

# Introduction

*“For years to come, the debris of a convulsed world will beset our steps.*

*It will require a purpose stronger than any man and worthy of all men to calm and inspire us. A sane society whose riches are happy children, men and women, beautiful with peace and creative activity, is not going to be ordained for us. We must make it ourselves.”* —Helen Keller, *The Open Door*

## What We've Always Wanted

Imagine a perfect world for a moment. A world similar to ours, but the evils of crime, hate, and envy are inconceivable—in fact, completely alien. There's no pain, sickness, disease, or disability. No stinging bugs, venomous, or bloodthirsty animals. There aren't even earthquakes, volcanoes, tsunamis, or tornadoes.

In this imagined utopia, motives are genuine. No one has thoughts they can't tell others. We have no misunderstandings and don't need to pretend. Our best foot is always forward because both our feet are perfect. There's constant pleasure. People smile and laugh, freely and unashamedly. Joy overflows each person's heart. Everyone is known and loved. Peace covers the land.

Not only is this ideal society rid of selfishness, it's also rid of poverty. Resources overflow. Every need and want is met. People go to their jobs not merely to scrape by. Their reward is found in the

enjoyment of work more than the paycheck. Occupations are easy, because people are passionate and fulfilled. In our perfect world, nobody's "workin' for the weekend."

Whether we recognize it or not, this is what each of our hearts cries for. Why don't we have it?

## **What We've Had As Long As We Can Remember**

When we look at the real world, we see a blurred image of the perfect, tainted with all the opposite characteristics. In the best of times, imperfection lingers and calamity waits at the door. In the darkest times, we cling to the hope that disaster can only last so long.

Even attempting to lead a life of joy and selflessness is draining. Each heart instinctively knows our many anxieties are an injustice. But despite every effort, we suffer.

Faithful friends are rare. Community threatens to shun. We long to be known and accepted, even as we put up walls. Our goodness, we fear, is surely nullified by the hate, impatience, lust, and envy hidden within.

We have impure motives, dirty politics, depression, illness, betrayal, starvation, deformity, natural disasters, perversion, rage, chaos, war, and death—among many other problems. These are the atrocities our hearts cannot understand, the horrors every person desperately wants to escape but has no idea how.

Humanity's made many attempts at solutions, but our problems persist mixed in with the answers. Still lone flowers push out of the asphalt. The starving inexplicably share their bread. Lows turn to

highs and back again. We inevitably drink from a diluted, bitter-sweet mixture of heaven and hell on earth.

## **The Clue In Our Desire**

Within our distress is a flickering reality. Every heart desires paradise. Deep down each of us demands things be set right inside and out. We want a place where we are at peace. We yearn for success, prosperity, and abundance of good things. There's an unending search for the fountain of youth where there is promised long life, filled with strength, health, beauty, and vigor. While we can barely conceive undying glee and laughter never squelched, we know we were made for it.

Why does our real world fall short of our dream? What in us longs for utopia? Where does this perpetual longing come from if we've never known its satisfaction?

If we're honest, half the time we don't even know exactly what we want. Despite our disappointment though, we continue to strive without reaching the goal. Only to find when we come close, the mark is moved. There is a clue hidden in all of this though. When our desires aren't met or pain overwhelms us—who do we blame?

## **The God Problem**

In the moment of suffering, we feel we are on our own. Few understand what we are going through. We're helpless and hopeless. No one's there for us, or can help us in meaningful ways. But God could, so why doesn't He?

We wonder, “God, are You with me? And if You're here, do You care I'm hurting? Why did You let me go through this pain? Why aren't You doing something to stop this?”

People blame God for being absent, uncaring, and allowing or even causing disaster, sickness, and death. But it's interesting that we blame Him. Why do these thoughts about God come up? Why do we expect there to be an almighty presence who loves and cares enough to help? The fact that this is our default response proves His existence.

Even zealous believers see tragedy in another's life and think, God has a reason. They have concluded He is using evil for purposes far above our understanding. Catastrophic events get attributed as God working “for the greater good.” Secretly, we avoid such thoughts because the road they lead down is too disturbing. Letting go of certain religious ideas and exploring other answers could unravel our whole approach to life so we avoid them as long as possible.

## **God's Sense of Humor**

Now that I've gotten you thoroughly depressed, I want to lighten things up with a story. Let me set the stage: It was a beautiful day, I was in my early-twenties, walking in the park with two friends—but I had my own metaphorical storm-cloud. I was struggling with a revelation I'd had at church that morning. I felt like God communicated something for me to do, and it involved confessing a sin to someone I had wronged.

I was filled with a mixture of self-abasement, self-pity, and anxiety. My friends knew I was having an internal battle and were

giving me some space. We were walking in the same direction, but they were a few feet ahead of me when I tripped, rolled past them, and at the end of my momentum stood up as if I had meant the acrobatic feat. We were all so surprised the only thing we could do was laugh. In fact—it was hard to stop laughing, which made me feel bad for feeling good.

A beam of sunshine broke through my gloom. In the midst of my trial it was possible to find joy. I just needed to open my eyes to see things through a positive light. I'm only human, far from perfect, but do I have to take that fact so seriously? God shook me out of my funk with a reminder to smile. It's all going to be okay.

## The Answer

I'll let you in on the answer to this book's question: God is close and loves you deeply. He only *seems* distant and aloof. I'm qualified to tell you this, because I've been "far" from God and am now "near." In the midst of overwhelming depression, loneliness, and pain, I experienced God turn my life around. Even as I hated Him for what I had concluded about life, He revealed Himself as good in ways I could not deny.

My focus on the negative in the first part of this introduction was to make a point most of us know all too well—we live in a broken world. Although this was all I could see at one time, my perspective has shifted. I'm more like Tigger than Eeyore now, but it's not because I ignore the pain and suffering around me. I've found there to be a true Light overcoming the darkness. I've encountered God and it was a surprisingly good experience. He's not to blame for our tragedies. In fact, He's the perfect

representation of good and is at work in us and around us in amazing ways, beckoning us to join Him.

In this book, I'll share the story of God breaking down my wrong ideas and how He helped me see another perspective. I'll talk about the darkness in us and the world, as well as the Light, and how you can know God's goodness despite the struggles you're facing. My hope is you'll walk away with a peace that defies understanding.

You've had different experiences than mine, but I believe you're not reading this by accident; and God wants to help you in a similar way as He has me. He wants you to know: He's always been with you, desperately wanting to help, and never holding back His love.

—John W. Nichols

P.S. — In case you prefer to listen to books, I want to give you this as an audiobook for free at [GodAndYouAndMe.com/Where-is-God-Audio](http://GodAndYouAndMe.com/Where-is-God-Audio)

# 1

## The Darkness

*“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”* —Martin Luther King Jr.

I’m going to ask you something tough. Trust me though, I’m heading in a positive direction. We’re traveling through darkness before reaching the Light. There’s darkness in all of our stories.

Remember your worst experience?

### Where Was God?

My story begins with a lot of darkness. You’ve experienced your own, maybe more, but I personally am living proof there’s a Light. The darkness I struggled with is now stripped of its power. If you’re

still in darkness as I was, hopefully my story will show you the way out.

The depth of my childhood understanding of God came from the little bedtime prayer my parents taught me to recite. "Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take." From a young age, I knew God was somehow involved, but didn't have a deep understanding of Him.

By the time I was four, my parents divorced and my mom started taking me to the Catholic church. I was "confirmed," but my heart wasn't in it. I didn't understand what I was doing, but memorized the words I had to say. Unfortunately, I didn't learn much more about God during this time. I continued calling Jesus "Lord," but it was much later when I actually let Him be Lord of my life.

At around age seven, a friend of the family exposed me to pornography and started molesting me each time I would see him. This went on every other weekend for some time. Fear kept me from telling anyone until I was sixteen. I learned a lifestyle of hiding, lying, and pretending things were okay.

By thirteen, I had trouble relating to others. I didn't have many friends until a group of other loner kids my age took me in and invited me to smoke some pot. Marijuana was my first experience with drugs. I didn't think it was serious, but that didn't stop me hiding it from my parents. I started smoking every day, and it wasn't long before I moved on to other drugs like acid and heroin-based Ecstasy. This was how I coped with the dark secrets inside me that I didn't want to admit were there.

By sixteen, I started drinking, adding another false comforter. By seventeen, the drugs and alcohol no longer helped cover up the

darkness inside. A sea of rage and depression churned beneath the surface. I couldn't see a point in living in this harsh world. All I saw was suffering and brokenness. I thought of killing myself, but never seriously tried.

By nineteen, I knew no one could love me if they knew the real me. Despite my hard facade, I wanted understanding, acceptance, and love. I wanted marriage and a family. Later I would realize I sexually objectified women. I had learned to use them and images to satisfy my needs apart from relationship. I never considered the person God made them to be.

I came to believe this world was a big test. At the end of our suffering, God would know if we were good enough for Him. He didn't seem to be present to help, lead, or protect. I hated Him for His apparent absence and indifference. I told Him this in secret too—yelling and journaling accusations against Him.

Where was God when my parents divorced, when I was molested, and when I considered suicide? I couldn't see Him at work in my life or others. Still, I believed He existed—only in a distant, cold place having little to do with us.

## **Atrocities Riddle Our World**

Everywhere we look, we see our society plagued with evil—abuse, theft, murder, human trafficking, war, and so much more. Even apart from people's influence we experience sickness, animal attacks, and natural disasters. If we focus on these things, we might think everything is against us.

Even now, you're facing battles. You may be in a desperate situation such as disability, addiction, debt, divorce, or rebellious

children. You've surely had family and friends suffer life-threatening sickness. You've seen loss around you as a result of people's actions and also from random events.

Affliction and trials surround us. Even to take on another's troubles on top of our own is often too much to bear. Trying to help carry someone else's burden takes great faithfulness and selflessness. We may hate to admit this, but it's much easier to shut out the world.

In the midst of these things, God appears absent. The horrible events around us practically scream out, "If God exists, He's maniacal and cruel!"

- **The problem—We don't recognize how close God is.**
- **The reason—We look at things with our natural senses and think there's nothing more to life. We judge what we're going through with fear and doubt.**
- **The solution—We should ask God to show us how He's been present, and look for Him to reveal Himself.**

## Another Message

We overlook another message, a communication of hope, counter to the world's screams against God. It's much quieter and less obtrusive. In fact, when it wasn't drowned out by the clamor and busyness of your days, you might have heard the whisper and shaken it off. The message is this: God loves you.

Often He brings help through an ambassador in the form of

devoted followers or seemingly random events. God sends these signals all throughout our lives, and we respond in various ways. Too often, we chalk almost miraculous deliverance up to circumstance. We deny His intervention if only so we won't get our hopes up.

Sometimes we don't recognize His message of love at all because we are so focused on the negative. For some time, I dismissed these signals, a victim unwilling to trust and accept rescue. Like many others who hear of God's love, I chose to ignore it.

He isn't as obvious as we'd like Him to be. But I believe that is because He doesn't want to force us to relate with Him. God desires our faith. It's one thing to believe He exists. And another to believe He's good and active in our lives. How forced will it be when He reveals Himself and His glory and majesty causes us to fall down and worship Him? It's much better to build the relationship now when we have a choice.

Faith always has room to go to another level. After recognizing the hint of God's presence and interaction with us, faith will lead us to begin to trust Him, see Him for who He really is, respond to Him, become devoted to Him, fall in love with Him, follow Him wherever He leads, and share His message of hope. This is when we become the messenger, sharing God's love with those who do not see it.

I hope you look for these messages and receive them with an open heart. When I came around to recognizing and accepting God's attempts to reach me, my whole life was positively changed. I long to see others impacted as I was. The message I once denied, I now humbly deliver to others in need of hope.

Because of God, I am free from drugs, alcohol, and pornography addiction. He's shown me beneath the surface of those things are roots of brokenness in my heart. Although the healing He's bestowed was powerful, it wasn't quick. I'm still learning how to go

to Him for comfort when I am in pain, feel worthless, anxious, or afraid. But my freedom was impossible without His help.

He's taught me how to recognize what a blessing my parents have been. The ripples of their divorce in 1985 continue today, but He will not stop bringing healing and redemption. In 2006, I was blessed to get married. God is teaching my wife and I how to walk together as two people who have different wounds and different ways of handling pain. He has shown us (both children from broken homes) how marriage is not easy, but with His help it is so good. He opens our eyes to see each other (and ourselves) through His love, hope, faith, grace, mercy, and healing. And He shows us how our differences complement one another. My wife is God's highest blessing to me—after Himself.

He gave us three children, each with a great destiny. Through them, I see the love of His Father-heart, and appreciate my parents who were patient, hopeful, and never raised their voices or hands! He's teaching my wife and I how to trust Him with them.

When my oldest daughter started showing symptoms of Autism, the ideas and conclusions from this book were stress-tested but held. Even though it has been horribly painful—God has shown us His presence, goodness, and words of redemption. We (and our daughter) have faced many trials, but we've also seen miraculous healing. Despite the battles we still face, we continue to believe God for victory.

On top of all this, He has given my family a hope and a future. He's given us a calling, passion, and fulfillment. We are seeing more and more the prayer of Jesus being answered, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." In heaven, there is no pain and suffering. They are not God's ways or the inheritance He has prepared for us. And when we let Him in the midst of our

darkness, He reveals His kingdom of Light. He even lets us be part of blessing others with His goodness.

