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Beginning Places

Daniel A. Brown, PhD

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THE JOURNEY

BEGINNING PLACES

by Daniel A. Brown, PhD

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THE JOURNEY

BEGINNING PLACES

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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 GETTING TO KNOW GOD PERSONALLY

More than anything else, God desires a relationship with you. He created the world out of the overflow of His heart, wanting to be with and to share with people like you and me. As incredible as that sounds—*the Almighty One, God who made every single thing on this planet did so with us in mind*—it is the simple truth from which flow all other understandings about God.

We did not happen upon the earth as a result of cosmic coincidence. The beginnings of our race did not unfold in a vacuum of uncertainty or in empty swirls of random particles. Rather, we are the culmination of God’s creative and intentional handiwork. His purpose for us has always been the same—to reveal Himself to us and to love us. He longs to have us know Him better and better. And that explains everything else He does.

Though it is somewhat difficult to think of God in human terms—just because He is so much greater in every way than any human being—we cannot adequately grasp His intentions for relationship with us unless we use language that is familiar to our everyday lives.

In fact, one of the most common misconceptions about God is that He only wants to be thought of in grandiose, religious ways. Many people assume that since God is so great and holy, they should stay away from Him! Yet He reveals Himself to us in the Bible as a God who longs to have us by His side. He wants to talk with us, express His love for us and make plans with us. He thinks about us, remembers us and makes promises to us—and He wants us to do the same with Him. He does many of the same things that we do, except one—He never does anything wrong!

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL DISCOVER THAT GOD . . .

- Wants to reveal Himself to us.
- Created the world expressly to have a relationship with us.
- Prefers to be called “Daddy God” and wants to be intimate with us.
- Always wants to be with us more than we want to be with Him.
- Knows everything about us.
- Thinks about us all the time.

4 GETTING TO KNOW GOD PERSONALLY

God is knowable. He has a distinct character, one so wondrously perfect and magnificent that it seems almost preposterous to imagine that finite humans could ever get to know Him for who He actually is. How we could ever get to know God and why He would want to disclose Himself to us are great mysteries—but we can and He does. Before we see how, we first want to focus on God's unique nature.

All gods are not the true God; the Lord does not go by various aliases in different countries in the world. Our God has characteristics and qualities that set Him apart from all other gods. No god is like our God.

Read Psalm 86:8. What does this verse say about the true God, whose name is Jehovah? _____

Is it possible that your concept of God has been confused by attributes of other gods? _____

Can you think of specific examples? _____

As you walk with the Lord, you will increasingly learn to distinguish the Lord and His works from all other gods and their activities. There are two lies about the Lord that our culture tends to embrace. Some view Him as a nebulous presence like a low-grade electrical force that can be barely sensed when the conditions are favorable or when particularly sensitive people are present. Others confuse God with all the other gods in the world. He becomes a composite caricature of Thor, Zeus, Vishnu and everyone's ideas about what He is probably like. People's ideas about God can be like idols—false and misleading. Just because something is worshipped does not mean it is the Lord.

God is knowable, and He wants you to get to know Him.

RELIGION OR RELATIONSHIP?

Christianity is the only faith that presents God as a loving Father who wants to have an intimate, personal relationship with His followers. Here's a quick look at some other images of God.

The angry avenger. Some religions teach that God is a cruel judge who spends most of His time punishing His followers when they disobey His orders. He is not a god of love, but a god of violence and hatred.

The mystical spirit. Many people worship a god who is elusive, mysterious and impersonal. They view this being not as loving and personal, but as some kind of energy force that hides its true identity from mankind. Only a few can figure out this god's strange "secret code," so they explore the occult to glimpse him.

The apathetic creator. Some people believe in a Supreme Being who has no intimate interest in individual people. After He created the world He abandoned us to live on our own.

The impotent god-man. Many people in Western cultures have fashioned their own god—in their own image. God is really just like man and tolerant of any and every "sincere" moral code or religion.

KNOWING GOD UP CLOSE

God is much more than a force or a vague power coursing through the universe. He is not just a principle of oneness, an energy of life, a universal understanding or a featureless supreme being. He is the Creator of all things, but He is not contained in or part of all things. He was before all things came into being, but He is not merely a primal energy that gave rise to life and has since faded into the cosmos.

We are invited to know Him not at a distance, but up close. He does not want us to know *about* Him, but to actually know Him as Moses did—"face to face, just as a man speaks to his friend" (Exod. 33:11).

Questions: What do you think it means to know God face to face?

Do you feel that you know Him that closely—like a best friend?

What sorts of things do you tell only to a best friend?

Do you feel that you can tell them to the Lord?

The great day will come for each of us who know the Lord through Jesus Christ, when we will be “face to face” with Him in heaven (1 Cor. 13:12). In the meantime, we get to become better acquainted with Him each day. God loves all the people of the earth. For those who do not yet know Him personally, glimpses of His nature can be seen by looking at the cosmos—His creation. (Read Romans 1:19–20.)

For now we see
in a mirror dimly,
but then face to
face.
– 1 Cor. 13:12

Read Psalm 19:1–6. God has left His signature in the sky. What impressions have you had about God when you have seen a spectacular sunset or gazed out into the vastness of a starry night?

Describe how you were moved and how close you felt to Him.

Considering the grandeur and majesty of all creation, it is incredible that God would think about mankind. David was a man whose heart was in tune with the Lord’s. Yet, he was puzzled by God’s attention and affection toward us. Contemplating the vastness and beauty of the night sky, he asks, “What is man that You are mindful of him?” (Ps. 8:4, NKJV). We might well add, “Who am I that God would want to disclose Himself to me on a personal basis?”

We describe the process of getting to know other people as *growing closer and closer to them*. It works the same way with the Lord. The better we get to know Him, the closer we feel to Him. He longs to be near to us, close at hand, so that He can help us in our times of need and be there for us. The nearness of our God—the intimacy with which He relates to us—is one of the most amazing attributes of our relationship with Him, and one that differentiates Him from all other gods.

The writer of Deuteronomy put it this way: “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?” (Deut. 4:7). In Jeremiah 23:23, God reminds His people, “Am I a God who is near . . . and not a God far off?” His constant invitation to us throughout our life is, “Come near to Me” (Isa. 48:16).

WHAT GOD IS REALLY LIKE

If God had wanted to be unfair, whimsical, unjust, cruel, spiteful or careless, He could have been. Have you ever stopped to consider what life would be like if God had chosen to be other than how He is? What a horrid cosmos this would be!

We can be glad God is God as God is. His kind intentions are manifest in everything He does. (Read Ephesians 1:3–6.) The more we come to understand His heart and the characteristics of His dealings with people, the better we will come to know Him.

God is gracious. He bends down like a loving parent to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. “Therefore the LORD longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the LORD is a God of justice; how blessed are all those who long for Him” (Isa. 30:18).

God is merciful. He understands us and our frailties, and He eagerly extends forgiveness to us for what we do wrong. “But Thou, O LORD, art a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth” (Ps. 86:15).

God is compassionate. He cherishes us the way a mother thinks fondly about the child in her womb. “For the LORD your God is a compassionate God; He will not fail you nor destroy you nor forget the covenant with your fathers which He swore to them” (Deut. 4:31).

God is kind. He unexpectedly takes special interest in us the way that a famous pro football star might greet a young kid. “But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men” (Luke 6:35).

God is good. He is bountiful, cheerful, at ease and glad. Well-being and health flow from Him, and He makes everything better. “For Thou, Lord, art good, and ready to forgive, and abundant in lovingkindness to all who call upon Thee” (Ps. 86:5).

God is righteous. Absolutely nothing is wrong with Him. He is always and only the way He should be. He is the absolute standard by which we can set our lives. “The LORD is righteous in all His ways, and kind in all His deeds” (Ps. 145:17).

WHAT GOD REALLY WANTS

The Genesis (Beginnings) account of creation holds some of the most intriguing details about God’s intended relationship with us as people and with us as individuals. In the first place, we were made in God’s image to resemble and reflect Him in the most significant ways so that we could relate to Him (Gen. 1:26–27).

Isn’t that one of the prerequisites to relationship among people—to have things in common? God made us like Himself so that He would not seem strange to us. We were fashioned to fit in perfectly with Him and to coincide with what is true about Him.

He is not a strange God. In fact, He warns us against allowing any strange god to turn our hearts away from Him (Ps. 81:9).

Though He is majestic and awesome in scope and power, God never intended to be so different from us that we would struggle to relate to Him. What makes it hard for us to have a comfortable relationship with Him is *our wrongness*, not *His strangeness*. We are His offspring, His children. Earthly parents may, at times, wonder how they could have given birth to children who seem so different in looks or behavior. However, it is unimaginable that the Lord would, in anticipation of future conversation and connection with us, bring forth people who were unlike Himself.

In both image and likeness, we resemble the Lord. While we are not close to being as great as He is or to having His power, our image is like a pale, powder blue to His deep, royal blue. At our core—our spirit—our inner shade is the same basic color as His. Our frame and constitution are limited by physical realities, whereas His composition is not. But in the beginning His nature was impressed into ours. That is why the

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” And God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.

—Genesis 1:26–27

Let there be no strange god among you; nor shall you worship any foreign god.

—Psalm 81:9

story of redemption and growth in the Lord can be seen as our restoration back to being like Him.

Each of the following scriptures tells us something specific about God restoring His children in His image—just as He had made us in the beginning. **Read the verse** and then fill in what God said.

Romans 8:29. _____

2 Corinthians 3:18. _____

Colossians 3:10. _____

2 Peter 1:3–4. _____

We were made male and female in the beginning. God saw that it was not good for man to be alone. That was the condition He Himself had been in before He created man. Knowing how full His own heart had been with longing to share His love, He created a companion for Adam, and Eve became the perfect counterpart. Just as God wanted man and woman to be together, to have communion and conversation with one another, so He wants us to be together with Him. In the beginning, before man's wrong choices ruined the profound connection between God and us, He walked and talked with Adam and Eve in the midst of the garden. (Read Genesis 2 and 3.)

That is how He wants to accompany you in your life. Day after day, year by year, you will experience an ongoing disclosure of who He is and what He is like.

OTHER NAMES OF GOD

Many times in the Scriptures the Lord discloses a new aspect of His character to someone by revealing a new name for Himself. When Moses encountered God in a burning bush, God told Moses that His name was “I AM WHO I AM.” (Read Exodus 3:14.) This name for God revealed that He is transcendent, eternal and all-sufficient. God reveals other aspects of His nature with other names like:

“The Lord Will Provide” (Read Genesis 22:14.)—God showed Abraham that He would indeed provide the sacrifice necessary to pay for our sins.

“The Lord Is My Banner” (Read Exodus 17:15.)—God told Moses that He goes before us and fights against what opposes us.

“The God Who Saves Me” (Read Psalm 51:14, NIV.)—The psalmist learned that God preserves us from death and eternal destruction.

God “My Hiding Place” (Read Psalm 32:7.)—David came to understand that he could find safety and comfort in the Lord’s mercy.

“Wonderful Counselor” (Read Isaiah 9:6.)—The prophet realized that God listens to our problems, understands our hurts and has great wisdom to resolve our conflicts.

