

Beyond Pretend

A Sheep's Guide to the Universe



David Scott

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2017

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To Val Loomis, Official Sheep Illustrator

*Thanks so much for your thoughtful work in capturing my
thoughts and illustrating them so beautifully.*

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To Connie Bricker, Proofreader Extraordinaire

*Thanks for your many suggestions, deliberations and
corrections. Truly a blessing.*



“Life makes it so hard sometimes, to know what’s real.”

—“CAN YOU FEEL IT?” (DAVID CROWDER BAND)

FOREWORD

As the president of a Christian university, I am always interested in creative ways to share the story of the most important person—Jesus Christ—to have ever impacted our planet. Now, whether a person hears, accepts, agrees with, disregards or rejects this story is another matter. What is meaningful is sharing the story.

After reading Dave’s story, I had two perspectives enter my thinking at the same time.

Pause.

This is how Dave works. As you read this exceptional book, you will understand this point. Dave writes in such a manner that it generates a creative spark in the reader. He pushes you to a thought and then pulls you back to a level of thoughtfulness that is inspiring. So, as you read this you might toggle between: “What does this mean?” and “I never thought of it that way!”.

Now back to those two perspectives.

Dave has presented what Christians call the “Gospel Story” in such a manner that it crosses all generations. *Storyformed. Millennials. Generation Z.* This message is for you. You will enter a creative realm in this book that will move you from your story to God’s story. This is Dave’s message. If we are truly storyformed, then we all share in the great story of Peter or Paul. Both had their own story encountering Jesus. Then both Peter and Paul lived a story we all know—a story that was formed by the most important person to have ever impacted every person on this planet—Jesus Christ, Son of God.

I would also like to say that the art in this book by Valerie Loomis is amazing! I was impressed. I grew up desiring to be a great cartoonist, so I have a deep appreciation for artists who create illustrations because I feel they are kindred souls. Valerie’s work is so complimentary to

the story, and yet so distinct. She created a great balance to Dave's storytelling.

I am so honored to share this introduction. Dave and I were members of the same church. I have been blessed to receive his preaching on the Gospel, listening to him sing worship songs and just plain ole being in fellowship with him. Dave is so wonderfully unique. He is both here and there. Now and yesterday. Retro and contemporary. God continues to inspire him in ways that inspire me.

So, if you have read this far then here is my challenge to you. Share this story with a friend. When you do so, they will probably ask you why. When they do, just simply say this. Dave sent me to share this with you.

Blessings,

Gene

Gene Crume / President /Judson University

PREFACE

Three questions to move us past pretend:
Where am I?
Who controls my world?
What can I do about it?

One day each of us—every person on the planet, no exceptions—will leave earth for another destination in the universe. An honest approach to these three questions will prepare you not only for that moment when you find yourself standing on the threshold of eternity but also for the moments of this life.

Looking past this world ...

So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Corinthians 4:18 NIV).

We cannot know the reality of life if we do not look past this world. God is good, better than we could even dream, but we will not experience his goodness if we live in a world of pretend, a world limited to and constructed in our human, finite minds, a universe that leaves God out of the picture.

Step back and think about it. If we build our lives according to a blueprint based on human capability and intellect, then what are we left with? Can a mere mortal formulate a viable plan for immortality? Can the finite somehow prepare for the infinite? Where does that leave us? Or better yet, where does that take us?

We need a plan for the future which is better than anything we could ever come up with on our own. One day we will die and leave this life. God offers his plan for the journey. The question is, do we accept his gracious offer, or do we make our own travel arrangements?

Most people would agree that there is more to life than the empirical, what our senses—sight, sound, touch, taste and smell—reveal to us. We may label this *awareness* as religion, the force, spirituality, mysticism, etc., but we are all aware of the intangibles that envelop our lives, the people around us and the world we live in.

He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end (Ecclesiastes 3:11 NIV).

This is why people who have no apparent interest in God or a next world suddenly are churchgoers after a tragedy such as the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center. And it is why a person who has enjoyed a satisfying life on the planet apart from any apparent connection with God, now seeks prayer from anyone and everyone after being diagnosed with cancer. And this is why a teenager whose parents are tragically killed in an auto accident now considers for the first time the God-issue and “what comes next.”

The majority of us do not believe that when you die that is it, all over, end of story. Not really. But we have become very skilled, very proficient, at keeping those thoughts buried in the back places of our consciousness, that is, until the reality of a cancer diagnosis suddenly jolts those “back places” to the forefront, and now we are faced with the stark awareness of our mortality.

I am not making light of the tragedies of life but merely referencing the obvious. Most of us live with our attention focused on life on the planet, i.e. what is directly in front of us—planning a birthday party, going to work, paying a bill, remodeling the house, mowing the grass.

We give little thought to the unseen world, unless an event or a set of circumstances upsets our pretend world enough to cause us to look past the temporary nature of this life and consider something more. Those events and circumstances send ripples through our lives, waves of change powerful enough to rattle our perspective that life is lived only in the here and now. Questions about God and life after death bubble to the surface for brief moments, but unfortunately our first response is usually to fend them off and submerge them as quickly as possible.

I really hope you don’t do that. I really hope that you don’t settle for a perspective that disregards such a significant part of the reality of life without at least considering what God might say on the subject. We humans have this uncanny knack for settling for less than what God offers by insisting on our own way, pretending that happiness lies in the next this or that, or that there is no more to life than sixty or

seventy years on the planet, and just generally being stupid. I have a lot of experience in that also, but you probably don't need my help with that one. Smirk.

God offers a life that connects now and forever, a life in which God provides hope, joy and peace beyond human ability or comprehension, and a reality and quality of life above and beyond the pretense and disillusionment of this world. At some point you must come to understand that the truth lies on the other side of pretend. Would you let me help you with the journey?

Sincerely,

David

Where am I?

We're all like sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost. We've all done our own thing, gone our own way (Isaiah 53:6a MSG).

You were lost sheep with no idea who you were or where you were going. Now you're named and kept for good by the Shepherd of your souls (1 Peter 2:25 MSG).

The Son of Man came to find lost people and save them (Luke 19:10 NCV).

First, God asks the question everyone needs to hear: “Where are you?” To begin answering this question, we will travel to the ancient Garden of Eden. You may wonder how a person might accomplish such a feat? Time travel, really? Access details of events thousands of years old? Oh yes, by an amazing device usually referred to as “the Bible.” Zip, zap, whoosh, back and forth in earth history, back and forth into the deepest part of your soul. Need to gather some information from before the creation of the world? Got that covered. Want a portal into eternity? Yip!

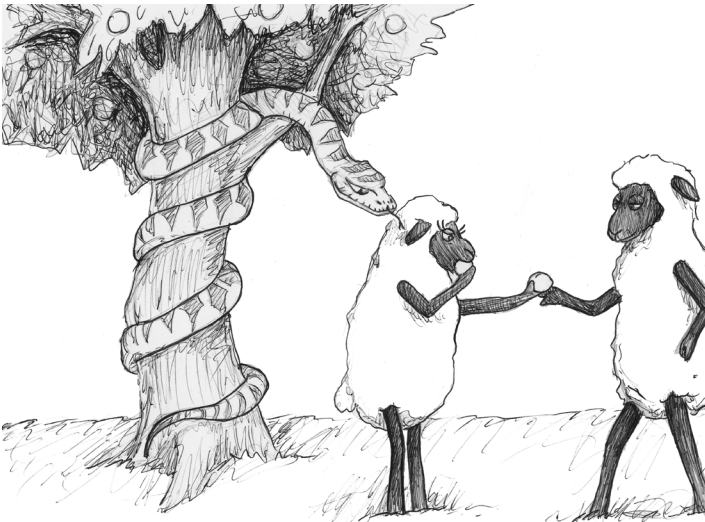


Traveling to Eden ...

So now, thanks to the most reliable source of information on the planet, we will listen in as God asks Adam the question we all must hear: “Where are you?” This drama begins in Genesis 3:1 as we find Eve and the snake in the middle of a discussion as to whether or not she and Adam were allowed to eat fruit from the “tree in the middle of the garden,” also known as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Scene One: Adam, Eve and a snake are standing by a tree in the middle of the ancient Garden of Eden.

In this scene, Eve finalizes her decision, eats some of the fruit and gives some to Adam.



The snake was more clever than all the wild animals the LORD God had made. He asked the woman, “Did God really say, ‘You must never eat the fruit of any tree in the garden?’” The woman answered the snake, “We’re allowed to eat the fruit from any tree in the garden except the tree in the middle of the garden. God said, ‘You must never eat it or touch it. If you do, you will die!’” “You certainly won’t die!” the snake told the woman. “God knows that when you eat it your eyes will be opened. You’ll be like God, knowing good and evil.” The woman saw that the tree had fruit that was good to eat, nice to look at, and desirable for making someone wise. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Genesis 3:1-6 GW).

Here is a lesson in ethical and moral decision-making as you try to personally answer the question: “Where am I?” Eve’s extended conversation with the snake has a very specific purpose, and it was not to gain a better understanding of God’s words. She wanted a way out, so she applied the rebel’s rule of convolution and transformed a straight line into a maze. She wiggled like a snake to wriggle out of the will of God.

Teaching moment: Our most important decisions are usually not overly-complex. And the most basic principles of life as God instructs are as clearly defined as “don’t eat from that tree.” In Matthew 22:40 Jesus squeezed two simple truths out of the entire Law and the Prophets: “Love God. Love your neighbor.” Do we sometimes face very intricate and complex issues? Undeniably. But the greatest proportion of decisions we make are as simple as Eve’s choice in this text. Listen to God and obey him or seek other data to justify a different course for your life.

Her clever adversary knew precisely where to strike. He challenged not her intellect but her will and defeated both ever so deftly with such an innocent question: “Did God really say?” Eve didn’t become entangled in a labyrinth of ethics and morals; she tripped over herself and pulled Adam down with her. They were going to do what they wanted to do and needed some “biblical” data to back up their decision. Don’t miss this distinction. They didn’t just turn from God in disobedience; they first played with the words, they quoted the words of God for goodness sake, and then set about making their own pudding pie.

Adam and Eve did not sin because they weren't boned up on the intricacies and complexities of theology or the ethical and moral nuances of the day. They sinned because they disobeyed simple words from the mouth of God: "Don't eat from that tree." They fell, and we along with them. In the world as they saw it, the created beings knew better than the Creator.

Scene Two: We now find Adam and Eve hiding behind some trees as they hear God walking in the garden.

In the cool of the evening, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking around in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees in the garden. The LORD God called to the man and asked him, "Where are you?" He answered, "I heard you in the garden. I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid" (Genesis 3:8-10a GW).

So to our question: "Where are you?"

I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this query to each of us. It is hard to believe but Adam and Eve's decision in that ancient garden created a shared experience of life (and death) for each person born onto the planet. Fast forward several thousand years via our amazing Book and the Apostle Paul tells us this:

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12 ESV).

Therefore, as one trespass [eating from the tree in the middle of the garden] led to condemnation for all men ... (Romans 5:18 ESV).

For as by the one man's [Adam's] disobedience the many were made sinners ... (Romans 5:19 ESV).

What Adam and Eve began we continue to this day. We will now turn our attention to this shared experience and what it means to us. Since "the fall" every person begins his or her life apart from God, every one of us. We need to know what that means.

A shared experience from the garden ...

“Where are you?” God had asked, but the one asking the question was the only one with an answer. How could we expect Adam and Eve to know? Their landscape had shifted from light to darkness, the cataclysm of “the fall” leaving them dazed. Waking up that morning, eagerly anticipating another day as the pinnacle of God’s creation, it was good to be them.

Within hours everything from the deepest inside parts of their souls to the dirt under their feet had been transformed. They tucked each other in that night, snuggled in their new clothes, fearful of life in the new world they had created. Yes, they did know more than they did before, but knowing more they now lived in darkness. Their newly acquired knowledge yielded only confusion and fear.

Welcome to our world, Adam and Eve! Adam and Eve can’t answer our question, but we will find vital information as we continue to study our shared experience.

The fall of humanity ...

We share the Fall. I believe it helps us in our current evaluation of life to understand that in a very real sense, the Fall of humanity centered around the goodness of God. A wedge worked its way into the minds of Adam and Eve when their view of God changed from God being the provider of everything good to someone who was holding out on them. Satan used this wedge to dissolve the relationship as it eventually led to Adam and Eve choosing the gifts over the Giver, the blessings over the Blessor. What God could do for them became more important to them than their relationship with God. They decided to look elsewhere as God became only one of multiple options for the good things in life.

Taste and see that the LORD is good. Blessed is the person who takes refuge in him (Psalms 34:8 GW).

Two tracks to the good life ...

Adam and Eve were the first sheep off the path but certainly not the only ones.

We're all like sheep who've wandered off and gotten lost. We've all done our own thing, gone our own way. And GOD has piled all our sins, everything we've done wrong, on him, on him (Isaiah 53:6 MSG).

In pursuing the goodness of God apart from God, they gave up life with God. However, before we engage in too much finger-pointing, we should look at what these first two sheep were presented with. No wonder they couldn't keep their little hooves out of the mess. They already had the whole world. They didn't have to give up their lives to gain ownership over the entire planet about which Jesus warned us (Matthew 16.26). It was all theirs, all of it, gift of God.

God created human beings; he created them godlike, Reflecting God's nature. He created them male and female. God blessed them: "Prosper! Reproduce! Fill Earth! Take charge! Be responsible for fish in the sea and birds in the air, for every living thing that moves on the face of Earth." Then God said, "I've given you every sort of seed-bearing plant on Earth And every kind of fruit-bearing tree, given them to you for food. To all animals and all birds, everything that moves and breathes, I give whatever grows out of the ground for food." And there it was. God looked over everything he had made; it was so good, so very good! It was evening, it was morning—Day Six (Genesis 1:27-31 MSG).

In a very real sense the blessing of God was their undoing—from the grass under their feet to the trees overhead, works of beauty and functional excellence. We observe God's goodness from the very beginning as plain old grass, plants and trees speak volumes more than their simple nature suggests. Why? Because creation reflects the Creator, and in the Creator's world even something so common as grass speaks the message of eternity. In fact, all creation reflects this powerful message: There is something more. God did this. God is there.

But the real something more is God, not his gifts, not his blessings, not his provision and care. Maybe that is what I am trying to say in this book: that there is something more and how to get there. God began

with a desire to give us his best, the good stuff. That hasn't changed, thus the slippery slope and the inherent tension that every occupant who arrives on Planet Earth has to live with: Do we choose the blessings or the Blesser?

Life on the creation track ...

Most of us taste the blessings of God every day in the beauty of this earth and in the daily provision of food, housing, entertainment, physical activity, friendships, jobs and family. In fact, with many of us, even as Christians, the good stuff is so good, so satisfying, that we overlook God's best. And even though grass and plants and trees are great, they are merely part of God's provision, the part we can enjoy on earth whether we know God or not.

I call this "life on the creation track" and "life on the creation track" can be absolutely wonderful—the joy of being on the water in the summer, camping in the mountains, the newest album by your favorite group, the latest 3-D movie experience, sitting under the backyard trees drinking a glass of sun tea listening to the birds, watching the squirrels and the rabbits, enjoying a weekend fishing outing with the boys, smelling freshly cut grass, driving your convertible with the top down, family and friends, intimate moments with your spouse. The list of *things to enjoy* on the creation track is very, very long and God is responsible for it all.

It doesn't get any better than this, does it? Well, as a matter of fact, yes it does.

Eternal life on the redemption track ...

Even the best case scenario for life on the creation track ends in a fiery crash. We will see that the really good stuff—lasting hope and the blessing of living forever with God—comes on the redemption track. The redemption track stands in stark contrast to the creation track, as access to the redemption track requires the saving work of Jesus Christ due to the sin problem that Adam and Eve introduced to the world in

Eden. Their sin brought spiritual death (separation from God), so since the time of the rebellion in Eden, people need an ambassador, a go-between for access to God. We need someone who can bridge the gap and make a way for us to once again taste God's best, to not be afraid in his presence, to not face condemnation. We needed someone who could lead us beyond our limitations and our pretense to capture and live God's original purpose.

We needed a Savior, a Shepherd. So God sent himself in human form. You may have heard of him? His name is Jesus.

Moving past pretend ...

We cannot answer our question—Where am I?—without facing our inclination to pretend.

These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is pointless, because their teachings are rules made by humans (Matthew 15:8-9 GW).

We all pretend, play make believe, play dress up, for better and sometimes for worse. As children we pretended to be moms and dads, wilderness explorers, space travelers, cowboys, gorgeous models, sexy movie stars, super-heroes, the winning quarterback in the Super Bowl, the game seven pitcher in the World Series, and even less glamorous roles such as pretending to be the garbage men who came through the alley every Thursday morning, or the carpenters who built our new house. Or maybe we just took the box that the new refrigerator came in and transformed it into a race car or a house.

Much of our pretending is harmless, even good. But not when our pretending distorts reality to the point of damaging our lives in the real world. One specific harm I would like to address is pretending to know God through our religion.

The Master said: "These people make a big show of saying the right thing, but their hearts aren't in it. Because they act like they're worshiping me but don't mean it" (Isaiah 29:13 MSG).

We pretend to love God and pretend that God loves us and has a wonderful plan for our lives. We pretend that the Bible says the things we want to hear. We pretend to serve and worship God. We pretend that one day we will be with God in heaven. We pretend that .. rrrrrrrrrrr!

One day we will awake to the reality of all the pretense and finding where we are now is key to where we will find ourselves later.

Moving past the green grass ...