## What's Beneath the Surface

From the beach, the ocean appears to stretch towards the horizon without ceasing. I love the panoramic view of water meeting sky with no obstruction. What we can't see, except for occasional hints, is under the deep expanse hides a whole other realm. The ocean is teeming with life you can't know by looking at it from the sand.

Similarly, there's more to our lives than we experience with our five senses. Most people would agree, although maybe not with my conclusion. In the same way our eyes can't see deep in the water, our spiritual senses are limited and inhibit our understanding. We only see glimpses of this spiritual side of life on occasion.

I believe one of the things we can't see is something hiding in the darkness of our pain and suffering. This something—or someone—is the enemy of our souls, an evil force who takes advantage of us when something bad happens. In the darkness he whispers one of two things: “God wasn't with you”—or worse, “God did this to you.”

Another presence, led by God, motivates us in good, positive ways. This subtle voice in your heart says, “Have hope. It will all be okay. Don't give up! There is a light at the end of this tunnel.” He whispers almost imperceptibly, “You are valued. You're loved. Your life has purpose.”

Good and evil interact with humanity on a regular basis in the midst of our normal lives. But their persuasion is not always

obvious. This is simply because we attribute them to ourselves, other people, and chance.

## We Have a Part to Play

In life's ocean, we may seem tossed to and fro without any control of our own, but the fact is we do have a choice. Will we choose to listen to the negative or the positive? Every person decides one way or the other, which voice they will agree with and attune their life to. We make these choices often without recognizing them. Inevitably, our thoughts, feelings, words, and actions follow the one we align with, and our lives are changed for the better or worse.

Whichever force you agree with, the other does not give up pursuing you. The difference is that one pursues to trap, and the other pursues to free. One of the unfortunate lies humanity has believed about God is that He wants to strip us of our freedom and imprison us. But the truth is He has come to remove our shackles.

*"So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God's Spirit when He adopted you as His own children." (Romans 8:15 NLT)*

*"Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." (2 Corinthians 3:17 NIV)*

## We Are Pulled From Both Sides

Even now, after experiencing so much of God's goodness, there are times when I lay my head down at night and a nagging thought haunts me. God, are you going to rescue me? Are you going to come through on my behalf? There's something hiding beneath the surface of this thought. It's a seed of doubt the enemy planted long ago.

This negative thought is a prickly vine rising from the garden of my mind, one that will grow into a spiked, thick tendril if I don't deal with it. It will choke out the good fruit-bearing plants in my life. These doubts about God's presence and goodness will grow if left untended. The distrust starts out small, barely noticeable. And if I let it, this negative perception will grow and cause more damage.

There is also another vine that brings life, its seeds scattered by God. They grow into a fruit yielding plant that reproduces more light and life. Unlike the vine which destroys, this plant brings sustenance as it bears fruit. It is a different vine—the light, the life of all men, and His name is Jesus.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5 NASB). And, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows Me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12 NIV).

*"In Him (Jesus) was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." (John 1:4-5 NKJV)*

Jesus is the greater unseen force at work in this world. The darkness is nothing compared to Him. His glorious light invites us to follow Him and find life. Despite God's power, He is humble and rarely forceful. He gently invites us to come out of the darkness and walk with Him.

## Let's Pray...

*God, please shed Your life-giving light into the dark places in my soul. Reveal to me all that's hiding there—all that belongs to me and all that doesn't. Most of all, let me see You—the real You, the Light of the World, that has never left me. My eyes are used to the dark. Help them adjust to Your Light and follow You, Jesus. So be it!*

## Next Steps:

- 1. As you go through your days, look for God to reveal Himself. He loves to do this, and He is happy to show glimpses of Himself, especially when we seek Him with a genuine heart.**
- 2. As you look for God, the enemy of your soul watches and knows when you turn toward the Light. He doesn't want you to recognize God. The enemy will work to distract you from Him, and speak false accusations against God.**
- 3. When you feel God has revealed Himself to you, even in the smallest ways, you will be faced with an opportunity to believe or doubt. I encourage you to believe and tell someone who loves Jesus about what God is doing in your life.**

## 2

# Is God Really Here With Us Now?

*“God is in the hearts of all, and they that seek shall surely find Him when they need Him most.”* —Louisa May Alcott

I remember vivid dreams of a psychopath killing my family members one by one. He would force me to watch each night as he took another’s life in a different way. I woke terrified, sweating, and feverish—still sick with the flu. The next night I told my mom I didn’t want to go to sleep again. She said to pray for Jesus to help.

When I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore, I dreamed I was tied up and the man had connected my brother to a machine that would pump him full of radiation. He was about to throw the switch, when a brightness engulfed everything. After a few seconds I could

see again, the man had gone with the dissipated light, and my family was restored. I never saw anyone in the light, but I knew it was Jesus.

This was one of my first encounters with God. He answered my prayer with a hint, more than anything else, gently leaving room for my faith.

There have been times where I could have sworn He was absent. But as my eyes have adjusted to His ways, my sight, mixed with faith, recognizes His presence more and more. Sometimes I even sense a smile as He encourages me to figure Him out. He was and is always there.

## **Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover**

Do you believe there's more to life than what we see from the outside? We've learned this about people, when finding out something unexpected about another, either to our joy or dismay. But I believe the phrase above is even better advice than we give it credit for. Almost every area of life has more depth than what we recognize immediately.

Sticking to the subject of people for now, what makes up a human is more than what you can see on the outside. Our minds house thoughts, emotions, and will—our personality. We aren't just a body and a brain though; there's a spiritual element to us.

When we look in the Bible, we learn God created humanity with at least three different parts. 1 Thessalonians 5:23 shows we have a body, soul, and spirit. Scripture distinguishes spirit and soul, but their differences can be mysterious.

*"For the word of God is alive and powerful. It is sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires."* (Hebrews 4:12 NLT)

## Another Realm

People tend to put up a facade of perfection as much as possible, but every person experiences distress in the realm of the soul. We all have troubling thoughts and emotions, which lead to bad choices. We exhibit fear, anxiety, depression, and anger. At times, deep down, we feel unfulfilled, ashamed, betrayed, unloved, insignificant, and alone.

Our turmoil can be rooted in past wounds. But these feelings also come out of nowhere, typically explained away by dysfunction in chemical processes. This is just one aspect of life that we can't see. I propose it could even come from something outside ourselves.

The problem is, we lack God's perspective. When we look at the world, we can't see absolute truth. Everything is in a constant state of flux. Even what seems solid, isn't, when you get down to the molecular level. Every conclusion humanity comes to adapts and changes over time.

We not only lack God's point of view on people and our natural world, there's another realm outside our perspective—the spiritual. Almost everyone admits quite a bit of our existence is unexplainable. Some claim this is spiritual, while others write that off as imagination or ignorance. Though we barely recognize it, this other realm is real. Maybe more real than what we perceive with our

natural senses.

## The Supernatural

Around 65% of adults say they have experienced or believe in supernatural spiritual events. This is according to a phone survey of 1000 people, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International.

People tell ghost stories. Some say relatives have communicated with them after death. Inexplicable help from strangers is received and then the good samaritans can't be found. Even the resuscitated recount after-death experiences.

You're likely to have personal accounts you can't explain too. Maybe a sound in an empty home made your hair stand on end. Have you ever seen someone out of the corner of your eye, or heard a voice calling your name—but no one was there?

Many people have experiences like this, and because they don't make sense, we almost always explain them away. The truth is, we live in a spiritual realm as much as in a natural. We just can't see it most of the time.

Why do cultures everywhere worship gods? Even people who claim there is no God still cry out to Him on their deathbed. My friend wrote a letter saying he hoped the God he questioned existed would forgive him, before he committed suicide. In grief, our thoughts, and for some reason our requests go to God.

## The Spiritual

All these things above point to the fact that we are not only natural beings, but also spiritual. Despite all our rationalizations, something in our very natures assumes there is a God. Without trying, quite automatically, we make judgments about what He is like. This is where the problem comes in.

We use our natural senses and experiences to define God. Many are haunted in their inner spiritual dimension—the heart of hearts. There is an emptiness inside and persistent nagging questions about the meaning of life. They are trying to understand spiritual truths with natural ability.

Let's look to God's Word, the Bible, to find the answers to some of these spiritual questions. It assures something you must know—God is always with you:

*“God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though He is **not far** from any one of us. ‘For in Him we live and move and have our being.’” (Acts 17:27-28 NIV) (bold mine)*

*“God is our refuge and strength, an **ever-present** help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...” (Psalm 46:1-2 NKJV) (bold mine)*

*“Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I make my bed in the nether world, behold, You are there.” (Psalm 139:7-8 NASB)*

Jesus comforted His disciples before He went to the cross by saying...

*“I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, **who***

*will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth.*" (John 14:16-17 NLT) (bold mine)

The Bible tells us the Spirit of God is at work in us and around us. But it also says there is another spiritual element in the world, one destructive in nature. God created everything and it was good in the beginning, but the world didn't stay on His track. There's opposition to His purposes, explaining our experiences of both good and bad in life. But we can't see these spiritual forces with our eyes, only the effects of them.

## What Happened When I Was Writing

One day, when I was nineteen, I had an experience I couldn't explain. I promise I wasn't high when it happened (it's horrible I have to say that)! However, it was one of the most surreal moments in my life. It was so strange; I wasn't sure what to do.

I was writing in a style called "stream of consciousness," where you compose without thinking. I know many will consider that weird, but it's what I was doing. Now I'm paying for being weird by having to share what happened while I was being weird. Maybe that will encourage you to be normal!

I used to write in this way to be silly and see what off-the-wall things came to me. This was during the time I hated God, but I wasn't thinking of Him in this moment. I was just having fun, minding my own business. But as I was writing, something changed. In my imagination, I saw a young man from behind and wrote these words as they came to me, "I know you more than you know yourself. And I love you . . . enough to give my son to die for you."

Then the man turned, and I saw he was me.

I thought I was writing from my own perspective looking at someone else. I didn't realize I was looking through God's eyes at myself until He wrote through me, "enough to give my son to die for you." I was absolutely caught off guard by this statement. Remember in the last chapter I said I would yell at God and write to Him my angry thoughts? Without warning, God had spoken back. I stopped writing and felt goosebumps on my arms.

For some months after this happened, I still didn't change a thing. I kept doing drugs. I was still depressed and angry. I didn't want to talk to anyone about God.

I had made conclusions about Him based on experiences and what happened in the world. With my limited ability to make sense of it all, I had determined God was not good. So I hated Him because I didn't understand the true story behind this life.

I share this because, while I had already judged God, He *still* revealed His presence and love. Despite my beliefs, I couldn't ignore that moment. Now, roughly 18 years later, as I've read the Bible and walked in a relationship with God most of that time, I've learned I was so wrong and His character is in line with what happened to me in that strange experience. I can now assure you He loves me, but I'm not more special to Him than anyone else.

Let this be an encouragement for those of you who are praying for God to reveal Himself to someone who seems too far-gone to be rescued. And whoever might not know God personally, I hope my story helps you see how much He wants a real relationship with you. Like He told me, He knows you and loves you... enough to give His son to die for you.

## God Is With Us

You may recognize God's presence in a church service, but do you when you're hurting or when you hurt others? What about everyday life? When you are working, or you're waiting to see the doctor, or getting your hair cut—is God with you?

I'm here to tell you, whether you recognize it or not, He's always with you. When you go to sleep at night and when you wake in the morning, He's with you.

He's with you when you are following Him. He's with you when you choose to do something wrong. He's with you although you may be running as fast as you can away from Him.

But His proximity is not the only consideration...

- **The problem—We don't know how much God cares.**
- **The reason—We don't see the true cause of the pain and suffering in the world, and we wonder how a God who is present and good could ever let it happen.**
- **The solution—Ask God to show you His goodness and His love, and thank Him for it.**

## Okay, okay, He's with me. But maybe I don't want Him to be . . .

*"Is he—quite safe?" . . . "Safe? Who said anything about safe? Course he isn't safe. But **he's good.**"—C.S. Lewis, The Lion, the Witch,*

and the Wardrobe (bold mine)

So many have the view that God causes bad things to happen, if only for their “ultimate good.” Bible-educated believers who love God can come to this well-meant conclusion. The Old Testament seems to indicate this in some places. But God wasn’t finished unfolding His plan of redemption, and Jesus had not come yet.

We need to be careful what we unintentionally blame God for, and what the implications are of the things we attribute to Him. Christians often look at tragedy as if it’s from God and somehow a good thing beyond our understanding. When a loved one dies too young, a natural disaster happens, or someone receives a diagnosis of a so-called incurable disease, people say:

- **God took them home.**
- **He must have needed them there more than He needed them here.**
- **God works in mysterious ways.**
- **He doesn’t give us more than we can take.**
- **He wouldn’t have let this happen, unless you could handle it.**
- **God must be teaching us something.**
- **God did this to lead us back to Him.**
- **God disciplines the ones He loves.**

There is an element of truth to some of this, because no matter what happens, somehow He works it out for good (Rom. 8:29). His

goals will be accomplished. He does teach us, lead us, and discipline us. But He does this despite the fallen nature of our world. Just because He picks up the pieces of our lives and makes art, doesn't mean He smashed them to begin with. Just because He knows the beginning from the end and works it all out, doesn't mean He's controlling everything and we're all automatons.

