

HOW YOU CAN KNOW GOD BETTER

provided by Canyon Hills Community Church

What Is Missing in Our Lives?

Purpose, meaning, a reason for living—these are all things we desire and search for in life. Despite steps each one of us takes to find purpose and meaning in life, we still feel empty, and unfulfilled. That is because there is a spiritual emptiness in each of our lives. We each have a hole in our heart, a spiritual vacuum deep within our soul—a “God-shaped blank.” Possessions won’t fill this hole, nor will success. Relationships alone cannot satisfy this emptiness, and morality, in and of itself, falls miserably short of occupying this space. In fact, even religion cannot fill the void in our heart.

There is only one way to effectively fill that void. This way will not only help us to have a life that is full and rich on this earth, but—more important—will give us the absolute hope of spending eternity in the presence of God. Before we can truly appreciate this good news though, we need to understand the bad news, which is a serious problem we all have.

The Problem: Sin

The Bible clearly identifies our serious problem as sin. Sin is not just an act but the actual nature of our being. In other words, we are not sinners because we sin. Rather, we sin because we are sinners! We are born with a nature to do wrong. King David, the Old Testament Israelite ruler, wrote, *“For I was born a sinner—yes, from the moment my mother conceived me.”* (Psalm 51:5). Because we are born sinners, sinning comes to all of us naturally. That is why it is futile to think that the answer to all of life’s problems comes from “within.” According to the Bible, the *problem* is within! Scripture tells us, *“The human heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?”* (Jeremiah 17:9).

Although it is not a ‘politically correct’ statement, the Bible makes it clear, we are not basically good—we are basically sinful. This sinfulness spills out into everything we do. Every problem we experience in our society today can be traced back to our refusal to live God’s way. Clear back to the Garden of Eden, Adam made his choice, and he suffered the consequences of it, setting the pattern that all humanity would follow. The Bible explains, *“When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam’s sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned... Yes, Adam’s one sin brought condemnation upon everyone.”* (Romans 5:12,18).

“That’s not fair!” you may protest. Why should we suffer because of what someone else has done? Yet, given the opportunity, each one of us would have done the same thing as Adam. In fact, not a single day passes that we do not face the same test that was set before Adam. God has given us the freedom to choose between two separate paths: the path that leads to life and the path that leads to death. The Bible says, *“Today, I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. I call on heaven and earth to witness the choice you make. Oh, that you would choose life, that you and your descendants might live!”* (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Without A Leg to Stand On

Someone may say, “But I live a good life. I try to be kind and considerate to others. I live by the Ten Commandments.” But the truth of the matter is that the Ten Commandments, or the law, as they are called in the Bible, were not given to make us good but to show us our sinful heart. The Bible tells us, *“No one can ever be made right in God’s sight by doing what his law commands. For the more we know God’s law, the clearer it becomes that we aren’t obeying it.”* (Romans 3:20). The purpose of the law is to make us realize how sinful we are. You might say that God’s law was given to “shut our mouths” and show us that we desperately need his help and forgiveness for our terminal condition as sinners. Look at the passages on the next page to get a better understanding of the nature and seriousness of sin.

We Have All Missed the Mark Or ‘Fallen Short’:

*For all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious standard. **Romans 3:23** [NLT]*

Romans 3:23 says we have *all* sinned. For those that would claim to be the sole exception to this eternal truth, verse 10 of this chapter plainly says, “*No one is good—not even one.*” (Romans 3:10). Another word for *good* is *righteous*. The word *righteous* means, “One who is as he or she ought to be.” When the Bible says that no one is righteous, or good, it is not so much referring to behavior but to inner character.

What exactly is “God’s glorious standard” that Romans 3:23 says we have failed to meet? God’s standard is absolute perfection. One definition of *sin*, derived from the Greek word *hamartia*, is to “miss the mark.” As far as the mark of perfection goes, we miss it by a mile. Although our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to live up to God’s standard, we cannot blame sin on our nature alone. Sin is also a deliberate act.

Sin Is a Deliberate Act

*As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins,² in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient.³ All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath. **Ephesians 2:1-3** [NIV]*

Another word for *sins* is *transgressions* or *trespasses*. This word speaks of a lapse or deviation from truth. In contrast to simply “missing the mark,” this is a deliberate action. Because sin is a deliberate action, we cannot blame our sin on our society or our environment or our mental or physical state. Everyone has chosen to do what was wrong. The Bible says, If we protest this point we are only try to fool ourselves or pretend not to know what we truly know.

If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth.

1 John 1:8 [NLT]

The Ultimate Penalty for Sin Is Death (see Romans 6:23)

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

Romans 6:23 [NLT]

Wages are something that you are paid for work rendered. In other words, you earn your wages. Because we have all repeatedly sinned, we have earned the penalty of death, which is eternal separation from God’s presence. God is a holy, sinless God and heaven is a sinless place. If God would merely ignore our sinful condition and allow us to live in heaven without dealing with our sin, heaven would no longer be heaven. It would possess the same sins and problems that we are enduring down here.

Amid all this talk about sin and death, there is some good news. God has given us a way to escape the penalty of our sin. He has made it possible for us to have a relationship with him and enjoy the hope of eternal life without punishment.

The Solution: Jesus Christ

God understood our problem and knew that we could do nothing about it. Because God loves us, he sent his own Son, Jesus Christ, to earth to bridge the chasm of sin that separates us from him.

Why Jesus Can Bridge the Gap

There has never been anyone like Jesus. For starters, Jesus was not conceived in the womb of his mother through natural means. Rather, he was supernaturally conceived in the womb of a young woman named Mary. Because of his supernatural conception, Jesus, who is wholly God also became wholly human. This miracle is called the miracle of incarnation.

Though Jesus is God, he chose to lay aside the privileges of his deity to live on earth as a man. The Bible, describing the sacrifice Christ made in becoming a man, says that Jesus *“Made himself nothing; he took the humble position of a slave and appeared in human form. And in human form he obediently humbled himself even further by dying a criminal’s death on a cross.”* (Philippians 2:7-8). It is important to note that Jesus did not cease to be God when he came to earth. He simply laid aside his divine privileges and walked the earth as a man. In doing so, he was personally able to experience the gamut of human emotions, ranging from happiness to deep sorrow. He felt what it was like to be tired, cold, and hungry - even betrayed.

Moreover, he came to this earth with a clear objective in mind: to bridge that gap between us and God. When the Israelites of the Old Testament sinned, they would have the high priest go into the Temple and offer an animal sacrifice to God to atone for their sins. In a symbolic sense, this was a way of putting one’s sins on the animal, which stood in the place of the guilty person. The Bible teaches, *“Without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sins.”* (Hebrews 9:22).

The sacrificial rituals carried out by the Israelites in the Old Testament foreshadowed what Jesus would do when he came to this earth. He took the sin of the world upon himself when he hung on the cross many years ago. Numerous Old Testament prophecies pointed not only to his birth and life but also to his death, including the way in which he would die.

Jesus knew from the beginning that he had come expressly to die for the sins of humanity. He also knew that this sacrifice would be made on a Roman cross. He began his final journey to the cross of Calvary at a place called Caesarea Philippi, and he often spoke of his impending death with his disciples. Scripture records, *“From then on Jesus began to tell his disciples plainly that he had to go to Jerusalem, and he told them what would happen to him there. He would be killed, and he would be raised on the third day.”* (Matthew 16:21).

He was eventually arrested on false charges after Judas Iscariot, one of his own disciples, betrayed him. But it was no accident. If humanity was going to be put in touch with God and have the barrier that separated them removed, something drastic had to be done. In essence, with one hand Jesus took hold of a Holy God and with the other hand he took hold of the sinful human race and brought them together. As crude nails were pounded into his hands, he bridged the gap for us! We must not forget, however, that three days after his crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead! If it is true “you can’t keep a good man down,” then it is even truer that you can’t keep the “God-man” down.

We Were The Reason That Put Jesus On The Cross

The necessity of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross shows just how radical our situation was as sinful people. It’s been said that you can tell the depth of a well by how much rope is lowered. When we look at “how much rope was lowered” from heaven, we realize how grave our situation really was.

