

PEACE Within Reach

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Fred Wilgenburg

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LCCN: 00-190308

ISBN: 1-57579-314-8

Printed in the United States of America

Pine Hill Press, 4000 West 57th Street, Sioux Falls, SD 57106

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Acknowledgments

Much thanks to my wife, Amy, and our daughters, Whitney, Siera, and Jenna for their encouragement and patience. I love you very much!

Much thanks to my sister-in-law, Vanessa, for the pictures throughout the book and for my photo in the back, to my sister-in-law, Michelle, for editing help, and to my cousin, Marie, for editing and publishing suggestions.

Much thanks to my friend Jim for making some treacherous climbs in photographing a front cover.

Introduction

PEACE is 1. freedom from war and public disturbance, 2. freedom from disagreement or quarrels, 3. an undisturbed state of mind, serenity, 4. quiet, calm.

--- *Webster's Dictionary*

If those are meanings of “peace,” then this book should offer you some real peace of mind. But will the message of this book bring more *quiet* and *calm*? Depending on your present lifestyle, it may do that, but not necessarily. In fact, because of the message of this book, the level of activity in your life may increase much, even though a sense of peace will increase right along with it. Without a doubt, if people would personally receive the message of this book, there would be more peace in the world.

**Will you take a little bit of your time to read,
for peace**

CHAPTER 1

You Have Great Worth, Great Value

Unless you are a friend, a neighbor, a relative, or an acquaintance, I probably don't know you personally. Without knowing you, or what you do, or what you believe, I know that you have great value. You are special -- of great worth! I don't think that because I'm such a caring person. I know that because you are a human being.

As a human, unlike anything else in the world, you have the image of God in you.

In Genesis 1:26-27 of the Bible (NLT), God said, "Let us make people in our image, to be like ourselves. . . .

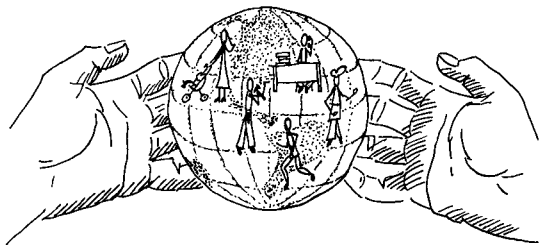
So God created people in his own image; God patterned them after himself; male and female he created them."

Because of that, you can have a personal relationship with God, in which you can talk to Him in prayer. Having the image of God in you, you reflect the wisdom of God. You can think and make choices, unlike animals that do things by instinct. You have a conscience, so that you can know "right" from "wrong." Because you have God's image, God gives you, along with all other people, the responsibility to manage His world, His creation. Having God's image, you have the ability to either honor or

disobey God. So, in comparison to animals, you are held to a higher standard before God. He counts on us people.

As a person, do you know you are different from every other person who has ever lived? The human body is made up of about 10,000,000,000,000 (10 trillion) cells. Each cell lives, and inside each cell there is a nucleus that is the cell's control center. The nucleus contains chromosomes that contain DNA. Every one of the 10,000,000,000,000 cells in your body has the same DNA, and your DNA is different from every other person who has ever lived --- billions of people by now. Your DNA make-up determines your blood type, the color of your eyes, the color of your hair, and thousands of other characteristics.¹ There has never been, nor will there ever be, a person just like you!

FOR YOU AND EVERY OTHER PERSON LIVING ON THE EARTH, GOD SAYS, "I KNOW YOU, JOHN." "I SEE YOU ANNEKA." "I KNOW YOU, HAKIM." "I KNOW YOU, ROSA."



Psalm 139 of the Bible (NLT) has this to say about God:
"You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body, and knit

me together in my mother's womb. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, . . . in the dark of the womb."

God knows you; He has known you every minute since the time you started growing when your mother was pregnant with you. YOU ARE AMAZINGLY UNIQUE AND SPECIAL!

But let's take a step back a minute. Are you unsure that God exists? Are you unsure that the Bible is God's Word? Those questions are okay. As I refer many times to God and to the Bible in this book, the next few pages of this chapter explain why. If you are pretty sure of these things, go ahead and jump forward to chapter 2. If you are unsure, take a few minutes to read the next pages.

For many years, scientists have tried to prove that the existence of God is false. Rather, they have tried to prove that everything has just evolved (grown) over millions and billions of years to what it is today. In doing that, many of them have admitted to proving that their theories are actually false. In his book, How Now Shall We Live?, Charles Colson describes how this has happened. Long before the information age [when microscopes, telescopes, and computers became available], the living cell was thought to be quite simple,

and it was easy enough to think life arose by **chance**, that it just kept growing on its own to whatever]. [A cell is the basic unit of life; all living things are made up of a bunch of cells.] Biologists took refuge in the idea of nearly endless time. Given enough time, anything can happen. But as science began uncovering the complexity of the cell, it became harder and harder to hold on to chance theories. The computer revolution put an end to any chance theory of life's origin. Beginning in the 1960s, mathematicians began writing computer programs which simulated [imitated] evolution over the equivalent of [what would equal] billions of years. The outcome was jolting: The computers showed that the **probability [likelihood]** of evolution by chance processes is essentially **zero**. Today it is common to hear prominent scientists scoff at the idea that life arose by chance.² But some scientists, in still trying to support the evolution theory, have taken on the task of proving then that life has arisen (started) . . . by forces in matter itself. These scientists are searching for some force within matter that directed the process.³ They call this "force" the Big Bang which they say occurred about 15 billion years ago. Though it's unknown what caused the Big Bang, they say the Big Bang laid the foundations for the universe. It happened as tremendous heat was caused by the Big Bang, which caused common particles to form. These common particles are known as atoms. These atoms

combined in certain ways to become amino acids, the building blocks of the rest of matter, including cells. From here, things have just kept evolving to what they are today. **The problem with this is explained** by Professor Dean Kenyon of San Francisco State University. He was one of the original strong supporters of the evolution theory and one of the authors of *Biochemical Predestination*, a widely used college textbook. If you look at the experiments, Kenyon states, "one thing that stands out is that you do not get ordered sequences of amino acids If we thought we were going to see a lot of spontaneous (automatic) ordering, something must have been wrong with our theory."⁴ What the experiments (as performed in neat, controlled, laboratory environments) do produce is mostly a sludge of gummy brown tar, a non-biological material from which nothing can grow.⁵ Professor Kenyon, among others, has since accepted the idea of an Intelligent Designer (God) as the answer to the origin of life.⁸

A strictly evolutionistic, "godless" understanding of the world would view every living thing, including us humans, as if we were leaves in a forest. The leaves grow, living on trees for their season, until Autumn. Then, they die and fall off, joining other fallen leaves, and over time they rot away and are buried by falling leaves of the next year, and the next. The leaf, a human life, lived during its season and now

its life is over; it falls to the ground, likely to be forgotten in this impersonal, cold,



“world-machine” that somehow started a long time ago. It’s done. Make room for the next. Do you see that for yourself? YIKES, THAT’S PRETTY HOPELESS!

I believe that God is the Creator, the Intelligent Designer, behind the amazingly detailed and complex world; He’s the Cause of life, rather than some “Big Bang!” which somehow caused things to evolve to what life is today. Believing that God is behind all of it is not unscientific. Atoms, amino acids, and DNA are all real and carefully selected, arranged, controlled, and organized by an Intelligent Cause -- by God.

That naturally leads me to the Bible, the most widely read book in the world, the one book on which a hand is placed as oaths are made in the courtroom or at a

presidential inauguration. The Bible is defined as God's Word.

In **II Timothy 3:16** of the Bible (NLT), it's written, "All Scripture is inspired by God . . ." This means that God breathed His Spirit on the writers of the books of the Bible to write what He desired to communicate to us. That verse then goes on to add that the Bible ". . . is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right."