“My Strong Deliverer” (Read Psalm 140:7, NIV.)—The psalmist understood that no matter what difficulty entraps us, even if it is a result of our own sin, God in His mercy will set us free.

“The Good Shepherd” (Read John 10:11.)—Jesus Christ revealed the tender, loving heart of God when He compared His love to that of a shepherd defending his sheep from danger.

GOD’S FAVORITE NAME

Most of us do not have much of a choice about our name. It was given to us, and unless we change it, it is ours for life. But there are a few situations in life when we have the opportunity to tell people what we want to be called—grandparents, sweethearts and close friends can push for nicknames. God has lots of names and titles. He is “I AM,” the Eternal One, the Almighty, God the Provider,

Maker of the heavens and earth, and many other names.

But the intimacy and tenderness with which God loves us is wrapped up in one of His favorite names, the one His Spirit teaches us to say first, just after we are restored to relationship with Him. This name is *Abba*, which is Hebrew for “Daddy” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). He loves to be called “Daddy God.”

God has a father’s heart. That is why we call Him “God our Father.” He is a perfect father who always knows what is best for us and who always does what is best for us. Unfortunately, many people end up with a distorted picture of God because their earthly fathers were unable to be everything God wanted them to be for their children. Whereas earthly fathers may be distant or absent, God is always there for us—“a very present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). He is “the one who goes with” us anywhere we go (Deut. 31:6). Instead of being impatient or critical as some earthly parents can be, God patiently and compassionately deals with our shortcomings. He is slow to anger, quick to forgive.

For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”

—Romans 8:15

And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

—Galatians 4:6

OUR EARTHLY FATHER AND DADDY GOD

Even the best parents will say and do things that cause their children lingering grief. Our human failings and weaknesses make us vulnerable to hurting and disappointing the very people we most want to cherish. So it is that moms and dads sometimes choose poorly—and do lasting harm to their kids. This is especially true when a father repeatedly misses the mark in how he relates toward his children. Children whose earthly fathers did not have a positive, intimate relationship with them will carry a measure of mistrust and confusion toward God, their heavenly Father, even into their adult years.

If you had a difficult upbringing and were unable to truly rest in the close presence of your father—for whatever reason—it may explain some of your awkwardness with the Lord. The table on the next page contrasts what you may have come to expect from your earthly father(s) and what you can always count on with your heavenly Father.

Earthly Father(s)	Daddy God	Bible Verses
<p><i>Distant or absent</i>—Dad was always at work; had a weak personality; dead or divorced; he spent no lingering time with you.</p>	<p><i>Close and ever present</i>—He will never desert or forsake you; He is a near help in times of trouble; One who is near, not far off.</p>	<p>Read Deuteronomy 4:7; 31:8; Psalm 46:1; 73:28; Jeremiah 23:23; Matthew 28:20; Hebrews 10:22.</p>
<p><i>Selfish or self-serving</i>—family life revolved around his wants and convenience; many confusing rules; kids “seen, not heard.”</p>	<p><i>Compassionate and sacrificial</i>—He spared not His own Son; God graciously does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.</p>	<p>Read Psalm 86:15; 103:4; Isaiah 30:18; Daniel 9:9; Hosea 2:23; Matthew 9:36; John 3:16; James 5:11.</p>
<p><i>Conditionally loving</i>—attention was based on accomplishment or behavior; <i>if</i> or <i>when</i> were the only paths to affection.</p>	<p><i>Unconditionally loving</i>—based on His promise, not our performance; nothing can separate us from His love; He loved us before we loved Him.</p>	<p>Read Jeremiah 31:3; John 3:16; Romans 8:38–39; 1 John 4:10.</p>
<p><i>Angry or violent</i>—unpredictable outbursts kept you on edge; you feared for your safety, well-being; you felt that you could do nothing right.</p>	<p><i>Patient and encouraging</i>—slow to anger and abounding in mercy; focused on our well-being; seeks to do us good and give us peace.</p>	<p>Read Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 145:8; Joel 2:13; Jonah 4:2; 2 Peter 3:9.</p>
<p><i>Critical or fault finding</i>—his focus was always on what’s wrong; you felt “out of favor,” never good or right enough.</p>	<p><i>Forgiving and gracious</i>—He covers our faults and trespasses; we are never “too” bad; He cleans us from wrong.</p>	<p>Read Psalm 103:10; Isaiah 43:25; Micah 7:19; Hebrews 8:12; 10:16–17.</p>

Earthly Father(s)	Daddy God	Bible Verses
Abusive —sexually, emotionally or verbally; you were the target; his touch and words shamed you; you felt like discarded leftovers.	Restorative and redemptive — He bandages broken hearts and liberates captives of emotional, physical, spiritual and mental abuse.	Read Psalm 69:16–20, 29–33; Isaiah 40:31; 61:1–3, 7; Jeremiah 30:17–18; Joel 2:25; Zechariah 9:12.
Controlling or authoritarian —stern punishment landed on you without love; punishment was harsh and sterile; you were never allowed to explain yourself.	Loving and attentive — He draws us to Himself in compassion; disciplines us for our good; gives us choice and free will.	Read Deuteronomy 7:7–9; 30:19; 2 Chronicles 16:9; Isaiah 49:13, 15; Hebrews 12:5–11.

Questions: Which characteristic of earthly fathers in the chart above best describes your earthly father? _____

Through which of the characteristics of your heavenly Father has God revealed Himself to you? _____

Which characteristic of your heavenly Father do you feel is the most important way that you need God to reveal Himself to you right now? Why? _____

.....

*God is a perfect father
who always knows what is best for us
and who always does what is best for us.*

.....

A FAITHFUL HUSBAND

Another telling picture of God and how He feels about being in constant relationship with us can be seen when He describes Himself as a Husband who intentionally betroths us to Himself forever in faithfulness, love and tender mercy (Isa. 54:5; Hos. 2:19–20). Just as a bridegroom feels about his bride, so God feels about us—filled with excited anticipation about all the years ahead (Isa. 62:5). He does not want a casual, intermittent relationship with us. He has done everything He can to assure that we can get to know Him and be with Him forever.

How sad that so many people imagine a god who barely puts up with them. They see a god who must somehow tolerate people for whom he doesn't really care. To them, relationship with God is tenuous at best and based only on their ability to perform adequately. Because they do not understand the family connection God wants to have with them, they feel they have to live up to certain standards in order to remain acceptable to Him. The tragedy is that no one can be good enough to maintain relationship with God on his or her own. People who do not grasp how much God Himself wants to maintain the relationship with us end up feeling resentful toward Him. They feel an angry guilt.

What a contrast such a viewpoint is to the truth about God. His love is so powerful, His desire for eternal closeness with us is so compelling, that He was willing to give up everything most valuable to Him in order to reestablish His lost relationship with us. What He sacrificed and why He had to restore our broken relationship with Him is really the story of the Bible.

We will consider this story from many different angles in this book. But for now, the most important truth to remember is that God always wants a relationship with us more than we want it with Him. He is the initiator and the repairer of the relationship.

You never have to wonder if God wants you around. No matter

For your husband
is your Maker,
whose name is
the Lord of hosts.
—Isaiah 54:5

And I will betroth
you to Me forever;
yes, I will betroth
you to Me in righ-
teousness and in
justice, in loving-
kindness and in
compassion, and I
will betroth you to
Me in faithfulness.
Then you will
know the Lord.
—Hosea 2:19–20

As the bridegroom
rejoices over the
bride, so your God
will rejoice over
you.
—Isaiah 62:5

what, He wants you. Whatever happens, whatever you do, whatever choices you may make, you can be completely assured that God, our heavenly Father, our Husband, our Maker, always wants to have you near Him. And He will use every situation in your life to disclose more of Himself to you.

Since God is God—the One who made all the initial decisions about how reality was to be configured and the One who has the last word about everything—He could be any way He wanted to be. No one could tell Him what He should be like. He had no counselor at creation (Rom. 11:34). If God had wanted to be unfair, whimsical, unjust, cruel, spiteful or careless, He could have been.

GOD KNOWS US

Ultimately, God wants us to see and know Him as fully as He knows us (1 John 3:2). God knows everything about us—inside and out. He knows all the places we go with our feet and with our thoughts. Before we say something, He knows what we are going to say. But He doesn't just know things *about* us such as curious details of our past, all the nicknames we've ever had, how tall we were at age seven and why we have that scar above our right eye. He knows us for *who we are*—distinct from all the other people in the world.

That is because He made us Himself. And the way He made you—or me—is unlike the way He made anyone else.

Read Psalm 139:13–16. The psalmist marvels at how God created each of us so uniquely. What does he say about God's involvement while we were in the womb? _____

The expression *wonderfully made* actually means “with differentiating marks and distinctions.” The Lord is our designer and manufacturer. He knows us better than we know ourselves. The One who made us is the One who offers to oversee the details of our

For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor?

—Romans 11:34

Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.

—1 John 3:2

life circumstances. In effect, day by day and situation by situation, as we place ourselves in His hands we are sending ourselves back to the manufacturer for proper treatment and necessary repairs.

Since He has made each of us different from one another, I do not have to wonder if His plan for my life would be better if it resembled His arrangement for yours. You need not struggle trying to follow His assignment for me. Remember, we are not self-made beings who somehow show up on the planet and present ourselves to God. No one has to remind Him who you are. We are not objects of study or things to be memorized by Him. He already knows you—really knows you. He can pick you out of the crowd at a Rose Bowl game on New Year’s Day.

His knowledge and understanding are intensely personal when it comes to things about us. In much the same way that a mother knows her youngest son—his quirky humor, the colors he likes best, the jeans he prefers to wear, the hesitation he feels about ladders and the teacher he had in fourth grade—God knows us. He has the insider’s perspective. He is privy to our innermost sensibilities. He knows us absolutely and loves us absolutely.

Read the following verses, and then write down how God’s awareness of and focus on you is described:

2 Chronicles 16:9. _____

Matthew 10:30. _____

How do these ideas change your picture of how well God knows you?

Part of the reason God knows everything about you is, of course, because He is *omniscient* (all-knowing) and *omnipresent* (everywhere at once). How could He not know? If He is all-knowing, then He knows all. If His presence fills all, then He knows where you are—in fact, He is there with you. But God knows you from *His heart* more than from *His supernatural attributes*. He is “*intimately acquainted*” with you (Psalm 139:3).

GOD THINKS ABOUT US

God has lots of time on His hands. Since He is “from everlasting to everlasting,” He is not short of time to do whatever He wants to do (Ps. 90:2). So how does God spend His time? With what does the God of everything occupy Himself? What does He think about?

Well, He thinks about the ones He loves. One of the ways we know that we are falling in love with someone is that we think about that person all the time—we can’t get him or her out of our mind. Being in love is almost synonymous with always thinking about someone—where he is, what she’s doing and things about his or her personality.

God thinks about us. In fact, if you tallied up all the thoughts He has about you, they would number as much as all the grains of sand on all the beaches and in all the deserts of the world. The psalmist exclaimed, “How precious also are Thy thoughts to me, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I should count them, they would outnumber the sand” (Ps. 139:17–18). Wow! We are always on His mind. He thinks about us constantly. We never have to worry if He has forgotten about us.