For that reason, don’t blame the people of that day for putting Jesus on the cross. We are just as guilty as they are. In reality, it was not the Roman soldiers who put him on the cross, nor was it the Jewish leaders: It was our sins that made it necessary for Jesus to volunteer for this torturous and humiliating death.

Read the verses and notes below to see exactly what Jesus did for us.

The Greatest Demonstration of Love (see Romans 5:6-8)

Jesus did not die for us while we were his friends, but while we were opposing him by our sinfulness. Yet, in spite of all of this, God demonstrated his love for us by dying on the cross. In this verse, the Apostle Paul explains that Jesus did not simply die for humanity as a whole, but he died for us as individuals. Elsewhere, Paul writes, "*Christ loved me and gave himself for me.*" (Galatians 2:20).

Whenever you are tempted to doubt God's love for you, take a long look at the cross on which Jesus died. Then realize that, for all practical purposes, it was not nails that held him to the cross, but love.

Forsaken That We Might Be Forgiven (see Luke 23:32-49)

Many of us have heard this story at some point in our lives. Yet the significance behind this heart-wrenching scene is often missed or misunderstood. This was not simply some "good teacher" being crucified for his beliefs. It was God in human form who hung on that cross, bridging the gap between sinful people and a holy God.

Matthew's Gospel tells us that when Jesus hung on that cross, he cried out, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*" (Matthew 27:46). Many Bible scholars believe that those words marked the precise moment at which God placed the sins of the world upon his Son. The Bible, speaking of God, says, "*You are of purer eyes than to behold evil, and cannot look on wickedness.*" (Habakkuk 1:13, NKJV). For that reason, the Holy Father had to "*turn his face*" and pour out his wrath upon his own Son. On the cross, Jesus received the wages that were due us. He was not heard that we might be heard. The ear of God was closed to Jesus for a time that it might never be closed to us.

Christ, the Sole Mediator (see 1 Timothy 2:5-6)

Why is there only one mediator who is qualified to bridge the gap between God and people? Haven't there been other religious leaders who have claimed to have *the* way to God? Haven't some of them also died as a result of their message?

While the answers to these questions may be yes, the truth is that not one of these other leaders was fully God and fully human. That is why Jesus is uniquely qualified to deal with sin. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me.*" (John 14:6). Acts 4:12 tells us, "*There is salvation in no one else! There is no other name in all of heaven for people to call on to save them.*" And, most important, Jesus Christ rose from the dead! His resurrection validated his claims and separated him from the rest of the good, moral teachers of history.

Though it is true that you must believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins in order to receive eternal life and be a true Christian, there is still something else you must do.

The Response: Accept God's Offer

To know Jesus Christ personally and have your sins forgiven, you must believe that you are a sinner separated from God and that your only hope is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came and died for your sins. To stop here, however, would be to stop short of salvation. There are two things you must now do to enter into a relationship with the God.

Turn From Your Sins

As Jesus began his public ministry, his first message was *"Turn from your sins."* (Mark 1:15). In essence, Jesus was telling the people to repent—to acknowledge their sins, change their minds, and change the direction of their lives.

Look at it this way. In the past, we have been blinded by our sins, causing us to run from God. As we repent, we do a "U-turn" and start moving toward him. It is not enough just to be sorry for our sins. We must also change our lifestyle, for the Bible teaches us that *"God can use sorrow in our lives to help us turn away from sin."* (2 Corinthians 7:10). In other words, if you are really sorry for something, it will result in a change in your actions.

The apostle Paul summed up this change when he quoted Jesus, who had said that people must *"Turn from the darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me."* (Acts 26:18).

You see, there are some things only God can do and some things only you can do. Only God can remove your sins and give you the gift of eternal life, but only you can turn from your sins and receive Jesus as your Savior. That brings up the second thing you must do to respond to God's offer.

Believe In Jesus Christ And Receive Him Into Your Life

Having seen the enormity of your sin and having decided to turn away from it, you then must believe in and receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. Becoming a Christian, however, is far more than following a creed or trying to live by certain standards. Jesus said that you must be *"born again"* or more literally, *"born from above"* (John 3:3). This spiritual rebirth happens when we personally believe in Jesus Christ, receive him by inviting him into our lives, and turn from our sins. In other words, we ask Jesus to come and take residence in our lives, making the changes he deems necessary. A person must take this all-important step in order to become a child of God.

Notice that this offer is yours for the asking, and it is free. You don't have to work for it, trying to cleanup your life before you make this life-changing decision. The Bible says, *"The free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord."* (Romans 6:23).

Being a Christian also means having a relationship with the living God. In Revelation 3:20, Jesus said, *"Look! Here I stand at the door and knock. If you hear me calling and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal as friends."* To better understand the meaning of this verse, it is important to understand the culture at the time it was written. Eating together in Bible times was a long, drawn-out affair. People would not sit on chairs behind tables in a formal setting as we do, but they would sit on the floor reclining on pillows around a low table. The relaxed atmosphere made meals a time when you would not only satisfy your appetite but also receive a gratifying serving of enjoyable table conversation. You would share your heart and life with those who sat beside you.

Consequently, when Jesus says that he will "share a meal" with us, it implies intimacy, closeness, and friendship. He offers this to us, but we must first "hear him calling" us. To hear God calling us, we must know how he speaks. One way in which God speaks to us is described in the Bible as a "still, small voice." This could be described in another way as that tug you may have felt on

your heart from the Holy Spirit showing you your need for Jesus. He may even be speaking to you right now! It is at that point that you must “open the door.” Only you can do that. Jesus will not force his way in.

Receiving Jesus Christ Into Your Heart

If you are ready to turn from your sins and believe in Jesus Christ so that you can receive the forgiveness of sin and the hope of eternal life, then take a moment to bow your head and pray a prayer like this one:

God, I'm sorry for my sin. I turn from it right now. I thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die on the cross for my sin. Jesus, I ask you to come into my heart and life right now. Be my Lord, Savior, and friend. Help me to follow you all the days of my life as your disciple. Thank you for forgiving and receiving me right now. Thank you that my sin is forgiven and that I am going to heaven. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Rededicating Your Life to Jesus Christ

Perhaps you are already a Christian but you have strayed from Jesus Christ. You have been a prodigal son or daughter. God will forgive you right now if you will return to him. He tells us in Scripture, “*My wayward children, come back to me and I will heal your wayward hearts.*” (Jeremiah 3:22). If you would like to return to God and rededicate your life to him right now, you may want to pray something like this:

God, I am sorry for my sin. I am sorry that I have strayed from you. I ask you to forgive me now as I repent of my sin. I don't want to live like a prodigal any longer. Renew and revive me as I once again follow you as my God. Thank you for your forgiveness. In Jesus' name I pray, amen.

Whether you prayed to make a first time commitment or a recommitment, you have made the right decision. God has forgiven and received you if you really meant it. Know that your relationship with Jesus Christ will bring radical and dramatic changes in your life. Describing this, the Bible says, “*Those who become Christians become new persons!*” *They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). Now that is good news! But more important, God has changed your eternal destiny. Instead of anticipating judgment for your sins, you will spend peaceful eternity in God's presence in heaven.

Read the next section to see what else God has done for you now that you have taken this step.

What God Has Done for You

What actually happens when Jesus Christ comes into your life? First, he saves you from your sins and the punishment you deserve as a result of them— a Christ-less eternity. This is called salvation, or regeneration, and has to do with what takes place in your heart: God gives you new life. Second, he justifies you. Justification has to do with your standing before God and includes the complete removal and forgiveness of your sins. Think about it! When you receive Jesus Christ into your life, you are completely forgiven. God's Word tells us, “*Brothers, listen! In this man Jesus there is forgiveness for your sins! Everyone who believes in him is freed from all guilt and declared right with God Justified - something the Jewish law could never do*” (Acts 13:38-39). Speaking of our sins, God says, “*I will never again remember your sins and lawless deeds.*” (Hebrews 10:17). What a wonderful promise!

Justification, however, is more than just the forgiveness and removal of the guilt and condemnation that accompany sin. While God has removed your sins and forgiven you of them, he has also placed the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ “into your account,” so to speak. You don’t have to earn it or try to achieve it. It is yours as a gracious gift from the God who loves you. To understand justification more fully, read the following Scripture passages and notes below.