Can I prove to you that the Bible is God's Word, and that it's trustworthy? No, not completely, but we can get pretty close. Like all other ancient books, the hand-written original of the Bible is not available, so we turn to the earliest manuscripts available. As more manuscripts, that is, ancient copies, are found, then the original can more accurately be reproduced. Regarding the New Testament (2nd-half) portion of the Bible, there are more than 24,000 ancient hand-written copies of the New Testament in various ancient languages, including 5300 known manuscripts in the original Greek language. In comparison, the 643 manuscript copies that exist of Homer's Iliad, a well-respected classic, is the most for any other ancient work. There are only 10 manuscripts ever found of Caesar's War Commentaries, and 7 for Plato's Tetralogies.⁷

Okay, but how early were the manuscript copies written in comparison to when the events in the Bible took

place; that is, when were the originals written? One manuscript copy, John Ryland's papyrus, containing a few verses of the Gospel of John of the Bible, dates only some 35 years after the original was written by John. The Bodmer & Chester Beatty papyri, which contains a majority of the Bible's New Testament, dates only 100-150 years after the originals were written. In comparison, the next major ancient writing, that of author Virgil, has earliest manuscript copies having been written 300 years after the originals were written. The next ones, including Homer's Iliad, range from 500-1000 years after the originals.⁸ Research has also shown a much higher degree of copying accuracy from ancient manuscripts of the Bible in comparison to ancient classics like Homer's Iliad or Mahabharata, a popular ancient religious book.⁹ As well, much evidence of archaeology (study of ancient civilizations and its relics or remains) has proven that events and places described throughout the Bible were there and did happen.

You're right; I can't prove that God is the Designer and Manager of the world against the thought that the world with everything in it has somehow evolved on its own to where it is now and that it just manages itself. But looking at all of the evidence, such as an ordered solar system which keeps the earth just far enough away from the sun so that we neither all burn up nor freeze, or the fact that there are over 600,000 different

kinds of insects, or that some animals have the ability to hibernate in the winter --- staying alive for months without eating or drinking, or the fact that the life of a mother and father can develop a completely original, new life in the form of a baby, all give me a strong faith that God, an incredibly intelligent Designer, is behind it.

Hebrews 11:1 of the Bible (NIV) defines faith as "being sure of what we hope for, and certain of what we do not see."

As well, I can't prove that the Bible is God's Word. But looking at the research that shows the Bible has a much higher degree of being an accurate, real copy of the original manuscripts, in comparison to any other major ancient writings, and seeing in life how the Bible consistently rings true gives me a strong faith that the Bible is God's Word for us.

Again, without knowing you personally, I know you have great worth, great value; you are significant! God tells me this in His Word, the Bible.

CHAPTER 2

. . . Even though You and I Can Make a Real Mess of Things

I didn't write earlier that we **perfectly** reflect God's image. In having God's image, we have the ability to have a personal relationship with God, and within that ability, through our lives we can honor God or dishonor God. Sadly, we often dishonor God. People have been dishonoring God since the beginning of time when Adam and Eve, the first people described in the Bible, sinned. This means they did something that was forbidden by God. Their first sins included falling to temptations, disobeying a direct order from God, and blaming others instead of taking responsibility for their actions. These are described in Genesis 3 of the Bible. Since that time, every person seems quite helpless in that they cannot live sin-free lives. I know I'm not able to.

Sin includes lying, stealing, murdering, gossiping, being controlled by addictions, being jealous or selfish, hating others, degrading others, falling to hurtful temptations, profaning others, and anything else that dishonors God, our perfect Creator. Sin hurts everyone. In many cases, the sins that people commit are harmful to

themselves, physically and emotionally. In most cases, sin also causes even worse pain for others affected by that person's sin. Imagine the pain felt by a victim and her family when a hurtful crime is committed against her. Family members feel enormous pain and hurt when a relative controlled by addiction drags his family down with him. Sometimes large groups of people, even an entire country of people, are hurt by the effects of the country's oppressive, selfish leader. And, I imagine most of us, including myself, can admit that others are hurt at times by our gossip, or degrading words, or by our jealousy or selfishness at times. Sin hurts everything. In Genesis 3 of the Bible, after Adam and Eve sinned, the Bible describes how pain, suffering, diseases, and natural disasters resulted from sin. A frightening disease like cancer wasn't in the world at the beginning of time. It entered the world after people began to sin, as an effect of sin. And finally, the ultimate effect of sin for every person is that their body eventually quits --- they die.

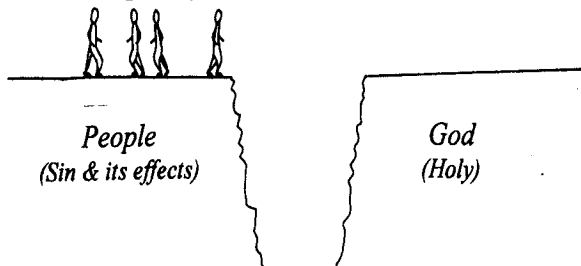
Romans 6:23 of the Bible (NIV) reads, "for the wages [the cost] of sin is death"

The thought of death is heavy for our human minds, and it eventually comes knocking on every single person's life, including yours and mine.

You and I as humans do have the image of God in us, but sin delivers a nasty blow to our ability to be good reflections of God's image.

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In fact, Isaiah 59:2 of the Bible (NLT) reads, "Your sins have cut you off from God," who is holy.

Being holy, God is perfect and set apart from all sin and evil and He requires some justice, some punishment, for our sinfulness. Sin and all its bad effects separate us from God, like a deep canyon that cannot be crossed.



What personal sins especially trip you up in your life?

What consequences of sin have hurt you or have made your life more difficult?

But, that hopeless separation of us from God doesn't have to stay that way because of who God is. Yes, God is holy, but He's also loving, and incredibly gracious. God created us in His image, in part so we could have a personal relationship with Him. Though we mess this up, God made a huge choice to offer us an opportunity to be

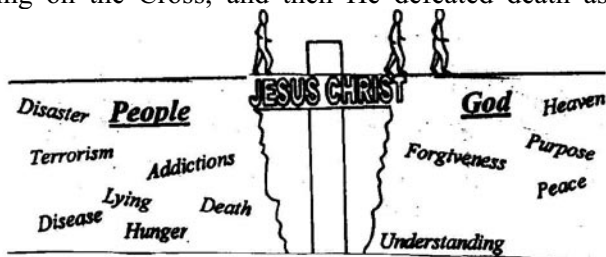
cleaned up from our sins. He offers to bring us back into a good relationship with Him.

John 3:16 of the Bible (NLT) reads, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish [die] but have eternal life [go to heaven]"

This "Son" is Jesus Christ. Over thousands of years during which the Old Testament (the 1st part of the Bible) was written, the coming of Jesus Christ, the promised Redeemer, was forecast, and He finally came. This was the best news that the world could ever receive! God's love is so great and He is so full of grace that He did the unthinkable thing.

As Romans 5:8 of the Bible (NLT) reads, "God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners."

Jesus Christ is God Himself, the only perfect One who could handle punishment for sin. He took our punishment, dying on the Cross, and then He defeated death as He



came alive again from the grave, so that we also can rise from death and go to heaven. Jesus Christ offers a bridge over the deep canyon of sin that separates us from God.

The only step that you and I need to take is to believe this for ourselves. Believing is a great thing! *Hang on, it will be explained more in the next chapter.* Most religions and religious cults leave the burden of getting right with God up to people. They say, if people will just live good-enough, holy-enough lives, they can reach God. Or, if people can just find somewhere deep within themselves, god-like qualities and abilities, they can reach God. Or, if people live better and better lives, they will keep coming back in future lives as higher order beings, and finally reach God. Some people rely on some vague understanding of a very distant Higher Power that may have been shared with them by their forefathers. In this case, there is no personal relationship with God, but rather, the person hopes to somehow, sometime get to the “spirit-world” because that’s what she was told happens.