We must move past the green grass of God's blessings to the greener grass of his love. The grass is really green on the creation track. God's creation wows us by day and by night. Look at the grass, the flowers, the trees and the sky. But the green grass of creation can keep us from the greener grass of redemption.

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God (1 Corinthians 2:12 ESV).

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things (Romans 8:31-32 ESV)?

Our problem may be that we are too content to want the more that God offers, living on the wrong side of faith, having fallen in love with nice lawns and homes, thriving in the material plenty of what is created and the joy of family and friendships on the horizontal plane of God's good earth. The truth may be that we are simply too satisfied, fat and sassy, living large on this side of the fence, not really interested in going anywhere.

Maybe it is time to believe God and move on, time to shed our indifference and fear, time to start looking past earth's city life to the strong town of God, time to by faith start climbing over to the other side. The reward is worth the journey. The greener grass of walking with Christ really is better. I think I can help you believe that. Would you let my try?



Discovering our post-Eden world ...

Organizing our information ...

At least six things happened as a result of “the Fall.” My list is not exhaustive and my treatment of each subject is not much more than an overview, but you will come away with an accurate understanding of the human predicament, and if you choose to do so, you will know enough to answer: “Where am I?”

DISPLACED

You probably already know this, but just in case you do not, I will inform you: You neither live in the Garden of Eden nor have access to the property. Your family was kicked out, given the boot and never allowed to return. You are a displaced person, and we are a displaced people. How do I know this? Because that is exactly what happened to

the first human inhabitants on the planet and remember we share the experience.

GOD said, "The Man has become like one of us, capable of knowing everything, ranging from good to evil. What if he now should reach out and take fruit from the Tree-of-Life and eat, and live forever? Never - this cannot happen!" So GOD expelled them from the Garden of Eden and sent them to work the ground, the same dirt out of which they'd been made. He threw them out of the garden and stationed angel-cherubim and a revolving sword of fire east of it, guarding the path to the Tree-of-Life (Genesis 3:22-24 MSG).

Forcefully driven from their home and banned from reentry, Adam and Eve began a new life. God still provided for them, but things would never be the same as they would now farm the land by the sweat of their brow. Can you imagine how displaced Adam and Eve felt? No, you can't, and neither can I. Talk about being on the outside looking in. What a change they experienced—from the intimacy of walks in the garden in the evening breeze with God to the hostility of being forcefully removed from the garden and having an armed, heavenly being set to guard the gate.

Picture a family who, after farming the same ground for generations, has been forcefully evicted from their property, and they are now living in a refrigerator box under a bridge.

So you see then the first displacement ever in the world. And as cushy as we may seem to be in our homes, the reality is that this is very fleeting. Just ask someone at the end of his or her life. As we say: "How time flies." We are a displaced people. We are wanderers, pilgrims and sojourners but good things are on the way. God tells us that there is a do-over in the works.

But according to his promise we are waiting for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13 ESV).

HIDING

Another fact of our post-Eden world is that by default we are hiding. Since Genesis three our tendency is to hide, to keep our distance from

God. God allows this hiding for a time. One day there will be no more hiding. By default, every person begins his or her life on this planet hiding from God. Adam and Eve hid behind the trees, and we hide behind our careers, families, hobbies, perversities, entertainment, wealth, religions, philosophies. We even hide in our enjoyment of what God has created.

When they heard the sound of GOD strolling in the garden in the evening breeze, the Man and his Wife hid in the trees of the garden, hid from GOD. GOD called to the Man: "Where are you?" He said, "I heard you in the garden and I was afraid because I was naked. And I hid" (Genesis 3:8-10 MSG).

"And I hid."

In spite of the hiding, God had his reasons for asking Adam, "Where are you?" And we still need to hear the question from God as it echoes through the centuries, as it calls out to every generation and to every person of every generation as it ripples over the stones of our lives. "Where are you?" Can you hear the echo from the Garden of Eden? Where are you? Can you hear him now?

GAME ON ...

And a deadly game it is. Adam and Eve played the first game of hide-and-seek. They initiated this game when they shopped around for a source of fulfillment other than God, and in their disobedience they began a deadly contest. They not only dramatically changed their lives when they disobeyed God, but in doing so, they set the norm for everyone who would be born onto the planet. Now the default setting for humanity is to hide from God.

One day there will be no more hiding. No more hiding behind the distractions of this life. No more hiding behind philosophy or religion. No more hiding behind our opinions and willful ignorance. In fact, one day in the future everyone who has not answered this question will find themselves totally revealed before God in judgment. See God now or see him later, but you will see him. The "God-issue" will be resolved.

I saw a large, white throne and the one who was sitting on it. The earth and the sky fled from his presence, but no place was found for them. I saw the dead, both important and unimportant people, standing in front of the

throne. Books were opened, including the Book of Life. The dead were judged on the basis of what they had done, as recorded in the books. The sea gave up its dead. Death and hell gave up their dead. People were judged based on what they had done. Death and hell were thrown into the fiery lake. (The fiery lake is the second death.) Those whose names were not found in the Book of Life were thrown into the fiery lake (Revelation 20:11-15 GW).

That deep, nagging question of judgment ...

The nagging, unanswered issue of reckoning and judgment, the question that brought the dread of death from the hidden places of our psyche is now answered. We refused to answer “Where am I?” and in doing so disabled our ability to find the answer to “Where am I going?” However, somehow deep within, we knew. In the recesses and hidden corners of our minds, we knew. When life slowed down enough, got quiet enough, we knew. But in the insanity of our depravity we continued on a deadly course of denial.

Every person on this earth is born playing the game that Adam and Eve began early in the history of humanity. Apart from the saving work of God, everyone now hides from the presence of God. Now in the last book of the Holy Book we find everyone who hid from the presence of God for their entire lives standing before God’s throne awaiting judgment. No more hiding as even the earth and sky flee from his presence. Everything is revealed before him; everything is dragged out of the dark places. Even the sea and death and hell give up the game.

Nothing is hidden. Now they will hear God.

GAME OVER ...

LOST

We are lost. Hiding behind the trees, lost and don’t know it, still hiding. Still stupid. And we don’t want to know where we are.

Let’s think through this for a minute. Why do people fight off attempts by others to help them see their standing before God? Logic would seem to tell us that a lost person would want directions—that he or she would want to be found. But depravity is not logical. It wasn’t logical to listen to the snake, no matter how beautiful and clever, rather

than listen to God. Forget logic. We humans are desire-driven, and that is dangerous, no, deadly, if our desires are not found in God.

So I don't think it is a stretch to say that we don't want to know where we are. And if we don't know where we are, then all we have is wishful thinking when it comes to where we are going. We live in a land of wishful thinking, and wishful thinking, the dangerous territory of our flawed minds, is different than hope. Every wishful thinking blueprint for the future, is presumed upon a false schematic which overlooks the design and engineering flaws inherent in each of us and the curse this planet is under. We are irreparably damaged from hard wiring anomalies resulting from denial and rebellion.

We're messed up and we kind of know it, but we still insist on writing the story ourselves.

The myth of the better place ...

Doesn't this reflect the thoughts of the average person concerning "what comes next?" Listen to the person at the funeral of our friend. "Well, she's in a better place now." [I hope.] Could you hear the "I hope?" They didn't say it, and it wasn't audible, but it was very real. They don't say I hope, but they wishfully hope it to be true because that is what they are wishing for when they die—a better place. But don't you dare try to get them to think about "it" now. "It" as in, where they actually are now, separated from God, lost, hiding, God's enemy, and where this means they will be later ... and it's not a better place.

Don't you dare try to get them to leave the land of wishful thinking. Don't you try to get them to "look under the hood" and check the wiring. Don't you dare try to warn them about hell and the consequences of denying reality and remaining lost. Let them enjoy the sunshine of a fool's autonomy, let them love what they do away from the light, let them run to the darkness. Let them go to hell. What kind of friend are you anyway?

The Son continues the Father's quest ...

In Genesis three, we read how God came looking for Adam and Eve as they hid behind the trees after rebelling against him. In Luke nineteen, we see Jesus continuing the search, but now on a much larger

scale. He came to seek and to save the lost among all humanity. He is looking behind all the trees.

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10 ESV).

Luke's words present the concept of our lostness. Biblically speaking we understand that the state of being lost is something to be saved from. Through their rebellion in Genesis three, Adam and Eve introduced spiritual death, which includes (among other things) our desire to hide from God and our state of being lost.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12 ESV).

The Bible uses many words to describe our relationship with God, one of those words being dead—the state of being spiritually separated from God. The serpent coaxed Adam and Eve with these words.

But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not surely die” (Genesis 3:4 ESV).

Kind of true (they didn't physically drop dead on the spot) but not really true, a stretching of the truth that Adam and Eve were willing to accept to fulfill their immediate desires. On the small screen of their lives they missed God's big picture. They winked at reality in order to grab what they wanted now. So no, they didn't drop over dead, but the reality is that the moment they gave in and ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they became spiritually dead (separated from God), and the process of physical death had begun. Death, both physical and spiritual, would now win its battle against every person born onto the planet.

God said they would die. Satan said they wouldn't. Someone was lying.

And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1 ESV).

Who will we believe—God or the serpent? Seems to be a no-brainer, but that's not the way depravity plays out in the lives of humankind.

Do lost people try to be found?

Let's review. What have we discovered so far? As human occupants on this earth we are displaced, hiding, lost and dead. We have also learned that all is not lost because Jesus came looking for us to save us. When we see Christ coming, we should be running to him shouting "Over here, Jesus, over here." Right? Not exactly. Not how the mind of a fallen human works. We, in fact, don't admit we are lost. We pretend we know where we are and where we are going, and we become angry if you tell us otherwise. Just as Adam and Eve hid behind the trees when God came calling, we too hide behind the trees when Jesus comes seeking us. After all, we don't need a map. We aren't lost. Why come out of the shadows?

Interesting that you brought that up.

Why wouldn't we come out into the light when Jesus comes calling? I mean if we were lost in the Amazon rainforest or in the mountains of Colorado or on the streets of New York, and we heard and saw the leader of our group coming toward us, wouldn't we be running toward him, waving our arms, sending up flares, shouting, building a bonfire on the beach—anything to get their attention so we could be rescued?

This is the crisis we're in: God-light streamed into the world, but men and women everywhere ran for the darkness. They went for the darkness because they were not really interested in pleasing God. Everyone who makes a practice of doing evil, addicted to denial and illusion, hates God-light and won't come near it, fearing a painful exposure (John 3:19-20 MSG).

We don't want to be exposed. Crazy, nuts? Yes, but this is depravity. Our thinking is mortally flawed. We do not want to be found, and we do not want to be exposed. *We will stay hidden* in our denial and illusion while wishing for the best. *And we will die in our sins unless we come away from the trees.* Cuckoo birds, the whole lot of us. We like what we have better than what God offers. Looney tunes for sure but just as in Eden, we are still seeking the goodness of life apart from God. It's our sin, and we're sticking to it. We are holding out for "the better place."

To be found we must know what it means to be lost, and only God can get through our defenses. Knowing how lost we were before we came

to Christ is a tremendous help as we grow in our faith because when Christ finally finds us and saves us, we will know how saved we are. Too many times we allow the enemy to successfully attack us with arrows of false guilt and sharp accusations because we don't understand the completeness of our forgiveness in the shed blood of Christ. But when we truly understand *how far from God* we were, *how dead* we were, *how without hope* we were and *how desperate and lost* we were, we begin to understand how saved we are in Christ. The enemy attacks our goodness, but our salvation is not based on our goodness.

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God (Ephesians 6:16–17 NIV).

When we fully realize and accept that our relationship with God depends on what Christ has done and not on our goodness, then the devil's flailing away is meaningless. The fiery arrows are quenched by our shields of faith because we now know that we were lost and dead and could not have been any further from God than we were, and we know that God loved us and saved us while we were still his enemies. We have God's full acceptance; we value the enemy's opinion no longer. The accusations fall ineffective. The truth that lives in our hearts tells us that Jesus completely took care of our debt to God on the cross.

As Scripture says, "Not one person has God's approval. No one understands. No one searches for God. Everyone has turned away. Together they have become rotten to the core. No one does anything good, not even one person" (Romans 3:10-12 GW).

But God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much, 5 that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead (It is only by God's grace that you have been saved!) (Ephesians 2:4–5 NLT).

When we allow the Holy Spirit of God to instruct our minds to the true condition we were in before Jesus Christ did his saving work in our lives, then we are confident in the helmet of salvation against the hateful and lethal blows of the dark forces. There will be no surprises,

no skeletons in the closet and no non-disclosures before God. It is all out there before him in all his holiness and fully and completely dealt with through the shed blood of Jesus Christ. All of our dark deeds are dragged before the light of God's holiness, and we have the blessing of "Yes, approved by God by the blood of the Lamb" applied to us as we believe.

DAMNED

Beep ... Beep ... beep ...

Can you see the text streaming across the bottom of your set? You know, how they give breaking news and sports updates. Picture this disclaimer running across the bottom of your screen: "The following anecdote is for educational purposes only and not intended to offend." Please receive the following snippet as a vehicle to effectively convey the truth of this section.

My wife went back to school a few years ago so she could upgrade her employment. In one of her classes, Mr. Cane (not his real name), had just passed out a test with which I believe his students were to work on in groups of three or four. John (not his real name, actually it may be John as I don't remember his name) was leading his group, and he opened the textbook during the test. Not supposed to open the textbook, John. Which part of those instructions didn't you understand? But John was one who knew it all, often held court in class and seemingly had all the answers until it came time for the real answers. Anyway, John gathered his flock around the textbook as they began the test. Mr. Cane strolled by and with a look of amazement and amusement rolled together into a beautiful smirk he asked John, "Are you that damn stupid?"

I'm sorry but that struck me as so funny. Okay, so maybe I enjoyed John getting his comeuppance a little too much. I am probably not too sorry or I wouldn't have included this but I sincerely do not intend to offend. I am using this because it captures my point so vividly. If we were to ask the human race the same question, the correct answer, biblically and theologically, would have to be yes. If we were to be candid and honest, here is how the interview would go.

INTERVIEWER: “Are you that damn stupid?”

HUMAN RACE: “Yes, we are!”

INTERVIEWER: “All of you? Everyone? That damn stupid?”

HUMAN RACE: “Yes, all of us. None of us seek God. You know the saying ‘stupid is as stupid does.’ We’re all in the same boat or hand-basket, if you will.”

So where does that put us? Do we [religious people] get a better break than the others? Not really. Basically, all of us, whether insiders or outsiders, start out in identical conditions, which is to say that we all start out as sinners. Scripture leaves no doubt about it: There’s nobody living right, not even one, nobody who knows the score, nobody alert for God. They’ve all taken the wrong turn; they’ve all wandered down blind alleys. No one’s living right; I can’t find a single one. Their throats are gaping graves, their tongues slick as mud slides. Every word they speak is tinged with poison. They open their mouths and pollute the air. They race for the honor of sinner-of-the-year, litter the land with heartbreak and ruin, Don’t know the first thing about living with others. They never give God the time of day. This makes it clear, doesn’t it, that whatever is written in these Scriptures is not what God says about others but to us to whom these Scriptures were addressed in the first place! And it’s clear enough, isn’t it, that we’re sinners, every one of us, in the same sinking boat with everybody else (Romans 3:9-19 MSG)?

We all begin at the same place—every generation, every person born on earth starts out a sinner, “damned if we do, damned if we don’t” as they say. Perhaps a bitter pill to swallow but theologically accurate. Were you born in the U.S.A. in A.D. 1979? You’re damned. Born in Europe in A.D. 1423? Damned. Born in Persia in 584 B.C.? Damned. Get the point? We are all damned and stupid, condemned before we get out of the gate, until or unless we come to believe in Jesus Christ and receive his gift of eternal life.

He who believes in Him is not condemned [damned]; but he who does not believe is condemned [damned] already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God (John 3:18 NKJV).

And for this reason God will send them strong delusion, that they should believe the lie, that they all may be condemned [damned] who did not believe the truth but had pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:11-12 NKJV).

Don't like those apples. Too harsh? Too negative? Then take it up with God. Oh, you don't believe in God and don't trust the Bible even though there is nothing close to the Bible as far as historical authenticity? Then don't worry about any of this; brush it aside as more religious nonsense. Nothing to it.

All you have to do is figure out the meaning of life on your own or what happens when you die. Just ask other people, look at the glass as half-full, study some books or maybe take a philosophy class or do a Google search. Go ahead and try to navigate the universe on your own. I mean that makes real sense, given our track record and all.

But maybe, if you quell the protests for just a minute or two and take a breath, then you may agree that this rings true, and possibly you will hear God in the quietness. We all know there is a coming day of reckoning; it's in our wiring. Maybe tomorrow, maybe forty years from now, and all of this will be gone ... like a vapor ... gone. This is why you are afraid to die. The opportunity for life as God intended was lost to the human race in Eden by a tree and now you thirst for something that nothing on earth can satisfy. In your desperation you will try anything to fill the void.

This is why you try to lose yourself in sports or escape to music or sexual adventures, real and imagined. This is why you grasp at anything that promises happiness or fulfillment. This is why family and friends mean more to you than anything, including God. This is why you attempt to buy peace and security through insurance companies and investment plans. This is why you are bitter and sad when life seems to pass you by and you have yet to drink its best. This is why a mid-life fling and vacations to exotic lands are especially appealing, and this is how you justify shopping binges on already exhausted credit cards, and it explains why you are building a house you know you can't afford.