God Promises Us His Gracious Forgiveness

But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. 1 John 1:9 [NLT]

The word *confess* means “to say the same thing as another” or “to agree with.” To confess means that we are agreeing with God about our sin. We are seeing it as he does. We know that God hates sin. Therefore, to truly confess our sin means that we essentially feel the same way God feels about what we have done. After committing that sin, we will be determined to put it out of our lives and never do it again. That is true confession in the biblical sense. The reason many believers are not experiencing the forgiveness and joy they desire is because they have not yet truly confessed! Once we have met God’s conditions, however, we will know his gracious forgiveness. We may not “feel” forgiven, but we are. We have his word on it.

God Has Balanced Our Moral and Spiritual Budget (see Romans 5:1-2)

When God justifies us, he does so by placing all of the righteousness of Christ to our credit. This balances the moral and spiritual budget for us. We now have sufficient “capital of character” to get on with the business of living.

Up to this point, salvation has been God’s responsibility. From this point on, it continues to be his responsibility except that we are responsible for the wise investment of our “capital of character”—that is, we are responsible for living as God desires us to. It is as if your checking account was empty, but then someone made a \$100,000 deposit. What you do with that money is up to you.

God Calls Us His Children (see Luke 15:11-32)

This incredible story illustrates what happens when a person turns from sin and returns to God. First, notice that the father in the story did not give this prodigal son what he deserved—judgment and banishment. In the same way, we do not receive from God what we deserve—judgment and punishment for sin. Second, the young man was given what he did not deserve—the rights and privileges of full sonship. Likewise, although we are not worthy to be called children of God, he calls us sons and daughters. In summary, he doesn’t give us what we deserve (judgement). He gives us what we don’t deserve (forgiveness and justification).

Speaking of our sons and daughters, read on to see how God has adopted you into his family.

Adopted and Assured

We have looked at what happens when we are regenerated (when Christ comes into our lives) and when we are justified (when God forgives our sin and puts his righteousness in its place). Now let's look at another incredible thing God has done for us. He adopted us into his family as his children!

Adoption means "to be given the rights of a son or daughter." In essence, you have been given the full rights of sonship in the family of God as though you were born that way. The story of the Prodigal Son illustrates this (Luke 15:11-32). The wayward son thought that after leaving home, he would no longer be considered a son but would instead be treated as a hired servant. Much to his surprise, when he made the long journey home, his father welcomed him and smothered him with kisses. He then gave orders to bring out the best robe and to put a ring on his finger, signifying full rights as a son. That is exactly what God has done for you! Take some time to examine three scripture passages that assure you of your adoption into God's family.

God Disciplines His Children (see Hebrews 12:5-9)

Recognizing you are now a child of God is not some distant hope but a present reality. One of the ways God will remind you of this is by correcting you and bringing you back into line like a loving father when you stray away from him. Before we were believers, we may have felt no sense of guilt for certain things we did or did not do. But now that we are Christians, God's Holy Spirit shows us the way to live, which includes correcting us. He does this not because he hates us, but because he loves us as his own dear children. Understanding this truth should help us in the way we behave.

You Have an Approachable Father (see Galatians 4:6)

The Hebrew word translated "dear Father" is *abba*, which is a word of affection that a young child would use endearingly toward his or her father. A western equivalent of that phrase would be "papa" or "daddy." God does not want to be viewed as some distant, disinterested father, but as a loving, approachable father to whom you can turn at any time because you are his child.

His Promises Are Not Based upon Your Feelings (see 1 John 5:11-13)

There will be times as a Christian when you may not "feel" God's presence. You may even be tempted to doubt that he has come into your life. But 1 John 5:13 does not say, "I write this to you who believe in the son of God so that you may *feel* you have eternal life." This is because feelings come and go. They fluctuate. Nor does the Bible say, "I write this so that you may *hope*—if God is in a really good mood—that you have eternal life." It says, "*so that you may know. . .*" Eternal life is yours! Stand on God's promise to you. You are forgiven, justified, adopted into his family, and assured of salvation. Now that is reason to rejoice!

Foundational Truths Of Christianity:

Who Is God?

Thousands of years ago, Pharaoh, the Egyptian ruler, proposed a question people are still asking today: “Who is the Lord that I should listen to Him?” That’s a good question, but it is not an easy subject to tackle. It is difficult for our limited minds to grasp the limitless, eternal God. It has been said, “If God were small enough for your minds, he wouldn’t be big enough for your needs.” For that reason, don’t be exasperated if you can’t fully understand who God is or why he does certain things. One day, Scripture promises, everything about God and his character will be made perfectly clear to us (1 Corinthians 13:12). But until then, we will find everything we need to know about him in his Word. Look up the following notes and passages to find out who God is.

God Is All-Knowing, Ever-Present, and All-Powerful The creator of the universe knows every intimate detail of his creation (see Matthew 10:29-31).

God Is Holy God’s incompatible holiness merits our worship (see Revelation 15:2-4).

God Is Loving and Just God’s justice is tempered by his love (see 2 Peter 3:3-9).

God Is Personal This characteristic of God sets him apart from the so-called “gods” or other religions (see Acts 17:22-31).

God Is in Control It is important to remember that God is still in control, even if things around us seem to be in chaos (see Romans 11:33-36).

The God of the Bible Is the One True God While some insist on the existence of many gods, only the God of the Bible is the true, living God worthy of our devotion (see 1 Corinthians 8:4-6).

Who is Jesus?

Throughout history many people have attempted to answer this question. Some have done so accurately, but many have not. Our best source for answering this question is—once again—God’s own Word. The Bible presents us with some inescapable truths about Jesus that prompt a response. Anyone who seriously studies Scripture to learn more about Jesus must answer two probing questions: (1) “What do you think of Jesus Christ?” and (2) “Who is he?” The writer C.S. Lewis made this observation: “You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill Him as a deceiver; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (*Mere Christianity*, rev. ed. [New York: Macmillan, 1952], 41).

Jesus was not just a good man. He was—and is—the God-man. Let’s examine what the Bible has to say about Jesus.

Jesus Is Human Jesus became our supreme example as God in human form (see Philippians 2:5-11).

Jesus Is Divine Even though Jesus became human, he still remained God (see Colossians 1:15-20).

Jesus Had a Specific Mission to Accomplish Jesus came to save humankind from sin (see Luke 4:16-21).

Jesus Made the Ultimate Sacrifice Jesus endured tremendous pain so that we could enjoy eternity with him (see 1 Peter 2:24).

Jesus Has Great Power to Transform People Jesus can change the most unlikely person into one of the most powerful witnesses on his behalf (see Acts 4:1-13).

Who Is the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is also part of the Trinity, which includes God the Father, God the Son (Jesus Christ), and God the Spirit (or the Holy Spirit). Many struggle with the idea of God being three persons, yet one. Quite honestly, we will never fully grasp the concept this side of heaven.

Some, however, have wrongly thought of the Holy Spirit as more of an “it” than a “him.” That is probably due in part to biblical descriptions of him as being like the wind or coming upon Jesus in the form of a dove, among other comparisons. Yet these descriptions must be balanced with the descriptions of the other members of the Trinity. For instance, Jesus referred to himself as “the bread of life,” and the “good shepherd.” In the same way, God the Father is referred to as “a refuge” and “a consuming fire.” Does this mean that Jesus is a loaf of bread or a sheep farmer, or that the Father is a pile of rocks or a blast furnace? Of course not! These are simply metaphors used in Scripture to help communicate God’s character. Likewise, the unique descriptions attributed to the Holy Spirit is merely some “force” or “power.” Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit: “*When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all truth. . . He will tell you about the future*” (John 16:13). Note the use of the pronoun *he*. The Holy Spirit has a distinct personality, and he also has specific work that he wants to do in our lives as followers of Jesus Christ. Explore what the Bible says about him.

Who the Holy Spirit Helps The Holy Spirit strengthens and empowers followers of Christ and draws people to become Christians. (see Acts 2:1-40).

How the Holy Spirit works with the Father and the Son The Holy Spirit works alongside God the Father and Jesus, God’s Son, to strengthen us and provide guidance. (see 1 Peter).

Why God Gives Us the Holy Spirit The Holy Spirit’s presence in our lives is God’s mark of ownership (see Ephesians 1:13-14).

How the Holy Spirit Works in Our Lives The Holy Spirit draws us to Christ and empowers us as we allow him to work in our life (see John 14:15-17).