But just from knowing myself and people around me, these systems of relying on ourselves don’t work. Live good enough? I don't know about you, but I know I can't, on my own. And, regarding myself, I know how "human" I am, far from reaching God on my own through certain spiritual exercises. And the idea that some day I’ll reach a vague “spirit-world?” What assurance is that? On our own, we may get a little ways toward reaching God,

but not all the way. **That's why God did it for us, through Himself, through Jesus Christ.**

This is available to anyone, including you and me, no matter what we've done in life. John Newton lived in the 1700's. As a slave trader, he owned his own ship. He bought people, oftentimes taking them by force away from their family and putting them on ships in order to later sell the people as slaves in another country. Slaves were often treated terribly. John Newton was known as a mean slave trader. He was known to have a terrible temper. He was hated by those who worked with him, as he cared for no one and nothing, but only his own pleasure. Then one night John Newton hit rock bottom. Caught in a fierce storm at sea which nearly sank his ship, Newton faced a terrifying fear of death. He knew he had little chance of survival, and he was not ready to die and to face eternity. John tried to cry out to God for mercy, but he was stopped abruptly by the thought of how little he deserved it. By an act of God, the battered ship found safe harbor. It was then that John Newton realized that he was a sinner in need of a Savior. For the first time, he understood the meaning of God's grace. Repenting of his sins, and the mess he had made of things, he surrendered his life to God completely. At the age of 39, the former slave trader dedicated the rest of his life to sharing with others the good news he learned, that Jesus Christ had come "to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10 of

16 *Even Though We Can Make a Real Mess of Things*
the Bible (NIV)). Newton then influenced the abolitionist movement, exposing the evils of slavery and fighting to outlaw the vile trade he had once engaged in. John Newton is best known as the writer of the old song, "Amazing grace how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see."¹⁰

Murderers can even reach God through Jesus Christ. A certain man was a serial killer and a cannibal. A few years later after he was put in prison, he learned about God's acceptance of him and he put his faith in Jesus Christ and he was baptized. He faithfully attended chapel in prison before being killed there by another inmate.¹¹ A certain woman was known as the pick-ax killer and was executed in prison for her crimes. A heroin user at age 10 and a prostitute as a teenager, she received Christ six months following her arrest. Among her last words before being executed was a plea for people to accept God's love and forgiveness.¹² Is that fair, that God would even forgive a sin like murder!? Rather, let's just personally thank God for what He does for us and our many sins, and leave the far-reaching forgiving power up to God.

God says in Isaiah 44:22 of the Bible (NLT), "I have swept away your sins like the morning mists. I have scattered your offenses like the clouds. Oh, return to me, for I have paid the price to set you free."

God wrote that, for you.

CHAPTER 3

How Did They? Can I?

Imagine standing in a river where the water is up to your chest. The water is flowing downstream at a fast enough speed that you can just barely remain standing in one place. However, your life depends on you getting two miles upstream in the next hour. In other words, you will die if you don't make it upstream. You are not a very strong swimmer but you try to swim anyway. Meanwhile, a boat has pulled up next to you and you are offered a ride upstream free of any charge. Are you going to accept what seems to be the only good choice --- the boat ride?



God is the captain of the boat, offering to you that ride.

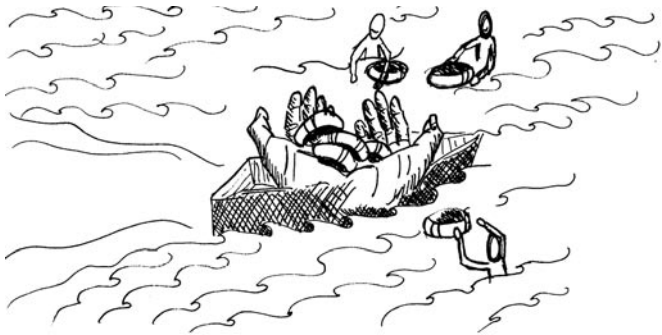
Jesus Christ said in **Matthew 11:28** of the Bible (NLT),
"Come to me, all of you who are weary [tired] and carry heavy
burdens, and I will give you rest."

AH, REST. That sounds good, doesn't it? Well, it's amazing how often we decline God's/Jesus' offer! Sometimes it's with an attitude which says, "I'll do it my way, by myself. The money that I'm already getting tired of working for is buying me lots of happiness, right?" At other times, people seem to enjoy, at least in the short-term, the rut that they are in, and which keeps growing deeper. In a way, the troubles and problems are exciting, and they choose to deal with the consequences later. "No one is going to tell me how to live my life." Unfortunately, by that time other people, especially children if they have some, also have to deal with the tough consequences due to their attitude and lifestyle. Sometimes, people have the misunderstanding that "getting into the boat" would mean giving up on themselves and entering a rigid or boring life.

Mike is a young man (mid-20's) whom I'm acquainted with, and who has a little of each of these attitudes. Physically, Mike is tough. In fact, he gets paid for fighting professionally. But with his macho attitude, Mike has become the unwed father of children from different mothers; he can't keep up with the bills that come with his fancy, expensive lifestyle; and he just can't find satisfaction. In spite of his physical toughness, Mike

feels weak. He's losing his footing while standing in the fast flowing river of life that goes on around him.

Mike, the right option is to get into the boat. You'll become a better man. You'll become a better father. You'll probably even become a better professional fighter if that's the career you continue in because you will finally be able to focus on some "light at the end of the tunnel" for your life which has been in a lot of darkness.



This option of getting into the boat offers tremendous "goods" for life! But, it does require one big step. In the middle of the river, as you are trying to hold your own while time is running out, and as the caring Captain of the boat is offering a ride, you must finally be able to say, "I can't make it; I need your help." And, you must be able to repent. "To repent" is to reflect on who God made you to be as a person, as one made in His image, to express a sincere apology for the sins that you

do, and to have a sincere desire to be cleaned up in order to live a better life. Repenting is "letting go" of your sins that are nearly toppling you over in that tough river called life, and "letting God," as you climb into His boat. Let God forgive you of your sins. Through all that Jesus did, God has already written out your "Certificate of Forgiveness;" you just need to accept it.

How did the people described at the end of the last chapter receive peace from God? They believed! In other words, they saw the grace and the love that God offers to people, which they had not yet received, and then they humbled themselves and said, "God, I'm sorry. Please forgive me and lead me." In doing that, they started to have some real peace and hope and they started to feel some real purpose in their lives. Getting into God's boat of grace doesn't mean that all of your sinful habits, and the consequences of your sins, will just disappear. Though we will do our best to honor God because we will be thankful to God, we will still stumble; pain of various kinds will still come into our lives; death is still approaching. We are still human! But as God forgives us through Jesus Christ, and as He gives us healthy purpose in life, and as He holds a room in heaven for us, we will become more free from sin, and better able to deal with consequences of sin, even death. That's good stuff, isn't it? **So, are you interested in getting into the boat?**

You're right, I don't know what your life is like, or

where you've been. You may be in a situation that is tougher and rougher than I could ever imagine. You may be lonely and feeling depressed, and feeling like no one cares. I'm sorry for you and how you are feeling.

When I met Rachel, she was fifteen years old. She was raised mostly by her dad after her parents broke up; her mom was an alcoholic who went to jail frequently for alcohol violations. Though she loved her dad, she was often bullied by her older brothers and sisters, especially her one sister. Her older, stronger sister would often threaten Rachel with serious physical harm. Once the older sister was sitting on Rachel and choking her. Rachel grabbed a knife and stabbed her sister in the side. Violence, at first as a way to defend herself, soon became a way of life for Rachel. She became mixed up with a violent gang. Her initiation into the gang was to carry out an act of serious violence. Rachel shot an innocent bystander in the kneecap. She thinks the victim had to have part of his leg amputated because of the injury, for which Rachel later felt very bad. Rachel sold illegal drugs for the gang. Through all of this, Rachel became distrustful, depressed, and she felt used and hopeless.

I met Rachel when she moved to our city to again try to live with her mom to get away from things back home. But shortly after Rachel came, her mom again wouldn't show up at night or would come home drunk. She would be mean to Rachel, often cussing her out.

Rachel started staying at friends' houses and skipping school again. The authorities put Rachel in the Juvenile Detention Center for skipping too much school. Her mom, who was in jail at the time, asked me to visit Rachel because she was worried about a question Rachel kept asking her and Rachel's father. Rachel's question was, "What do you think heaven will be like?" Rachel was depressed and thinking about taking her own life.

But Rachel's question was a good one. "Rachel, according to the Bible, heaven is a wonderful place to look forward to, where there won't be any more pain and suffering and abuse, and where you will be in the presence of God forever." (*read more about it at the end of the book --- Pg. 51 --- "9 Commonly Asked Questions (& Answers)"*). Soon after, Rachel started on a healthy, meaningful walk through life, hand-in-hand with Jesus, and understanding that she will go to heaven some day, according to God's time.

