

Living Now in the Kingdom of Heaven

The Transformation Series



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This book is dedicated to my wonderful wife Anne and to my amazing children, Katie and Nathan. I'm very proud of each one of you and can't imagine life without you!

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LIVING NOW IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

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This book is the result of more than 30 years of thinking, studying, experimenting, and growing. I believe the things written here are true, or at least as true as I am able to understand and communicate. Things of the Spirit are hard to describe in writing. For example, the night before I wrote this introduction, I was at a worship service and had a fresh encounter with God. How do I communicate that encounter with God? I could speak about my attention being lovingly drawn to His Presence, but how do I describe that Presence? The feelings of peace and well-being? The sense of profound relief? The happiness and sense of inner freedom? The mild electrical-like current of energy on the skin of my arms as I lifted them in praise? The urge to jump and dance in His sight and spin around with joy? All these things are true in terms of my physical and emotional response to the Holy Spirit, but His Presence itself still goes beyond my ability to express.

At any rate, I've done my best in this booklet to describe and explain matters of which entire books have been written. The explanations are meant to be brief and to the point. Bless you as you read!

1. THE GOSPEL OF THE KINGDOM

Jesus Christ said that the kingdom of heaven is available now (Mt 4:17). That was his main message – and still is today. Salvation is not just the forgiveness of sins, it is a life. It is the life of the kingdom of God. It is the life of the Holy Spirit. It is eternal life. It is the life of heaven. This life is available to us now. This booklet is written to help the reader understand what this life is, how one enters into it, and most important, how to successfully live in it.

Many Christians do not know that the kingdom of heaven is available now. Some read the phrase “kingdom of heaven” in their Bible and just mentally interpret it as heaven – the place they hope to go to when they die. Others have not been taught the gospel of the kingdom by their pastors. Instead, the gospel preached on Sunday mornings from conservative pulpits tends to be about the forgiveness of sins through the shed blood of Jesus on the cross and the offer of heaven after death. In mainline denominations, the gospel tends to dwell only on the love of God and our command to love our fellow man. Neither gospel just mentioned is wrong, they are just incomplete. The gospel Jesus preached is the gospel of the availability of the kingdom now: **“The time is fulfilled,”** he said. **“The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel!”** (Mk 1:15)

The translated phrase “the kingdom of God is at hand” has also been a source of some confusion. Keep in mind that our New Testament is a translation of a foreign language, Greek. In Greek the word *engizo*, “is at hand” is in the perfect tense, which means a completed act. In other words, Jesus was not saying that the kingdom of God was ABOUT to come but HAS come. The good news that Jesus proclaimed is that the kingdom of heaven is here now, and available to everyone who wishes to enter.

2. WHAT IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

Can you picture an invisible dimension of reality? That is the kingdom of heaven. It is here concurrently with our natural world of the five senses. Reality consists first of a spiritual realm in which the material realm was later “spoken” into existence. What you see with your eyes is reality, but it is not the deepest or most substantial part. The kingdom of heaven encompasses all of reality, matter and spirit, including those parts of the material and spiritual world that are currently in rebellion. But most specifically, the kingdom of heaven is seen in action when the dominion of God is fully expressed on earth as it is in heaven. This is why Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Thy kingdom come – thy will be done **on earth as it is in heaven**” (Mt 6:9-13).

Ask yourself what is not in heaven. That is what disappears when the kingdom of heaven is manifested on earth. “There will be **no more death, or mourning, or crying or pain**, for the old order of things has passed away” (Rev 21:4). The “old order” is what we currently live in. But a new order, the kingdom of heaven, has made itself known and is available through Jesus Christ. We do not have to wait to die to begin to experience the life of heaven. Heaven is available now. Disciples of Jesus Christ live in the co-mingling of the ages. Yes, there is “death and mourning and crying and pain” but in addition a superior reality can also be known and experienced: joy and healing and deliverance and overcoming of circumstances. When Jesus Christ healed the sick, cast out demons, and raised the dead, he was not “proving” his teaching but was demonstrating the kingdom of heaven. There are no demons in heaven. There are no diseases in heaven. There is no death in heaven. The reality of God’s kingdom is available to us now.

3. KINGDOM OF GOD VERSUS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN?

The phrase “kingdom of God” is used 72 times in the New Testament and the phrase “kingdom of heaven” is used 30 times. Of the four gospels, Matthew alone uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven.” Both phrases describe the same reality of God’s present dominion and life. “Kingdom of God” alerts us to WHOSE kingdom it is. It is God’s kingdom and no one else’s. Angels and human beings who live in this kingdom live in glad submission to Jesus Christ as Lord. The name of Jesus Christ has complete authority in heaven and on earth. There is no power stronger, no authority greater.

“Kingdom of heaven” describes WHERE that kingdom is located. It is located “in the heavens.” In the Greek New Testament, *ouranois* is the plural form of “heaven” translated by the phrase “kingdom of heaven.” In the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus literally taught, “Our Father **who art in the heavens**, hallowed be Thy name.” The New Testament speaks of three heavens. The first heaven is the air around our bodies including where the birds fly. The second heaven is the visible universe, where sun, moon, and stars are found. The third heaven is the very throne of God, described in Revelation chapters 4 and 5. The “kingdom of heaven” includes all three. God is as close to you as your breath and yet fills

the farthest reaches of space. Since most readers already have a mental concept of heaven, I plan to use the phrase “kingdom of heaven” throughout this booklet.

4. WHAT DOES LIFE IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN LOOK LIKE?

Let’s begin with the end result. A person who has fully matured and integrated his life with the kingdom of heaven will be a person who naturally and easily does the things Jesus taught. She will be one whose entire self is permeated with the love of God. You will see the love of God in her countenance, bodily posture, hear it in her tone of voice, and discover it in her reactions and responses. This love, the Apostle Paul wrote (1 Cor 13) is “patient, kind, not envious, not boastful, not proud, not self-seeking, not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, always trusts, hopes, and perseveres.” The content of her speech, the unguarded facial expression, the humor and joy of life will consistently reveal the indwelling Jesus, who Himself reveals the heart of God, which is love.

One for whom the kingdom of heaven has become an abiding reality will find that Jesus’ teachings from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5-7) come “naturally” and consistently. This will be a person who finds it increasingly difficult to become angry or hold others in contempt, one who gratefully lives without lust, one who is sacrificially faithful to his spouse, one who is quick to stand up for others, and one who is happy to let personal insults and grievances go. This is a man or woman whose word is their bond. They prefer not to be noticed for their virtues, but are not awkward when thanked for acts of goodness either. These are people who simply trust God and are almost never afraid or worried.

Furthermore, a mature life lived in the kingdom of heaven brings a familiar acquaintance with the supernatural and the miraculous. These ones know what it is to experience the power of the Holy Spirit within and upon them. They live out of the knowledge that they are seated with Jesus in heavenly places. They are accustomed to (though not casual about) intimacy and access to God as well as the authority they have over evil spirits in the name of Jesus. They delight in ministering healing and deliverance to others. These ones have learned how to live as “more than conquerors” in this fallen world.

Finally, those who have increasingly taken on the “life of the age to come” are ones whose lives are filled with the simplicity of worship. Their eye is on God. Praise and thanksgiving has become as familiar to them as breathing. Their heart is tuned to the Master’s voice and they constantly pursue what they know to be God’s will. These ones can say with the Apostle Paul “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that **now as always Christ will be exalted** in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Php 1:20-21).

You are not there yet? Well, I’m not there yet either. But I plan to get there. How about you? The remainder of this booklet is aimed at understanding how we increasingly live in the kingdom of heaven.

5. HOW DO WE ENTER?

The kingdom of heaven surrounds our bodies like water surrounds fish. God rules His kingdom according to His good purposes. But He has chosen not to rule alone. God works in tandem with the prayers, faith, declarations, and obedience of His people. We are co-laborers with God. We are being “trained to reign” with Jesus. It brings the Father glory that we bear much fruit showing ourselves to be His disciples (Jn 15:8). All around us, everywhere on the planet, grace and mercy from the kingdom of heaven is being revealed. From simple loving actions toward us by human beings, to angelic visitations, to interruptions of evil by the hand of God Himself, every one of us is being upheld, protected, and blessed by the kingdom of heaven operating around us. Our life-span is considered the “day of God’s favor” (2 Cor 6:1-2). It is during the course of this life that we are to reach out and find the God who is always close (Acts 17:27). And the promise is that He will accept all who call upon Him. **“For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved”** (Acts 2:21).

We enter the kingdom of heaven through Jesus Christ. He is the way into the kingdom. He has already provided the way through His life, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension back to the throne of God. Jesus said, **“I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me”** (Jn 14:6). We enter by giving ourselves to Jesus. We place the control of our lives into His hands. We entrust everything about us to Him. We surrender. This is what the Bible means by putting our faith in Jesus. We agree that Jesus Christ is God and the only person worth living for. To have faith in Him is to follow Him as His disciple – learning from Him how to live our lives. This is what repentance is all about. Repentance is changing your mind about the nature of reality. I like to say that it is changing your mind about who is best suited to run your life. Is it you? Or is it God?

We trust Jesus as both Savior and Lord. As Savior, we trust Him to have made us right with God 2000 years ago through His death on the cross – that the shedding of His blood brought us forgiveness and right standing before God. We trust that He has saved us from hell, from Satan, from disease, from torment, from poverty, from alienation with others, and from death. Faith in Jesus is confident trust and the expectancy of good. We have every expectation that Jesus will bless our lives. As Lord, we trust that He has all authority in heaven and earth and that no matter what, He is ultimately in charge of all things – and that our lives will be orchestrated by Him for our blessing and the greater glory of God. We trust and expect that He has a wonderful destiny for us in this life and in the next. We believe what He said is true – that He is preparing a place for us in heaven and is coming back one day to take us home (Jn 14:1-2).

