



*12 Questions for a Strong Foundation
In Faith and Practice*

*Wednesday Night Bible Study
7:00 PM*

Some topics in Scripture are worth turning to again and again as the Spirit of God works in the heart and life of the believer to make them more and more like Jesus in moral character and spiritual faith. We're going to revisit 12 of these topics. For some it will be review. For others all new. For everyone an opportunity to invest in your relationship with Jesus.

TOPICS

Why "Back to Basics"?

Can I be certain I'm a Christian?

What are "personal devotions"?

What does it mean for Christ to be "Lord"?

How can I learn to pray?

Is there an easy way to share the gospel?

Does everyone have the fruit of the Spirit?

How does a person know God's will?

Is it okay to set goals in my life?

Why does life have to be so hard?

Am I ready to be baptized?

Does God care how I spend my time?

Who is the Holy Spirit?

What is "true fellowship"?

How much obedience is enough?

How can I be less negative?

Does anger ever serve God's glory?

Where does gratitude come from?

What is the difference between humility and humiliation?

Why Back to Basics

2 Peter 1:3–12 (ESV)

³ His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, ⁴ by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire.

⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

¹⁰ Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. ¹¹ For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

¹² Therefore I intend always to remind you of these qualities, though you know them and are established in the truth that you have.

Why back to basics? Why is it good to return to some basic discipleship topics? Peter gives us five reasons:

1. v. 3 God's abundant provision of love, grace, and power
2. v. 4 God's abundant provision of restoration of His image in our lives
3. v. 5 God's abundant provision of an imperative to personal engagement in the process of sanctification
4. v. 8 God's abundant provision of a goal for your life in the world
5. v. 11 God's abundant provision of an entrance into the eternal kingdom

Can I be certain I am a Christian?

It is one thing to believe in Christ. It is another to know with certainty that what we believe has gained for us what is promised. Are there assurances in the word of God that I am saved, that my faith is enough?

Jesus said, "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you." It is likely, if you have any faith at all, it is at least like a grain of mustard seed. But Jesus is not pointing to the quality or quantity of your faith here. He is pointing to the quality and quantity of His faith in His Father and His Father's plan for you.

It is not that your faith is enough. It is that Christ is enough for your faith. "All the promises of God are 'Yes' and 'Amen' in Christ."

Let's take a closer look at the question, "Can I be certain I am a Christian?"

1 John 5:11,12 *And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.*

1 John 1:8-9 (ESV) ⁸ *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.* ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 (ESV) ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come.* ¹⁸ *All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation;* ¹⁹ *that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.* ²⁰ *Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.* ²¹ *For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

Philippians 1:6 (ESV) *And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.*

John 10:28 (ESV) *I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.*

Romans 8:29-30 (ESV) ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

Jude 1:17-23 (ESV) ¹⁷ *But you must remember, beloved, the predictions of the apostles of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ¹⁸ *They said to you, "In the last time there will be scoffers, following their own ungodly passions."* ¹⁹ *It is these who cause divisions, worldly people, devoid of the Spirit.* ²⁰ *But you, beloved, building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit,* ²¹ *keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.* ²² *And have mercy on those who doubt;* ²³ *save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by*

the flesh.

“Semi-Pelagianism,” a common misconception among believers, requires that good works on our part augment grace on God’s part in order for us to be saved. Doubt arises, then, because we can never be certain that our works are good enough. The truth is, good works flow from us BECAUSE we are saved, as a result, not a cause.

Assurance of salvation depends objectively and solely on the quality of the life and death of Jesus Christ the Son of God to accomplish God’s eternal purpose, all of which was certified by God when He raised Jesus from the dead.

God is ALL that He is at all times and in all places. That is the nature of His glory. We know that God is good, and just, and perfect, and holy. We know that God is right and true. Since God is ALL that He is at all times and in all places, it is inherently and infinitely true that God cannot and will not abandon His glory with a lie.

God does not lie, deceive, mislead, mispresent. He is not false, deceptive, or untrustworthy. God is true. God is truth. Therefore, the assurances He provides must also be true and trustworthy because He will never be less than He is. Not with you. Not with anyone. Ever.

Faith builds not on feelings but facts. Our assurance is not in what we feel (our emotional and experiential state) but Who God is and what He says (our faith state). In other words, we may, subjectively, experience doubt as a Christian, but, objectively, theologically, truthfully, there can be no doubt because salvation is not dependent on any work of the believer but solely on the grace and goodness of God our Savior.

So, how can we build a faith that silences doubt? Live what you know.

- **You know God calls everyone to repent, so repent.**

Romans 2:4 (ESV) *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God’s kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*

2 Peter 3:9 (ESV) *The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*

Revelation 3:19 (ESV) *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.*

- **You know God calls everyone to trust Him, so trust Him.**

Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV) ⁵ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.* ⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

- **You know that those who love Jesus obey His commands, so obey.**

John 14:15 (ESV) *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.*

- **You know that the premier command Jesus gave us was to love, so love.**

John 15:12 (ESV) *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

What are personal devotions?

The easy answer is this: all the time and effort you spend developing your own personal, intimate relationship with God.

While theology and doctrine are essential to faith, God's intent in salvation is a relationship that is formed and nurtured by Truth (theology and doctrine.) He intends that our personal, experiential knowledge of Him make us more than walking theological libraries. He intends a soul-satisfying, heart-changing, life-transforming, mind-stretching, emotionally intimate relationship with Him as we take on, day by day, through the Spirit and the word, the likeness of Jesus.

Jesus practiced personal devotion to His Father.

Mark 1:35 (ESV) *And rising very early in the morning, while it was still dark, he departed and went out to a desolate place, and there he prayed.*

Genuine Christian faith engages the whole person in a relationship with God: heart, mind, spirit, body. Personal devotions are the relational exercise that builds strong faith and strong practice. Personal devotions are to the soul what going to the gym is to the body.

Here are Oswald Chambers thoughts regarding personal devotion in a devotional article titled, "The Conditions of Discipleship," in his devotional book, *My Utmost for His Highest*:

If any man come to Me, and hate not ..., he cannot be My disciple. Luke 14:26, also 27, 33.

If the closest relationships of life clash with the claims of Jesus Christ, He says it must be instant obedience to Himself. Discipleship means personal, passionate devotion to a Person, Our Lord Jesus Christ. There is a difference between devotion to a Person and devotion to principles or to a cause. Our Lord never proclaimed a cause; He proclaimed personal devotion to Himself. To be a disciple is to be a devoted love-slave of the Lord Jesus. Many of us who call ourselves Christians are not devoted to Jesus Christ. No man on earth has this passionate love to the Lord Jesus unless the Holy Ghost has imparted it to him. We may admire Him, we may respect Him and reverence Him, but we cannot love Him. The only Lover of the Lord Jesus is the Holy Ghost, and He sheds abroad the very love of God in our hearts. Whenever the Holy Ghost sees a chance of glorifying Jesus, He will take your heart, your nerves, your whole personality, and simply make you blaze and glow with devotion to Jesus Christ.

The Christian life is stamped by 'moral spontaneous originality,' consequently the disciple is open to the same charge that Jesus Christ was, viz., that of inconsistency. But Jesus Christ was always consistent to God, and the Christian must be consistent to the life of the Son of God in him, not consistent to hard and fast creeds. Men pour themselves into creeds, and God has to blast them out of their prejudices before they can become devoted to Jesus Christ.

Chambers, O. (1986). My utmost for his highest: Selections for the year. Oswald Chambers Publications; Marshall Pickering.

Here are four verses to think about relative to the topic:

Isaiah 26:3 (ESV) *You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.*

Proverbs 3:5-6 (ESV) ⁵ *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding.*
⁶ *In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.*

Luke 10:38-42 (ESV) ³⁸ *Now as they went on their way, Jesus entered a village. And a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. ³⁹ And she had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching. ⁴⁰ But Martha was distracted with much serving. And she went up to him and said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me." ⁴¹ But the Lord answered her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things, ⁴² but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion, which will not be taken away from her."*

1 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV) ⁷ *Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;*
⁸ *for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.*

Like any good, healthy, meaningful relationship, our relationship with God through Christ takes time, effort, intent, and discipline. The relationship God commits to with us is not meant to be stagnant but to grow, develop, deepen over time, and we have a role in developing and nurturing that relationship. We are not meant to simply put our faith in Jesus and stop at conversion. We are meant to increase in love and grace and power and faith until we reach full maturity in Christ (see Ephesians 4:13). This maturity is accomplished partially through intentional, focused, private time spent in Bible study, prayer, worship, and obedience.

This personal worship has many of the marks of the Sabbath. It is time spent in worship and rest and spiritual renewal to which God Himself has called and commanded us. Words like *consistency, continuity, commitment, contentment, communication, and confirmation* are rightly associated with the discipleship practice of personal devotions. Jesus said that knowing the one true God was eternal life. Time spent in personal devotion and worship is an investment in knowing God and therefore an investment in the acquisition of eternal life promised us by Christ through Christ.

The call to commitment to personal devotion (as both practice and life-style) is grounded on:
The mercies of God

Romans 12:1 (ESV) *I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.*

The goodness of God

1 Samuel 12:24 (ESV) *Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.*

The call of God.

1 Thessalonians 2:12 (ESV) *we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

The death of Christ

2 Corinthians 5:15 (ESV) *and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

Our creation

Psalms 86:9 (ESV) *All the nations you have made shall come and worship before you, O Lord,*

and shall glorify your name.

