

Choose Your Best Life



LORRAINE PETERSON

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About the Author

LORRAINE PETERSON was born in Red Wing, Minnesota, grew up on a farm near Ellsworth, Wisconsin, and now resides in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She received her B.A. (in history) from North Park College in Chicago, and has taken summer courses from the University of Minnesota and the University of Mexico in Mexico City. She lived for some years in Mexico. Lorraine has taught high school and middle school. She has been an advisor to nondenominational Christian clubs in Minneapolis public schools, has taught teenage Bible studies, and continues to write for teenagers. She has written several bestselling devotional books for teens:

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

To Teenagers for Daily Devotions:

In order to get the most out of these lessons, keep a notebook and *write down* the answers. The lazy part of you is saying, "I don't want to – it's too much work." However, education research supports the idea that you remember things you write down longer than things you only think about. God's Word is very important – important enough to get your best effort.

To Youth Workers for Sunday School or Bible Study Material:

Leaders should assign the daily readings for the Chapter. Ask students to write out the answers to the questions along with any new questions that they would like to discuss with the group. The leader can pick out the most important questions and ask members to contribute their findings. If it is not practical for your group to prepare in advance, it would be better to spend at least two Chapters on each topic, read the material in class, and cover the questions as you go along. The teacher will want to add questions and thoughts that are specifically relevant to the particular group being taught.

CHAPTER ONE

THE BIGGEST DECISION OF YOUR LIFE

What Are My Choices?

When you're deciding what to do with your life, the possibilities at first seem limitless. There are hundreds of occupations to choose from and probably

thousands of people you could marry. You might want to live in sunny California, frigid Alaska, or maybe even settle in Paris or Rio. But even when you're happily married, working at your occupation, and living in your dream home, you will still have to decide what to do with your life. There are only two real choices – or at the most, three; (1) to live for yourself; (2) to live for other people – the ones you choose; or (3) to live for God.

When you think of all the mistakes you've made so far, and contemplate all the errors you've watched others make, you should have a healthy fear of making your own decisions and "doing your own thing." If there is a God who showed himself to the world through His Son Jesus, and gave us the Bible, there is only ONE logical choice, and that is to live your life – all of it – for God.

"Choose this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24: 15).

"And this is eternal life, that they know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent" (John 17: 3).

"Thus says the Lord; 'Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practice kindness, justice, and righteousness in the earth; for in these things I delight, says the Lord'" (Jeremiah 9: 23, 24).

1. What qualities of God can you find in these verses?
2. Why is knowing God so important?
3. What is the greatest thing you can achieve in your life?
4. Is knowing God *the most important* goal for your life? What are you doing to reach that goal?

Window Shopping – Or Really Searching?

A guy named Skip loved animals and had a special interest in a pet monkey that was for sale in a local pet shop. He went to see the monkey often and enjoyed playing with it. He even dreamed about the monkey at night. Clerks who saw how much he liked the monkey kept hoping for a sale, but they always received the answer, “I don’t make a lot of money. If I bought a monkey I’d have to move; my neighbors think a monkey is a weird pet. Besides, I enjoy just coming here to see him because I get the benefit of enjoying him without the responsibility of caring for him and buying his food.”

Skip was a confirmed window-shopper. He refused to get involved or make a firm decision. Skip could honestly say, “I went shopping today for a pet monkey, but I couldn’t find one.”

A lot of people are window-shopping for Christianity. They are drawn by Jesus’ love and the benefits of living for Christ. Because they may go to church and even read the Bible, they might be saying, “I’m seeking God, but I just can’t find Him.” The truth is, if they didn’t care what their friends thought, if they were willing to let God change their lives, if they would assume responsibility and if they’d consider God more important than any possession or friendship, they would find Him.

“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart”
(Jeremiah 29: 13).

“And as he was setting out on his journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ ... And Jesus looking upon him loved him, and said to him, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.’ At that saying his countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions” (Mark 10: 17, 21, 22).

1. Was the rich man really seeking Jesus, or just window-shopping? Why?
2. Notice that Jesus went straight to the point – to the thing this man wouldn’t give up to follow Him. What was it?
3. What other things keep people from following Jesus?
4. If you or another person is endlessly searching for God, what is the basic reason for not finding Him?

But What If I Find It?

What are you looking for? Be careful. You'll most likely find it! You may say that you are looking for peace, or happiness, or reality, but you have probably already decided what will give you this. You may have determined that enough money will give you peace of mind – you don't want to worry about finances the way your parents do. Marrying the right person should make you "live happily ever after." Or maybe you think you can find reality if you study all the great thinkers, or take the right drugs.

If you put all your energies into trying to accumulate money, you will probably succeed at just that. If you are determined to marry a certain person, you may reach your goal. You may also become very knowledgeable about philosophy or psychology. The problem is that all of us know of people who have gotten exactly what they wanted – only to be miserable.

Enough that God my Father knows,
Nothing this hope can dim;
He gives the very best to those
Who leave the choice with Him.

- Author Unknown

"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (Matthew 6: 33).

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field that a man found and covered up; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it" (Matthew 13: 44-46).

1. How valuable was the pearl in the story Jesus told?
2. How important to you is finding God, and your place in His kingdom?
3. List the things that are hindrances to your finding God and the plan He has for you. Be very honest and very specific.

Is It a Real Dollar Bill, or a Counterfeit?

You've heard it and have probably said it yourself; "If that's Christianity, I don't want it." However, in many cases what the person is rejecting is not Christianity. It's Pastor Law's eighty extra commandments; it's the stubbornness displayed by some church people; or it's Matilda's hard-hearted attitude toward the girl desperately needing help. Remember that *God* decides whom the real Christians are, and that many people who claim to be Christians really aren't. However, those who are real Christians don't always live their Christianity either.

It has been said that if there weren't any real dollar bills, there wouldn't be any counterfeits. Well, there are real Christians and there are counterfeits. Don't reject Christianity because there are hypocrites in the church, because the German church didn't stand up against Hitler, or because your uncle who reads the Bible all the time yells at you. If you do reject Christianity, first take time to read the New Testament for yourself so you know what you are rejecting. Then be honest enough to admit that you're rejecting *Jesus* because you're unwilling to make the changes He requires in your life. Jesus wants to be the Boss of your life; He demands so much that many people have said of real Christianity, "If that's Christianity, I don't want it."

"Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?" (John 6: 60).

"After this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him. Jesus said to the twelve, 'Will you also go away?' Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God'" (John 6: 66-69).

1. Why didn't Peter want to leave Jesus even if some of His teachings were tough?
2. Why does Jesus have the right to tell the disciples – and us – what to do?
3. Why do you think the other disciples left Jesus? (Reading John 6 could help you here.)
4. Why do people today decide not to follow Jesus?

What Makes You a Christian?

Which of these would most certainly be a Christian? (a.) Charlene Church Attender (b.) Dudley Do-Goooder (c.) Baptized Benjamin (d.) Confirmed Cynthia (e.) None of the Above

You probably answered the question correctly because you realized that just doing something outward can't change you on the inside. Yet, a lot of people think that believing the right things, using the right words, and running with the right crowd makes one a Christian. There is no magic in the words, "Jesus, come into my life" if they're simply repeated because someone else thought it was a good idea.

Others think that being "born again" is just turning over a new leaf, a determination to be better. Your deciding to be different won't save you either. Of course, you have to believe that Jesus is God's Son who came to die for your sins. And, after you become a Christian you will want to do good deeds. Yet, the missing ingredient here is repentance. Repentance means not only feeling sorry for your sin, but being willing to give it up and to turn around and face God honestly. If you admit your sin and are willing to let Jesus change you and run your life, then the words, "Jesus, come into my life" have meaning, and the Spirit of Jesus miraculously enters you.

An early American evangelist was confronted on the street by a drunk. One of his critics turned to him and said, "There's one of your converts." The evangelist replied, "He must be one of mine. He certainly isn't one of God's." Are you God's convert or somebody else's?

"Repent and believe in the Gospel" (Mark 1: 15)

"Jesus answered him, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born anew"'" (John 3: 3-7).

1. With what does Jesus compare conversion? (Conversion; "accepting Christ," or being "saved").
2. Can you think of a more drastic change than being born all over again and becoming a new person?
3. According to John 3: 6, can a person be called a Christian if he or she has not miraculously been changed by God on the inside? Why not?

Are You Ready to Get into the Wheelbarrow?

If I really believe something strongly enough, I will act on it. If I'm convinced that understanding chemistry will help me get through nurses' training, I'll study hard. If I'm certain that I can't make the cheerleading squad, I won't even try out. If I really believe the ice will hold, I'll go snowmobiling on the frozen lake. Saying, "I believe the ice will hold, but I'd never walk on it," would reveal my lack of faith.

If you really believe in Jesus, you'll want to trust Him. There is an old story about a man who walked on a tightrope across Niagara Falls. Next, he wheeled an empty wheelbarrow across the rope above Niagara Falls. Then he asked his applauding crowd, "Do you believe that I can put a man in the wheelbarrow and still make it across?" Everyone shouted, "Yes!" then he asked, "Who will get into the wheelbarrow?" No one volunteered.

Real faith will have action. Do you have "getting into the wheelbarrow" faith? This is the kind of faith needed to receive salvation.

"He who believes in the Son has eternal life; he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God rests upon him" (John 3: 36).

In the next passage, Paul describes what active faith meant in his life. To get the whole story, read chapters nine and twenty-six of Acts. ("Repent" means to turn around and change one's ways. "Gentiles" refers to people who are not Jewish).

"Wherefore, O King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those at Damascus, then at Jerusalem and throughout all the country of Judea, and also the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God and perform deeds worthy of their repentance. For this reason, the Jews seized me in the temple and tried to kill me" (Acts 26: 19-21).