God says in John 3:16 in the Bible (NIV) that Heaven will be a place for "whoever believes in Him [Jesus]."

But please understand, God never wants us to try to get to heaven on our own terms. Suicide is so heartbreaking for many and it dishonors God. Though life can get so tough sometimes, God wants a person to open up his or her life to Him, wherever they are at or however bad they're feeling, so He can reveal His love to them, and the hope, and the much better purposes that He has for their life. If

you are dealing with overwhelming hurt, talk to God about it; He can hear you and He cares about you. Also, call someone, a caring friend, a pastor, or a counselor, who can also help to lead you in the right direction.

My prayer to God is the same for people who live in terribly difficult conditions around the world. Does that include you today? What's the worth of living in conditions where there is not enough food and medicine to even keep your child living, or where you have been severely violated physically and emotionally by thugs who were maybe even hired by government officials (as is the case in some countries) to hurt you, or where you have a disease that will not go away, but will only get worse until you die? My heart hurts over what some people must live through, and then even worse, imagine that many people live through these terrible conditions on their own, not knowing that they can look above and beyond this earth, to God, the One of true hope. What's the worth of these conditions without knowing God? Sometimes we wonder if there is any. But with God, you can know you are not alone. He, the Almighty Creator, will personally walk with you. Often right in the middle of terrible conditions, He will give a person a sense of real hope and some peace to carry them along through what would otherwise be hopeless. Remember, through Jesus and His death on the cross, God was at the receiving end of the worst of cruelty, by the hands of people. He has been

there, and He cares about what you are going through. And, if you are willing to listen, God, the Understanding One, will reveal to you His special call for your life -- for one thing, maybe to help others through that similar situation. This offers much purpose for your life, even in the most terrible conditions. **And purpose in life is absolutely available to each person, at any time as they “let go” and “let God.”**

Angola Prison is home to some 5,000 men --- rapists, robbers, and murderers, 61 percent of whom will die there. It is a prison that, in the last several years, has been transformed from being one of America's bloodiest prisons to one alive with hope. Much of this transformation is due to the prison warden, Burl Cain, and to God. When he became warden, Warden Cain erected a huge concrete sculpture at the front gate that reads: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:13-14 of the Bible (RSV)). Every incoming inmate sees it. Throughout the prison and its programs, inmates are encouraged to accept God's grace and the purpose and meaning for life that it brings, even in prison, encouraging them to live as better men. Even when a punishment of execution is to be carried out, Warden Cain holds the prisoner's hand, praying for him and telling him that if he trusts in Jesus Christ, he will be met on the other side by

an angel who will take his hand from there and guide him home (TO HEAVEN). Through the grace and truth of God, the once bloodiest prison in America has become one marked by grace, compassion, love, and hope.¹³

CHAPTER 4

Really Strong!

My family and I enjoy watching some of the reality shows on television. We watch billionaire Donald Trump weed out candidates for a great paying job on "The Apprentice." Each episode, another candidate is fired until the final candidate gets the job, including much prestige and a lot of money. On the show, Donald Trump flaunts his private helicopter, his private jet, his limousines, his extravagant home, and his attitude that success in life is measured by how much money you have, by how much influence you have on other people's financial status, and by how popular you are, no matter how many people you might need to step on in climbing the ladder of success.

On the television reality show, "The Bachelor," success seems to largely be determined by how beautiful a person looks on the outside, and by how good a person's personality seems to be, as a group of women try to beat out sixteen others in "stealing the heart" of the bachelor in a matter of weeks in order to begin a relationship with him.

But what if Donald Trump gets a life-threatening disease or what if his private helicopter was to crash with him inside. No amount of money or prestige can completely protect him. And I imagine there must be some big “headaches” that go along with having so much financial influence on others. For the good-looking people on "The Bachelor," what if a disfiguring accident took their good looks away, or what if they won the bachelor's heart, but they found out that this guy is totally different from what they learned during the few weeks of the show, and now the television network and its millions of viewers have put them together. Or what if they looked great on the outside, but circumstances suddenly happen in their life that tear them up in the inside, mentally and emotionally. You,

Without God



With God



me, and the other people described here can be so much

more in life, no matter what age we are, or what situation we are facing. We can be much stronger, peace-filled people through God. Earlier it was described how God, the Creator and Sustainer of the world, knows you personally. He uniquely designed you as a person made in His image. Just accepting that truth offers some hope and strength. Next, we talked about our sin, but how God's love was then especially expressed as God the Son, Jesus Christ, took our punishment of death on Himself to offer us forgiveness of our sins, and heaven, when we die. Personally accepting that truth offers a lot more hope, and strength.

There's more. As Jesus saw that His time on earth was coming to an end, He promised His followers that He would send to them the Holy Spirit of God.

In John 16:5-7 of the Bible (NIV), Jesus said, "Now I am going to him [God] who sent me, . . . it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor [the Holy Spirit] will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." Verse 13 reads, "When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth."

God never leaves you and me alone to somehow get through life on our own. He never says, "I'll see you later. Good luck on your way through life!" No. All along the way, God is with us. He encourages us with the truth of His love and grace when we are down. He gives us the courage and wisdom to be all that He made us to be. And,

He pricks our consciences and brings us back on the right path when we fail. This is all done through the Holy Spirit.



God is constantly there with you -- in your home, in your car, in your room, at work, in your cell -- through the Holy Spirit. He is just a prayer away. Maybe you are thinking, "But I don't know how to pray."

In Romans 8:26-27 of the Bible (NLT), it reads, "And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father [God] who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying."

God is completely on your side, working out the best for you and those around you, even when you don't know what to do, or how to do it. He can read your deep, inner struggles and concerns, and the fact that you sincerely want help, and He helps you. Prayer is just telling it to God. **Wow, God, the almighty Creator and Maintainer**

of the universe, is interested and available to listen to you and me, at any moment of the day!

God the Holy Spirit works through your prayers, but He also works through you. Do you ever ask yourself big questions like, "Why am I here?" "Is there any purpose to my being here?" "What am I supposed to do in life?" I don't have that answer for you, but God definitely does, and yes, He has special things for you to do. A lot of times it goes along with some of your natural, God-given talents and abilities.

In 1 Corinthians 12 of the Bible (NLT), it's written, "A spiritual gift is given to each of us. . . . To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice. . . . The Spirit gives special faith to another, and to someone else he gives the power to heal the sick. . . ."

Several more spiritual gifts are mentioned and it is the Holy Spirit of God who gives these gifts. He decides which gift each person should have. When you begin to know God personally and to have a relationship with God, He begins to turn your talents and abilities into gifts that you use to really make a difference in the world. In God, your talents and abilities become spiritual gifts -- gifts that benefit those around you and honor God. Since I sure don't have every ability and gift from God, I thank God that He has given you and others special abilities and gifts to help in areas where I'm lacking. Pray about your special gifts, and in the meantime, carry out your God-given

talents and abilities. God will then begin to reveal to you your spiritual gifts and what it is you are supposed to do in life.

God gave Donald Trump the intelligence and the talent to make lots of money. Imagine if a talented person like Donald Trump turned his life over to God. Then that "spiritual gift" of making money could help so many more people as it would be offered with compassion and care, and in honor to God --- the ultimate Giver of life.