## God Gets a Bad Rap

My wife and I have a friend who is hurting so much. She believes God took someone she deeply loved from her when the person got sick and died. She's angry with God and hostile at the mention of Him. I feel so bad for God getting the blame, and our friend is suffering from the lies of the enemy. It's choking the joy out of her life.

Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10 NIV).

Becoming a father has helped me get a glimpse of God's love for me. I would give my children anything they wanted if I knew it was good for them. Not only the things I think they should have, or scarcely what they need. I don't even have to like what they want, to enjoy blessing their request. So long as it won't hurt them now or in the future. And get this, I would *never* make them sick or kill someone to teach them something. This may seem like a ridiculously obvious statement, but for some reason we don't put it past God.

*"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and*

*it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.*

*“Or what man is there among you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!” (Matthew 7:7-11 NKJV)*

Before I knew God, I had a lot of ideas about Him. One was that He sends bad things our way merely for His own cosmic purposes or to test us. This concept is far from the character of God and what is going on in this life.

People judge and misinterpret God. This is as silly as clay questioning a potter (Isa. 45:9-10), but it happens all the time. I recommend Andrea Joy Moede's book, *Misunderstood* ([GodAndYouAndMe.com/Recommends/Misunderstood](http://GodAndYouAndMe.com/Recommends/Misunderstood)), which brings clarity to God's attributes.

He's been misunderstood and falsely accused more than any person who ever lived. His ultimate goodness gives me confidence to say this—He's better than you could ever hope, dream, or imagine.

I'm going to explain about where the bad things in life come from in the next chapter. But for now, hold that thought, and let's briefly consider the goodness of God.

## God's True Character

Jesus made this amazing statement that no one is good except for God alone. He basically redefined “good.” He didn't use it like we

do. We had a good day. Our dog is a good boy when he obeys. The movie was good. She's a good mother. I got a good night's sleep. But Jesus said,

*"Only God is truly good."* (Mark 10:18 NLT)

I've learned to take Jesus at His word. What did He mean by this proclamation? Let's entertain the idea there is no "bad" in God. To the religious, the mental ascent of this concept is easy, but in many hearts, there are still questions. However, He is truly not like our definition of good. He isn't a mixture, with good ultimately outweighing bad, like we've experienced in life.

We call many things good, despite their imperfections. But Jesus loves perfectly and unconditionally. God's grace is perfect, His generosity towards us immeasurable. Our heavenly Father's mercy, the undeserved pardon we receive, is perfect. His judgment, holiness, righteousness, and purity are good to the point of perfection.

All these characteristics are seen coming together in the life, sacrifice, and resurrection of Jesus. Because God loved the world so much, He humbled Himself and became like us. He did this so He could live the perfect life we were supposed to. Then He gave that perfect life to us graciously, even though we had done nothing to deserve it.

Along with that, God carried out His righteous judgment for our wrong-doings on Jesus, when He went to the cross. Showing God's holiness, but also mercy toward us, because Jesus took the punishment we deserved. Then Jesus conquered death, as God raised Him to new life. And this new life has been offered to us as well.

*“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” (John 3:16-17 NIV)*

## Let's Pray . . .

*God, give us a deeper revelation of Your goodness. Show us the true root of the suffering in this world and our pain and trials. Forgive us when we have blamed you for evil. Help us to recognize and thank You for how You work everything out. Thank You, Jesus, that You give us good things and life to the full. Let it be done!*

## Next Steps:

- 1. Think about the negative things you are going through, and have gone through, and start to talk with God about them. Ask Him to show you what He wants to do in those situations. Invite Him to help you and work in your life.**
- 2. Ask God if you have attributed any bad things to Him. Ask His forgiveness for blaming Him. He loves you and is patient and merciful toward you. He will help you walk in His ways of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22-23).**
- 3. Look for good things in your life and even good that has come during, or out of, bad things. Start to thank God for the**

**positive. Ask Him to help you continue this habit of recognizing, and thanking Him for the good. When trials come, remember God's character and thank Him in advance for shifting things to positivity even while you are in pain.**

# 3

## Credit Where Credit Is Due!

*"We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light."—Plato*

I continued my downward spiral for months after God interrupted my writing session. Along the way, a new friend invited me to a Bible-study at a small church in the country. I had been afraid this would happen. From the moment I found out my acquaintance was a church-goer, I was on-guard. I knew eventually he would harass me by talking about God. So of course, I said yes. Wait, what? Nothing in me wanted to agree. But I went. And there God spoke to me again.

In a small drab room surrounded by my enemy (Christians), a quiet string of words went through my mind. I knew this message

was not my own thoughts. Neither was it the subject of the Bible study. I realized the words were only between God and me. He whispered, “You can think what you want about Me, but it doesn’t make it true. If you want to know Me, you need to know what I say about Myself. You need to know My Word.”

God gives everything to us by grace, and we receive from Him through faith. “Giving by grace” means the recipient doesn’t have to do anything, or be something special to deserve the gift. God’s gifts are free and not dependent upon us.

Faith is our response to what God has done and said, even when we can’t perceive it as being true with our physical senses. Biblical faith—believing God—isn’t only a mental acknowledgement of truth. Faith causes us to act. Sometimes, the action can feel and appear strange because we could have little evidence to support it.

When God said if I want to know Him, I need to know His Word, I had an opportunity to believe and respond in faith. I didn’t understand what was happening to me, but a deep hunger came with His whisper. I started reading the Bible non-stop. I started going to four Bible studies a week, along with Sunday School and church. I couldn’t get enough of His Word. Does that sound like me from Chapter 1?

As I read His Word, I started realizing I was attributing things to God that weren’t true. For example, my belief God allowed bad things to happen to us. Such thinking is commonly held and could be considered “correct” out of context. But I want you to think of this from a different perspective. Have patience while I explain my point. God’s not only with you always, but He really is good. He didn’t cause all the pain that’s happened to you.

- **The problem—We don’t know who God made us to be, how negative spiritual forces use us, and the depth of God’s**

**goodness.**

- **The reason—We're entrenched in lies we've believed about ourselves, others, and God.**
- **The solution—Read His Word. Ask God to show you His truth, and begin to exercise faith.**

## **Where to Start? How About The Very Beginning?**

*“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.*

*Then God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” (Genesis 1:2-28 NKJV)*

In Psalm 8:6 (NLT) the writer is speaking to God about humanity. “You gave them charge of everything You made, putting all things under their authority . . .”

When God made mankind, He gave us responsibility in the world. In other words, before we messed up, God allowed people to make choices and even have authority. Many don't want to recognize this, but the Earth has been ours since the beginning. Despite how

quickly we learned to shift responsibility (Gen. 3:12-13), it actually never changed hands.

God gave people this dominion without condition. He never said, "I'm giving you authority, until you sin." Or "If you become deceived, I'll take back the control I've given you." One thing God will not do is go back on His Word. Everything is held together by the power of His Word (Hebrews 1:3), and nothing can break it. He had already instructed Adam about mankind's relationship with the world.

The Bible holds the answer to why the Earth is in such a horrible state. God had given Adam and Eve one rule in the Garden of Eden, which had to do with not eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They sinned when they broke this rule. Sin is an immoral thing done, or the right thing not done. The Hebrew people used the word, sin, in archery. It meant to fail and miss the bullseye.

Adam and Eve missed the target when they did the thing God told them not to do in the Garden of Eden. Because of this act of disobedience, an epidemic of sin along with pain and suffering entered this life. They had the perfect utopia we all long for now. But they submitted themselves to evil, and it all went to pieces.

## **The Enemy**

The serpent convinced Adam and Eve to sin by telling them God didn't want them to be like Him (something they already were according to Genesis 1:2), and enticing them to decide what is good and evil apart from God. They fell for the snakes trick and guess what? Humanity continues believing the same lie Adam and Eve fell for.

We are still trying to place ourselves in God's role and determine right from wrong. We continue to give up our God-given authority over the earth. The enemy I mentioned in Chapter 1 controls the world now through people's authority just as he did in the garden. Like Adam, this happens when we agree with the evil spirit's whispers.

*"... the whole world lies under the sway of the wicked one."* (1 John 5:19 NIV)

*"And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience."* (Ephesians 2:1-2 NASB)

*"Satan, who is the god\* of this world, has blinded the minds of those who don't believe. They are unable to see the glorious light of the Good News. They don't understand this message about the glory of Christ, who is the exact likeness of God."* (2 Corinthians 4:4 NLT)

\*That's a little 'g.' "The god of this world," Satan, has blinded people's minds so they won't believe God and see the truth about Jesus. This serpent has continued to lie about God since the garden.

## The Effect of Sin

God made humanity in His image, sharing some of His qualities with us. In the beginning, He even called us "good." (Gen. 1:31).

People reflect God's love, grace, mercy, patience, justice—and goodness. But when Adam and Eve sinned, they died spiritually. From that point on, we've held on to God's standards but lost the ability to live up to them.

If we take a closer look at mankind, we'll find our desire is for good, but we can't escape the evil within us. This is the result of humanity's descent into sinful nature. We've become lost in the darkness which blinded our hearts. Our souls have a vague memory of something called "home." But we can't find it, because sin separates us from our Creator and Father God.

Before recognizing the truth, each person thinks he's on a balancing post. In his mind, he teeters between light and darkness, assuring himself he is good. He struggles not to tip over. But in truth, he already has. He never felt the fall because it happened generations ago in his ancestor, Adam.

*"Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned —"* (Romans 5:12 NASB)

The sad but undeniable truth is: Sin permeates the whole world. It's a part of every person's being, so we cannot keep from sinning. Even the most pious people you know struggle with impure thoughts and motives (Jeremiah 17:9-10). No person apart from God can escape this.

*"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* (Romans 3:23 NKJV)

Adam and Eve's personal relationship with God became strained when they chose to sin. They had trusted Satan's deception

about God, and in that moment the curse of death entered the world. Romans 6:23 says the punishment for sin is death. This doesn't only mean physical death, but also eternal death—a cutting off from God.

Like a flower cut from the root, Adam and Even's physical lives began to fade and eventually die from lack of spiritual sustenance. The joy of life and fellowship with God was broken. Sin uprooted their spirits from the source, the Holy Spirit of God.

Ever since, mankind has been born spiritually dead. Every man and woman to this day starts out with the nature of Adam, slaves to sin, under the sway of the enemy, unable to perceive spiritual truth on their own.

## **Judging Others (But Not Ourselves)**

None of us live up to the standards we believe the rest of the world should. You may not like my saying this, but it's true. Many times, we see the faults in other people, but we don't in ourselves.

For instance, while in our cars, we judge everyone driving around us. People cut us off, drive too slow, ride our bumper, veer into our lane, and sit too long when the light turns green. But at times we do many of those things too. In our own eyes, we drive better than everyone else on the road, but we don't drive perfectly.

Life is much the same way. This is why the Bible says all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). God is absolutely perfect. If He were on the road, He would be the only one driving without flaw. There's a standard each person strives for and also expects everyone else to meet. But God is the standard-bearer. He created the true rules for living, and He is the only one able to

fulfill them.

This is why we all fall short of the perfection our souls long for. The Bible speaks of our hearts as being stone. Until they are reconnected to God, we are unable to have true joy and unconditional love.

From childhood, we recognize what life and community should be. It doesn't take long before we learn our ideal is out of reach. This is when we get angry at the injustice of the world and blame God.

Sin doesn't only account for the atrocities we see in humanity, but even affects the world around us. In the Garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve sinned, there was no sickness. Animals were not threats. Natural disasters may not have ever happened before the flood spoken of in Genesis 6.

Our pain and suffering is not God's fault though, in fact He has given us a way to receive what we long for. A great Christian named Augustine once said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." There is a homing beacon in each of us. We can have paradise—but it won't come apart from Him. We must reunite our spirits with the Holy Spirit, and that only comes through God's Son, Jesus Christ.

## **Believe His Word**

We've looked at some verses that reveal God gave the world to us, but it's under the sway of the enemy and our sinful nature. Now, let's see what the Bible says about God, and if He causes our pain and suffering to somehow suit His purposes.

*"The Lord is gracious and merciful; Slow to anger and great in*

## Nichols / FINDING GOD'S LOVE COMFORT AND

*lovingkindness.*" (Psalm 145:8 (NASB))

*"... God is light and in Him is no darkness at all."* (1 John 1:5 NKJV)

*"The faithful love of the Lord never ends! His mercies never cease. Great is His faithfulness; His mercies begin afresh each morning."* (Lamentations 3:22-23 NLT)

*"... He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."* (2 Peter 3:9 NIV)

*"The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love."* (1 John 4:8 NASB)

God—is—love. Consider these famous words about love as if they were talking about God.

*"Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NIV)

If this kind of love is God's pattern for us, how much more does He love in this way? Since 1 John says God is love, let's swap out the word "love" and read the passage from 1 Corinthians again.