We enter the kingdom of heaven by beginning a lifestyle of trusting Jesus Christ with everything.

6. TO FOLLOW JESUS IS TO FOLLOW THE HOLY SPIRIT.

To trust Jesus with everything is another way of saying that we follow Him wherever He goes. And to follow Jesus is to follow the Holy Spirit. The ancient Hebrews followed the visible Presence of God in the pillar of fire and smoke. We too follow the Presence. The major part of learning to live in the kingdom of heaven is to abide in a relationship with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is God. He is not just an influence or a power. He is not a subordinate member of the Trinity. In fact, it is fair to say that the Holy Spirit is God-on-earth. The Holy Spirit is the one who led you to faith in Jesus. He is the one who opened your heart to believe. The Holy Spirit is the one who gave you the gift of repentance. He is the one who entered inside you to dwell with you forever. He is the one who comforts your soul with the knowledge that you are now a true Son or Daughter of God – and that God is not a distant deity, but your true Father who pre-conceived you in His mind long before this world began.

In the Greek New Testament, the Holy Spirit is called *parakletos*. This name means that the Holy Spirit is your personal advocate, the one who strengthens, comforts, encourages you, and the one who is your teacher. Do you need to know how to pray? The Holy Spirit will teach you. Do you need to know how to speak to someone about Jesus? The Holy Spirit will teach you. Do you need to know how to repair your plumbing? The Holy Spirit will teach you. Of course the Holy Spirit uses natural instruments such as books and other people when He teaches us (though He is not limited to that) but too often He is seen as only helpful for “spiritual” matters. I’ve had the Holy Spirit teach me how to teach my students at school. The Holy Spirit has taught me when to change investments. He has taught me how to fix things around the house. And He has taught me how to pray for another’s healing.

7. BAPTIZED WITH THE SPIRIT.

In all four gospels John the Baptist is recorded as saying that Jesus Christ will baptize people with the Holy Spirit: “I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, ‘The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is **he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit**’” (Jn 1:33). Jesus Himself, in speaking of the baptism of the Holy Spirit to come at Pentecost said, “And behold, I am sending **the promise** of my Father upon you” (Lk 24:49). Please notice that the coming upon them with power Jesus refers to as THE promise of the Father. It takes nothing away from the majesty of Jesus to acknowledge that life in the kingdom of heaven is not just brought about by Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It also includes the baptism of power with the Holy Spirit which Jesus Himself sent forth – “And behold, **I am sending** the promise of my Father upon you.” Notice also the preposition “upon.” The Greek word is *epi* and has the connotation of “hovering.” It is also used by Luke when Jesus speaks again of the baptism with the Holy Spirit: “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come **upon [epi]** you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

The Holy Spirit comes to live within the believer at our new birth. Jesus said “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever— the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be **in** you” (Jn 14:16-17). In Greek *en* (“in”) has the connotation of position, “inside” the believer. Every believer has the Holy Spirit within them [*en*] but not every believer has the Holy Spirit upon them [*epi*] until they have been baptized with the Holy Spirit.

8. WHAT IS THE BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT FOR?

I like the way that Bill Johnson, pastor of the Bethel Church in Redding, California puts it: “The Holy Spirit is within you for your sake. He is upon you for the sake of others.” The Holy Spirit upon us is the supernatural power to minister the kingdom of heaven to other people. It is an invisible, but tangible Presence.

Let us consider Jesus’ own words: “But you will receive **power** when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my **witnesses** in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The baptism with the Holy Spirit confers divine power upon the believer, so that the believer might be a witness of Jesus Christ to others. Being a witness (Greek *martys*, from which we get “martyr”) involves manifesting the life of Jesus Christ in us. It involves speaking about Jesus to others, ministering to others in His name and power, and revealing His life-characteristics of kindness, righteousness, compassion, and love. The world gets to witness that Jesus is with us!

The power (Greek *dynamis*, from which we get “dynamite”) activates both the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5) and the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12).

9. WHAT IS THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT?

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Gal 5:22-23).

The fruit of the Spirit is a nine-fold manifestation of the life-characteristics of Jesus Christ. The power of the Spirit activates all nine qualities within each believer. The manifestation and growth of the fruit of the Spirit comes by God but is not automatic. The believer cooperates in the mature growth of the fruit of the Spirit. The primary fruit of the Spirit is love (Greek, *agape*).

The Greek language has four words we translate with the word “love.” *Storge* is family love. *Philia* is friendship love. *Eros* is romantic love. *Agape* is the unconditional love of God. We say such things as “I love mint-chocolate chip ice cream” or “I love my wife.” No wonder that the phrase “the love of God” can seem so bland, because it sounds so general. But when we understand that *agape* is the very heart of God and His will to good for all people, and that *agape* is infused into the believer by the Holy Spirit giving us the

capacity to love others, even the mean and hateful, then the phrase “the love of God” takes on more significance.

Let me be frank. No one can love their enemies unless they are empowered by divine love. If you are at all like me, you have a hard enough time loving people who love you! Divine love, *agape*, is the will to good towards others. Love does not require that we like our enemies. Its essential characteristic is to seek their good. “But God demonstrates his own love [*agape*] for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). Jesus said “But love [*agape*] your enemies, **do good to them**, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because **he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked**” (Lk 6:35).

It is too easy to make a show of loving people when we are around other Christians. It is another thing entirely to genuinely love people with divine love. We must be baptized with the power of the Holy Spirit for this kind of love to be activated through us.

10. WHAT ARE THE GIFTS OF THE SPIRIT?

“But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the **word of wisdom** through the Spirit, and to another the **word of knowledge** according to the same Spirit; to another **faith** by the same Spirit, and to another **gifts of healing** by the one Spirit, and to another the **effecting of miracles**, and to another **prophecy**, and to another the **distinguishing of spirits**, to another various **kinds of tongues**, and to another the **interpretation of tongues**. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills” (1 Cor 12:7-11).

Like there are nine aspects of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23), there are nine gifts of the Spirit listed in Scripture (1 Cor 12:7-11). Certainly, there are additional aspects to the fruit of the Spirit such as truthfulness, and additional gifts of the Holy Spirit not listed, such as divine hospitality. But sticking with the gifts of the Spirit mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12:7-11, we notice that first of all, the gifts are a manifestation of the Spirit. In other words, the gifts are evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. When we consider that the ministry of the Holy Spirit duplicates the ministry of Jesus Himself, it is fair to say that the manifestations of gifts of the Spirit are manifestations of the life and ministry of Jesus.

Secondly, we notice that the gifts of the Spirit are for the common good. When a gift of the Spirit is activated through you, the gift is for other believers. For example, the Bible urges all believers to prophesy: “Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, **especially the gift of prophecy**” (1 Cor 14:1). The reason for this is given two verses later, “everyone who prophesies speaks to men **for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort**” (1 Cor 14:3). In other words, the gift of prophesying is for the well-being of other Christians. The following are brief definitions of these nine gifts.

The word of wisdom. A supernatural impartation of knowing the right way to proceed.

The word of knowledge. A supernatural knowing of a fact that would otherwise be hidden. For example, the “word of knowledge” can be a great help to know how to pray for healing.

The gift of faith. The “gift of faith” is not the same as “saving faith,” which connects us to the life of the kingdom of heaven. The gift of faith is a supernatural expectancy that God is about to act in a certain situation and in a certain way.

Gifts of healing. Notice the plural. In my opinion, “gifts” of healing refer to the variety of ways God heals, sometimes all at once, sometimes over time. It also refers to the variety of things which are healed, bodily disease and injury, mental and emotional illness, inner healing of past trauma, and deliverance from the torment of evil spirits.

Effecting of miracles. In the Greek, this is *energata dynameon*, “workings of power.” Unfortunately, when people think of miracles they either think too small (“It’s a miracle I passed that test!) or too big (the parting of the Red Sea). Think of the “signs and wonders” of Jesus when you read of this gift.

Prophecy. Mentioned above, prophesy is a supernaturally given insight, spoken for “strengthening, encouragement, and comfort.” Prophecy tends to be a promise of blessing for one’s future, whereas the “word of knowledge” is helpful insight for the present. Apparently all believers can learn to prophesy, “Therefore, my brethren, **desire earnestly to prophesy**” (1 Cor 14:39) but only certain people are called of God to the office of Prophet, “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, **some prophets**, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry” (Eph 4:11-12).

The distinguishing of spirits. A supernatural “knowing” as to whether another person (particularly someone who claims to speak for Christ) is being animated simply by their human spirit, or the Holy Spirit, or an evil spirit. This may also refer to an awareness of another’s spiritual anointing and authority in Christ. This awareness is given that we might know who to learn from and who to receive prayer from. Suspicion is not the gift of discernment. Discernment is an awareness that leads to helpful actions. It is not used to slander.

Tongues. To speak (or pray or sing) in tongues is the supernatural ability to express your human spirit directly to the Holy Spirit without using a cognitive way to form speech. Normally the one who speaks in tongues does not know the meaning of what he is saying. It is one evidence that a person has been baptized with the Spirit, but not the only evidence.

I believe the best evidence that one is baptized with the Holy Spirit is not speaking in tongues, but a new-found power to witness about Jesus. I do not believe that all Christians ought to speak in tongues, though I do believe that many can if they pursue the gift. (Most of the people whom I have prayed with over the years to receive this “prayer language” have eventually been able to do so.)