Our preservation

Isaiah 46:4 (ESV) *even to your old age I am he, and to gray hairs I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save.*

Our redemption. 1 Cor. 6:19, 20

1 Corinthians 6:19-20 (ESV) ¹⁹ *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own,* ²⁰ *for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

The conduct of our personal devotions should be:

With our spirit

1 Peter 4:6 (ESV) *For this is why the gospel was preached even to those who are dead, that though judged in the flesh the way people are, they might live in the spirit the way God does.*

With our bodies

1 Corinthians 6:20 (ESV) *for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

Romans 6:12-13 (ESV) ¹² *Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions.* ¹³ *Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness.*

1 Peter 4:2 (ESV) *so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.*

With our best commitment

Exodus 22:29 (ESV) *“You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me.*

Proverbs 3:9 (ESV) *Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the firstfruits of all your produce;*

With our unreserved commitment

Matthew 6:24 (ESV) *“No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.*

Luke 14:33 (ESV) *So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*

With abounding commitment

1 Thessalonians 4:1 (ESV) *Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God, just as you are doing, that you do so more and more.*

With persevering commitment

Luke 1:74-75 (ESV) ⁷⁴ *that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,* ⁷⁵ *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*

Luke 9:62 (ESV) *Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

With a whole life commitment

Romans 14:8 (ESV) *For if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's.*

Philippians 1:20 (ESV) *as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*

The content of our personal devotional practice should be exhibited in:

Loving God

Deuteronomy 6:5 (ESV) *You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.*

Luke 10:27 (ESV) *And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself."*

Serving God

1 Samuel 12:24 (ESV) *Only fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart. For consider what great things he has done for you.*

Romans 12:11 (ESV) *Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.*

Walking worthy of God

1 Thessalonians 2:12 (ESV) *we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.*

Doing all to God's glory

1 Corinthians 10:31 (ESV) *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.*

Self-surrender

Mark 8:34 (ESV) *And calling the crowd to him with his disciples, he said to them, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*

Living to Christ

2 Corinthians 5:15 (ESV) *and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

Total commitment

Matthew 19:21 (ESV) *Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess*

and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."

Matthew 19:28-29 (ESV) ²⁸ *Jesus said to them, "Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.* ²⁹ *And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.*

Torrey, R. A. (1897). The New Topical Text Book: A Scripture Text Book for the Use of Ministers, Teachers, and All Christian Workers (New, revised and enlarged edition, p. 68). Fleming H. Revell.

So, the practical questions becomes, "How do we have personal devotions that are both meaningful and helpful?" Here are a few guidelines

1. Set aside time, daily. Same time, same place every day is a best practice.
2. Find a quiet place where you can concentrate and don't take your phone!
3. Have a Bible, a hymnal, a notebook, and a pen handy.
4. Ask God to be present with you as you worship and invest yourself in Him.
5. Prayer, worship, Bible reading are means of investing in this relationship. Listening to sermons or good, solid, Bible teaching can be a part of this time. Some people use devotional books along with their Bibles to augment their efforts.
6. What other resources or practices can you think of that will help you know Christ better and follow Him more faithfully from the heart?
7. In order to develop a solid, meaningful devotional habit, some re-prioritizing often has to happen in our lives. What activities may have to be shifted in order to make personal devotions a priority in your life?

Prayer, Bible reading, and worship are essential components of personal devotional practice. While we are thinking about how to engage in personal devotions, let's consider some good advice regarding devotional Bible study. This excerpt comes from the book, *Biblical hermeneutics: a comprehensive introduction to interpreting Scripture* (2nd ed., pp. 46-49) from Broadman & Holman.

The potential for practical, moral, and theological error is great among those Christians who have little knowledge of applying the Bible personally. Awareness of these problems must guide Christians as they practice devotional study of the Scripture.

Devotional study aims at changing personal behavior. Those who practice devotional study must approach the Bible with a desire to listen readily to God's voice. Several procedures can be used to assure wisdom and accuracy in making application of Scripture.

Guidelines in Practicing Devotional Study

Some who use the Bible to promote moral and spiritual growth can abuse Scripture. Some

Christians will feel that any means for obtaining a blessing is justified in Bible study. The following principles are intended to provide a wise use of the Bible in moral and spiritual growth.

First, those who practice devotional study of the Bible must understand the true grammatical-historical sense of the verse or section of the Bible. Some well-intentioned Christians, eager to find a practical use of Scripture, will utilize an application which violates Scripture's meaning. The result can be either trifling or confusing. At a time when few medicines were available to treat illnesses, Paul advised Timothy to use a little wine for his stomach problems and for his numerous weaknesses (1 Tim. 5:23). A Christian with a nervous stomach today should not take this suggestion as a guideline for personal physical problems.

Second, we must view the Bible more as a book of general principles than as a collection of detailed directions. If the Bible were too specific, it would be linked to a time and a culture. If the Bible were a collection of rules, then a Christian might obey the letter of the rules and miss the spirit of genuine godliness. The words of James in 2:1-7 are not relevant in providing instructions for seating in most Christian churches. Most churches have seats which are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Normally the poor are not placed in uncomfortable seating in comparison to the wealthy. The words of James, however, do provide guidance for Christians in dealing with the problem of bias against the poor and toward the rich. The principle of the passage is thus useful in our time and culture to stimulate us to show compassion for the poor.

Third, some commands of Scripture are to be obeyed according to their spirit rather than in a literal fashion. Literal obedience would sometimes entail drastic consequences. Jesus' suggestion in Matthew 5:29-30 to pluck out offending eyes and cut off offending hands is not to be taken literally. Jesus is eager that Christians confront personal sin with relentless firmness rather than pamper and nurture it in any form.

Fourth, the student should correlate the passage with other sections of Scripture. This principle represents an effort to compare the topic or the passage being investigated with other passages which teach the same truth. Jesus' teaching about prayer in Matthew 7:7 seems to be an unqualified promise of an answer for those who continue asking. We should modify our understanding of this Scripture in the light of such passages as James 4:3 and 1 John 5:14-15 which show that the motives of the petitioner and the will of God are also factors in answered prayer. Our correlation of the passage which we are studying will help us to realize that sometimes the Bible writers do not provide discussion about the possible applications of a passage when they initially discuss it. Our comparison of one passage with another which deals with a similar topic can assist us in making a wise application.

Practicing Devotional Study

In practicing devotional study of Scripture, we can list the specific areas in which the truth from a writing can be applied. We can apply the truth personally and to others. We can apply truths in the political, economic, and social arenas as well as in the spiritual arena. In probing areas of application, it is helpful to use key questions. Among questions which we can address to a passage are:

1. What am I to believe as a result of this passage?

2. What am I to do as a result of this passage? Are there actions which I must begin or change? Are there attitudes which I must confront such as fear, worry, hate, resentment, or jealousy?

3. What have I learned about relationships? Does this passage teach me a new truth about my relationship with God? Do I see new insights into my relationship with others in my family, community, congregation, or world?

4. Is there a promise that I need to claim? Are there conditions for claiming this promise? Is there some word of encouragement or hope for me?

We must not use these questions in a mechanical way. They serve as an aid in probing possibilities for application. To assure that all application moves from theory to practice, it is helpful to state a devotional application in the form of a principle. This principle will provide a goal toward which we can direct our own energies in devotional application.

Corley, B., Lemke, S., & Lovejoy, G. (2002). *Biblical hermeneutics: a comprehensive introduction to interpreting Scripture* (2nd ed., pp. 46–49). Broadman & Holman.

What does it mean for Christ to be “Lord” of my life?

The Mariner’s Message

Imagine a ship guided by a skilled captain. The captain owns the ship, employs the crew, negotiates for the cargo, determines the destination, names the price of stowage and passage. The captain’s authority in regards to and onboard his ship is absolute. The captain dictates the ship’s purpose, complement, course, speed, and activities. The entire crew looks to the captain to supply their needs, order their tasks, distribute the rewards, apply the discipline, and provide direction. Nothing on board the ship is considered outside the captain’s authority or concern. The captain is lord and master of the ship and all the lives aboard for the duration of the voyage. To take any other perspective is mutiny.

The expectation of God, as revealed in His word, is that those who answer the call of Jesus, “Come, follow me,” will continue in the life of faith with Jesus as their Leader, their Teacher, their Lord. Jesus does not call those first disciples from the boat to the shore and then commend them for their faith and leave them their on their own, to do their own thing henceforth. He calls them to a commitment to follow Him into His agenda for their lives. Their acceptance of His call is an assent not only to His invitation but to His ongoing agenda, to what they will become as a result of being His followers.

The Disciple Question

Disciples of Jesus accept and commit themselves to the Lordship of Jesus. But what exactly does it mean for Christ to be Lord of my life? What does it mean for me, in faith, to surrender to Christ and make Him the captain of my ship? Let’s consider the answer to the question in terms of four spiritual conditions that accompany genuine faith in Christ: calling, commitment, conduct, commission

The Lordship Conditions

The disciple is called to both faith and service

Romans 10:8-9 (ESV) ⁸ *But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim);* ⁹ *because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.*

Acts 2:36 (ESV) *Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”*

A person is saved (justified before God) by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. A disciple, saved by faith, develops in the life of faith as they learn to yield more and more of their life to Christ’s present and continuous authority. Christ is not only the believer’s Savior, a position provided by God, He is also the disciple’s Lord, a position required by God.

The titles “Lord” and “Christ” denote more than mere identifiers. They reveal how any given person must relate to Jesus if they are to be “in relationship with Christ.” Jesus is not only One who “does things for us,” He is the One, by God’s command, to Whom we owe allegiance and obedience. He is both God’s anointed One (“Christ”) and His appointed and authorized One.

To have Christ as the Lord in our lives means first of all to be called by God into a relationship with Christ that begins with faith in Him and continues in faithfulness to Him. That ongoing, increasing faithfulness is called “commitment.”