*"(God) is patient, (God) is kind. (He) does not envy, (He) does not boast, (He) is not proud. (He) does not dishonor others, (He) is not self-*

*seeking, (He) is not easily angered, (He) keeps no record of wrongs. (God) does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. (He) always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” Always!*

In Chapter 1, I had you think back to the worst thing that ever happened to you and asked, “Where was God?” Consider God’s character revealed in the verses above. Meanwhile, remember people and the enemy have a level of control here on earth. Now, do you see that God was with you on your very worst day, but He wasn’t the cause of it?

## Let's Pray...

*God, we ask for you to let us see life from Your point of view. Help us to seek and find the truth from You and Your Word. Please forgive us for believing and acting on lies about ourselves and You. Please begin to change our minds so our ideas line up with what You say. Let us agree with You and not the lie from the darkness. Thank you for not condemning us but instead sending Jesus. In Jesus' name we pray, amen. So be it!*

## Next Steps:

- 1. Start scheduling regular times of reading God’s word. Begin in the New Testament, in the Gospel of Mark or John. As you read, ask God to reveal the forces at work in the struggles people faced in the Bible. Also ask God to help you identify the source of the pain and suffering in your own life history. Did it come from people making bad choices, sickness, or natural**

disaster?

2. The enemy will try to distract you and/or accuse God, even attempting to use God's Word against Himself. The more I read the Bible, the more I understand the context, perspectives of the people, and God's character. The Bible's confusing parts become clear when judged in light of God's goodness, our limited view, and Satan's corruption. Trust God when what you are reading or experiencing doesn't make sense, and ask Him to show you His truth.

3. Notice in the Gospels, Jesus perfectly represents God's character. He said, "I and the Father are one. Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father (John 14:6-11 paraphrased)." Over and over He forgives people and sets them free. Jesus heals the sick, time and time again. In some places it says He healed all who were sick. He even stopped a storm His disciples feared would kill them. The enemy perverts good things by stealing, killing, and destroying. God gives life—He purifies, generously gives, protects, heals, repairs, creates, and builds.

4. Again, take a survey of your life, thoughts, and words. Make sure you aren't blaming God for something He didn't do. Make sure you are giving Him credit for what He has done. The enemy wants us to feel guilt and shame and that we are utterly alone. The enemy does not want you to talk about what you are going through or have gone through. It will blame God, other people, and yourself in these situations. A good indicator of which power is at work is what it would lead to if you believed it. Would it lead you towards God, into the light, and good things, or away from God, into darkness, and bad things?

# 4

## The Light

*“God loves each of us as if there was only one of us.”* —Augustine

When I think back on the words God spoke to me at that Bible-study, I see He wants to be known and loved, even as I do. This thought contradicts many “religious” people’s image of God. He, who created everything and is lacking nothing, wants to be known and loved by us? Don’t get me wrong, I’m not saying He made the world because He needed us. God had eternal and perfect community in His triune being—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Still, He wants us. Not only us in general, but you and me specifically. He pushed past my walls and spoke to me one-on-one. He pursues you too, although your interactions with God will be different from mine. No two friends have the same friendship with anyone else. How and what He speaks to us isn’t a cookie-cutter experience. Our relationship with God is active, growing, living, and

changing as we ourselves mature. And this relationship can bring us into a maturity we never imagined.

Think about my experience. I felt no one could ever love me, if they knew me. But God said, "I know you more than you know yourself, and I love you." Despite His obvious reach towards me, I didn't respond in kind. Did He give up? No, later He put Himself even further in enemy territory and confronted my false ideas. He said, "If you want to know Me, you need to know My word."

Here I was, only thinking of myself (in the most worldly way). I wanted people around me to understand me, but I especially wanted someone from the opposite sex to know and love me. In the midst of this need, God says, "I know you. I love you."

Ironically, I hated God for what I thought I knew about Him. But He never stopped loving me. Most of us will not find it easy to get over being falsely judged and accused. But when I misjudged God, He showed me mercy and didn't write me off. He invited me to know Him instead!

God is so misunderstood. I had no concept of His unconditional love and goodness. I've come a long way in this wonderful relationship, but I've probably still only scratched the surface. I truly believe it's impossible for us to imagine the depth and perfection of His unconditional love.

God wants to be known by us. And to be loved. He doesn't give up on us as long as there's a chance we'll come to Him. As long as we have breath, His love always hopes and always perseveres.

When I started studying the Bible, I began feeling an urgency which grew until I couldn't ignore it. My relationship with God was becoming real and healthy. He had planted a spiritual seed inside me and the vine of life and light was breaking out of its shell.

It wasn't long before I gave in and surrendered myself to the

Lord. I longed for my whole being to be consumed by Him, for the darkness to be washed away, to be saturated and filled to overflowing with light, to discard my old dead way of being, and be born again with new life.

*“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. This is why it is said: “Wake up, sleeper, rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.” (Ephesians 5:8-14 NIV)*

## Where is God?

“Believers” are those who have placed their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. They have received the gift of Him dying for their sins and given their life to Him. Because of this their sins are no longer recognized by God and they have been restored to the relationship their soul has always longed for.

In case you haven’t noticed, I’m not only talking to the believers or unbelievers. God is actually with both. Don’t get me wrong, I’m not at all saying unbelievers have received the gift of eternal life without submitting to God in faith. I’m not saying when you sin, or aren’t following God, there aren’t consequences.

But everyone reading this, believer or not, needs to recognize

He is with you—always. As long as you have breath, you can't escape His presence, and you can't escape His love. The answer to the question "Where is God?" is, "God is with you."

- **The problem—We're not convinced God really wants us.**
- **The reason—Deep down there is a feeling of unworthiness in us, that tells us we are not lovable.**
- **The solution—Ask Jesus to make the perfect love of the Father real and personal to you.**

## **The Gift of Jesus—The Light of the World**

In the last chapter, we saw how all of us are infected with a sinful nature. With this being the case, who can be right with God? If only the truly righteous can enter heaven, what hope do we have?

God knows all things. From eternity He saw we would fail in our responsibility to rule over His creation while walking with Him. He knew in advance humanity would sin, and instead of ditching us, He planned our rescue. God's creation Adam ushered darkness into our existence, but He broke the curse by sending His son Jesus, the Light of God.

*"For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." (1 Corinthians 15:22-23 NIV)*

God's word could not be broken, and He set mankind (with free-will) in charge of this world. So to accomplish our redemption,

almighty God humbled Himself to become like us. The Bible says Jesus was the fullness of God in human form. He was not merely a man, but God in the flesh.

Because of this, Jesus was the only human who could repair our mess. He was the only one able to tip the scales of righteousness. No one else has been able to live a perfect life without sin. The amazing truth is, before God even created the world, Jesus took our death sentence so we could be right with the Father (Revelation 13:8).

*"Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through Him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world.*

*"Everything was created through Him and for Him. He existed before anything else, and He holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is His body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So He is first in everything.*

*"For God in all His fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through Him God reconciled everything to Himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross.*

*"This includes you who were once far away from God. You were His enemies, separated from Him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now He has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in His*

*physical body.*

*"As a result, He has brought you into His own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before Him without a single fault. But you must continue to believe this truth and stand firmly in it. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News." (Colossians 1:15-23 NLT)*

But Satan continues to whisper, "the Light (Jesus, God, redemption, Christianity) is a lie." Ironically, he is the one who distorts all truth. The enemy blames God for every trial, even as he twists the knife in our heartache. Satan tells us God doesn't want us to enjoy life and perverts His beautiful gifts—marriage, parenthood, friendship, intelligence, creativity, etc.

The enemy has been telling the same lies about God and about humanity ever since the Garden of Eden. Chief among them is, "You can't trust God and you need to live apart from Him." But God continually gives mankind the opportunity to believe Him and become His children again. You get to decide who to listen to. Will you accept what Jesus did for you?

## **The Abusive Father**

As long as we reject God's fatherhood, we may think we are free, but there is another spirit who seizes God's rightful position in our hearts. Jesus warned the unbelieving Jews of this in John 8:41-44 (NLT), when He said they imitated their true father:

*They replied, "We aren't illegitimate children! God Himself is our*

*true Father.”*

*Jesus told them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, because I have come to you from God. I am not here on my own, but He sent me. Why can’t you understand what I am saying? It’s because you can’t even hear me! For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.”*

Jesus never ceases to amaze me. In the quote above, He’s talking to the religious leaders of the Jewish culture. He straight up told them, their daddy was the devil! Not only does this give us insight into the devil (he is “the father of lies”), but it also reveals something amazing and frightful. Jesus was not just name-calling. These people had no idea they belonged to their father the devil.

I referenced the verse below, in the last chapter, when talking about how the world is under the sway of the enemy. Notice there’s a reference to sonship in it:

*“And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the **sons of disobedience.**”* (Ephesians 2:1-2 NASB) (bold mine)

The word “sons” isn’t written as merely poetic language. Everyone since Adam was born into this sonship of disobedience. It comes along with the plague called our sinful nature.

If Jesus were to call you a “son of disobedience” or a child of the

devil, you'd either feel hopeless or hostile. But what if He said it with love, mercy, grace, and an offer of freedom? The Great Physician lets us know our condition and the way to be healed.

The Bible says the punishment for sin is death (Romans 6:23). Our condition will kill us eternally, but God made a way to pay for sins through the bloodshed and death of something innocent (Leviticus 17:11, Hebrews 9:11-18). Jesus's sacrifice on the cross was the ultimate payment for the sins of the world.

Father God loosed Satan's bonds on us by paying for our freedom with the life of His willing Son—Jesus.

## Finally adopted!

*“God decided in advance to adopt us into His own family by bringing us to Himself through Jesus Christ. This is what He wanted to do, and it gave Him great pleasure. So we praise God for the glorious grace He has poured out on us who belong to His dear Son. He is so rich in kindness and grace that He purchased our freedom with the blood of His Son and forgave our sins.” (Ephesians 1:5-7 NLI)*

*“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all people . . .  
(1 Timothy 2:5-6 NIV)*

*“For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out,*

*“Abba! Father!” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, heirs also, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.” (Romans 8:14-17 NASB)*

God knew no human would be able to live up to His standards, so He met them for us. Jesus lived a sinless life, and was punished in our place, so our spirits could join with God. Those who put their faith in Jesus, He spiritually positions in His death, and raises us with Jesus into His life. From that point God considers us His children.

God loves us. He extends the chance to experience the life we long for and the one He meant we live. He offers us the adoption papers, but we must take them, and put our lives in His hands. The Bible is clear: to get to be with God in heaven, you must receive Jesus's work on the cross. God did His part. We can either deny or accept this gift.

If you haven't surrendered to God, I earnestly pray you will. Even though He doesn't stop pursuing us in this life, the Bible indicates we can only make the choice while we live in this world (Hebrews 9:27, Matthew 7:21-23, Luke 16:19-31). We never know when our time here will be up, and then we will either be eternally with God who is good, or eternally separated from Him by our own choosing.

If you want to receive what Jesus did for you, there's a short appendix called “Giving Your Life to God” towards the end of the book. Go there and come back when you finish. You will never be the same! Giving yourself to God and receiving His adoption as His own child will save your soul as well as your life in this world.

If you gave your life to God before reading this, He's always

inviting you to dive deeper. Because of God's unending depth, we can have an ever-deepening relationship with Him. I submitted myself to God a long time ago, but I continue giving more of my life to Him, and experiencing the greater abundance He created me to enjoy. Your devotion and love for God will grow as you continue to receive His endless love for you.

## Let's pray . . .

*Jesus, thank You for giving Your life for me, even though I was a child of disobedience. Father, thank you for choosing me in love, and not grudgingly. I'm so thankful you loved and accepted me with all my faults, and you aren't leaving me broken. Despite my unloveliness, you have lifted me up and transformed me into a different person. Thank you for giving me your Holy Spirit, who reminds me I am your child. Please help me live every day with these truths in mind. So be it!*

## Next Steps:

- 1. As best as you can, start recognizing God is the perfect Father—He really is good. Don't harbor negative thoughts about Him. This is even possible if you had a negligent or abusive father. Schedule a time to meet with the Lord daily. During these devotionals, give Him undivided attention in worship, His Word, and prayer. Talk one-on-one with God, unloading all your needs. Also try to quiet your soul and listen. One of the first times I recognized God speaking to me was during such a quiet time. He said, "I love you," the most**

precious words anyone can hear. It wasn't audible, but in my spirit I recognized the words. Sometimes He speaks simple encouragement like this. Sometimes He gives direction and wisdom. Sometimes He corrects. But He never condemns.

2. When God speaks, you have an opportunity to believe or doubt. Everyone wonders if they really heard God, if it was their own voice, or even the enemy's. Some criteria to know if God's speaking to you is: Does what you "heard" line up with His character and the Bible? Is it something you would think, or do the words contain a wisdom beyond you? Will it produce good things if you accept and act on it?

3. As best as you are able, soak in the Holy Bible. It is the authoritative Word of God, so we must judge everything from it. Unfortunately there are a lot of differing applications and interpretations in the world. Get a Bible translation which I have quoted in this book or that is recommended by a Christian you know who is strong in faith. While navigating these, stay connected to God and trust Him. As you get into the habit of spending regular time with Him, your relationship will grow. You will learn how to be real with God as His child, and how to listen for His direction. He is the perfect Daddy. He will lead you into all truth.