Why speak in tongues? Scripture mentions two reasons: personal strengthening, and as a means of prophesy to the entire congregation, provided there is interpretation (see 1 Cor 14). I also believe that effectiveness in intercessory prayer, particularly in the context of spiritual warfare is an important reason, “And **pray in the Spirit** on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph 6:18).

To “pray in the Spirit” is to pray in tongues. This is a language of your spirit directly to God. Some believers actually speak in a known language (such as Russian) but one that is unknown to them. Most though, pray in a “language” of sounds and syllables that is not a known language, except to God. Possibly it is the language of angels, as Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:1 when he said “If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels...”

My own prayer language is not, I believe, a known language, except to God. When I pray in tongues, I find that I become more aware of God’s presence. I also discover an inner strengthening within me as I gain the confidence that I’m “getting through” to God. Frankly, there are also times when I either have too much on my mind or am too distressed to pray intelligently and calmly – it is at those times I am particularly grateful God has given me the ability to pray with my spirit.

Interpretation of Tongues. A supernatural ability to know the meaning behind an utterance in tongues during a corporate gathering. Interpretation is different than translation. Some “tongues” may in fact be other known languages, but even then, the interpretation is God’s meaning behind what is said. “Tongues with interpretation” is a form of corporate prophesying, hearing God speak for the group’s encouragement, strengthening, and comfort.

11. HOW DO YOU RECEIVE THE BAPTISM WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT?

First, some terminology. The Bible uses two phrases to describe this event: “baptism” in, with, or by the Holy Spirit, and being “filled” with the Holy Spirit. Other terms used in the Church today include “empowered by the Spirit,” “anointed with the power of the Spirit,” and having the power of the Spirit “released” in one’s life. It does not seem important to me which phrase one uses, but rather that one receive the experience. Have you had a personal Pentecost?

Second, what type of experience will you have? There are a multitude of ways Christians have experienced this empowerment of the Holy Spirit, both throughout Church history

and today. Some speak of waves of liquid love washing over them. Others report an energy or current flowing into their bodies. Some speak in tongues. Some laugh. Some cry. Some sing. Others shake and tremble. Some “fall out” in the Spirit. Others see visions of God. For many, simply a profound sense of peace and well-being. But the universal characteristic of the baptism with the Holy Spirit is a greater awareness of the presence and love of God.

So how does one receive this baptism of love and power? Here my explanation must be general. I can't give you the “five easy steps to empowerment.” God is a person. He is not a machine. But I will say what I know.

I believe it is best to talk about the necessary conditions in the one asking. We can assume that God is willing and ready to give. What is needed then to receive? Two things: hunger and expectancy. God is a rewarder of those who earnestly seek Him (Heb 11:6). We don't earn His favor by seeking, but we do find Him when we seek with all our heart. To be empowered by the Spirit brings great responsibility. We seek more of God so that we might bear witness to Jesus and minister to others in His name with power and authority. Perhaps God waits to see if we are serious?

God can and does make sovereign choices among people, but generally, He empowers those who hunger and thirst for more of Him. Furthermore, He empowers those who expect to be empowered! Like everything else in the kingdom of heaven, we receive by faith. Can you trust God to empower? After all, Jesus said, “For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. Which of you fathers, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead? Or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more** will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Lk 11:13).

Sometimes people fear they might receive an evil spirit if they open themselves up fully to God. Seriously? Think about that. Can you trust God to give you good if you ask Him?

Biblically, there are two ways people received the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Waiting in prayer (called “tarrying” by some Christians) is one way. I know two people personally who were baptized with the Holy Spirit, all alone, lying in bed in their hotel room. The other, more frequent way, is to have someone already filled with the Holy Spirit lay hands on you and pray. I have received a filling and empowerment of the Spirit both ways: once, completely alone while praying; another time having someone else lay hands on me and pray. It seems to be God's will that we humble ourselves before someone else more anointed with the Spirit than we are and ask them to pray for us. The gift of discernment of spirits leads us to understand that this person we are seeking prayer from has received from the Lord something of value which we would like imparted to us.

Having been filled with the Spirit on an initial basis, we seek to continue to be filled. In this sense we are like plants that need continual watering. Daily I pray “Holy Spirit, fill me once again to overflowing. Anoint me with more of your love and your power. Be the river of the water of life flowing into me and out from me to every human being I encounter. Let me be a host of your Presence and your kingdom wherever I go today. Thank you, Lord! In Jesus’ name, Amen.”

I thank Him because I assume He has answered that prayer, whether I felt anything at that moment or not. Sometimes I do, sometimes I don’t. But nevertheless, I know the Spirit has been poured out on the earth, I know it is my Father’s will that I live filled with His Spirit, and so I am very, very confident about that prayer. I simply consider it done as I have asked.

12. GROWING IN THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

God’s activity in our lives has to do with “training for reigning.” God’s purpose since the Garden of Eden has been to produce off-spring who will reign over the earth and universe with Him. We see this in both the first chapter of the Bible and the last chapter of the Bible. In Genesis 1:26, God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and **let them rule** over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” Then, in Revelation 22:3-5, we see the final destiny of redeemed mankind: “No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. **And they will reign for ever and ever.**” Here we see that the original plan of reigning has been reinstated and that the curse over man is no more.

The center of the process of “training for reigning” is in the renewing of our minds. The primary agent in renewing our minds is the Holy Spirit. He uses the Word of God and the trials of faith in our daily life and our consistent practice of spiritual disciplines as means of grace to transform us. Transformation is not automatic. We must cooperate with the Holy Spirit!

The diagram of the “Golden Triangle of Spiritual Growth” is used with permission from my mentor, Dr. Dallas Willard, retired professor of Philosophy at the University of Southern California and author of many books of the Christian life, including THE DIVINE CONSPIRACY and THE SPIRIT OF THE DISCIPLINES.



Our minds are renewed in the likeness of Jesus so that we know who God is, who we are in Christ, and what our purpose and destiny is. The Holy Spirit does the actual work of renewal, but with our full cooperation. His primary tool of renewal is the discipline that comes through daily trials and our (oftentimes) failing at them. We try to discover why we failed. If I lost my patience with someone, for example, was it because I was in a hurry? Why then was I in a hurry? Was it because of fear? If so, then why was I afraid? In our failures, we learn to receive forgiveness for ourselves and others, we learn how to walk by faith, not by sight, we discover the abiding grace and faithfulness of God, we gain compassion for the weaknesses of others, and we learn how to seek more of God to “gain the victory” through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit’s secondary tool of renewing our mind (and character) is in conjunction with our steady use of spiritual disciplines as means of grace. The spiritual disciplines such as solitude, silence, prayer, worship, thanksgiving, Scripture study and memorization, fasting, giving, service, and so on, do not earn grace. Rather they are means of grace – they open us up to the influence of God. In the words of Dallas Willard, “Grace is not opposed to effort. It is opposed to earning.” For example, lifting weights and running are means to gain physical fitness. They don’t make us more “righteous” and we certainly are not wicked if we don’t practice them. They are means by which our body gains strength. In a similar way, daily reading of the Bible and prayer does not make God love us more – but it does make us more aware of the love of God!

13. WHAT THE RENEWED MIND LOOKS LIKE.

The renewed mind takes on the beliefs, attitudes, and world-view of Jesus Christ Himself. Each born-again believer has, to some extent, been given the mind of Christ already. “But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. For ‘who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?’ **But we have the mind of**

Christ” (1 Cor 2:15-16). Having been given the mind of Christ in our new birth means that the seed of a renewed mind has been planted within us. But we must pay diligent attention so that seed can become a fully mature planting of the Lord. The renewing of the mind takes a life-time. But significant steps can be gained quickly enough that we (and others) are aware that we have grown in Christlikeness.

I believe the “we” in the verse, “we have the mind of Christ,” is very important. The “we” applies to the individual, but more importantly, to the body of Christ as a whole. The church is a covenant family. It is within the covenant family that we can best receive the full counsel of God. Our need for the discernment and wisdom of our fellow believers and teachers in Christ will always be of great importance. No single one of us will have the full flowering of the mind of Jesus. We will always need each other’s knowledge, wisdom, and discernment.

14. WHAT IS REALITY ACCORDING TO JESUS?

Jesus Christ taught that reality is God and the kingdom of heaven. What we cannot see, namely the kingdom of heaven, is bigger, deeper, and more “real” than what we encounter with our five senses. In fact, the Scriptures teach that the realm of the spirit created the realm of the material. The material world and universe is very important and treasured by God. But it is constantly contingent upon and upheld by the power, mind, and presence of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Jesus also taught that this world is a battlefield. There are forces of good and evil at war in this world. Jesus assured us that He will return in victory. His return will culminate in a glorious demonstration of the power and love of God through Jesus Christ. Satan’s dominion has already been broken in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through the preaching and demonstration of the gospel, together with the prayers, proclamations, and obedience of Christ’s people, Jesus is now reigning over all things and subduing all things under Him. “Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. **For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.** The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:24-26).

15. WHAT IS GOD LIKE?

God is like Jesus. You really, really need to be clear about this. I’ve seen Christians over the years become paralyzed in pain and unable to pray because they are persuaded God has brought their suffering upon them. They ask “why?” and assume it was because of bad things they had done. Now granted, if you get drunk, drive into the wall of your garage and then have to spend \$15,000 fixing your house and car, sure – you are experiencing consequences of sin. But consequences are not the same thing as divine retribution.