Your life may take unexpected turns, or you may find yourself in lonely, desert places, but no matter what the conditions or how desperate life seems, God is intently thoughtful of you. Nothing about our lives escapes His notice. He is perpetually mindful of you and me.

Read Isaiah 49:14–16. Have you ever felt forgotten and abandoned by God? _____

How easy do you think it is for a nursing mother to forget her child?

If you wrote someone’s name on your hands, how often would you be reminded of them? _____

What does this make you realize about God, your Father?

Did you know the Bible says that God feels good when He thinks about us? When He took a step back and surveyed what He had made in the beginning when He brought forth Adam and Eve, His comment about it all, and especially about us as the preeminent part of creation, was, “This is good—very, very good” (Gen. 1:31). Deliberations about us make Him happy. Sometimes

The Lord your God is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will exult over you with joy, He will be quiet in His love, He will rejoice [to spin or twirl about] over you with shouts of joy.
—Zephaniah 3:17

He quietly celebrates over you; at other times His rejoicing as He thinks on you takes the form of shouted exclamations in the heavens—and even some dancing (Zeph. 3:17).

This knowledge of how God feels about us bumps into a misconception that can cause you lots of trouble in your walk with the Lord. Many people mistakenly believe that God is fundamentally disgusted with human beings—that He really doesn’t like us because of how evil we are. It is true that God abhors the deadly sin in our life, but He hates it because of what it does to us.

KNOWING GOD

Using your Bible, read Psalm 139:1–12. After each statement below, write down which verse corresponds to the truths in the statement:

God searches and knows me inside and out—so I do not have to wonder if He will still love me when He “finds out” what I am really like. _____

He knows every step I take, every thought I think—so He knows how I have ended up where I am, and what steps and thoughts will lead me to where He wants me to go. _____

He knows how and where I live—so I can rely on Him to point out elements in my lifestyle that do not correspond to His intentions for my life. _____

He surrounds me with His attention and touch—so even in the presence of my enemies, He is in control. _____

Wherever or however I end up, God is there waiting for me—so I never have to worry about being so far away from Him that I cannot find Him. _____

He can get hold of me anywhere, anytime, so I can rest in the knowledge that He can speak to me in a way I can truly understand. _____

Darkness and light are alike to Him—so no matter how dismal my circumstances may seem, or how lost I feel in the midst of them, God sees everything clearly. _____

God always loves us. Because He longs to be with us forever, because He delights so thoroughly in us, because He absolutely adores us; therefore He has made a way for our sins to be removed from our lives. He never confuses *us* with *our stuff*. His thoughts about our sins are exactly the opposite of His feelings about us—He wants to get rid of our sins so He can get next to us.

From the very outset of your journey with God, realize and remember that God knows you in particular, and His loving interest in you is not just a generalized welcome to all of humanity. Does He love and invite everyone into relationship with Him? Absolutely! But He never lumps us all-together in His heart.

In exactly the same way that He knows you and everything about you, He wants you to come to know Him for who and what He is. Getting to know God personally is a life-time journey, but each step along the way will thrill your heart!

LET'S TALK ABOUT IT

Describe how you viewed God before you read this chapter. Did you view Him differently than the Bible describes Him? If so, how? _____

Why do you think people have a hard time believing that God loves them unconditionally? How would you explain God's love in your own words? _____

Why did He create the world? What is God's purpose for us? _____

Why does God prefer to be called "Daddy God"? What makes it hard for us to have a comfortable relationship with Him? _____

God wants us to search Him out to have a deeper, more meaningful relationship with Him. Have you done this willingly, wholly, continually and intentionally? Have you let go of your old ways of thinking about and doing things? Why do you think God wants you to change your old ways? _____

YOUR TIME WITH GOD

Share your innermost thoughts and feelings with God. Tell God anything that is on your mind and release to Him whatever has been bothering you. God wants to accompany you in your life. Ask God for confirmation that He is there. Ask Him to use every situation in your life to disclose more of Himself to you. Ask God to hold your hand when you need courage, and ask Him to reassure you that you have strengths yet to discover and use.

Thank God for what He has already done and what He has already revealed of Himself to you. Perhaps you would like to include the following prayer in your conversation with God.

.....

Father God, it's hard for me to say this, but I thank You for making me me. I look at myself and could point out several areas where I'm tempted to believe You made a mistake.

But I'm choosing to believe instead that You framed me from the beginning with purpose and delight, and that even the things I don't like about myself are arranged by You for my welfare—and even for blessing other people. Show me how this can be true for me personally. I want to draw near to You, Lord.

Open my eyes to see Your heart toward me.

Where I have been hurt or betrayed in the past . . .

where I have guarded my heart against You . . .

Lord, heal me.

Help me to know You for who You are—my Daddy God.

In Jesus' name, amen.

#2 BEING LOVED WITHOUT END

Nothing in all the world is more meaningful to us than being loved. We love being loved—not just because of what those who love us do for us, but because of the special feeling we get by simply knowing that we are loved. Though humans are capable of getting by in life without being personally loved and delighted in by others, we all want to be loved. This is no accident, no evolutionary development of our emotions. We were made that way by a God whose whole purpose for creating us was to have a lasting relationship of mutual love and affection with us. From the very beginning of the cosmos and all the way through unfolding eternity, the single greatest hallmark of God’s touch is love.

That’s because God is more than merely a feeling or a force or an atmosphere of love—*He is love personified . . . love incarnate* (1 John 4:8, 16). As we saw in the last chapter, God is a knowable persona. He is an actual

The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love . . . And we have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.
—1 John 4:8, 16

Being whose supernatural attributes and character are almost beyond human comprehension, but distinct and certain nonetheless.

God is not *just* love, but of all the tangible or intangible elements in human experience, what is true of love comes the closest to depicting what is true of God. Love exemplifies God’s essential characteristics. Love defines His nature, His motives and His dealings throughout all time.

At one point when Moses asked the Lord to reveal more of Himself, to more tangibly register His nature in a way that Moses could truly understand, the Lord agreed to “pass by” where Moses would be hidden in the cleft of a rock

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN THAT . . .

- God is love.
- We were conceived by God in love.
- God welcomes and honors us.
- God wants us with Him forever.
- We love God by accepting His love for us.
- God has adopted us into His family.
- God’s love will keep surprising us.

(Exod. 34:5–6). Moses wanted to know what sort of a god he would be following. The miracles he had witnessed in Egypt convinced Moses of God’s power, but Moses wanted to know His ways (Exod. 33:13). He wanted to know the full truth about the God of his fathers. What is God like? How does He choose to reveal Himself? What is the nature of His glory?

And the Lord descended in the cloud and stood there with him as he called upon the name of the Lord. Then the Lord passed by in front of him...

—Exodus 34:5-6

Now therefore, I pray Thee, if I have found favor in Thy sight, let me know Thy ways, that I may know Thee, so that I may find favor in Thy sight.

—Exodus 33:13

God could have declared anything about Himself. Imagine if you were told to describe yourself in a handful of words. What would you say about yourself that you would want recorded for all time? Would you mention your accomplishments in school or at work? What boast could you truthfully make about yourself? Look at what the Lord told Moses:

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; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin.” —EXODUS 34:6–7

In Exodus 34:6–7, God gives us the most significant qualities about Himself. Read these verses and describe how each of His traits is a manifestation of love:

Compassionate _____

Gracious _____

Slow to anger _____

Abounding in loving [merciful] kindness _____

Abounding in truth [and trustworthiness] _____

Maintaining loving [merciful] kindness _____

Forgiving

Love prompted God to conceive us. That love was not just a generic love for a species. He did not make all of us so that He could have lots of human beings milling about like so many pets. Quite the contrary is true. His love is a basic part of who He is. It is so compellingly creative, so animating and life-giving in its makeup, that it generates His relationship with one person after another. Every person in the world is born out of a unique yearning in God's heart.

GOD'S LOVE ARRANGES THINGS

God's love arranged quite a place for Adam and Eve! Everything they could ever want or need was in the Garden of Eden. What a lavish layout! They were given stewardship over all of creation and freedom to pursue their inclinations (with certain exceptions). The Garden of Eden is a picture of the sort of place God wants to make for us. It was not a tiny, spare or secondhand place. The accommodations were not Spartan quarters. Once we realize just how great Eden was, and grasp the fact of who made it (God) and why (for us to enjoy), we get a feel for what God has in store for our future.

The devil will continuously challenge what God says to us and what He arranges for us. Just as the evil one tempted Adam and Eve to doubt God's motive for setting certain things in place the way He did, so the devil will try to convince us that God is trying to withhold something good from us when He tells us how to live. (Read Genesis 2:7–9; 3:1–6.) The better we truly know God and His love, the better able we will be to resist the lies that come at us.

The first lie basically said, "God wants to keep you from what you really desire, what will completely satisfy you." That lie will come at you throughout your life with the Lord. It may take slightly different forms or relate to other matters than what you eat or see, but it will try to get you to turn away from the Lord's commands. So whenever we find ourselves thinking along those same lines, we ought to compare what the first couple enjoyed in Eden with what they ended up having after they bought into the lie. (Read Genesis 3:16–24.)

God does not wait until *after* we are born to love us. He loved us and knew us before we had physical existence. While we were still in our mother's womb, God was at work making us and framing the details of our being to match a desire that was already in His heart (Read Psalm 139:13–16). In other words, God started with who and what He wanted you to be, and then He followed that “blueprint” in the nine-month process of fashioning you. God’s love is “from everlasting to everlasting” (Ps. 103:17), and that means His love for you predates your existence—before you had any chance to earn it or to deserve it.

Many times in your walk with the Lord, you will be drawn down a path of thought that questions whether or not God still loves you (especially after you have done some horrible thing). There are many other reasons why He will never stop loving you, and we will explore them throughout this book. But from the outset, let this simple truth give you a stay against the inevitable lies that will come your way: *You were loved before you were anything; “loved” was the first attribute of your being.*

That is what the Bible means when it says, “He [God] first loved us” (1 John 4:19). Before our race existed, God’s love motivated Him to create us; before you and I came into being by His hand, He already loved us.

God’s love has history to it; it isn’t a love that He decided upon recently. Like Him, it has been from everlasting. Because of His long-standing affection and lovingkindness, God has done several wonderful things for us.

Read the following scriptures. What does God do as a result of His everlasting love for us?

Jeremiah 31:3. _____

Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:8. _____

Titus 3:4–5. _____

LOVE (RE)DEFINED

God doesn't think the way we think—His ways are unlike our ways. Often, therefore, in our walk with Him we will have to adopt new definitions to words in order to understand what He is saying to us. What God means by love and what we mean by it are two very different things. Perhaps the best way to fill out our understanding of God's love is to look at the New Testament word *agape*. Two of our words that best translate *agape* are “welcome” and “honor.” God's *agape* love welcomes us and wants us near to Him. He constantly invites us and draws us to Himself. Rather than being put out because of having to put up with us, He delights in the closest possible contact and connection with us. His love is totally welcoming.

Beyond that, His love bestows incredible honor and value on us. Although God has no peers, no equal in all of creation, He chooses to relate to us in terms of respect—much in the same way that a father interacts with a son in young adulthood. In other words, God is delighted not only in our nearness to Him, but also in who we are. He thinks highly of us, and He esteems us according to the place He has given us in His created order, as overseers of the earth. He Himself crowns us with “glory and honor” (Heb. 2:7).