Death has touched the planet and you languish in your search for life. You are running and desperately searching for happiness as a damned individual. You go for the gusto wherever you can find it because time is running out. And you are right to do this if you are only going to take into account life on this earth and give no thought to what lies beyond.

Go for it. Grab it while you can. Eat, shop, drink, travel, build and be merry because tomorrow you will die.

But true life and peace will always remain just beyond your reach because true happiness and lasting peace do not come to damned people. Except for very brief moments you will never find what your heart aches for as a damned man or a damned woman. The damned cry in vain for peace and safety. You might as well go back home and crawl under the covers because that ship is not coming in. That train is not pulling into the station.

Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea. "There is no peace," says the LORD, "for the wicked" (Isaiah 48:18, 22 ESV).

At times you may almost be able to drink in enough of this life to quiet your soul; to still that inner voice that tells you there is more. But that semblance of peace will never reach the core of your being—not even for the world champion athlete, the most beautiful woman, the most talented musician, or the richest billionaire, not as long as you remained damned.

What good would it do to get everything you want and lose you, the real you? What could you ever trade your soul for (Mark 8:36-37 MSG)?

One day the questions will be answered, and everything will be revealed. No more mystery, no more denial and illusion, and consequently, no more opportunities. Out of options. Remember, you're damned. And if you're still damned on that day, then you're damned forever. So am I really being mean by saying this? Judgmental and self-righteous? I could avoid the criticism and let you find this out on your own, but this is one path of self-discovery that you do not want to have any part of.

But on second thought, I really don't need the criticism, people getting mad at me, hurting my feelings ... and all the name calling. So never mind. You're really okay. Just find the answers inside. You're a good person and things will probably work out for you. As they say at funerals, "One day you'll be in a better place." So have faith (whatever

that means to you) and be blessed. No, no, no to all that silliness. This is a matter of life or death. The tragic irony is that for most people who cling to the wishful notion of “a better place,” the end result is hell. If you do not know where you are now, your false hope will conceal an accurate view of the future until it is forever too late. If you do not know where you are now, then every look down the road will be blinded by pretense and then you will be before God. And then it is too late.

There is only one resolution, one name, one Person, one plan and only one way to escape being damned forever. You must change your status before the day you die. Otherwise, as they say, you don’t have a snowball’s chance in hell. Your status must change from damned to blessed before the day of judgment. So name-calling and cursing aside, I will give you the necessary information. There is only one name to remember. No need to study theology or survey the religions of the world or examine the progression of philosophy over the last two centuries as I have. Once you bow before God it is simple.

Jesus. J-e-s-u-s is all you need to know.

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12 ESV).

So it’s time to stop being stupid, time for a change from damned to blessed, time to consider what God offers. You need a Savior, and there’s only one. Everything you want is found in Jesus Christ.

Believe it or not, but as you read these words, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is looking for people to save. Go ahead, look over your shoulder. He may be right behind you. So what are you waiting for?

I will look for those that are lost, bring back those that have strayed away, bandage those that are injured, and strengthen those that are sick ... (Ezekiel 34:16 GW).

For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10 NIV).

But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the message concerning faith that we proclaim (Romans 10:8 NIV).

DEPRAVED

Meet John and Edith (not their real names) ...

John and Edith were good friends of my parents. They are on a short list of possibly the kindest, most caring and generous people I have ever known. They had such respect and care for other people, even kids, even me. Kids and dogs have that in common; they can tell if someone's faking it. The love John and Edith had for people was real. Edith worked with my Mom at a local factory. She and John weren't wealthy, but they had more materially than Mom and Dad during the beginning of their friendship. Edith would bring well-prepared lunches to work and share the bounty with Mom; probably at times Edith brought more lunch for Mom than Mom brought for herself. But she and John didn't "let on" as we would say in our part of the country. They were not being good to be noticed for their goodness. They were good because they cared and were some of the best people you would ever want to know. And they were unsaved. John and Edith did not know Christ. And now I am sad even writing this, but unless they believed in Christ late in life and I missed it (which I really hope is what happened), then they died not knowing God.

How do we explain the John's and Edith's of the world? Challenge that it is, I will now attempt to present a working understanding of the term depravity. Then as we confront the great mystery of good and evil in every human on the planet, we will have at least a starting point from which to work. You are depraved. And so am I. And so is your dear old sweet grandma. Everybody misses the mark, even John and Edith.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23 ESV),

The apple ...

No, not that apple, you silly rabbit, just an apple—a rotten one actually. I will use the example of a partially rotten apple to give us an idea of the meaning of depravity. You have seen an apple like this; it looks oh so good until you turn it over and see the brown, rotten spot. Part of the apple still looks quite good and can be very tasty, but it will



never be good enough to be sold in the grocery store with one of those little “Inspected by 4261” stickers. Those apples have to be perfect. There can be no rotten spots inside or out.

- Why are bad people so good and good people so bad?

Remember the “apple” ...

Bad people are good and good people are bad because we all are both bad and good. We are depraved, born bad to the bone and in the image of God, the complex mixture of the human race since the great rebellion in the garden of Eden. We deviated from the course of God, from what God defined as moral and right and proper and chose our idea of life over his.

And now we have this enigma to deal with as we look at each other. People who are supposed to be so bad are wonderful people. That biker guy—tattooed, cigarette smoking, cussing? How in the world can he be such a good person? And that young lady who obviously didn’t sign the abstinence from sex before marriage covenant, how is she such a caring, understanding person? And while we are on the subject, why is my neighbor who makes no claim to knowing God a better person than many of the people in my church?

Do you ever have questions like those? Believe it or not, becoming familiar with the teaching of the depravity of man can be very encouraging and strengthening. And yes, I like broccoli, brussels sprouts and asparagus. For years I pondered these questions and found no good answers. How could these people I knew in various stages of my life, who were not Christians, be such good people? I met friendlier kids in the pool hall downtown than at the church youth group. I didn't understand these things, and unfortunately, I believe that many of the people teaching and preaching in the churches I attended didn't understand them either.

An overview of the problem resulting from an inadequate understanding of depravity per my experience in church:

- In attempting to emphasize that a person's good works served no good purpose in finding God and salvation, we seem to have skewed the meaning of depravity. We taught that depravity meant the whole apple was rotten even though personal experience demonstrated otherwise. I don't think I was the only one confused as to why my unsaved neighbor could be such a good person. Many of us lived with a dissonance between what we were taught in church and what we saw to be true in the people around us. In this confusion, passages such as Romans 3:10-18 were misunderstood.
- I remember no reference to the biblical teaching that we humans were made in the image of God. I think this was an overreaction, as many things were, to liberal groups who embraced the goodness of man via being created in his image as an avenue to God. From what I remember it now seems to me that the teaching on the image of God was mishandled by both liberal and fundamental groups.
- Because we skewed our theology, we were afraid to address the great darkness inside. Yes, we talked about being lost and needing to be saved, but we didn't know what to do with the good/bad mixture that continued after someone came to Christ.

I believe this forced many people to live in denial, not realizing that this was part of the path of even the most faithful pilgrim. Not understanding the importance of the subject matter, we avoided the discussion. We were probably afraid to acknowledge our inner pervert (the miserable wretch inside who fought daily against our growth in Christ) because we had not allowed the gospel to penetrate the deep, dark places in our lives.

- As a result, we didn't understand our salvation and the people around us as well as we should have. This confusion came from an incomplete grasp of our state before and after coming in saving faith to Jesus Christ. *We didn't know how saved we were because we didn't know how lost we had been.*
- When someone stepped outside these parameters of confusion and denial, instead of embracing them in grace and truth, we made further demands which often caused them to give up on the whole process.
- We must have at least a basic understanding of these things, or we will create a social context within our group where openness and honesty in our approach to God is punished, not rewarded. As a result of our misguided punishment, those interlopers who are open and honest will be punished, and we will have created an environment of fear and not faith. We must understand the process and know that until we see Christ and he finishes his transforming work in our lives, that drawing closer to God means confronting the mess within us.
- If we do not make ourselves aware of this, then we will discourage each other along the way. We need to reward, not punish, people for sincerity in their pursuit of God in all of his holiness. We must be more accepting of the mess. Through the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross, all of our sin, even the darkest places inside, has been cleansed and forgiven. The specter of this dark territory should never stop our progress in following Christ. Jesus saves completely. Know it and live it!

How a better understanding of depravity might help us ...

1) We don't have to be afraid of the darkness.

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 5:1 NIV).

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:1 NIV).

The guilt trip is over and finished when we come to understand this teaching that we are justified through faith in Jesus Christ. We have right standing in the presence of God now and forever, so we should never allow the devil to taunt or accuse us for our sins. We must trust the biblical teaching and grow in our awareness of this foundational truth. Awful stuff still lurks deep inside even after we come to know Christ. The lingering effects of depravity may remind us of who we were, but we must never allow our before Christ past to define who we are now in Christ.

When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross (Colossians 2:13-14 NIV).

It is time to stop being afraid that the skeletons of our past are going to slip out of the closet. It is time to carefully open the door and live transparent, faith-filled lives and risk letting people know who we really are. It is time to start accepting each other for who we are. God has the whole story and doesn't love us any less. We must do the same and create a more realistic spiritual environment for growth.

2) We can better understand how being pathetic and wonderful can coexist during God's sanctification process. Sanctification is the ongoing work of God, the continuing work of salvation in our lives and the process by which he completes and perfects us. Sanctification is part of the salvation package for which Christ paid the full price with his shed blood at the cross. During this holy process as we are transformed

into the image of Christ, we are sometimes anything but holy. But we are not surprised because we understand depravity. And even if we are surprised by the villain lurking within, God isn't.

3) Understanding depravity helps us to better understand and live mercy and grace. Knowing who we are, honestly confronting our darkness, we become more enduring of other people. The gentle hand of mercy and grace that brought us through our dark moments can now more easily work through us in touching others.

4) Understanding depravity gives us a more biblical, realistic understanding of our world. Understanding our depravity helps us make some sense of the good and bad in our relationships. Good as in our wonderful neighbor or friend or grandma or husband. Bad as in countries warring against each other and hundreds of thousands die, or how a person can deviate so far from God to murder, or to destroy a life with ridicule.

5) Understanding depravity may reduce our accusations of hypocrisy. A hypocrite is someone who is putting on a mask, acting like someone he isn't. It is very possible that the person we might accuse of being a hypocrite is merely reflecting his depravity. He is not putting on and taking off a mask but merely being who he is, both good and bad.

In the beginning, we were created in God's image. This did not disappear when we rebelled but it was tarnished and corrupted. Our physical beauty, our intelligence and our expressiveness are all reflections of God in his creation. Physical beauty doesn't usually enter this discussion, but I mention this here because these things—our physical appearance, beauty, design, athleticism—do reflect God. The creation reflects the Creator in all these aspects. The artist is always seen in his handiwork.

Our ability to love, seek meaning and significance, be creative, invent, build, show mercy and kindness all flow from God. Our personalities are reflections of his image. A biblical understanding of depravity teaches that this is now all tarnished, as it no longer fits God's ideal, but it is not absent as we still have tasty parts of the apple. The

“image of God” has lingered in all the generations of humankind, but we lost our intimate connection in the rebellion, when we deviated from God and his goodness. Our relationship with God was damaged beyond human repair.

Back to my good neighbor ...

So now we see why we still can find exceptionally good people in our lives who do not know Christ. They were created in the image of God. Depravity doesn't mean that goodness was obliterated which I think is a point of dissonance with many people. Within limitations people can still love, be merciful and practice grace and goodness, even good works. People still perform acts of heroism and sacrifice even to the point of death.

However none of this can make us right with God. Depravity means that religion can never save us. With the rebellion came death, a severed connection with God, and there are no efficacious remedies on our part to bridge the gap between God and us. This is why a religion of good works, stated or practiced, cannot bring you to God, but it can bring you great confusion as you may see extraordinary examples of his image within that religion. Depravity means total vertical disconnect. However, even though we could do nothing to fix our problem, God could and did through Jesus Christ.

God intervened with his plan. We were helpless and hopeless, sinful, perverted, rebellious creatures. And at just the right time, God demonstrated his love for us.

(Romans 5:6–8 ESV) For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Don't think for a minute that God isn't aware of all the darkness that was and is inside you. You may be afraid to let someone else look inside, or very likely be afraid to look yourself, but you should never worry that God will turn away from you. There will be no surprises for him. Christ paid it all at the cross—all your sins, all my sins. Until we

understand the damage done we cannot understand the repair that was made.

Depravity helps us to understand the damage that was done to us as individuals, the human race as a whole and the entire planet as a result of the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

SAVED

Are you saved, brother?

Saved. The word saved is sometimes misrepresented as past its prime, out of touch, old-fashioned or merely sentimental, but saved is a solid Bible word, relevant now and forever. This is not a forties or fifties or sixties word. In spite of the confusion and manipulation, this word does not find its roots only in fundamentalist American religion. This is a forever word, a golden oldie, which when we clean away the cultural milieu, we find that God has spoken to his people for centuries, even millennia.

An illustration via art restoration ...

So how badly have we distorted God's concept of saved? How much cleaning up needs to be done? Let me illustrate from the world of art restoration with this thought in mind. Many great paintings are plagued by the good-intentioned efforts to preserve or restore their beauty.

What plagues the Mona Lisa is the same thing that plagues many old paintings: a bad case of yellowed varnish. Over the past 495 years, the painting has been plastered with resin, lacquer and varnish at various times. Light causes those substances, originally clear, to darken with age. Removing them is tricky, because each different substance requires a different solvent, and those solvents, in turn, must not damage the paint that lies underneath everything.

... To top it all off, paintings have sometimes been "restored" by means of having a lesser-talented artist repaint portions of it—and sometimes, elements of the original have been painted over completely to hide an offending element. In the Sistine Chapel, for example, 16th century Vatican artists painted in strips of cloth to hide the nudity of Michelangelo's original figures. (Art Restoration by Edward Willett <http://edwardwillett.com/1998/08/art-restoration/>)

We sometimes (often) as evangelicals or fundamentalists try to explain more about God than we know because for no good reason, biblical or otherwise, we think we must have and dispense all the answers.

This is what we have done and still do with many of God's masterpieces. Trying too hard to explain his words and forever concepts, we unwittingly paint over them to fit our lives and theology. We skew their meaning as our human varnish darkens God's concepts and brings them down to earth.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts (Isaiah 55:8-9 ESV).

Two distinct advantages ...

Our seemingly well-meaning efforts to preserve God's truth sometimes actually distort his intent. We need to allow God to remove our brush strokes so he can display his truth as he intended it to be seen. As an aside, it should be noted that we have two distinct advantages over scientists and artists who attempt to restore ancient paintings. One, we cannot actually destroy the original on which we are working. Two, our original is still pristine.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever (Isaiah 40:8 ESV).

O LORD, your word is established in heaven forever (Psalms 119:89 GW).

Shifting our love back to the original ...

Our issue is not fear of destroying the original but being able to shift our love from the darkened image back to the original. I once was giving a piano lesson to a new student and demonstrated the chorale style of hymn playing that I had learned in college. Various things go into this style but I drew her attention to that fact that I was not playing every single note each time it was written. I was holding some notes to create more flow and to bring out the melody of the song. I told her that

this would allow her to play without the “clunk, clunking” that is often heard. Her reply was “I like the clunking.” Consequently, her love for the familiar hindered my ability to teach her.

Sometimes we are so in love with a particular “Bible” teaching that we don’t notice the yellowing and darkening that has occurred from years of reading the text through the smoke of our own candles. This familiar haze keeps us from seeing the clean, clear teaching of the Word of God.

So back to our word “saved.”

You will want to become very familiar with this “old school” term, unless, of course, you have no interest in “what comes next,” no interest in the ancient paths and no concern with your standing before God. Don’t let the negative publicity keep you away. Give me a chance. Let me help you understand this simple, yet very powerful concept. Let me help you remove the human brush strokes and see the picture of salvation as painted by God himself.

Saved. Lock it in. This one is a keeper.

Heal me, O LORD, and I shall be healed; save me, and I shall be saved, for you are my praise (Jeremiah 17:14 ESV).

And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21 ESV).

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12 ESV).

Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved ...” (Acts 16:30-31 ESV).

Right with God ... forever!

Saved says it all—rescued, redeemed, bailed out, clean slate, second chance, new life, fresh start, forgiveness, significance, meaning, love, joy and peace, right with God. Saved. Before 3:16 (as in John 3:16) we



(as in the human race), were in mortal peril, dangling over eternity by a thread with no hope, no help, no solutions.

Our predicament ...

Leave this planet with no changes from where we began our journey and where we are now, and whoosh, next thing we know, we find ourselves in outer darkness and lost forever— a fragility of life that would and should terrify us if we grasp even a fraction of the significance of our vapor-like, God-defying experience here on earth. Yes, the Bible tells us that on average we have seventy years to work out our problem, but tomorrow is not guaranteed.

An anecdotal detour ...

Our first home when I was a pastor was an old farm house in rural, northern Indiana. I got up in the middle of the night once to shut the back screen door as it was flapping in the brisk wind. This was not a storm door but a wood-framed screen door, as we called them back in the day, which allowed us to open up the enclosed porch/dining room to the evening breeze. Stumbling to the back porch and opening the main door, I discovered not only a strong wind but also a significant

snowfall. I reached for the handle just as a west wind caught the door, and the next thing I knew I was lying flat on my back in the snow; no pain suffered except the embarrassment of lying in the back yard in the snow at 2 a.m. in my pajamas. Reminiscent of a scene from “Gunsmoke,” I probably looked like I had been thrown through the swinging doors of Miss Kitty’s bar onto the streets of Dodge City, just waiting for Marshall Dillon and Festus to come around the corner of the house to cart me off to jail to sleep it off.