The following people are examples of those who allowed God to work through their lives and circumstances. They were Holy Spirit-strong! Betsie and Corrie Ten Boom were sisters who were prisoners in a concentration camp during World War II. Corrie wrote about their concentration camp experiences and about her sister Betsie's unshakable faith in God. The conditions in the women's concentration camp at Ravensbruck were terrible. During the war, over 132,000 women went through the camp; an estimated 92,000 of them died there --- many in the gas chambers or from starvation.¹⁴ Corrie wrote about their barracks, "Fleas! Betsie, the place is swarming with them! Here! And here another one! Betsie, how can we live in such a place!?" Meanwhile, Betsie prayed, "Show us. Show us how." She then responded, "That's it, Corrie! That's His answer. 'Give thanks in all circumstances!' That's what we can do. We can start right now to thank God for every single thing about this new

barracks! 'Thank-You,' Betsie went on serenely, 'for the fleas and for' Days later, Betsie said to Corrie, "You know we've never understood why we had so much freedom in the big room (for holding Bible studies with the other prisoners). Well, I've found out. The guards wouldn't step through the door. And you know why?" With triumph in her voice: "Because of the fleas! The place is crawling with fleas!" Corrie wrote, "My mind rushed back to our first hour in this place. I remembered Betsie's bowed head, remembered her thanks to God for creatures I could see no use for." Betsie, who was very sick during her time at the camp, later died there in great peace, despite the awful physical surroundings.¹⁵

In the 1950's, Jim Elliot was killed, along with some others, by native peoples in the jungles of Ecuador as they sought to become friends with the native people and to spread the good news of God's love to those who had never heard of it. Jim Elliot once said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep [his life] to gain what he cannot lose [heaven]."¹⁶

Mother Teresa, a famous Catholic nun who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her care of those living in poverty, said the following. "I see God in every human being. When I wash the leper's wounds, I feel I am nursing the Lord Himself. Is it not a beautiful experience!?"¹⁷

Mother Teresa's daily prayer was, "Dear Jesus, help me to spread Thy fragrance everywhere I go. Flood my soul

with Thy spirit and love. Penetrate and possess my whole being so utterly that all my life may only be a radiance of Thine. Shine through me and be so in that every soul I come in contact with may feel Thy presence in my soul. Let them look up and see no longer me but only Jesus. Stay with me and then I shall begin to shine as you shine, so to shine as to be a light to others.”¹⁸

The Apostle Paul, who wrote several of the New Testament letters in the Bible, and who was beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, put in prison, and finally executed, wrote in

Philippians 1:21 of the Bible (NIV), “For to me, to live is Christ [Jesus], and to die is gain.”

In other words, no matter what, I’m okay, because I belong to God.

You can be Holy Spirit-strong, too, simply, powerfully, by personally entering a relationship with God.

CHAPTER 5

. . . Maybe, But What Costs are Involved?

That's a good question. Anything that has value, especially the kind of value that God's grace offers, must have some personal cost --- "some strings attached" --- right? Usually, but not in this case. God's grace, and all its benefits, such as God's love, forgiveness, assurance of eternal life in heaven, and a life with purpose and meaning are all free, at least for us! Jesus paid the cost. As described earlier, forgiveness of sin costs a bunch; it costs punishment --- a punishment that only God/Jesus could handle. And in love, Jesus took the punishment through His death on the cross. The only thing that we need to do is personally receive His gift of grace.

Still, "costs involved?" is a good question. As Romans 10:9 of the Bible (NLT) states, the only thing that a person needs to do to receive these gifts

is to "confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead." Then, "you will be saved."

Saved from the control of sin and many of its devastating consequences, including ultimately, eternal death apart

from God. Saved from a life that leaves us feeling empty--perhaps without much meaning, or peace, or fulfillment, or real hope. But it's important to understand that as good as "Jesus is my Savior" sounds, it does not have any meaning unless a person says with that, "Jesus is my Lord," as stated in the above verse. Does that sound costly? It's really not costly; it's full of benefits! Entering a personal relationship with God is a two-way relationship. For all that God gives to a person who receives Him, He calls for that person to live a life that's committed and honoring to Him, a life which expresses thanks to God for all that He gives. God, who is holy, asks us to put aside sin in our lives. Usually these sins have been tripping us up and making life more difficult, or making us feel guilty, or hurting other people around us.



God, who has given each person special abilities, expects us to use those abilities and spiritual gifts. In doing this, our lives start to make a positive difference for ourselves, for others, and for the world! Some people seem to think that a personal relationship with God may

cost them their culture, or their family, or their friends. It's understandable to think that since some religions and cults seem to require this. However, God doesn't ask a person to give up her culture, or her family, or her friends. Rather, God has given us different cultures and God encourages cultural expression. A wonderful experience of mine was once watching a Native American woman sing a praise song in the Lakota language in honor of her Savior and Lord, Jesus, while her young daughter danced a traditional Native American dance in honor to God. As Native American author and pastor Richard Twiss writes, "Cultures are to be instruments through which Christ [Jesus] reveals Himself to the nations."¹⁹

God doesn't ask you to leave your family to come to Him. No, God is the origin of family. As you are committed to God, He will make you a more loving child, a better parent, a better brother or sister. For example, a person who comes into a personal relationship with God is to pray often to God, to communicate with God. If you have a troubled relationship with your family, and if you receive Jesus as Savior and Lord, not only are you encouraged by God to be reconciled to your family members, but you are to pray continually for your family and for your relationship with your family.

Sometimes, before a person receives Jesus, she has friends with whom she does things that dishonor God. After receiving Jesus as her personal Savior and Lord, she

would begin to do things that bring honor to God. For example, just as it would be unwise for a recovering alcoholic to go to a bar to be with his drinking friends, so a person who receives Jesus would not continue to knowingly do things on his own or with his friends which dishonor God. He can still care about his friends though, seeking to do healthy things with them and praying for them. As he prays, he can be assured that God also cares about his friends, and God wants the best for them.

Is it worth it? Just ask Kathy. Years ago I was walking in the trailer park where Kathy lived. I was asking the neighborhood people there what kind of needs they had and how I could help. After knocking on Kathy's door, she and her husband, Lon, immediately welcomed me in and shared with me about their deep love for God, their Rescuer. Thirty minutes later, when I was ready to leave, they grabbed my hands and with passion they prayed for me.

Why does Kathy have such a passion for God? It's because of what He caused her to give up, and where He took her from there. Kathy experienced much grief in her life. Her dad died when she was six and her mom died when Kathy was fifteen. Her only sibling was her older brother who was two years older than Kathy. He was murdered as a young man. Kathy used drugs already as a teenager to numb her "hurts" in life. The use of drugs soon turned to an addiction that lasted for years. She

married Lon who also was addicted to drugs. They sold drugs for “drug bosses” to support their addictions and because it was exciting to make quick money and to “hang with the bad boys.” Over time, the excitement turned to depression as the addiction controlled her life and as their marriage was falling apart. As well, the excitement turned to paranoia as some of the people they hung out with were getting busted by the police and others were overdosing.

Meanwhile, a friend who knew God and who knew of Kathy’s troubles, persistently told Kathy that God had much better in store for her life, and that she needed to go to treatment. Kathy finally went reluctantly to treatment and as she often quotes from

Psalm 34:8 of the Bible (NIV), she started to “taste and see that the Lord is good.”

After six months of anger at his cleaned-up wife, Lon also personally received the Lord. Now years later, Kathy says that as she continues to surrender more parts of her life to God, more things work out.

What has receiving Jesus cost Kathy and Lon?

Drug highs, and lows. It cost them the opportunity to make some fast-earned money, but now as they receive lower incomes from honest jobs, in comparison to dealing drugs, they have been able to move into a newly built home. It has cost them the short-lived excitement and prestige of drug use and dealing, and of being in an outlaw motorcycle group, “which now looks like hell.”

They now enjoy making a difference in people's lives and in society through Christian Motorcyclists Association and involvement in other ministries.

What would God's grace cost you? Based on your answers to that question, could the question just be re-phrased --- **How would God's grace benefit you?** As Kathy would encourage, "Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the person who takes refuge in Him."

CHAPTER 6

What About Church?

Whether you are ready to personally receive God into your life right now or not, it's important to understand "church." The Bible describes the Church as the body of Jesus Christ. Every person who has a personal relationship with God is in the body of Jesus Christ, in the Church.

First Corinthians 12:25-26 of the Bible (NIV) states, "There should be no division in the body, but . . . its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it."

Notice that in the last paragraph, the "c" in the word Church is capitalized. While there is one worldwide body of Jesus Christ, one Church of people who have personal relationships with God, many of these people go to local churches to gather together with other people to worship God and to grow in Him. These churches are places where there should be "no divisions," but lots of warm welcome, and encouragement, and care. While many churches are caring places where people grow together in the Lord, unfortunately that's not always the

case. Sometimes people read in the Bible the right way to live and respect other people, but they don't actually live that way. Maybe you have been hurt by a church, or by "church people." That should not happen, and as a pastor, I apologize on behalf of churches and church people who have hurt others and maybe you.