Imagine that . . . God can't get enough of us. He cannot have us close enough to suit His tastes. And He values us, holding us in the highest regard. How differently God thinks about us than we think about ourselves! Most people imagine that God can barely stand the sight of them, or that they are far more trouble to Him than blessing. We tend to think ill of ourselves, and if we had the chance to somehow escape from our own presence, we would do it. Our natural thinking concludes that we must be barely tolerable in His sight. The truth is, we are “precious” and “honored” in His sight (Isa. 43:4).

One of the best words to describe God's feeling about you is *delight*. He is not reluctant in His love, but unhesitatingly eager to shower us with delights.

Read the following scriptures.**Read Psalm 35:27.** What does God enjoy with and for us? _____

Read Proverbs 3:12. Why does God correct and instruct us? _____

Read Isaiah 62:4. What nickname does the Lord give you? _____

Read Micah 7:18. Why does God forgive you? _____

Read Psalm 37:23. Why does God lead your path? _____

If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

—Luke 6:32

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

—Romans 5:8

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

—1 John 4:10

God's love reaches out with an embrace that draws us to Him before we do anything, and it continues to draw us in spite of anything we may do. His love for you is never a response to what you do for Him; anybody can return love for love (Luke 6:32). No, long before we even wanted connection with God, His love activated our relationship with Him based on His giving and serving, not on ours (Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:10).

That's why it is so vital that you begin your journey with God realizing that you are loved limitlessly by Him. You are now—and always have been and always will be—loved by God. Being loved is not due to your lovable behavior or your marvelous attributes. God loved you from the beginning, and He will love you to the end.

LOVE SO GREAT

God abounds in love (Exod. 34:6). It spills over out of His heart and floods toward each one of us personally and profoundly. Having set His affections on us, He has an insatiable desire for us. In the same way that we want to spend the rest of our lives on earth with the ones we love, God wants to be with us for all of His life—and that means forever. It can seem almost sacrilegious to put it this way, but God is addicted to you and me. His craving for us is intense and all-consuming. Everything about His life is focused on having us in much the same way that people become consumed by various pursuits or substances.

The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth.

—Exodus 34:6

.....
*Wondrously driven by His undying love for us
 and propelled by His rich mercies,
 God exchanged what was most precious to Him—
 His only begotten Son—as a ransom to win
 our release from the clutches of death.*

That is why He could not bear the prospect of eternity without us. We are not just a sideline interest of His, a way for God to idle away the eons. We are not just an occasional hobby He takes up in moments of dullness. We are, instead, the single, central focus of His heart—the whole reason He made the world. Wondrously driven by His undying love for us and propelled by His rich mercies, He exchanged what was most precious to Him—His only begotten Son—as a ransom to win our release from the clutches of death.

For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.
 —John 3:16

Read John 3:16. Using the analogy of addiction—that God was and is wondrously consumed with us, that He cannot get us out of His system or out of His heart—explain why the Lord “gave up” His Son. What did that mean? _____

... so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; and that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God.
—Ephesians 3:17–19

By this the love of God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him.
—1 John 4:9

That act of sacrifice manifested for all time the vast height, width and depth of God's love for you and me (Eph. 3:17–19; 1 John 4:9). God loved the world that much.

When God tells us to love Him with all our heart, mind, soul and strength (Deut. 6:5), He is not setting out some standard for an acceptable level of performance. He knows how love is supposed to work. He understands that the most fulfilling kind of love—the sort we want to have with our spouse, for instance—is total and absolute. We dream about a relationship in which we love another person with the totality of our being. Anything short of that is unsatisfying. Loving God utterly is far more fulfilling than just loving Him a bit.

The main reason He tells us to love Him that way is because God Himself loves us with all of *His* heart, soul, mind and strength. He is totally in love with us.

He has made sure that nothing will ever again be able to separate us from Him and from all the love He has to give us. No distress, dismay or agony in our life will have the power to push us beyond the reach of His love. Whatever past we have, whatever future stretches before us, regardless of any and all spiritual forces arrayed against us—God will still, as always, love us.

Questions: Have you ever worried that something has happened to separate you from God's love? _____
Have you ever felt far away from Him—especially after you have done something that you know is wrong? _____
Have you ever been so depressed or overwhelmed by the stuff of life that you forgot to even think about God? _____

Read Romans 8:35–39. Our feelings often tell us it is impossible for God to still love us after all that has happened. The Bible tells us it is impossible for God to ever change His mind about us.

RECEIVING GOD'S LOVE

Notice how the Bible says that the love of God is in Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:38–39). Jesus is the tangible expression of God's love in the same way that He is the exact representation of all that is true of

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.
—Romans 8:38–39

And He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation.
—Colossians 1:15

And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.
—Hebrews 1:3

God Himself (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). As we learned earlier in this chapter, love defines God's nature and His motives. It is an inseparable part of everything He is. God sent His Son (love) into the world. Whoever welcomes His Son receives His love. So if the question ever comes up in your heart, "Can God (still) love me and want relationship with me after what I have done?" ask yourself another question: "Do I (still) welcome Jesus in my heart?" Both questions have the same answer.

When God sent His Son, Jesus Christ, into the world, the invitation from Him was clear: "I love each of you, and I want to have relationship with you forever. Receive My love." The simple, sad truth is that most people did not, and do not, accept God's invitation. Jesus came to the very people who had been created by the love of God, yet most of those people rejected Him (John 1:11). They chose not to identify themselves with Him because His presence cast light on wrong things they were doing and saying. They opted to remain in the darkness, away from God and His love for them (John 3:19–20).

As we are discovering, God's love is not a passive, internalized emotion. Though He thinks about us all the time, He does not *just* think about us. Our culture teaches us that love is mostly a feeling inside, one that

occasionally manifests in doing something for the one we love. True love, *agape* love, is more than a

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

—John 1:11

And this is the judgment, that the Light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light; for their deeds were evil. For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light, lest his deeds should be exposed.

—John 3:19–20

feeling—it is a way of being toward others, a disposition, a set of behaviors, a manner of relating to people. It acts and initiates.

God's love *gives* and actively *offers* itself to you and me. Our love must *receive* and *accept* His love actively in return. He initiates; we respond. He loves; we receive that love. This may seem like a small point, but it is one of the most significant truths you will ever learn.

It explains why we must intentionally receive Jesus Christ into our heart and welcome Him into our lives. God extends His love to every person in the world, but only those who receive His Son take in His love. It is exactly like gift giving on a birthday—someone can wrap a present and give it to you, but only when you take it and open it is it really yours. Accepting Jesus into your heart is the only way to receive God's love. Until people receive Jesus, they have not received God's love.

This truth also defines how we express our love to God. The primary way in which we love God is to receive and accept His love for us. His love is always first. Our role is not to generate love for Him or to come up with ways to show our love—the greatness of His love has arranged for us to simply embrace His love. It is like being invited to a dinner party. Our host wants us to accept the invitation and come. Period.

Jesus tells a parable of a great wedding banquet that was to be hosted by a nobleman (Read Matthew 22:1–14). He invited everyone on his carefully prepared guest list, but most of them were too busy with other things to attend. So he got out the word that anyone and everyone was welcome to come and enjoy the celebration. People from every walk of life and every social stratum showed up on the big day. But one guest was dressed inappropriately for a wedding. He was kicked out.

Jesus made several significant points with this parable. None of the wedding guests had earned the right to be there. But everyone was welcome; no one was turned away. These same principles apply to the great marriage feast of Christ and His bride. We have all been invited. All we do is accept the free invitation—and acknowledge it as a special occasion by the clothes we wear.

Read Isaiah 61:10. What is the proper clothing, without which we cannot attend the feast in Heaven? _____

Our natural inclinations will lead us to want to do things *for* God—to prove how much we love Him. In and of itself that is not wrong, but if we are not careful we can fall into a subtle trap that will make us feel unworthy of His love. He doesn't invite us because of our accomplishments or our worthiness. If we try to prove that we are worthy of being invited, we have missed the whole point.

We will feel condemnation every time we get confused about how our love expresses itself to God. All we can ever do *for* God is to receive and to accept His love for us. Whenever we try to do anything else for Him than just to respond with thankfulness for how He has first loved us, we set ourselves up for trouble. Pride will masquerade as love—suggesting that we can, and should, be on equal terms with God, doing for Him as He does for us.

UP FOR ADOPTION

Being on equal terms with God is as impossible as an adopted daughter's wanting to adopt her new parents. The emotions of gratitude and joy are understandable and completely fitting. As a response to her adoptive parents stepping into her life with love and provision, the little girl wants to return love in like fashion. But the parents have already accomplished the adoption. When we adopt someone as our own, we assume full responsibility to care for that person. Adoption is an act done by the provider and caregiver, not by the one who will receive that care.

God has adopted you. According to the kindness and affection in His heart for all people, He made a way for us to have permanent relationship with Him through Jesus Christ (Eph. 1:5). God has only one *begotten* Son. But He adopts any and every person who wants to become a part of His eternal family. The adoption is not on the basis of how good we are or how well behaved we have been at the orphanage over the last several years. We are not adopted as a reward for how well we followed the rules of the orphanage.

God chose you and me simply because He delights in us. He wants us in His family. And once we begin living in our new home, the rules of the orphanage no longer apply to us (See Galatians 4:3–6). Children do things they should not do, but they do not

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will.

—Ephesians 1:5

lose their family identity. Regardless of all the wrong choices and mistakes children make, they are still sons and daughters.

Read John 1:12–13. What privilege do we receive from God when we receive Jesus into our lives? _____

Whose will and whose strength accomplish it? _____

Now read 1 John 3:1. Why does God want to call us His children?

Once again, we see how impassioned God is about having an eternal connection with us. By adopting us, He settled the nature of that relationship for all time. From now on we are addressed as children in God’s household. This ties back in with receiving Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and the love of God. God extends His loving gift of adoption; we respond to His offer by welcoming Jesus into our life. Jesus, the only *begotten* Son of God, has invited us into His life as brothers and sisters. We become part of His family when we receive Him into our life.

LOVE REMOVES FEAR

By this, love is perfected with us, that we may have confidence in the day of judgment; because as He is, so also are we in this world. There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love.

—I JOHN 4:17–18

One of the most difficult truths to grasp in the kingdom of God is how all-encompassing God’s love truly is for us—and how totally forgiving. Deep down in our anxious hearts we worry about the possibility of being punished for all the stuff we have done wrong. After all, our minds tell us, we cannot get away with anything since the Lord knows all and sees all. We dread the Day of Judgment when every “careless word” we have ever thought or said will be brought out into the open (Matt. 12:36). We imagine every deed or thought

will be played on a giant video screen for the gathered multitudes to see. Good thing He loves me, we think, because otherwise I'd really get a harsh sentence.

God has indeed fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through Jesus. (Read Acts 17:31.) Jesus is the one appointed by God to judge the living and the dead. The basis for His judgment will be the words He has spoken—and how people have responded to them. (Read Acts 10:42 and John 12:48.) The coming Day of Judgment, when every person whose name is not written in the Book of Life will be judged according to their deeds, is a looming reality when God will deal out punishment upon all unrighteousness. (Read Revelation 20:11–15.)