Why Christians Need the Holy Spirit Living the Christian life is impossible without the Holy Spirit’s help (see Galatians 5:16-26).

Who Is the Devil?

What is the Devil like? Does he really look like the red-suited, pitchfork holding cartoon caricature seated on a throne in hell? Or does he roam through the earth disguised as an angel of light? Unfortunately, far too many people do not have an accurate view of who the Devil is. Many underestimate him and his prowess, even going as far as to doubt his very existence. Someone once asked the great evangelist Charles Finney, “Mr. Finney, do you believe in a literal Devil?” Finney replied, “You try opposing him for a while, and you see if he’s literal or not.”

The Bible clearly shows us just how active and conniving the Devil really is. At the same time, Scripture also lets us know about the Devil’s limitations and ultimate demise. The more we understand the tactics of this intelligent spirit being, the better equipped we will be to ward off his attacks. Below are some key passages of Scripture that answer some of the most commonly asked questions about the Devil—who is also referred to as Satan.

Where Did Satan Come From? Satan’s pride led to his fall from heaven (see Revelation 12:7-9).

What Are Satan’s Abilities? Satan has the power to influence people, especially those that don’t have a relationship with Jesus Christ (see 2 Corinthians 4:3-4).

What Are Satan’s Limitations? While we should not underestimate Satan’s power, we should realize that it is limited (see 2 Timothy 4:18).

How Does Satan Work in This World? Satan masterfully uses manipulation and distortion to deceive people (see 2 Corinthians 11:13-15).

How Was Satan Defeated at the Cross of Calvary? Satan lost his undisputed stranglehold on humanity when Jesus went to the cross (see Colossians 2:13-15).

Who Can Thwart Satan's Agenda? Those who are committed Christians will be able to be victorious against the Devil's attacks and temptations. (see Revelations 12:10-12).

What Are Angels?

According to recent surveys, most people believe in the existence of angels. A glut of books on the subject fill bookstore shelves. Still, our only reliable source on angels and their activity is the Bible. Just who are these mysterious creatures? What do they look like? Do they wear long flowing robes and have large birdlike wings? And what is their purpose?

You might call angels "God's secret agents." They basically work undercover. Most of the time these secret agents remain invisible—except on those special occasions when God allows people to see them. No doubt God realized that if we were allowed to see them all of the time, they would become an object of our worship, which is to be reserved for God alone. Let's take some time to see what the Bible has to say about angels and their role in this world.

Why Did God Create Angels? God created angels as unique spiritual beings who worship Christ and care for his followers (see Hebrews 1:4-14).

What Do Angels Do in the Life of a Christian? God has ordered the angels to protect his followers and keep them from harm (see Acts 27:23-24).

Why Shouldn't We Worship Angels? Those who worship angels are disobeying God (see Colossians 2:18-19).

What Role Will Angels Play in the End Times? Angels will play a strategic role in spreading the gospel or the good news of Jesus Christ. (see Revelation 14:6-7).

What Are Demons?

Just as there are angels who look out for your welfare, there are angels who are bent upon causing confusion and robbing people of joy. The Bible teaches that when Satan fell from heaven, he took one-third of the angels with him (Revelation 12:4). Although we do not know their exact number, Scripture tells us there are multitudes (Luke 2:13) and legions (Matthew 26:53) of angels. So Satan has a sizable, highly organized force under his control. These fallen angels, also known as demons, help Satan accomplish his purpose, which, in the words of Christ, is to steal, kill, and destroy. While the Bible does not give us specific details as to how demons work, we can be confident that everything we need to know about them is found in Scripture. We do not need to look elsewhere for insights into the spiritual world. See what God's word has to say about these evil agents.

What Do Demons Believe? Strange as it may seem, demons acknowledge that there is only one God (see James 2:19).

What makes Demons Powerless? The name of Jesus used by the followers of Jesus makes the demons tremble (see Luke 10:1-20).

What Is Heaven?

The Bible gives us wonderful, vivid descriptions of heaven. From Scripture we know that sin has no presence in heaven and that pain, fear, and sorrow are not present there. But even with all of this detail, we still fall short of understanding “the big picture.” That is because it is difficult for us to grasp the absolute perfection and glory of heaven.

All splendor aside, though, what truly makes heaven spectacular is that we will be forever in God’s presence. As the psalmist so poignantly expressed, *“You will show me the way of life, granting me the joy of your presence and the pleasures of living with you forever”* (Psalm 16:11).

While we may not be able to have all of our questions about heaven answered here on earth, the Bible does answer some of our most probing questions.

Who Will Enter Heaven? Heaven is a place for those who have received Jesus Christ as Lord (see John 14:1-6).

When Does a Christian Enter Heaven? When we take our last breath on earth, we will take our first breath in heaven (see 2 Corinthians 5:6-9).

Will We Recognize People in Heaven? While our heavenly bodies may resemble our earthly bodies, we will in some ways be like the angels (see Matthew 22:23-33).

What Will Life in Heaven Be Like? Our lives in heaven will no longer be consumed by the cares of this life, but we will be filled with joy being in the presence of our heavenly Father (see Revelation 7:13-17).

What Is Hell?

According to the Bible, you have two options to choose from when it comes to deciding where you will spend your life after death. One option is heaven. The other is hell. Interestingly enough, while there seems to be an increased belief in a place called hell, most people don’t believe that they are headed there. Instead, they believe that hell is reserved for only the most hardened of criminals and other “evil” elements of our society. But God’s Word judges people by a different set of criteria. You are not “sent to hell” for being a bad person any more that you are “sent to heaven” for being a good person. Actually, according to the Bible, God doesn’t “send” anyone to hell away from God’s presence. Rather, he doesn’t “force” anyone to spend eternity in heaven with Him.

While God clearly says that those who reject the salvation offered through his Son, Jesus Christ, will spend eternity in this place away from God’s presence, he repeatedly gives each person ample opportunity to choose life—abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven (2 Peter 3:9). If you haven’t made that choice yet, or if you have decided and want a better understanding of what your nonbelieving friends will have to face, consider these fact about hell from the pages of Scripture.

Who Will Go to Hell? Those whose names do not appear in the Book of Life. Those who have not responded to God’s offer to accept His son as their need for a Savior. (see Revelation 20:11-15).

What Is the Worst Punishment of Hell? Hell’s worst punishment is everlasting separation from God’s presence (see 2 Thessalonians 1:7-10).

Love

On one occasion Jesus was asked what commandment was the most important. He replied, *“The most important commandment is this: ‘Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself’”* (Mark 12:29-31).

These are the two most important commandments because if you truly love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, you will want to do what pleases him. In the same way, if you really love others as much as you love yourself, you will be concerned for their welfare and will treat them accordingly. Before you can effectively love God, however, you must first realize how much he loves you.

Scripture explains that God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners who had no relationship with him (Romans 5:8). The more we realize this wonderful truth, the more our love for God will grow. These Scripture passages explore some different facets of the love we should have for God and for others.

God Should Be the Greatest Love of Our Life Before we can fully love one another, however, we must fully love God and understand his love for us (see Matthew 22:37-38)

Christ’s Love Sets the Standard Our love for others should model Christ’s love for us (see Ephesians 5:1-2).

Love Surpasses All Spiritual Gifts A Christian who understands what love truly means and shows love in his or her life is the greatest testimony to others (see 1 Corinthians 13:1-13).

Our Love for God Prepares Us for Service The depth of our love for God directly affects our ability to minister to others (see John 21:15-17).

Our Love for Others Mirrors the Condition of Our Heart The love we have for those around us is an indication of the strength of our Christian walk (see 1 John 2:9-11).

Our Love Should Grow The closer we grow to God, the more our love for others should increase (see 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13).

Forgiveness

One of the great principles of the Christian life is forgiveness. Jesus modeled this principle for us when he hung on the cross and prayed for the very people who had put him there (see Luke 23:34). His words were so powerful and unexpected that they brought about the conversion of one of the thieves hanging on a cross next to him.

Because Jesus completely forgave us, he wants us to follow his example by forgiving others. As Scripture says: *“Be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you. Follow God’s example in everything you do, because you are his dear children”* (Ephesians 4:32-5:1). The Bible gives us several important characteristics of the forgiveness we should have for others.