# 5

## God and You and Me

*“God has been good and He will continue to manifest His goodness. Let us approach these days expecting to see the goodness of the Lord manifest. Let us be strong and of good courage, for the Lord will fight for us if we stand in faith.”* — Francis Frangipane

I started this book focusing on a few common questions about life and God. Why is there so much turmoil? Where is God? Does He care? The boiled-down answers are: we are responsible for this world, God is here and active with us, and His personal love and goodness are immeasurable. God is able to complete His good plan, despite our mistakes and the fallen nature of this world. He’s always been present and active in your life, attempting to redeem every part so you would come to know and rely on Him.

God’s brought so much healing to me. I feel like the wounds I received and inflicted on myself are from a different life or even

another person's story. I wasn't immediately healed though; it took time. And I've continued to face various trials, some brought on by my own mistakes, and some from the fallen world we live in. But as I've learned to constantly walk with God through hardships, I've experienced breakthrough. Sometimes in the quick and miraculous ways where you can't deny it was God, but more often in the day-to-day interactions with God and His people, that bring change over time.

## How Should We Interact with God?

Even when people haven't acknowledged God, He has acted in the world and brought about good things. He wants us to recognize Him, and give Him the honor He deserves, but He doesn't need us intrinsically. In fact, He's been at work since before time as we know it—amazingly working on our behalf before He had even created us.

*"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." (Revelation 22:13 NKJV)*

*"He (Jesus) was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you who through Him are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God." (1 Peter 1:20-21 NASB)*

*"Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed by My Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for*

*you since the creation of the world.” (Matthew 25:34 NIV)*

God has been active since the beginning and thankfully many see Him working in their lives, but it's important to consider what our relationship to Him should be like. Can we interact with God? What happens when we talk to Him? Can we experience Him in a meaningful way?

Even though I prayed before I was a Christian, I didn't think much about how I spoke to God or if He might speak to me. I said prayers I had memorized from childhood, prayers from my culture, involuntary cries for help, and plenty of accusations.

When I gave my life to the Lord, I struggled with feeling very formal and religious while praying. I didn't know how to talk to Him. I wanted to treat God as my Father and see myself as His son. But I found my tendencies were to address Him like a peasant before an emperor.

I fear the Lord in the Biblical sense, in other words, His perfect holiness demands respect. I recognize He is great, mighty, awesome, completely pure, and a righteous Judge and King. But He is not a tyrant who rules subjects from a distance. Jesus shows us that God is a King who eats with His people and gives His life on the front-line of battle.

God is not the kind of Father who works twelve hours, and then goes to a bar to avoid His family. He doesn't fly off the handle with His children and become abusive. He is a Father who communicates, provides, teaches, plays with, protects, and holds His children.

So I do regard God in high esteem, but I have to remember my standing has changed because of Christ. Where I used to be an enemy, I am now God's child and He invites me into the throne

room, even to sit beside Him just as Jesus does.

*“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” (Hebrews 4:16 NKJV)*

Talking with God, in a relational way, wasn't intuitive. But eventually, I learned to converse with Him the way I would a friend. I guess it makes sense when you think about talking with someone who you have baggage with. If you keep at it, there will come healing, and then eventually an ease and friendship. I kept going to God, like working on a strained relationship. Obviously this relationship was not damaged by Him, but my own misguided perception of Him.

Practically, it looked like disciplining myself to have early morning times tucked away to pray and read my Bible. I talked with Him first in regular set-aside times of devotion like this, but now I'm also in constant communication as I go through my day. I still pray in the quiet-place, but I continue submitting my thoughts to Him as well, while doing my best to listen and follow Him everywhere I go.

The sooner you can talk to Him in a non-religious way, the sooner you will recognize the personhood of God. He is a person who loves you, His child, as a perfect Father *who feels*. If we look, we'll find God exhibits emotions in the Bible. He gets jealous over His people. He laughs. He cries. God is not mechanical. He is not tame. He is the living God, who desires a deep and intimate connection with you.

## How God Changes Everything

His relationship with you is very personal, but believe it or not, it's also meant to change the world. Since you've received God's grace and become His child and friend, He wants you to help others do the same. In fact, He plans to show the world who He is and what He's like through you.

- **The problem—We rely too much on God working apart from us.**
- **The reason—Down deep, we don't want to take responsibility for our actions, or for the chaos around us.**
- **The solution—Submit to God, walk with Him, and see how He will use you to positively impact the world.**

God works in people's lives by the power of His Holy Spirit. He moves as He pleases, coordinating events and working all things together for His plans. God is able to use bad things, even though not initiated by Him, for good purposes.

*"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28 NASB)*

Even though God is capable of working on His own, a primary way He accomplishes His plans is actually through us. Never forcing us, He uses those who are submitted to Him, acting in conjunction with their wills. As we give ourselves to Him, God fills us with His Holy Spirit, enabling us to live lives that represent Him.

*“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by Him we cry, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory.” (Romans 8:14-17.NIV)*

When I was angry at God, I didn’t realize how He was using all the people around me. My mother’s prayers, the email from an old high-school friend saying God put me on his heart, and the acquaintance who invited me to church, were just a few of the means God used to redeem me. Once I became His child, even with all my old flaws, I saw Him now working through *me* for good in other's lives.

I stumbled into this at first, letting God bless people through me. But over time, I grew in recognizing if I allow God to use me, He will help people in ways which have everlasting effects. In the gospels, Jesus gave us a few “great” things to do. Christians refer to them as:

The great commandment,

*“‘You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.” (Matthew 22:37-40 NLT)*

And the great commission,

*“Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:19–20 NKJV)

At the end of 2015, my wife and I started feeling nudges by God to take these “greats” of loving God, loving people, and making disciples seriously and practically. So we prayed and followed God’s direction, which led to us moving our family about six short months later. You may assume it was to a foreign land, but it was just 9.8 miles down the road. We found ourselves in an apartment community with the purpose of blessing our neighbors and sharing the love of God.

We were aware of this goal each time we set foot outside our door, watching for opportunities God gave us, sometimes avoiding them out of fear, sometimes missing them and realizing too late, and sometimes getting to see God touch a life through us. We resolved to continue loving our neighbors whether we felt scared, tired, or incapable. After two years, we’ve gotten to plant seeds of faith with hundreds of people, and even seen tangible fruit from our labor.

We’ve been a part of eternal change—like the young girl recommitting her life to Christ, several families connecting with God and the church, and hearts we thought would never be open becoming softened towards our heavenly Father. While we may not know what other ways God has used us in this time, what’s most important is that we’ve obediently walked with Him in love. At the time of writing this, He is calling us to take another step towards fulfilling the great commission, as we become involved with international missions.

He desires to use you in powerful ways to help others as well. As the Spirit of God leads you, you will fulfill the purposes of His heart. It may not be to work as a missionary, preach, or write a book about God, but He will show you how He desires to bless people through you. As you perceive Him and respond to Him with a submitted will, He will begin to change you and the world around you.

## Reflect God

As you pursue God, He will change your perspective, thoughts, and feelings. He will continue to amaze you with how close He is and how loving He is. God is with you always, and He never stops loving you. He wants good things for you, but He won't force them on you. You will experience the blessings He has to offer you, as you walk in relationship with Jesus, and He changes you to be more like Him.

In Exodus 33, Abraham asked God to show him His glory. Human eyes could not behold so much greatness, but God let the man see part of Him. As He passed by, God put His hand in front of Abraham so he only saw His back. God's presence and goodness, in this brief moment, made Abraham's face literally shine. In a similar way, if you spend time with God, a figurative light will radiate from you for the world to see.

*“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:14-16*

*NLT)*

God accomplishes His will on Earth as His children read the Bible, pray, speak, and act in agreement with Him. In other words, God gets things done through born-again believers who listen to Him and obey Him. When we do this, we are changed into a reflection of God for the world to see.

Do Christians perfectly represent Him? No, but that doesn't stop Him from shining His light through us. Can God work apart from people? Yes, He can do whatever He wants. But we should not let that make us lazy, as if He is going to do everything without us. He tells us what to do through His Word and the Holy Spirit. We shouldn't excuse ourselves from living a life as His ambassador.

God provided the way for you to come to Him, through Jesus. Using that freedom and the righteousness you've received in Christ, live your life according to His plans. Often I pray, "God, help me receive everything You have for me, and nothing the enemy has for me." What God makes available to us is free, but we must choose to take part in His gifts. I hope you will let God show the people around you, He's closer and more loving than they could ever imagine!

The next book I plan to release is on this topic of who we are meant to be in Christ, why we are in this world, and how we should live. It will hopefully be published within a few months of the release of this book. If you'd like to get updates or if you're interested in being an advance reader of this and future works, go to my website: [Godandyouandme.com/Advance-Reader](http://Godandyouandme.com/Advance-Reader)

## God Speaks

In our friendships, one person doesn't do all the talking. They listen and share thoughts. Yet many Christians do all the speaking in

their relationship with God. He speaks to people today like He did in the Bible. He wants to talk with His people, but a lot of Christians don't believe or recognize He still speaks to us, so they never allow time to hear Him.

Ask God to speak to you, believe—and even expect—He will. In your devotional time, wait for Him to speak. Quiet your mind and listen. When He does, it will be in line with the truth of the Bible and His character of love, mercy, grace, and goodness. If He calls you to do something, it will lead to positive change. Trust and obey Him. As you step out in faith, your relationship with God will deepen and you'll see His generous blessings.

I'm currently writing a book on how to hear God communicate with us, a key element in living a life of adventure with God. I can't say yet when it will be finished, but hopefully within a year of this book's release. It will cover different ways God speaks to us, what we can do to better hear Him, and what to do when He speaks. In the mean-time, I've recorded a free teaching on this topic, available here: [Godandyouandme.com/Hearing-God](http://Godandyouandme.com/Hearing-God)

I hope my words have blessed you. If they have, take a moment and ask God to show you who else they could help. He may bring someone to your mind that is going through a hard time, or struggling with questions about life and God. You have an opportunity to be a part of helping them by suggesting this book. Be sure to let them know they can get the audiobook for free at [GodAndYouAndMe.com/Where-is-God-Audio](http://GodAndYouAndMe.com/Where-is-God-Audio)

In closing, despite the horrible things we see and experience in this life, God will always be with us. He's been by our sides, hoping we will lean on Him for comfort and peace. He loves each person immeasurably. Continue this journey of receiving His love and

sharing it with others. God bless you richly!

## Let's Pray...

*God, I submit myself to You. Do whatever You want to do with me. I give up living my own way, and blaming You when things don't work out. Show me Your way. Show me how You've never left me, and You've always loved me. Show me Your glory. I will wait for You to reveal Yourself to me. I will seek You and give You room to speak into my life. I will talk to You and expect You to talk to me. Help me to follow You all the days of my life. I love You, God. I pray all this, in Jesus's name. Amen.*

## Next Steps

- 1. When you give your life to God through Jesus's free gift of salvation, the Bible says you become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Living as a new creation should look differently than your previous life. As you read the Bible and talk with God, believe the things He says about who you are and how you should live. Because what He says seems impossible, we often gloss over it or dismiss it. The life we are called to live is for today, not just for the future, so receive His Word and act on it now.**
- 2. God wants to speak into your life. You can learn to receive God's personal words for you and follow His guidance. Ask Him to speak to you, believe He will, start listening, and follow**

**Him!**

**3. Never give up the belief that God is with you and loves you deeply. Trust Him, walk with Him, and talk with Him. Let Him change you and change the world through you.**

## **Additional Notes**

Reviews on sites like Amazon, iBooks, Kobo, and Good Reads help books from little-known authors like me to be read. Please take a couple of minutes to review this book on one or more of these sites. I appreciate your feedback, so I can learn to communicate God's heart better, and hopefully reach more people. Thank you in advance!

If you would like to contact me, go to my website [GodAndYouAndMe.com](http://GodAndYouAndMe.com) or email me at [John@GodAndYouAndMe.com](mailto:John@GodAndYouAndMe.com). You can also find weekly, short words of encouragement on [GodAndYouAndMe.com/blog](http://GodAndYouAndMe.com/blog).

# Appendix 1

## Giving Your Life to God

When you decide to believe and receive Jesus's sacrifice which makes you right with God, there is a miracle that takes place. Christians refer to it in many ways which come from the Bible: "being born again," "receiving new life," "being adopted as a child of God," "becoming a joint-heir with Jesus," "putting your trust in Jesus," "salvation/being saved," "making Jesus Lord of your life," "dying to self," "living for Jesus," "deliverance/being delivered/being set free," "committing your life to Christ," "sanctification/being sanctified/being set apart for God," "becoming a disciple of Jesus," "giving your life to God."

In this miracle, all of these things are (or should be) happening, some we can see and take part in, and some require faith to believe

they've transpired. God saving you is mysterious because there are many elements to it we can't see, and many parts that seem incompatible. Salvation happens both over time, and is instantaneous. It is a free gift from God, yet will ask for your life. Your spirit comes alive immediately, yet your soul (thoughts and feelings) is changed over time. You will continue to struggle with sin, but you are set free from slavery to sin. You will feel like nothing's changed at times, but you are truly awakened to new life.