The disciple commits their life to faith and service

Luke 9:57-62 (ESV) ⁵⁷ *As they were going along the road, someone said to him, “I will follow you*

wherever you go.”⁵⁸ And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”⁵⁹ To another he said, “Follow me.” But he said, “Lord, let me first go and bury my father.”⁶⁰ And Jesus said to him, “Leave the dead to bury their own dead. But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.”⁶¹ Yet another said, “I will follow you, Lord, but let me first say farewell to those at my home.”⁶² Jesus said to him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”

That Christ is both Savior and Lord in our lives means that we humbly and intentionally submit not only in faith in His death on the cross and seek forgiveness of sin through Him but also that we measure every single aspect of our lives against His character and His will for us. We commit our will to His will. We yield to His plan to transform us into His likeness. We actively pursue God’s ongoing transforming power and grace. We hold nothing back from Christ. We refuse to retain authority over anything in our lives, yielding every aspect of our self to Him: what we think, what we love, what we desire, what we reject, how we relate and respond, what we are. Everything surrendered to Him in order that He might make us like Him.

The disciple conducts their life in faith and service.

John 13:13-14 (ESV) *You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet.*

John 20:28 (ESV) *Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!”*

Put another way, salvation in Christ has both a moral and an ethical component. The effect of saving grace on the state of our soul is life-saving. The effect of sustaining grace is life-changing. There is grace that changes our standing with God. We call that saving grace or justifying grace. There is also grace that changes the way we live before God, the way we conduct our lives in the world before Him, the way we practice our lives, conduct ourselves and behave in the world. Christ expects His followers to become like Him in what they believe and think and in how those beliefs and convictions impact and guide their living.

When Jesus the Lord commands His corps of disciples, “Love one another!” He intends them to conduct their lives in a manner characterized by the love for the Father and for one another that He has so vividly demonstrated to them. He expects them to adopt for themselves His life in the world. How does Jesus commit Himself to the Father’s will and conduct Himself in the world? The answer to that question is how the disciples of Jesus are expected to conduct themselves in the world.

The called and committed disciple conducts their life commissioned to faith and service.

Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV) ¹⁸ *And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”*

Jesus, fully authorized by God, fully vested with God’s sovereign authority to accomplish God’s will in the world, commissions His disciples to the work of making disciples. To live under the lordship of Jesus is to be called to faith in Him, committed to faithfulness to Him, conducting one’s life in accordance with His life, and faithfully pursuing His commission in the world.

How can I learn to pray?

Luke 11:1-2 (ESV)

¹ Now Jesus was praying in a certain place, and when he finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." ² And he said to them, "When you pray, say: .

..

Prayer is as natural to a disciple of Jesus as breathing, talking to God as walking. Innately, disciples want to fellowship with the Teacher and prayer is an active means for fellowship.

But how do we go about praying? Is there a form or formula? Are there right ways and wrong ways to pray? Do some prayers please God and others elicit an angry response? How can I learn to pray?

Like any other learned activity, you first have to start. Longing for fellowship with Christ is good and desire to pray is healthy but at some point, whatever else you do, you just have to start. Will it feel awkward? Will you stumble? Have you ever seen a baby learn to walk? Sure, it may take a while for you to feel totally comfortable but the effort IS the process. Don't wait for a lesson. Try.

Prayer really is a simple conversation with God from the heart. Start there. Tell God what is on your heart. Tell Him what is on your heart about Him. Tell Him what is on your heart about you and the people you love. Tell Him what is on your heart about the world and what's happening around you. Tell Him what you've found in His word, what is instructive and what is puzzling. Tell Him something. Tell Him everything.

Then listen. Like any good communication, prayer is a two-way street. Some talking, some listening. Listen when you pray because God will speak. He may bring a particular Scripture to mind relative to what you are praying about. He may leave you with an impression that does not fade away but seems to urge attention and action. He may bring to mind some attribute of His character that bears consideration: how are you like this or how are you not like this?

Some prayer is intentional. Some is casual. Some prayers lead with adoration and worship. Other prayers, born in crisis and trouble, rise like a call for help from faltering lips. Prayer is the heart and soul reaching out to God like a thirsty man reaches for a glass of water on a sun scorched summer day.

Remember this, when God's beloved children pray, they do not have to negotiate for His attention. *The eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous and His ear is inclined to their prayer.*

Probably the greatest hindrance to prayer, other than guilt, is the reluctance to simply try. Let that reluctance pass. God is eager to hear from you, eager to speak with you, eager to fellowship with you, eager to love you.

Want to learn to pray? Try.

Here are some further thoughts to help you as you learn to love Christ in prayer:

Hindrances And Helps to Prayer

There is a reality about prayer we have to face. Sometimes, it is hard to pray. Something gets in the way of the free conversation we want to have with God. There is something that moves us to silence rather than praise and petition.

Sin

Sin is the greatest internal hindrance to prayer. Unconfessed, willful sin separates us from our holy, righteous, gracious, glorious God. Unrealized sin, sins we commit but are not aware of, also hamper our relationship with God in prayer. We cannot, we must not think that because Christ has carried all our sin and guilt to the cross that we can continue in sin without consequence. Sin must be confessed and abandoned for our prayers to be heard and our life of faith to deepen and grow.

Isaiah 59:2 (ESV) – *2 but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.*

Micah 3:4 (ESV) – *4 Then they will cry to the LORD, but he will not answer them; he will hide his face from them at that time, because they have made their deeds evil.*

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

Jeremiah 14:10–12 (ESV) – *10 Thus says the LORD concerning this people: “They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet; therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins.” 11 The LORD said to me: “Do not pray for the welfare of this people. 12 Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence.”*

Disobedience

Disobedience is a form of sin in which we deliberately resist or deny God’s revealed will for us. Disobedience assumes we are aware of the command or instruction we have received, are aware of the authority behind that command or instruction, and are intentionally either not fulfilling that command or are actively doing other than instructed.

Zechariah 7:13 (ESV) – *13 “As I called, and they would not hear, so they called, and I would not hear,” says the LORD of hosts,*

Deuteronomy 1:43–45 (ESV) – *43 So I spoke to you, and you would not listen; but you rebelled against the command of the LORD and presumptuously went up into the hill country. 44 Then the Amorites who lived in that hill country came out against you and chased you as bees do and beat you down in Seir as far as Hormah. 45 And you returned and wept before the LORD, but the LORD did not listen to your voice or give ear to you.*

Proverbs 1:28–31 (ESV) – *28 Then they will call upon me, but I will not answer; they will seek me diligently but will not find me. 29 Because they hated knowledge and did not choose*

the fear of the LORD, 30 would have none of my counsel and despised all my reproof, 31 therefore they shall eat the fruit of their way, and have their fill of their own devices.

Selfishness

Selfishness qualifies as sin since the revealed will of God is that we, in faith, present ourselves selfless to and for Him.

James 4:3 (ESV) — *3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

Injustice

It is not only in our responsibility toward God that God requires integrity in those who would have Him hear and answer prayer. Jesus said the second most important commandment was that we love our neighbors. He meant for us to take that seriously.

Isaiah 1:15-17 (ESV) — *15 When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. 16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, 17 learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.*

Proverbs 21:13 (ESV) — *13 Whoever closes his ear to the cry of the poor will himself call out and not be answered.*

Isaiah 58:1-7 (ESV) — *1 "Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. 2 Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 3 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. 4 Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. 5 Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? 6 "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? 7 Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"*

Lack of faith

Lack of faith is the other side of unbelief. They are the two faces of the same coin. The life of a believer is a life born in faith and borne in faith. And yet, there are many promises and invitations in Scripture that we are reluctant to claim as our own. We should appreciate the consequences on our prayer life for unbelief.

James 1:6-7 (ESV) — *6 But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. 7 For that person must not*

suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord;

Qualities that lead to effective prayer

Just as there are spiritual conditions that hinder prayer, there are spiritual qualities that lead to effective prayer.

Humility

Luke 18:9-14 (ESV) – 9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: 10 “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV) – 14 if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Psalm 51:16-17 (ESV) – 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Obedience

1 John 3:21-22 (ESV) – 21 Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; 22 and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him.

1 Samuel 15:22 (ESV) – 22 And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.

Righteousness

Proverbs 15:29 (ESV) – 29 The LORD is far from the wicked, but he hears the prayer of the righteous.

Psalm 34:15 (ESV) – 15 The eyes of the LORD are toward the righteous and his ears toward their cry.

Single-mindedness

Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV) – 13 You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Deuteronomy 4:29 (ESV) – 29 But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul.

Faith

Matthew 21:21-22 (ESV) – *21 And Jesus answered them, “Truly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what has been done to the fig tree, but even if you say to this mountain, ‘Be taken up and thrown into the sea,’ it will happen. 22 And whatever you ask in prayer, you will receive, if you have faith.”*

Matthew 7:7-11 (ESV) – *7 “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!*

John 14:12-14 (ESV) – *12 “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. 13 Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. 14 If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.*

Questions for Consideration

1. What makes humility a desirable quality in regard to prayer?
2. How does God nurture humility in a disciple?
3. What makes obedience a desirable quality in regard to prayer?
4. How does God nurture obedience in a disciple?
5. What makes righteousness a desirable quality in regard to prayer?
6. How does God nurture righteousness in a disciple?
7. What makes single-mindedness a desirable quality in regard to prayer?
8. How does God nurture single-mindedness in a disciple?
9. What makes faith a desirable quality in regard to prayer?
10. How does God nurture faith in a disciple?

Prayerfulness

Prayerfulness is an attitude in and by which a constant relationship between God and believers is developed.

Prayerfulness is a way of life

Psalm 55:17 (ESV) – 17 Evening and morning and at noon I utter my complaint and moan, and he hears my voice.

Daniel 6:10-11 (ESV) – 10 When Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open toward Jerusalem. He got down on his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before his God, as he had done previously. 11 Then these men came by agreement and found Daniel making petition and plea before his God.

Prayerfulness arises from a desire to be with God

Psalm 130:5-6 (ESV) – 5 I wait for the LORD, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning.

Psalm 42:1-4 (ESV) – 1 As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. 2 My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and appear before God? 3 My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, “Where is your God?” 4 These things I remember, as I pour out my soul: how I would go with the throng and lead them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of praise, a multitude keeping festival.