One instant I was in the house; the next instant I was gone. Here, then gone! Whoosh!

That is what the transition from this life to the next will be like. Whoosh, and next thing you know, life on the slippery slope of oblivion brings you to the edge of the dark valley with only yourself to consult and with only your own measly human strength to rely on. You find yourself with no help, no hope and no Savior. You insisted on traveling the universe without God’s input, on doing what seemed right to you, making your own choices, life as you thought it should be, and now you have it.

Whoosh! Lied to, deceived and now here you are—alone in the dark. Yes, others played a part, but possibly the greatest anguish washes over you when you realize that you knew that all along but refused to acknowledge the truth. God is not there to help you because that is what you insisted on your entire life. You chose the path.

God said, in effect, “If that’s what you want, that’s what you get.” It wasn’t long before they were living in a pigpen, smeared with filth, filthy inside and out. And all this because they traded the true God for a fake god, and worshiped the god they made instead of the God who made them - the God we bless, the God who blesses us. Oh, yes (Romans 1:24-25 MSG)!

They chose their impression of God over the original portrait, but it doesn’t have to be that way with us. God sent his Son to save us. The key is that access to this saving help for walking through the dark valley is only available on this side of the valley. God the Father sent Jesus his Son so that if you accept his help now, if you acknowledge your need

and believe in Jesus the Savior now, then when you die, next thing you know ... you are with God.

One day you will be in a situation entirely out of your control. You will be dead, and the only help available will have been determined through a decision prior to your death. Unless your help was prearranged with God before your death, then no one can or will help you. It is too late. All the good options needed to be exercised before you died. Let me help you sort through them. This is really pretty easy, takes about a minute as there is only one option for heaven, only one person who can help, only one name—Jesus Christ—which you can depend on to keep you from this untenable crisis. Believe now in Jesus Christ and be saved.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him (John 3:16-17 ESV).

Let that sink in. A father and son cared enough for you to come up with a plan. The son would come to our world and die for us so that we might have eternal life, that we might be saved. Someone cared enough to die for you, and his father cared enough to send him to do it.

Maybe you have already done this.

You chose life with God over weeping and gnashing of teeth in outer darkness. You realized that you had begun like everyone else—displaced, hiding, lost, damned and depraved. Somewhere along the way your status changed to “saved.” You recognized what this father and son had done, and you accepted the gracious offer from Heaven. And now you are different. You abandoned the path of the damned for the path of God. Under God’s advisement, you left the smooth, easy, familiar road for the Way. You caught a glimpse of the narrow road and squeezed through the gate leaving everything behind. Yes, you lost everything and gained everything at the same time.

You are saved.

Saved. When you arrive in the goodness of God, experiencing the blessing of his daily care and presence on this earth, then you will love the word, be thrilled with the word. Saved, saved, saved! Woohoo! Not

saved because of what you have done but because of what the Father and the Son have done for you. Not saved because of the good life you lived but because God so loved you that he sent Jesus to live a perfect life which would end with his sacrificial death on a cross. The Son chose the Cross so that we could have a choice to live. Jesus restored what Adam lost in Eden.

But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ (Romans 5:15 NLT).

And being found in human form, he [Jesus] humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross (Philippians 2:8 ESV).

Jesus chose that deadly path, so you would have a choice of paths, not necessarily happily ever after on this planet but one day happily forever after in the presence of God. All you had to do was believe, simple but not easy. In fact, the most contentious, fiercely opposed act in the universe is for a person to turn in belief to Jesus Son of God. The ultimate battle between good versus evil climaxed with Jesus' death on a cross and his subsequent resurrection from the dead; a colossal war was fought to give you this opportunity today. The good guys won, but vicious outbreaks with the dark forces linger and simmer even two millennia later as the defeated forces of darkness attempt to obscure the results.

Our fight is not against people on earth but against the rulers and authorities and the powers of this world's darkness, against the spiritual powers of evil in the heavenly world (Ephesians 6:12 NCV).

The enemy seemingly won the battle when Christ was murdered on the cross, but he lost the war because this was God's plan all along. The sacrifice of the perfect Man, the Son of God, was necessary for the salvation of the rest of us. I sometimes wonder how Satan could not have known this. Though fallen and defeated by God, Satan is a super-being, and we mere humans (apart from God) are no match for his

schemes and dark powers. What plan could he have had? Could he have hoped to thwart the resurrection of Christ? Was that his dark scheme?

Shouldn't he have realized he was being set up when Christ the King allowed himself to be captured and beaten and killed like a helpless, little lamb? Shouldn't he have thought how weird it was that Christ would just give himself up in the middle of the night and listen to all the stupidity and false accusations?

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth (Isaiah 53:7 ESV).

What happened to the God-Man who kicked butt in the temple because they were so dishonoring to his Father in heaven? Didn't they notice that Jesus would not even have had to fight, that he could have called up thousands upon thousands of super-beings (aka angels), an army of powerful extra-terrestrials awaiting word from their commander-in-chief? Christ allowed mere humans to nail him to a cross, as men vented their hatred against God with every nail that tore through his flesh.

But didn't they notice? It was all a setup.

Couldn't Satan see he was the mark in this tragic and wonderful event? The great deceiver had been played. He was not only defeated but he was part of the plan for the great buyout, the redemption of humankind.

We sent our hate message to God postmarked with spit, thorns, fists, ridicule and nails. Christ delivered God's love message back to us, "It is finished." Done. Paid in full. Mission accomplished. Glory to God.

Battle of the ages and Jesus had laid his six-guns down on the dusty streets of Jerusalem. There would be no shoot-out on that day, but there would be salvation. What love, wisdom, mercy, grace and power. Saved. So how do you like me now?

Who controls my world?

Who controls my world? Who is pulling the levers, pushing the buttons? Who am I trying to please? Whose approval do I really want? Discover who you are trying to please, and you will find who controls your world. It may be God or not.

You try to get praise from each other, but you do not try to get the praise that comes from the only God. So how can you believe (John 5:44 NCV)?

Am I saying this now to win the approval of people or God? Am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be Christ's servant (Galatians 1:10 GW).

The pain of discovery ...

Who is the main person in our lives? As Christians, we really, really want this to be God. We may, in fact, say it is God as we nod to the creeds and proclaim “to God be the glory,” but what might a closer examination reveal?

God or family ...

My guess is you don't like the sound of that. Not really. Shouldn't that be “God *and* family,” along with apple pie, hot dogs and baseball? Sometimes we make the anguishing discovery that family is above God

in our priorities. But more often, we don't make that discovery because we "don't go there." Doing so would be too painful, too confusing. Doing so would push us toward a decision we cannot or will not face.

In Matthew ten, Jesus warns that the battle between heaven and earth, salvation and damnation, sometimes comes down to family. Sometimes Jesus means war, even in our families.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Matthew 10:34-38 ESV).

A very sticky wicket ...

As discussed above, the battle is often very close to home, way too close. Our decision to follow Christ may mean rejection by those we love the most. Love Christ and lose the love and acceptance of friends and family. This becomes especially difficult if the people involved are



very religious. And the stickiest wicket is when the people involved are family and also very religious, maybe even attending the same church we attend.

So we ask ...

Do the people closest to you help you believe everything about God or believe something less? Do they demand (even if ever so subtly) first place or do they bow with you before King Jesus? Has fear of rejection sabotaged your decision-making? The only way past pretend is to trust the only Person who can guarantee the journey. I think you know his name—Jesus!

Our only goal is to please God whether we live here or there (2 Corinthians 5:9 NCV).

So what are we to do?

Choosing our true allegiance is about as serious as life gets. What do we find if we work our way past the pretense? Do we put our hands over our eyes and wish for the best? Or do we open our eyes and hearts to the words of God and present ourselves for a faith quest to discover the wonder of God's sovereign care for our lives?

Tough stuff! Very tough stuff!

But we have to keep asking: Who controls our private worlds?

In the Wizard of Oz, a seemingly thunderous display of power had Dorothy, Tin Man, the Scarecrow and the Cowardly Lion trembling in their boots until Toto ran over and pulled back the curtain and the great and powerful Wizard of Oz was seen to be merely an old man from Kansas, very mortal and very ordinary.

More often than not the control person in our lives is a mere mortal.

Who is the mere mortal behind the scenes pushing your buttons and pulling your levers? Who has control? Who is your king? Who rules as your queen?

So let's perform our diagnostics with these questions: Who is behind the curtain? Who is my storyteller? Who edits the film? Who do I worship?

Who is behind the curtain in your life?

If we were able to pull back this imaginary curtain, what would we see? Maybe it would be a harmless old man from Kansas. Possibly even as an adult, you have yet to discover that your father, grandfather or dear grandma has more sway in your life than God does.

It is also possible that nary a family member would be found behind the folds. What would a quick peek expose? Would we see coworkers, classmates, a favorite professor, your church family or even your pastor? Who is it in your life who knows which lever to pull or button to push? The possibilities seem endless so let's find some perspective.

A real scene in heaven, a door opens in heaven revealing the throne of God ...

Then I looked, and, oh! - a door open into Heaven. The trumpet-voice, the first voice in my vision, called out, "Ascend and enter. I'll show you what happens next." I was caught up at once in deep worship and, oh! - a Throne set in Heaven with One Seated on the Throne, suffused in gem hues of amber and flame with a nimbus of emerald (Revelation 4:1-3 MSG).

I don't know who the control person is in your life, but somewhere along the path each of us needs to cede control of our world to God. In the text above we see the ultimate peek behind the curtain, a scene in heaven picturing God on his throne. This is not once upon a time, this is now. This is forever.

Take a minute to absorb the imagery of lightning flashes, thunder crashing, animals prowling ...

Lightning flash and thunder crash pulsed from the Throne. Seven fire-blazing torches fronted the Throne (these are the Sevenfold Spirit of God). Before the Throne it was like a clear crystal sea. Prowling around the Throne were Four Animals, all eyes. Eyes to look ahead, eyes to look behind. The first Animal like a lion, the second like an ox, the third with a human face, the fourth like an eagle in flight (Revelation 4:5-7 MSG).

The throne should give us perspective ...

No, we don't understand all of this, but John gave it his best shot, describing things as well as he could, using finite words of humans to describe an infinite God seated on his eternal throne. We should come away from this remarkable scene in heaven with at least two thoughts. One, this is real, there is a throne. Someone reigns over our world. He is there. He is God. Two, we can know him. We are not left out in the dark to wonder. We can know more. In fact, we can know the Person on the throne and become part of his kingdom. The King came to earth and invited us to join him.

An intimate connection with the Person on the throne of God ...

We have been given his words to live by on this earth, words of salvation and direction that not only are better than gold for our time on the planet but words that hold true and powerful as we step into eternity, even true before this very throne of God. When God instructs us, he sees our lives in the context of everything. When we are tempted to dismiss God's words, we must realize that his words fit his eternal purpose.

When he tells you to love your enemies, he doesn't only have in mind your daily struggle with an obnoxious neighbor or a demanding, ungrateful boss. He has the "forever you" in mind as he shapes and forms your life. You are the focus of his instruction, and he speaks to you in the context of forever. Loving your enemy is trusting God in the moment and is shaping your life in the context of eternity. Much bigger picture than we see.

But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you (Matthew 5:44 NKJV).

God speaks to his children in the context of eternity.

Can you see how excellent this is? If we have received God's gift of life, we will one day be before this Majesty, and we will be in this

picture John describes, an intimate part of what is happening because we will be home. The blood of Christ has bought for us intimacy with the one who sits on this heavenly throne. Too cool! Way too cool!

Please do not allow these real very images of heaven lie in obscurity in the back portions of your mind. We need this heavenly video to be a part of our lives as we decide how we will indeed live. No doubt about it. As we persevere in living out the reality of God's words in the "pre-heaven" part of our lives, things can become very complicated. Worlds collide, what is real, what seems real, and all the stuff in between.

Our reality cannot be formed only from this world. Our perspective must not be limited to time and space and our humanity. If we have received God's gift of eternal life through Christ, then we have a foot inside the door of eternity—God's world, ultimate reality, God's curtain, his veil of holiness.

We live with this constant tension, between two worlds, and God understands. Based upon his thirty plus years on the planet, and the fact that he is God, Jesus perfectly identifies with us. How do we live before the reality of a throne in heaven while still on earth? Learn today's lessons. The more we trust God in the moment, the more we live in view of forever. Trust God in your small world, and you will trust him with the whole world.

Who is my storyteller?

Identifying our primary storyteller(s) ...

When I speak of our story, I mean our lives both personally and in the world around us. What I mean by our storyteller is the person who helps you define and make sense of life. The person provides a plausible story line and a rationale for living as you do. This person may in fact determine whether or not we listen to God.

Let's try to identify this person (or these people) in your life.

- The person who when you want an opinion is **THE** person you approach with "So what do you think about ...?"
- This is your "go to" person.
- This person is often a peer whose opinion you value deeply.

- This person is often an authoritative person.
- This person is sometimes an authoritarian.
- This person grabs your attention and interest.
- This person affirms your life.
- This person tells you what you want or need to hear.
- This person usually confirms what you already believe.
- This person gives you a plausible spin on the events of your life.
- This person helps you make sense of life in general and your life personally.
- You really want to believe this person.
- This person may punish your disinclination.
- This person rewards your obeisance.

The church that made Jesus want to spit ...

The leaders of this church must have had compelling and attractive stories about God because outwardly they seemed to be quite successful, but Jesus saw their church in a much different light. Jesus addressed a church in Laodicea in the book of Revelation which was blinded by its own pretense. If you had read their brochures or had asked the members about their church, you would hear something like this: “We are rich, wealthy and in need of nothing.” But if you asked Jesus about the same church, you would hear this: “They are miserable, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth! You say, ‘I am rich. I have everything I want. I don’t need a thing!’ And you don’t realize that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked (Revelation 3:15–17 NLT).

Comparing notes with Jesus ...

We really need to give this the attention it deserves. From the many examples Christ could have chosen to give us, this was one of the few he included in his anecdotal accounts of “how not to do church.”

So track with me for a moment and let’s first notice that everything Christ said about them was the opposite of what they thought of

themselves. This church must have had something going for it, at least some externals for the members to presume this image of success. Maybe they were “the friendliest church in town.” Maybe it was their reputation in the community for their food pantry, the generous amount of money they sent to missions, the exciting programs or their stand on abortion.

Can you imagine if the leaders of this church had arranged a weekend retreat with Christ to evaluate their ministry? As they are sitting around the large conference table with coffee and doughnuts, basking in their success, anticipating the superlatives, they instead hear: “Okay, so here is my evaluation of your ministry. You are miserable, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.”

They didn’t see that one coming.

“Yet you do not realize that ...”

Shocked and blind sided, they think that surely he made a mistake, surely he had the wrong church. “Did you pick up the wrong file, Jesus? Maybe your secretary loaded the wrong Power Point presentation on your laptop?” Christ’s evaluation of their church could not have been a bigger surprise to these church leaders. There were two greatly conflicting stories. Someone was confused.

The fatal error of the church at Laodicea was listening to each other instead of listening to God.

Put yourself there. If you are familiar with the dynamics of church operations, I believe that you will come to the conclusion that the leaders of this church must have been convinced that they were on target and on-board with the vision, purpose and mission of the church and of God. Could they have presented the positive attitude and the polished front otherwise?

Bad storytellers ...

Their storytellers, the leaders of their church, had kept them from God. We aren’t surprised, are we? If we can pretend to worship, surely

we can pretend to do anything. They pretended to listen to Jesus but firmly held to their own opinions, writing stories about God as they saw fit, contriving a safe, lukewarm religion. And Jesus was ready to spit. Keeping their hearts at a distance, they demonstrated a dreadful unwillingness to relinquish what they had for what God offered.

Maybe this seems harsh, but do you remember our first question? “Where am I?” Helping someone find their “spiritual location” will sometimes hurt feelings, but we have to keep probing. Jesus wanted people to discover where they were now rather than later. Some were saved but many turned away, but he kept asking his questions.

After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him. So Jesus said to the Twelve, “Do you want to go away as well?” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:66-68 ESV).

So I am not being mean. I want to help you ask the question before God. Where are you? I want to give you the best opportunity possible. Maybe your storytellers are like those in the church we just discussed. Maybe you want it to be like that. Some of us may need to ask, “Is my church keeping me from following Christ?” I don’t know those things, but if Jesus were to write a brief story of your life, and you were to sit down and write your account, how would your stories compare? Where are you? That is why I am writing the book. So, you are sitting across the table from Jesus. What does he say about your life at this moment?

A good storyteller ...

Let’s finish this section with a look at some characteristics of a good story teller.

- A good storyteller tells the story of God, not a story about God.
- A good storyteller has a true dependence on God, not just a head nod to the abstractions of the Bible. He or she will always intersect with the Author of the Book.
- A good storyteller will not take the place of God in your life.

- A good storyteller will discourage your dependence on him, doesn't draw attention to himself or try to dazzle you with charm or personality.
- A good storyteller gets her story right with God first.
- A good storyteller will not force you to choose between her and the truth.
- A good storyteller will not try to intimidate or dominate you.
- A good storyteller may be a person in authority over you, but he will not present himself to be superior to you, neither implicitly nor explicitly.

Who is my film editor?

“You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say.”

As much as you or I may dislike that statement, and as much as it has been used as an excuse to stay away from the teaching of God's Holy Book the Bible, you can hardly argue with its truthfulness. As we discussed earlier, even basic instructions from God can be manipulated when we want to do something badly enough. You must decide who you will to listen to.