Forgiveness First Comes from God Our forgiveness of others should flow from God’s forgiveness of us (see Mark 11:25).

Forgiveness Knows No Limits For a Christian, no wrong is too great or too small to forgive (see Matthew 18:21-35).

Forgiveness Is Not Selective You shouldn’t choose to forgive some people and not forgive others (see Matthew 5:43-48).

Forgiveness Breaks Down Walls When you choose to forgive, you experience true freedom (see Colossians 3:12-15).

Purity

Purity is a quality we hear too little about today. Usually when we do hear something about purity, it is in reference to sexual purity. But purity goes beyond this to include wholesome thoughts, a sincere desire to do what is right, and a commitment to obey God's Word. Jesus alluded to the importance of purity by promising that those whose hearts were pure would see God (Matthew 5:8). In using the word *heart*, Jesus was saying that the center of our being—our will, our emotions, and our thought processes—needs to be cleansed of sin. The bible texts below examine the idea of purity and how it affects us as followers of Jesus Christ.

Don't Place Yourself in the Way of Unnecessary Temptation Know your moral weaknesses and avoid situations where the temptations to sin would be irresistible (see James 1:14-15).

Guard the Content of Your Thoughts Don't fill your mind with the world's moral filth (see 2 Timothy 2:22).

Beware of the Sins of the Heart The person who commits adultery in his heart is just as guilty as the person who actually carries it out (see Matthew 5:27-30).

Avoid Adulterous Relationships God specifically warns us against living in immoral relationships (see 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

If You Fall, Ask God to Forgive You and Purify Your Heart and Desires Only God can forgive you, restore your joy, and fill you with the right desires (see 1 John 1:9).

Perseverance

There will be times in your Christian walk when you will feel emotionally "down." You may think that God has forgotten about you. Or you might become discouraged as you see others who have professed faith in Jesus Christ lose interest in spiritual things and fall away. You may begin to wonder whether you are next on the Devils' "hit list." But God will not allow you to be hit with more than you can handle spiritually. In fact, it is during times of trouble that you will actually be strengthened, not weakened.

As you read your Bible, you will come across words like *endurance* and *perseverance*. These words are often used when the Bible compares the Christian life to a race. The race referred to is a marathon, not a fifty-yard dash. Because the Christian life is a long-distance run, you need to pace yourself, to persevere, and most of all, to *finish* the race. Look up the following passages that describe how and why you need to persevere through the inevitable struggles of life.

Perseverance Produces Results As you steadily grow in your understanding of God's Word and apply it to your life, you will win others to the Lord (see Luke 8:15).

Life's Trials Will Make You Stronger You shouldn't view difficulties as obstacles to your faith, but as opportunities for spiritual growth (see James 1:2-4).

Christ Endured Great Pain for Us Jesus modeled the ultimate in endurance so that we would be encouraged to keep our faith strong in the race of life (see Hebrews 12:1-3).

God honors Those Who Persevere A wholehearted commitment to God will enable you to "finish well" with your faith intact (see 2 Timothy 4:7-8).

Honesty and Integrity

Honesty and integrity seem to be in short supply these days. Yet the Bible tells us that they are a part of the godly man's or woman's life. Unfortunately, the world tends to gloss over that aspect of Christian life. It wants to characterize Christians as people who are out of touch with reality. But the Christian is simply someone who allows God to influence every aspect of his or her life—down to the practical, everyday dealings of business, finances, and relationships. The following passages examine how honesty and integrity should characterize our lives.

We Should Maintain A High Moral Standard A faithful and honest lifestyle will cause others to be more receptive to our convictions. (see 2 Corinthians 7:2).

Our Conduct Should Cause Others to Glorify Christ Living a good, honest life around our unbelieving neighbors will ultimately bring glory to God (see 1 Peter 2:9-12).

We Need to Set an Example for Others We must seriously pursue a life of integrity in order to be a solid example for those around us (see Titus 2:6-8).

Faith and Works

When a person truly comes to Jesus Christ, this relationship will dramatically transform his or her life. We may see this transformation more immediately in the lives of some than others. For those whose lives are characterized by pronounced bad habits and blatant immoral living, the change in lifestyle will show others that something profound has indeed happened within that person's life. For others who may not be known for blatant sinful living, the change may not be as outwardly pronounced, but it is just as significant. Remember, all of us were separated from God by sin, which was dealt with and atoned for at the cross of Jesus.

Our commitment to Christ will show itself in both fruit and works. This concept of "bearing fruit" is used often in Scripture to describe the results of someone's commitment to Jesus Christ. If we do not bear fruit, then it is apparent we have not really come to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Bearing fruit is the natural result of a person coming into union with God. Sometimes there is confusion in this area of fruit bearing, or works. See what the Bible has to say about the issue.

Our Lives Should Show That God Is at Work in Our Hearts God desires that we demonstrate our spiritual growth through our outward actions (see Romans 7:4).

We Must Live Out Our Faith Faith without deeds is incomplete (see James 2:14-18).

God Saved Us for a Purpose While God himself gave us salvation, he planned that our salvation would lead to good works (see Ephesians 2:10).

Our Walk Should Match Our Talk God isn't as concerned with what we say we believe as with how we *live* what we believe (see Matthew 7:21-23).

Discernment

An inspector who worked for Scotland Yard in the counterfeit department was once asked if he spent a lot of time handling counterfeit money. He said, “No.” He then explained that he spent so much time handling the “real thing” that he could immediately detect the counterfeit. In the same way, as we become knowledgeable about God’s Word, we too, will be able to detect teachings and concepts that are contrary to Scripture. Make no mistake—counterfeit “truth” is out there in force. Look at the following Scripture passages to find out how you can keep from falling prey to false teachings.

Beware of Satan’s Clever Imitations Satan’s work may appear godly, but in the end they will be exposed for what they really are (see Matthew 13:24-30).

Recognize Satan’s Strategies Lies and deceit are Satan’s two main strategies to lead people away from the truth (see 1 Timothy 4:1-2).

Understand the Difference between the True Gospel and a False Gospel Scripture provides us with a “litmus test” to distinguish between truth and error (see 1 John 4:1-3).

Use God’s Word to Evaluate Someone’s Teachings The best way to detect a counterfeit is to become more familiar with the “real thing” (see Acts 17:11).

Peace

Peace of mind—it seems almost elusive in a day when murders are commonplace, job security is nonexistent, and the moral fabric of society is tearing apart at the seams. Yet Jesus has promised that each one of us can experience true peace: *“I am leaving you with a gift—peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn’t like the peace the world gives. So don’t be troubled or afraid”* (John 14:27).

Unfortunately, some people are so caught up in the “pursuit of peace” that they have forgotten that Jesus has already given it to them. They have simply left that gift “unopened.” And we cannot find peace outside of the parameters God has given us. As Augustine said many years ago, “Our souls are restless until they find their rest in God.” Begin to “unwrap” this precious gift by examining what God’s Word has to say about it.

Peace Begins When We Relinquish Control of Our Lives to God When we give Jesus our burdens and allow him to guide us, we find rest (see Matthew 11:28-30).

Perfect Peace Builds Upon Total Trust As God become a regular part of our daily lives, our worries begin to disappear (see John 16:33).

Our Peace Continues As We Follow the Holy Spirit We must stop allowing our old, sinful nature to control us before we can really experience peace (see Romans 8:5-8).

God’s Peace Needs to Rule in Our Hearts We must constantly keep other things from crowding out God’s peace in our lives (see Colossians 3:15).

Joy

One noticeable change that takes place in a new believer's life is the inner joy he or she receives. In fact, joy is listed as part of the "fruit of the Spirit" that should be evident in a believer's life (see Galatians 5:22). But this joy is different from the fleeting and temporary "happiness" that is usually dependent upon "good things" happening in someone's life. While sorrows will come a believer's way, the Holy Spirit gives him or her an inner joy and peace that cannot be taken away. Below are some of the ways in which you can experience God's joy in your life.

Studying God's Word Helps Us to Experience His Joy As we study God's word and honor God with our lives, we experience his joy in our lives (see Thessalonians 1:6).

Knowing and Trusting God Is the Source of Inexpressible Joy The greatest joy we can experience comes only from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ (see 1 Peter 1:8).