Some, who suffer chronic pain, have a feeling that God is punishing them. No, God is not. Divine retribution for sin fell upon Jesus Christ so that we might not receive it. This is why we proclaim in the Apostles' Creed, "He descended into hell." Jesus received God's wrath against sin in our place. The punishment for sin has already been absorbed in the body and soul of our Lord Jesus, praise His holy name!

Because God is so good and constantly makes good come out of bad things, it is easy for some to assume that God must have brought about the tragedy IN ORDER THAT good would happen. That is simply not true. God brings good about in spite of evil — not because of it. I remember listening to a grieving grandmother tell me about the tragic car accident that killed her daughter. The grandmother was now the one raising her daughter's two young children. She had concluded that the whole situation must have been "God's will." I didn't have the heart to say so then, but no, it was not God's will that her daughter die tragically and leave her babies to be raised by another. It is not God who causes traffic accidents, or sends cancer to people, or breaks up marriages. That is the devil's will. Sometimes it is the will of human beings. But it is never God's will!

In any dilemma along these lines, ask yourself, "Since Jesus constantly did God's will, and did and said only what His Father told Him to do and say, as I look at my present painful circumstances, should I accept them as "God's will" or can I assume that the will of God is to change these circumstances for good? Unless we are clear about this, I'm not sure how anyone can have enough faith to pray and expect God to rescue them from sin, suffering, tragedy, or torment. Certainly we must accept life as we have received it. But do we then sink into despair over it? Or should we not instead expect that God has a victory in store for us, either by changing those circumstances, or by changing us in those circumstances?

Here's an extreme question. Do we see in the Gospels Jesus killing people or raising them from the dead? Do we see Jesus making people sick or healing all who came to Him? What about those in torment by evil spirits? Did Jesus send that suffering? Of course not. Jesus set people free from demons. Jesus Christ is God in the flesh! When you see Jesus, you see God.

Jesus said, **"Anyone who has seen me, has seen the Father"** (Jn 14:6).

"The Son is the image of the invisible God ... For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him" (Col 1:15-19).

"The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Heb 1:3).

Certainly, the Bible is clear that God is sovereign – that is, He is ultimately in charge of everything. He is the God who knows the end from the beginning. "All the days **ordained** for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Ps 139:16). But I want to reiterate: God is never the author of evil! He is a God who is only good, all the time.

Thankfully, He works and re-works all things according to His will. Nothing will ultimately stand in His way from accomplishing His purposes. For the present time though, we must be clear that much of what happens on planet earth is NOT the will of God. If that were sadly not true, why else would Jesus have taught us to pray God's kingdom into reality on earth? Remember the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done **on earth as it is in heaven.**"

So what is God like? God is like Jesus.

16. WHAT IS OUR CALLING?

All of us are in full-time Christian ministry. Followers of Jesus are called as Christ's ambassadors of the kingdom to bring heaven to earth. I love Bill Johnson's statement on this. He says that the Christian calling is to "live from heaven towards earth and host the Presence of God so as to change the atmosphere around us." Wherever our feet take us, as we "host" the Presence, the spiritual environment around us changes in the direction of the kingdom of God. Through acts of faith and obedience, declaration and prayer, the Holy Spirit brings heaven to earth through us.

Jesus put it this way. "Go into all the world and make disciples of all nations ... teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt 28:18-20). Jesus did not have in mind a political theocracy. That has been tried many times in Church history and has hurt the cause of Christ badly. Instead, as He Himself said, the kingdom of heaven will be like yeast, interpenetrating all the bread. Or, He said, like a tiny mustard seed, eventually shading and blessing all the garden. The kingdom of heaven in and upon and among us will create a spiritual reality of love. Love, as it permeates our environment, brings with it justice and temperance and self-control and hard-work and a willingness to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others. Even if only a minority within a culture are fully devoted followers of Jesus, the spiritual "up-lift" created by their presence changes that culture. This too has been proven many times in Church history. Remember, Jesus said that we are the light of the world, the salt of the earth. This applies to our family, our workplace, our neighborhood, and our congregation.

17. WHO ARE WE IN CHRIST?

The Bible tells us that having been born-again, we are now adopted Sons and Daughters of the living God. By nature we are not God's children in this sense. By nature the Bible tells us that we are rebellious, inclined to sin and wickedness, enemies of God. God already made His peace with human beings on the cross of Jesus. Human beings now must make their own peace with God. We must stop trying to be God. We must repent of our complaining and worrying. We must turn away from our resentment at how God has allowed our lives to be ordered. And we must repent of blaming God for our troubles. God is not the author of our problems. The devil may be, other people may be, and certainly we are the cause of a lot of our own problems, but God is not the cause our

suffering. His mighty power, good will, and cheerful disposition is ever present to bring us through suffering. Do you realize that God is always in a good mood? That He is happy? That He is glad He made you? That He has appointed a destiny for you that He longs to help you discover?

At the most profound level, we are not male or female, black or white, American or foreigner, educated or not, rich or poor, but we in Christ are children of God. My own deepest identity is that I am God's son. I'm not his only son, I am one of many, but I am deeply loved and valued by my Father. My father, my most real father, is God. The Bible says that you and I were pre-conceived in God's mind before He made the universe. Even if the circumstances of your birth were an accident, or even a crime, you yourself are a predestined being. The exact time and place for you to live was ordained by God. And He wants to be your Father.

18. WE HAVE A NEW NATURE.

Having been born-again, we are people who now are prone to righteousness and averse to sin. At the deepest level of our being, in the depths of our spirit, is the love of God. He has poured His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). This means that despite our sins and failures, we are in very essence, people who love God, trust Him, and want to be found pleasing to Him. That is who we are. We didn't get that way because we made ourselves that way. We got that way because of a new creation God made within us by the Holy Spirit. And because we didn't make ourselves that way, we also cannot "un-make" ourselves that way! True, we can choose to live according to the flesh and not follow the leading of the Spirit. We can fail to make use of the means of grace. We can abuse God's kindness and disgrace ourselves. But WHO we are by God's grace will not change. **"God's gifts and calling are irrevocable"** (Rom 11:29).

Some have been taught that the Christian has two natures, a God-loving nature and a sin-loving nature. They also have been taught that the nature you feed the most is the one which will dominate your life. While there is some real truth about that last statement, it is not correct that the born-again believer has two, divided natures. Romans chapter 6 and 2 Corinthians chapter 5 makes very clear that we who are in Christ have experienced a death to our old self. That person we were, who by nature was prone to sin and averse to righteousness, is dead and gone, never to come again. Like the caterpillar that became a butterfly through metamorphosis, the caterpillar is no more but is now a butterfly. Same being, different natures. The butterfly may remember his previous existence as a caterpillar. Perhaps he even wants at times to act like a caterpillar. But an irreversible change has taken place. Even if the butterfly starts grubbing around with his old caterpillar buddies, still trying to munch on leaves, crawl up branches, fall on the unsuspecting heads of humans walking underneath, he is nonetheless, and forever will be, a butterfly!

19. ALIVE TO GOD AND DEAD TO SIN.

Here's the point. If you are a born-again follower of Jesus Christ, you are now alive to God and dead to sin. Even though it doesn't feel that way at times. You do not have to sin. It is not inevitable. It is not your destiny. Sin does not have more power over you than grace does within you. So why do Christians continue to sin? Why will there always be a need for the confession of sin and the receiving of pardon while we are in this life?

As Jesus told His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, **"The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak."** The reason we continue to sin is because of the habits of sin formed in our flesh. The "flesh," in Biblical terms, is our embodied self, trained in unrighteousness, self-sufficiency, and avoidance of God. That is why it feels at times that we really do have two natures. The Apostle Paul, in Romans chapter 7 said, "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do. But what I hate, I do." Still, Paul's experience was not a description of his destiny, but his pilgrimage. The testimony of mature believers throughout history is that they experienced increasing victory over sin. In the words of Dallas Willard, "We are not worrying about perfection. We're just talking about doing a whole lot better!"

20. OVERCOMING THE FLESH.

If you have played sports, you know about the idea of "muscle memory." Athletes practice the same motion over and over and over until it is ingrained in their habits. You have seen talented musicians play. Their mastery of the instruments seems effortless. Again, what seems effortless is the result of hour after hour of practicing basic disciplines. We human beings have a "plasticity" to us. This plasticity can work to our harm but also it can work to our eternal good.

Remember, the "flesh" is the Bible term for the habits of sin formed in our body. Our body in this case also includes our feelings and automatic responses. You have probably said something like, "He really pushed my buttons and I just lost it!" Our "flesh" is that bodily response to stimuli that acts without thinking. And unfortunately for us, our flesh has been trained in sinful patterns, in rebellion to God. We have practiced losing our patience, giving way to contempt and pride, looking to lust, storing up anger and bitterness, and so on. Our spirit has indeed been born-again. We do love God, trust God, and desire to please Him. But our flesh has not been changed. The same old habit-patterns are still there and must be conquered.

Our flesh can become an aid for our transformation into Christlikeness. The goal, you may remember, is to believe and speak and do the things Jesus did "naturally" and without really thinking. In this way, "the left hand won't know what the right hand is doing." We want to grow to the point where we will just know what to do, in any given situation, and respond appropriately as a person in whom Christ dwells. For this to happen the "muscle memory" of our body, our mind, our emotions, and our soul must develop new habits.

We overcome the habits of the flesh in two simultaneous processes: dying to self and developing new habits after the Spirit.

The first blow to the habits of the flesh comes as we choose to “die to self” and take up our cross and follow Jesus. We surrender control to Jesus. We give up on having to have things our way. We lay aside our urges so as to obey God. We daily echo Jesus’ own words in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Not my will, but thine be done.” The second death blow to the habits of the flesh comes as we form new habits after the Spirit.