I don't mean to make excuses, but there is an explanation for why this happens. Though perfect God/Jesus is the focus of Christian churches, and churches are mostly made up of people who have personally received God's grace and who should be living respectable, caring lives as they sincerely seek to honor God in life, they are still humans who still have to battle personal sins. For this reason, I also, as a pastor, personally apologize if I have ever said anything inappropriate in church that has been hurtful to someone. Praise God for His grace and forgiveness, which we celebrate in church, and for the fact that the Holy Spirit of God works on making us more honorable to Him, and more caring to our fellow people.

So, please don't look for the perfect church with perfect people of God because you won't find it. Rather, if you're looking, look for a church that warmly welcomes you, and that is focused on the Bible -- God's Word -- and whose people humbly confess their need and their thanks for God's grace and truth for their life. Pastor Rick Warren in his book, The Purpose Driven Life, writes it this way:



"Every church could put out a sign, 'No perfect people need apply. This is a place only for those who admit they are sinners, need grace, and want to grow.'"²⁰ Maybe you have looked in the phone book under the heading, "Churches," and you see Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Methodist, Reformed, and others, with several individual churches listed under each. Or, maybe you notice all the different kinds of churches with various names as you drive through a city. Churches that are Lutheran or Baptist or Methodist or other are different denominations. That means they are Christian churches with different histories and traditions, and with some different understandings of certain teachings in the Bible. However, regarding the most important teaching of Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, churches must stand in agreement. Some churches are non-denominational, and most churches have different styles or ways of worshipping God. That's okay, too, as

long as God alone is worshipped and people are growing in their relationships with God. No church is perfect, but if you want to begin a personal relationship with God and you want to grow as a person, I strongly encourage you to start regularly attending a local church. The set-aside time to worship God and the encouragement from other believers is so helpful for growing in the Lord --- the best experience in the world!

CHAPTER 7

Putting It All Together

The plain fact that you are a person makes you worth a lot, whether you agree or disagree with the message given in this book. You are significant because as a person, a human being, you bear the image, the likeness of God. And, God designed you in such a way that, amazingly, you are specially unique from every other person who has ever lived and who will ever live. Yep, God knows you personally and He cares a bunch for you, and He has much available for you, **when you ask for it.**

And, yes, this is the case even though you and I make a pile of mistakes -- even though we sin. In fact, incredibly, because of our sin, and in spite of our sin, God, whom we sin against, offers to redeem us, to clean us up as people, and to give us a great life.

Romans 5:8 of the Bible (NLT) reads, "But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ [Jesus] to die for us while we were still sinners."

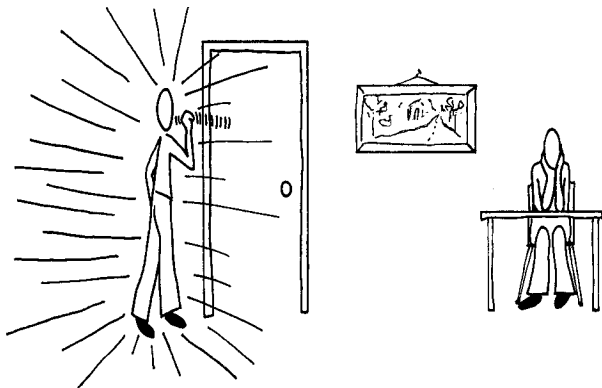
He, God, allowed Himself to die at the hands of sinful humans, and then He conquered death, so that we can also conquer death when we die; we can go to heaven!

Are you tired of a hopeless and purposeless

feeling about your life? Are you tired of trying to keep up with everyone else, but not feeling much fulfillment and peace in that? Are you feeling uncertain and afraid of what may happen to you when you die? Are you dissatisfied or guilty because of your personal sins and what they are doing to your life, and to the lives of others around you? Do you want to be released from their sticky grip? If so, God asks you to come to Him, and to confess your sins to Him because He will take them from you and all the bad feelings that go with them. He will forgive you completely of them. He will help you to be freer from their grip on your life. If you take up His offer of forgiveness and heaven, God, through His Holy Spirit, will walk with you on every step of your life on earth. He will keep you out of trouble areas. He will give you strength and encouragement and an understanding of why things in the world are the way they are. He will give you a peace and a hope that anchors you during tough times. He will help you to shine with a life full of purpose and fulfillment.

Jesus summed it all up in

Revelation 3:20 of the Bible (NRSV), "Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me."



It's that simple, and that profound!

Here is how you can:

1. Admit your need. (Admit, "I am a sinner so I keep stumbling and tripping up in life. I truly feel little or no peace, and not much real joy. Sometimes I hurt or use others through my actions and words. Often, I dishonor God who made me.")

2. Be willing to turn from your sins. (Repent. "I am tired of stumbling through life and not feeling at peace. I am sorry to God, to myself, and to others for my sins and I really want to live a better, more meaningful life.")

3. Believe that God can and will forgive you of all your sins. He does this as Jesus Christ, the Son of God/God the Son, died on the Cross and rose from the grave, for you. ("God, I accept your forgiveness and I look forward to living as your cleaned up child, both in my life now, and then forever in Heaven with you.")

4. In prayer, invite God, through the Holy Spirit, to now be your life's Guide. ("God, I love you for all that you give to me. In thanks to You, I want to live out your purposes for my life. I want to honor You.")

How to pray to God, to receive Him:

Dear God, I admit that I sin. I thank you for sending Your son Jesus to die on the cross for my sin, for forgiving me. I now invite you to come into my life and make me who you want me to be. Amen.

**If you sincerely went through steps 1-4,
you have just made a wonderful decision**

for your life. And it's just the beginning of a life-long relationship. To grow in your relationship with God:

1. Read the Bible (God's Word) often to learn more about God and His plan for your life.
2. Pray to God often, sharing your joys and your burdens.
3. Go to a church where you can receive support in growing in God.
4. Share your faith. You've received a wonderful gift. Tell others about it!

9 COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS **(& Answers)**

1. What do I do if I want to believe in God as this book describes, but I feel so much uncertainty, and even skepticism? (Pg. 50)
2. If God is holy and loving, why does He allow bad things (tragedies, terrorism, devastating storms, starvation, deadly disease, etc.) to happen? (Pg. 52)
3. Why should I believe the Bible has any more authority for my life than any other book? (Pg. 53)
4. The Bible is such a big book. Where should I start reading in the Bible to gain the best understanding of its message for my life? (Pg. 54)
5. How should I pray? What is the right way to pray? (Pg. 56)

6. In this book, God is called “Father.” Also, the Holy Spirit of God is described, and Jesus is called God. Are there different God(s)? Are there different parts to God? (Pg. 58)
 7. What is a cult? (Pg. 60)
 8. I’ve heard some say, “It doesn’t matter what religion you have because we all believe in the same God and we’re all going to the same place after we die anyway.” Does it matter? (Pg. 61)
 9. I hear people talk about heaven and about hell. Where are these places? Where do the concepts of heaven and hell come from? (Pg. 67)
-
1. **What do I do if I want to believe in God as this book describes, but I feel so much uncertainty, and even skepticism?**

It is completely normal to feel awkward or uncertain about placing your faith --- your trust --- in Him, especially if you have not read much of the Bible before, or if you have not prayed to God before. The most important thing is that you

have a desire to believe and to experience a personal relationship with God. Many times in the Bible we see Jesus performing miracles, but it is interesting to note that Jesus expects faith as a condition for performing those miracles. For example, in Mark 9 of the Bible (NIV), a father asked Jesus to heal his son who was demon-possessed. The man said to Jesus,

"If you can do anything, take pity on us and help us." To this, Jesus replied, "If you can? 'Everything is possible for him who believes.'"

Well, though the father did not yet have a deep faith in God, He did believe Jesus could heal his son. The passage goes on,

"Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, 'I do believe; help me to overcome my unbelief!'"

Jesus then healed his son.

Asking God to help you overcome your unbelief will help you if you want to believe, but you feel you can't. Your ability to trust and believe will grow as you begin to pray to Him, and as you read the Bible, and as you talk to others who have a personal faith in God. God will work through your uncertainty, and even skepticism, and start to reveal Himself to you, as He did for the father in Mark 9.