1. What did obeying God cost Paul?
2. Would it have been logical for Paul to have said to Jesus, "I have enough faith to let you save me, but not enough to do what you ask of me"? Why not?"
3. When Paul preached to the people, what things did he tell them to do?
4. Is faith in Jesus real if it does not change one's life?

Will the Real Christian Please Stand Up?

When someone says, “Jesus is the Lord of my life,” what picture do you conjure up in your mind – a person demanding things from Skyways Prayer Answering Service, Inc., an employee who does the King’s work when conditions are favorable, or a slave who bows before his Master and calls Him “Lord”? Because we don’t have slaves and absolute rulers anymore, the word “Lord” doesn’t mean much to us.

Back in Roman times, calling someone Lord meant that he, like Caesar, had absolute life-and-death power over you, that he had the right to this authority, and that you would obey him. In that context, can you really say that Jesus is the Lord of your life?

In our culture, no one wants to obey. A student once remarked to me, “I think too much of myself to do as you say.” If we are so self-centered that we refuse to obey Jesus, we have no right to call ourselves Christians. We can think so much of ourselves that we’ll miss heaven.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 7: 21).

“But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach); because, if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For man believes with his heart and so is justified, and he confesses with his lips and so is saved. The Scripture says, ‘No one who believes in Him will be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows His riches upon all who call upon Him. For everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Romans 10: 8-13).

1. By what actions does a person display faith in the word that is preached?
2. What promise is given in Romans 10: 11? Would we need this promise if faith did not require actions?
3. What do you think confessing “Jesus is Lord” really means?
4. Can you call Jesus “Lord” and mean it?

CHAPTER TWO **NO TURNING BACK**

Till Death Us Do Part

If you've ever attended a traditional wedding ceremony, you've heard things like, "For better, for worse; for richer, for poorer; in sickness and in health ... till death us do part." Taken seriously, that's a tremendous commitment to live up to. Would you describe *your* relationship with Jesus Christ as that kind of commitment, or do you think of it as "Try Jesus for ninety days; there's nothing to lose, and there's a money-back guarantee"?

Have you given yourself to Him because He is truth, because He made you, and because He who is smarter than anyone else has the right to run your life? Or do you just think it might be a good deal for you?

Do you think Jesus is pretty fortunate that you noticed Him, or do you realize that you in no way deserve His mercy and grace? The Apostle Paul referred to himself as a "slave of Jesus Christ." Do you think of Him as the Great Genie-in-the-Sky who should consider your every wish as His command?

There are *facts* you base your life on – an operation will cure appendicitis, it's safer to slow down when driving around mountain curves, and jumping from a twelfth-story window is hazardous to your health. Whether or not you feel like acting in accordance with these facts, they are valid. They are true whether or not you understand the reasons behind them, and whether or not everyone else believes in them.

You must commit yourself to Jesus because of the facts – "He is the way, the truth, and the life" – and not because He'll give you a new high. Following Jesus and His truth has great end results, but it takes a *lifetime* commitment. "And he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10: 38).

"For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.' ... So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14: 28, 29, 30, 33).

1. Why is it ridiculous to start building something without finding out how much it will cost?
2. What will it cost *you* to be a real Christian?
3. Are you willing to sacrifice *everything* (popularity, wealth, comfort, dreams) in order to follow Jesus?

Receiving Jesus

The great gift of God was His Son. The great response of any person is receiving Jesus. Taking Jesus into your life made you a Christian. You believed God's Word, and as an act of faith, accepted Jesus as your Savior. Because of this, God miraculously changed the direction of your life. This is not the end of your responsibility though. Study the Bible to find out how children of God are supposed to act and what characteristics they are to have. You will notice that we are to be totally *obedient* to our Heavenly Father and totally *dependent* on Him. Even if this is not yet part of your experience, believe God's Word. Recognize that Jesus will work in you. Jesus lives within you to make you the kind of child that would bring honor to His name.

Know what God expects of you and don't try to live up to manmade rules. You don't always have to be serious, somber, and studious because Mrs. McFrown says you should be. You don't have to wear 1990s styles because Aunt Tillie thinks you'd look better if you did. But you do have to love your enemies when right now you hate them. This is just one of many situations in which you will have to receive Jesus and His power in order to become God's obedient child.

“But to all who received him, who believed in His name, He gave power to become children of God” (John 1: 12).

“Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3: 20).

1. If we open the door to Jesus, what does He promise?
2. Jesus will come into our lives, in the first place, to save us. But Jesus may still be knocking on doors that lead to secret compartments in your life. “May I go with you on your date tonight?” “May I control your eating habits?” “Would you let me show you how to spend your money?” “Would you obey me by respecting your parents?” Are you locking Jesus out of any area of your life?
3. Eating together symbolizes fellowship, partnership, and belonging to the same social class. Jesus wants to be your best Friend. He wants you to share your dreams and fears and hopes with Him, and to let Him direct you in everything. Do you have that kind of relationship with Him now?

But Don't Look in the Closet

Christ lives in your heart because you exercised faith – you let Him in. Someone has written a beautiful booklet that compares your heart to a huge house. Even after you let Jesus into your heart “house,” you will discover that there are still more rooms to give to Him. Although becoming a Christian means giving Jesus your life, few people realize what that *means*. Jesus is usually invited into the “living room” and treated more like a guest than a landlord.

Little by little, Jesus shows us that He has a right to determine what goes on in the “recreation room” and to decide what is served in the “dining room”. He even has the right to clean out the “closets” – to make you apologize for past words, to pay for things you’ve stolen, and to try to make things right with people you’ve wronged. He has glorious plans to remodel and redecorate your heart home – plans that are greater than you’ve ever dreamed of.

Most of all, Jesus wants to be your constant Companion, showing you His love continually. Let Jesus clean out your closets, make your plans, and share His life with you.

“To them God chose to make known ... the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1: 27).

“And that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ, which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3: 17-19).

1. How does Christ live in our hearts?
2. Love makes a house a home, and it's love that transforms your heart house. What is the Source of real love?
3. Jesus can put love in your heart that keeps on growing and that is outside the realm of human understanding. What wrong attitudes are preventing the love of Jesus from growing in you?

Your Gift to God

Have you ever tried to “un-give” a present? You don’t give your mother a beautiful plant for Mother’s Day and then proceed to tell her, “I’ll keep it up in my room because I’ll take better care of it than you will.” You’ve been taught from the first birthday party you attended that if you give something away, you don’t take it back again.

Now this also holds true for your commitment to Jesus, and it’s good to renew it each day, saying, “Jesus, I have given myself to you. I will follow you and serve you – I am totally yours.” If you sin after making this surrender, don’t think that your surrender was insincere. It’s because you are still learning how to trust Jesus and to give yourself to Him. Ask His forgiveness and reaffirm your surrender to Him.

Don’t hold anything back. Confess every sin to Him. Give Him your mind and your thought life, your mouth and the words you say, as well as your heart and your love, your job, your schoolwork, your computer, your motorcycle, and even your hairdryer. He has a right to all you are, all you do, and all you own. If you give it, Jesus will take it; and what He takes, He will care for.

I’d give you a rainbow
If I had many colors,
But alas my sky is gray.
I’d give you a lark
To greet your sunrise,
But wings were made to be free.
I’d give you a mountain,
Blue and majestic,
But all I have is one stone.
I will give you my life, Lord.
My gift to you is me. - Patrice Joncas

“But first they gave themselves to the Lord” (2 Corinthians 8: 5).

“And he said to all, ‘If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it’” (Luke 9: 23, 24).

1. Why do you actually lose your life when you approach everything with a selfish “me first” attitude?
2. Can you think of an instance in which denying yourself for the moment to obey God will not only guard you for eternal life but also protect you from trouble right here on earth?
3. Can you think of two difficult things which you might face this Chapter if you really follow Jesus?

Lord, May I Change My Mind?

“I don’t particularly feel like being a Christian today.” The girl who said that expressed something most people feel at some time or another. There could be a number of reasons for this feeling. You may want to sneak out when your parents have grounded you, even though you know God commands you to obey them. Goofing around in geometry class may be more fun than doing your assignment, in spite of the fact that if Jesus physically walked into class, you’d start doing the problems. Or maybe it’s a party you’ve been invited to; you’d like to go because all the popular kids are invited, but you know it won’t be a party a Christian should attend.

Sometimes it seems so hard to be a Christian that you’d rather not try than try and fail. When you’re afraid that you can’t hold out as a Christian, you’re forgetting that God is all-powerful, and that it’s not your ability to hold onto Him that matters, but His ability to hold on to you.

If you’ve given your life to Jesus, the Holy Spirit is at work inside you. Just as a kitten or a pine tree grows large because of the life inside, so you grow as a Christian because of the life of the Holy Spirit inside you. Choosing to sin will squelch that life inside you, but you can choose to obey. The formula for going on with Jesus is very old and very simple – “trust and obey.”

“Jesus said to him, ‘No one who put his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’” (Luke 9: 62).

“For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure” (Philippians 2:13).

“Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord; His going forth is sure as the dawn; He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth” (Hosea 6: 3).

1. What specific area in your life will require your willingness to obey if God is going to change it?
2. What command is given in Hosea 6: 3?
3. If you are really trying to obey God, how certain can you be that God will come to you?

You Can Be Sure

Back in high school I remember talking to a girlfriend about heaven. When I told her that I was certain that Jesus was in my life and that I was going to heaven, she said, “But that’s presuming a lot; it sounds like a pretty proud attitude.” If my status depended on my good works and flawless character, “proud” would be an understatement. But, we are saved by faith and not by works.