You give your life to God when you recognize your desperate need for Him, your way of living falls short of what you know it should be, and you don't know how to make your life pleasing to God. When you humble yourself and come to your Maker asking for help, He saves you. He's provided everything you need through His son, Jesus. But you must submit your life to God, choose to let Jesus be your Lord (the master and ruler whom you obey), become His disciple (let Him teach and train you), and follow Him (walk with Him and let Him lead you).

## Jesus Gave His Life for You

Because God wanted you and me—and the whole world—to be saved, He sent Jesus as a man, to be our mediator. If it wasn't for Jesus, the world would be stuck as enemies of God and destined to hell. Apart from His work on the cross, there is no hope for anyone.

*“. . . God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony given at the proper time.”* (1 Timothy

2:3-6 NASB)

*“For this is how God loved the world: He gave His one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent His Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through Him.*

*“There is no judgment against anyone who believes in Him. But anyone who does not believe in Him has already been judged for not believing in God’s one and only Son. And the judgment is based on this fact: God’s light came into the world, but people loved the darkness more than the light, for their actions were evil. All who do evil hate the light and refuse to go near it for fear their sins will be exposed. But those who do what is right come to the light so others can see that they are doing what God wants.” (John 3:16-21 NLT)*

Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, innocently died a criminal’s death, and God raised Him to life again. His life which overcame the grave is freely given to you who believe. Jesus took the punishment you deserved for all the ways you’ve fallen short of God’s goodness. He redeems you from the constant internal struggle you face with the sinful nature you received from Adam. He offers you the life God meant you to live.

*“If you declare with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9 NIV)*

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

Jesus didn't deserve His tragic death, but He knew God was with Him and there was a reason for His suffering. He believed in His Father's goodness, even while carrying the cross He died on. He offered His life on that torture device, knowing God would use it to save millions of broken lives.

Just as He was with Jesus, God is with you. As He did with the cross of Christ, God will take the suffering you've faced, heal you, and then use it to heal others. We all have darkness in our story, but God brings the light like the dawn.

God was with you during the worst thing that happened in your life. Whatever you're going through right now, Jesus is by your side. And when you've given your life to Him, the Holy Spirit will never leave you, wherever the future takes you.

*“And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.”* (Romans 8:28 NKJV)

Sometimes we give too much focus to Jesus's cross and not enough to His resurrection. His sacrifice was on the way to His goal, conquering death and bringing us life. Revelation 1:17-18 says He obtained the keys to hell, which unlocked the gates representing the eternal curse of our spiritual separation from God. When God raised Jesus to life, He canceled the death-sentence of sin, making a path

to Him for anyone who accepts His Son as Lord.

*“... God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”* (Romans 4:24-25 NIV)

Out of the misery of the false accusations against Jesus, His torture, humiliation, and death, God brought the most good to mankind since creation. Jesus endured the cross to rescue us out of the evil of our world. Having finished His task, Jesus sits by God's throne, and every tongue will confess Him as Lord (Philippians 2:11)!

*“Because of the joy awaiting Him, He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now He is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne.”* (Hebrews 12:2 NLT)

Because of Christ's obedience, whoever wants to be saved from their sins can be. All you must do is trust in Him and place your life in His hands. When you put your faith in Him, you are raised out of death to the life He created you for. Relying on Jesus's work, makes you right with God and begins a relationship with Him that lasts forever.

## **Become a Child of God**

To forgive yourself and others from the pain of your past and to have God's help with the problems you face now and in your future, you need to know who He is and who you are in relationship to Him. Jesus made a way for us to become God's children.

*“But as many as received Him (Jesus), to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.” (John 1:12-13 NKJV)*

Jesus was confident in who He was as the Son of God and who the Father is. This assurance helped Him go through the darkness of His crucifixion. Can we know the Father like that? Can we be confident in His love for us?

God paid for us to be able to boldly come to Him by the blood of His Son. So the answer is a resounding, “Yes!” He is worthy of our confidence in Him, and we should also trust in who He says we are.

As children of God we should walk in faith and not doubt or fear. By His death, Jesus showed we can trust in God’s goodness, no matter what darkness we endure. Jesus’s resurrection and our salvation reveal God’s faithfulness to change trials into blessings.

Not only does He work out the bad, but He has good plans for us too. We can’t lose! Our relationship with God is the most important piece to this though. We are only able to fulfill God’s plans as we walk with Him as His child.

*“So you have not received a spirit that makes you fearful slaves. Instead, you received God’s Spirit when He adopted you as His own children. Now we call Him, “Abba, Father.” For His Spirit joins with our spirit to affirm that we are God’s children. And since we are His children, we are His heirs. In fact, together with Christ we are heirs of God’s glory. But if we are to share His glory, we must also share His suffering.” (Romans 8:15-17 NLT)*

## Dying to Live

Sharing in Jesus's sufferings means joining with Him in death, and sharing in His glory means joining with Him in the resurrection. This means letting go of all that you are, all your being, all your plans and desires—all your life given over to God.

Even though you give yourself to Him willingly, salvation is by grace. This means you are saved as a free gift from God, not because you've made yourself worthy of Him, or done something in exchange for what He offers.

*God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:4-9 NASB)*

At the time of salvation, God takes your old life (which is really leading to death), and gives you His life and Spirit. You will receive a new nature like His. From that moment on you will experience real life with Him lasting for eternity.

*"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for*

*me.*" (Galatians 2:20 NKJV)

*"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, that person is a new creation. The old has gone, the new is here!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV)

*"Should we keep on sinning so that God can show us more and more of His wonderful grace? Of course not! Since we have died to sin, how can we continue to live in it? Or have you forgotten that when we were joined with Christ Jesus in baptism, we joined Him in His death? For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives.*

*Since we have been united with Him in His death, we will also be raised to life as He was. We know that our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. And since we died with Christ, we know we will also live with Him."* (Romans 6:1-8 NLT)

I'm thankful the old messed-up part of me has died, and I have become new in Jesus. I'm filled with joy to not be the one who lives anymore, but having Christ living through me. I've happily given up my old ways and desires, and found it was not really a sacrifice. Some things He has redeemed and given back to me, but some were not good for me to begin with. Now that I trust God, I seek out His ways and His desires, knowing they are more pleasurable than anything else.

Though being saved is a free gift, we are called to die to ourselves and live for God. I want to make this clear, because giving your life to Jesus is not only for the afterlife. It's not merely an insubstantial decision, essentially changing nothing until you get to heaven. Salvation is meant to change you today. Jesus said,

*“Whoever wants to be My disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for Me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? If anyone is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when He comes in His Father’s glory with the holy angels.”* (Mark 8:34-38 NIV)

Bearing your cross and living for Him, doesn't mean you must be perfect. As if you are not really saved when you mess up or lose your focus. Believe me, if I am any example, you will continue to make mistakes and fall into sin. But the direction of your life turns toward God and you now have the power to live for Him.

If you haven't given your life to Jesus, I'm asking you to now. God invites you, and because of His Son, nothing disqualifies you anymore. Come just as you are. You don't need to have your life in order. Christ lived the perfect life for you. God made a way for you to come to Him, by accepting Jesus as your Lord. Now it's your choice.

If you pray the prayer below and mean it in your heart, you will be saved.

**Let's Pray...**

*God, I'm sorry for what I've done wrong in my life, and I ask Your forgiveness. Thank You for Jesus dying on the cross to set me free from my sins. Please come into my life, fill me with Your Holy Spirit, and be with me forever. I give You everything in my life to do whatever You want with. I ask You to rescue me, make me new, and lead me. Let it be done, in Jesus's name!*

If you prayed that prayer for the first time and meant it, congratulations! All heaven is rejoicing right now! You are a new creation in Christ Jesus, and this is only the beginning. I would love to hear about you giving your life to Him. Send me an email at [John@GodAndYouAndMe.com](mailto:John@GodAndYouAndMe.com) to tell me what God is doing in you.

The next step of faith is to be water baptized. This is a public proclamation and depiction of us being carried with Christ into the waters of death, and being raised to life again. If you attend a church, ask to be baptized to show your new life has begun. If you do not attend a church, you will need to find one so that you can be discipled by other believers and learn how to live the life Jesus died for you to live.

Please also read the next appendix on being filled with the Holy Spirit.

# Appendix 2

## Being Filled with the Holy Spirit

*“So it is with your prayers. Ask and you’ll receive. Seek and you’ll discover. Knock on heaven’s door, and it will one day open for you. Every persistent person will get what he asks for. Every persistent seeker will discover what he needs. And everyone who knocks persistently will one day find an open door.*”

*“Let me ask you this: Do you know of any father who would give his son a snake on a plate when he asked for a serving of fish? Of course not! Do you know of any father who would give his daughter a spider when she had asked for an egg? Of course not! If imperfect parents know how to lovingly take care of their children and give them what they need, how much more will the perfect heavenly Father give the Holy*

*Spirit's fullness when his children ask him.*" (Luke 11:9-13 TPT)

## Experiencing the Spirit

"Brother Bill, my cousin prays in tongues. How can I help her?"

My pastor (name changed) and I faced each other holding our overflowing plates, topped with the various dishes of a typical church potluck. It was sometime in the year 2001, not long after giving my life to the Lord, and I had recently heard teaching about deception in charismatic churches.

I don't remember his answer, just the fear I felt for my cousin. As young adults living in separate cities, she and I both had radical transformations for Jesus. The next time I saw her I didn't tell her about her wrong beliefs. Despite what I'd learned, she didn't seem to be used by demons rather than the Spirit of God as she supposed. I was impressed by her maturity in the Lord, and her obvious transition from the life she had before being saved was very real.

It was a couple years later when we finally did talk about it, but I still didn't tell her she was deceived. I asked for her to pray for me to be baptized in the Spirit. Despite my reservations, I had come into agreement with her beliefs. As we prayed, I expected a feeling to come over me or something strange to take place. From what I could tell at the time though, nothing happened.

Interpreting the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" has been a controversy among Christians, so I'm going to spend some time on the Spirit of God and how we experience Him at and after salvation.

Many believe the Spirit coming to dwell in us at the moment we give our lives to Jesus is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. No matter

what we call it (baptism, filling, anointing, falling, or any of the other words Christians use to describe this experience), they don't believe there is more of the Holy Spirit to receive after we give our hearts to Jesus.

Still many others say you can have more from the Spirit after submitting your life to God. They say the baptism of the Holy Spirit is not an automatic part of what people experience when they are born again. According to them, it's possible to receive this baptism at the time of salvation or sometime after. They proclaim it is a needed and normal element of what Christ intended us to have, which empowers His people to do what He wants them to do.

So which is it?

I'm thankful for the church I was born again in, but they taught certain experiences of the Spirit and spiritual gifts were only for the early Christian church. They believe God purposed these things for a specific time in history. Teaching people who claimed to experience these things were under the influence of evil spirits. Even though I've come to disagree, I still love, respect, and honor Christians who believe this way. It's my opinion these believers continue to be used by God to bless the world.

But because of the teaching I had in my early walk with the Lord, it took me years to come to terms with some of the spiritual things the Bible seems to depict believers experiencing. For some time I was skeptical, prejudiced, and scared of what charismatic Christians called the things of the Spirit. They didn't make sense and seemed abnormal.

But I began meeting believers (other than my cousin) who had the Spirit move in their lives in a different way than I had. I kept thinking they were wrong and foolish, but after years of prayer and Bible study, I came to see confirmations of their stories in the life of

Jesus and many others in the Bible. Even though I knew the reasons and arguments of my early church, I eventually came to believe these spiritual things were available to believers today.

Because of my skepticism it still took God confirming the truth to me in a way I couldn't deny before I came to faith and began experiencing the Spirit operating in my own life. Now that I have had the Holy Spirit fill me and exercise His gifts through me, I believe the baptism of the Spirit and spiritual gifts are vital parts of following Jesus and walking in His abundance and power.

Before I get to that, I'm going to back up a bit and introduce the Holy Spirit and give a Biblical explanation of how I came to believe what I do.

## Who is the Holy Spirit?

Before Jesus went to the cross, He prepared His disciples for the time when He would no longer be with them. He told them not to worry because God was sending another Helper, the Holy Spirit, who would be with them forever (John 14:16-17 & 26). This word we've translated as "another" originally meant "exactly the same." The Holy Spirit is exactly like Jesus, and He is with us every moment.

Like Jesus, the Holy Spirit is God. The idea that God is the Father, Spirit, and Son all in one is difficult if not impossible to completely understand, but this is how the Bible speaks of God.

*"When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in*

*whom I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16-17 NKJV)*

*“Jesus said to him, ‘Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.” (John 14:9-10 NKJV)*

*“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24 NASB)*

*“For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God... we have the mind of Christ.” (1 Corinthians 2:11-12, 16 NIV)*

The Holy Spirit worked all throughout history and the Bible.

*“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” (Genesis 1:1-2 NLT)*

We first see the Spirit of God filling and working through people in the Old Testament. Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams by the Holy Spirit in Genesis 41:25-40. People were filled with the Holy

Spirit for the purpose of making the tabernacle and the items within in Exodus 31:1-5. The Holy Spirit filled certain kings, priests, and prophets, and the Old Testament foretold that He would fill many more people.