So, don't just sit there in confusion and uncertainty and hopelessness. Start taking the steps described, for life.

2. If God is holy and loving, why does He allow bad things (tragedies, terrorism, devastating storms, starvation, deadly disease, etc.) to happen?

As described in chapter 2, early in the history of time people began to sin --- to do things that are not allowed by God. Sin, as well as the effects of sin, is described in Genesis 3 of the Bible. Tragedies, terrorism, starvation, deadly disease, etc., are effects of the sin of people. Therefore, these effects of sin are not the fault of God, but the fault of people.

Still, it's a good question to ask. Why doesn't God, who is all-powerful and all-knowing, prevent bad things from happening? First, we can be sure that God does prevent many bad things from happening as He answers the prayers of people. But why doesn't He stop every bad thing? At the beginning of chapter 1, people are described as having God's image in them. Among other things, this means that people, in contrast to all other created things, can think and make choices. After people fell into sin, God did not then take away His image from people;

therefore, He did not take away their ability to make choices. In other words, because people started to sin, God didn't then make them into robots who are completely controlled by Him in order to prevent them from sinning and facing the bad effects of their sins.

Another reason why God allows bad things to happen is that perhaps at times He is punishing people as they face the effects of sin. As God is holy and loving, He sends people "wake-up calls" at times. In a similar way, God might allow difficult times to occur in order to mold and refine us into what He wants us to become or to prod us to seek Him.

Only God knows why a certain bad thing is allowed to happen. As difficult as it might be to accept this, it is good for each person to think about their sins and the effects of those sins, so that he/she no longer commits them.

3. Why should I believe the Bible has any more authority for my life than any other book?

As described in chapter 1, I believe that the Bible is God's Word. I also believe that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the universe; God has an enormous amount of power and authority.

9 Commonly Asked Questions (& Answers)

In His Word, the Bible, God offers wonderful news for people, as well as strong statements, including laws, of how He calls people to live.

Thus, if a person sincerely believes in who God is, and they believe that the Bible is God's Word, naturally the Bible will have more authority for that person's life than any other book.

The key words are “sincere belief,” which is faith. Sincere belief/faith in God, and in His Word, the Bible, takes time to develop. As described in chapter 1, faith can be based on the Bible's high degree of accuracy and authenticity. It can be based on the clear evidence of the intelligent, divine Author of the Bible through His beautiful, ordered universe. It can be based on a person's on-going experiences of the Bible's truths being lived out in his/her life. It can be based on a person's sense of peace and purpose in life as they are in a personal relationship with God and as His Spirit guides their life.

- 4. The Bible is such a big book. Where should I start reading in the Bible to gain the best understanding of its message for my life?**

It's a really a big book. It has well over 1000 pages and it is divided up between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament covers a period of time from the beginning of the world until about 400 BC. The Old Testament contains 39 books, from Genesis to Malachi. The New Testament covers a later and much shorter period of time – from 4 BC to about 80 AD. The New Testament contains 27 books, from Matthew to Revelation.

However, as divided up as the Bible might seem from the above description, it is a unified book all the way through. The major theme throughout the whole Bible is God's relationship to people. Most of the focus of the Bible is on Jesus Christ. As the Old Testament describes, people failed, through sin, in their relationship with God. But God offered redemption for people through Jesus Christ. Though the name "Jesus" is not used in the Old Testament, Jesus is described in different ways in the Old Testament --- as the Prince of Peace, the Messiah or "anointed one," Wonderful Counselor, and others.

The New Testament covers the period containing the life of Jesus Christ and the beginning of the Church.

While the whole Bible is God's Word, and therefore every book and chapter in the Bible is important to read, for a person who is new at reading the Bible, it is not most helpful to just begin in Genesis and read all the way through Revelation. Rather, I would suggest starting with the book of John --- the 4th book in the New Testament. From there, it would be good to follow a guide such as Through the Bible in a Year, or a similar one, which offers an outline for daily Bible reading.²¹

As mentioned earlier, it would be helpful early on in your relationship with God to attend a church which is solid in teaching from the Bible. It would also be helpful to join a small Bible study group to grow in your faith.

5. How should I pray? What is the right way to pray?

There's not a specific way that a person must pray in order to be heard by God because God doesn't only hear our words in prayer, but He also knows our thoughts and attitude as we pray. When praying, the attitude and thoughts are much more important than the words. There needs to be trust in the One to whom we are praying. In other words, we need to know that God cares

deeply for us and He always hears us. When entering a time of prayer, we need to sincerely seek to know God more and more. Also, there needs to be commitment to God when we are praying; we must be willing to live according to God's will for our lives as it is explained in His Word, the Bible. In my work, occasionally I meet people on the street who might be drunk or high on drugs and not thinking clearly, and who are actively living in ways which dishonor God. Sometimes at that moment, they want me to pray with them, and to pray for them. Though I usually pray for them, I tell them first that God will listen to our prayers when our thoughts are focused on Him and when we truly want His will for our lives. The following are some helpful suggestions for praying. We should begin our prayers with praise to God for all that He gives to us, and for how wonderful, gracious, and powerful He is. In prayer, we need to know who we are as we come to God who is holy. In other words, we need to be humble, and we need to confess our sins and our weaknesses, knowing that without God and His redeeming love and forgiveness, we cannot live. We can ask God for things through prayer, but they need to be asked unselfishly. This might include asking God to

heal a family member or friend who is sick or sad. You can ask God for anything as long as it is with an unselfish attitude.

In our prayers we should also ask God to help us become better people, so that we may glorify Him through our actions.

When we pray, it can also be helpful to keep our minds more focused on God by seeking out a quiet place, such as a room where we can be by ourselves to avoid distractions. Some people also close their eyes and hold their hands together to avoid distractions. Some people kneel on their knees or even lay prostrate on the floor to pray, out of humbleness before God. Others fast from food to help them focus on prayer.

6. In this book, God is called “Father.” Jesus, His Son, is also called God. And, the book also talks about the Holy Spirit of God. Are there different Gods? Are there different parts to God?

No, there are not different Gods, each with divine power. There is just one, supreme God.

In answer to the second question, there are not different parts to God; rather, there are three different beings of God. I realize that may

be confusing. I'll do my best to explain this important doctrine of the Bible and of faith in God. This doctrine or teaching is called the Trinity. God could be described as a Triune God. "Tri" means three. God is described in the Bible as the Father, as the Son, and as the Holy Spirit. These are not just different names of God. These are different beings of the same, one God. God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit have distinct functions. God reveals Himself through the three distinct beings. The Father is the Creator, the cause of all created things in the world and the Father is the Sustainer of the world. The Son, Jesus Christ, is God who came in the flesh, as a human, to redeem people from being lost in sin. Jesus did this as He lived, as He died on the cross, and as He completely resurrected (rose up) from the grave when He conquered sin and death. As described in chapter 4, God the Holy Spirit actively works through our prayers and guides us in life.

It is important to understand that God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are together equal and eternal. Another way to state that is to say, they are co-eternal, always working together as one God.

Though the Bible never uses the term,

“Trinity,” the concept is described throughout the Bible. A few examples are the following:

Matthew 28:19 (NIV) states, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

II Corinthians 13:14 (NIV) states, “May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

7. What is a cult?

A cult is a group of people who together have a very strong devotion and dedication to some person or idea. The people in a cult often follow a certain belief that their ideas are unique and special, offering the only system for change that will solve life’s problems or the world’s ills. Most cult founders have developed the unique beliefs of their group.

While there are different kinds of cults, most of the well-known cults are religion-based. In fact, many cults would be “break-aways” from the Christian faith described throughout this book. This means that the cult group follows some teachings of the Christian faith based on the

Bible, but in addition, they follow teachings that have originated with the cult founder or leader. Often, these additional teachings of the cult twist and change and misinterpret major foundational teachings of God's Word, the Bible.

Examples of popular cults and religious movements which have twisted and changed major foundational teachings of God's Word, the Bible, include Mormons, Jehovah's Witness, the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, and New Age. While these are popular groups, there are others as well.