You can “make the Bible talk” or you can let God speak to you through the holy words. You remember our drama in Genesis three, don't you? Eve had to choose whether to listen to the snake or listen to God. The first rebel used God's words to make her case, thus becoming the first human to make the Bible say what she wanted it to say. Just curious. How did that work out for her?

What does this have to do with film editing?

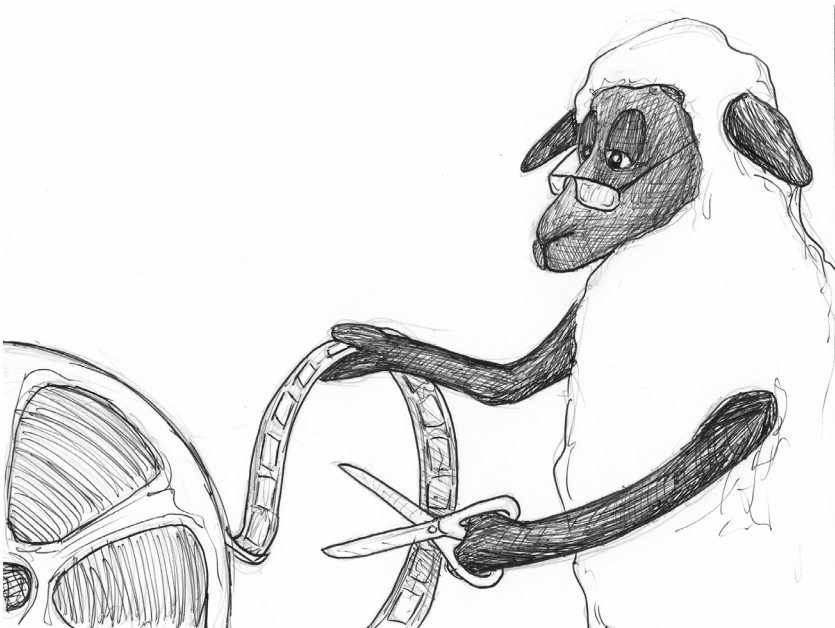
A film editor takes the raw data, the footage, and creates a movie, a story. Although this section is similar to the previous section because both have to do with storytelling, in this section I will deal more with the manipulation and presentation of the story by those who preach and teach, the film editors. Preachers and teachers begin with the raw data, the footage, and on Sunday mornings from the pulpit, or on radio and television, or in books and seminars, they present a story.

Going to the “movies” on Sunday morning ...

Who do you want to listen to when you “go to the movies” on Sunday morning? You are trusting the person up front for the story, so have you chosen to hear someone who will communicate what God wants you to hear or what you want to hear? That is your challenge. Many people faithfully come to worship God sincerely desiring to hear God speak only to have the message skewed by the person behind the pulpit. The speaker’s motivation or intention is irrelevant if the message shared is not God’s message.

Using several analogies from the film industry I will demonstrate how people attempt to control our worlds. I hope to demonstrate how effective these methods of manipulation are even though the raw data (the Bible) which our “editors” begin with is holy and pure. I will familiarize you with these methods so you can recognize the different strategies employed.

Who is in the film room? Whoever is in the film room



determines the outcome of the story. Here's why!

The people who influence you the most as you view life on the big screen are the ones who select and weave together the shots from the raw footage. They are the ones who tell you how it is. Life, I mean. So who do you allow in the film room? Who forms your perspective of life from their perspective of life?

Are you presented with a “highlight reel” portrayal of life that blurs the reality of who God is, and who you are before God? Or does the presentation draw you into a closer awareness of God? Does the story line cause you to show your love for God in worship and service?

Another problem ... Welcome to “Itching Ears Studio” ...

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Timothy 4:1-4 ESV).

A few things to be aware of as we choose who edits our personal “reality show.”

- We all are born with “itching ears.”
- We want to follow the myth. “Tell me lies, sweet lies ...”
- We want other people to tell us what we want to hear.
- We want to determine the establishing shot, determine the point of emphasis.
- We want to be portrayed as right, whether we are or not.
- We believe what we want to believe.
- We accept what fits with what we believe.
- We want life to turn out a certain way—our way.
- We are the focus of our movie.

We must understand that from God's perspective that there are only two valid choices.

A time will come when people will not listen to accurate teachings. Instead, they will follow their own desires and surround themselves with teachers who tell them what they want to hear. People will refuse to listen to the truth and turn to myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4 GW).

Everyone will listen to some truth. The key is will we listen to the truth we need to hear? Some people will put up with truth and others will follow their desires.

For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths (2 Timothy 4:3-4 ESV).

Either/or ...

- **OPTION #1:** Endure sound teaching and listen to what God would tell us.
- **OPTION #2:** Follow our own desires and find people to tell us what we want to hear.

It is essential that we understand that choosing Option #2 does not mean that we are no longer interested in biblical truth per se. Because, in fact, many people who have chosen Option #2 are immersed in church and Bible study. The difference between the two options is not whether we study the Bible and pursue truth. The difference is that with Option #1 we are committed to hearing what God would tell us from the Bible and maintaining a course of obedience as he changes our lives.

The people in the church at Laodicea thought that they excelled in things spiritual but per Jesus' evaluation they were "miserable, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked."

So why even mess with religion?

If you are going to choose your own life direction, why go to all the trouble of finding people to justify your decision? Why mess with religion? Why not just do what you want to do?

Because ignoring the truth is not enough.

We must suppress the truth because the truth of God, scrolled over his entire creation, is so plain, so evident and so powerful that it cannot merely be ignored. Christ warns us.

Whoever is not with me is against me, and whoever does not gather with me scatters (Matthew 12:30 ESV).

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them (Romans 1:18-19 ESV).

The entire creation speaks to the presence of God. The sound of God in his world is too powerful to be merely ignored.

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse (Romans 1:20 ESV).

The truth of God is so powerful and pervasive in his creation that evil attempts to beat the drums of myths and fables to drown it out. We must choose: God or noise. Written across the sky and buried deep in our hearts, the message of God never stops. Your choice of who you listen to (the people you allow to edit the film, the raw data of God's word) will depend on whether you decide to hear the voice of God or whether you decide to suppress the voice of God. Much noise is made in the name of God, but a crucial step on your journey through the universe is determining to hear God over the noise. Who you ultimately listen to is the deciding factor.

When you obscure the truth, you must understand that you are the first victim of the lies and deceit that follow.

The choice is simple and clear. Hear the truth of God or suppress the truth of God. The word is perspicuity—God speaks with clarity, plainness, intelligibility concerning the things we need to know. The person who obscures the simple truth of God’s word with unnecessary complexity reveals himself to be spiritually deceitful, deceived and blind: “Yet you do not realize that you are ...”

No editing the raw data ...

God makes it pretty clear that we must not add to or take away from his words in the Holy Book, the Bible. We can see this from the following Scriptures.

Don’t add to these commands, and don’t leave anything out, but obey the commands of the LORD your God that I give you (Deuteronomy 4:2 NCV).

You are to keep with care all the words I give you, making no addition to them and taking nothing from them (Deuteronomy 12:32 BBE).

For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book (Revelation 22:18-19 NKJV).

In evangelical circles, we would be hard-pressed to find disagreement on the basic principle. Editing God’s word by adding or taking away is strictly forbidden, but as with anything human, we always seem to find a way around what God says. I would like to borrow some terms from the film industry to demonstrate a few of our workarounds. You will probably recognize these workarounds. Hopefully it will not be as you sit in the pew next Sunday.

The Establishing Shot

Let's begin with the establishing shot. Please give me a little time to build my story; I think it will be worth the wait.

- The establishing shot is “a shot, normally taken from a great distance or from a ‘bird’s eye view,’ that establishes where the action is about to occur.”
- The principle: By focusing primary attention on a lesser phrase of the text, a person may skew the main point of the text, sometimes leaving it out altogether, but not always. By giving some attention to all the text, the preacher can then rationalize that he has given a thorough exposition of the passage. Our example will be from Ephesians 4:26.

As I listened to the radio one day, the preacher entered into a discussion on Ephesians 4:26. Certain texts grab my attention when I hear them mentioned, and this is one of them. I remember confronting it for the first time as I taught through Ephesians at an inner city church in Chicago and deliberating how to handle the “be angry” emphasis. Like so many Christians, I had been influenced by those who believe that we should never be angry because all anger is sin, but I couldn’t escape the clear statement of the text: “Be angry.” The Apostle Paul was pushing the Ephesians toward honesty in speaking to each other, even if that honesty stirred anger.

I revisited this text at a church I pastored a few years later and was approached by a “disgruntled” member (he couldn’t be angry because he was one who believed that good Christians are never angry) who showed me Bible verse after Bible verse from his friend’s *biblical* counseling notebook demonstrating the sinfulness of anger. What was I thinking? What he could not grasp was that although anger is *often* sin, maybe even *usually* is sin, it is not *always* sin. Biblical counseling notebook aside, no amount of “sinful anger” verses quash the very clear, strong exhortation in Ephesians four to be angry.

Here is the text, and then I will get to the editing part.

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil (Ephesians 4:25-27 ESV).

Using the establishing shot ...

The radio speaker that day may never have heard of an establishing shot, but that is what he used to manipulate the text. In review, we see that an establishing shot establishes where the action is about to occur. The establishing shot in the radio message was: “do not let the sun go down on your anger.” This is what he led with. As the “director of the movie,” he could have chosen to focus on “be angry.” However, never during his entire presentation did he emphasize this phrase. He spoke of not letting the sun go down on our anger, of not sinning in our anger and of not giving the devil an opportunity.

With his establishing shot he successfully directed our attention from the main thrust of the verse which was “be angry.” He focused the stage lights on “not sinning in our anger” and “not letting the sun go down on our anger” while allowing “be angry” to languish in the shadows.

He preached the text while disregarding the main point of the text by intentionally avoiding the main phrase of the text, and he still probably appeared to most to have given a true exposition of the text.

We must understand that the anger Paul addressed was vital to the Ephesians’ growth in Christ. He exhorted the Ephesians to put away the pretense, the lies, and speak truth to each other even if it meant they became angry with each other because the maturing they would do through this was worth it, in fact imperative to maturing in Christ.

Anger can be defined very simply as strong displeasure. This means I care enough about you and you care enough about me that even though we may become strongly displeased with the other person or her actions, because we are in this together, and because it is God-directed, please tell the truth, even if you are angry or I may become angry. But do not sin.

Let's go back to the radio preacher. He didn't add or take away words, but he did edit the meaning by changing the emphasis and focusing on the secondary. He used the raw data of Ephesians 4:25-27 and preached the wrong message. Part of the irony is that many people believe that this passive, stoic, never-show-your-feelings-or-emotions is a sign of spiritual maturity, when it seems that Paul is saying just the opposite—that our speaking honestly to each other in love, even if we are sometimes angry, is essential to our growth. Our radio preacher let us down that particular day.

The “be angry” hurdle ...

- Based on the number of references, the person in the Bible who is connected to anger more than anyone else is God. This is a pretty difficult hurdle for the “all anger is sin” crowd to overcome.
- So to avoid the “be angry” emphasis while at the same time trying to appear to stay true to the text, they establish a point of emphasis away from the main teaching of the text.
- They preach the text without really preaching the text.
- Yeah, I know.

Using the Cut ...

Another well-known radio preacher I heard speaking from Ephesians four “edited the film” with the use of a cut.

- A cut is a visual transition created in editing in which one shot is instantaneously replaced on screen by another.

This man mentioned the command to be angry but then immediately he cut away to Matthew 21:12-13 where Jesus enters the temple and drives out the temple merchants. The preacher skillfully shifted the emphasis of Paul's teaching.

And Jesus entered the temple and drove out all who sold and bought in the temple, and he overturned the tables of the money-changers and the seats of those who sold pigeons. He said to them, “It is written, ‘My house shall

be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers" (Matthew 21:12–13 ESV).

He compared the “be angry” directed to the believers in Ephesus with the anger of Jesus in the temple in Matthew. His point was that the anger Paul spoke of in Ephesians 4:26 was like the righteous indignation that Jesus felt and that type of anger is approved by God.

So the movie after his editing went like this.

- **SCENE ONE:** The command to be angry is given by Paul as a group of Ephesian believers sit around the table discussing their relationships with each other.
- **“CUT” TO SCENE TWO:** Jesus is in the temple, knocking over tables, swinging a whip over his head, clearing his Father’s house of the “den of robbers.”

Do you see what happened? As before, there was no adding to or taking away words from the text per se, but the cut he implemented changed the emphasis so dramatically that Paul’s intent was obscured. Could Ephesians 4:26 involve righteous indignation? Yes. But to focus our attention on righteous indignation neuters the main emphasis and proper interpretation of the text. Paul’s emphasis was fellow Christians who are trying to honestly work out their relationships with each other. Possibly they don’t like how the other fellow is going about his business as methods and personalities clash.

Another possible scenario is that a brother or sister is sinning and the group is keeping silent. Either way when we do not speak truthfully with each other, we deprive the group and ourselves of the tremendous resource that we could be to each other. That resource being a sharpening stone, a transforming perspective, a grid by which we can see and correct our faults in the context of a loving family who lives out the teachings of Scripture.

The “edit” by the second radio preacher stifles non-sinful anger that should be expressed per Paul’s command but is not expressed because it does not fall into the “righteous indignation” category. His edit limits the text in a way that God never intended and now his listeners will feel the need to quash genuine feelings of frustration with their brothers

and sisters in Christ instead of following the biblical model that Paul gave them which was:

- put away the pretense and lying and talk to each other,
- be strongly displeased if necessary but don't you dare sin,
- work it out before the sun sets,
- and don't give the devil an opportunity to wreak havoc in your relationships.

But, no, either I can't be angry at all, or I have to have righteous indignation, so I guess I will just suppress my feelings. Suppressed feelings, however, usually do not remain suppressed. Our inexcusable editing of the text results in gossip, bitterness, an unforgiving spirit and sinful explosions of anger because we have foolishly removed the biblical apparatus which God put in place to enable us to deal with our unresolved issues and to help each other grow up.

By our disobedience to this text we produce *nice Christians* who do not realize that stepping forward in Christian maturity is an ongoing battle of faith, and we produce *courteous Christians* who refuse to relate beneath the surface for fear of a sub-cultural environment in which we punish the obedient and reward the indifferent. Maybe it is time to question whether or not our spiritual house is more pretense and facade and less *a holy temple in the Lord*.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22 NIV).

Jesus didn't die so we could be nice and courteous, and he didn't call us to be friendly. He calls us to love one another, to lay our lives down for one another, even if it means we get ticked off at times.

This is my command: Love each other (John 15:17 NIV).

Most important of all, continue to show deep love for each other, for love covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8 NLT).

Often our lack of anger is not a sign of spirituality but of indifference. Our speaker used “the cut” to cut the heart from the text.

As we continue with our film analogies, please let me introduce the montage.

Using the Montage ...

- Montage: Scenes whose emotional impact and visual design are achieved through the editing together of many brief shots.

Do you recall my earlier reference to the disgruntled church member who was upset with me because I taught the truth about “good” anger, and how he proceeded to school me in the sinfulness of anger from his friend’s counseling notebook? He used the editing process called the montage. Multiple shots from various Bible verses, all with the same perceived theme and focus, directed toward the screen in the audience’s mind in rapid fire succession to build one image. His message: Anger is sinful and don’t you dare say otherwise.

He missed the irony of this flawed approach in which you pay attention to the Bible when it supports what you want to believe, but you disregard the Bible when it disagrees with you. He would only hear what he wanted to hear and believe what he wanted to believe. He was determined to write the ending for his *movie*.

An old Hollywood adage has it that a film is created three times:

- When it’s written,
- When it’s shot,
- And when it’s edited.

Good film editors ...

- Good film editors want the best representation of the raw data no matter what.
- Good film editors want the main characters portrayed as accurately to the original as possible.
- Good film editors learn their trade.

- Good film editors seek to improve.
- Good film editors welcome criticism.
- Good film editors don't say more than God does.
- Good film editors know they are not the stars of the show.
- Good film editors are willing to die for the show.
- Good film editors are driven to humility, not pride.
- What to remember as we tell the stories and watch the film ...

The opportunity to tell the story of God should humble us, not make us proud.

We will struggle with communicating God's thoughts and ways which are higher than our thoughts and ways as the heavens are above the earth. We are finite and flawed. God is infinite and perfect. We should receive the opportunity to tell his story with great reverence.

The opportunity to tell the story of God should excite and encourage us.

God, in his mercy and grace, gives us what is necessary. Stop and think of this. He will use his people to water this earth with his words just as he literally waters the ground with rain and snow. God's words will not return until they make happen what God wants to happen. Praise and thanks to God for the opportunity to be used in his plan and purpose for the ages. Praise him.

The LORD says, "My thoughts are not like your thoughts. Your ways are not like my ways. Just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts. Rain and snow fall from the sky and don't return without watering the ground. They cause the plants to sprout and grow, making seeds for the farmer and bread for the people. The same thing is true of the words I speak. They will not return to me empty. They make the things happen that I want to happen, and they succeed in doing what I send them to do" (Isaiah 55:8-11 NCV).

What can I do about it?

What can you do about it? A lot. No matter where you are spiritually or geographically, you can call out to God. God is there. No matter what mess you have gotten yourself into, call out to God. This is not hype or wishful thinking but God talking. Listen to his words.