But for those who have put their trust in Christ and His righteousness instead of their own, the Day of Judgment will be a day of incredible joy. Our names are in the Book of Life, and all our unrighteous deeds and words will be “hidden in Christ.” His words and what He did on the cross will be the only focus when our name is called in judgment. (Read Colossians 3:3–4.)

What's more, when we are brought to stand before the throne of God in the presence of every created being, Jesus will interrupt the court proceedings just before a list of our sins and the judgments against us would have been read. He will call for all charges against us to be dropped—on three accounts:

1. He Himself has already paid the penalty for our sins, and we cannot be tried a second time for previously paid-in-full crimes. (Read Romans 8:3; Hebrews 9:26; 10:12–18.)
2. Our names were permanently inscribed in the Book of Life, so we have bypassed any court trial. We have immunity from judgment and cannot be prosecuted. (Read John 3:18; 5:24.)
3. He is happy and proud to call us His own family. Because we confessed Him before people on earth, He gladly confesses us before the Father. He vouches for us. (Read Matthew 10:32; Mark 8:38; Hebrews 2:11; Revelation 3:5.)

God wants to eliminate the fear of punishment from our lives. His love doesn't just reduce our sentence—it removes it. He doesn't change a felony to a misdemeanor—He completely wipes away the offense from our record.

Think of it this way: On the Day of Judgment the video of your whole life will have been edited with love and forgiveness. The resulting version will be shorter than the original—and rated cleaner than “G” for all audiences.

He wants you to have confidence in His love—but not a swaggering bravado that says, “My Dad is God, so I can do anything I want with impunity.” As you sincerely try to live your life in the Lord (and fail to live it perfectly), He wants you to rely on His love to cover all your shortcomings. The longer you walk with God and mature in your understanding of Him, the more you will stand in awe of His love and the less you will worry about getting in trouble.

TRADEMARKS OF GOD’S LOVE

True love is like a multifaceted gemstone, cut and polished to radiate God’s splendor in every imaginable situation and from countless different angles. God’s love is a constant variable like a warm tropical climate. It is not generated by anything in us; it simply and always is the way that it is. A tourist landing in Hawaii doesn’t expect to affect the weather; the tourist just plans to enjoy it. God’s love is a prevailing condition like that.

Because He loves us, and because He is always the same (James 1:17), God is always constant in how He acts toward us and in how He thinks about us. Love expresses itself; that is the nature of love. How does God’s love cause Him to behave toward us? What responses should we expect from a loving God, as opposed to an unloving God? What is His disposition toward us? What manner will He take in dealing with you throughout your life?

Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow.
—James 1:17

First Corinthians 13:4–7, one of the most well-known passages in the Bible, talks about the true nature of *agape* love.

Love is patient, love is kind, and is not jealous; love does not brag and is not arrogant, does not act unbecomingly; it does not seek its own, is not provoked, does not take into account a wrong suffered, does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. —1 Corinthians 13:4–7

By expanding the single words used to define love in these verses, we can arrive at a more complete picture of just how magnificent the Lord's love is for each of us. God's love for you is always:

1. *Patient (long-spirited, long-tempered)*—God patiently continues to care for and about us throughout all our years. He forbears (refrains) from enforcing the rightful consequences we deserve for our behavior. When we are sure that we have “really done it now” and that we are “going to get it,” God will keep surprising us with His mercy. Even when we run out of patience with ourselves, He has lots and lots of patience left.
2. *Kind (usefully helpful, not removed from our real lives)*—God always thinks about what would most benefit us in each situation, and He gears His activities toward being of service to us in very practical ways. He works to put us at an advantage in life. He keeps performing “little kindnesses” for us, doing favors and making things work out that wouldn't work out otherwise. Since He cares about the daily needs of our life, He clothes and feeds us in kindness. (Read Matthew 6:25–34.)
3. *Not jealous (contentedly generous, not anxious about getting anything for Himself)*—Because God has everything and is totally complete in who and what He is, He has no thoughts about what He might be losing or missing by continuously giving us what we lack. He is not stingy, miserly or jealous of the good He does for us. Envy does not cloud His vision as it does ours, and He never draws back from giving to us because “it is about time” we gave to Him.
4. *Not boastful (promoting us, not Himself)*—As the Almighty, the Lord of lords, God has no need to boast or to secure His own position. Over and over again He acts as our Advocate, to advantage and aid us, and to elevate our standing in life. His notion of true greatness, of having the “top spot in the cosmos,” is to serve and do for others (Matt. 23:11–12). He doesn't just boast of His greatness, but He uses it for us and allows us to discover how great He is through what He does.
5. *Not arrogant (gently thoughtful, not overbearing)* —He uses His preeminent place and power in the cosmos, His magnificent and stately majesty, not to remain distant from us or haughty,

but to give us dignity, self-esteem and value through His attention. He is not arrogant or aloof. Instead, He bends down, stooping the way an adult does to speak kindly with a child, in order to relate to us on our level. He comes into our world even though we live worlds apart.

6. *Not unbecoming (seemly in behavior, not odd)*—God always does what fits best and works most perfectly for all the unique situations in our lives. How He expresses His love for us will never cause us embarrassment. He is supernatural, not weird. He offers us soundness of mind and heart, not strangeness.
7. *Not selfish (generous, not self-seeking)*—The Lord does not love us for what He can get out of the relationship—He loves us for what He knows He can give to us. He does not seek what works best for Him—He opts for what works best for us. He is like a math major in college offering to help a fourth grader with an arithmetic assignment; other than the simple pleasure of doing something for the sake of another, He receives no personal benefit.
8. *Not provoked (steadily patient, not easily exasperated)*—Although God’s wrath comes out against sin, which ruins the lives of His children, He is never exasperated with us. He never gets pushed to the brink or over the edge by what we do. Sooner or later we expect Him to say, “That’s it; I have had it up to here with you.” If we had earthly fathers who flew into rages, we imagine that God is going to become annoyed and outraged, and that He will come down on us with lightning flashing. But He won’t. Not ever.
9. *Forgiving (forgetful, not mindful of wrongs)*—God does not dwell on the things we have done to disappoint or to hurt Him; rather, He consciously chooses to set them aside so that His heart is only filled with pleasant memories of us. In fact, He casts our sins behind His back where He cannot see them (Isa. 38:17). Since we are so conscious of all the times we have brought our sins to Him, it seems only reasonable to expect Him to bring them back up to us. But He doesn’t. Not ever.

10. *Righteous (focused on good, not bad)*—God has no delight when anything hurtful or sad happens in our lives, even though He sometimes teaches us through experiences. He is thrilled by every opportunity to make things right, good and true for us. We humans find it hard not to notice the bad things others do. Though we do not want to get what we ought to get, we can see how other people should. God, on the other hand, causes the sun to shine on everyone—regardless of what they deserve (Matthew 5:45).
11. *Truthful (mercifully covering, not uncovering)*—God knows and sees everything in our lives, including all our inner thoughts and past behavior. Rather than bringing up all those embarrassing realities time after time, He covers them in silence. If anyone can uncover us, God can. However, the truth of His love covers a multitude of violations and wrongs in our lives (1 Pet. 4:8). He does not hide things to keep them covered; He covers things to release us from their shaming power.
12. *Vulnerable (entrusting, not withholding Himself)*—No one has been rejected more often or more completely than God has been. Even when we turn away from Him or refuse to open up our hearts to listen to Him, He puts up no defenses against us and knows we will likely reject Him again. We put Him on hold; we ignore Him; we tell Him we do not want to talk to Him today. Still He offers Himself to us and is always there for us without reproach or indignation.
13. *Hopeful (excited about the future)*—God is always looking forward to a great future with us. In anticipation of times to come, He confides things to us about what He has in mind. His long-range thinking never loses sight of happy days ahead for us with Him. He has plans for us and our future. Those plans are meant to give us something hopeful to hold onto when our current situation is painful. He says, “I’m going to show you things you never dreamed of” (Jer. 33:3).

14. *Enduring (solidly persisting, not frail under pressure)*—God’s love is a rock-solid foundation that is so strong, so fortified, that it outlasts virtually everything else in life. It can bear up under incredible loads of junk—the stuff that normally breaks relationships. No one on earth would put up with the kind of garbage we have thrown God’s way—lies, betrayal, inconsistency and more. Underneath all our days and all our foolish ways are His everlasting arms, locking us in a loving embrace (Deut. 33:27).
15. *Unfailing (determinedly focused, not erratic)*—God has set Himself unswervingly on the course of loving us no matter what we do. His intention to love us through everything will never drop off or fail. His love, like His existence, has no end—it is everlasting.

LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

Describe how you defined love before you read this chapter. What does God mean by love? Put in your own words how love is more than just a feeling—it is a determined way of acting toward others. In what ways does the Lord relate to us in love? _____

In what ways does God honor us? Does it surprise you to realize that He wants to be with you more than you want to be with Him? How does that change the way you feel about Him? _____

Why does God want us to love Him with our heart, mind, soul and strength? What is the best way we can love God? Have you accepted the Lord’s invitation to the big banquet that He is hosting in heaven? _____

How did God make sure nothing ever again would separate us from Him and from all the love He has to give us? _____

Why do you think it is difficult for people to receive God's unconditional love? What makes us try to earn His favor and love? Can you identify some area in your life where you are insecure in His love—something you have done that makes you wonder how He can still love you? _____

Read back through the attributes of true love found in 1 Corinthians 13. Select three of love's qualities and meditate on how God's love causes Him to relate to you. What responses will you now expect (different from what you imagined before) from a loving God? _____

Have you run out of patience with yourself? Do you ever feel that you have really done it now and are going to get it? In what ways has God surprised you with His mercy and love? _____

YOUR TIME WITH GOD

Ask God to help you in very practical ways. Ask Him to make things work out that wouldn't work out otherwise. God wants to be your advocate. He cares about the daily needs of your life and wants to perform little kindnesses for you.

Reflect on the wrong in your life. Remember that God's love covers a multitude of violations and wrongs. God covers things to release us from their shaming power. Thank Him.

Thank God that in every moment of your life you are being blessed by His love. The Lord's love consoles, soothes and uplifts you. When you are in need of comfort, know that God is always right there with you. In God's presence discouragement is transformed into courage and hope is transformed into reality.

As part of your prayer time with God, you may want to include the following prayer:

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*Eternal Father, I'm amazed that it is possible that
You could truly love me this way—
You are so full of delight, so welcoming and embracing.
Neither my heart nor my mind can grasp it.
I just presumed that You would be less intimate,
less eager to be close to me.
I think that is why I have stayed remote and impersonal with You—
except in those moments of great need.*

*There is nothing remote or impersonal about You, is there?
I open myself to Your overwhelming love, Lord,
and ask that You help me get over my wrong kind of
fear of You. I thank You that I don't ever have to work at earning Your
approval—it was You who wanted me before
I could even begin to want You at all.*

*Now I come to You, wanting to trust You more for all
the things Your love provides: advantage, shelter,
encouragement, hope, mercy and fulfillment.
I receive the gift of love You offer me in the person of Jesus, Your Son.
I am humbled and so very grateful to be welcomed by Him into
Your presence, and to share with Him all the privileges of
being called Your beloved child.
In Jesus' name, amen.*

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#3 BEING FORGIVEN

When we truly realize that everything God has done through the ages has been for the sole purpose of (re)establishing the closest and most fulfilling relationship possible with us, we look at things very differently. God really isn't the aloof Judge-in-the-sky we expect Him to be, writing people off one after another as we each fail to live up to His expectations. He is, instead, a God of love who agonizes over the wrongs we introduce into our own (and others') lives. When we choose ways of believing or living that cut Him out of the equation, the loss He feels is more rending than the multiplied loss of every parent on earth suffering the death of a child.