When talking about religious beliefs that are different from Christianity, it is important to distinguish between religion-based cults and religions that are entirely different altogether. While religion-based cults twist and change and misinterpret major foundational teachings of God's Word, the Bible, other religions have an almost completely different set of teachings from that of the Christian faith in God. Other religions would include Islam (Muslim), Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism, and others.

- 8. I've heard some say, "It doesn't matter what religion you have because we all believe in the**

same God and we're all going to the same place after we die anyway." Does it matter?

As many know, Mahatma Gandhi of India was a great man of peace, of non-violent protest against abuses and injustices, and of religious tolerance. Gandhi insisted, "The need of the moment is not one religion, but mutual respect and tolerance of the different religions. . . .Any attempt to root out traditions, effects of heredity, etc., is not only bound to fail, but is a sacrilege. The soul of religions is one, but is encased in a multitude of forms. The latter will persist to the end of time. . . .Truth is the exclusive property of no single scripture (Bible). . . .I cannot ascribe exclusive divinity to Jesus. He is as divine as Krishna or Rama or Mohammed or Zoroaster."²² Gandhi and others would agree that there are a lot of truths out there. Their attitude is to pick the one Truth, or pick a few truths which work for you and for your life and let them guide and encourage your life. The problem with that understanding is that certain truths proclaim themselves to be absolute and exclusive of all other truths. And isn't that oftentimes the case, that a certain truth is the only one? For example, if a crime is committed by one person against

another person and there are no witnesses to see the crime being committed, it is the legal system's task to find the one truth of what exactly happened. Though different versions or perspectives of what happened might be presented, there is only one truth about what really happened. In much the same way, when a religion's belief is in complete disagreement with another religion's statement of what is true, it would seem impossible for a person to just accept that something they believe to be false is true for someone else. It's either true for life, or it's false. **So, in answer to the above question, "Does it matter?" Yes, I believe it does matter what religion or faith you are because we do not all believe in the same God, and we are not all going to the same place after we die.** I write that as a Christian who regards the Bible as containing the absolute and exclusive truth of who God is and who humans are in relation to God. **However, people of different religious belief systems can respect each other, be friends with each other, visit together, and learn from each other.**

Your decision of whether or not to commit your life to God as the one true God will have consequences for your life now, and after you die. Below I touch on a few major teachings

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of the Christian faith in comparison to some of the major beliefs of other religions. These are concepts you should consider as think about your place in the world and with God.

The Christian faith has a belief in one supreme God who made the universe and who sustains the universe which He made. As described in an earlier answer, there are three different beings of the one supreme God --- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Some other world religions accept many gods as divine and powerful, including natural objects like trees, rocks, the sun, rivers, and certain animals. Some religions accept a great king or emperor of the past as a god. In response to the belief that there are many gods, the Bible says that a person who professes to have a personal relationship with God (that is, a Christian) must not worship other gods. While things like trees or the sun or animals have their purposes and are to be respected as created things, they are just that --- created things made by the Creator. While there have been great people throughout the history of time, they are just that --- humans made by the Creator. And, as each of us people know, unlike God, people are far from perfect. Only God, the Creator, is completely worthy of our worship. The Christian

faith has record of historical events that go back to the beginning of time, and of God relating to humanity since the beginning of time. This record is the Bible. Though the Bible covers thousands of years, there is an amazing consistency and unity throughout the Bible. For example, prophecies written in the Bible consistently showed fulfillment hundreds and thousands of years after they were proclaimed. This is especially the case concerning many prophecies made in the Old Testament era about the coming Messiah, the Anointed One --- God the Son, Jesus Christ. In the Christian faith, historical events --- even those recorded in sources besides the Bible --- back up the truth of the Bible. In many other religions, gods are purely mythological and vague and lacking of any records of historical accounts. Most religions place the responsibility of getting right with God, of being in a personal relationship with God, largely on the shoulders of the person. These religions teach that if a person will just recite a certain creed enough, or obey certain laws enough, or live good enough, or “escape from the bondage of desire” through meditation and other exercises, they will be able to some day go to heaven eternally or they will be able to “attain to

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a state of passionless peace,”²³ as vague as that might seem. In contrast, the Bible explains that we cannot become right with God on our own because of the sinful nature within us. The Christian faith understands from the Bible that God and His grace allow people to become right with God and come into a relationship with God and ultimately go to heaven when a person physically dies. The Bible teaches that each person must have faith that God’s grace and forgiveness are for her. It is true that out of thankfulness to God, a person’s life should become honorable and fruitful, but a person’s relationship with God only begins with God extending His grace through Jesus Christ to people who are lost in their sinful nature.

Again, yes, I do believe that it does matter what religion you are and in whom you have your faith because the Bible clearly says that it does. Assuming that possibly you don’t have a personal Christian faith, I must ask, does your faith and your belief system offer to you any real, solid comfort and assurance? Or, does it all depend on you and your “goodness” or lack of “goodness” as a person? Are your spiritual beliefs vague, **uncertain**, and impersonal? Does your lack of faith in God cause you to **wonder** what the

purpose of life even is? Does your lack of faith in God cause you to **wonder** what will happen to you when you die?

If you do right now, you do not have to wonder, or feel uncertain and confused.

9. I hear people talk about heaven and about hell. Where are these places? Where do the concepts of heaven and hell come from?

The concepts of heaven and hell are found in many places in the Bible. The Bible makes it clear that when a person physically dies, their body no longer has life in it, but their soul/spirit lives on eternally. That means a person's soul/spirit lives on after they physically die. (A person's "soul" is the place of their personality, including their intellect, emotions, and will. A person's "spirit" makes them able to know and relate to God.) That's a beautiful thought if a person has received Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord, or in other words, if that person has a personal relationship with God. If so, that person's soul/spirit will go to heaven. Though we do not know exactly where heaven is, or what exactly it will be like, the Bible describes it as a wonderful

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place where a person is continually in the very presence of God.

Revelation 21 of the Bible (NIV) describes that in heaven "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

In Luke 23:43 of the Bible (NIV), as Jesus was dying on the cross, there was a thief next to Him being executed at the same time. This thief, in his last moments of life, received Jesus as his Savior, and Jesus assured him,

"I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise."

The fact that a person's soul and spirit live on after they physically die is not a comforting thought if a person has not received Jesus as their personal Savior and Lord. If they have not, their soul/spirit will be in hell after their bodies physically die. Though we do not know exactly where hell is or what exactly it is like, the Bible describes it as a terrible place.

Matthew 8:12 of the Bible (NIV) describes hell as a place of "darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Other passages of the Bible describe hell as a place with intense heat and fire. Perhaps worst of all is that hell is a complete separation from God.

I think people oftentimes are confused about how a person enters heaven or hell. Many think that if a person has been a “good” person (nice, caring, compassionate), then they naturally go to heaven when they die. Or, many think that if a person has done many bad things in their life, they naturally go to hell when they die. Rather, the Bible says we will go to heaven after we die because of God’s grace if we personally accept God’s grace and forgiveness. A person who says that they have personally received Jesus as their Savior and Lord should become a good person --- nice, caring, and compassionate --- as a response of thanks to God for His grace. If they didn’t become a better person than before they received Jesus, I would question the sincerity of their personal faith, commitment, and relationship with God. But it’s important to know that a person does not go to heaven just because they are a good person. As we think about it, that thought would remove the reason why Jesus Christ came to die on the cross that was to save us from our sins, and from eternal death. Personally, I know I could never be a good-enough person on my own. Could you? None of us could. Again, the Bible is clear about the fact that we are saved from our sins by the grace of God.

Ephesians 2:9 of the Bible (NIV) reads, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith --- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God --- not by works, so that no one can boast."

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John 3:16 of the Bible (NIV) reads, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son [Jesus Christ], that whoever believes in him shall not perish [go to Hell after they physically die] but have eternal life [in Heaven]."

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Do you have any faith questions or comments? We're interested, we care, and we'll respond quickly.

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Fred Wilgenburg is a pastor with a passion to share a message of peace and hope to those who feel life is hopeless. (Perhaps each of us has felt that way at times.) He has been involved in outreach ministry for years to people who struggle with difficult life issues. He and his wife, Amy, and their three daughters live in the Midwest of the United States.