession—just as it was complete when we first confessed Jesus as Lord. There isn't a residue left over for us to scrub out on our own. This is critical to remember when it comes to the frequent instances for repentance in our daily life. Each of the many times we commit a particular sin, like fantasizing or lusting, the Lord wants us to confess so that He can restore us and get us back on the right track. But, we do not have to repent numerous times over each individual time we sin. Christians tend to get stuck repenting repeatedly over single incidents, and not repenting after each incident.

"I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance."

—Luke 15:7

But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance."

—Matthew 3:7-8

In later books we will look at repentance and forgiveness between people—acknowledging that making things right with the Lord is not exactly the same as, and in many ways easier than, restoring right relationship with other people.

REPENTANCE AND RESTORATION

The angels in Heaven celebrate with joy whenever someone repents (Luke 15:7). Is that because of their smug self-satisfaction when a sinner realizes the angels had it right all along? Are they happy because a human is now groveling and squirming with embarrassment? No. They celebrate like the shepherd who finds one lost sheep, or the woman who finds the lost coin (See Luke 15:4-6, 8-9). What was missing or out of place gets restored to where it belongs. Remember, you and I belong with the Lord; that is why He made us.

When John the Baptist challenged the Pharisees to "bring forth fruit in keeping with" their supposed repentance (Matthew 3:8), he was not telling all of

us we need to prove that we are really repentant. He was warning them against the presumption that their spiritual ancestry was all they needed, and that they could come and watch everyone else who needed to repent. Fruit does grow from repentance, but we cannot force the fruit by means of our fleshy efforts to “be better.” We are called to repent because repentance leads to marvelous spiritual developments in our life. True repentance takes away the impotent regret people feel about the wrongs they have committed, and replaces it with a life-giving resolve for their future.

QUESTIONS: Read the following scriptures about repentance, and answer the questions.

Acts 3:19. What does the Lord send our way after we repent? _____

2 Corinthians 7:9-10. Put in your own words the difference between the “sorrow of the world” and “repentance without regret.” _____

2 Timothy 2:25. Repentance leads to greater what? _____

Repentance is not a dreadful requirement, an angry cry of condemnation to heap on ourselves. It is, rather, an invitation God extends to free us from the stuff of our lives that is out of alignment with His ways. The Lord urges us to be “zealous” for and earnestly desire opportunities to repent because they will train, shape and teach us (Revelation 3:19). Repentance is a chance to reorient ourselves as often as we need to in order to stay on track.

Jesus, who came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8), wants to lead you and me to repentance over and over again, until those places where the enemy has fastened his hateful grip in our heart and mind are loosened and broken up. It is another of the marvelous and miraculous provisions God grants to us on our journey, to rearrange everything of our lives according to His original plan for those whom He loves so dearly and so deeply.

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Why do people have such a difficult time acknowledging when they do something wrong? Are there things about being wrong that are particularly troublesome for you? _____

How has your thinking about repentance changed from reading this chapter? Describe in a few sentences God's concept of repentance.

What is God looking for in your heart when He asks you to repent?

What is the difference between wanting to be right, and wanting to have been right? Which of the two perspectives is most likely to lead someone to repentance? _____

Why is repentance the starting point for the good news? How is repentance a process of conversion, exchanging one reality for another? _____

What are some attitudes, thought patterns or behaviors in your life that you realize do not line up with God's way of thinking or living? Name the ones from which you would like to be rescued. _____

To confess means to openly agree with someone. What are the three important parts to confession or openly agreeing with God? _____

Prayer:

“Dear Father in Heaven, I am doing this, it is wrong and I do not want to keep doing it. I want to live another way. Please free me of the daily stuff in my life that is out of alignment with Your ways. Thank you for giving me the chance to stay on track and rearranging my life to Your original plan no matter what I have done. I openly acknowledge where I have allowed myself to turn off from Your way. I have done and spoken wrong things. I want You to know that I agree with You about them, and about the poison they have put into my system. Forgive me, Lord. Purge me of their evil. Lord, thank you that You so easily exchange the wrongs in my life for more of You. Even though I feel frustrated with myself or ashamed for things I know are wrong, I know You always approach me with kindness and forgiveness. Thank you that You are the God of infinite compassion and mercy, and no matter how often I seek forgiveness, You forgive me each time. Lord, I ask that I would willingly participate in the process of change that happens when I repent and seek forgiveness from You. Thank you that repentance is just one of the avenues through which You long to change me for good.”

.....



THE JOURNEY *continues...*

#1 GETTING TO KNOW GOD PERSONALLY

The sovereign One holds you and your future in His hands. He has a personal plan for your life based on His intimate and undying love for you. You are not alone, or on your own; God wants to make Himself known to you deeply and intimately.

#2 BEING LOVED WITHOUT END

God wanted you before He made you. You are exactly what He longed for, and He loved you before you existed. Regardless of what you do or what you become, nothing changes His love for you. He never forgets or rejects the real-you.

#3 BEING FORGIVEN

The merciful God forgives and forgets all your bad stuff. He can take away the influence your past mistakes have to determine your future. You can be released from controlling temptations, and their power to ruin you. God separates you from evil.

#1 WORSHIPPING GOD

Worship is both an activity and a lifestyle that celebrates the truth about the One who made you (His goodness and power). You were designed to worship with your whole being, and few things align your life more fittingly than declaring God's praise.

#2 READING THE BIBLE

The Bible contains many examples of God's relationship and dealings with people like you, so it is filled with amazingly helpful understandings and revelations for your life. It also penetrates the deepest places in your heart/mind and changes you from the inside out.

#3 ASKING FOR GOD'S INTERVENTION

Talking with God is personal and powerful. Prayer invites God to get involved in what concerns you, and welcomes Him to turn things around. Need answers for needs, burdens and questions? Talk to God and He'll respond.

#4 BEING BAPTIZED WITH THE SPIRIT

God's Spirit dwells in you, a profound presence in your soul (mind, will and heart, conscience). He enables you to know and do things that are not possible without His power, including being able to pray to God in an unknown language.

#1 LOVING AND FORGIVING OTHERS

Because of His love, God acts on behalf of people, speaking forgiveness and bringing freedom. His love will infect you and identify you as His follower. Love and forgiveness are two of the most powerful (and hard to master) forces in the universe.

#2 WARRING SPIRITUALLY

Three kinds of evil will seek influence in your life to lead you astray. Jesus conquered them, and gives you power to withstand (a) your fleshly nature; (b) the sin-force in this fallen world; and, (c) demonic presences in the spiritual dimension.

#3 BEING RECOVERED FROM EVIL

When evil overwhelms you and leaves its mark in your psyche, it changes you from the person God intended you to be. His great delight is to restore you, to repair devastations caused by evil-spirited beings and forces beyond your natural control.

#4 BEING PART OF THE WHOLE

You are individually part of God's whole church on Earth, so He wants you to be part of a faith community where you receive instruction from more experienced travelers, and where you discover the unique way in which you were designed to function.

Commended to The Word (CTW) develops resources to help Christ-Followers deepen their relationship with God, increase their willingness to serve others, and develop their ministry understanding. In short, **CTW** trains spiritual leaders.

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