He created every one of us very purposefully and particularly, desiring above all else to share His whole life with us forever. At all costs He intends to maintain the closeness and intimacy of our relationship with Him—even when He has to pay the price Himself.

So what's the problem? God is God . . . can't He do whatever He wants to do? If He wants something to be a particular way, *presto*, He can make it that way, right? Why does God's relationship with human beings need to be maintained and repaired? Couldn't God just fix it once and for all time—and make it foolproof? That way everyone could live happily ever after.

This brings us to the most central issue in all of creation. In a way, it is the whole story—the theme, the plot of God's dealings with each of us. In order to understand the magnitude of what God has done for you, you must first grasp a reality that people do not like to hear much about—sin. The reason most people do not want to talk about sin is simple. However anyone defines their personal boundaries between right and wrong, between acceptable and unacceptable behavior, everyone knows that they have made many mistakes. No one has been able to live up to his or her own standard for conduct.

IN THIS CHAPTER YOU WILL LEARN . . .

- What sin is.
- What sin does to cut off relationship.
- What forgiveness is.
- Why we need forgiveness.
- What forgiveness does to remove and lift the stain of sin.
- Why we no longer need to make sacrifices.
- Why every wrong we will ever commit is already forgiven.

We do not like being reminded of the bad things we have done—either because we feel badly about them and wish they had not happened, or because we plan to do them again and do not want to have to hurdle our conscience to do so. We do not want our mental, emotional or physical excursions into darkness exposed.

Literally, *to sin* means “to miss the mark—to come up short, to be off target, to end up missing where you are supposed to be and, ultimately, to miss out on what you would have received if you had hit the target.” A sin is both the wrong we do or think *and* the consequences for that wrong.

Consequences are not the same as punishments. A child may or may not be punished for breaking the vase his mother told him not to touch. Either way, though, the consequence of the wrongdoing is the same—the vase is now broken.

According to the following verses, what is the automatic result or outcome when we sin?

Romans 6:16, 21. _____

Galatians 6:8. _____

Everyone wants sin buried in the past, with no aftereffects in the future. We all want to be done with what we’ve done and not to have to face it. The problem is, sin doesn’t just go away on its own—it has a lingering outcome. Perhaps if sin somehow had no consequences—if breaking the vase didn’t break it—sin could be forgotten or passed over as though it did not exist.

SIN SEPARATES US

But sin does have consequences. In fact, if you think about ways in which others have wronged you, what you are left with is not so much what they did, but the effect of what they did to you—the outcome it had in your life. Once someone grievously sins against us, a curious thing happens—that person’s wrongdoing becomes more prominent on the landscape of our relationship than he or she is. We lose sight of the individual because the sin looms enormously in our way. What we “cannot get over” or “put behind us” blocks our relationship.

Sin always ends in death—not always a physical end of one’s life, but a cutting off of relationship with the person against whom we sinned and an end to the future life we would have enjoyed if we had not sinned (Rom. 6:23). *Death*, as the Bible defines it, is a loss of relationship and a loss of future.

One of the spiritual laws governing how life works is that sin results in death. That means you cannot have relationship with both a person and that person’s sin against you. Their actions or their words become the focus of your attention. If you hang on to their sin, you have to let go of the relationship. As Adam and Eve chose to disregard God’s instructions, sin entered the world, and death came along with sin. Then death spread to all people from that point on because they (and we) kept making the same sorts of terrible decisions that Adam and Eve made (Rom. 5:12).

For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

—Romans 6:23

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned . . .

—Romans 5:12

Questions: Can you think of something that someone did or said to you several years ago that the individual has probably forgotten—but it still pains you deeply? _____

That person’s words or deeds probably left no lasting impression on them. Nor did the behavior affect the rest of the world. It landed primarily on you, and you are having a hard time getting out from underneath the personal consequences of their sin. It is almost impossible to separate what the person did from what it did to you. Even if someone apologizes and asks for forgiveness, your vase is still broken. No after-the-fact apology can change the fact that it is broken.

Questions: Why is it hard to continue in relationships with people who have betrayed or violated us? _____

Can you see what God’s dilemma was? _____

Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight, so that Thou art justified when Thou dost speak, and blameless when Thou dost judge.
—Psalm 51:4

And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden.
—Genesis 3:8

Sins committed against other people also have a consequence on the one who committed the sins—even though they may not be aware of that consequence. As surely as sin affects others with its deathly consequences, so it brings long-lasting consequences into the life of the sinner. Every wrong we have done has ultimately been an offense against God. Each wrong cuts across and disregards boundaries God has set for His creation (Psalm 51:4).

That is what the Bible means by saying, you were “dead in your trespasses and sins” (Eph. 2:1). In other words, you were cut off from connection with the Lord, “excluded from the life of God” (Eph. 4:18). You had forfeited future (eternal) life with Him. (Read Ephesians 2:12.)

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In order to restore what people had done away with, God had to do away with the cause of all the devastation; He had to get rid of our sin.

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Though not physically dead, we have lived a life spiritually removed from the Lord’s presence. Adam and Eve had to give up their place in the perfect garden. They found themselves hiding from God—rather than relating to Him intimately and conversationally as they had before their sin (Gen. 3:8). So, too, have we lived life away from God’s presence and plans.

Sin and death ruined everything God wanted us to enjoy with Him. In order to restore what people had done away with, God had to do away with the cause of all the devastation; He had to get rid of our sin.

Amazingly, He took that job upon Himself. He didn’t yell down at us from heaven, “Take care of your sin problem!” Instead, seeing that no one on earth had the capacity or the interest to solve the sin problem, He undertook to do it Himself (Isaiah 59:16).

FORGIVENESS: THE ONLY SOLUTION

Sin is a permanent mark on our record. It is like a blotch of indelible ink spilt onto a white cotton shirt. God's original intent was for no one to sin, just as our hope is that no one will ever do anything to hurt and offend us. It is a great plan as long as no one messes up, but when everyone has dark stains on their shirts and blouses, another plan is needed. God saw that there was no one on earth who was perfect; everyone turned aside from His ways. Therefore He Himself acted to rescue us from our hopeless condition (Isa. 63:5).

And I looked, and there was no one to help, and I was astonished and there was no one to uphold; so My own arm brought salvation to Me; and My wrath upheld Me.
—Isaiah 63:5

The subject of sin is central to the good news God wants to share with the world. The issue of sin—who has committed it and how it can be removed—is one of the surest ways to distinguish false religions. Some religions teach that people can become so spiritual or pure that they no longer sin. Other ideologies are convinced of the basic goodness in people—a goodness that is hindered only by external factors in the environment, upbringing or lack of education.

Read the following verses and see what they have to say about that.

2 Chronicles 6:36. _____

Romans 3:10–12, 23. _____

James 3:2. _____

Therefore the Law has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith.
—Galatians 3:24

One of the first things the Lord did was to “shut up all [men] in disobedience [under sin]” (Rom. 11:32). He heightened everyone's awareness of wrong by furnishing the world with a readable instruction manual for how things were to work (and not to work) called *the Law*. The whole point for giving it was to convince all of us that we need forgiveness for our sins (Gal. 3:24). We have absolutely no hope of maintaining our life in God by means of our own flawlessness. As the saying goes, “Nobody is perfect . . .”

Our culture uses that line as an excuse: “Compared to most other people, I do pretty well. You make mistakes, too.” But God is faultless. He made the worlds to work in perfection and beauty, not in shortcoming and blemish. His kind intention is for things to be right, not wrong. He cannot reconcile evil with His goodness; there is no place for distortion in the midst of perfection. That would be like a master woodworker trying to fit wrongly cut boards into an exquisitely designed cabinet. Wrong and right cannot fit together. We learned that lesson doing math in school. If even one wrong is allowed to be part of an equation, the error throws off the whole answer.

God could not just say, “Oh well, good try. Never mind about your wrongs; we’ll find some way to work them into our future together.” Our sin could not be accommodated—it had to be dislodged. Our wrongs could not be entertained—they had to be eliminated. There was no possibility for God to “look the other way.” The very nature of sin and trespass and evil is to ruin what is right. Wrong acts to destroy; it always introduces death. God could not allow it to perpetuate itself forever. To do so would be like a doctor who knowingly lifted the quarantine of patients infected with a highly contagious and deadly virus like Ebola.

There was only one solution: forgiveness.

WHAT IS FORGIVENESS?

Next to love, forgiveness is the most basic and most powerful dynamic of the good news Jesus has delivered to the world. Through forgiveness God restores what is lost, He repairs what is broken and He reestablishes His life with us. Forgiveness is the foolproof plan God implemented so that our relationship with Him remains in constant repair instead of in need of constant repair. It is why and how we will live happily with the Lord ever after. Forgiveness is the miraculous working of God to save us from the consequences of our sin. It takes us from the wrong place we have ended up to the right place to which God has invited us.

Read Romans 1:16 and 1 Corinthians 1:18. The Greek word for *power* is *dunamis*—from which we get the word *dynamite*. It means “force, miraculous power, ability, mighty work.” In our culture we tend not to think of forgiveness as a powerful force, but as a fairly feeble

response from someone who has been victimized. In what ways can you see forgiveness as being a very strong power? _____

What our natural language communicates about forgiveness is a far cry from what it actually is. We mostly use it after making small social gaffes (“Forgive me; I didn’t realize that seat was taken”), or we ask others for it only infrequently for specific offenses (“Forgive me; I should never have said that”). Consequently, we fail to realize the magnitude and might of forgiveness.

What does the Bible reveal about forgiveness, and how does it work out in our walk with the Lord? To begin with, forgiveness is one of the most imposing features of the Lord: “There is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared” (Ps. 130:4). Forgiveness is the last word, the final statement that can be uttered about someone’s ultimate destiny.

Forgiveness has the authority to grant a pardon. If you committed a capital crime and were caught, tried and sentenced, you would face several people, each of whom had an authority over your life. These would include the detective who arrested you, the prosecutor who brought evidence against you, the jury who convicted you, the judge who sentenced you and the warden who jailed you. But none of them could match the authority held by the governor with the power to grant you clemency.

Jesus told us not to fear the one who can affect only this life, but to fear the One who has authority to affect our eternity. (Read Luke 12:4–5.) Mercy and forgiveness can always outdo judgment because they come into play *after* the verdict and sentence (James 2:13). Forgiveness has the last word, and once it is spoken, nothing more can be said—except “Thank you.”

For judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy; mercy triumphs over judgment.