Psalm 84:1-2 (ESV) – 1 How lovely is your dwelling place, O LORD of hosts! 2 My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God.

Prayerfulness arises from an awareness of need that can only be met by God

1 Timothy 5:5 (ESV) – 5 She who is truly a widow, left all alone, has set her hope on God and continues in supplications and prayers night and day,

Psalm 105:4 (ESV) – 4 Seek the LORD and his strength; seek his presence continually!

Psalm 86:1 (ESV) – 1 Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy.

Prayerfulness demonstrates a continuing trust in God

John 15:5-8 (ESV) – 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Psalm 63:1-8 (ESV) – 1 O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for

you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. **2** So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. **3** Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. **4** So I will bless you as long as I live; in your name I will lift up my hands. **5** My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food, and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips, **6** when I remember you upon my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; **7** for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy. **8** My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Prayerfulness involves a heart that is right with God

Isaiah 1:15-17 (ESV) – **15** When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. **16** Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, **17** learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Matthew 6:7 (ESV) – **7** "And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.

Prayerfulness involves the need to be alert

Matthew 26:41 (ESV) – **41** Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Luke 21:36 (ESV) – **36** But stay awake at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that are going to take place, and to stand before the Son of Man."

Micah 7:7 (ESV) – **7** But as for me, I will look to the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation; my God will hear me.

Colossians 4:2 (ESV) – **2** Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving.

Prayerfulness needs to be maintained especially in difficult circumstances

Luke 18:1 (ESV) – **1** And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

Habakkuk 3:16-19 (ESV) – **16** I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us. **17** Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, **18** yet I will rejoice in the LORD; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. **19** GOD, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer's; he makes me tread on my high places. To the choirmaster: with stringed instruments.

Is there an easy way to share the gospel?

Here's what we know we have in our possession relative to this question:

COMMISSION;

Matthew 28:18-20 (ESV)

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

CONNECTION:

John 14:26 (ESV) *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

COMMITMENT:

Acts 1:8 (ESV) *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."*

So, given what Jesus has given us, what do we need to share the gospel?

First, you need conviction

That the authority of Jesus is real and applicable now

That you are obligated by grace to share the gospel

That the gospel actually has the life transforming message of grace people need

That love and duty compel you to live, love, and share the gospel.

1. Do you understand the difference between simple assent and concrete conviction?
2. Do you hold the aforementioned truths as convictions?
3. If you are not unreservedly convinced of the reality of these truths, why not? What more do you need to have these things move from assent to conviction?

Second, you need confirmation

That you know the gospel well enough to share it

That your life exemplifies the gospel well enough to support it

1. Do you know the gospel narrative well enough to share it?
2. Are there areas in your life that would counter or deny the validity of the gospel in the sight of others?

Third, you need

To train yourself to recognize or make opportunities to share the gospel

To remember that the ultimate responsibility falls on the Spirit, not you

To practice until talking about Jesus and the grace of God is second nature

1. Do you have a Christian brother/sister/friend with whom you can practice sharing the gospel?

2. Do you understand what the role of the Holy Spirit is in sharing the gospel?

Fourth, you need

An opening that you know well and are so comfortable with you can adapt it on the spot

A ready mind, an eager spirit, an open heart, and a determined will

A biblically informed expectation

1. Imagine the most perfect for you opening someone could provide for sharing the gospel. What would that opening be like?

2. Each of the “needs” presented in this point have a common source in our lives. Do you know what that source is? Do you draw from this source specifically and intentionally?

A Parable from Jesus that provides context for sharing the gospel.

The Parable of the Four Soils (Matthew 13:3-9, 18-23)

How will the gospel seed fall on the hard heart?

How will the gospel seed fall on the stony heart?

How will the gospel seed fall on the thorny heart?

How will the gospel seed fall on the ready heart?

How does the insight Jesus provides in this parable make sharing the gospel easier?

Does everyone have the fruit of the Spirit?

One of the fundamental promises God makes to His people involves His Spirit. God sets the expectation through the prophet Ezekiel that He (God) will put His Spirit in His people (individual believers and the corporate Body).

Ezekiel 36:26-27 (ESV) ²⁶ And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

²⁷ And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

Via the prophet Joel, God reveals the time frame for this PROMISE:

Joel 2:28-29 (ESV) ²⁸ “And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. ²⁹ Even on the male and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit.

Peter tells us that the Holy Spirit promised the people of God was given on the day of Pentecost 50 days after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Acts 2:14-18 (ESV) ¹⁴ But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them: “Men of Judea and all who dwell in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and give ear to my words. ¹⁵ For these people are not drunk, as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day. ¹⁶ But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: ¹⁷ ““And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; ¹⁸ even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy.

God the Holy Spirit is God active in the world to magnify Christ and accomplish God's will, in this case, by enlivening and empowering the people of God's choosing to come to faith, live by faith, and receive the reward of faith, eternal life. One aspect of the work of the Spirit in the life of a believer (after regeneration and conversion and as an aspect of sanctification) is “fruitfulness.” It is the Holy Spirit, God in us, who prepares our hearts to be fruitful and brings forth out of our lives the abundant fruit anticipated in Jesus' parable for the Sower, the seed, and the soils.

Assuming the Holy Spirit is essential to salvation and that keeps His promises to His chosen people, then we may ask, if everyone who is a true believer has the Spirit, does everyone have the fruit of the Spirit?

FRUITFULNESS, THE SPIRIT, AND THE PEOPLE OF GOD

Fruitfulness is the supernatural response of the soul and spirit, heart, mind, and body to the saving work of God in Christ and the sanctifying work of the Spirit as God transforms the inner life and outer conduct of a believer into the likeness of Christ. It is the direct result of keeping covenant with God for it depends on the working of God in the garden of the heart and hearts of His people. In

other words, spiritual fruit is not the result of self-effort on our part but of real spiritual activity on God's part. We are simply the context in which God does His work, the branch that bears the grapes, the field that yields the harvest, the garden in which the fruit of faith matures to readiness.

What is the spiritual expectation of "fruitfulness" in the Bible? Is there a real expectation that God's people will be "fruitful" in some sense?

Commanded by God
Of Adam

Genesis 1:22 (ESV) *And God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth."*

Genesis 1:28 (ESV) *And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth."*

Of Noah

Genesis 9:1 (ESV) *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth."*

Genesis 9:7 (ESV) *And you, be fruitful and multiply, increase greatly on the earth and multiply in it."*

Of Abram

Genesis 17:6 (ESV) *I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you.*

Of Jacob

Genesis 35:11 (ESV) *And God said to him, "I am God Almighty: be fruitful and multiply. A nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall come from your own body.*

Preached by John the Baptist

Matthew 3:8 (ESV) *Bear fruit in keeping with repentance.*

Matthew 3:10 (ESV) *Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.*

Expected by Christ

Matthew 12:33 (ESV) *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.*

Luke 6:43-44 (ESV) ⁴³ *"For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, ⁴⁴ for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.*

John 15:5 (ESV) *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in*

him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:8 (ESV) *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

John 15:16 (ESV) *You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.*

Nurtured by the Spirit

Romans 6:21-22 (ESV) ²¹ *But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death.* ²² *But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life.*

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV) ²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.*

Produced by Faithfulness

Colossians 1:9-10 (ESV) ⁹ *And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,* ¹⁰ *so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*

Keeping in mind that spiritual fruitfulness is commanded by God and is the work of God in the heart and life of His people, we can now focus on the fruit of the Spirit and ask these four questions:

- What are the “fruit of the Spirit”?

Galatians 5:22-24 (ESV) ²² *But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,* ²³ *gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.* ²⁴ *And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*

Definitions (from *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*)

Love (Agapē). Love characterizes God, and when performed by men and women love fulfills the Law (Rom 13:10). It is a self-giving action for the benefit of others, not necessarily an emotion. The best example of such love is, of course, Christ’s self-giving on the cross (Gal 2:20; Eph 5:25).

Joy (Chara). Even in trials, believers may retain the joy of the Lord, which prevents them from giving way to total despair.

Peace (Eirēnē). Genuine Christian existence demonstrates the peace of God because believers have peace with God (Rom 5:1). Peace, like all graces in the list, is not a precondition of justification; instead, for Paul justification is the precondition and root from which these qualities grow. Peace is the tranquillity that is ministered to believers to sustain them in life.

Patience (Makrothymia). Patience is a positive value embracing steadfastness and staying power. Patience, or forbearance, is a quality of God (Ps 103:8), and it is to be reproduced in God's people (1 Cor 13:4; Eph 4:2; Col 1:11; 3:12).

Kindness (Chrēstotēs). The Holy Spirit produces in believers the attitude of gentleness, or kindness, putting love in action. Kindness is a quality of God's gracious attitude and actions toward sinners (Rom 2:4; Eph 2:7; Tit 3:4). Christians have no better way to continue in God's kindness than by showing others the kindness of God (Eph 4:32).

Goodness (Agathōsynē). Goodness includes the idea of generosity, but focuses on moral excellence. Fung claims that "goodness is an attitude of generous kindness to others, which is happy to do far more than is required by mere justice" (Fung, 268). Such magnanimous generosity is the antithesis to envy (Gal 5:21).

Faithfulness (Pistis). *Pistis* may mean either "faith" or "faithfulness." Since God is faithful (Rom 3:3), his people also are to be faithful. The word points to the idea of reliability or trustworthiness.

Gentleness (Praūtēs). This quality combines strength and meekness, denoting strength under control. It lacks any negative sense of an absence of spirit, courage or vigor sometimes associated with the English word *gentleness*. This spiritual grace is best understood as a humble disposition to the divine will (Burton, 317).

Self-Control (Enkrateia).