## **Our Body, Soul, and Spirit**

God made every person to have a body, soul, and spirit. Our bodies are the natural parts of us, with physical cravings. The Bible speaks of the flesh as where sin inhabits. Most Christians believe our souls are our minds, housing emotions and thoughts. And at the core of each of us is our will, what the Bible refers to as the spirit or the heart.

God makes your spirit new when His Spirit comes to dwell in you at the time of salvation. This is the new birth, described by Jesus in John 3:3-7. Before you were born again, the Bible speaks of your heart as hard and describes it as a heart of stone. But when the Holy Spirit comes into your heart, the Bible says God gives you a heart of flesh, one that can truly love God and others. You submitted yourself to Him, He has softened your heart, and you ultimately want to please Him.

Even though we've submitted our body, soul, and spirit to God, and the core part of us is made new, we don't always do what we should do. At times, we submit to the desires of our flesh, as well as thoughts and emotions contrary to God's Word. This explains why we do what we don't want to do, as the Bible talks about in Romans 7. Thankfully, Romans 8 shows God's grace and how, because we're new creations, we're able to walk according to His Spirit.

## **The Difference Between the Holy Spirit Dwelling in You for Salvation and Filling You to Live an Empowered Life**

Jesus always had the Holy Spirit. When He was conceived, His Spirit was holy because it was the Holy Spirit. He was not only man, but also God in the flesh, and His Spirit continued to be the Holy Spirit all of His time on Earth. Unlike us, who live part of our lives with our spirits dead and rebellious, Jesus's Spirit was always alive and submitted to God.

But the Bible says the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove when He was baptized in the Jordan River. Before Jesus started His recorded ministry in the Gospels, the Holy Spirit fell on Him—even though He already had the Spirit of God within Him.

Jesus went on from there preaching repentance and proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God. He gathered disciples, healed the sick, delivered people from demons, preached, ate with sinners, fulfilled prophecies, and generally shook up the Jewish religious world. After three years of ministry Jesus came to the cross where He died so we could live.

By the time Jesus died and rose again, the disciples who walked with Him were truly believers of God. They submitted their lives to God, and I believe He had saved them. They were born again of the Spirit, and He had put His seal of salvation on them.

*“Having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption.” (Ephesians 1:13-14 NKJV)*

*“But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” (Romans 8:9 NASB)*

These verses show that you receive His Spirit when you put your faith in Jesus, submitting yourself to God. I don't think it was different for Jesus's disciples or anyone who had given their life to God up until this point in history. This is important because, many Christians use these verses to say baptism of the Spirit and salvation occur at the same time. This Spiritual baptism is automatic, and there is nothing more for us to receive of the Spirit after salvation.

But something new was about to happen in His disciples' lives, separate from salvation. Between when Jesus was raised from the dead and when He was finally taken by God into heaven, He appeared to the disciples and taught them many times as well as revealing to several hundred people He'd been raised to life. He even ate with them and let them touch Him to prove He was really with them in person.

Forty days after His resurrection Jesus was about to be taken again to heaven, this time He would not return in person until sometime in our future. But before He left, He gave His disciples the great commission.

*“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.” (Mark 16:15-18 NKJV)*

The disciples had been told to do something similar to this earlier in the gospels as Jesus sent them into towns to do as He did and preach repentance for the coming kingdom of God. In these times, first with His inner circle of disciples (Mark 6:7-13; Luke 9:1-6; Matthew 10:1-15) and then with seventy of His followers (Luke 10) He gave them authority and power to deliver people from the enemy and heal the sick.

But this time, instead of the disciples immediately going to accomplish the great commission, Jesus said to wait for His Spirit before they did anything. I can't help but be reminded of Jesus's own ministry which didn't really begin until after being water baptized and the Spirit descended on Him like a dove. Before Jesus's disciples carried Jesus's torch into the world, He told them,

*“Wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit... you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”* (Acts 1:4, 8 NIV)

As I said earlier, I believe the disciples were saved. In other words, they already had the Holy Spirit dwelling in them, and He had sealed them for salvation. But they had not received what would empower them to do what God called them to do—namely being baptized with the Holy Spirit.

## **The Filling of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost**

Pentecost is a Jewish harvest festival that takes place fifty days after the start of Passover, which is when we know Jesus was crucified. If we do the math, we'll find the disciples waited about a week after Jesus's ascension for the gift of the Holy Spirit. He came as the original disciples were gathered together with other believers.

*“Suddenly, there was a sound from heaven like the roaring of a mighty windstorm, and it filled the house where they were sitting. Then, what looked like flames or tongues of fire appeared and settled on each of them. And everyone present was filled with the Holy Spirit and began speaking in other languages, as the Holy Spirit gave them this ability.*

*“At that time there were devout Jews from every nation living in Jerusalem. When they heard the loud noise, everyone came running, and they were bewildered to hear their own languages being spoken by the believers.*

*“They were completely amazed. ‘How can this be?’ they exclaimed. ‘These people are all from Galilee, and yet we hear them speaking in our own native languages... about the wonderful things God has done!’*

*“Then Peter stepped forward with the eleven other apostles and shouted to the crowd, ‘Listen carefully, all of you, fellow Jews and residents of Jerusalem! ... what you see was predicted long ago by the prophet Joel:*

*'In the last days,' God says,*

*'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people.*

*Your sons and daughters will prophesy.*

*Your young men will see visions,*

*and your old men will dream dreams.*

*In those days I will pour out my Spirit*

*even on my servants—men and women alike—*

*and they will prophesy...*

*“People of Israel, listen! God publicly endorsed Jesus the Nazarene by doing powerful miracles, wonders, and signs through him, as you well know. But God knew what would happen, and his prearranged plan was carried out when Jesus was betrayed. With the help of lawless Gentiles, you nailed him to a cross and killed him. But God released him from the horrors of death and raised him back to life, for death could not keep him in its grip...*

*“God raised Jesus from the dead, and we are all witnesses of this. Now he is exalted to the place of highest honor in heaven, at God’s right hand. And the Father, as he had promised, gave him the Holy Spirit to pour out upon us, just as you see and hear today...”*

*“So let everyone in Israel know for certain that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, to be both Lord and Messiah!”*

*“Peter’s words pierced their hearts, and they said to him and to the other apostles, ‘Brothers, what should we do?’*

*“Peter replied, ‘Each of you must repent of your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you, to your children, and to those far away—all who have been called by the Lord our God.’ Then Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, ‘Save yourselves from this crooked generation!’*

*“Those who believed what Peter said were baptized and added to the church that day—about 3,000 in all” (Acts 2:2-8, 14, 17-18, 22-24, 32-33, 36-41 NLT portions excerpted for condensing),*

This was obviously an amazing time in history, for God was at work in a new way. He was fulfilling the Old Testament promises of His Spirit. The disciples (now called apostles) continued in this power, performing miracles, giving glory to Jesus, and adding to

what we now know of as the Christian Church.

Some time after receiving the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost, the apostles ran into persecution from the Jewish religious leaders. In turn, they prayed and asked God to move. Here another amazing thing happened and they received the Spirit filling them—again!

*“Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to Your servants that with all boldness they may speak Your word, by stretching out Your hand to heal, and that signs and wonders may be done through the name of Your holy Servant Jesus.’ And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:29-31 NKJV).*

I believe these verses as well as others show there is something more of the Spirit for us to have after salvation—possibly multiple somethings throughout our lives. When we give our hearts to Jesus, we too are meant to become disciples of Christ, and we too need this work of the Holy Spirit to be able to live lives like the apostles.

This is going to sound mean, but much of the Christian Church is living a life that is imperceptibly different from the rest of the world. Although they give God the glory, they are rarely empowered to work apart from their own strength and ability. Non-believers show they are able to strive towards a similar morality and effect of social change as believers who are not allowing the Holy Spirit to move through them. This is sadly because they believe they’ve already received everything they can from God when they prayed to be saved.

The Pharisees (Jewish religious leaders in history) claimed Jesus

performed His miracles by the power of demons (Matthew 12:22-37). I don't mean to be harsh, but many Christians see and hear rumors of what God is doing in "Spirit-filled" believers, but like the Pharisees they deny it's from God. This is exactly what the enemy wants. If he can't keep you from being saved, he will do everything to keep you from impacting the world in powerful ways.

Just as Jesus healed and delivered people from their oppressions, some believers today are doing the works He did like He said would happen (John 14:12). Similar to the apostles, believers around the world are living empowered lives, overcoming sin, experiencing the supernatural, having dreams and visions from God, knowing and having wisdom imparted which they could not have on their own, watching God work as they listen to Him and obey, praying for and seeing people healed, and driving out demons.

## **Our Understanding, the Words We Use, and What Really Matters**

The words used to describe this miracle, and our understanding of what's happening, are not what's most important. The bottom line is, we should want everything God has for us—every spiritual gift and the baptism of the Spirit, filling, fresh anointing—no matter what it's called so long as it is from God. Everything He does is good, even if we don't understand it and it's outside our comfort zone.

If you are in a similar place as I was before I came to believe the baptism of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts are for every believer today, I encourage you to take these things to Jesus in prayer and ask Him to reveal what He wants to show you. Read the Bible with fresh eyes and try not to put God in a box. See if your life looks like

believers lives in the New Testament. Take your time, listen in prayer, and see what He does.

What you believe God for is important and plays a role in what you experience of Him. That is not to say God changes by what we believe, but in the Bible we often see God give to people according to their faith. Similar to the miracle of salvation (and many other blessings and gifts of God), you receive the gift of baptism of the Holy Spirit by hearing, believing, asking, and receiving.

We're free to gain or deny God's gifts, and it comes down to faith. Now that you have heard of what is available to you from the Spirit of God, do you believe? If you are more blessed than I was in faith, the next step is to ask and then receive.

We're going to pray and afterwards I want you to wait quietly as God ministers His work within you. Your belief is important. You are going to ask, and God is going to give you Himself, so believe that He will and that He will continue to. You may not feel anything. This doesn't mean He is not at work and that nothing is happening. But, you may experience peace, or feel God's presence, joy, and love. He might speak something to you or give you a vision. No matter what you feel or experience, believe God is working in you, filling you to overflowing with His Spirit.

## Let's Pray...

*God, I submit myself to You. Every part of me, body, soul, and spirit, I give to You. I want every part of You, and all You have to offer. Holy Spirit, thank You for coming to live in me when I gave my life to Jesus. Thank You for putting the seal of salvation on me. I pray now for whatever else You want to do with me. I ask for You to pour over me like*

*anointing oil and spring up like a well of living water within me. Please fill me to overflowing. Please use me in powerful ways for Your kingdom and glory. I want every spiritual gift You have for me. I want my life to show the fruit of the Spirit. Work Your miracles in and through me to be changed, overcome the enemy, bless others, and reveal Jesus to the world.*

Now, don't rush things, spend some time worshipping God, praying, and listening. The Holy Spirit is working deep inside. Sometimes we look for outside signs and feelings to prove something, but greater faith does not need evidence. Still, in the book of Acts, when the Spirit baptized people, they began speaking in unknown tongues. There are words (or even one word or syllable) that don't make sense in your mind, I encourage you to open your mouth and speak whatever comes out in prayer to God.

After spending time with God, move on to the next appendix which details what to expect after being filled with the Holy Spirit and more about spiritual gifts including unintelligible languages.

# Appendix 3

## Walking with the Holy Spirit

If you prayed in tongues after reading the last appendix, you may have only said one word. That's okay and happens to many people. Still some open their mouths and nothing comes out. Others start praying in sentences and paragraphs of words that don't make sense to their minds. But know this, your ability to perform and the way you feel do not change the truth of God's Word. You may feel like the spiritual gifts in this appendix are lacking in your life as you start walking them out. I'll explain some of these gifts and share how you can experience them more in your life. But first I want to discuss our mindset.

Remember, in the last appendix, when my cousin prayed with me to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, I felt nothing? If a spiritual event took place at that point or later, I don't know, but I

think that's because I was still apprehensive. I wanted to experience something, and at the same time, I was afraid of being weird. The Spirit working today like He did in Acts I accepted, but for some reason, I still didn't like hearing my cousin pray in tongues. If God would just take control of me, I could know whatever happened was real.

I wish I wasn't reserved, analytical, and cautious in the area of the supernatural. God didn't mean for us to understand or rationalize this stuff. But I must confess, even after praying in tongues, having God give me visions, hearing His still small voice, Him imparting wisdom and knowledge for me to share with people in need, having prophetic dreams, praying for people to be healed and seeing it happen—a part of me wondered if people's miraculous stories were real. I'd rather be child-like in faith, abandoned to God, and a fool for Him.

Even though it was a stretch of faith for me to accept miracles are being performed today, I had to come to a point of believing God when I didn't understand and when I didn't have evidence (as many Biblical figures had to do). Whether we decide these things are valid and within our limits of believing changes what we experience and how we respond to others experiences. A lack of faith leads us to ask God to perform supernatural feats to prove His Word is true.