Seek the LORD while you can find him. Call on him now while he is near. Let the wicked change their ways and banish the very thought of doing wrong. Let them turn to the LORD that he may have mercy on them. Yes, turn to our God, for he will forgive generously (Isaiah 55:6-7 NLT).

Call out to God.

For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved” (Romans 10:13 (ESV)).

I don’t have an exhaustive list of things for you to do. What I have is a starting point, a gentle push and a prod onto the path of Jesus Son of God—a really good place to be. When I first began collecting my thoughts for the book, this section was very different than it is now. I thought it would be in a more “how to” format.

But the overriding truth which we must always keep nearby on the journey is this: God comes to us if we seek him with all our heart and

soul. Your journey will be different from mine. He meets us where we are even if where we are is a mess because of our sinful, stupid decisions. God isn't afraid of the mess. He has done something about it. His name is Jesus. Bow before God no matter where you are, and he will come to you. Moses knew this and told the people of Israel that if they lost their way and were scattered across the globe, God would come to them and pull them to himself.

But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 4:29 ESV).

“But from there ...”

This is how God works. Wherever your “there” is, God will come to you. He will make himself available. You don't need to have a five-year or ten-year plan, just a heart open to God. Begin here with a few steps of faith. God will meet you on the path, and the rest of the stuff he will bring to you along the way. Follow along and you will see a few arrows pointing you toward the throne of God. These very clear markers used by the Spirit of God will guide you through the haze of pretend to the glory of God. If you follow the path as Jesus instructs, you will be very pleased to find everything you are looking for and even some things



that weren't on your list. Along this path you will see how everything comes down to One, Jesus. Jesus is the One.

That's the math of the path.

Jesus answered, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6 NIV).

It is all in a name. Simple math. There is only one name to remember. To successfully move beyond pretend to forever, at some point you must discover that there is only one way, one path, one Person and one plan that delivers on the promise of true life. It is completely unnecessary to sift and sort through the debris of thousands of years of speculation and opinion as we need to remember only one Word, simple and clear, and his name is Jesus. J-e-s-u-s.

No one else can save us. Indeed, we can be saved only by the power of the one named Jesus and not by any other person (Acts 4:12 GW).

... every knee will bow to the name of Jesus - everyone in heaven, on earth, and under the earth (Philippians 2:10 NCV).

Love God, love your neighbor.

Jesus said this command was the greatest of all the commands. Yet, for some people it just doesn't seem quite "beefy" enough—too simple, too liberal, too easy. I'm not sure what the problem is because Jesus was very clear on this point.

"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 22:36-40 ESV).

Let me illustrate his answer in a way that may help us understand its significance. The Law is the writings of Moses, the first five books of the Old Testament. Take your Bible in your hands and separate the

pages that contain the Law—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy—and hold them between your index finger and your thumb. All of those pages packed with the teaching of Moses, Jesus squeezed down to one sentence: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”

It gets even better. Now take your Bible, and beginning with Isaiah through to the end of the Old Testament with Malachi, hold those pages between your fingers. Jesus continues to tell them that, yes, love God is the greatest and first command, but there is a second one like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” On these two hang all the Law and the Prophets.

Can you see what has happened? Jesus squeezed two sentences from those many pages of Scripture and said basically, “If you want to know what God is about then get this.” With the skill of a master craftsman, the carpenter from Nazareth presented the essence of God’s instruction to us in two brief phrases. Love God, love your neighbor.

All of Moses’ Teachings are summarized in a single statement, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself” (Galatians 5:14 GW).

Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10 ESV).

This royal law is found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” If you obey this law, you are doing right (James 2:8 NCV).

One significant way we show our love to Christ is to obey him. There is more to Christ’s teaching than this, but I don’t think you will find a better starting point. What we do need to grasp is that God’s intent is always a love relationship with him. He didn’t change his mind or change costumes between the Old and New Testaments. This is not a “bad cop, good cop” thing with the Old and New Testaments: God of judgment and law in the Old Testament and God of love in the New Testament. It’s always been about a love relationship.

Neither rote obedience nor playing loose with the words is what Christ speaks of. He commands obedience that will bring us to places

we would never go on our own, good places that strengthen our love for him. Nothing is commanded for the sake of a rule but for the sake of our hearts and the glory of the Father. The cleaning and buffing prepare us to absorb the truth of God past a “painting by numbers” mentality to the reality of living in the presence of God. You will not find a richer source of fulfillment in your walk with God than to bow before his instruction to love as he calls you to.

If you love me, you will obey what I command (John 14:15 NIV).

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you (John 15:12 NIV).

Be Willing to Die for God.

Is what we believe about Jesus Christ worth dying for? Jesus calls us to die, so before we go any further let's take some time and face the question: Is the life that Christ offers worth dying for? Is it worth giving up everything to live like Jesus says to live? Jesus says it is and calls us to do that very thing. Do we believe him?

He said to all of them, “Those who want to come with me must say no to the things they want, pick up their crosses every day, and follow me. Those who want to save their lives will lose them. But those who lose their lives for me will save them” (Luke 9:23-24 GW).

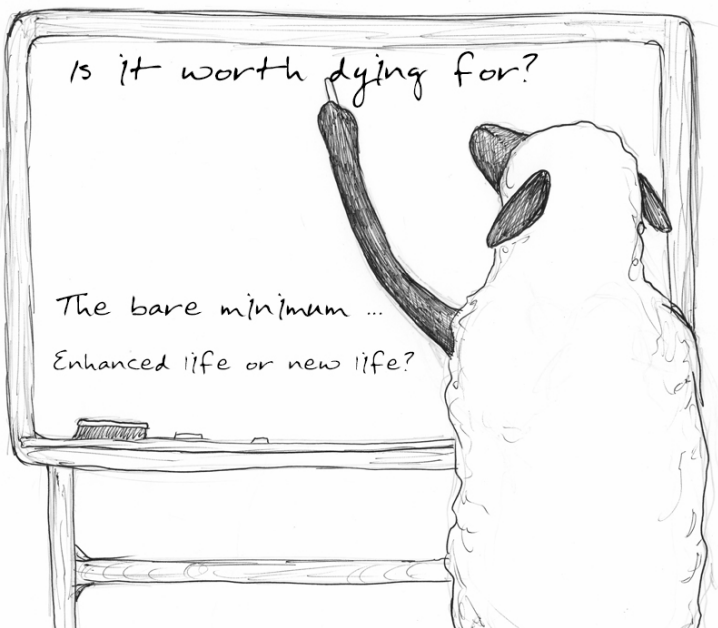
The bare minimum ...

The bare minimum we take away from this text is that God is telling us that the life he offers is dramatically different than the life we would choose. Christ calls us to “say no to the things [we] want” and to say “yes” to whatever he wants for the rest of our lives. We are to “pick up [our] crosses every day.” We struggle with this in a few ways. This lifestyle calls us from the familiar to the unknown, it challenges our control, and it is contrary to our social sub-structure, as in this is not the norm, not what most professing Christians believe experientially.

But life with Jesus is anything but the norm. The norm is that you read your Bible, go to church, tithe, keep your nose clean and God will enhance the life you have chosen. It might not be what we say, but it is what many believe.

Enhanced life or a transformed life?

We need to know what God says. God tells us that he makes dead people alive in Christ. Also, we still have our question on the board: Is what God offers that good that we should give up everything? The new life Jesus purchased for us with his shed blood surpasses anything we could dream or imagine, but the offer is not to enhance our lives but to make us new. The reason that many do not have the abundance Christ speaks of is because they are trying to squeeze the riches of grace out of the material of the old life instead of wearing the garment of salvation. Religion can happen in the church pew, but transformation only happens on the path. Only there do we find the “yes” we have been looking for.



A clearly defined path ...

Our choice is to die or pretend, and the path he calls us to is a holy path. God will “have no truck” with our mixing and blending. Only by our willingness to die, by our willingness to believe that God is as good as he says he is, will we be able to push past pretend to the amazing abundance that was unlocked on a cross outside of Jerusalem about 2,000 years ago. At some point you must realize that God has plans for your life that far exceed your expectations.

Check your authenticity.

Since the tree incident and through every generation of humankind, we have twisted every good thing God has called us to, including prayer, worship, preaching and service to him. The struggle has always been between seeking a better life for ourselves and receiving a new life from God. The issue is control. Seeking the better life, we write the rules and set the parameters. But receiving eternal life from God comes with a completely new set of instructions which we receive as we bow before him in heart, mind and soul.

And let’s not just blame the “damn hypocrites” or the pagans because it is all of us. By default our inclination is self-determined tweaking, not unabridged receiving. We want God’s plan only if it enhances our plans for a better life now. If you doubt this, just flip the pages back to Eden for a moment. Beautiful people living in God’s perfect world, and it all came crashing down because they couldn’t resist tweaking God’s plan.

This means that having elements of these good things—worship, prayer, preaching and service—even in abundance, does not validate their authenticity.

WORSHIP

What does “honor me with their lips” mean? Just what it says. We honor God with our words, but this does not mean that our worship is sincere or genuine.

The Lord says: “These people come near to me with their mouth and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men” (Isaiah 29:3 NIV).

Religious people really know how to talk about God and are often very skilled in exalting God with words. They may powerfully proclaim God’s greatness and majesty. They may beautifully sing of his glory, but they do not bow. However, the true worshiper bows in love and obedience. The religious pretender does not understand that a God who is only great enough to talk about, but not great enough to love and serve is no God at all.

- Inauthentic religion: Receive the good things of God and tweak to make our lives better.
- Authentic spirituality: Receive the good things of God to live new lives.

APPEARANCES

Religious people are all about appearances.

They’re busy, busy, busy at worship, and love studying all about me. To all appearances they’re a nation of right-living people—law-abiding, God-honoring. They ask me, “What’s the right thing to do?” and love having me on their side (Isaiah 58:2 MSG).

In this text God gives us his perspective of a people who worship, study about God and “to all appearances” are “right-living people.” They seem to be obedient, God honoring people who ask God what is the right thing to do and want God on their side.

But who were they really? Rebels who thought only about themselves. “Declare to my people their rebellion ...”

Shout it aloud, do not hold back. Raise your voice like a trumpet. Declare to my people their rebellion and to the house of Jacob their sins ... “Why have we fasted,” they say, “and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” Yet on the day of your fasting, you do as you please and exploit all your workers (Isaiah 58:1,3 NIV).

“Yet ... you do as you please.”

Everything they did only served to position themselves so God would make their lives better. They wanted God to bless them, but they refused to bow to him. They asked, “Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?” In other words, “God, we have done our part in the play, now do yours and bless us.” But God had noticed. He had noticed more than they would have wanted, and what he noticed was an arrogant, selfish people demanding him to repay their lip service with his blessings.

- Inauthentic religion: Receive the good things of God and tweak to make our lives better.
- Authentic spirituality: Receive the good things of God to live new lives.

PRAYER AND SUBMISSION

These people must really be surrendered ... Or maybe not?

They said to him, “Please listen to our request, and pray to the LORD your God for all of us who are left here. As you can see, there are only a few of us left. Let the LORD your God tell us where we should go and what we should do” (Jeremiah 42:2-3 GW).

Have you ever heard a request more heart-felt and genuine?

Surely they were sincere in seeking God’s will as they came to the prophet of God asking for prayer. And it was all great UNTIL Jeremiah came back with the wrong answer, as in the answer that did not provide God’s blessing for their plan.

Here is the context. After the Babylonians had conquered the land, the Israelites who were not led off as captives had been told to stay in the land and God would take care of them. But they wanted to run to Egypt, contrary to God’s instruction, and wanted God and the prophet to bless their decision. This “prayer sham” was a last ditch effort to reassert their control and get their own way. When their attempted manipulation failed, they were so angry. Now we would see the real “them.”

... and all the arrogant people said to Jeremiah, “You’re lying! The LORD our God didn’t send you to tell us that we must not go to live in Egypt” (Jeremiah 43:1-2a GW).

- Inauthentic religion: Receive the good things of God and tweak to make our lives better.
- Authentic spirituality: Receive the good things of God to live new lives.

PREACHING

Many people believe they have done quite a good thing if they faithfully show up at church and sit under good, solid biblical preaching every week. No liberal nonsense for this group. They want to hear the word of God, and they receive somewhat of a blessing for their effort. But please read the following account of a group of people who eagerly anticipated church and hearing a “word which comes from the Lord.”

And as for you, son of man, the children of your people are talking together about you by the walls and in the doorways of the houses, saying to one another, Come now, give ear to the word which comes from the Lord. And they come to you as my people come, and are seated before you as my people, hearing your words but doing them not: for deceit is in their mouth and their heart goes after profit for themselves. And truly you are to them like a love song by one who has a very pleasing voice and is an expert player on an instrument: for they give ear to your words but do them not. And when this comes about see, it is coming, then it will be clear to them that a prophet has been among them (Ezekiel 33:30-33 BBE).

Only there for the entertainment value, they had no intent to live the words. They enjoyed the good feeling they got from church, and they eagerly anticipated seeing their friends and neighbors, but they were deceived and greedy. In the New Testament Paul wrote to Timothy that the purpose of God’s word is transformation (2 Timothy 3:16-17) and the preacher’s job is to preach to change, not to entertain, people (2 Timothy 4:1-2). Do not fall for the popular misconception among many evangelicals that an affinity for God’s word means you are where you are supposed to be before God. The words of God appeal to many who use them to build their houses on sand (Matthew 7).

- Inauthentic religion: Receive the good things of God and tweak to make our lives better.
- Authentic spirituality: Receive the good things of God to live new lives.

Check the gate now.

For he says, “In a favorable time I listened to you, and in a day of salvation I have helped you.” Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2 ESV).

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit”—yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes (James 4:13-14 ESV).

I believe we as Christians make a mistake in some of our evangelistic methods by asking people to picture themselves standing at the pearly gates answering questions from God or St. Peter as to why they should be let into heaven. While this approach possibly gets people thinking about their eternal destiny, it also reinforces their gross misconception that there will be one last opportunity after they die to make things right with God.

But there is no heaven or hell decision to be made at the pearly gates or anywhere else in heaven.

After you die, there is no deal to be done, no bargaining, anteing up, or weighing good deeds versus bad deeds. The decision for salvation is made before you die while still on earth. Did you choose the narrow gate or the wide gate? Those two gates determine your destination. Make sure you give attention to the correct gate while there is still time to do this. Jesus calls our attention to this decision in Matthew seven.

Enter through the narrow gate. The gate is wide and the road is wide that leads to hell, and many people enter through that gate. But the gate is small and the road is narrow that leads to true life. Only a few people find that road (Matthew 7:13-14 NCV).

So first things first. If you miss the narrow gate, then nothing else matters.

No amount of effort or religious service will help. Later in Matthew 7:21-23, Jesus addresses a group of very religious people who missed the small gate and the narrow road. They decided to begin their trek toward heaven through the wide gate. They entered the wide gate to pursue God on the wide road. Do not miss this. It was while they were on the wide road that they spoke for God, battled the darkness and performed miracles. When Jesus spoke to them at the end of their lives, he had these words for them: “Get away from me, you who do evil. I never knew you.”

You who do evil. Jesus was definitely not speaking of a glass that was merely half-empty. “Get away from me, you who do evil. I never knew you.” There was no commendation for sincerity or effort or sacrifice or almost getting it right. No cheery welcome. No thanks for speaking for him and standing up for morality. Missing the gate, they missed everything. What they had done on the wide road meant nothing to Jesus.

You who do evil. Evil? But how could this be? All that religious activity and they did not know Christ? Just taking the wrong gate meant they were evil? Yes. Because at some point in their lives they chose a different way than God’s way. People who try to get to heaven via the wide gate do not know Jesus, and he does not know them.

You who do evil.

Is this an oops? No.

Taking the wrong gate is not an innocent mistake but a deliberate decision to pursue heaven contrary to God’s direction.

They had built spiritual houses using the words of God, but because the words did not direct their lives, they were building on sand. You can build an impressive religious life but if you miss the narrow gate, your life will collapse at the most crucial time, as you stand before God.

Everyone who hears my words and obeys them is like a wise man who built his house on rock. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and hit that house. But it did not fall, because it was built on rock. Everyone who hears my words and does not obey them is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. It rained hard, the floods came, and the winds blew and hit that house, and it fell with a big crash (Matthew 7:24-27 NCV).

Two things to remember:

1. One day it will “rain hard” and test your structure.
2. The wide road always leads to destruction.

But we are back to an earlier question. Who do you listen to? Many people love the wide road. It is well-traveled and highly recommended. The online reviews would probably be five stars, but there is no hope on the wide road. It will never lead you out of the darkness. It will only lead you to a pretense of peace and safety. You must find the narrow road to move beyond pretend to the life of God. The wide road leads only to hell.

So check the gate ... now!

Jesus chose his words carefully in pointing out the devastation of the wide gate. These people had spent their lives with a false sense of security as they were speaking for God, fighting immorality, performing miracles and going to church every Sunday. In their own way, they were devoted to the Bible, but they did not enter through the narrow gate. They were extremely religious and did practically everything except what God told them was essential.

Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few (Matthew 7:13-14 ESV).

They chose the wide gate, and Jesus doesn't know the people who go through the wrong gate and follow the wrong road. He is telling you the same. So check the gate. Have you believed in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and received his gift of eternal life? Are you saved?

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12 ESV).

As the Holy Spirit says, "If you hear God speak today, don't be stubborn. Don't be stubborn like those who rebelled and tested me in the desert" (Hebrews 3:7-8 GW).

God loved the world this way: He gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him will not die but will have eternal life (John 3:16 GW).

Check the gate, call out to the Lord Jesus Christ and believe in him. At your moment of genuine, saving faith, you have stepped through the narrow gate and onto the path of life.