God does not grade on the curve. The Bible states that, “you have been saved through faith ... not because of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2: 8, 9). God tells us in many places in the Bible that He will forgive us and make us His children if we confess our sins and make Him the Lord of our lives. When God says it, He means it.

There is nothing humble about calling God a liar. You don’t like it when someone doubts your word; you don’t want people to think that you lie. Then how can we doubt God’s Word? Unbelief in Jesus’ power to save is nothing less than treating Him as a liar. Jesus commands us to be born again. He wouldn’t command something that wasn’t possible. He promised to give eternal life to anyone who believes in Him and He means it. If you completely turned your life over to Jesus, He came into your heart **BECAUSE HE SAID HE WOULD.**

“Truly, truly I say to you, he who hears my word and believes Him who sent me, has eternal life; he does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (John 5: 24).

“He who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself. He who does not believe God, has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has borne to his Son. And this is the testimony; that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who has not the Son of God has not life. I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5: 10-13).

1. What is the only way you can know that you're going to heaven?
2. John wanted his readers to know that they had eternal life. How can something written 1900 years ago help *you* to have assurance of eternal life?

Assurance

The night you invited Christ into your life, you felt so clean inside and so full of joy. God seemed so near that you were sure you could never doubt Him again. But then you had to go back to “real life.” There was Friday’s book report, and you hadn’t even picked out a book to read. As usual, every dish in the house seemed dirty the night it was your turn to clean up the kitchen, and you complained the whole time. The boss yelled at you at work, and life seemed no different from before. You heard the devil’s sneering whisper, “See – you’re no different. You’re not a Christian after all!” you might even have answered, “Well, I surely don’t feel any different.” Maybe the beautiful bride feels no different after the trip to the altar either. Three days later, with a terrible sore throat and a temperature of 103 degrees she may not feel one bit married. But the fact is, she is married. If she keep’s acting on that fact, sooner or later she’ll feel married.

If you truly accepted Christ, you are God's child, regardless of your feelings. Trust that fact. Also remember that even if you're still a child of the King of Kings, if you stay close to Jesus, you will grow and mature in your Christian life. But if you keep doubting that you are a Christian, you'll never grow. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold the new has come” (2 Corinthians 5: 17).

“Jesus said to her, ‘Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world’” (John 11: 23-27).

1. What promise did Jesus give Martha?
2. What did Martha believe?
3. How would Jesus have felt if Martha would have said, “I don’t feel anything. You can't expect me to believe I have eternal life without giving me proof”?
4. Will you put your faith in Jesus and His work instead of in your feelings?

CHAPTER THREE **THERE IS A DIFFERENCE!**

If You Have Jesus, You Have Everything

You may have seen the greeting card showing two contented children with the caption. "If you have Jesus, you have everything." Begin each new day with that thought. You may feel like a little lost lamb in a big bad world, but Jesus, your Shepherd, is with you whether you need forgiveness, help with a problem, or someone to love you. If you fall, He'll help you in temptation and guide you into His perfect will.

Let Jesus be your Shepherd. Let Him be everything to you.

In Him is all I need.

In Him is all I need.

His abundance for my emptiness,

And His life for my lifelessness.

His love for my coldness,

And His light for my darkness.

His truth for my deceit,

And His joy for my sadness.

His victory for my defeat,

And his rest for my restlessness.

- Translated from the German by Gerdi Sirtl

"He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, will He not also give us all things with Him?" (Romans 8: 32)

"Though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If any other man thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more; circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law a Pharisee, as to zeal a persecutor of the church, as to righteousness under the law blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ" (Philippians 3: 4-8).

1. What things did Paul give up in order to follow Jesus?
2. Why did Paul feel it was worth it?
3. Is there anything in your life you're holding onto because you don't trust Jesus to be everything?

Green Pastures and Still Waters

Jesus promises to give us peace. Most of us think of peace as vacationing on a Caribbean island or being able to sleep until noon on Saturday morning.

Yet if peace means escape, the only way to get it is to drop out of regular day-to-day living, with its cell phone bills, traffic jams, and tight schedules. Fortunately, Jesus offers peace that the world can't give – peace when your mother yells at you, peace when the car runs out of gas, and peace when the band bus leaves without you – peace in the middle of pressure.

An artist once portrayed “peace” as a little bird content in a nest on the end of an oak branch sticking out over roaring Niagara Falls. That is peace.

There is an interesting verse in Psalms; “Blessed are the men whose strength is in thee, in whose heart are the highways to Zion” (Psalm 84: 5). Zion was the hill in Jerusalem where God's temple stood. The temple was filled with the peace and presence of God. It was impossible to camp out in the temple all the time. However, since God is the Source of peace, turning our thoughts to Him makes a “highway to Zion” in our hearts.

Paul commands us to “let the peace of Christ rule” in our hearts. If you keep your mind on Jesus and you look to Him in faith, you'll find green pastures and still waters, even in the middle of the fifth-hour English class and other unexpected places.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want; he makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside the still waters; He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for His name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me, they rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies; thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.” (Psalm 23)

1. List ten things you shouldn't have to worry about.
2. What do “green pastures” mean for *your* life?
3. In what area of your life do you need the peace of Jesus today?

Your Best Friend Forever – Jesus

Do you ever feel like nobody really cares about you? If you answered “yes”, join the human race. Loneliness and that “no one understands me” feeling are very common. Sometimes the people whom you think are your friends let you down. Other times they are too occupied with their own problems to notice that you need special help. Even if someone takes the time to try to help you, that person is often unable to understand your feelings.

Jesus wants to be your Friend and constant Companion, the One with whom you share your plans, your dreams, your failures, your sin, and your problems. Not only does He understand you perfectly, but He has all power, and can direct you in the right way and show you how to get out of the mess you got yourself into.

Jesus will always be your Friend – no matter what. He’ll be the honest Friend who lets you know when you’re doing something wrong, the comforting Friend to whom you can pour out your heart, and the Counselor who will help you make your future plans.

Good friends spend a lot of time together. Jesus can’t help you if you don’t talk to Him, and He can’t advise you if you don’t listen to Him by reading what He wants to tell you, found in the Bible. You need a Friend like Jesus. Take the time to get to know Him.

“No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15: 15).

“For he has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you’” (Hebrews 13: 5).

“Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand” (Isaiah 41: 10).

“No man shall be able to stand before you all the days of your life; as I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you” (Joshua 1: 5).

1. How do you know that Jesus is always with us?
2. Because Jesus is always with us, what commands are we given?
3. During the next Chapter, what should you do differently because you know Jesus is your friend?

Happiness Is Jesus

Do you want to be happy? You might respond, “That’s a dumb question. Of course, *everyone* wants to be happy.”

God loves you and wants to give you real joy, but like everything God has for us, it must be on *His* terms, not ours. If you're looking for gladness, you won't find it, because you're looking for a feeling, for something within yourself. Look to Jesus, follow Jesus, believe in Jesus, and joy becomes automatic. Gladness is only proof that something really satisfies you. Does your happiness come from the fact that Jesus really satisfies you and that you enjoy doing His will?

In the Bible, light and joy usually go together. You can even see a glow on the face of a person who is genuinely happy. When gloom descends it's because of one of these reasons; (1.) ignorance of all God can do; (2.) doubt that God can work in a tough situation; (3.) unwillingness to give up everything to Jesus; (4.) sin.

God can give you joy and light in the middle of absolutely terrible circumstances; there are Christians around who prove it by their lives. I'll never forget Helen. I met her once when I was eighteen. Helen was a hunchbacked lady, caring for her dying mother in a rickety old house on an out-of-the-way farm. She had never been able to realize her dream of attending a Bible school, and now found herself in a very lonely and difficult situation. Helen's face was beaming and she talked constantly of the Lord and His many blessings. She knew that if she had Jesus, it was possible for her to find all her happiness in Him.

Jesus assured us that whoever follows Him “Shall not walk in darkness.” Deep-down joy doesn't necessarily mean absence of pain and heartache. Hopelessness causes depression – but the Christian can always have hope and faith in any situation because God is all-powerful.

“The joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8: 10).

“And he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 13: 58).

“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full” (John 15: 10, 11).

1. What are some reasons for Christians not experiencing joy?
2. Which of these reasons do you feel is your biggest problem at the moment? Ask God to show you what to do about it.

This Job Takes Jesus

A six-year-old boy was terrified to walk past the house of a big bully. This bully would always beat him up. Then one day the boy's fifteen-year-old brother walked with him past the house. The bully never even appeared. The six-year-old was safe as long as he was accompanied by his brother. But one day he became overconfident and decided to go past the home of the big bully all by himself. He was badly beaten up. At first, he was afraid to tell his big brother, but when he did, the big brother taught the bully a lesson. He also instructed his little brother never to walk by that house alone again. Jesus intends that we have victory over sin – not once in a while, but constantly. If we approach life in our own strength, sin will defeat us just as the bully beat up the child. However, Jesus within us is all-powerful and He has never yet lost a fight with the devil.

Stay close to Jesus and be afraid to venture into anything without His presence and approval. Bring every sin to Him. Never try to deal with it yourself. It is as ridiculous for you to try to deal with sin by yourself as it is for a beaten-up six-year-old to take on a big bully. Jesus will forgive you and give you strength for the next time. Jesus is a Savior from sin. You don't overcome sin with a little help from Jesus, but when Jesus himself lives within you, He can insure victory over sin.

“And you shall call his name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1: 21).

“I confess my iniquity, I am sorry for my sin” (Psalm 38: 18).

“I can do all things in Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4: 13).

1. Why is it sometimes difficult to confess sin?
2. Why is it necessary to confess sin?
3. Once your sin is confessed and forgiven, what can Jesus do through you?
4. Reread Philippians 4: 13 several times, replacing “all things” with something specific in your life. For example, “I can study for the geometry test through Christ who strengthens me.”