AN EXCURSION ON SELF-CONTROL AS A FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

It seems pretty interesting that self-control is not an exercise of the flesh but an imposition of the power of God on the flesh. In other words, spiritual self-control is accomplished by the Spirit working in us rather than simply our own will working for our own benefit. Let's take time to reflect on this fruit of the Spirit.

Self-control is physical and emotional self-mastery, particularly in situations of intense provocation or temptation.

Self-control is the mark of a wise person

Pr 29:11 A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

Self-control is an aspect of Christian character

Galatians 5:22-23 (ESV) ²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

Titus 2:11-12 (ESV) ¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

1 Timothy 3:2 (ESV) Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

Titus 1:8 (ESV) but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and

disciplined.

Titus 2:2 (ESV) Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness.

Titus 2:5-6 (ESV) ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. ⁶ Likewise, urge the younger men to be self-controlled.

2 Peter 1:5-9 (ESV) ⁵ For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.

- What are the spiritual antitheses of the fruit of the Spirit?

Galatians 5:19-21 (ESV) ¹⁹ *Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality,* ²⁰ *idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions,* ²¹ *envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

By this quick exercise you should see that our lives produce either the “works of the flesh” (which lead to death and exclude us from the kingdom of God) or the fruit of the Spirit (about which there is no judgment and which are the result of crucifying the flesh and its works.)

It is so very important, especially in our day as the evil one actively deceives the people of this world into compromise and lies, that we grasp the reality of a changed life through the work of the Holy Spirit. We must commit in faith and through faith to that transformation in our own hearts from lives lived according to the desires of the sinful nature (the flesh) to the life lived in the Spirit, in trust and obedience to active working and direction of God.

- How are the fruit of the Spirit gained?

We know the fruit of the Spirit are the result of the present working of the Spirit in our hearts. But, like any garden, though the soil and seed have their own work to do in growth, development, and productivity over which the gardener has no control, there is always work for the gardener. Paul reveals ways in which the faithful believer participates with the Spirit in the production of fruitfulness in their own life.

Using Ephesians 5:1-21 as a guide, make a list of imperative attitudes and behaviors that the Spirit may use to nurture spiritual fruitfulness in your life.

Ephesians 5:1-21 (ESV)

¹ Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children.

² And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.

³ But sexual immorality and all impurity or covetousness must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints.

⁴ Let there be no filthiness nor foolish talk nor crude joking, which are out of place, but instead let there be thanksgiving. ⁵ For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God.

⁶ Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. ⁷ Therefore do not become partners with them; ⁸ for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord.

Walk as children of light ⁹ (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true), ¹⁰ and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

¹¹ Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. ¹² For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. ¹³ But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, ¹⁴ for anything that becomes visible is light. Therefore it says, "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

¹⁵ Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, ¹⁶ making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

¹⁷ Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

¹⁸ And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit,

¹⁹ addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart,

²⁰ giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,

²¹ submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

How does a person know God's will?

James 4:13-15 (ESV)

¹³ Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" – ¹⁴ yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵ Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."

Disciples of Jesus want to know three things. First, they want to know Christ personally in an authentic relationship of faith and being filled with His Spirit. They want by faith through the Spirit to be united and remain united with the Savior throughout their life. They want to declare, as does the Beloved in Song of Solomon 6:3,

I am my Lover's and my Lover is mine.

Second, a true disciple wants to know what the Master, the Teacher's, will is. What does the Master desire of me? What does the Master require of me? What does the Master want me to do generally and specifically? What is on the Master's mind for me?

Finally, the disciple wants to know the Master's ways. How does the Master desire or require that I fulfill His will? What attitudes and actions align with His intent for my life and for my role in the lives of others? In what manner does He ordain I represent Him and my relationship with Him so that others will be drawn to be His disciples as well?

Most often, when we ask to know God's will, we are asking to know His thoughts on a specific choice we have to make. Who should I marry? Where should I go to school? Should I change jobs? How should I invest or use this money? But knowing God's will is more than merely arriving at a situational direction. To know God's will requires knowing God, knowing what He is like, knowing what His priorities are. We need to know not only what God wants us to do in a given instance, but who He wants us to be in all our moments and minutes and days and weeks and months and years.

R.C. Sproul points out that we also need to know our ultimate destination. Where do we expect our pursuit of God's will to lead us? If we seek eternal life in the immediate presence of the infinite, everlasting glory of God and of the Lamb, then we will want to know what is prescribed for admission to the place to which we journey. That "prescription for admission" will reveal something of God's will for those He calls to Himself as disciples of Jesus.

Sproul completes his introduction to the topic of God's will in his little booklet, *Can I Know God's Will?*, with these insights:

The Christian pursues God, looking for His marching orders, seeking to know what course of action is pleasing to Him. This search for the will of God is a holy quest--a pursuit that is to be undertaken with vigor by the godly person. (Sproul, R.C., Can I Know God's Will?, Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2009. p. 1)

In our pursuit of the knowledge of God's will, let's offer one word of caution. The topic of God's will is complex and difficult and not to be treated lightly, insufficiently, callously, or simplistically. We will ask some questions regarding the will of God for which God provides no certain answers and

we will have to accept as mystery what God does not reveal. It will be hard because we may feel entitled to an answer to our questions. We may discover that God's will is not what we thought it was or what we were led to believe it was. We may find that God's will requires more or less of us than we expected. Still, we will submit to the reality of the sovereign God who owes us nothing He has not promised and we will be content in His intent and timing.

Let me say up front, I am not choosing to traverse every path available to us in the pursuit of God's will. There are some things that cannot be known about God's will but there is much that can and should be known to us. There are delicate nuances of word meanings that shed light on the will of God. Some we will mention, some we will assume and not mention directly. For our basic study, my plan is to focus on what the Bible specifically, directly, and concretely reveals about the knowable will of God. There are dozens of very fine books that explore the finer points of God's will that are available for you to consider. (The aforementioned Sproul booklet is a great start!)

So the very first answer to *How does a person know the will of God?* is get to know God as He desires to be known!

Psalm 46:10 (ESV) *"Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth!"*

Matthew 11:29 (ESV) *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.*

2 Timothy 2:15 (ESV) *Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.*

In these three verses we find three principles for discovering and knowing God and His will.

1. Determined diligence
2. Applied action
3. Serious study

Be still means to put yourself into an intentional context of undistracted focus on God. It is determined diligence. We love to be busy. Busy makes us feel valuable, purposeful, worthy. But sometimes, busyness distracts from what we really need, which is a context to hear and love and heed the mind, and heart, and voice of God. Sometimes, we just need to stop and listen. We need to stop doing, stop talking, stop planning and strategizing and scheming, stop with all the hustle and bustle and noise and simply sit down without our phones but with the Bible, reading and listening for God to speak. Or, sitting in that lonely place you love, where the world does not intrude, and just be prayerfully in the presence of God waiting for Him to impress upon your heart and mind and spirit the realness and purpose of His presence. Be still and know . . .

There are other occasions (after the stillness?) when we must deliberately take up the mission and ministry of Jesus and through our living relationship with Him learn what is God's will for us. This is the nature of the *Basics* study. Jesus taught the will of God in word and action. As we search out His life, His teaching is revealed to us and through it we discover more of the will of God for the disciples of Jesus. ***Applied action*** suggests more than simply learning what Jesus taught. It means also doing what Jesus taught, putting the life of Jesus into action in your own life and discovering

through the subsequent experiences what God's will is for your life.

Let me give you a personal example. Jesus said, "Go into all the world and make disciples." When I was in seminary, an opportunity came for me to provide pulpit supply at First Baptist Church in Grand Marais, MN. I agreed to preach there on that occasion because Jesus said "Go!" and pulpit supply was a means of "Go-ing." As a result of one preaching opportunity, God gave a six-month preaching assignment in Grand Marais, which in turn led to a lifelong (so far) pastoral assignment there, an assignment I would not have found had I not taken the yoke of Christ's commission and preached in Grand Marais that very first time in May 1994.

"Take my yoke," means practice what Jesus preaches. It means enter fully into the relationship of faith Jesus offers to you, be and do what Jesus requires of you, and as you do you will learn more and more of who God is and what is His will for you. "Take my yoke," means making an obedient life the classroom in which you learn to know and trust and love the will of God.

The third verse we mentioned points to *serious study*. There was an occasion in the life of Jesus when He taught the crowds following Him that He was the bread of life. He told that crowds that they must "eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood" in order to have life. Those who so eat and drink, Jesus said, "will live forever."

Many of the people were dismayed at this teaching. Even some of Jesus' disciples were grumbling because they did not understand what Jesus meant. Many of Jesus' disciples (in the larger crowd) turned away from following Him at this point. So Jesus said to the twelve,

Do you want to go away as well?

Peter responded to Jesus.

"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life,⁶⁹ and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:68-69, ESV)

Peter had come to know, over time, living and working and watching and studying Jesus, that Jesus had the true words of life, the words of God that lead to eternal life, and that Jesus was, in fact, the Messiah of God. The majority of the crowd seems to have followed Jesus for a time but had not, apparently, actually taken the time to study Jesus to know Him for Who He was. Since they did not truly know Him or trust Him, they did not see in Him God's will for them and they abandoned Him.

God reveals Himself in His word, both the living Word (Christ) and the written word (the Bible). If we are to know God and to know His will for us we must be serious students of God's word in both forms! We must be serious students of Christ and of the Bible. Our life goal must be to know God. In the pursuit of God we will come to know God's will for us.

What other principles about the will of God can we learn from God's word? Here is a brief survey of scripture verses related to God's will. What do they teach us?

- **Matt 26:42** *Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass*

unless I drink it, your will be done."

Jesus, praying in the garden on the night before His crucifixion reveals that the will of God must be sovereign over ours. When the will of man (or of me!) is pitted against the will of God, the will of God must prevail. Jesus proves that the expressed will of God is right and good and worthy of acceptance and obedience no matter the cost to ego or flesh. This is the heart attitude of the loving and beloved Son. So it should be the heart attitude and conviction of those who are adopted sons and daughters through faith in Christ.