For example, if I have learned to walk in love, I need spend no energy at all trying not to steal. All the habits of the flesh are overcome in like manner. We concentrate on developing the “muscle memory” of the fruit of the Spirit, namely, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, and in doing so, find that the habits of the flesh wither because of lack of attention. If I am practicing joy, losing my temper will take care of itself. This is how we “put to death the works of the flesh” as commanded in Scripture. We kill-off those works by inattention to them. For example, one way to kill a plant is by not giving it water. Similarly, the habits of the flesh die best through inattention.

You will find by experience how wonderfully effective this can be. Most of us have tried to overcome the flesh by concentrating our efforts on the sinful habit. To our dismay we find that concentrating on eliminating the sinful habit makes it even more powerful! This in turn leads to the Romans 7 dilemma, “Woe is me! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” Well, God delivers us through Jesus Christ as we learn to walk in the Spirit.

21. WALKING IN THE SPIRIT.

“Walk in the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh” (Gal 5:16). These words from the Bible describe the key to victory over the habits of the flesh. To “walk in the Spirit” is to live moment by moment abiding in Christ. It is to have one part of your being always tuned to receiving instruction from God. It is to be aware of the Presence of God in and upon you. Bill Johnson has a wonderful illustration of this: “In the Bible it says the Spirit came upon Jesus like a dove. Now imagine, if a real live dove landed on your shoulder, and you wanted him to remain, how would you then walk? You would take each step with the dove in mind.”

So, wanting the Holy Spirit to abide upon us, we address our day with Him in mind. We take each succeeding task in hand, present it to God, invite His participation, and do that task unto Jesus, in the awareness of the Holy Spirit. Our lives consist of a series of events, most of them quite small and ordinary. From brewing the morning coffee, to our time alone with God, to getting ready for work, to the innumerable tasks at our job, to our personal errands, recreations, and chores, to winding-down in the evenings, to relating with our family, to our preparations for sleep, all can be done in God’s presence and with His guidance and help.

For years, I have followed the suggestion of Dr. Frank Laubach, literacy missionary to Muslims in the Philippines in the 1930's. He began a practice of trying to keep God in mind on a continual basis. He created a "game with minutes" to find if he could keep God in mind at least once every minute. He found he repeatedly failed at the attempt, but even those days in which just 10% of his time God was in mind, he found those days to be days of joy and glory. One of his practices was to pause after each task and silently pray, "What now, Lord?" Then whatever good and helpful thing came to mind, he proceeded to do. He discovered that his days became far more productive and far more refreshed when he deliberately asked the question of God, "What now, Lord?" instead of plunging ahead with his own plans. I have found this to be true as well. To walk in the Spirit is to seek to be led. It is living out of a place of personal surrender to God and receiving a constant inflow of His love and Spirit. It is a willingness to be directed by God, corrected by God, and when things don't go our way, "walking with the dove in mind" creates a readiness to trust God with delays, set-backs, opposition, and pain.

I do not believe that it is possible to walk in the Spirit without some significant time each day to be alone with God and simply worship Him. Yes, we always want to be worshipping God as we do our tasks. Prayer is to become as natural as breathing. Giving ongoing thanks and praise creates the greatest flowering of our lives. But this comes out of the wellspring of significant time in solitude alone with God.

The key to walking in the Spirit is to obey God when He speaks. Nothing is more important than obedience. God is very kind and patient. He will continue the lesson as long as we need. But until we obey, we cannot move on. It is our Father's intention to always bring us to a new place of promotion and grace. Obedience to God's will for us today is the pathway to promotion in the Spirit.

22. HEARING THE VOICE OF GOD.

God wants us to be able to recognize His voice. Can you imagine any relationship between two persons in which communication does not take place? Jesus Himself said, "**My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me**" (John 10:27). We are blessed to be living in a time in which most Christians believe God can communicate with them. When I was a child, people who said God spoke to them were seen as crazy. Thankfully, no longer.

Still, there is a fear of being deceived. We have all heard of well-meaning people who have been deceived. Is this "voice" God, or just me, or might it even be the devil? The possibility of being deceived should keep us humble. But if we belong to Jesus, we need not be afraid. We can trust Him. Jesus said that the Holy Spirit will teach us all things (Jn 14:26). We can trust the Holy Spirit to teach us how to recognize when He is speaking.

God's voice does have certain characteristics. Here are a few parameters I learned from my mentor, Dr. Dallas Willard, and have since gained by my own experience as well. The

voice of God is never rushed, panicky, critical, or contemptuous. It is never silly, or frivolous. Instead, when God speaks, there is the calm weight of authority behind it. His voice is strong and peaceful. The effect it leaves on me is an immediate desire to obey Him. I feel relief at hearing God speak, even when I am being corrected. His voice brings life to my soul.

We learn to recognize His voice from experience. If you have never met me personally, others who know me could try to describe to you what my voice sounds like. They could mention tone, pitch, cadence, typical vocabulary, use of humor, and so forth. But until you actually heard me speak, it would just be guessing on your part. Once you and I had a conversation though, then you would be able to recognize my voice again. So too with recognizing the voice of God. It takes experience.

But there is a pre-requisite to hearing God (usually). You must want to hear Him speak. And to want to hear Him speak, means that you are ready to obey Him. If that describes you, ask the Holy Spirit to teach you how to hear Him. When some good and helpful thing occurs to you, that you think might be from God, act on it. You will make mistakes. So what? As long as you are acting in love mistakes you make will turn out for the good anyway. Below is a listing of several ways in which God speaks to us today.

The revelation of Scripture. The overall message of the Bible is the foundational means of hearing from God. Except for prayer, there is no practice more important than to grasp the overall characteristics of God from the stories and teachings of the Bible. The point of Bible study is to get to know the Author! To do so, we invite the Holy Spirit to teach us as we read. He inspired the human authors and is well able to instruct the reader whose heart is humble before God.

Individual passages of Scripture. As you read meditatively in Scripture, certain passages will “grab” you. This is the Holy Spirit speaking to you and applying God’s truth to your life. Once that happens, it is best to stop reading and simply dwell on that passage that has “spoken” to you. Make a mark in your Bible with the date, or write it on a 3 x 5 card to memorize.

The “rhema” of God in our spirit. There are two Greek words in the New Testament for “word,” *rhema* and *logos*. A simple distinction is this. The “*rhema*” of God is the spoken word to God’s people. The “*logos*” of God refers to the content of that spoken word and can be used to describe Scripture as well. When people say “God spoke to my heart” what they have received is the *rhema* of God.

Our spirit is the inner-most part of our being. It is also known in the Bible as our heart. It is where our will initiates action. We who have been born-again have a brand new spirit. Our spirit is now inclined to trust God, to love Him, to choose to obey Him, and it is our spirit that hears from God. We don’t “hear” with our head – we hear with our spirit and our mind receives and comprehends.

God speaking in my spirit, with the “still, small voice,” is one of the most common ways I personally hear from God. Usually it is in response to a question I have posed to God in prayer. But not always. Sometimes His “rhema word” just comes to me when I least expect it. Getting out of bed in the morning, or while in the shower, or while in an ordinary conversation with someone. When I hear God speak to me in this way, it is usually just a brief sentence, or phrase, or literally, just one word. But when He speaks, my whole self instantly becomes activated to what God might then want me to know or do.

Inner impressions. People often experience inner “nudges” which are from God. These simple desires to act in a helpful way or even a “check,” a hesitancy to act, should be listened to and obeyed. People in the world talk about intuition or having a “hunch” about something. I believe that many of them are hearing from God but just don’t know it. Many great scientific and artistic breakthroughs have occurred at serendipitous moments of “inspiration.” I believe it was God giving that inspiration even if the scientist or artist was not a believer.

An audible voice. While I have never experienced the audible voice of God, I know of some who have. The voice may be God Himself or, as Judith MacNutt writes in her book about angels, the audible voice may be from your guardian angel. In my own church, the young granddaughter of one of our elders was playing in the cul-de-sac outside her house when she heard an audible voice tell her “Get out of the road.” She ran into her yard just in time to avoid being hit by a car.

Dreams. God speaks to people through dreams. Often the dreams will then need to be interpreted. Over the years I have had a few dreams I believed were from God (most of my dreams are the ordinary, nonsensical type). Dreams from God seem to be of two types. One, in which the meaning is obvious to the one dreaming. You remember Joseph, husband of Mary, had a dream in which an angel told him to get up and take the child Jesus to Egypt that very night because Herod was attempting to kill him. No interpretation was necessary with that dream – just obedience! The second type of dream is symbolic and requires interpretation. Either God will give the one who had the dream the interpretation, or God will give the interpretation to someone else with a special gift for doing so. In the Old Testament both Joseph (for Pharaoh) and Daniel (for King Nebuchadnezzar) were given the gift of interpreting dreams.

Visions. Visions are mental pictures. They are of two kinds. One, which I personally receive, consists of brief mental flashes or images in “my mind’s eye.” Sometimes these are exact images, such as “seeing” a person’s spinal vertebra out of place, so as to then speak the healing of God to that condition. Sometimes the mental pictures are symbolic, and an interpretation is needed to understand the meaning.

The other kind of vision is referred to as an “open vision.” Those who experience this describe it as like watching a movie in front of their eyes. This type of vision also seems to

be of two kinds, literal and symbolic. The Apostle John, in receiving the book of Revelation, received a number of these kinds of open visions. He faithfully recorded what he saw. The difficulty for the reader of those visions is to know whether the vision was literal (does Jesus have a sharp two-edged sword sticking out of His mouth?) or was the vision symbolic (does the sword out of His mouth represent the living Word of God)?