Are There Any Goliaths in Your Life?

Breaking that date for Friday night, saying “no” to drugs, starting the homework that’s due on Friday, or replacing the stolen bike sometimes can seem like beady-eyed nine-foot-high giants. Life is full of Goliaths. Jesus is the One with the power to win the victory over each of them, and He wants to give that power to us.

The story is told of a mother who visited her son’s dormitory room at college. She was disappointed to see the walls filled with immoral pictures. She said nothing but mailed her son a present – a beautifully framed picture of his favorite Bible verse. He put it on the wall, and as he looked at it, he thought of Jesus. He was forced to take down the other pictures. The power of Jesus is like that – it wins over wrong thinking and sinful actions.

The power of Jesus is not just for facing emergencies and full-grown Goliaths. Do you realize that Goliath was once a cute, helpless little baby? The most innocent or potentially worthwhile thing can become a monster unless it is under the control and guidance of Jesus. Even a search for love can turn into a horrible experience if Jesus is not in charge of it.

Take all your plans, all your decisions, and all your temptations to Jesus. Let Jesus fight the Goliaths in your life.

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me’” (Matthew 28: 18).

“Then David said to the Philistine, ‘You come to me with a sword and with a spear and with a javelin; but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have defied. This day the Lord will deliver you into my hand...’ And David put his hand in his bag and took out a stone, and slung it, and struck the Philistine on his forehead; the stone sank into his forehead, and he fell on his face to the ground” (1 Samuel 17: 45, 46, 49).

1. Why do you think David won his fight with Goliath?
2. What are the giants in your life right now? Are you facing them the way David faced Goliath?
3. What might have been the ending of this story if David had trusted in his own strength?

I Am Weak but He is Strong

Jesus wants to be your strength, but He can't be unless you let Him. In order to let Jesus be your strength, you must be weak – by God's definition; you must recognize that you are unable to live the Christian life – period. It is not a matter of desperately trying to be kind to a crabby boss and getting a little help from Jesus to push you over the top. It is not witnessing like mad in your own strength and getting a boost of God's power to keep going. No, it's recognizing that Jesus meant it when He said, "Apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15: 5).

Sometimes, we use the word "weakness" to cover up sins. A little child who comes in from playing doesn't usually get by with saying, "I'm too weak to clean my room." Spending time in Bible study and not helping others is not due to "weakness." It's more accurate to say, "I'm too lazy," or, "I think other things are more important."

A child who struggles to put his shoe on the wrong foot, disregarding his mother's instruction, is not weak. He is *disobedient*. You may be trying to do something God doesn't want you to do; you can't expect His strength for that. If your mother baked a birthday cake for your younger sister, asking you not to touch it, your eating three pieces before the party is not weakness; it is pure selfishness.

If you want God's strength, you can have it. First of all, stop calling sin "laziness" and disobedience "weakness." Second, recognize that you don't just need *some* help from Jesus – you need Him to do the whole thing, from beginning to end. Now, this does not mean sitting in a chair for the next twenty years until a voice from heaven tells you to stand up. It does mean recognizing that you can't drive a car, wash the dishes, take a test, or call your girlfriend *in such a way as to glorify and honor God* unless you admit your complete dependence on Him. Of course, you can physically accomplish any of these things. It's *pleasing God* that you cannot do on your own. Just as you would constantly seek the guidance of your teacher while performing an experiment with explosives, so you should realize that the relationships and responsibilities of life require God's supervision if they are not to blow up in your face.

Once you acknowledge your weakness, by faith claim God's strength. God promises strength for the weak. He has enough strength no matter what you're facing, as long as you don't rely on your own resources. Andrew Murray puts it this way, "The Christian is strong in His Lord – not sometimes strong and sometimes weak, but always weak and therefore always strong."

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12: 9).

"But Peter said, 'I have no silver or gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' And he took him by the

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right hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong. And leaping up he stood and walked and entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God” (Acts 3: 6-8).

1. What did *Jesus* do for the lame man?
2. What sin in your life have you been excusing as “weakness”? Confess it to the Lord as sin and begin to obey God in that area.
3. For what do you need the strength of Jesus today? Ask Him for it.

CHAPTER FOUR **HOW TO WIN THE WAR AGAINST SIN**

When It's Legal to Hate

Do you *hate* sin? God does. You might hear someone say, “Why does God let little children starve and suffer?” However, the real culprit is sin. It was greed that started the war, alcoholism that misspent the money, and uncontrolled anger that caused the beating. A heresy of our day teaches that finally even the devil will go to heaven! The devil is the author of sin and delights in seeing starving children, broken homes, and misunderstood teenagers. You should hate the devil and hate sin.

Sin hurts God and makes people unhappy. If you are to talk to God at all, the first thing you must bring to Him is your sin. You had to confess your sin and bring it to Jesus in order to become a Christian. As a child of God, confession of sin is one of your greatest privileges. God's holiness actually eradicates sin. His holiness is like fire that consumes evil, or a spot remover that erases every stain.

Our first tendency is to cover sin or to try to lessen its impact. Have you noticed that the kid who cheated on the test goes out of his way to be nice to the teacher? If you stay out past the time you promised you'd be in, isn't it easier to take out the garbage without being told than to tell her the truth? But sin is so terrible that you can't cover it, patch it up, or rework it. It's like that rotting garbage. The only thing to do with it is throw it away. But you can never get rid of your sin unless you are completely honest with God and with people you have wronged.

“He who conceals his transgressions (sins) will not prosper, but he who confesses and forsakes them will find mercy” (Proverbs 28: 13).

“When I declared not my sin, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. I acknowledged my sin to thee, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the Lord’; then thou did forgive the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32: 3-5).

1. What are the symptoms of a person who is trying to cover up unconfessed sin?
2. Just as pain tells you to pull your hand off the hot stove, guilt reveals the sin you must get rid of. If a person refused to take his or her hand off the hot stove and yet kept complaining about the pain, no one would be very sympathetic. Somehow, though, we will do everything with our guilt feelings except confess our sin. Confess any covered-up sins to God – and to people you've wronged. Then accept God's forgiveness and refuse to entertain more guilt

Does This Shake You Up a Little?

Do you know what God thinks about “little white lies”? A “little white lie” is

a dangerous sin that can break your communication with God and damage your relationships with other people. The Bible tells the story of Ananias and Sapphira, a nice Jerusalem couple who sold their land and gave the money to the church. Now that's a very generous thing to do. There was just one problem – they pretended to give all the money, when they really gave only part of it. When Ananias told this “little white lie,” Peter answered, “You have not lied to men but to God.” When Ananias heard these words, he dropped dead. That is probably the reason why Noah and the ark is a much more popular Bible story!

Maybe you'd better look at your own life. Do you lie to give false impressions? Do you exaggerate to make people listen to your stories? Do you hint that you are a better ball player than you really are? Would your comments lead others to think that you had more dates than a palm tree? Confess these lies to God. Remember that He loves you exactly the way you are, and it isn't necessary to give a false impression to Him, or anyone. Also ask Him to help you overcome any bragging habits you have established. Never justify your “little white lies.” Confess them as sin and determine to tell the truth.

“Be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32: 23).

“After an interval of about three hours his wife came, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, ‘Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.’ And she said, ‘Yes, for so much.’ But Peter said to her, ‘How is it that you have agreed together to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? Hark, the feet of those that have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.’ Immediately she fell down at his feet and died. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came upon the whole church, and upon all who heard of these things” (Acts 5: 7-11).

1. How do we know that Ananias and Sapphira were guilty of “premeditated lying”?
2. Do you ever find it easier to go along with something that is not completely honest because another Christian suggests it?
3. Do you have a real fear of saying or doing something that is not entirely honest?

Even If They Stone You

The Scarlet Letter, not a popular book nowadays, is an early American novel in Puritan Massachusetts. In the story, a young unmarried minister fathers a child. He is suspected by no one and the mother will not disclose his identity. The young minister says from the pulpit that he is the worst of sinners; he constantly condemns himself. At the same time, he refuses to do the one necessary thing – make a direct confession of his specific sin before God and the people, with the intention of facing the consequences. Because he refused to do this, he was most miserable. Finally, his approaching death made him confess publicly, but he had no time to enjoy his clear conscience.

Actually, it would be better to say nothing than to repeat, “and Jesus, forgive all my sins,” every night for five years. It’s better to tell God that you have nothing to confess than to confess just for the sake of confessing. Ask the Holy Spirit to point out specific sin in your life. Confess that sin to God – and to another person if you have wronged him or her.

Whenever you feel guilty, ask the Holy Spirit to show you if you’ve done something specifically wrong. Ask with an attitude of willingness to face God honestly. If God doesn’t show you anything, then dismiss the guilty feeling. That “yucky” worthless feeling, which is vague and uncertain, comes from the devil. Ignore it and forget it. However, the conviction of specific sin is from the Holy Spirit and must be dealt with immediately. “Against thee, and thee only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in thy sight, so that thou are justified in thy sentence and blameless in thy judgment” (Psalm 51: 4).

“And Achan answered Joshua, ‘Of a truth I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I did; when I saw among the spoil a beautiful mantle from Shinar, and two hundred shekels of silver, and a bar of gold weighing fifty shekels, then I coveted them and took them; and behold, they are hidden in the earth inside my tent ...’ And all Israel stoned him with stones” (Joshua 7: 20, 21, 25)

1. Notice how specific Achan’s confession of his sin was. How do you think he felt after he confessed?
2. Are your confessions of sin specific or general?
3. God could not bless Israel again until Achan’s sin was dealt with. In view of that, and in view of the eternal consequences of sin, was Achan’s confession worth it, even if it sealed his death?