- **Matt 6:10** *Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.*

Jesus teaches us to pray. Having acknowledged in our prayer the holiness and glory worthiness of God, we begin our petitions with the desire that God's goals for all creation be met. We align ourselves with the mission of God to fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD (Hab. 2:14). We set ourselves before God as those who would see His will done in, through, and around us for His glory, just as His will is loved and performed in heaven for His glory.

When you think about it, this prayer that Jesus teaches His disciples early in His ministry is essentially the same prayer He Himself prays in the garden: "Not my will but thine be done, in me as it is in heaven. And through this fulfilment of Your will in Me, let Your kingdom come in me and in the world."

- **1 Thessalonians 5:15-18 (ESV)** ¹⁵ *See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.* ¹⁶ *Rejoice always,* ¹⁷ *pray without ceasing,* ¹⁸ *give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*

Paul sets before the believers in Thessalonica the principle that God's will for them is a life essentially different than they previously lived and different than the culture in which they live. God's will is that they have a God-honoring, Christ-exalting, Spirit-empowered lifestyle aligned with Christ and directed by a focused desire for God's glory to be actualized in their practical life experiences. They are to live in the joy God has in being God. They are to radiate the moral character of God in the way they conduct themselves in the world.

- **Heb 10:36** *For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised.*

Knowing the will of God requires determined diligence, applied action, and serious study. Doing the will of God requires endurance! There is no suggestion in Scripture that implementing God's will in our lives will always yield a pleasant experience. Sometimes, the will of God is difficult, producing pain and sorrow rather than pleasure and joy. But, the promises of God come to those who endure and pursue the will of God without falling away.

This kind of endurance is the work of the Holy Spirit. It is through utter and total reliance on the Holy Spirit, I believe, that Jesus stood against the opposition He faced, did the good that He did to reveal the Father, and suffered and died on the cross for love of God and love of us. He relied on the real presence of God in Him, just as any human believer must, and, for the joy set before Him, endured the cross. I do not think the man Jesus endured because He was God (though I believe Jesus is fully God and fully man). I believe Jesus endured the way all men must, by relying on the

Spirit of God in Him to do the work of God through Him. This, then, is the will of God: rely on the Holy Spirit and endure.

- **1 Peter 4:1-2 (ESV)** ¹ *Since therefore Christ suffered in the flesh, arm yourselves with the same way of thinking, for whoever has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin,* ² *so as to live for the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for human passions but for the will of God.*

The principle here is clear. Living in the will of God involves self-denial, even in the face of suffering. God's will in suffering is this: cease from sin. Don't give in to the temptation to be faithless when God's providence in your life includes suffering. Faithless people wrap themselves in resistance, grumbling, complaining, anger, rebellion; anything that helps them find temporary relief at the expense of God's glory. Faithless people miss God's will by turning selfish rather than gracious.

Humans are driven by passions, intense emotional commitments that underlie our judgment and decision making. Redemption and union with Christ offer a new foundation for life, a more holy foundation than the passions of the unredeemed flesh. Since Jesus suffered in the flesh for the will of God, so, too, will His disciples live lives based on God's will (to fill the earth with the knowledge of His glory).

- **2 Corinthians 8:1-5 (ESV)** ¹ *We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God that has been given among the churches of Macedonia,* ² *for in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.* ³ *For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord,* ⁴ *begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints —* ⁵ *and this, not as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us.*

God's will includes active participation of believers in the needs of other believers as an expression of love for Christ. It appears that when the question of financial support for the poor saints in Jerusalem came up, the Macedonian Christians were eager to help, begged to help but their eagerness flowed not from self-interest first, but from the church committing itself and its resources to Christ and letting Him determine their giving. Paul offers that this is the way in which giving ought to be done (according to God's will): first we give ourselves to Christ and make all that we have and are available to Him and then we give out of that commitment. First, we take stock of Christ and then we give rather than take stock of resources first and then give. Giving like that is God's will.

- **Romans 12:2** *Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

Two principles here: 1) Testing – putting what we believe to be God's will into practice and determining whether what we thought is God's will or not – is a fair approach to determining God's will in a given situation. The testing here is the concept proving, as in proving the quality of a metal through a refining process. 2) The measure of God's will is in whether what we are proving/testing is "good and acceptable and perfect." In other words, how well does the outcome of the choice we are making reflect the actual, revealed character of God.

Remember that God has given us at least one clear statement of His overarching will, His mission in the world:

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (Habakkuk 2:14)

God's will in all things is that his glory be known. So, how well does the projected outcome of my choice (in regards to knowing and doing Gd's will in a given situation) contribute to the expansion of the knowledge of God's glory in my and others' personal experience?

- **Romans 8:27** *And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.*

God wills that the Spirit assist us by praying for us. It is God's will that we not face the challenges of life alone and that the Spirit's work be not only in us but for us!

- **1 Peter 4:19** *Therefore let those who suffer according to God's will entrust their souls to a faithful Creator while doing good.*

Principle: God's will calls for trust and obedience even when it hurts.

- **Ephesians 1:5** . . . *he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will,*

Principle: God's predestining will is based in the purpose of His will not in any foreknowledge of our will.

- **Eph 1:11** *In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will,*

Principle: See above. Paul makes it clear that God's will to save some of humanity is based solely on His purpose, His will, not on some other factor as foreknowledge of our choices.

- **Ephesians 6:5-6 (ESV)** ⁵ *Bondservants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ,* ⁶ *not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart,*

Principle: Obedience to God's revealed will, whether to His decretive will (the will of revealed in sovereign decrees) or prescriptive will (the will that allows human interaction with outcomes) must come from the heart. Obedience to the will of God draws us into deeper commitment to the One Who is God.

Is it okay to set goals in my life since God is supposed to be in charge?

We've just spent several weeks considering how God's general, revealed will provides the best criteria for determining His specific will in any given situation. God's specific will for us will never violate His general, revealed will that we readily find in His word.

So, what impact does knowing both God's general and specific will have on personal goal setting in our lives? If God has a specific will for us that aligns with His revealed general will, can we set goals for ourselves, our lives, our dreams?

Yes, we can and should set goals. Our goals do not replace God's will in our lives. Rather, setting godly goals supports our efforts to fulfill God's will and not get distracted by lesser things. Let's take a look at what God has to say about His people setting goals.

1. **Proverbs 15:22 (ESV)** *Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed.*

Proverbs 20:18 (ESV) *Plans are established by counsel; by wise guidance wage war.*

The Bible assumes the desire to accomplish and achieve is within the natural scope of human interest. Rather than reject the idea and process of planning and goal setting, the Bible cautions us to be diligent, thoughtful, and wise. One aspect of wisdom in goal setting is to seek the counsel of others. To ask enough questions and gather enough data to make informed and appropriate choices for ourselves.

The idea is here is not that we are looking for someone else to tell us what to do. What we are seeking are enough wise perspectives and perceptions to guide our processing as we seek to set godly goals. Other people may be able to see flaws in our thinking or pathways ahead that we have not considered that would prove more helpful for our plans.

This can also include asking select others to pray for us as we set goals. Ask these counselors to pray for wisdom, honesty, clarity, faith, courage, holiness, determination, tenacity, whatever you may sense you need to honor God in your goal setting.

2. **Proverbs 16:3 (ESV)** *Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.*

The plans we make, the goals we set, ought first and foremost be committed to the Lord. That word committed means entrust to. What goals can we entrust to God to establish? Goals that align with His general and specific will. What goals might we resist "committing" to God? Goals we have not prayed about or sought God's will regarding.

This idea of committing our work to the LORD intends for us to seek God first and build our goals and plans in accordance with His will. It does not mean for us to "do our own thing" and ask God to bless it. Henry Blackaby once wrote something like this, if you want your plans to succeed, "find out where God is working and join Him in it."

The best goals are ones derived from God's revelation of Himself and His will. Their development is guided by the Holy Spirit and committed to the Lord in faith by His people.

When we commit our work (or plans, or goals) to the Lord, *we completely give something over to God in dependence upon Him*. When we commit our work to the Lord we:

- a. Trust Him to develop our plans as He sees fit
- b. Pray for His guidance and rely on Him for His direction and enablement
- c. Surrender processes and outcomes to His sovereignty and providence.
- d. Defer control to Him and His wisdom.
- e. Determine to set His honor and reputation and gain as the goal of our goals.
- f. Decide that throughout the process you will give to God the praise He deserves.

3. **Proverbs 20:4 (ESV)** *The sluggard does not plow in the autumn; he will seek at harvest and have nothing.*

Fields, once harvested, are plowed under to prepare for planting in the spring and next year's harvest. This is a practical example of goal setting. In order to have a harvest the following autumn one must plow in the current autumn. Timing matters!

A sluggard (lazy, unmotivated person) rejects timing and takes no action when action should be taken. Goals and plans require an understanding and accommodation of appropriate timing. A Christian, Baptist congregation may have a goal that all their children will be baptized, but, because they practice believer's baptism, the goal of baptizing requires each child wait to be baptized until they make a genuine profession of faith in Jesus. The goal requires right timing.

Think about some goals in your life that have "failed." How often is timing a factor? Perhaps you had a great plan but the people or situations involved were not ready? And now think about the successes. What impact did timing have? Years ago someone I know invested in the "silver boom." They waited until it seemed they were sure to make a killing buying silver. When the boom started silver was \$4 an ounce. At the height of the boom it was \$27 an ounce. That's when my friends bought it. Literally days later, silver was down to \$7 an ounce and has not moved much since. Timing matters!

What is the right time for your goals? Do the goals you are setting diligently account for the essential criterium of timing?