23. WALKING IN FORGIVENESS.

We must not minimize how important the forgiveness of our sins is to us who believe. Simply on an experiential basis to be able to maintain a clean conscience before God and ourselves – wow – what a difference that makes in the enjoyment of life. One reason that drugs and alcohol are so appealing to so many today is to cover the pain of guilt. That need not be. Forgiveness of sins, full and complete, is always available to every human being. **“For whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”** (Acts 3:21).

In the most important sense, the forgiveness of sins for all human beings has already been granted. This forgiveness was granted by God through the death of His Son Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. Jesus Himself announced this at the Last Supper, in the familiar words of institution we hear in the Sacrament of Communion: **“This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins”** (Mt 26:28). Jesus became the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world. **“My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense —Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world”** (1 Jn 2:1-2).

Because the forgiveness of sins has already been obtained for us by Jesus, does that mean that everyone is therefore automatically forgiven? No, it does not. God has made His peace with us, but we must make our peace with God. We must receive God’s forgiveness. What does that look like? The short answer is that we **place our trust in Jesus** to forgive us. The somewhat more lengthy answer is that to “trust” first means we **relinquish self-righteousness**. In other words, we admit to God that if He wished to condemn us for our sins He would have every right to do so. “Trust in Jesus” also implies **confession of our specific sins**, not minimizing, not excusing, and not blaming others. With confession, **we repent**. We change our minds about the right way to live and deliberately choose God’s way. This necessarily brings us to **renounce** our sins. We go on record with God (and others as appropriate) that we are very sorry we sinned, that we wish we had not done so, that we are willing to make **restitution** where practical, and that by God’s help, we intend not do so again!

But I don’t want to make it too complicated, either. When we become aware that we have sinned, we confess that to God, we ask for His forgiveness, we thank Him for the forgiveness obtained for us on the cross of Christ – and then we continue to walk with Jesus. Pope John Paul II wrote in an Easter meditation, words I will never forget. He said, “As Christ fell three times under the Cross, then got up again and continued His

obedience, when the Christian sees that he has fallen into sin, the solution is not to lay there in condemnation, but to get up and follow Christ!”

We don't want to minimize the place of restitution in gaining a clean conscience. At the very least, we must make a personal apology to those we have sinned against, unless by our doing so, even more pain would be heaped upon the one sinned against. The Holy Spirit will guide you in this matter. Having confessed our sins and having made restitution where appropriate, we renew our trust in Jesus, thank Him for our forgiveness, and the Holy Spirit does His inward work of making our conscience clean again.

24. WE MUST ALSO FORGIVE OTHERS.

If there is one thing that would block our ability to walk with a peaceful conscience before God it would be our own refusal to forgive those who have sinned against us. It is simply impossible to walk in the Holy Spirit and at the same time hold onto bitterness, hatred, and to harbor offenses. The most serious sin in the New Testament is refusing to show mercy. We certainly are to forgive those who ask for our forgiveness. But we must also forgive those who are not even sorry for what they have done. That is the usual situation too, isn't it? It would be nice if everyone who injured us would be deeply repentant and apologetic. But that rarely happens. Here is how God sees this matter. He has had mercy on us. We also must extend that same mercy to others. Or we will not be forgiven.

Some reading this may have been injured in ways that are almost beyond belief. You too must forgive. To forgive is to let that person “off the hook.” It means letting go of revenge. It means cancelling their debt. You release them. It is a choice you make from your will, despite any protesting feelings of outrage. I encourage you to say out loud, “For the sake of Jesus Christ, I choose to forgive _____ for what he or she did to me. I bless them in Jesus' name and release them to God.” As often as you find the remembrance of their sins rising inside you, repeat that same declaration of forgiveness.

To forgive does not mean you must seek reconciliation (though that could happen). It does not mean the offender now deserves your trust or that you must now “like” them. It does not mean that if a criminal act occurred they should not have to be punished. Nor does it mean that a lawsuit for damages is out of the question.

Still, forgiveness releases the poison in our own heart, it brings healing “to our bones,” it may provide the spiritual and emotional place for the offender's salvation, and it honors God who has saved us. And as we forgive others, we experience again the joy of our own salvation, which further energizes us as we walk in the Spirit and live in the kingdom of heaven.

25. WE ARE JUSTIFIED IN THE SIGHT OF GOD .

Living in the kingdom of heaven requires that we live out of a true knowledge of who we are. As mentioned earlier, the truth is that we are Sons and Daughters of the living God. We have entered a new covenant with God by Jesus Christ, different and better than the one the ancient Hebrews lived under, and this new covenant brings us into a relationship of love, not legalism. We relate to God not on the basis of a contract (“Do this and you will be blessed”) but on the basis of a family relationship (“All that I have is yours”). Blessings do accrue to us through obedience. But those blessings are not contractual, but familial. You remember times as children when you got along well with your parents and times when you did not. You remember rewards and punishments associated with those times. Still, those rewards for obedience as children (increased allowance, privileges regained, the feeling of happiness at getting along with Mom and Dad) were on a whole different level than say, the plumber who got paid for doing the household repairs. Blessings come from a different basis than wages.

What is true about ourselves is that we are God’s very own children. Not only does this mean we have been accepted into God’s family but it also means that we are justified in His sight. “Therefore, since we have been **justified through faith**, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1). What does this mean? It means that God considers us righteous before Him. We have “passed” the judgment. We are counted, not just forgiven, but as bearing the very righteousness of Jesus Christ. “God made him (Jesus) who had no sin to be sin for us, so that **in him we might become the righteousness of God**” (2 Cor 5:21). We are not justified by our good works, we are justified by God’s grace. **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith** —and this not from yourselves, **it is the gift of God**—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Eph 2:8-9). Our good works will be rewarded one day, but those rewards are blessings, not contractual wages. We do not earn favor with God – He bestows favor upon us by choice.

The practical outworking of our justification is that it gives us confidence before God in prayer and it emboldens us to testify about Jesus, even though we are painfully aware of our own sins and shortcomings. “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? **It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns?**” (Rom 8:32-34).

Furthermore, since our righteousness before God is actually the righteousness of Jesus (which is perfect, complete, and flawless), the whispered accusations by Satan about our unworthiness can fall on deaf ears. Certainly, obedience is better than sacrifice. But who we ARE before God does not change because we may have fallen into sin. We are always much-loved children, forgiven, and righteous in His sight. It is on the basis of grace (gift) that we receive our protection, our blessings, and our answers to prayer. God does not change His mind about who He has declared us to be!

26. WE ARE SEATED WITH CHRIST IN HEAVENLY REALMS.

“And God raised us up with Christ and **seated us with him** in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Eph 2:6-7).

“**Since, then, you have been raised with Christ**, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and **your life is now hidden with Christ in God**” (Col 3:1-3).

These two verses teach us an essential truth in being able to live victoriously in the kingdom of heaven now. We who have been born-again live in two dimensions simultaneously. Our most “real” location is with God in heaven, where Jesus Christ sits in His glorious splendor, reigning over everything in heaven and on earth. We cannot see this dimension of reality, so of course, that which seems most real is the world of our five senses. But we must grasp the reality that we have been raised up spiritually with Jesus and are seated with Him in heaven, right now! The Apostle Paul writes “**But our citizenship is in heaven**. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Php 3:20-21).

Our place with Jesus gives us our authority to bring heaven to earth. It is from our place in Jesus (and He in us) that we can embody and host the blessings of heaven to those around us. We have the right and the power to proclaim blessing, to bind-up spiritually anything that is not in heaven, and to release to earth everything that is in heaven. Because Jesus Christ has overcome Satan and all his evil powers and entities, we too, seated with Jesus, can overcome all our spiritual adversaries. The devil is under the feet of Jesus Christ. Because we are seated with Jesus, the devil is under our feet as well. But we must take up that authority. I encourage the reader to take to heart the following prayer by the Apostle Paul, describing Jesus and His authority, and our place in Him as members of His Church:

“I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. **And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church**, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:17-23).

27. SPIRITUAL WARFARE.

The devil is not to be feared. God alone is to be feared. Our calling is not to spiritual warfare. Our calling is to bring the gospel of Jesus to this world. We are ambassadors of Christ and carry in and upon us the good news of peace with God and the power to change lives. We are co-laborers with God in the increase of the kingdom of heaven on earth: **“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”**

But the advance of God’s kingdom on earth is opposed by Satan and his legions of evil spirits and powers. The devil is a defeated foe, a squatter on earth, but will not leave until compelled to do so. Adam and Eve unwittingly gave human authority and obedience to Satan. Jesus Christ regained human authority and obedience to God. **“The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil”** (1 Jn 3:8).

When you and I receive something from God, or minister in the name of Jesus, we can expect that victory to be countered to some degree. This is not something to be afraid of, any more than a running back carrying the football fears being tackled. Our “team” is superior and vastly stronger. Even if there are many demons, there are at least twice as many angels! Jesus Christ has won the victory. Our victory is inevitable because we are in Christ and Christ is in us. So the battle before us is real, often painful and distressing, but the outcome is not in doubt. As someone has said, “I’ve read the end of the book – Jesus wins!”

Jesus has taught us not to be afraid of the devil. “I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; **nothing will harm you.** However, do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Lk 10:19-20). Can you imagine being asked to step into a pit filled with snakes and scorpions in order to rescue someone? No way! I don’t want to be bitten or stung. But Jesus promises that as we encounter evil spirits in our field of mission, we have the authority to compel them to submit, and we will not be hurt by them.