—James 2:13

FORGIVENESS LIFTS, CLEANS AND SENDS AWAY

Two images help us picture what forgiveness is and what it does. First, forgiveness lifts a load from us; it carries away what we were carrying. All of us can relate to struggling under the weight of bad things we have done. They “weigh” on our conscience. Like a heavy debt, our wrongs burden us and overwhelm our heart. Sin is a heavy encumbrance, and in the spiritual realm all the wrongs committed by a person accumulate into a massive load over the entire course of that person’s life—a heavy debt that is impossible to carry. Forgiveness lifts the amassed weight off our lives.

Forgiveness also wipes away the stain of sin. Forgiveness is not preventative, like an unfolded napkin across your lap. Napkins are good things—they guard against many spills that would otherwise spoil your clothes. Forgiveness takes the next step—it takes care of what your napkin misses. It washes your clothes and makes them as clean as new. Forgiveness removes the cranberry stain from your white cotton shirt, making it “as white as snow” (Isa. 1:18).

Have you ever noticed how the smallest stain draws all the attention? A splotch on a dress or a pair of pants stands out more than all the rest of the fabric because it is so out of sync with the original pattern. So it is with sin.

Read Psalm 51:1–9. Find all the words David uses to ask God to forgive his sin. _____

Does David see his sin? _____

Against whom has he sinned? _____

What does David say to God in verse 7? _____

Does that give you hope for your own sins? _____

We have spilled lots of stuff on ourselves. We have wiped dirty, greasy hands with our heart linen. We have engaged in rough and careless play that has soiled our soul. Forgiveness cleans away all stain and any trace of what dirtied us.

The common theme in both these pictures is that forgiveness separates our sins from us. It severs the link between us and what we

have done. Our wrongs and crimes are no longer connected with us. They are put away from and behind us. That’s the very thing we want—to have our sin done away with, left out of the equation, no longer with the power to affect our future. Without God’s intervention, we can only *pretend* that our sins never happened. God offers us actual slate-cleaning, stain-removing forgiveness for the undeniably real sins in our life.

FORGIVENESS, NOT WHAT WE DESERVE

That sounds great! It’s just what every person wants. So, why would anyone struggle with forgiveness? As strange as it may sound, people in general—even believers—have a hard time accepting God’s forgiveness. Over the course of your journey with the Lord, you will discover that forgiveness is one of the most difficult spiritual truths to keep embracing. That’s because we do not think as God thinks—His way of doing things is almost always the opposite of ours.

Forgiveness is a free gift from God to all who accept Jesus as their Savior (Rom. 6:23). That is the meaning of *Savior*—“the One who rescues us from the power of our sins.” We do not do anything to earn forgiveness. A pardon that commutes a sentence is not the same as “time off” for good behavior. There is absolutely nothing we can do to gain forgiveness on our own. Forgiveness is not a wage we earn; we cannot increase our take-home pay of forgiveness by putting in extra hours or effort. The only wage we have been able to earn from our sin is death.

OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT WORDS FOR FORGIVENESS

<i>Language</i>	<i>Word</i>	<i>Meaning</i>
Hebrew, OT	Nasa’ (pronounced naw-saw’)	Lift off or up, carry or cast away, pardon, take away
Greek, NT	Aphi’emi (pronounced af-ee’-ay-me)	Send forth or away, lay aside, let go of, forsake

Because humans like to accomplish things on their own, it bothers us when we are told we cannot do anything to affect our life situation. Our pride finds it difficult to accept that forgiveness is completely unconnected to our behavior. There is no link between the gift of forgiveness and what we do or do not do. If we pause to think about it, it is ridiculous—we want to be forgiven, which is to have every connection between us and our deeds removed, but we are tempted by a desire to have forgiveness earned by what we do.

This is another of the many traps waiting to ensnare you as you live life as a believer. The lies will come, whispering accusations and bringing us to a horribly misleading conclusion: *You don't deserve to be forgiven after what you have done. God will never forgive you now.*

We never earn forgiveness; we never deserve to be forgiven. That is the whole point. A guilty, convicted felon on death row cannot do anything while awaiting execution to earn forgiveness. His only hope lies in a pardon from the chief executive of the government. Our only hope lies in the Ruler of the universe!

NO MORE SACRIFICES

After sin entered the world, God introduced another theme: sacrifice. As we learned in the last chapter, sacrifice has always been a way to maintain God's close relationship with His people. Sacrifice is directly tied in with forgiveness. Sin always acts like a wedge—its presence drives people apart from one another. Sin, as the precise opposite of what God wants, separated our race from Him. It brought in death, so God had to find a way to remove sin from our lives. Otherwise there was no possibility of keeping us together with Him.

Consequently, He implemented a way for people to transfer their sin away from themselves and onto an animal. The sin-carrying animal was sacrificed—put to death—as a guilt offering. (Read Leviticus 1:4; 4:13–21; 5:15–16.) The penalty for sin is always death. In the Old Testament system of sacrifice, when the penalty was paid by a sacrificial animal, there was no longer any death fine to be paid by the guilty person. This process was called *atonement*—“covering over and wiping away sin with the blood of another.”

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The atonement God offers to us through the sacrifice of His Son gives us forgiveness and freedom forever.

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Have you ever heard of a *scapegoat*? We generally use the word for someone who takes the rap for and bears the punishment deserved by another. The word *scapegoat* comes from one of the specific details God gave about atonement.

Read Leviticus 16:7–10. Describe what happens to the scapegoat?

What was put on the goat? _____

When John the Baptist introduced Jesus, he said, “Behold the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). What did he mean? _____

The Law alerted people to their countless shortcomings, and it described sacrifices, which *temporarily* cleansed people’s stains, but could never make anyone perfect (sinless) forever. (Read Hebrews 10:1–4.) Jesus came into the world expressly to offer Himself as the sacrifice that would “put away” our sins once and for all (Heb. 9:26; 10:11–14). Because of Jesus’ atonement for our sins, God never again remembers our wrongdoings or takes them into account in His dealings with us (Heb. 10:17). The atonement God offers to us through the sacrifice of His Son gives us forgiveness and freedom forever.

Jesus told people that He “fulfilled the Law and the Prophets” (Matthew 5:17). Just as the Old Testament prophets uttered prophetic details about the Coming Messiah, so the Law—what most people think is just rules and regulations—is a prophecy pointing to Jesus.

WHY BLOOD FOR ATONEMENT?

Our modern sensibilities recoil at the thought of blood sacrifices. They seem too raw, too violent, too primitive for a loving God's approval—much less His requirement. Yet the consequence of sin is always death. The debt cannot be paid except through the loss of life. In His mercy, God allowed the sins of our race to be transposed to sacrificial animals in order for the beasts to pay the penalty in people's place. This process is called atonement (think of it as “made at-one-ment” with God)—covering over our sin with the blood of another.

Why would God choose such an unsanitary and seemingly gruesome way to take care of our sin problem? Why is the shedding of blood so central to God's plan for our restoration? When God formed Adam out of the dust of the ground and “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life,” what carried that breath to the cells in his body? (Read Genesis 2:7.) It was Adam's blood. In that perfect original world, Adam was inspired by God—given physical breath and inner motivation. He was animated in both body and spirit through what God breathed into Him.

Adam's blood was an agent of life designed by God to connect Himself with His child in much the same way that a mother passes life to the infant in her womb by means of the umbilical cord. That is why the Lord declares, “The life . . . is in the blood” (Lev. 17:11). Adam's whole being, body, soul and spirit worked in perfect harmony with the Lord.

When sin entered the world, everything was cut off from its original relationship with God, and it all became subject to death and decay—even the very blood that had once carried the breath of God to our race. From that point on, the blood carried a “gene” of death. Our “image” no longer matched that of our Father Creator. The breath of His life was expelled from our blood, and in its place came the curse of death.

God was left with only one option to restore us to Himself. He had to provide a substitution for us—something that would satisfy the death penalty under which we would otherwise remain imprisoned. That sacrifice had to involve shed blood, because that's where the life resides. God had to furnish a blood sacrifice that would perfectly cover the stain of our sin. He foretold His solution on the very day Adam and Eve fell from communion with Him—the seed of woman (not tainted by the life-blood of man) would bruise the head of the serpent. (Read Genesis 3:15.)

Jesus, born of a virgin without the “sin gene” of man in His blood, was God’s solution to fix the problem of sin once and for all. His blood was both completely human and absolutely sinless. He was the fullness of God in human form, the perfect likeness and image of both. As such, He could represent our race as no beast ever could, and as His blood was poured out, the final atonement took place for all time. In modern terms, our race received a complete blood transfusion to rid our bodies of a deadly disease. His blood carried the “breath of life” from His Father, and it perfectly matched the blood of humanity—except it carried no fault, no sin.

Long, long ago God had told Abel and Cain there was a way to overcome sin—the sacrifice of a lamb. (Read Genesis 4:4.) Every lamb that was sacrificed from Abel onward foreshadowed Jesus, who was, as John the Baptist introduced Him, “the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). That title is the one most often used of Jesus in the Book of Revelation because it best summarizes what He has done to redeem the world from the curse of sin and death. “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” will be the resounding chorus of our gratitude in heaven (Rev. 5:12–13). And here on earth, we overcome that curse, as well as the serpent of old, by “the blood of the Lamb” (Rev. 12:10–11).

Once we have received forgiveness for something, there is nothing more to be done about it (Heb. 10:18). Forgiveness means the deed is no longer connected with us; we have nothing to do with it, or it with us. Forgiveness is absolute and complete. When we have been forgiven, there is nothing left for which we can be forgiven again. Trying, then, to offer a sacrifice to God to prove our sincerity or to live up to His free gift misses the truth of forgiveness.

Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

—Hebrews 10:18

God forgets about our sin, but we do not (and neither does the devil). As part of the Law, sacrifices reminded people of their sin—in order to point them to the need for forgiveness. The reminder serves no purpose after the fact. It would be like tying a string around your finger to remind you not to forget to buy the carton of milk you purchased at the market two days ago! I have been forgiven; you have been forgiven—for all things for all time.

PERPETUAL AND TIMELESS PROVISION

We sinned regularly before we accepted Jesus' atonement for our sins, and we will continue sinning with grievous regularity for the rest of our lives. However, the amazing message of the gospel is that when we receive God's forgiveness through the cross-borne sacrifice of His Son, we instantly have forgiveness for all of our sins regardless of when they transpire in our life—past, present or future.

Many verses in the Bible tell us what the Lord does for us when He forgives us. Here are two scriptures that sum up what is true about God's forgiveness. As a beginning place for memorizing and meditating on Bible verses, read Hebrews 8:12 and 1 John 1:9, and commit them to memory.

Questions: What does God say He will remember about our sins?

If we confess our sins, how much of our sin will He cleanse away?

God's forgiveness perpetually covers us. Some people have mistakenly taken the promise in 1 John 1:9 and turned it into a requirement—that unless we confess, we won't be forgiven. In other words, it's up to you to ask for that forgiveness, and until you do God doesn't forgive you. Even if we tried to ask God to forgive us for each sin we could think of, we would surely forget about or be unaware of many others! All of us would live in a constant state of unforgiveness with the Lord because of our poor memory or blindness.