Check your hypocrisy card at the door ...

I know that some of you have gotten plenty of mileage out of your hypocrisy card. I certainly did at one point in my life, but this is another deal-killer. The only thing that blaming other people accomplishes is keeping the reality of your own life in the shadows. If you truly want to either come to Christ, or move on in your walk with God, then it is time to put that thing through the shredder.

Possibly the following spoof will help. I think you'll see my point pretty quickly. Please note the dripping sarcasm.

Use that hypocrisy card while you have the chance ...

All of us at one time or another have regarded someone, usually someone else, as a hypocrite. The hypocrisy card is often the first line of defense for folks who do not believe in religion, or more specifically, who do not believe in Jesus Christ. They effectively use it to deflect any and all attempts away from a conversation concerning a person's spiritual condition.

Plenty of examples ...

We all have our hypocrite stories. Examples abound. But even though we may point the finger all around, each of us at some instant

has held the mask in front of our face to deceive the person with whom we are communicating. But that isn't really my point, to prove whether you are or are not a hypocrite. My point at this moment is to urge you to use your hypocrisy card as much as you can while on earth because when you leave this planet, when you die, the card expires, becomes meaningless. Yes. The hypocrisy card has an expiration date—the day you die.

Function and effectiveness

We have to understand the function and effectiveness of the “\hypocrisy card to fully understand this. Some people mistakenly believe (although I don't think they really believe this) that they will be able to use said hypocrisy card after they die when they face God. They are going to “drop the dime” on every church person they can think of. Presuming of course that they have the opportunity outside the pearly gates to speak with St. Pete, they will explain to him that if it were not for those damn hypocrites, then they would have come clean before God a long time ago. They are of the notion that they can use the hypocrisy card as a kind of “get out of hell card” or more aptly put a “get into heaven card.”

But that's not what the card does. They have misunderstood the function and purpose of the hypocrisy card. It can only be used effectively while still on this earth to keep you from examining your spiritual condition by blaming someone else for your decision to not seek God, and *the card* functions quite well in this respect.

So use the card while it still works. And just as you would not want to have your gift card at the local home improvement store expire before you have used the last dollar, I want you to realize that you need to use the hypocrisy card while you are still alive. When you're dead, it's done, expired.

One caveat.

Of course this means you are going to spend forever apart from God. You know ... hell, damnation, lake of fire, that sort of thing.

And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Then another book was opened, which is the book of life. And the dead were judged by what was written in the books, according to what they had done (Revelation 20:12 ESV).

Why do you pass judgment on your brother? Or you, why do you despise your brother? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God; for it is written, "As I live, says the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God." So then each of us will give an account of himself to God (Romans 14:10-12 ESV).

Embrace your calling.

We are called by the King who sits on the throne of heaven. We are called by the High Priest who moves with sovereign power behind the holy curtain in heaven.

I saw a throne in heaven, and someone was sitting on it (Revelation 4:2b GW).

One day you will be there, right in the middle of that scene. Smack dab in front of God. As a believer in Jesus Christ, you get to meet personally with the King of the universe. Pretty hard to believe, isn't it? Yes, we are there to give an account of ourselves (Romans 14:12), and, yes, we are there to be judged for the work we have done in his name (1 Corinthians 3:13). But don't let this be a scary thing. Don't allow some specter of judgment diminish a very beautiful and powerful opportunity. Embrace your calling. The path to the throne begins at the narrow gate. When you chose to believe in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins and received his gift of eternal life, and when you entered God's kingdom through the narrow gate, you became royalty. The first step through this gate ultimately brings you before the King.

... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Peter 2:9-10 ESV).

My dream in Little League ...

I grew up playing baseball with the kids in the neighborhood, but I got a late start in organized baseball. In our little town we played in the open schoolyard, but when I joined an organized Little League in a larger, neighboring town, we had fences. Really cool looking fences with the names of many of the city's businesses advertised on them and the green paint that was so familiar. Fences and dugouts and a concession stand. I loved Little League. And how could I forget the uniforms? For one day a week, I looked and felt like a real ballplayer.

My dream was to hit one over the fence with my dad watching.

My dream in the big leagues ...

And now my dream is to hit one over the fence for my heavenly Father. I was listening to a tobyMac song one day and these words stood out: "And, Daddy, I'm on my way." And I thought, "Yes, Abba, Father, I am on my way." My vision of service now is to honor the LORD God Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, to bring joy to him, and to embrace the amazing stewardship he has given to me. God has given us an opportunity that is beyond our ability to completely understand, but not beyond our ability to fulfill as his children. Embrace your calling.

... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father" (Romans 8:14-15 NIV).

We exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12 ESV).

Be willing to stumble.

Sometimes our pride keeps us from following Christ through the difficult territory. We fall and he picks us up, but we don't want to be seen with our clothes still dirty and torn, our lip cut and maybe a few

tears we haven't brushed away yet. Sometimes we fall because we sin, but sometimes we fall because of the hate of the enemy. Job was God's pick-of-the-litter and cream of the crop, and God allowed Satan to beat him up and embarrass him in front of the whole countryside. He stumbled, screamed and threw a fit, but he always directed his thoughts toward God. Through all his anger and distress, he always moved in the direction of God.

For many of us, our perspective of the Christian life has no biblical roots. We accept only what we signed on for, upward and onward and well-played scenarios in our minds where we assume the roles of Christian super-heroes praying our way past the fiery darts of the enemy. We didn't sign up for the ugly stuff, not so much into following Jesus if we can't look good doing it. We have yet to learn that style points are overrated and pale in comparison to sheer faithfulness and determination to please our God. We haven't learned the value of stumbling, even crawling, in Jesus' name.

A lesson from Felix Mendelssohn in stumbling.

I was listening to our local NPR station one day, and they were interviewing someone discussing Felix Mendelssohn and his struggle in writing his Violin Concerto in E minor, Opus 64. The account given was that he felt as if he were "fumbling" along. They went on to discuss how insecure and unsure he was. But what was the result of his fumbling, his insecurity and his unsureness? One of the most popular and most frequently performed violin concertos of all time. So if you can't march and you can't run, then stumble forward in Jesus' name. You may have to change your clothes as we've seen that pride doesn't wear so well in these situations. But if you throw on some humility and work through the tears and pain, you will taste the excellent fruit of righteousness.

Grinding it out.

In sports they talk about the athletes who know how to "grind it out," do the grunt work, because they know the reward. Sometimes our sky high inspiration yields great work, but often we just grind and

plod. We press toward the smile of God, and in doing this we provide a perfect opportunity for Christ to show his strength.

And he said to me, My grace is enough for you, for my power is made complete in what is feeble. Most gladly, then, will I take pride in my feeble body, so that the power of Christ may be on me. So I take pleasure in being feeble, in unkind words, in needs, in cruel attacks, in troubles, on account of Christ: for when I am feeble, then am I strong (2 Corinthians 12:9-10 BBE).

Proud wimps in Jesus' name ...

Dirty, frayed and frazzled, we grind it out. We do the grunt work. We follow Christ. We love him. We obey him. Our heart's desire is to bring him joy. We embrace what is true and right. And we persevere. We keep chugging along in the name of Jesus Son of God.

Then it happens. One bright day, a powerful, thrilling, joyful scene bursts upon us. We celebrate with angels who are so proud of us because we faithfully served their God in ways they could not. Our loving obedience to God has filled the angels of heaven with joy.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly (Hebrews 12:22-23 NIV).

Hero for a moment.

One snowy winter day as I traveled into Chicago to work, I came up on a young woman in a car who had tried to make a U-turn across the concrete median and was now stuck in the snow on the curb. Not sure if I could help or not, I stopped my car and got out, and to my surprise pushed her enough to help her over the curb and on her way. Then the really cool part happened. I thought I heard people cheering and looking up I saw several guys hanging out of the windows of a factory on the north side of the street cheering me on like I had scored the winning touchdown at a Bears game.

That was so cool. I was their hero if only for a moment. I did what their hearts were calling them to do in rescuing their damsel in distress. As believers in Jesus Christ, we are called to do things that call to the

hearts of angels but in God's sovereignty are assigned to mere humans. It may be idle speculation, but I have to wonder if I might be surprised in heaven one day. What? No, those angels couldn't be cheering for me, could they? Why would these beautiful, powerful beings be excited about something I had done? Here's why: Because as weak and frail as I was, I *answered the bell*, so to speak. My service to Jesus Christ brought glory to their God and mine. By the way, that will be even cooler than the guys at the factory cheering for me. Smile.

His purpose was that through the church all the rulers and powers in the heavenly world will now know God's wisdom, which has so many forms (Ephesians 3:10 NCV).

Let God heal your wounds.

Don't miss this one: Wounds are part of the path.

We get beat up. Beat up for doing good. Beat up for doing bad. Wounds are part of life. To maintain our spiritual health as we follow Christ, we must allow God to heal our wounds—all of them. God's healing is necessary in his sanctification process. Do you remember the word "sanctification" from our living in a post-Eden world discussion? God's transformation process (sanctification) is the part of our salvation package that he works out in the events, circumstances and details of our lives.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed (1 Peter 2:24 ESV).

God's healing is also necessary to his navigation process, his guiding and directing of our lives. In his wisdom he works his plan and process through our choices, good and bad. We don't surprise God. He has made all the necessary provision through the shed blood of Jesus to transform us and bring us to himself. No feelings of guilt should ever hinder the course of your life or his navigation process.

I would give the confession of sin as an example. God directs us to confess our sins to him. As he steers us through life, confession of sin is

necessary to keep us in his will. We may not feel like God would forgive us again, but we continue on course by following his truth though it is contrary to our feelings. Guilt would have us make a U-turn from God's forgiveness and cleansing because we don't deserve it. But we continue to navigate the course God sets before us based on the coordinates of his words. We should never quit following Christ because of our guilt, real or imagined. Our decisions should never be based on guilt, false or otherwise. We trust God for the direction of our lives.

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us (1 John 1:8-10 ESV).

You may protest. But what if I keep coming to God again and again confessing my sins? Duh. He will do what he says he will do. He will forgive you and cleanse you. Did you not notice in the text who John says is faithful and just? He writes that "he [God] is faithful and just." God is faithful and just, not you, not me. Well, we are sometimes, but the promise of the text hinges on God's faithfulness. The point is that life injures its participants. Even if the injury is self-inflicted (sin), our clear course of action is to come to God and trust him to do what he says he will do. Let God be God, and he will be!

He only is my Rock and my salvation; he is my high tower; I will not be greatly moved (Psalms 62:2 BBE).

No, life is not so gentle at times. In fact, this world can be very harsh and cruel. But let God heal your wounds as "he is the healer of the brokenhearted. He is the one who bandages their wounds" (Psalms 147:3 GW). Believe what he says and take everything to him—hurtful words, broken relationships, unfair treatment on the job, racial and social slurs, discouragement from an illness, financial pressures or a spiritual and emotional beating from the dark forces—everything. Let him show you his greatness in the time of your greatest need.

Let God be God, and he will be!

And that is not always so easy, especially when it seems that what is right and just has been twisted every which way but right and fair, and God has let us down again. We have all felt that way, that maybe we have wasted our time trying to be faithful to God, and even though we are trying to do the right thing, we look around and see the people who have no care for God, no thought for doing what is right, doing better than we are. Asaph outlines his struggle with this in Psalm 73. Confused and discouraged, on the verge of giving up, he finds his rescue as he comes into the holy place of God.

But when I tried to understand this, it was too difficult for me. Only when I came into God's holy place did I finally understand ... (Psalms 73:16-17 GW).

Wounds and worship, a powerful relationship ...

No matter the origin of our wounds, bringing our pain and hurt to God lifts us to his otherness, and in his holy place we see more clearly. Satan the deceiver uses our troubles to spread his lies and stir up our fears, pushing us toward discouragement. He tells us that God isn't there, and even if he is he doesn't care, so we might as well stop following. We often have hurtful things happen that bring dramatic change to our physical and emotional health, our employment, our friendships. But bowing before God in the middle of the mess is an act of worship and trust that brings us to his place of holiness. The other world that often seems so distant becomes very close and real. We no longer interpret life through a lens of fear and helplessness.

My mom was killed in an automobile accident within ten minutes of leaving our house on a Saturday evening in August about eleven years ago. The following paragraph is an excerpt from a tribute I wrote for Mom's funeral service.

A tribute to Mom.

Mom is gone and how sad we all are. I was worried that night about her driving late and even jokingly tried to rush her along. She told me not to worry, “David, you don’t have to worry about me. I know where I’m going.” (And she didn’t mean Indianapolis.) She had such a big smile on her face as she said it. How that smile reflected the beauty of her life, and then she was gone.

Tears streamed and I couldn’t talk to the police officer who came to my door; my neighbor came over and helped. But in the middle of our anguish over the next few days, it was like heaven came to earth. People who I did not know and had never met told story after story of how Mom gave to them and the people around them. Her giving spirit was legendary. Her little Pontiac never went anywhere without something in it for someone else. And when Mom died, God’s entourage filled the countryside as he came to take his servant home; his presence was unmistakable. We worshiped and bowed before the throne of God as heaven opened, and we viewed the vapor trail of one little old lady from Indiana going home to be with her Father.

God is a good place to be. Always.

God is a safe place to hide, ready to help when we need him. We stand fearless at the cliff-edge of doom, courageous in sea storm and earthquake, Before the rush and roar of oceans, the tremors that shift mountains ... (Psalms 46:1-3 MSG).

Alternative medicine: the anti-healing properties of gossip ...

When we are hurt, do we attack the enemy or bow before God? We don’t always take our grief and our hurt to God, do we? Sometimes we take matters into our own hands. We have too much pride to bow, so instead we strike back. We get mad and we get even. We treat ourselves to a big, delicious drink of vengeance.

Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved,

never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord" (Romans 12:17-19 ESV).

Eve's School of Theology ...

Eve introduced us to a more rational and reasonable (read sinful) approach to the words of God. Re-examine the given words in view of your own observations and trust in your ability to discern good and evil. Her creed apparently was: *"If it looks good and tastes good, then it must be good."*

And just like Adam and Eve in Genesis three, when we choose a direction contrary to God's truth, we step away from the sovereign care of a holy and loving God.

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it (Genesis 3:6 NIV84).

That the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was tasty and beautiful was never up for debate. Of course it was excellent. God created it. And the seemingly obvious fact that vengeance can look good and taste good is likewise not up for debate. Vengeance can be delicious, very satisfying, but eating this tasty fruit moves us away from the will of God and the life he would have for us. No exceptions. And that means you.

Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21 NIV84).

Running in the ways of the fallen ...

Wounded sheep who do not let the shepherd heal them will go somewhere to relieve the pain. And very often the healing potion first off the shelf is vengeance, distilled and perfected in the ways of humans for millennia and often taking the form of gossip.

Wound for wound, hurt for hurt, we salve our injuries with words sent like arrows to the heart of the enemy. Their pain is now our medicine, their anguish invigorates dark places in our soul. And evil has won the day. We are running in the ways of the fallen. In seeking revenge we fall prey to our fears and insecurities. Our decisions now flow from the darkness of our fallen nature.

Gossip ... the evil twin of vengeance ...

And the tongue is a flame of fire. It is a whole world of wickedness, corrupting your entire body. It can set your whole life on fire, for it is set on fire by hell itself (James 3:6 NLT).

Gossip is a common symptom of the person who has been overcome by evil. I believe (hope) that in recognizing this “other-side-of-the-coin” relationship between running to God for refuge versus gossip, we may be able to make better choices as we struggle with the agony of life.

The universal acceptance of gossip ...

The problem with gossip is twofold: One, it is universally accepted; and, two, it is very effective, even in the church. Bringing some sense of justice into your world can feel good if only for a little while. But no one is exempt from this evil. You will fall; you will be overcome by this evil if you do not make a conscious decision to trust God with the events of your life, taking your wounded heart and soul to him instead of fending for yourself, giving God the opportunity to show you his greatness.

A very clear choice ...

Trust God and taste his goodness, or trust ourselves and taste evil.

Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him (Psalm 34:8 NIV).

Expect the storm.

Follow the Christ and expect the storm because you will be cruelly attacked. Make it your intent to live godly and please him, and him alone, and congratulations, you have made the enemy's A-list.

In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, while evil men and impostors will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived (2 Timothy 3:12-13 NIV).

The battle doesn't stop this side of heaven.

Wounds and injury are part of God's plan, just ask Christ. But the reward of walking with God (once we truly grasp that concept) is worth the pain.

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18 ESV).

For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison (2 Corinthians 4:17 ESV).

But I will sing of your strength; I will sing aloud of your steadfast love in the morning. For you have been to me a fortress and a refuge in the day of my distress (Psalms 59:16 ESV).

So where are you?

Do you have a five-year plan? We've all been confronted with that question, or if you are like me, have run from the question. Honestly, I don't feel so great about my five-year plan. Or I should say that if I had a five-year plan, I probably wouldn't have much confidence in it. But I feel very good about my forever plan.

There is more ...

Many people have fantastic plans for this life, but the majority of people on the planet have no plan past this life, no plan for forever. If this is it, and there is nothing more, and you die and feed the maggots and turn back to dust, then you are good to go. Have a blast! But we know better than this because there is no escaping a message so powerful that it shouts from the sky: "There is more. There is more. God is there."

Relentless pursuit, endless message ...

The heavens declare the glory of God, and the skies announce what his hands have made. Day after day they tell the story; night after night they tell it again (Psalm 19:1-2 NCV).