Sharing Your Faith Results in Joy While laboring to introduce people to Jesus is difficult work, the end result will give you much to celebrate (see John 4:36).

Overlooking Petty Issues frees Us to Experience Joy God wants us to experience his joy in our lives and to avoid those things that could hamper that joy (see 1 Corinthians 1:10-17).

Knowing Whom You belong to and What the Future Holds Brings True Joy Realizing that you are a child of God and that you will spend eternity in heaven with him will bring you joy (see Romans 15:13).

Accountability

Once you receive Jesus Christ into your life as your personal Lord and Savior, not only do you obtain the privileged gift of eternal life, but you immediately acquire a great responsibility. You have been entrusted with the message of the gospel and are responsible for what you do with it in your life. In the end, we know that what we have done on this earth for Christ will be examined before almighty God and displayed before the rest of the world. The question we must all ask is this: Will what I am doing for Christ and his Kingdom stand the test of time? Those who have done much with what God has given them will be greatly rewarded. Take some time to see what God's Word has to say on this subject.

The More We Know, the Greater Our Responsibility Will Be The Lord holds those who have been given positions of spiritual leadership to a higher accountability for what they do (see Luke 12:48).

We Are Responsible for Our Own sins and Mistakes We cannot pass blame onto others for our own failings (see Romans 3:23).

We Need to Invest Our Abilities and Resources in God's Kingdom God has graciously given us abilities and resources to invest in the expansion of his Kingdom (see Luke 19:11-26).

The Value of Our Work on Earth Will Be Tested On Judgment Day, the Quality of our faith and the work we have done for Jesus Christ will be revealed and rewarded accordingly (see 1 Corinthians 3:10-15).

Study the Bible

You might say that the Bible is the "user's manual of life" we have all been searching for. Everything we need to know about God and living a life that pleases him is found in its pages.

Tragically, some of us go through life without so much as picking up this amazing book, whose words were inspired by God. Yet, success or failure in the Christian life is determined by how much of the Bible we get into our hearts and minds and how obedient we are to the principles and teachings found within it. Just as we need to continually breathe oxygen to survive, we need to regularly study the Bible to grow and flourish spiritually. Here are some important reasons why we need to spend time in this life-changing book.

Studying the Bible Is Necessary for Our Spiritual Growth The Bible performs three functions to help us mature spiritually (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Studying the Bible Keeps Us Spiritually Strong The more we get into this book and apply its teachings, the more we will be able to stand our ground in the storms and trials of life (see Matthew 7:24-27).

Studying the Bible Makes Scripture A Central Part of Our Lives God desires that we make the Bible an integral part of our lives (see Colossians 3:16).

Studying the Bible Helps Us Apply Its Truth to Our Lives We will notice positive changes in our lives as we apply what we read in Scripture (see 2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Prayer

The idea of talking to God can be intimidating. But it doesn't have to be. In fact, prayer can be a wonderful experience if we know how to do it God's way. Fortunately, we have God's Word to teach us how to pray. The Bible instructs us to pray at all times, in any posture, in any place for any reason. In addition, it does not matter whether you pray in King James English or the most contemporary jargon. God only desires that you pray from a pure and sincere heart.

The disciples observed the profound effect prayer had in Jesus' life and ministry. They witnessed how Jesus would often go off by himself to spend time in prayer with his heavenly Father. They saw the power, peace, and tranquility that emanated from his life, giving him the ability to stay calm in troubled circumstances. Jesus' prayer life so impressed these men that they asked him to teach them to pray (Luke 11:1-13). Certainly if the perfect son of God often took time to pray during this life here on earth, how much more do we need to pray?

Because prayer is an essential ingredient to walking with Jesus Christ, we need to examine its elements found in God's Word.

Prayer Was Modeled for Us by Christ Jesus took the time to show his followers how to pray (see Matthew 6:5-15).

Prayer Is Not a Solitary Experience God has given us his Holy Spirit to aid us in prayer, even when we do not know what to pray (see Romans 8:26-27).

Prayer Allows Us to Voice Our Requests to God Prayer is God's appointed way for us to relate our concern and present our needs to him (see James 4:2-3).

Prayer Enables Us to Seek Forgiveness When we pray sincerely for forgiveness, God will hear our prayers and restore us (see James 5:15-16).

Prayer Helps Us Overcome Worry In the midst of troubles, we can receive God's peace through prayer (see Philippians 4:6-7).

Prayer Increases Our Spiritual Knowledge and Maturity God will give us greater spiritual understanding through prayer (see Colossians 1:9).

Stay “Plugged In” and “Part of” A Healthy Local Church

One of the essential building blocks of spiritual growth is fellowship with other believers by becoming part of a local church. The church (meaning the entire body of Christians) is not really an organization so much as an organism. It thrives by keeping its members spiritually active and well fed. The church provides you with spiritual instruction from God’s word, allows you to worship God with other believers, enables you to use your God-given gifts and abilities as God intended, and makes you accountable to spiritual leadership.

Some people think they can get enough spiritual input from Christian television, radio programs, and books. While those things do have value, nothing can replace the need to become an active member of a church like Canyon Hills. Think about it—if joining in fellowship with other believers was not important, why did Jesus establish the church? (see Matthew 16:18). The Bible has plenty to say about the characteristics of a healthy, vibrant church and the necessity of Christian fellowship. Here are four helpful insights from God’s Word on looking for and attending the right church.

What to Look for in a Church You should look for a church that has the qualities and characteristics of the first century church (see Acts 2:42, 44-47).

Why You Need Fellowship with Other Believers Fellowship with other Christians sharpens your spiritual discernment and prepares you for Christ’s return (see Hebrews 10:25).

Why the Church Needs You Not only will you benefit from the church, but the church will benefit from you and your God-given abilities (see Ephesians 4:11-16).

You Have a Place in the Church God has given each one of us a unique role to play in our place of fellowship (see 1 Corinthians 12:12-31).

Obey God

The real evidence of a true Christian is a changed life. The great British preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once said, “Of what value is the grace I profess to receive if it does not dramatically change the way that I live? If it doesn’t change the way that I live, it will never change my eternal destiny.”

A changed life begins with obedience to God. This means that you will have to stop doing certain things and start doing others. While God begins to change your heart and desires once you have accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, he still gives you the freedom to decide just how much of your life you will let him influence. But know this: Whatever you give up to follow Jesus Christ will pale in comparison to what he will give you in return. For example, when you give up sinful behaviors for God, he will replace your sin with forgiveness and a clear conscience. With this incentive for obedience, look at six specific ways the Bible instructs us to obey God.

Recognize That You Are a New Creation When you understand what God has done in your life, obedience becomes more of a desire than a mere duty (see 2 Corinthians 5:14-17).

Follow God Wholeheartedly When you follow God completely, you will finish the race of life well (see Hebrews 12:1-3).

Offer God More than Lip Service God looks at your heart more than your religious actions (see Matthew 23:25-28).

Live in God’s Love Discover the secret of true and lasting joy (see John 15:9-11).

Put on God’s Armor Obedience prepares you for the battles of life (see Romans 13:11-14).

Let God Occupy Your Thoughts Your thoughts will affect your actions (see Colossians 3:1-4).

Resist Temptation

Now that you are a follower of Jesus Christ, Satan is going to try to draw you away by tempting you to disobey God's Word. It is not a sin to be tempted—even Jesus was tempted (see Luke 4:1-13). We sin when we give in to that temptation. The good news is that God will never let a temptation become so strong that we can't handle it. In addition, he has given us specific ways to handle temptation. Here are three *Rs* to remember when dealing with temptation.

Realize Who Is Tempting You Satan is the mastermind behind all of your temptations (see Ephesians 6:10-12).

Resist the Devil The Bible says that if you resist Satan's enticements, he will flee from you (see James 4:7-8).

Understand the Simplicity of the Gospel The message of the gospel is simple yet powerful (see 1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

Share Your Own Story Never underestimate the strength of your personal testimony (see Acts 26:1-23).

Seek God's Will

Have you ever wondered about the future? Have you pondered the answers to such important, life-changing decisions as whom you should marry or what career path you should pursue? More than likely, most of us have asked these questions and wondered if God has a definite plan or opinion in the matter. With that in mind, here is some good news: God is vitally interested in your life, and he does want to lead you in your decisions.