In terms of persecution from this world, we also want to distinguish between hurt and harm. Jesus has promised us that no harm will happen to us. Yet we know from Jesus, the witness of the Apostles, and from Church history continuing up to today, that Jesus’ followers are often persecuted and sometimes martyred for their faith. How does that square with Jesus saying “nothing will harm you?” We will experience pain and suffering as we follow Jesus – but not harm. “Harm” refers to destruction. Our lives are invincible and immortal, being held by the hand of God. Many years ago I came to the realization that everyone on earth suffers. Since that is so, I reasoned, why not let my suffering come about from following Christ? At least then my suffering will have a point to it and be redeemed. Suffering that comes from sin and foolishness brings bitter regret. Suffering that comes from obedience brings joy.

28. STANDING FIRM IN THE DAILY BATTLE.

The classic spiritual warfare text in the Bible is that found in Ephesians chapter 6. In the passage below, I've put in bold the actions we are to take.

“Finally, my brethren, **be strong** in the Lord and in the power of His might. **Put on** the whole armor of God, that you may be able to **stand** against the wiles of the devil. For we do not **wrestle** against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore **take up** the whole armor of God, that you may be able to **withstand** in the evil day, and having done all, to **stand**.

Stand therefore, having **girded** your waist with truth, having **put on** the breastplate of righteousness, and having **shod** your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace; above all, **taking** the shield of faith with which you will be able to **quench** all the fiery darts of the wicked one. And **take** the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God; **praying** always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being **watchful** to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints...” (Eph 6:10-18).

The command to “stand” does not imply a weak, barely-able-to-stay-propped-up sort of standing, but a determined resolve. It is the picture of a warrior who is left standing alone on the battlefield after his enemies have all fled or lie fallen at his feet. But notice that there are things the believer is to do. No one can do this for us (though the prayers of others greatly help). We are the ones who must strengthen ourselves in the Lord. We put on God’s armor. We stand. We pray. We remain watchful.

Some view the armor of God mentioned above as something you put on by prayer. I disagree. The armor which God supplies consists of, not a quick prayer, but a settled way of life with these characteristics: truthfulness, righteousness, readiness to speak of Christ to others, trusting God (especially), knowledge of and confidence in our salvation, familiarity with the Word of God (Scripture and the spoken *rhema* word), a lifestyle of prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, and sober-minded awareness that comes from practicing the Presence of God.

29. WHAT THE DAY OF EVIL LOOKS LIKE.

The approach of evil spirits towards us always takes the form of temptation to doubt God. “Did God say” was the first temptation towards Adam and Eve. It was the first temptation towards Jesus, “If you are the Son of God...” The strategies against us will be varied, but the temptation will be the same, namely, “Can God be trusted?”

The strategies of the spiritual forces of wickedness include things like persuading us to view other believers with suspicion, despairing over personal circumstances, and striking out on our own to secure ourselves. More temptations could be listed, of course, but these three are typical. The battlefield is in our thoughts and feelings. The Apostle Paul wrote, “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, **your minds will be led astray** from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2 Cor 11:3). Evil spirits do not announce their presence. Instead they “suggest” ideas and images that tend to flow with our own thoughts. Usually, I am not aware I am under attack until I’m already in the pain of temptation.

The Apostle Paul’s counsel in the passage above is sufficient for our victory. I believe that the imagery of armor is to help the believer understand that we can be FULLY protected. This armor is God’s own armor which He constantly supplies His children, provided we are willing to take it up. Note that the Apostle Paul uses the word “wrestle.” This implies a struggle, something that is not necessarily quick or easy. My own experience is that sometimes evil does leave quickly; at other times there is a protracted battle. But the outcome is sure. **“Resist the devil and he will flee”** (Jas 4:7).

30. GIVING THE DEVIL NO PLACE TO WORK.

Compare evil spirits to flies and angels to butterflies. Flies are attracted to things that smell bad. Butterflies are attracted to sweet nectar. Angels are drawn to certain things; demons are drawn to certain things. As followers of Jesus, we can choose things that attract the angelic, or unfortunately, we can choose things that attract the demonic.

What attracts angels? Acts of courageous faith, praise and thanksgiving, worshipping God with a whole heart, humility before God and others, preferring others before ourselves. What draws demons? Bitterness, unforgiveness, complaining, worry, giving way to fear, suspicion of others, immorality, drunkenness, violence, witchcraft, and the like. Giving the devil no place to work is like weeding a garden. Pluck out the weeds when they first appear. Otherwise they grow and form clusters of other weeds that take over the garden.

I like to compare our vigilance against evil spirits like our vigilance against germs. We know there are germs out there. Most of us don’t live in fear of germs, we just take simple, wise precautions such as washing our hands. When we are aware of suspicion, anger, contempt, lust, fear, or bitterness, we quickly turn to Jesus and invite the Holy Spirit to cleanse us.

A precaution about witchcraft and the occult. Most Christians have no idea how serious it is to access the occult. Horoscopes, Ouija boards, séances, fortune telling, etc., are often viewed as entertainment. They are not. These things open doors to the demonic. Evil spirits do not play fair. They don’t care whether you meant harm or not. Avoid all forms of witchcraft like the plague. It offends God and will harm you.

Finally, a word about addictions to such things as pornography, drugs, alcohol, spending, and gluttony. I believe that God's greatest concerns with these sorts of sins is not because they so offend Him (like witchcraft) but because of His tender concern that His children not live in shame and defeat. These are usually sins of weakness, not malice. There are ways to come out of these habitual sins. Victory really is possible. You can come to the place of feeling clean and unashamed and free of that behavior. But you will not find freedom by just trying harder. You will need to find ways to access supernatural power from on high. Trusted friends will also need to help you. And that will mean coming into the light. But I assure you that Jesus Christ is willing to bring you out of darkness and shame – and through Him, you can overcome!

31. SHARING IN THE SUFFERINGS OF CHRIST.

“Now if we are children, then we are heirs —heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed **we share in his sufferings** in order that we may also share in his glory” (Rom 8:17).

“For just as the **sufferings of Christ** flow over into our lives, so also through Christ our comfort overflows” (2 Cor 1:5).

“But rejoice that you participate in the **sufferings of Christ**, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed” (1 Pe 4:13).

What is it to share in the sufferings of Christ? We want to recall that we are connected to God through a relationship, not a contract. We are adopted Sons and Daughters, taking on the family resemblance, sharing in the family business, and experiencing the trials and victories of that family. Furthermore, we are “in” Christ and He is “in” us. Whatever He goes through, we go through. Whatever we go through, He goes through. Jesus prayed that we would be one with Him as He is one with the Father. That prayer has been answered.

Jesus Christ's sufferings were physical, emotional, and spiritual. And until all His enemies come under His feet (including death), we have the privilege of joining with Him in His continued sufferings through us, His body on earth.

Jesus' physical sufferings included weariness, hunger, sleeplessness, miles and miles of walking, hard physical labor and exposure to the elements, including storms. In His Passion (from Greek, *pascho*, to suffer) Jesus received wounds from beatings, the shredding of His flesh by flogging, nailing of hands and feet, terrible pain from the pierced median nerve of His wrists, loss of blood, shock, abrasion of His wounded body by the wooden cross, and extreme pressure on His heart and lungs, leading to death. It is interesting to note that the word we use to describe extreme pain, “*excruciating*” comes from Latin, *ex-cruciatius*, meaning “out of the cross,” or to crucify.

Jesus' emotional sufferings recorded in Scripture include sorrow, heartache, anger, grief, loneliness, hurt, and humiliation. He was constantly misunderstood and unappreciated. People wanted Him only for what He could do for them. He rode the upward crescendo of popularity only to plunge into massive contempt. He was mocked and spat upon. He bore with the injury of envy, hatred, suspicion, rejection, and scorn by His enemies. He suffered the anguish of betrayal and abandonment by His closest friends.

Jesus' spiritual sufferings included the pressure of temptation to sin, the frequent presence of Satan, depression to the point of despair ("My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"), the loss of the awareness of God's presence ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"), and ultimately, the sufferings of hell on our behalf.

When we go through any of these sufferings **because we belong to Christ**, we need to understand that we are in good company. Nothing strange or unforeseen is happening to us. Our sufferings are our badge of honor, proving we belong to Christ, and will be a great source of joy to us when Jesus is fully revealed to this world. Even now, we rejoice because those sufferings are producing for us "an eternal weight of glory" (2 Cor 4:17; see also Rom 5:3, Jas 1:2).

32. THE ARENAS OF OUR LIFE IN THE KINGDOM.

The place of our congregation. Most of us do not take our congregational life seriously enough. It is a sober reality that the folks we see each Sunday (assuming they are born-again believers) are those we will interact with for all eternity. We are a family in God. It is in our congregation that we learn to love and do the ministry of Jesus. Our spiritual gifts are released in the context of the congregation. We grow in the knowledge of Jesus in our congregation. We learn how to relate to spiritual authority in the congregation. And the congregation is the place where we can lay aside titles and social class and simply relate to one another as human beings under grace.

It is my conviction that one desiring to live fully in the kingdom of heaven will give 10% of his income (the "tithe") to the church, with offerings beyond that. There are many reasons for doing so, but the great reason is to join with God's kingdom work at this very personal level. And yes, I do believe that followers of Jesus should be in church every time the doors are open. This may seem old-fashioned, but again, our congregational life can be the closest thing we will experience now as heaven on earth. Life in the kingdom of heaven depends on our living from right priorities. It is too easy in our world to be distracted from the simplicity of our devotion to Christ.

The place of our family. "Large crowds were traveling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: 'If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—he cannot be my disciple' (Lk 14:25-26).