But ...

Are you able to talk yourself into and out of almost anything? Can you think of sixty-nine good reasons for not doing your history lesson? Are you able to defend yourself for ten minutes straight when your mother mentions that a bulldozer may be needed to get your room cleaned out? Can you rationalize that running with a rowdy group of friends won't hurt you?

If you decide to prove that everything you do is okay, you will hurt yourself immeasurably. People who are really good at rationalizing won't take advice – but it's amazing what you can learn from other people *if you listen*.

Jesus demanded a “no ifs, ands, or buts” obedience from His disciples. If you keep making excuses, you won't obey your parents, your teachers, or God. Probably the worst thing about an excuse-maker is that he or she can't really ask God for forgiveness. If you can't admit that you're dead wrong and that you need forgiveness, God won't forgive you. Your confession can't be, “God, if you had to live with my sister, you'd blow your stack too – and besides, she started it. By the way, I'd like forgiveness for getting angry.” God wants you to deal directly and honestly with your sin. No excuses are allowed.

“For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity (sin) cannot be found out and hated” (Psalm 36: 2).

“But he said to him, ‘A man once gave a banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, “Come; for all is now ready.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.” And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.” And another said, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.”’ (Luke 14: 16-20).

1. Since oxen and fields can wait, and women love to go out to eat, what were these excuse-makers really saying?
2. Jesus is asking you to follow Him completely and to be frank and honest about your sin. What excuses do you have for not obeying?
3. Why do excuses keep you from seeing yourself as you really are?
4. What is the real motive behind the excuses you are giving God for your disobedience to Him? Talk this over with Him, asking Him to help you stop making excuses.

Eve Made Me Do It

I walked into the principal's office just in time to hear a good-looking blond boy's, "But he started it!" cut off by the principal's booming voice; "I don't care what the other guy did. I want to know what *you* did." Just as the student had to face the principal because of *his own* actions, each of us must face God, knowing that we are responsible for our own deeds; we can't blame anybody else.

My father tells about the first lie he ever heard my sister tell. "Chickie did it. Don't spank me." She was barely two. No one has to teach us to cover up for our mistakes and sins. That comes naturally. If we don't stop blaming other people, we will never build an honest and healthy relationship with God. It doesn't matter if it is ninety-five percent the fault of the other person. God expects us to confess our part to Him and to apologize to the other person – and not in such a way as to force an apology in return.

We are not responsible for making other people confess their sins. We are only responsible for ourselves. One of the devil's best tricks to keep us from having pure hearts is getting us to concentrate on the faults and sins of others. If God had a loudspeaker in the sky to give us constant audible advice, I think we'd often hear, "MIND YOUR OWN BUSINESS." Confess your sin without blaming anyone but yourself.

"When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, 'Lord, what about this man?' Jesus said to him, 'If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!'" (John 21: 21, 22).

"Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand" (Romans 14: 4).

"The soul that sins shall die. The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son; the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself" (Ezekiel 18: 20).

1. Why is it so easy to blame others for our own failures?
2. Why do we find it easier to excuse ourselves for wrongdoing than to excuse others?
3. If you have been blaming your parents, your church, your school, or your friends for the way you act, talk to God about your attitude. Do exactly what He tells you to do.

Do You Enjoy Being Kidnapped?

Not long ago, the newspapers carried the story of a wealthy Italian girl who was kidnapped. Her parents came up with the ransom money, only to find that she liked being with her kidnapper! She refused to be freed.

Do you enjoy your sin? Do you find self-pity comforting? Do you appreciate the way your temper helps you get your own way? Do you find that dwelling on unclean thoughts is an enjoyable pastime? If you answered “yes”, you'd have to admit that confession of these sins wouldn't be completely sincere. Real confession implies willingness to stop sinning – willingness to hate the sin you're confessing. You still might fall sometimes. However, there is a great difference between trying to go through every red light without getting caught and determining never to go through a red light again, once in awhile not being able to stop in time.

Treat even the thought of sin like a traffic light that has turned red – stop before you get into it. If you have decided always to stop at red lights, your conscious decision soon becomes subconscious, and obeying traffic lights becomes easier and easier. Set your mind completely against sin. Be willing to take any action necessary to follow God. Don't just confess sin.

Determine to stop doing it.

“And put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4: 24).

“When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow. Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord; though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (Isaiah 1: 15-18).

1. Why wouldn't God listen to the prayers of His people, according to Isaiah 1?
2. Is there any reason why God won't listen to your prayers?
3. God wants you not only to stop doing wrong, but also to “learn to do good.” What kind of student are you when it comes to learning to do right?

Repent? You've Got To Be Kidding!

I'll never forget it. At a senior high Bible camp, as we silently sat around the campfire, God's power became very real, and his Holy Spirit began convicting people of sin. A seventeen-year-old boy who had been one of the troublemakers started sobbing and saying, "I'm a terrible sinner." "I'm a terrible sinner." That night kids not only confessed sin, they also genuinely repented.

Repentance means turning around and going in the opposite direction. Those kids were serious about giving their lives to God. Dates were cancelled so campers could go back to their cabins to pray and apologize for wrong things they had said or done. The next day camp seemed a little bit like heaven. The whole atmosphere had changed.

Repentance always includes these things; (1.) a deep sense of sinfulness and a realization that a holy God can't look upon our sin. A flippant "All have sinned so I'm a sinner too – big deal" won't make it. We must recognize the seriousness of sin. (2.) A desire to get rid of our sin badly enough to obey God – to do whatever He says must be done. (3.) A determination to live our lives for Jesus and not for ourselves. There must be a *complete change of direction*.

You may not hear the word "repent" very often, but if you don't experience the ingredients of repentance, you'll never have a solid relationship with God.

"I tell you, No, but unless you repent you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13: 3).

"Many also of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices. And a number of those who practiced magic arts brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all; and they counted the value of them and found it came to fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily" (Acts 19: 18-20).

1. How do you know that those people in Acts really meant it when they confessed their sin?
2. Do you have some things on YouTube you shouldn't be watching, a website you should never visit again, or a friendship you must terminate?
3. From Acts 19: 20, what is the result when people confess and then follow through with *action*?

CHAPTER FIVE **THAT NASTY STUFF CALLED “SIN”**

Sin and Separation

Do you remember doing things such as avoiding Mr. Farnsworth for years because you hit a baseball through his window when he was vacationing in Colorado? Or trying to keep your mother from discovering that you had broken her most beautiful vase? Or hoping you wouldn't meet the kid whose bike you stole? If you've ever done anything like that – and most of us have – you know how uncomfortable the person you have wronged can make you feel - even if that person knows nothing about what you have done.

Sin makes us feel very uncomfortable around God, and there is no way we can hide what we have done from Him. **YOU CAN NEVER GROW AS A CHRISTIAN WITH UNCONFESED SIN IN YOUR LIFE.** It doesn't matter if it is something you did yesterday or whether it happened five years ago. To feel close to God again you must clear up your sin.

If you think back on your life again, you may also be able to recall confessing what you did and finding a beautiful relationship with another person completely restored. When I was a child, my mother left an open can of red paint on the kitchen floor while she went out into the yard. While she was gone, my sister and I were running through the kitchen and dumped the whole thing over. We ran out to tell my mother what had happened. She not only forgave us, but said, “When you do something wrong, always tell me right away. Because you told me immediately, I can clean up the floor without permanent damage. If you had tried to hide it, the kitchen floor would have had a nasty red splotch for years.”

When you do something wrong, remember the can of red paint. If you don't confess it immediately, it will do more harm and will be much harder to confess later. If you have something from your past that must be made right, clear it up immediately before it gets worse.

“If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened” (Psalm 66: 18).

“Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened that it cannot save, or his ear dull that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you so that He does not hear” (Isaiah 59: 1, 2).

1. If you feel like avoiding Bible study, church services, and youth leaders, what could be the reason?
2. Is there specific sin in your life that is separating you from God? What is it?

Hiding in the Garden Is Not Advised

The story of Adam and Eve is so familiar that we forget we can learn

something from it. We could title their experience, “All the Wrong Ways to Handle Any Situation.” Adam and Eve did all the dumbest things. The sad part is that their actions have been repeated millions of times.

Eve listened to the devil as he questioned God. That is very dangerous because we are then assuming that we know more than God, and have the right to revise His commandments. Eve hadn’t listened to God carefully enough to be sure about what He had actually said. She inaccurately repeated His instructions.

Next, Eve believed the devil’s lies. What he said seemed logical so she bought it. Remember that your logic is never better than God’s.

Eve then desired the forbidden fruit. I’ve heard a mother say to her child, “You can’t have it, but it’s okay to want it.” That is not true when it comes to temptation. If the devil can make you dwell on your desire to have something that’s wrong, he has won half his battle.

Misery and sin like company. Eve not only sinned but also convinced Adam to join in her sin. Then, instead of confessing, they made silly fig-leaf outfits and played the first game of hide-and-seek! To say the least, God was not impressed.

Anything you do to try to hide your sin is just as ridiculous. You don’t have to repeat the Garden of Eden experiment. The results are always the same.

“Then desire when it has conceived, gives birth to sin; and sin when it is full grown brings forth death.” (James 1: 15).

“So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons. And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Genesis 3: 6-8).

1. What attitude did Adam and Eve have toward God after the sin?
2. How will sin affect your relationship with God?
3. In what ways have you tried to hide from God when you have sinned?