4. **Proverbs 21:5 (ESV)** *The plans of the diligent lead surely to abundance, but everyone who is hasty comes only to poverty.*

Good plans and godly goals deserve careful, diligent development. Since we are not omnipotent and cannot account for every contingency in an instant, we need to take time to set well thought out goals. God does not succumb to the tyranny of the urgent and neither should those who have committed their work and their plans to Him.

Paul writes to the Galatians that "in the fullness of time, God sent His Son." "In the fullness of time."

Not in haste and hurry but when everything was ready according to His will and knowledge. Godly goals mirror intentionality, patience, thoughtfulness, and purpose, just as God's own goals do.

Does God have goals? Habakkuk 2:14 says, *"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD as the waters cover the sea."* Is that not a divine goal? Is that not God's plan for all of creation, that the knowledge of His glory will be literally everywhere? And does He not seem to be taking His time, guiding the course of history to His own satisfaction?

Step by step, God takes His time in time to accomplish His goal. He is not hasty nor hurried. His goals are worth the time. Are yours?

5. **Isaiah 30:15-18 (ESV)** ¹⁵ *For thus said the Lord GOD, the Holy One of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength." But you were unwilling,* ¹⁶ *and you said, "No! We will flee upon horses"; therefore you shall flee away; and, "We will ride upon swift steeds"; therefore your pursuers shall be swift.* ¹⁷ *A thousand shall flee at the threat of one; at the threat of five you shall flee, till you are left like a flagstaff on the top of a mountain, like a signal on a hill.* ¹⁸ *Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you, and therefore he exalts himself to show mercy to you. For the LORD is a God of justice; blessed are all those who wait for him.*

They didn't trust Him. They didn't wait for God. They didn't put their covenant God at the center of their faith or their plans. God said wait in peace, trust me, and you will be saved. They refused. They devised their own plan, set their own goals for escape and rescue and they were miserably confounded. Their plan would become their doom.

But look at what God offers. He says, "The LORD waits to be gracious to you," and He "exalts Himself to show mercy to you." God says fit your goals and plans into Me and into My ways and into My will and you will find grace and mercy and blessing.

How is God central to your goals? What needs to change in your plans to put God first?

6. **Matthew 6:33-34 (ESV)** ³³ *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.* ³⁴ *"Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.*

In some ways we are saying the same thing over again, but, since God repeats Himself throughout His word, it is probably a good thing that we repeat what He repeats. Want to set goals? Seek God's authoritative will and eternal glory first.

God's kingdom is His rule in the hearts and lives of His people until Jesus comes and God's kingdom will be established in the new heavens and new earth forever. So, God's kingdom now foreshadows God's kingdom then. The rule He will have without the resistance of sin then is the rule He ordains for our lives now.

When we set goals as citizens of God's kingdom, those goals must, by design, reflect the glory and majesty and wonder of our King!

How do your goals testify to Christ the King in your life?

7. **Matthew 7:12 (ESV)** *“So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.*

Personal goals should also keep the welfare and spiritual well-being of others in mind. Goals that trample the hopes of others or use others for personal gain but in some way intentionally leave them lessened are not godly goals.

Our goals, both as we set them and as we work them out, should build up other believers in the faith and draw unbelievers to Christ. At the very least they should cause God’s name to be honored and praised in the world.

8. **John 6:6 (ESV)** *He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.*

Jesus had goals for Himself and His disciples. He tested them because He had an outcome in mind for them. That outcome would be their development and maturity in faith, their preparation for ministry, their courage to face the challenges of life, and ultimately (and most importantly) their appreciation and love for the Father in all His glory. Jesus’ ministry in the lives of His disciples involved intentional training as both disciples and missionaries. They were to know, to become, and to do.

In another place Jesus says to His disciples (and to all disciples of all time), “As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” And in still another place He told them, “See, I have set you an example that you should follow it.” If you survey John 14-16 you find Jesus repeatedly saying, “I have spoken these things to you so that . . .” Jesus had a plan.

If Jesus does not approach the lives and ministries of His disciples in random fashion but mindfully, intentionally, purposefully, ought we not also approach our lives and ministries with at the very least (and probably the very best) His plan for us, assuming and enacting in the Spirit His goals for us?

Do you know generally and specifically what Christ’s goals are for you? Do you know how to find them? Are you living out Christ’s goals in your life or some alternate goal of your own devise?

9. **Philippians 3:12-14 (ESV)** ¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* ¹³ *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

The word “goal” in verse 14 is the Greek word for target, as in a target that one shoots at, a bullseye. It is used only here in the New Testament. The context for the word is an athletic competition, a shooting match where proficiency and excellency are well rewarded. Every truly Christian life has a target, a goal, a bullseye. Paul’s goal was to serve Christ who through the cross made Paul His own. Paul’s goal for His present life and future living was to exert every effort to hit the bullseye of a faithful life lived for Christ.

Do you see faith as something God gave you so you can live for yourself? Or do you understand that in the cross, God acted to bring you to Himself through faith in Christ so that from the moment

of faith forward you actively and intentionally live your life for the cause and glory of Christ? Do you bear witness through your obedience and faith to the truth of God's transforming grace issued through the cross as THE defining criterium of your future life?

10. Philippians 4:13 (ESV) *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

We should be very careful and very discerning how we use these words. Considering the context in which Paul makes this summary statement of reliance on the grace and goodness of God, we should tread lightly. Look at Philippians 4:11-12:

¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

Paul is talking about experiencing the grace of God in the providence of God in all the highs and lows of life. The strength God gives is the strength of contentment whether in pleasant or challenging circumstances. This is the strength of "not my will but Thine be done" in the face of the cross. This is not God giving us strength to carry out any old plan. This is God giving us the strength of heart and mind and spirit and will to endure and accomplish **His** will in all the circumstances of life.

"All things" are not all the things I want to do but all the things God ordains me to confront and do. God promises the ability to accomplish His will. In fact, in the letter to the Thessalonian believers, Paul writes, "Faithful is He Who called you Who also will do it."

Are you only setting goals that you know you can do or are you listening and enacting goals that God Himself will do in and through you?

11. Hebrews 12:1-3 (ESV) ¹ *Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.*

We should get rid of anything that hinders us from following Christ. That includes goals and plans of ours that are not His and anything in our lives and hearts that hinders His goals in us. This takes careful, honest, faith-filled self-examination. It must account not only for what is sinful that should be rejected but for things that are good in themselves but not useful for us for obtaining and enacting God's goals in our lives.

God has a goal for you and a mission for you. He says this, "Be holy for I am the Lord your God am holy." That's the goal: the transformation of the self into the character and condition of God's character. He also says, "The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." That's the mission: to so know God personally as to be a contributor to filling the earth with the knowledge of His glory.

We have to ask ourselves, then, as we set goals and work plans, is this activity increasing the

likeness of Christ in my character? Does my life radiate more and more the glory of God as I set goals and work these plans? Not just is God honored but is He seen for Who He knows Himself to be? If not, what do I need to change? What needs to be dropped; what needs to be added to my life?

12. 2 Peter 1:5-9 (ESV) ⁵ *For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, ⁶ and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, ⁷ and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. ⁸ For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins.*

One aspect of all our goals ought to be to increase our faith. The verses just prior to these declares that God has provided through His revelation of Himself everything necessary for life and godliness. He has bestowed on us in mercy and grace His great and precious promises in order that we may become partakers of the divine nature.

In other words, God has given us everything we need, through His word and His power, to be holy, to be like Him in heart, mind, spirit, and will. That provision of transforming grace necessitates whole hearted participation on our part - "make every effort" - to engage and experience spiritual growth and maturity. A prime goal in the life of a true disciple will be the realization and multiplication of inner spiritual traits that magnify the glory of God and the value of Christ as they are lived out in real life.

Bible study and prayer contribute to identifying and understanding these spiritual virtues but knowledge of these spiritual attributes must be accompanied by practice of these virtues. You've got to walk the talk. So the goal has to be not only to know what is required of us but to have a plan for authentically enacting these spiritual disciplines for our benefit and God's glory. God's expectation is that His people will have these virtues and increase in them and that when these conditions are true we will be effective and fruitful in our knowledge of Jesus.

Take each of these virtues one at a time and ask yourself what you are doing to effectively understand, nurture, and practice each of them in your life right now. What attitudes or actions assist you in growth in grace? What attitudes and actions hinder your growth? What is it worth to you to be less than God expects? What is it worth to you to experience all God has for you?

Here's another exercise to help you understand and set godly goals:

Philippians 3:12-4:1 (ESV) ¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. ¹⁶ Only let us hold true to what we have attained.*

¹⁷ *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even*

with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.¹⁹ Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.¹ Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Consider these questions

What different ways did Paul use to describe where he was in living life as a Christian?

How did Paul describe his goal?

What other specifics did he add to his initial description (see verses 20–21)?

What do verses 15–16 teach about goals?

How did Paul describe the goals of those who resist Christ?

How did Paul express the fact that we can count on help in setting our goals?

Paul was coming to the end of this letter and he wanted to emphasize how important these directions were for the Philippians. How did he convey his seriousness?

Related Bible Verses

Genesis 9:1; 11:1–9 – Personal goals vs. God’s will

Genesis 9:1 (ESV) *And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.*

Genesis 11:1–9(ESV) ¹ *Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.* ² *And as people migrated from the east, they found a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there.* ³ *And they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks, and burn them thoroughly.” And they had brick for stone, and bitumen for mortar.* ⁴ *Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.”* ⁵ *And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of man had built.* ⁶ *And the LORD said, “Behold, they are one people, and they have all one language, and this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them.* ⁷ *Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.”* ⁸ *So the LORD dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city.* ⁹ *Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth. And from there the LORD dispersed them over the face of all the earth.*

Psalms 97:10 – Make your goals God’s goals

Psalms 97:10 (ESV) *O you who love the LORD, hate evil! He preserves the lives of his saints; he*

delivers them from the hand of the wicked.