*“Then the Pharisees came out and began to dispute with Him (Jesus), seeking from Him a sign from heaven, testing Him. But He sighed deeply in His spirit, and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Assuredly, I say to you, no sign shall be given to this generation.””* (Mark 8:11-12 NKJV)

Instead we should humble ourselves before God, ask Him to do

what He wants to do in us and through us, and walk with Him in faith. The gifts of the Spirit are some ways God uses us to bless the world and advance His kingdom on Earth as it is in heaven. As we seek for God to perform miracles and work His power through us, we should be sure we are motivated by faith in Him, love for Him and others, and not for selfish gain or prestige. As the Holy Spirit empowers you, seek to become like a tree which bears good fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

## The Power of the Holy Spirit

*“Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh? Did you suffer so many things in vain—if indeed it was in vain? So then, does He who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith?”* (Galatians 3:3-5 NASB).

These verses show us we must seek the Spirit to perfect us after salvation. We’re reminded it’s God’s power at work in us—first to be born again and then to live as He desires. This comes by faith and the work of the Spirit rather than trying to fulfill God’s rules by religious righteousness apart from a relationship with Him.

The word translated as “miracles” above is the Greek word “dunamis,” the root of “dynamic” or “dynamite.” It’s the same word Jesus used when telling His disciples they would receive “power” when the Holy Spirit falls on them. Jesus prayed for His Father’s kingdom to come and will to be done on earth as it is in heaven (Matthew 6:9-10). God saved us to give us more than a free pass to

heaven. He wants to show the world His glory through us in meaningful ways.

This miraculous power Jesus and Paul talked about is available and necessary for us to live the life Jesus died for us to live. When He gives you His Spirit in the same way He did the disciples, He empowers you to do the things Christ did. The Holy Spirit will minister freedom and healing to others through you, in a display of Jesus's kingship, love, grace, mercy, and goodness.

When the Spirit fills us, this dunamis power also allows us to operate in Spiritual Gifts (Romans 12:3-8 and 1 Corinthians 12:4-31). God meant these gifts to build us up in love and be used in humility. Even as Jesus was a servant, so we are to serve one another and show the world God's love and work in us as we submit to Him in faith.

## Gifts of the Spirit

*"Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don't want you to misunderstand this. You know that when you were still pagans, you were led astray and swept along in worshipping speechless idols. So I want you to know that no one speaking by the Spirit of God will curse Jesus, and no one can say Jesus is Lord, except by the Holy Spirit. There are different kinds of spiritual gifts, but the same Spirit is the source of them all. There are different kinds of service, but we serve the same Lord. God works in different ways, but it is the same God who does the work in all of us. A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the*

*same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing. He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have..."*

*"All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it. Here are some of the parts God has appointed for the church: first are apostles, second are prophets, third are teachers, then those who do miracles, those who have the gift of healing, those who can help others, those who have the gift of leadership, those who speak in unknown languages.*

*"Are we all apostles? Are we all prophets? Are we all teachers? Do we all have the power to do miracles? Do we all have the gift of healing? Do we all have the ability to speak in unknown languages? Do we all have the ability to interpret unknown languages? Of course not! So you should earnestly desire the most helpful gifts." (1 Corinthians 12:1-11;*

*27-31 NLT)*

God empowers believers to minister like His son through spiritual gifts. As Jesus walked this hurting world, He cured the pain of spiritual oppression, sickness, and sin. His disciples continued His ministry, performing amazing feats by the power of the Holy Spirit.

## Nichols / FINDING GOD'S LOVE COMFORT AND

We'll only dip into the oceanic topic of spiritual gifts. I'm listing the major Bible passages and the gifts mentioned in them below. Read these verses in several translations as you continue to pursue Him to teach you about these wonderful blessings.

Romans 12:6-8 includes these gifts:

- Prophecy
- Serving
- Teaching
- Exhortation (Encouragement)
- Giving
- Leadership
- Showing Mercy

1 Corinthians 12:7-11; 27-28 includes these gifts:

- The word of wisdom
- The word of knowledge
- Faith
- Gifts of healings
- Effecting of miracles (works of power)
- Prophecy
- Distinguishing of spirits (discernment)
- Tongues
- Interpretation of tongues
- Apostle
- Prophet
- Teacher
- Helps
- Administration

Ephesians 4:11-13 includes these gifts:

- Apostle
- Prophet
- Evangelist
- Pastor
- Teacher

Most charismatic believers agree these lists aren't the only supernatural abilities God gives. When reading the Bible we see the Holy Spirit gifting people to do many amazing things. For example, in Exodus 31:1-11 the Spirit gave craftsmen special skills to work on the tabernacle. We shouldn't put God in a box of how we expect Him to behave and limit spiritual gifts to our comfort or even knowledge of the Bible.

I say this because Spiritual gifts are another topic of debate among believers. Some think these gifts went away after the first generations of the Church. Some claim they are a possibility today. Even Christians who believe in these blessings have different opinions about how we should practice them.

The church where I gave my life to the Lord taught God only gave these abilities to the apostles. They said tongues were a sign to the Jewish followers of Jesus that God had also saved the Samaritans (Part-Jewish people) and Gentiles (non-Jewish people). They believe people with stories of supernatural gifts are faking or deceived by demons.

Many who proclaim these gifts are not in action today point to 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 where it says the gifts of the Spirit will pass away when the "perfect" comes. At that time there will be no need for spiritual gifts. Some have interpreted "perfect coming" to mean the completed the Bible, but others understand it as Christ's return. I

am in the latter camp and for the ones who don't trust experiences I'll lay aside mine for a moment and stick to theory.

We continue to need the gifts of the Spirit today, just as the early Church needed them. Although the Bible is perfect, its completion didn't bring us into the maturity these verses talk about, and spiritual gifts help fill the gap between who we are and who we're destined to be. I believe 1 Corinthians 13:8-13 is speaking of Christ's return because the Bible says we'll be like Him at that point (1 John 3:2). God will complete the spiritual transformation Jesus began in us, and we'll commune with the Holy Spirit without our flesh getting in the way.

While we wait for Jesus, these supernatural abilities enable us to live and minister as a greater reflection of Him than we can without the gifts. When He returns, we'll discern and understand spiritual things as never before, making gifts like a spiritual language and prophetic revelation of knowledge and wisdom unnecessary. We won't need gifts of healing and miracles (or even faith in the same way), because Jesus will bring complete healing and the fullness of His kingdom for all to see.

But the world's desperate for sons and daughters of God to exercise spiritual gifts. The Bible commands us, earnestly desire them. Just like salvation and the filling of the Spirit, your belief is important though. Many who don't accept the gifts of the Spirit will not see them because of unbelief. It's when you believe God will give you these gifts that He begins to use you in spiritual ways.

Ask God to give you all the blessings listed above. Paul says each individual will not have every gift in 1 Corinthians 12, but he doesn't say to assume any gifts are not for you. Even if some gifts are not evident in your life, don't limit your belief for God to use you in any way. As we encounter need, the Holy Spirit works within us. So look

for opportunities to step out in faith and ask the Spirit to bless the world with each spiritual gift working through you.

## Speaking in Unknown Languages

I wish I hadn't ever struggled with believing in spiritual gifts. But thankfully, one morning in prayer my walls finished coming down. I asked God to speak and was shocked to hear Him whisper, "I want to give you the gift of tongues."

Without thinking, I responded with a pleading, "No!" Still holding a prejudice from old teaching, I said, "If there's any gift you want to give me, please don't give me that one."

I didn't want something I couldn't understand, and I was afraid of being strange. I only knew what happened next as a profound sensation within. I felt His presence turn in grief and I realized something I had never considered could happen—I had hurt the Holy Spirit. I heard Him say, "How could you not want anything I have to offer you?"

His words touched my heart and in sorrow I repented, saying, "I want everything You have to offer me!" Staying bowed before Him, I examined my motives and submitted my will to His.

Later that day I told my pastor what happened, and he gave me some teaching material about the gifts of the Spirit. The next day in my prayer time was the first time I prayed in tongues. I didn't feel much at first, and it was awkward, but I continued.

I had no idea I was about to enter a trying season in life where I didn't know how to pray. Praise God, who spoke to me when I sought Him, even though I didn't want to hear what He said! I was a believer for ten years before I allowed the Holy Spirit's gifts to work through

me. I began experiencing His power, fulfillment, and ability to help others more than ever before. I wish I had exercised faith and submission sooner.

One thing that happened to the disciples when the Spirit filled them was they spoke in other languages. The Bible speaks of tongues of angels (1 Corinthians 13:1), praying in the Spirit (Ephesians 6:18, Jude 1:20-21), groanings in the Spirit (Romans 8:26), and the gift of tongues (1 Corinthians 12 & 14). This spiritual gift is done in submission and believing God is at work even when we can't understand or interpret it.

In 1 Corinthians 14, Paul gives the believers in Corinth instructions on the gifts of the Spirit and order in the church. They weren't operating the best way. The church will appear crazy if everyone is exercising the gifts at the same time, prophesying out of turn, and praying in tongues aloud without interpretation. This behavior disturbs visiting unbelievers and distracts some members, keeping both from receiving during the service.

My first experience in a charismatic church was not a good one for this reason. I didn't have a real relationship with God when a friend invited me to a revival. After a brief word and prayer from the pastor, everyone around me started running around, speaking gibberish, arms flailing, and convulsing (I'm not exaggerating). I now believe these Christians were abandoning their hearts in worship, but in the moment, I was uncomfortable to say the least!

The fact that Paul gives instructions confirms we're able to control how we use spiritual gifts. It's possible to choose when to operate in these gifts, rather than the Spirit controlling our body. That's part of the mystery of God working them through us. It doesn't always feel like a supernatural experience, and I believe that's one reason it's hard for some to believe. Coupling that with

seeing things done “in the Spirit” for selfish motives only makes it harder. But we shouldn’t allow these improper uses to rob us from experiencing God’s gifts.

I recommend reading about the gifts of the Spirit in 1 Corinthians chapters 12-14. I’ll quote a portion about tongues and prophecy below, but don’t want you to misinterpret it to mean tongues are bad. Prophecy is better because it helps people who hear it. Tongues are unintelligible unless the Spirit also gives the power of interpretation. Not being able to understand something doesn’t make it worthless though. Even without interpretation, tongues is praying God’s will by the Spirit and builds yourself up—that’s not bad! Building others up is better, but when this gift builds us up we’re more useful to God’s kingdom. So *do both* with consideration for who’s around you.

*“Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified...”*

*“For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my*

*spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding...*

*“Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way” (1 Corinthians 14:1-5, 13-15, 39-40 NIV).*

Paul states he will pray and sing with his spirit, and with his understanding. He chooses between both depending on what's best in the moment. This is another indicator, like I mentioned before, how God rarely (if ever) takes over our bodies. We see over and over in Scripture that He works with us when we submit to Him. In the same way, we do not lose control of our mouth and tongue to exercise this gift.

This goes both ways, we shouldn't act crazy and blame the Spirit, but we also shouldn't blame Him if we're not exercising His gifts. For a long time, I assumed I hadn't experienced these things because the Holy Spirit hadn't moved in my life that way. I now know I inhibited God from working in me, and I don't want that for you.

Since you prayed to receive the filling of the Spirit in the last appendix, believe God is at work in you, open your mouth, and let an unintelligible language come out as you speak in faith. He will use it to build you up with powerful prayer in line with His Spirit and will —when you don't even have the words! I really mean it. Stop now and receive the gift of tongues.

## **Baby Steps**

If you continue working with the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts will grow in you. As you pray and go through your day, expect to receive

revelations of wisdom and knowledge you could not have known. These whispers from God are the forming of gifts to be shared with others. Prophecy is speaking them in an encouraging way. God will help you discern spiritual things and even give you supernatural faith, miracles, and healing power.

If you are like I was, you may expect the Holy Spirit to overcome you and the miraculous to happen in an instant without your control. I believe this is possible but doesn't happen as often as we'd like. As with any natural discipline, walking in the ways of the Spirit becomes easier as you exercise.

Wherever you are in this process, continue to pray for the supernatural work of the Spirit in your life. Continue to take baby steps until you are running with God. He will use you in amazing ways to change the world.

## Let's Pray...

*Holy Spirit, please help me walk with You every day of my life. Help me to always remember You are with me. I want to walk in Your ways, not my own. Please help me trust You, even when I don't understand. I want everything You offer me. Your gifts are good. I pray You would bless me with all of them, build me up, and use me to build up others. Help me exercise Your gifts in love and represent You to the world. In Jesus's name, amen.*

I'm so excited for your future and how God will use you! Keep following the Spirit, letting Him work through you, and sharing what He does with others. I recommend you tell people when the Holy Spirit works His gifts through you. Even though this can be a divisive

subject, and some don't believe God works this way, we shouldn't let that make us shy about what God is doing. Pray for unity and never let conflict sway your value of Christians who believe differently than you.

One thing that was hard for me after spiritual gifts were active in my life was when I joined a church who did not allow the Spirit to move in these ways. Even though they claimed to believe in these gifts, they were not talked about or exercised in any gatherings I had been to (small or large). I prayed for months to discern if I should take my family to another church. When I did go, I blessed the church I left. Try not to divide church members or subvert the authority God placed there. Remember, God cares deeply for every one of His children, and He is working on any varying beliefs in us.

Some environments are more conducive to growth. I recommend joining a "spirit-filled" church who also holds the Bible in high esteem. You might look at the websites of churches near you, visit services, and speak with church leadership to see what they believe about these things. Be careful that the enemy does not use differing beliefs to isolate you. Whatever you do, follow the Spirit in love.