The Blood of Jesus

If your kidneys failed to function, the only way that you could hope to again live a normal healthy life would be by receiving a kidney transplant. If I volunteered to donate my kidney to you, you would really owe me your life. If you honestly asked me what you could do to repay me and I told you to give me your antique diamond ring, you'd be obligated to do exactly as I said. To me, that ring would be the most valuable thing you could give me. Have you ever wondered how the blood of Jesus can take away our sins? Has the idea of sacrificing animals in the Old Testament to cover sin until Jesus died, been a terribly difficult concept for you to understand? Blood is valuable to God because He says it is. God created the world and He made the rules. We couldn't live without blood running through our veins; to give His blood for us, Jesus had to die, showing how terrible sin is and how much it cost God to forgive us.

Yet, there is no completely logical way to figure out why blood is valuable to God, so we must accept it by faith. Human logic would say that we should try to do enough good deeds to outweigh the bad ones. God says, "No." Man's idea is to show penitence and remorse to try and make God feel sorry for us. But that isn't necessary. Jesus already shed His blood for our sins. You can't do a thing to make yourself acceptable in God's sight. Only Jesus' blood can remove your sin. That is what is valuable to God.

"But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1: 7).

"Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Hebrews 9: 22).

"For this is my blood of the covenant (promise), which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26: 28).

1. What is God's requirement for the forgiveness of sins?
2. Do you really believe Jesus' blood is what takes away your sins, or do you try to feel bad, or do more good works to "make up" for what you've done?
3. Because Jesus gave His blood – His life – for you, what is the only logical thing you can give Him in return?

So Satan Is Accusing You Again!

Do you hear the devil whispering discouraging things to you? He'll suggest things like, "God never forgave you – look how bad you are"; "You're a failure and you might as well stop even trying to be a Christian"; "Don't bother trying to confess that sin. God won't even want to talk to you after this."

Obviously, if we have done something wrong and refuse to be honest and confess it, we should feel guilty – because we are. But I'm talking about that vague feeling of failure and discouragement, or the constant rehashing of old sins you've confessed before. The devil loves to accuse Christians, and he spends twenty-four hours a day doing it. The reason we have so much trouble is that we fall for his tricks.

The devil might say, "You're a rotten Christian. You didn't feel one bit like helping that crabby neighbor, Mrs. Jones, carry in her groceries yesterday – and Christians are supposed to love to help everybody." Our usual reply is something like, "Well, I did mow the lawn without my mother saying a word - so there." Other times we answer, "You're right. I'm a terrible, awful, lousy Christian who should flee the planet."

In both cases, we are trying to find righteousness and goodness within ourselves, and the Bible teaches that it just isn't there. The right answer for you to give is, "Big deal, Satan. I've confessed that, and it's Jesus' blood that takes away my sins and clears my conscience. I don't expect to find something good inside me because it just isn't there. But Jesus has forgiven me, I never need to think of that sin again. Besides, you were defeated by Jesus on the cross and will be completely destroyed at the end of the world." "When he (the devil) lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies" (John 8: 44).

"And the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world – he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him. And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, "Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the accuser of our brethren has been thrown down, who accused them day and night before our God. And they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives unto death" (Revelation 12: 9-11).

1. What kinds of things does the devil do to discourage you?
2. According to Revelation 12, how can the devil be conquered?

But God is On My Side

When you have a hassle or a problem, it's nice to have someone stick up for you. The devil is always trying to condemn you. The comments of non-Christians are part of his ammunition; "After all, what can one expect of a fanatic." "I thought you were a Christian," or, "But then, everyone from your church is weird."

When you deliberately do wrong, you open the door for the devil because he then has a definite reason to accuse you. Of course, he won't stop with the true accusation. He'll bring up some false ones also to completely wipe you out. As soon as you confess your sin to God and claim Jesus' blood, you can effectively resist the devil's accusations. Pray honestly, and if God doesn't reveal any specific sin, ignore Satan's whispers. Then remember that God is on your side. He loves you, He forgives you, and He sent Jesus to die for you.

You are working for God, not the devil. You would think it strange if the manager of McDonalds came over to Burger King to tell one of the employees he was making the French fries wrong. He would have no right to criticize the employee of another company. God is the only One who has the right to criticize you. If you are doing God's will, Satan's whispers and the comments of other people should not disturb you. God is your Boss. Serve Him faithfully and listen carefully to His correction, always keeping in mind that *He is on your side*.

"With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can man do to me?" (Psalm 118: 6).

"What then shall we say to this? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes (prays) for us" (Romans 8: 31-34).

1. Why is God for us?
2. God has elected us, or chosen us, because He loves us. Who is the only one who has the right to bring a charge against us or to condemn us?
3. Let God convict you of specific sin and confess it. Why is it wrong to accept the devil's condemning words?

How Did I Become a Sinner?

Does sinning make you a sinner, or do you sin because you're a sinner? None of us likes anger, jealousy, hatred, lying, or selfishness, and we are quite willing to admit that they are bad. Nevertheless, we tend to think of ourselves as good people who get angry only when we have a right to, who hate only people everybody else would hate, and who lie only when we get into especially tough circumstances. Yet, if you go on a "I'm-going-to-be-good" campaign, you'll find that something inside you just wants to be bad. Benjamin Franklin tried to eliminate some bad traits by spending a Chapter overcoming each. He was surprised that his experiment failed.

The moment you first willfully disobeyed God, you became a sinner. You are a student because you study, a person is a farmer because he farms, you are a sinner because you sin.

There are a lot of inherited things about you that you can't help – freckles, curly hair, a long nose – but not sin. You were born with imperfect judgment and independent emotions, which don't help the situation, but you chose to sin – just like every other person on this planet.

"We have turned, every one to his own way" (Isaiah 53: 6). That is why, in yourself, you can't obey God. You're like a train that has headed itself down the wrong track; the only way it can go the right way is for someone to pick it up and set it on the right track.

If you'll give Jesus control of your life, He can put you "on track" to live in victory.

"As it is written; 'None is righteous (good), no, not one'" (Romans 3: 10).

"And you he made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience. Among these we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath like the rest of mankind. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)" (Ephesians 2: 1-5).

1. What are the characteristics of a person who is following "the course of this world"?
2. How does Christ change our sinful natures and make us new people?

Whose Slave Are You?

A movie on the life of Harriet Tubman or studying United States history can make you hate slavery. In fact, maybe you couldn't imagine anything worse than being a slave. But did you know that millions of people are slaves today? Their master is sin, and sin is a terrible master. It binds people until they are unable to make choices or see truth.

I remember an object lesson I saw as a child. A visiting pastor picked out one boy from the audience and tied the boy's arms together with a strand of thread. It was easy for the boy to break the thread. Winding the thread around him three times made it a little harder to break. Finally, so many threads bound the boy's arms together that he could do nothing. "Sin," the pastor explained to us, "is like that thread. It looks so harmless at first, but it takes away your freedom and makes you a prisoner."

If you know an alcoholic, a drug addict, or a very bitter person, you have seen this principle at work. The only way to break away from sin is to get a new master – Jesus Christ. If you obey Jesus, He gives you power to overcome sin. But you can't be your own master and stay in the "middle of the road." You must either be a slave to sin or a slave of Christ. Whose slave are you?

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (the false god of riches)." (Matthew 6: 24)

"Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments of righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you since you are not under law but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as an obedient slave, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness" (Romans 6:12-16).

1. Why can't you successfully serve God and follow the devil at the same time?
2. What are the advantages of being an obedient slave of Jesus Christ?
3. Judging by how you've lived your life in the last Chapter, whose slave are you?

CHAPTER SIX FORGIVENES

Sin Removal

Do you live as if you are *completely* forgiven? Or do you let the devil whisper things to you like, “You can't expect to live a holy life because a person with a past like yours will never be able to reform,” or, “What you've done is so terrible that God will never be able to forgive you,” or, “You're ruined for life. God can't do anything with a mess like you”?

Don't ever listen to those lies. God says He forgives your confessed sin and won't even remember it again. He doesn't just put all the smutty contents of your sin in an envelope so you look perfectly good on the outside. He *removes* your sin and actually makes you pure and righteous.

Moses didn't run around, saying, “But I killed a man in Egypt, so there's no way that God can use me.” Moses knew how to accept God's forgiveness, to live close to God, and to let God do miraculous things through him.

Peter didn't keep reminding himself that he had denied Jesus at the time when Jesus needed him most. Peter lived like a forgiven man, and that made all the difference. With forgiveness comes God's love, joy, and power to defeat sin. Of course, the earthly consequences of sin will still be around – the murdered man will still be dead, the murderer will still be in jail, the child born to a single mother will keep asking questions, and the person you've hurt deeply may not forgive you. But God in His wisdom and mercy can work His miracles in all of this – if you let Him. A former murderer who lives like a forgiven man, displaying real joy and peace, even in jail, may be one of God's best advertisements. Give God a chance with your life.

“For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8: 12).

“As far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us” (Psalm 103: 12).

“He will again have compassion upon us, He will tread our iniquities under foot. Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Micah 7: 19).

1. List the figures of speech, or examples, used to explain what God does to our sins when He forgives them.
2. How does God feel toward a person who comes to Him for forgiveness?
3. Think back on any sins you've committed in the last Chapter. Confess them to the Lord, and then imagine them being buried in the darkest, deepest ocean bottom. (Micah 7: 19).

Perfectly Clean

If I were sending a five-year-old girl out to play in a yard still filled with puddles from last night's rain, I'd give her clear instructions; "Now don't play in the mud and don't get your teddy bear dirty." If she were an ordinary five-year-old, she'd probably come back into the house covered in mud, and crying, "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to do it. Please don't spank me." I could reply, "That's okay, dear. I accept you and forgive you just the way you are." But forgiving her wouldn't be enough. She would still be a mess. Because she was already so dirty, she'd have no reason to stop playing in the mud. And there are lots of things that a clean girl can do that a muddy girl cannot do – a clean girl would be allowed to go many places where a muddy girl would not be accepted. Actually, my scrubbing that little girl and giving her clean clothes would make a *change* in her. She would *act* differently once she was clean.