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 – The ultimate goal in life

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 (ESV) ¹³ *The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.* ¹⁴ *For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.*

Philippians 3:12-20 – Keep focusing on your goals

Philippians 3:12-20 (ESV) ¹² *Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.* ¹³ *Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,* ¹⁴ *I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* ¹⁵ *Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you.* ¹⁶ *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* ¹⁷ *Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.* ¹⁸ *For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.* ¹⁹ *Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.* ²⁰ *But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ,* ²¹ *who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.*

James 4:13-16 – Make sure your goals please God

James 4:13-16 (ESV) ¹³ *Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit" –* ¹⁴ *yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes.* ¹⁵ *Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that."* ¹⁶ *As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.*

Why does life have to be so hard?

John 16:33 (ESV)

I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world."

Job 5:7 (ESV) *but man is born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.*

Romans 8:17 (ESV) *and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.*

Philippians 3:10-11 (ESV) ¹⁰ *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* ¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Why does life have to be so hard?

Genesis 3:6-19 (ESV) ⁶ *So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate.* ⁷ *Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths.*

⁸ *And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God among the trees of the garden.* ⁹ *But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"* ¹⁰ *And he said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself."* ¹¹ *He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"* ¹² *The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate."* ¹³ *Then the LORD God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate."*

¹⁴ *The LORD God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and above all beasts of the field; on your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life.* ¹⁵ *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel."*

¹⁶ *To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."*

¹⁷ *And to Adam he said, "Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree of which I commanded you, 'You shall not eat of it,' cursed is the ground because of you; in pain you shall eat of it all the days of your life; ¹⁸ thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. ¹⁹ By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*

From the moment Adam and Eve surrendered the freedom of glory for the bondage of sin, they and the world God created for them were cursed. Where joy and life had been theirs, sorrow, pain, and death would now dog their footsteps all the days of their lives. Generations of their descendants from then to now cry out, *La vie est dure!* "Life is hard." Difficulty, trouble, trials, afflictions, hardships, pain, suffering, these are the legacy left to us by our first parents as a result of their sinful insistence on abandoning God and seeking their own way in the world.

Yes, God in His glory, in His justice, in His righteousness and holiness and goodness and love followed through on the word He spoke to Adam. He told them, as an act of covenant law, that they were not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that was in the middle of the garden. If they did, they would die. He told them the truth. He gave them the terms of their relationship with Him. He did not hide from them His conditions as their Maker for their existence. He did not sabotage them with surprises. He was up front and straightforward. "Don't eat. If you disobey, the consequence is death."

They ate. God followed through on the Truth He spoke. The curse He pronounced was no feat of churlish arrogance. God's condemnation and curse of Adam's sin is God being faithful to Himself, to His glory, and to them. They might not like it, but God is a God of integrity. He keeps His word. He tells the Truth and He does what He says. And that matters.

You see, a God Who is clear, consistent, and faithful to His word is a God Who can, Who must, be trusted! He is not fickle but faithful. He is not conniving but consistent. He is and will be all that He says He is; He will do all the He proposes to do. He will not lie. He will not deceive. He will not disappoint. So when Jesus, the Son of God, God come in human form, says,

"I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world,"

you have every reason in the world to know and trust that He is telling you the truth about Himself, about you, about the world you live in, and about what He is doing and will do relative to all these things. Life in this world is hard, Jesus says. My goal for you in this hard life is peace, Jesus says. I'm going to make it happen, Jesus says. And you can take that to the bank, as the saying goes.

How does Jesus lift the burden of a hard life? Listen to what the Holy Spirit reveals about Jesus through the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:

Galatians 3:10-14 (ESV) ¹⁰ *For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them."* ¹¹ *Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for "The righteous shall live by faith."* ¹² *But the law is not of faith, rather "The one who does them shall live by them."* ¹³ *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree"—* ¹⁴ *so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.*

Did you see it there in verse 13? We are all under a curse. We saw that in Genesis 3. We know that from our experience in daily life and from our own inner spiritual condition and experience. Conscience and experience testify to the reality of the curse. *Christ redeemed us from the curse of law by*

becoming a curse for us.

Christ is the curse cure! Jesus, fully man fully God, lived the life of faith and obedience in perfect union with the Father that mankind was created to live. He did for us, as our representative and on our behalf, what Adam failed to do. He then, as truly innocent before God in every way, took on Himself the full measure of the curse: death. He did not deserve death. He deserved eternal life and glory for having personally fulfilled every requirement of God and retaining God's full favor. But He did not claim what was His to claim. Instead, He gave Himself to suffering, to the cross, to death in our place on our behalf fully satisfying the righteous requirements of God's justice and removing from us the condemnation of the curse. If there had been no sin there would have been no curse. Since Jesus lived and died without sin but for sin, He removes the curse of sin from us in both His life and His death.

We appropriate this grace of God in Christ through faith. Through faith in Christ we are united with Christ in His life and in His death by the Holy Spirit. The full benefit of the life and death of Jesus are actively, really, spiritually, and personally applied to us as an act of love and mercy by God Himself when we put our faith in Jesus and trust Him. And we should trust Him because He is God. He told us we are in trouble but that He would take care of it, and He did. He removes the curse from us and us from the curse. He deserves trust.

And yet, even when we have trusted Christ, we often find life is still hard. Why? Why does life have to be so hard? Two reasons. One, we live in a fallen, sinful world that still exists under the curse and waits for the full redemption Christ bought for us to be realized in creation. And, suffering has divine purpose in Christians as it did in Christ.

Why does life have to be so hard? Creation and Curse

Romans 8:18-25 (ESV) ¹⁸ *For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.* ¹⁹ *For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.* ²⁰ *For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope* ²¹ *that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.* ²² *For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now.* ²³ *And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.* ²⁴ *For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees?* ²⁵ *But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

There exists a glory that has not yet been revealed to us. It is an incomparable glory; a glory all God's own that encompasses and surpasses all we have seen and known in this life and at this time. It is a glory that will make the sufferings of today seem like nothing at all.

Creation awaits the revelation of this glory. Creation longs for it, groans for it because creation also abides under the curse. God cursed the ground for Adam's sake forcing it to bring forth thorns and thistles with great effort when it was created to bring forth life in abundance. God subjected creation to futility so that all that dwell upon the earth would learn to long for the day when the curse is lifted. Subjected creation longs to be free with the freedom that will come when the children of God finally realize the full measure of their eternal redemption, the glorification of their resurrected

bodies in eternal life.

Why does life in this world have to be so hard still for those who believe? Because God is not done with fallen, cursed creation. God is not done gathering to Himself and to His Son those elect people who will put their faith in Him and find forgiveness and eternal life. There are still those in the world, and coming into the world, from whom God will graciously lift the burden of the curse through faith in Jesus, for His glory and for their (and our) joy! Their experience of suffering in the present world will contribute to their longing to be released from the curse of sin and the fear of death into new joy and eternal life in Christ. Suffering in this world will be one of the factors God uses to convey sinners to Christ.

Why does life have to be so hard? Discipleship and Divine Purpose

Why does life in this world still have to be so hard for those who believe? Because God is using this world and the hardships of life in this world to expand the knowledge of His glory and bring others to faith in Christ. But that is not the only reason. Suffering and hardship also have a divine purpose in the lives of believers.

The key to understanding the divine purpose for hardship in the life of a believer is found in Paul's letter to the Philippians and John's first letter.

Philippians 3:10 (ESV) . . . *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, . . .*

1 John 3:2 (ESV) *Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*

Both Paul and John set as the goal of faith and faithfulness to be "like him," that is, to be like Jesus. The practical goal of discipleship is to take on the moral character of the Master, to become an accurate copy of the Person Jesus is in character and conduct and outcome.

Remember what the Father said about Jesus (repeatedly)? *This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.* God uses hardship in our lives as a tool in our personal transformation into the likeness of Jesus so that one day we too will hear, *This is one of my beloved children in whom I am well pleased.*

The question now is, "How does God use hardship in my life to make me increasingly more like Jesus day after day?"

- God uses hardship in my life to draw me closer to Himself.

1 Peter 5:6-7 (ESV) ⁶ *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you,* ⁷ *casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*

- God uses hardship in my life to help me know and love Christ better.

Philippians 3:10 (ESV) . . . *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may*

share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, . . .

- God uses hardship in my life to perfect personal holiness in me.

James 1:2-4 (ESV) ² *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,* ³ *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.* ⁴ *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

- God uses hardship in my life to spur connection with others for His glory. (Bear burdens)

Galatians 6:1-2 (ESV) ¹ *Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.* ² *Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.*

- God uses hardship in my life to motivate sensitivity and compassion for others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-5 (ESV) ³ *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort,* ⁴ *who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* ⁵ *For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too.*

- God uses hardship in my life to focus my desire on Christ's return and the consummation of His Kingdom.

1 Peter 1:13 (ESV) *Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.*

Why does life have to be so hard? Because we live in a fallen world where suffering is used by God to mold us into the likeness of Christ and through suffering bring sinners to a desire for saving grace and life giving mercy. Because suffering is a tool in the hands of our all-wise God Who would not have us be less than He created and purposed that we should be before time began and the world was made. Because suffering is a means by which God reveals into the scope of human experience the immensity of His person, the power of His sovereignty, the value of His love, and the treasure of His glory.

La vie est dure mais Dieu est bon! Life is hard but God is good.

Am I ready for baptism?

Romans 6:1-4 (ESV)

¹ What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? ² By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? ³ Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴ We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.

Does God care how I spend my time?

Ephesians 5:15-16 (ESV)

Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.

Who is the Holy Spirit and what is my relationship with Him?

John 14:15-17 (ESV)

¹⁵ *"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, ¹⁷ even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.*

Is it possible for believers to truly be of one mind and heart and enjoy true fellowship?

How much obedience is enough?

How can I become less negative?

Joy may be full . . .

Does anger ever serve God's glory?

How can I cultivate more gratitude in my life?

What is the difference between humility and humiliation?



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