No matter how fast we run or how hard we try to push it aside and cover it over with our busy schedules and our countless diversions, the

“more” question sneaks back into our consciousness. Why? Because the plain-as-the-nose-on-your-face evidence for the existence of God surrounds us and penetrates deep places within us. We may not completely understand this *inner witness*, but on some level every person knows that God is there. Cutting through the murky activity deep within, one thought seems to always bubble to the surface—“There is more.” Fight as we may, we know a master plan underlies all of life that is greater than us and beyond us. So take the first step past pretend and face the obvious truth about God.

Move past the deception of wishful thinking.

Maybe our first step past pretend is to quit fighting and let God open our eyes to the obvious truth about him. Quit covering and hiding, quit pretending, and honestly ask, Where am I? And where am I going? I encourage you to consider the results of your current strategy. If you have not yet trusted Christ, why are you hesitating? Is it because of all the things you think you will have to give up or change? That was the “deal killer” for me for several years, so I understand your dilemma. This is a faith issue. Your life with God will not come into view until



you look past what you can see to the things which you cannot see. God has a better life for you. You just can't see it yet.

We have small troubles for a while now, but they are helping us gain an eternal glory that is much greater than the troubles. We set our eyes not on what we see but on what we cannot see. What we see will last only a short time, but what we cannot see will last forever (2 Corinthians 4:17–18 NCV).

If you can get beyond that obstacle—what you may have to give up, then maybe you are ready to evaluate your strategy for life. You need to ask questions such as, on what am I basing my future? Are you one of the wishful thinking crowd at the funeral home? Are you hoping for the better place? Ask yourself if you really think you have a better plan than what God has revealed in the most reliable book on the planet. And if you have trusted Christ, then have you decided if what he has given you is worth dying for? Are you ready to take that next step of faith and be willing to lose everything you have to gain everything Christ offers?

Value the Word of God.

You may not yet value the Bible as I do but please consider these things. The Bible is the word of God, and it accurately reflects and speaks to life on the planet. There is no other religious or philosophical work that puts the pieces of life together as the Bible does. The historicity and authenticity of the Bible are unmatched. The manuscript evidence for the Old and New Testaments is unparalleled. The Bible has more manuscripts, better manuscripts and more manuscripts closer to the time the events occurred than any piece of literature. Nothing comes remotely close.

- Transparency ...

The transparency of Scripture speaks to its authenticity. If humans had been responsible for its composition, much of our Bible would never have made it to press. Nothing has come under the scorching criticism and scrutiny the Bible has. No religious holy book has been attacked with the relentless ferocity with which the Bible has faced for millennia. The Bible stands, and it will stand forever.

- Forever information ...

This is information you can count on forever, from your time on the planet through your death experience and past all things familiar to life beyond this earth. The Bible rings true to life as nothing else. The Bible reaches places in your soul where you didn't even know you had places.

- The perfect source ...

And this is where I draw my confidence in writing. I have the perfect source in the eternal words of God, holy data that will stand for eternity. If I bow before the task and stay consistent with God's intent, then what I write will ring true and accomplish his purpose.

Listen to this beautiful picture God gives the prophet Isaiah concerning the purpose of his words.

- Rain and snow ...

Rain and snow fall from the sky and don't return without watering the ground. They cause the plants to sprout and grow, making seeds for the farmer and bread for the people. The same thing is true of the words I speak. They will not return to me empty. They make the things happen that I want to happen, and they succeed in doing what I send them to do (Isaiah 55:10-11 NCV).

Consider the Person Jesus Christ.

- Jesus the lightning rod ...

Some people see Jesus Christ as just another man, a carpenter, Mary's boy, not worth bothering with, let alone listening to.

Isn't this the carpenter? ... And they took offense at him (Mark 6:3 NIV).

Who does he think he is anyway? But I have to wonder how anyone could really believe that Jesus was just another man. I have to wonder that even as they spoke those words that inside they knew the truth, that this was not just another man, that they were playing a fool's game. Moments before they were amazed. Now they are offended. Why? Because he called them to a different life.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:14 ESV).

- Jesus the watershed ...

They took offense at his claims. And that is our watershed: Do we take offense at the claims of Jesus or do we examine his promise of life? Do we listen or do we deflect the obvious?

Have you ever been heating something in the microwave and heard the familiar “poof?” Yip. You have a mess to clean up. You know the drill—overheat, poof, mess. The container could not hold the food—“Poof!” That must have been what it was like being around Jesus. “Poof!” Truth splattered all over the place, dripping off everyone who heard him speak. And then they were scrambling to clean up the mess—truth everywhere, all over creation, written across the sky and now truth standing right beside them. What’s a good Pharisee to do? And they were offended. What did Jesus tell them one other day? Shut the people up and the rocks will sing. Poof! You can’t ignore God’s truth.

The Word became human and lived among us. We saw his glory. It was the glory that the Father shares with his only Son, a glory full of kindness and truth (John 1:14 GW).

- Jesus the perfect Person to listen to ...

Jesus is the perfect Person to listen to as you ponder your trip to forever. He has lived in both worlds. He is now back in heaven, but he has traveled back and forth. He was present at creation, and he spent a little over thirty years here completing his work down to the very details that were written by prophets hundreds of years before his birth. The Man has a resume. Listen to what he said when the bad people came to arrest him. Peter was ready to fight but Jesus called him off.

But Jesus said to him, “Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword. Or do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels? How then could the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must happen thus” (Matthew 26:52-54 NKJV)?

Jesus is all about sticking to the Father’s plan and trusting him to work out every beautiful detail to our praise and his glory. Jesus was *big picture* all the way. When he directs our lives in a particular way, when

he speaks something difficult to us, we need to carefully listen. He has been here, done this.

- And Jesus the perfect Person to talk to ...

That's why he had to enter into every detail of human life. Then, when he came before God as high priest to get rid of the people's sins, he would have already experienced it all himself—all the pain, all the testing—and would be able to help where help was needed (Hebrews 2:17-18 MSG).

We don't have a priest who is out of touch with our reality. He's been through weakness and testing, experienced it all—all but the sin. So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help (Hebrews 4:15-16 MSG).

Epilogue: If I succeeded ...

To my friends and fellow travelers,
You have been on my mind for several years now as God stirred my heart to write this book. If with my many hours of research and writing I have succeeded, I will have led you to a Person, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior of the World, the Great Shepherd who can guide us from here to eternity.

So, tell me then, did I succeed? Did you see Jesus clearly enough to make a decision? Did you come to know him? Or if you already knew him, are you better able to trust and follow him? If you haven't trusted Christ, then why not now, at this very moment?

Now is the time, today is the day. Trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Shepherd now and forever ...

- Understand that because of Adam's disobedience in the garden, sin and death entered our world and spread to everyone.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12 ESV).

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins (Ephesians 2:1 NIV).

- Understand that God demonstrates his love for us and offers salvation through the death of Christ.

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8 NIV).

Confess that we are part of the mess. You are a sinner. I am a sinner.

For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:22b-24 ESV).

- Believe in Jesus Christ and be saved.

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16 ESV).

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12 ESV).

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace (Ephesians 1:7 ESV).

Woohoo! You just became a child of God.

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (John 1:11-12 ESV).

Now say it out loud.

But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved (Romans 10:8-10 ESV).

The angels just threw a party.

In the same way, there is joy in the presence of God’s angels when even one sinner repents (Luke 15:10 NLT).

Appendix 1:

My primary source of research ...

My primary source of research is the Bible. This amazing Holy Book of God is our only reliable account of life on the planet. If you want reality, then you want the Bible. Nothing else compares. God put his personal diary about his relationship with the human race front and center for all to see.

God wrote the Book!

We humans would not have been so revealing, so transparent. God's first two created humans, Adam and Eve, bailed on him at the very beginning, preferring to listen to the advice of a snake. Who would have put that on public display? We would have spun it, cleaned it up, a little image management here, a dash of public relations there ... kind of how we manage (read manipulate) much of our popular Christian literature and the bare truth of God's word becomes carefully edited, family friendly highlight reels that transform the real characters and stories of Scripture into sanitized mock-ups that better fit our "nice and friendly, you can have-it-all-now" paradigm of the Christian faith than the world God writes about.

We would not have included the steamy details of Queen Esther's rise to power or allowed the great Apostle Paul to call himself the worst of sinners. And we definitely would not have recorded Jesus' first miracle to be the creation of a party drink because his mom said please.

What was God thinking?

Not what, but who! He was thinking of you and me. Just as he has been all along. The whole story of *the Book* is the reality of who he is, his love for us and the life he offers. The Bible delivers the goods but

many of us don't know that because we have been shammed by too many people who speak for God without first having listened to him. Many people base their forever decision on second-hand info. Do you?

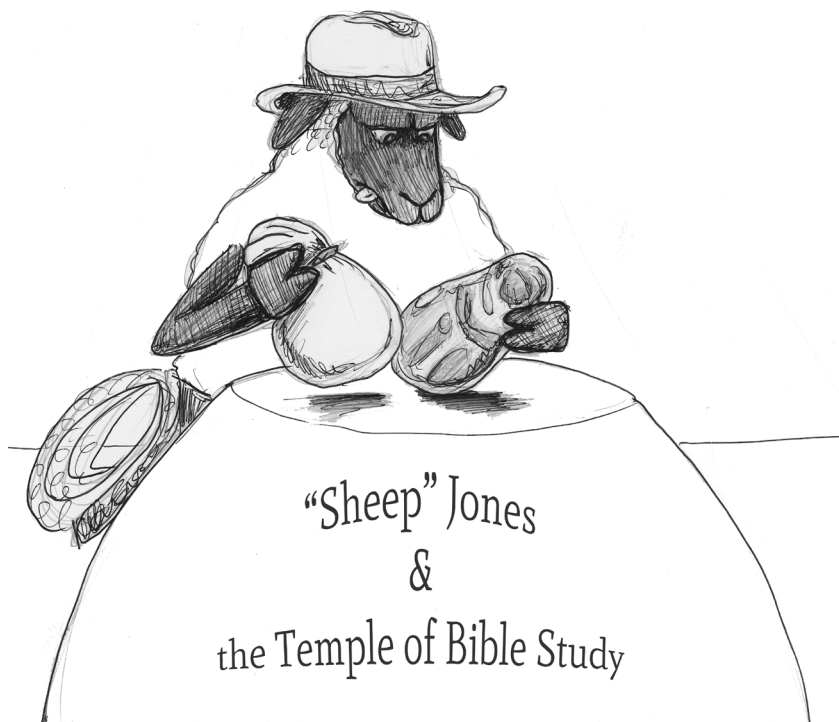
One sheep to another ...

Give me a chance, one sheep to another, to help you examine the information and see God's perspective of life on earth. I promise you that I will do the very best I can to stay out of the way, just in case God decides to tell you something.

Appendix 2: On light and truth

Light and truth are not synonymous.

Like something out of an Indiana Jones movie, for years they had sought the Holy Grail—the key to eternal life—from the their Scriptures. They were all about Bible study and more Bible study—acquiring truth, seeking life in God’s Word. So how was it then that Jesus was standing right in front of them, and they were totally blind as to who he was, the one whom the story was all about, the main character, the leading man, the hero, the long awaited Savior of the world? How could that happen? This story is unbelievable.



The Father who sent me, confirmed me. And you missed it. You never heard his voice, you never saw his appearance. There is nothing left in your memory of his Message because you do not take his Messenger seriously. You have your heads in your Bibles constantly because you think you'll find eternal life there. But you miss the forest for the trees. These Scriptures are all about me! And here I am, standing right before you, and you aren't willing to receive from me the life you say you want (John 5:37-40 MSG).

Would you track with me for a moment? They diligently study the Scriptures seeking eternal life, but the One whom the Scriptures are all about is literally standing in front of them, talking to them and they can't make the connection. What has happened? This is pretty crazy.

Let's review: They zealously study the words of God looking for a message from God, but they refuse to accept the Messiah God sent. The Son of God was standing in front of them speaking to them informing them of all the above, and they don't get it. Whew!

What is going on? This is what is going on—Light and truth are not synonymous. They made the same mistake that many of us make. They filled themselves with truth but did not come into the light. If they were walking in the light, they would have embraced Jesus as Savior and Lord. They would have known who was standing there. They were full of truth but void of light. In our pursuit of God, we must make a distinction between light and truth.

A relevant digression ...

I will digress for a moment to partially explain some of my methodology in writing the book, and then I will weave this relevant digression back into our discussion of the necessary distinction between light and truth. My overall approach is not intended to be theological or philosophical in a highly technical sort of way. I will clearly present a line of thought that is biblically and intellectually sound while allowing myself the freedom to zoom in at appropriate times to draw our attention more closely to the infrastructure. The subject of light and truth brings us to one of those times.

Let me give an illustration by way of comparison. Several years ago I became a Mac user and the proud owner of a powerful Mac Pro

computer. In changing from Windows I had to learn Mac OS X, the latest operating system from Apple at that time.

Mac OS X (now macOS) is designed to be simple, effective, powerful, secure and attractive. However, if you were to peer beneath the surface you would find Unix, a very powerful OS over 30 years old. I do not need to know Unix to run a Mac, but I am very encouraged to know what a strong platform my everyday computing is built on.

My point ...

My point is that in this book I go to great effort to see that *my* “Unix” is rock solid, but it is not my focus to present all the theological, intellectual, philosophical and biblical underpinnings. Following our analogy, I want you to learn “macOS” so you do well with everyday living. I actually do give quite a bit of Scriptural support, but equally important is that I believe what I write is true and will ring true. My main focus in the book is to present not to prove. You hopefully will follow my meager bread crumbs with further action and study.

Saying all that, I will probe a little deeper in some parts of the book to help assure you of the strong, biblical foundation of the book. We will indeed peek under the hood at times. One area that needs this extra attention is drawing a distinction between light and truth.

For too long, many of us who profess to know and love Christ have based our pursuit of God and his righteousness on a knowledge-based paradigm. Knowledge has been king, specifically Bible knowledge—memorizing verses, Bible studies, Bible talk shows, proliferation of study Bibles, elaborate prefab studies for individuals and groups, sophisticated Sunday School curriculum, Bible exposition, and so on.

Somewhere along the line in our pursuit of God, merely learning about God became the goal and Bible study became the end, not the means.

But Jesus calls us to follow him. You may learn a great deal and study the Bible tirelessly and still not follow (see above example.) We need to

change our approach, our paradigm. Hiding God's word in our hearts means total involvement with our mind, our emotions and our will.

We learn it, we live it, we love it.

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalms 119:11 ESV).

Unfortunately, many of us have made pursuing and gathering biblical truth synonymous with coming to the light. Our pursuit of God should not end with the intellectual satisfaction of learning about the Bible. Our goal should not be to merely conquer the abstract. The Bible is the Word of God, containing the words of God. Of course it is heady stuff. We find ourselves reading, discussing and studying revelation from God—words breathed out from his Spirit to humans, spoken and written down centuries ago and still lingering, still carrying their message across the world today, words written on paper that say the same thing that God has written in the sky. This is powerful stuff, but often we confuse this exciting relationship with the written word of God with an actual living, breathing relationship with God himself. Maybe we don't realize that coming into the light is coming into God's presence. It is very possible to become a Bible expert but dwell in the darkness.

Please note in John 3:21 the significance of “*lives by*.”

But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God (John 3:21 NIV).

The distinction between light and truth ...

Whoever —>lives by the truth—>comes into the light.

We shouldn't miss the clarity of this text and the distinction drawn between truth and light, but we do, and we have. We have built massive, Bible-knowledge databases, and we mistakenly equate maintaining and building these repositories of truth with coming to the light. If nothing else, shouldn't this give us pause as we study the words of God?

Shouldn't this give us reason to be concerned about our heart attitude when we open our Bibles? Could this possibly be enough to prompt us to examine our motives and methods? The truth seekers in John five were poring over the Scriptures but were living outside of the light, which means they were living in the darkness.

We have to somehow get over much that we have been indoctrinated with through the years. One such hindrance is that Bible knowledge alone equates to spiritual growth and pleasing God. Walking in light is living the truth, doing what we say we believe, where it counts. If the Bible presents a paradigm that shatters our previous belief, then we need to have the humility to walk past the broken pieces of our bad theology and the courage to let go of the "old ways" of our old religious operating system. Do I hear an amen from the back row?

Not connecting the dots ...

So why couldn't they see Jesus for who he was? As preposterous as it sounds, the short answer is that they did not want to because he was more than they bargained for. They didn't want the eternal life Jesus offered; they wanted an extended deal on the life they had chosen. The information did not fit their expectations, as in—it did not fit their theology, did not fit their customs, did not fit their times (desire for a political leader) and possibly most of all, did not fit their perceived needs. Those who are well don't need the doctor.

And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance" (Luke 5:30-32 NKJV).

Jesus came looking for sinners to save. Apparently this was not a need they thought they had. They had devoted their lives to seeking the truth, but their pride had blinded them to even the most obvious truth. As evidenced for centuries now, people can be filled with truth, even religious truth about God, even Bible verses, and still not connect the dots, still not come into the reality of living before God.

A snowball's chance ...



About the author ...

Dave is the pastor of a small church on the prairies of western Illinois. He received the majority of his formal training at Moody Bible Institute and Moody Seminary (then Moody Graduate School). He also authored *God's Word: Learn It, Live It, Love It!* © 2015 David Lee Scott.

Dave's passion is to clearly communicate the word of God as the word of God so that the reader would have the best opportunity possible to hear the voice of God and to understand God's offer of salvation and eternal life through Jesus Christ.

To God be the glory!

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