God not only forgives our sin but He also "cleanses us from all unrighteousness." He cleans us up completely. This is not something we can do for ourselves, but we do have a part. The five-year-old cannot do an adequate job of washing herself and providing herself with clean clothes. However, she must cooperate with the person who is bathing her and giving her a fresh change of clothes. Let God cleanse you from the inside out and make you a new and a clean person. The more you long for a clean, pure life, the deeper His cleansing will be.

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1: 9).

"How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9: 14).

"In a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and earthenware, and some for noble use, some for ignoble. If anyone purifies himself from what is ignoble, then he will be a vessel for noble use, consecrated and useful to the master of the house, ready for any good work. So shun youthful passions and aim at righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon God from a pure heart" (2 Timothy 2: 20-22).

1. What is the thing that purifies our consciences?
2. God cleanses us for a purpose. What is that purpose?
3. It is the blood of Jesus that cleans us up, but we have the responsibility of cooperating with Him. What specific things are we told to do?

How Many Times Is Seventy-Times-Seven?

"I don't think I can ever forgive him." Have you ever said or thought that? If

you have, you are on dangerous ground. The verses that come just after the Lord's Prayer in the Sermon on the Mount are not recited by church congregations, or used often as sermon texts, but they are just as much a part of the Bible.

“For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6: 14-15).

If you are a Christian, *you must forgive*. When Jesus, the perfect Son of God, forgave you for everything you've ever done, how can you not forgive another person – no matter what he has done? Your emotions may not be completely under your control, but if, by an act of your will, you choose to forgive, your feelings will sooner or later come into line – and in difficult cases that can take a long time.

God cannot forgive you if you refuse to forgive others. The Christian with an unforgiving attitude walks straight into trouble – God won't let His children get by with unforgiving attitudes. Peter thought he was being very generous if he forgave a person for the same offense seven times. How many times has God forgiven you?

“Then Peter came up and said to him, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? As many as seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven.’ ... then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you? And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, till he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart’” (Matthew 18: 21, 22, 32-35).

1. What should you do if someone wrongs you and is unwilling even to apologize?
2. What kind of forgiveness does God expect us to give?
3. How will God deal with us if we refuse to forgive?

Are You Forgiving Yourself?

When I was young, my cousin came one day to play with my sister and me. In her excitement, my sister told him about the bedroom slippers with bunnies on them that he would be receiving for Christmas. Suddenly remembering that this was a secret, she said, "Forget that I ever told you." The next time we visited my cousin's home, he assured my sister, "I forgot all about the slippers with bunnies on them that you're going to give me for Christmas."

Is your attitude toward God's forgiveness of your confessed sin influenced by similar experiences you've had with people? Do you really believe that God means it when He says that He will forgive *all* your sin? He does mean it. Confess your sin with complete trust that God will destroy it in the fire of His holiness.

Some people say, "Well, I know that God forgives me, but I can't forgive myself." Since when have you been in the business of forgiving your own sins? Only the extreme pride of putting yourself above God could make you think you're responsible for forgiving your own sins. God says He'll not only forgive your sin, but He'll forget it. Not taking God at His word is unbelief. Accept His forgiveness.

"I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins" (Isaiah 43: 25).

"I thank him who has given me strength for this, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful by appointing me to His service, though I formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted him; but I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance; that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners" (1 Timothy 1: 12-15).

1. What kinds of sins had Paul committed?
2. What things had Jesus done for Paul?
3. How can God's willingness to forgive Paul encourage you?

Forgiven Sinners, Inc.

I wish I could have seen Jesus heal a blind man, or raise Lazarus from the dead. Yet, the miracle of Jesus' forgiving and changing the repentant sinner outranks all others. David committed both adultery and murder, but because of his full and sincere confession, he received forgiveness, and God was able to use him to rule His people and write part of the Bible.

As a boy St. Augustine had taken part in a theft, and as a young man he had lived with his girlfriend, an arrangement acceptable to most of Roman society. After he became a Christian, Augustine lived a holy life that others admired, and he became a brilliant writer and church leader. When he was dying, he asked that Psalm 32 be printed in large letters and hung above his bed so he could read the words and meditate on them. The Psalm begins; "Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32: 1).

It's easy to forget that Jesus taught that visible sins are a result of wrong thinking, and that we are responsible for our *thoughts* as well as our *actions*. Therefore, we tend to think that only ex-cons have experienced great forgiveness. But if a film were made of your thought life, would it be an X-rated movie? All of us need mountains of God's forgiveness. Forgiven sinners are amazing miracles. If you're not one of the group, join 'em! "Then turning toward the woman he said to Simon, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house, you gave me no water for my feet, but she has wet my feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave me no kiss, but from the time I came in she has not ceased to kiss my feet. You did not anoint my head with oil, but she has anointed my feet with ointment. Therefore I tell you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7: 44-47).

1. If you have been forgiven of little, is it because you haven't sinned much, or because you haven't bothered to confess the sins you have committed?
2. Why will the truly forgiven person love Jesus so much?
3. What are some of the blessings of forgiveness?

No Unfinished Projects

Some of my Christian friends wear buttons that say, “Please be patient, God is not finished with me yet.” It’s wonderful to know that God doesn’t just forgive us and then leave us alone. Also, He won’t suddenly abandon us to work on more promising Christians. The work that God began in you the day you accepted Christ as your Savior, He continues every day of your life and will one day complete in heaven.

God wants to care for everything in your life – temporal or spiritual – because it will affect you for eternity. He will silently continue working in you every moment. All this will happen on one condition – that you trust Him. Absolute trust in God has been the key factor in the lives of people God has mightily used. They weren’t the most talented people. Often they didn’t possess great charm and wit. They even made mistakes that some other Christians would not have made. But, through it all they trusted God to work in them, and God fulfilled His purposes in their lives.

The devil wants to prevent the work of God in your life, and he has some very sneaky ways of doing it. He tries to convince you that it’s humble to say or think, “I’m such a poor Christian, I could never work for God,” or, “Other people can pray, or witness, or lead a Bible study so much better, so I’ll let them do it.” or, “I’ve had such a bad background so the devil especially picks on me. I don’t have much chance to grow as a Christian.” These are not humble confessions. They are insults to God who can do the impossible. He is waiting for you to trust Him enough to take your hands off and let Him work in your life.

“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me” (Psalm 138: 8).

“For I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29: 11).

“And I am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1: 6).

1. Who will take the responsibility for making sure you develop into a mature Christian?
2. What is your part in all this?
3. Why shouldn’t you allow “bad” circumstances to get you down?

God Even Used Peter's Big Mouth

A lot of teenagers could identify with the Apostle Peter. He was a jump-in-before-you-think loudmouth who couldn't be depended on. He loved to let people know he was around and wanted to be an authority on topics about which he knew very little. Peter was born with some great natural abilities and characteristics, but his wrong motives made them completely useless to Jesus.

People must have wondered what Jesus saw in him, but He loved Peter and forgave him. Peter accepted this forgiveness and gave his life to Jesus. When Jesus put the right motives within Peter, his willingness to jump into anything became courage, his love for talking was transformed into ability to preach – and God made him dependable. Everyone else would have laughed if Jesus had predicted the great things Peter would do.

Jesus never gave up on Peter; He saw his potential. Jesus sees what you can be and He won't give up on you – trust Him. If you fail, it's not because you are ugly, or have an offensive personality, or are stupid, or have horrible parents. It's because you didn't let Jesus give you His motives and you didn't expect miracles in your life. In order to receive Jesus' motives, you must confess your sin and yield to His correction. Then accept His forgiveness and wait in faith to see what God can do with your big mouth or your poor study habits.

“Simon, Simon behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Luke 22: 31, 32).

“But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed the, ‘Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words ... Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.’ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brethren, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 2: 14, 36-38).

1. Why did the sermon Peter preached on the day of Pentecost take a lot of courage?
2. Where did Peter receive the ability and the fearlessness he displayed that day?
3. Is there a situation you must soon face that demands more ability and courage than you already have? What should you do about it?

CHAPTER SEVEN **QUIT SINNING AND START WINNING**

Do You Send Invitations to Temptation?

A little boy who lived near a lake was instructed by his father to never go swimming without supervision. One day his father caught him swimming. Soon the innocent-sounding little guy was saying, "But, Daddy, I didn't mean to go swimming. It just happened."

"Then," replied his father, "why did you take your swimsuit with you when you came to play near the lake?"

The little boy answered, "I took it along just in case I got tempted."

Are you that little boy? Do you devise plans that will make it harder for you to obey Jesus' commands, even though you say you love Him? Instead of providing yourself with the possibility for sinning, give yourself every opportunity to do right. If the little boy had worn his new watch and left his swimsuit at home, the day would have ended differently.

Take Jesus with you through the day and think, "How would He plan for this situation?" Jesus wouldn't even consider lying his way out of an uncomfortable predicament. Realizing this, honestly face the problem at hand. You know that Jesus would have you plan a date carefully to avoid circumstances in which temptation could become strong. Jesus would study for the test instead of trying to pick up some answers at lunch from a friend who took the test second hour.

If you give yourself to Jesus, He'll show you how to organize your life so that obeying God's commandments will be easier.

"But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify (fulfill) its desires" (Romans 13: 14).

"And after a time his master's wife cast her eyes upon Joseph, and said, 'Lie with me.' But he refused and said to his master's wife, '...How then can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?' And although she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie with her or to be with her. But one day, when he went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house, she caught him by his garment, saying, 'Lie with me.' But he left his garment in her hand, and fled and got out of the house" (Genesis 39: 7-12).