To the contrary, this promise tells us that when we do sin, His forgiveness *always* covers our sin and washes it away. Consequently, when we confess a sin, it is not so much that we are asking Him to forgive us (in the hope that He will decide to do so), but rather to thank Him that His provision through the cross enables us to be fully released from sin's evil effects.

God's forgiveness is like a great pool of cool water on a very hot day. By receiving Jesus' forgiveness, we jump into this pool where we get to revel in its refreshing waters every moment of every day. We dwell continually in these waters, which offer the forgiveness

that we need even before we commit a sin. When we become aware of a particular sin in our life, we can simply cup our hands together, fill them with His forgiving waters and pour it down our heads, faces and bodies. It's simply a reminder of what God has done for us, and this reminder cleanses our guilty conscience and draws us near to God to enjoy relationship with Him.

Because of the price Jesus has already paid on the cross, the just and right thing for God to (always) do is to forgive and cleanse us from our sin. The atonement has been made. It would be unjust and unrighteous for God to accept payment for the sins twice. God's judgment and righteousness are based on forgiveness as His first choice for every situation. God is never unwilling to forgive. The problem is only with people who either do not seek His forgiveness or do not accept it.

BEING BAPTIZED IN WATER

For those who have sought—and found—the forgiveness of God for their sins, one of the most important first steps a believer can take is being baptized in water. It makes a powerful public statement about your conversion and your decision to live no longer for your own desires. Being baptized in water is a profound act of obedience you can do. (Read 2 Corinthians 5:15 and Galatians 2:20.)

Being *baptized* literally means to be immersed. By being placed in it, you take on its qualities as though they were your own, and you end up where it takes you. Floating down a river is the perfect picture of being baptized—while you do not actually become water instead of flesh, you take on the river's speed, direction and view, and unless you swim against its current, you will follow its course and go where it flows.

Jesus Himself, though sinless, chose to be baptized in water as a way of fully identifying with our human need to be washed clean from our sin. If He identified with us by being baptized in water, it must be very important for us to be baptized as well.

It is not correct to say that a person cannot go to heaven unless he or she has been baptized. Instead, baptism *represents* what happens to us when we accept Jesus' death as payment for our sins. Water baptism is supposed to follow closely after a person's decision

to die to himself or herself and live to God, and the act of being baptized presumes the intentional choice to become a Christian—and vice versa. While the sacrament of baptism will always be a bit of a (wonder-ful) mystery, it is safe to say that every believer ought to follow the Lord in obedience into the waters of baptism.

Read Romans 6:4. Though baptism is symbolic, what does this verse suggest the act of baptism gives us power to do? _____

Read 1 Peter 3:21. Though the act of being baptized does not save anyone who has not received the forgiveness of God extended in Jesus Christ, for those who do believe in Him, baptism acts like a huge eraser, wiping away what? _____

Believers in Jesus are baptized in water as a symbolic expression of being buried in the grave. The old nature, with its carnal desires and its separation from God, is pronounced dead—and buried. We are baptized into, and fully participate in, Jesus' death on the cross when He paid the penalty for our sins once for all time. (Read Colossians 2:12–13 and Romans 6:9.) When kids float along in a river, the real force carrying them is the river; that's the whole point—letting the river do the work. Likewise, Jesus' death is the power that transports us to a sinless condition. The river of His life and His death, not our swimming, has enabled us to enter the presence of God free from our sin.

We are going to explore more of God's provisions for our earthly walk with Him in the coming chapters—including the importance of repentance and confession. There will be help for forgiving other people in the same way that God has forgiven us. But the most important truth for you to take away from this chapter is this: Whenever we ask for it, we receive forgiveness as a free gift. Amazing!

On your journey with God, be on the lookout for traps and false trails that suggest you must regain God's favor or sufficiently satisfy some requirements BEFORE you receive His forgiveness. Very often, those false ways appear pious or sincere. But they are still wrong.

FORGIVING OURSELVES

Sometimes it is harder to forgive ourselves than it is to receive forgiveness from others—or God. We keep getting knocked over with regret about what we did—especially when it radically altered our life or the lives of others. How can we experience relief from the terrors of self-reproach? How can we forgive ourselves for the terrible past? Here are some starting places:

Make a clear, verbal confession to the Lord by saying aloud: “Lord, I fully acknowledge that I did ‘X’; it was my doing, and I am the one responsible for doing it. I have no excuses. It was wrong, and I was absolutely wrong for doing it. All the consequences that have resulted from it—the ones I cannot see, as well as the ones I can see—are my responsibility, too. They would not have happened if I had not done ‘X.’ Forgive me, in Jesus’ name.” Then thank the Lord for forgiving you.

If it is possible without renewing unnecessary painful contact between you and anyone who has been affected by what you did, confess your sin to the people you hurt. Make no excuses. Be simple and straightforward, openly declaring that you did “X.” Acknowledge how “X” has severely affected their life and brought death to them. Make a statement, and ask a question: “I have sinned against you, and violated you by doing ‘X.’ I deserve every bad thing you think about me for what I have done, and though I cannot expect you to forgive me now—or even in the future—I humbly ask you to forgive me. I do not ask for your forgiveness to put pressure on you to forgive, but to remind you that I have done you a terrible wrong. You do not need to answer this question—just hear it: ‘Will you forgive me?’”

Accept the consequences your sin has brought about. God is able to intervene now, today, in the midst of where things have ended up. Tell Him you will put your trust in what He is able to do from now on—rather than living under the power of what you have done. Pray like this: “Deliver me, O Lord, from what I have brought on myself. Rescue me and those I have sinned against. I can and will live with whatever You allow or do. Thank You, Lord, for Your mercy.”

Remember that God offers us a future based on what He has done, not on what we have done. Not being able to forgive yourself is one of the psycho-spiritual lies the enemy puts in your mind and heart. It is like he buries smelly old tin

cans in the vegetable garden you have tried to tend so carefully. The cans do not belong there, but there they are. The I-cannot-forgive-myself-for-what-I-did feelings, impressions and sensations are real. But they are not true. Consciously take the cans—those thoughts of shame, regret, self-hatred—and pull them from the soil as often as you have to. Ask for God’s grace to take the feelings from you.

The accuser, the liar, wants us to believe the opposite of the truth. The devil calls God a liar, and tells us to listen to voices other than the Lord’s. “I cannot forgive myself” is not the truth of God. It feels so real, so big and so loud. But it is a lie. It makes you feel helpless, hopeless and forever weakened. You keep getting stuck because of it. It is like a compulsion—an addiction to regret, shame or self-loathing. Do you see how evil it is? Even though it seems rightly motivated—acknowledging you have done wrong—it is a twisted and incorrect conclusion.

Finally, confess that wrong conclusion—the sense that you cannot forgive yourself—to the Lord. Acknowledge that it is a sinful thought, and then receive His cleansing forgiveness for it. You may still have the memories and be aware of the magnitude of your past wrongs, but when you face those memories, whisper aloud, “Thank You; thank You; thank You, Lord Jesus, for forgiving me!”

LET’S TALK ABOUT IT

How has your thinking about sin changed as a result of reading this chapter? Did you realize that sin is both the act (thought, behavior, etc.) and its built-in consequence? How would you define sin (in your own words) to someone who has never heard of it? _____

What are most people afraid of when the subject of sin is brought up? Why does God talk about it? What is His purpose for making it such a central theme in His dealings with us? Why did He “shut up all [men] in disobedience [under sin]”? _____

How does sin cut off relationship between us and others—especially the Lord? _____

What is forgiveness? Can you think of an analogy for what forgiveness is and what it does to sin? _____

Why is every wrong we will ever commit already forgiven? _____

In what ways have you missed the mark, come up short or ended up missing where you are supposed to be? Even when you knew you were doing wrong, and went ahead and did it anyway, the Lord forgives you. Receive that forgiveness. _____

Is there something in the past causing you regret even though you have already gone to the person or persons involved and said, "Forgive me"? The desire to be forgiven is your acknowledgment that you wish you had done better in the past and your commitment to doing better now and in the future. But most of all it is an acknowledgment that you cannot live as you should without His power and grace. _____

How has God restored what is lost and repaired what is broken in your life? _____

YOUR TIME WITH GOD

Thank Him for full and complete forgiveness that washes away every bit of residue from bad choices and willful points of rebellion in your life.

Here are two simple prayers—the first one is for you if you have not yet welcomed Jesus into your life to fully forgive your sins. The second prayer is for you if you have previously accepted God’s forgiveness through Jesus, but have grown a bit distant from Him. You may want to pray both prayers because they express in words what our heart most wants to say to the Lord.

**To receive forgiveness for your sins and to become a
Christian . . .**

God, I acknowledge that I have done many wrong things in my life. I have sinned against You by sinning against others. My mind and my heart have engaged in so many different forms of wrong and wickedness. I have used myself in countless inappropriate ways. I am guilty of many sins. I cannot blame anyone else for what I have done.

I ask for Your forgiveness. I believe that You gave Your Son, Jesus Christ, to be a sacrifice for my sins. He paid the penalty for my wrongs when You had Him die on the cross. Thank You both for Your great love and mercy for me. I want to accept what You have done for me. I welcome the new life You offer me—fully forgiven for my sins.

Jesus, I invite You into my heart. I believe that You have been raised from the dead—just as You will raise me from death so I can live forever with You in heaven. I want You to lead me and guide me so that I can know You better. I want to live my life for You instead of for myself. Be the Lord of my whole self. I give my days to You.

Thank You for hearing my prayer. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit now dwelling in my heart. Amen.

.....

**To renew your commitment to the Lord and
to feel renewed in His forgiving grace . . .**

Lord Jesus my Savior, I know I have blown it. There are things I wish I had never done and things I didn't do that I wish I had. Not only have I stained my own clothes, I have stained other peoples' clothes as well—especially those I love the most.

I am still tempted to cover over my wrongs and to work hard to get myself right before coming to You. Show me, Lord, where and how I'm trying to earn my place with You rather than accepting the free and forgiving place You have already made for me. I want to start trusting Your forgiveness more and my efforts less.

Jesus, Your blood on the cross covers every stain of sin I've ever made (and will ever make). You were willing to give Your life so that I could be pardoned from the sentence that my failings have earned for me . . . the sentence of death. I confess how badly I need the forgiveness that only You have the power and authority to grant me. So I come to You now to receive the cleansing of Your blood, by which You separate me from what I've done and through which You restore me to Yourself.

Father, free me from the sins that so easily entangle me, and lead me in Your way of obedience. In Jesus' name, amen.

.....



THE JOURNEY *continues...*

#1 EXPERIENCING GRACE

God does for you what you cannot do for yourself. He guides and provides for you. He keeps doing good for you all the days of your life—regardless of what you do. Grace is not deserved or earned. God simply acts in your favor as a gift.

#2 OBEYING GOD

Since God made everything, and Jesus knows everything, it makes sense to listen carefully and pay attention to everything they say to you. When you follow God's instructions and advice, greater good comes your way, and you avoid life's pitfalls.

#3 CHANGING PERSPECTIVES

You don't naturally think the way God thinks, or do what He does. The conclusions life teaches you aren't the same as the ways God wants you to live. Whenever you realize that, God enables you to exchange your thoughts for His—and live differently.

#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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