Jesus called his followers 'friends' (see John 15:15). As God's friend you already have an "inside track" in discovering God's will for your life. It is called the Bible. There you will find God's general will for your life (such as putting God first in all you do and following God's guidelines for marriage), as well as some principles to follow when seeking his specific direction for your life. In the end, finding God's will comes down to living out what you read in the Bible and then living by faith. Here are six steps you can take as you seek God's will.

Unconditionally Surrender Your Life Certain conditions must be met if you want to know God's will for your life (see Romans 12:1-2).

Realize That God Has a Plan for Your Life Your life has purpose and meaning, and God wants to reveal it to you (see Ephesians 1:7-9).

Act upon What God has Already Revealed in Scripture God has already given us some specific guidelines to follow in his Word (see 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8).

Ask God for Guidance God should be the first person we turn to in moments of decision (see James 1:5-8).

Listen for God's Voice If we are truly God's children, we will know when he is trying to tell us something (see John 10:27).

Live as a Disciple

When you hear the word *disciple*, do you immediately think of the Twelve who followed Jesus during his ministry on earth? Many people do not realize that Jesus still has disciples today. While every disciple is a believer, not every believer is necessarily a disciple. A disciple is someone who has made a wholehearted commitment to follow Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In one sense, you might call discipleship “radical Christian living.” When you truly make a commitment to be Christ’s disciple, you will be living the Christian life as it was meant to be lived. Anything short of discipleship is settling for less than what God desires. Here are four passages from the Bible that explain what it means to truly be a disciple of Jesus.

A Disciple Counts the Cost Jesus’ disciples are willing to put him first in all they do. (see Luke 14:25-33).

A Disciple Abides in Christ The source of a disciple’s strength comes from his or her closeness to Christ (see John 15:1-17).

A Disciple Walks as Jesus Walked Disciples pattern their lives after Jesus, the ultimate example of how to live (see 1 John 2:3-6).

Give to God

Money is such an important topic in the Bible that it is the main subject of nearly *half* the parables Jesus told. In addition, one out of every seven verses in the New Testament deals with the topic. To give you an idea of how this compares with other topics, Scripture offers about five hundred verses on prayer and fewer than five hundred on faith, while there are more than *two thousand* verses on money!

You may be wondering what money has to do with your faith. Now that Jesus Christ has come into your life, he wants to be Lord (to be central) of every aspect of it. That includes your finances. Martin Luther astutely observed, “There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, the mind, and the purse [or wallet].” When we experience this “conversion of the purse” and give freely of our finances to the Lord’s work, we will make the best investment possible—an investment with eternal dividends. With that in mind, here are five questions to consider about wealth and giving.

Why Should You Give a Portion of Your Financial Resources to God? God wants you to prove your faithfulness through your regular giving, or tithes (see 2 Corinthians 9:6-11).

How Much Should You Give? God encourages us to give sacrificially (see Mark 12:41-44).

What Happens When You Give? When you give with the right motives, you will experience joy and God’s generous blessings (see 2 Corinthians 9:6-14).

How Should You View Material Wealth? Accumulating wealth should never be your ultimate priority because it is eternally worthless (you can’t take it with you) (see Matthew 6:19-34).

Can You Enjoy Wealth? God may bless you materially and it would be wrong to enjoy how God has blessed you, but you are responsible for using your material blessings wisely (see 1 Timothy 6:17-19).

Have Courage in Trials

Many Christians have the mistaken idea that once they make a commitment to Jesus Christ, life will be smooth sailing from that day forward. This is certainly not the case. While it is true that walking with Christ will help us avoid many of the problems we used to face, we are still going to experience what the Bible calls “trials.”

Trials may come in the form of a crisis, a sudden illness, the loss of a loved one, or some drastic change in your life. You may go through a difficult time when you don’t feel God’s presence, when church may not be as exciting as it once was for you, or your prayers seem to go no higher than the ceiling. This may cause you to wonder if you have angered God or if he has left you. But God does not allow us to experience trials because he wants to see us suffer. Rather, he allows these difficulties into our lives to help us grow spiritually—to learn to live by faith, not by feelings. Look up the following passages to see the role trials play in our lives. Notice also God’s promise to be with us during these times of trouble.

Trials Sharpen Our Faith Hardships develop our character and purify our faith (see 1 Peter 1:3-7).

Trials Help Us Comfort Others Experiencing suffering deepens our compassion for others who suffer (see 2 Corinthians 1:3-7).

Trials Are Survivable We must keep our eternal perspective through the tough times (see 2 Corinthians 4:7-18).

Trials Test Our Foundation When we ground our lives in Christ, we can weather any storm (see Luke 6:47-49).

Jesus Is with Us in Life’s Storms We are never outside of God’s watchful eye and his abiding presence (see Mark 4:35-41).

God Gives Hope to Our Troubled Hearts We can have peace of mind in the middle of our greatest trials (see John 14:1-7).

OFF AND RUNNING

How your faith affects the daily aspects of your life

Marriage

How many times have you heard the cliché “They have a marriage made in heaven”? This statement implies that some marriages are destined to be good, while others are destined to be bad. Such thinking assumes that marriage has a life of its own, and the only way to find out if you are to have a “good” one or a “bad” one is to “give it a shot.” What most people don’t seem to understand, though, is that marriage is like a mirror. It reflects what it sees. If a marriage is strong, it is because the husband and wife have put a lot of work into it. If a marriage is weak, it is because the husband or wife or both have neglected it.

God never intended for anyone to have a weak marriage. His design for marriage is lifelong, fulfilling companionship. For a couple’s marriage to thrive within his design, the couple must obey God and his Word and lay aside this world’s distorted and perverse concept of marriage. The Bible contains truths that will not only help keep a couple together but will also keep their marriage strong. In fact, the lessons this book gives on marriage should serve as the foundation of every Christian couple’s relationship. Whether you are married or single, the following verses will give you a godly perspective on marriage relationships.

God Created Marriage We can learn more about God's marriage ideal from the world's first husband and wife (see Matthew 19:4-6).

Husbands and Wives Have Distinct Roles in Marriage A marriage works when a couple follows God's specific design for the husband and the wife (see Ephesians 5:21-33).

The Boundaries of Marriage Are to Be Honored and Enjoyed Sexual intimacy is meant to be enjoyed only within the bounds of the marriage relationship (see Hebrews 13:4).

Keeping Your Marriage Strong God promises punishment to those who commit adultery or lead immoral lives (see Hebrews 13:4).

Divorce Is Not Part of God's Plan Jesus teaches that marriage is meant to be a lifelong commitment (see Mark 10:2-12).

A Christian Should Not Leave a Non-Christian Spouse An unbelieving husband or wife should not be abandoned, but loved (see 1 Corinthians 7:12).

Marriage Is Not for Everyone Although God blesses many with marriage, some are given a calling or ability to remain single (1 Corinthians 7:1-40).

There Is an Intimacy in Marriage That Can Be Found Nowhere Else God wants you to have a fulfilling, enjoyable sex life within the parameters of marriage (see 1 Corinthians 7:3-5).

Children

God's plan is to build, strengthen, and protect the family. Satan's plan is to undermine, weaken, and destroy it. Make no mistake: Satan has declared war on the family. Tragically, many of us have been willing accomplices. Why? Because the bulk of the problems in our culture today can be directly traced to the breakdown of the family or to homes in which biblical principles are ignored or disobeyed. This not only includes husbands and wives splitting apart, but also "alternative families," such as homosexual marriages and "live-in" lovers. Such relationships will never be blessed or honored by God, for they are clearly outside the parameters of his will. It has been said, "A family can survive without a country, but a country cannot survive without the family."

Fortunately, there is hope. The Bible gives us specific guidelines to follow when it comes to parenting. If they are put into practice, we will see amazing results. See what the Bible has to say about raising children who love and revere the Lord in a world that is often hostile to God and his values.

Children Are Never Too Young to Learn about God Teaching your children to love the Lord in their early years will help them stay true to the Lord later in life (see Galatians 6:7-9).

Make Sure Your Children Hear the Gospel Message The gospel is best heard and taught in the home (see Acts 16:29-34).

Encourage Your Children's Spiritual Growth As the apostle Paul suggests, a loving father encourages his children to live a life pleasing to God (see 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12).