1. What was Joseph's answer to Mrs. Potiphar the first time she asked him to go to bed with her?
2. What measures did Joseph take to avoid temptation?
3. What ways can you think of to avoid especially difficult temptations?

Choosing Right

If for some strange reason I wanted to rid America of Coca Cola, it would be ridiculous for me to start by defacing every Coca Cola sign I could find. Even smashing Coke bottles and burying Coke cans wouldn't be very effective. I'd have to demolish every factory and destroy every recipe to effectively do the job.

When it comes to fighting sin, people try to overcome sin by bits and pieces – crushing Coke cans if you will – without dealing with the source. The blood of Jesus takes away sins, but the cross has also made it possible to deal with the sinful self that is the source of sin. In your own strength, you can't die to sin and live to righteousness. You must give yourself completely to God so that His power within you can make you strong against temptation too strong for you, and He will always provide a way of escape.

Have this attitude; My eyes belong to Jesus and therefore it's impossible for them to look at an X-rated movie; my mouth belongs to Jesus who wouldn't think of spreading this gossip; my hands belong to Jesus so they'll be glad to help my Dad clean out the garage even though I would rather sleep in. This isn't just the power of positive thinking. Only God can work these miracles in your life. Memorize one of the Scripture verses for today and keep asking God to show you what it means for your life.

“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness” (1 Peter 2: 24).

“Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life which is corrupt through deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4: 22-24).

1. What are we to take off in the same way we take off dirty clothes?
Remember that throwing away the old sinful you isn't enough – you must replace it with something better. You must constantly expose your mind to God's truth and let that rule you rather than the world's thinking.
2. After taking off the “dirty clothes” of our sin, what are we to put on?
3. Peter writes that we can “die to sin.” What are some characteristics of being dead? Apply them to being “dead to sin”.

Right and Wrong

When God gives us commands, He gives us the power to obey. He wants us to have victory over sin. A lot of our frustration comes because we are

confused about what sin really is, and how we can overcome it. God *doesn't* command us to look sharp at all times, appear successful, never be clumsy, and always please everyone. God does command us to “Honor your father and mother,” “Be still and know that I am God,” “Trust in the Lord with all your heart,” and “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.”

Victory involves moment-by-moment decisions to apologize to your mother, to concentrate on God's power rather than on the unfair decision, to determine to trust God for the money you need to attend camp, and to be a good worker for the crabby boss. Maintaining an image of a person who never makes mistakes has nothing to do with victory over sin.

Also understand that there is a big difference between willfully disobeying God and unconsciously sinning. In fact, many people define sin as “willful disobedience to God.” Every person who has taken care of little children knows the difference between a child purposely disobeying a specific command such as, “You must not play in the sandbox with your good clothes on,” and a child in his excitement forgetting that the cement is wet and cannot be walked on. Our humanness may prevent us from doing all God wishes; but if we set our wills toward obeying Him, He will always give us the power to obey His specific commands. That power to obey comes from God who has all power.

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10: 13).

“But now put them all away; anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another, and if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony” (Colossians 3: 8-10, 12-14).

1. What are we told to do with sinful practices and thoughts?
2. List the things that Christians are specifically told to put on and wear. Are these part of your “wardrobe”?

That Selfishness Inside Me

The basic problem is, “How do I get rid of the selfish me that wants its own way and gets into arguments with God?” *God has provided a way.* Paul writes; “But far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6: 14).

Crucifixion means death. Since we have proven ourselves to be sinners, there is no way for that sinful self to be eradicated unless it dies. The miracle of the cross is that not only did Jesus shed His blood to take away our sins, but that sinful self within us was crucified when Jesus died. When Paul says, “I have been crucified with Christ,” he means exactly that.

Just as Jesus’ blood doesn’t cleanse your sin unless you have faith in that fact and ask for forgiveness, so too, the death of your old sinful self becomes real in you only if you allow it to. A cruel slave master wouldn’t be able to make a dead slave do anything – no matter how viciously he tortured him. Sin, like that cruel master, is always trying to enslave you. But by giving up your right to have your own way, and surrendering totally to Jesus, you can by faith make the miracle of the cross – “by which the world has been crucified to me and I to the world” – real in your life.

If I give up my right to have everyone think my piano solo was the highlight of the evening, and have faith that God can work in my life through every situation, I don’t have to be angry because my number is omitted from the program. The selfish me is dead, and circumstances don’t have to cause me to sin.

Know that Jesus took your old self with Him to the cross. Give your will to God. Believe that God can do in you what you can't do yourself.

“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit. He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves me, he must follow me – and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (John 12: 24-26).

1. What excuses could a grain of wheat have for not being buried in the ground?
2. What excuses do you have for not giving yourself totally to God?

Caterpillars Can Change

Do you ever feel like you're caught in quicksand, a slimy bog, a bottomless pit – a situation you don't think you'll ever be able to get out of? Well, the Bible calls this kind of vicious circle the law of sin and death. There are basically two laws – the law of the Spirit of life in Christ, and the law of sin and death. There is our selfish nature with its inability to obey and love God, and there is God's nature that loves freely and sets us free from the power of our old nature.

How can one get free from the law of sin and death? Caterpillars have a pretty rough time getting through mud without being soiled by it. Let's say that the mud is sin. Mud is everywhere and it seems impossible to avoid. The caterpillar can't rise above the mud either – unless it can get rid of its caterpillar self. This, of course, can happen if the caterpillar's old self is discarded and the creature becomes a beautiful butterfly.

Now if the caterpillar had a choice in this matter and could say, "I want to remain a caterpillar because I like the mud and it's just caterpillar nature to like mud," there would be no victory and no flying above the mud. You are faced with the same choice; you can choose to live by God's law and become a butterfly, or you can live by the law of sin and death and crawl like a caterpillar.

"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (Romans 8: 2).

"For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Romans 8: 5-9).

1. What does it mean to "set the mind" on something?
2. How can you set your mind on the Spirit?
3. What problem in your life will require setting your mind on the Spirit if the problem is going to be solved?

Faith and Sin Can't Sit on the Same Bench

One definition of faith goes like this; “Faith is my acceptance of God's fact.” The devil is always trying to get you to doubt truth. But your disbelief of a fact doesn't make the fact false, it simply becomes inoperative in your life. It is just as possible to walk across a plank that connects the roofs of two five-story buildings as it is to cross one laid on the ground. However, lack of belief in that fact, and fear based on lack of faith, will keep one from doing so.

One important Bible fact is, “No one born of God commits sin; for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God” (1 John 3: 9). Watchman Nee explains, “John is not telling us that sin is now no longer in our history and that we shall not again commit sin. He is saying that to sin is not in the nature of that which is born of God.” In nature wood floats, but in history it is possible for wood to sink if it is enclosed in metal or if it is nailed to a dock that is under water.

Now I have a choice. Will I live by God's fact – “Whatsoever is born of God cannot sin,” or by what my experience seems to show? If I were blind, I couldn't see a sunset, and if I were deaf, I couldn't enjoy a concert. Yet, the elegance of the colors and the beauty of the music would still exist even if I couldn't make them part of my experience. The piece of wood encased in metal may stay in the bottom of a lake until it rots not knowing its nature is to float. Even so, the devil may deceive you into thinking there is no deliverance from the power of sin. If you don't believe “no one born of God commits sin,” you live as though that verse in your Bible didn't exist.

Fact, Faith, and Experience were walking along the top of a wall. As long as Faith followed Fact, everything was fine. But when Faith looked back to see how Experience was doing, he nearly fell off. Put your faith in God's facts, not in your experience or feelings.

“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome. For, whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5: 2-5).

1. What is automatically expected of people who love God?
2. What is necessary if we are to overcome the world and have victory?
3. Why is belief that Jesus is the Son of God crucial to victory in your life?

But You Could Fly

The Bible talks about two kinds of life – the life of the spirit and the life of

the flesh – natural life. We’re living in a world where the things around us are running according to natural life – the life of the flesh. It’s a world in which people are expected to stomp on others to get to the top, to tell a lie when a lot is at stake, and to boast about how great they are.

When you become a follower of Jesus and start reading the Bible, you learn about selflessness, truth, and humility. The person who uses the resources available in natural life to try to turn the other cheek and love his enemies will give up in frustration. But God has given His children Spirit life, and Spirit life can do what natural life – the life of the flesh – can never accomplish. For example, the law of gravity governs our earth. Whether I throw an algebra book out the window on the eighty-seventh floor (wouldn’t you like to sometimes?) or merely drop a pencil, gravity will take over. However, there are other physical laws. Looking up in the sky, you’ll have to admit that neither birds nor airplanes seem to worry about the law of gravity. They fly according to a higher law.

If science fiction writers concocted a power that enabled individuals to fly three hundred miles per hour and land safely, just by carrying a pocket-sized device, readers would be amazed if this power were never used. Obviously, the person who has never accepted Christ in the first place doesn’t have the life of the Spirit to give them power. However, there are Christians who never use the supernatural Spirit-power they possess. If we try to follow God’s rules in our own strength, we are doomed to failure. The devil knows this and is always trying to make us depend on our own strength. If you rely on the supernatural life of Jesus’ Spirit, you’ll be flying above temptations to sin, but if you trust yourself, you’re bound to crash.

“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord of hosts”
(Zechariah 4: 6).

“But if Christ is in you, although your bodies are dead because of sin, your spirits are alive because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you. So then, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Romans 8: 10-14).

1. What great thing did the Holy Spirit do in history? (Romans 8: 11)
2. What is the difference between meeting temptation in our own power and in the power of the Holy Spirit?
3. What problem in your life have you been trying to solve with your own power?