Were you surprised that I didn't list family first in the arenas of our responsibility? Jesus said that at times, our family will be the place of opposition to following Him. "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division. From now on there will be five in one family **divided against each other**, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law" (Lk 12:51-53). Elsewhere Jesus said "**A man's enemies will be members of his own household**" (Mt 10:36).

It is a sad and painful reality, that across the globe today, many have to choose between following Jesus or following their family. Even here in our community, we would be surprised how many on a Sunday morning come to church against the wishes of their own family. This is why Jesus made it clear that He must come first. When we serve our family, it must be done from service to Jesus – otherwise our family becomes a false god that competes with our loyalty to the true God. This is one reason, I believe, the instructions about family life in the New Testament are sparse and to the point. Children are to obey their parents. Parents are to train their children to obey God and to do so in a way that does not injure their spirit. Wives are to serve their husbands with respect and honor. Husbands are to love their wives as their own bodies, as Christ loved the Church. Whether our family appreciates our witness or not, we are a revelation of the love and presence of God in their midst.

Sometimes you hear Christians ranking life in terms of priorities, God first, church second, family third, and work fourth. I suppose if one comes into the kingdom with no sense of appropriate priorities, this sort of ranking is helpful. But it is not helpful for very long in terms of the daily decisions that must be made. Sometimes when a family member is sick, we stay home from church. Sometimes to honor our boss, we miss an important family event. Sometimes to honor our family, we say "no" to our boss. This is where principles alone can't help us. How do we know what to do? We follow the Holy Spirit's guidance. But that guidance comes from a previously determined way of life, namely, that we have surrendered control of our lives to Jesus. In other words, for the follower of Jesus, there really is only one priority in life: obeying Jesus. Jesus comes first, Jesus comes second, Jesus comes third, and Jesus comes fourth. When our hearts are set on obeying Jesus, we will know what to do and when to do it; what to say "yes" to and what to say "no" to.

The place of our occupation. I grew up believing that a career would be the thing that brought meaning and satisfaction to life. Well, like everyone else with some amount of age, I now understand that view makes the career a false god, and a fickle one at that. Most human beings in most places at most times in history have just been lucky to find some way to make ends meet. A "career" is a modern development and even today, available only to those in Europe and North America, or to the wealthy in developing countries. So I want to think in terms of occupation. Our jobs.

Our jobs are very important. In the words of Dallas Willard, “Our job is the primary field of our public witness for Christ.” The way we do our work is a bountiful testimony of the kind of person we have become. Our true calling is as a full-time minister of Jesus Christ. But our occupation is the most visible way most of us will serve as Christ’s witness to the world. Qualities such as honesty, industry, willingness, promptness, and cheerfulness should be obvious attributes of Christ’s man or woman in the workplace. Furthermore, we host the Presence of God into that workplace. When we go to work, God goes to work. We can expect divine help and guidance, no matter what our field. It is our high privilege to declare in prayer the presence of the kingdom of heaven over our workplace and to intercede for the salvation and blessing of everyone at work. We are salt and light simply because of our presence in God.

33. THE MOST IMPORTANT SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The Christian speaker Graham Cooke says that “Abiding in Christ in the most important New Testament discipline.” I heartily agree. But to abide in Christ requires a whole other set of spiritual disciplines. A spiritual discipline is an activity we practice that in turn becomes a means of grace that enables us to do what I cannot do by direct effort, such as abiding in Christ. Spiritual disciplines do not earn grace, they are means of grace. Without the empowering of the Holy Spirit spiritual disciplines are only dead religious works. But as we examine the life of Jesus Christ and His apostles, we see that they all gave themselves to certain spiritual disciplines, such as solitude, study of Scripture, worship, prayer, and fasting, which the Holy Spirit used to bring about fullness of life and ministry.

Solitude. To practice solitude is to get away by yourself to be alone with God. When I go into solitude, my soul becomes healed as the Holy Spirit begins to minister to me. I find I am led into prayer for certain people and situations. At times, God speaks. And when He does, I come alive. For me, solitude is such a source of life that I get up early each morning to find it. Because I also like my sleep, I must go to bed early each night! You may need to find a different time for solitude. It may be that a daily time is not possible. If so, a weekly time may work best. But to find solitude, re-arrangements in your schedule will have to be made.

Study of Scripture. I cannot imagine seeking to live life in the kingdom of heaven without absorbing God’s written word. Scripture more than anything else shapes our attitudes, ideas, and inner concepts of God. Meditatively reading Scripture automatically cleanses our thinking from the pretzel logic of this world. If you have no previous experience in the Bible, I would encourage you to start at the gospel of John and then read through the rest of the New Testament. If you are looking for a way to continuously read through the Bible, I recommend the “three bookmark” method. This method allows you to read continuous cycle through the Old Testament, through Psalms and Proverbs, and through the New Testament. Place a bookmark at Genesis chapter 1, one at Psalms chapter 1, and one at Matthew chapter 1. Read one chapter each day in each of the three sections, then move the bookmarks. The next day do three more chapters, and so on.

One of the most important disciplines in my life has been to memorize portions of the Bible. I suggest you write down on a 3 x 5 card verses that stand out to you and commit them to memory, together with the reference.

Worship and prayer. Worship and prayer form the substance of the simplicity of our devotion to Christ and our life in the kingdom of heaven. Worship and prayer leads us into faith and obedience. Giving God thanks and praise, singing to Him, humming to Him, whispering words of appreciation, invoking His help and blessings on ourselves and others, telling Him that we love Him – these things are the oxygen of our life in the kingdom.

How do you start? Take each new task and offer it to God. Invite His help. Thank Him as you proceed and praise Him when it done. Ask, “What now, Lord?” and move to the next thing. Love God in each task. This is hard to do while in conversation with others. There is a reason why Scripture says, “Make it your ambition to **lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands**, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Th 4:11-12).

Worship and prayer as a discipline certainly includes public gatherings in worship as well. The manifold Presence of God is with us in corporate worship in far greater ways than when we are alone. Jesus said, “Where two or three have gathered together in my name, **I am there** in their midst” (Mt 18:20). He meant it!

Fasting. People who fast regularly all testify that this spiritual discipline is extremely powerful. To fast is do without food for a pre-planned, set period of time. There are other forms of fasting such as doing without the comforts of sweets, alcohol, television, and so forth. A vegetable-only fast is another Biblical way to fast. If you are new to fasting, I suggest you start with just one meal a week and do that fast “unto the Lord.”

What happens when you fast? Many good things happen as a result of bearing with the discomfort of doing without for the sake of Jesus. The greatest blessing is the increased awareness of the Presence of God. Other benefits include humbling ourselves before God (always a good thing), increased power in prayer and ministry, identifying with the hungry in this world, and self-control over our bodies. Regular fasting becomes a very powerful way to gain victory over bodily addictions. In the words of Dallas Willard, “Fasting enables us to become strong and sweet when we are not getting our way.”

34. ON INTO ETERNITY

Do you realize that you and I will never cease to exist? When our mortal bodies stop working, we won't miss a beat. We will step away from our bodies and continue in the fullness of mind, soul, and spirit. If we trust and follow Jesus, we will find ourselves in Paradise with Jesus, with the angels, and with other loved ones who love Jesus, becoming healed and whole from the effects of the sin and death of this life. Then, at an appointed

time known to God, you and I and all of creation will be resurrected and stand before Jesus Christ in judgment. We will each give an account for our lives. "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. **For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad**" (2 Cor 5:9-10).

Christians have already "passed" the judgment of condemnation because we were placed in Jesus. He received the condemnation for our sins so that we will not be condemned. Because we are in Christ, we receive His righteousness, that we might be fully acceptable to God, forever. Still, Scripture speaks of a personal accounting of our faithfulness that each of us will be called upon to give. What will that look like? We should think in terms of rewards. Though we are saved by grace and will be judged by grace, we will also be rewarded by grace for our faithfulness. "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then **he will reward** each person according to what he has done" (Mt 16:27).

It matters very much what we do in this life, for a whole host of reasons, but we should not despise the idea of accountability and reward. The principle of accountability is that **"To whom much has been given, much will be required"** (Lk 12:48). The principle of reward is **"You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things"** (Mt 25:23). I do not believe that unfaithful Christians will be punished at the day of judgment (after all, is that not why Jesus died for us?) but I do believe some will miss out on rewards that were theirs to inherit. More than this I cannot say.

Our focus must be on what God has set before us today. Most of our life consists of very small things that we can do with great love. As we are faithful with the little He has entrusted to us, God will set us over much. **"His master replied, 'Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful over a few things; I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord!'"** (Mt 25:21).

35. FULFILLING YOUR DESTINY

"For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph 2:10).

I love Bill Johnson's thoughts on this subject. He says "Consider it a given that God will meet your needs. But your possibilities you will have to pursue." I agree. It is not enough to just say to God, "Whatever you want to do with my life you may do." We must also be prepared to act when God opens doors of service. Again, the principle of accountability and reward is "faithful in little, faithful in much."

There is a destiny ahead of each one of us. It involves this life and it extends into eternity. I am sure that in the "new heavens and new earth," our final home, we will continue to

grow and develop and find adventure. Failures and disappointments of this life will disappear. The glory of the Lord will be beyond compare.

Yet it does seem to me that many of us are settling for less than God is offering now. Maybe I am too. I will admit that even after many years serving as a pastor, there are lots of days I just want life to be easy, with little responsibility, and without trials and temptations. But that's not going to happen now. There is a destiny in front of me and I want to fulfill it. I don't want to reach the end of my life and regret squandered opportunities to serve Jesus Christ. Neither do you.

So let us begin again now.