Watch the Legacy You Leave Your devotion to God—or lack of it—will make a resounding impression on the next generation (see Acts 21:5).

Discipline Your Children Parents who love their children and want them to grow up into young men and women of character will discipline them (see Hebrews 12:5-11).

Avoid Provoking Your Children Your discipline must be tempered with love so that your children do not become resentful (see Ephesians 6:1-4).

Priorities

As a Christian, one of the most dramatic changes in your life will be the way you spend your time. Your pursuits and ambitions in life will be different. After all, you are no longer living for yourself but for God. It may be a difficult transition at first, but here are a few pointers we can glean from God's Word.

Place Christ before All Else To be a true follower of Jesus Christ, you need to be wholly devoted to him and let nothing else get in the way of your devotion (see Philippians 3:4-11).

Balance Christian Service with Worship Don't get so caught up in "serving" the Lord that you forget to worship him and get to know him better (see Luke 10:38-42).

Don't Waste Time Pursuing Things That Won't Last Your time on earth is short. Ask God to help you spend it on things that count (see 2 Timothy 4:5-8).

Spend Time Feeding Your Soul God offers blessings to you if you choose to spend time with him rather than devote your life to the pursuit of temporary satisfaction (see 1 Peter 2:1-3).

Keep Your Spiritual Zeal Alive Work hard to keep that "fire" in your heart burning brightly as you serve the Lord (see Romans 12:11).

Prayer Time

Before you became a Christian, you may have prayed before meals, on holidays, or perhaps during times of crisis. As a believer, however, prayer should become second nature. Prayer is a privilege that should become part of all you do.

As you integrate prayer into every aspect of your life, you will not always see your prayers answered the way you would like them to be. When this happens, it is easy to grow discouraged and give up praying. But Jesus implored us to pray and never give up (Luke 18:1). Paul also instructed believers to "*keep on praying*" (1 Thessalonians 5:17). When we fail to pray, we miss out on one of the greatest blessings of the Christian life—fellowship with God himself, our power source for living. In addition, we are going against what God has instructed us to do.

The Bible gives us some perspective on how to experience the power of prayer in our lives. The following is a partial list of what should characterize your prayers as a believer.

Pray Regularly God wants to hear our prayers throughout the day—not just in times of crisis or before meals (see Acts 10:2).

Pray without Hindrance Sins and other distractions can negatively affect your prayer life (see Luke 22:39-46).

Pray Expecting to Get Answers The Bible gives us guidelines to follow so that our prayers will be answered (see 1 John 5:14-15).

Pray Effectively Prayer can work powerfully in the face of a crisis when God's people come together and call out to him (see Acts 12:1-17).

Pray Persistently God honors persistent prayer (see Luke 18:1-8).

Conversation

As a Christian, it is extremely important to remember that you are a representative of Jesus Christ. One of the more visible ways you represent him is through your speech or conversations. It has been said that every person speaks about thirty thousand words in an average day. That is a considerable amount of “representation time”—especially when you consider the power of the spoken word. With our mouths we have the power to build up or destroy. This should give you even greater motivation to weigh your words before you speak them.

The Bible shares some practical advice when it comes to controlling the tongue. Below are a few passages of Scripture to guide you in this area.

Think Before You Speak You demonstrate great wisdom and care when you weigh your words (see 1 Timothy 4:12).

Control Your Tongue As you learn to control your tongue, you will be able to control other aspects of your life (see James 3:1-12).

Refrain from Idle Talk We will be held accountable for every idle word we speak (see Matthew 12:35-37).

Make a habit of Talking about the Lord We should speak of our faith in the Lord with others (see Acts 11:20).

Keep Your Conversation Gracious We should speak gently and sensibly as we share our faith with others (see Colossians 4:6).

Never Use Vulgar Speech Our conversations need to reflect God’s goodness, not the world’s coarseness (see Ephesians 5:4).

Think of Ways to Encourage, Praise, and Build Up Others As a Christian, you should use your speech constructively (see Ephesians 4:29).

Use Some of Your “Speaking Time” Each Day in Prayer Just as you make the time to talk with your friends each day, you should also take time to speak with God (see Colossians 4:2).

Relationships

The people we associate with on a regular basis can either help or hinder our spiritual growth. For that reason God has given us some invaluable advice and strong warnings when it comes to choosing our friends. Look at the following Scripture passages to see what to pursue and what to avoid in your relationships with others.

Find a Close Christian Friend A true Christian friend will help you get through times of trouble and temptation (see Galatians 6:1-3).

Avoid Relationships That Could Cause You to Sin Bad company corrupts good character (see 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1).

Make Sure Your Friendships Honor God Seek the friendship of those who live as Christ intended (see 1 John 1:7).

Responsibility

A common question that many new Christians have is, “Can I be a Christian and still do...?” Some questions of “Christian liberty” can be answered easily, because the Bible directly addresses these questions. For instance, if someone asks, “Is it OK, as a Christian, to get drunk?” the answer is clearly no. The Bible says, “*Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin you life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you*” (Ephesians 5:18). However, questions like “Can I be a Christian and still drink alcoholic beverages?” or “Can I listen to any kind of music?” or “Can I go to any movie?” are not answered so easily. They are among the many “gray” areas of the Christian life that do not necessarily have a “chapter verse” answer.

When you face a situation that the Bible does not directly address, you must consider whether or not your actions will please God. Here is a “litmus test” you can apply to those uncertain areas of life.

Does This Activity Build Me Up Spiritually? You need to avoid anything that has the potential to dull your spiritual senses and take away your hunger for God and his Word (see 1 Corinthians 10:23).

Does This Activity Bring Me under Its Power? As a Christian, you only want to be controlled by the power of Jesus Christ (see 1 Corinthians 6:12).

Do I Have an Uneasy Conscience about This Activity? You must be obedient to what God has told you to do, not swayed by what others are doing (see Romans 14:23).

Could This Activity Cause Other Christians to Stumble in Their Faith? Stay away from things that could negatively influence other Christians around you (see Romans 14:13-21).

Job Performance

Some of the greatest challenges you may ever face as a Christian will come from the workplace. Perhaps you work in an unethical, morally questionable environment. Maybe you find it difficult to respect those who are over you. You might find your job tedious or meaningless. You may even wonder if you are making an impact on your co-workers for Christ. Whatever your vocation, your work can become more fulfilling and rewarding when you follow what the Bible has to say about your attitude toward your job or responsibilities. Take these biblical pointers to heart and see what a difference they will make!

Work As If You Are Working for the Lord Keep in mind that you are ultimately serving the Lord, not just people (see Colossians 3:22-24).

Create a Spiritual Hunger in Those around You Your godly example can help increase your coworkers’ desire to know more about Jesus (see Titus 2:9-10).

Strive to Be Responsible People will respect you and your message when you can prove that you are responsible (see 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Honor Christ with Your Hard Work Don’t allow nonbelievers to criticize the Lord because of your poor witness (see 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12).

Don’t Neglect Your Spiritual Health Never place your desire for material wealth above your spiritual welfare (see Luke 12:51-21).

Attitude Toward Self

Many are on a quest today to find personal happiness. They will do whatever is necessary to “find themselves” They are told that the answer is “within,” so they search in all the wrong places trying to find meaning and purpose in life. The Bible, however, does not teach that the answer is within us. Rather, it teaches that the *problem* is within us. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us, “*The heart is most deceitful and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?*” For that reason, all attempts to reform or improve ourselves will meet with failure. We do not need self-esteem as much as we need a realistic view of who we are and who God is. Once we honestly assess our own sinful condition and come to grips with our built-in weakness and vulnerability to sin, then we will be able to appreciate God’s solution. In a nutshell, the way to true happiness comes not from seeking *it* but from seeking *God*. Here’s what God’s word has to say about how we can be happy, fulfilled people.

We Need to Recognize Our True Condition As we humble ourselves before a holy God, we will be blessed (see Matthew 5:3-5).

Our Needs Must Come Last Jesus gave us the ultimate example of what it means to be a servant (see Philippians 2:3-11).

We Will Find Happiness in Loving God and Serving Others Loving God and others gives us real purpose and meaning in life (see Matthew 22:37-40).

We Must Surrender Our Dreams and Seek God’s Will True followers of Christ entrust their future into God’s hands, because he knows what is best for us (see Matthew 16:24-26).