



THE PERFECT GIFT

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Newly Revised Edition

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Ebook Edition

Dear Reader,

Most likely, someone who cares about you has arranged for you to receive this book. It is a gift that describes the perfect gift -- an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ.

A large portion of *The Perfect Gift* comes from a earlier work entitled *A Reasoning Faith* by Robert A. Laidlaw. For years, *LifeHelp* distributed this study to business people and professionals who used it to investigate the claims of the Bible. They were looking for a guide that would allow them to rationally examine spiritual matters without feeling pressured. Over 12,000 of these students chose to follow Jesus as their Lord and Savior. You are invited to use this tool to help you on your own spiritual journey.

To create *The Perfect Gift*, Ron Sheveland adapted and edited *A Reasoning Faith* and then added further helpful chapters (1, 9 & 10). Dr. Sheveland is a missionary, author, and seminar speaker who loves to show people how to begin a relationship with Christ and then accelerate their spiritual growth.

This material is not intended to answer all the questions that could be raised about Christianity. It does, however, address some key critical issues:

- Is Christianity credible?
- Is there a God?
- Do people need Him?
- How does one start and nurture a friendship with God?

Want to go further? *LifeHelp* (formerly the *Living Message Fellowship*) provides helpful free tools at <http://www.lifehelp.org>. You may also contact Ron Sheveland at RonSheveland@gmail.com.

But you also need the support of Christians around you. You will want to get involved with a local, Bible-teaching church. They will be happy to guide you on your spiritual journey.

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1

THE PERFECT GIFT

I grew up in a family that loved to give gifts during the Christmas season. My father got into it the most. He would make sure that tons of brightly colored packages were piled up high around the Christmas tree -- a rotating, silver aluminum beauty lit up by a color wheel (I get nostalgic when I remember that retro era).

Do you remember that scene with Chevy Chase during the movie *Christmas Vacation* (and please, don't take this as an endorsement) where he placed so many lights on his house that it caused a city power outage? Well, my dad was like him, but not with lights; rather with gifts. He sometimes bought them but more often made them. I wish you could see the ventriloquist dummies he made for my brother Jerry and me. With all the moving parts he built into the heads, they ended up as big as pumpkins. Then he formed the faces with auto putty and made hair out of cut up bathroom rugs. The end result was that the dummies were as big and heavy as his young sons. It took all my might just to hold mine up. They were ultra cool!

And there were many other memorable presents like a unicycle or the giant slot car race track that was built on an eight-foot table that used a pulley system to descend from our basement ceiling. I especially remember the wiggly box that contained Sam the beagle puppy. And then there was...*well, I think you get the idea*. Bottom line: I have received many wonderful gifts.

But the best present that I have ever received wasn't placed under a tree; it was hung on one. And the giver wasn't my earthly dad; it was our Heavenly Father. The gift of which I am speaking is the eternal life that is available through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Many get a little skeptical when they hear terms like "eternal life," "salvation," "conversion," or being "born again." I understand that; those terms carry some negative stereotypes, don't they? And beyond that, a belief that one can have a forever friendship with God may sound like nothing more than a "pie-in-the sky in the sweet-bye-and-bye" hope for people afraid of death. A religious pacifier, perhaps?

But what if it's true? What if there really is a gift of spiritual intimacy that the God of the universe wants to share with you? I know that we are told that "if it seems too good to be true, it probably is," but what if...? Seriously, what if it's true and you miss it?

Isn't it worth taking a little time exploring what this gift is all about? This little book will help you do just that. It will begin by explaining how to start a relationship with God. Then it will deal with many of the common objections that discerning people have. I think you will discover compelling reasons for accepting God's gift.

Before I tell you about the day that I received this present, let me share a few of the reasons why I love it so much...

REASONS THIS GIFT WAS SO GREAT

The first big reason is that this gift lasts forever! Most presents wear out, rust out or are eventually thrown out, but the Bible says, "...*the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23). My "forever" relationship with the Lord Jesus has filled my life with genuine meaning, purpose and joy. I could go on and on about this because there is no way that I can exaggerate how wonderful this is.

The second reason is this is a present that I didn't deserve. Some people have the mistaken notion that they can earn salvation by being good or religious. Good works follow salvation but they don't bring salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). God says that "*the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life...*" (Romans 6:23). As you know, there is a big difference between "wages" and "gifts." Wages are earned and deserved but gifts are free and undeserved.

According to the above verse, if I got what I deserved, it would be death -- and not just physical death, but spiritual and eternal death. Spiritual death refers to the death of our relationship with God. Eternal death refers to the fact that this painful separation from God will last forever.

Death is the wage that I deserve due to my sin. I, like everyone else, am guilty of violating God's perfect standards with my wrong actions and attitudes. The Lord says that "**all** have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). In another Scripture He says that all sinners "*shall find their place in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone. This is the second death*" (Revelation 21:8).

But instead of this death that I deserved, God offered me the free gift of eternal life which I didn't deserve and could never afford. This brings up the third reason I appreciate this gift so much: IT IS VERY EXPENSIVE!

The price tag was the very life of Jesus, the Son of God. "*But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16).

I was astounded to realize that Jesus loved me so much that He willingly experienced the death that I deserved so that I could begin a new life with Him. Can you see why I love this gift so much? Now let me tell you how it became mine...

HOW I RECEIVED THIS PERFECT GIFT

I had what I like to call "a personalized truth encounter." It was at a meeting that the lights came on for me. The speaker opened up the Bible and explained clearly how I could enter into a real relationship with God. I discovered that the gift of salvation couldn't be earned by good works or through religious activity; it could only be received by a simple prayer of faith. Romans 10:13 states: "*Everyone who **calls** on the name of the Lord will be saved.*" What do you pray? Well, according to the God's Word, that's as easy as ABC:

Admit that you have sinned. God calls this sorrowful apology "repentance." All of our sins are an offense against God and it is only right to apologize. They have separated us from Him and our repentance results in His complete forgiveness.

Believe in the resurrected Christ as your Savior. This belief goes beyond mere "head" faith. It includes trusting in Him with your whole heart. "*For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved*" (Romans 10:10).

Confess Jesus as the Lord (Master) of your life. "*If you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved*" (Romans 10:13). This is a serious step. You are giving your whole life to Jesus to do with as He pleases.

At the conclusion of that meeting, I decided to pray that prayer. Even though I was a religious church attender, I knew that something was missing in my life. But after I prayed to invite Christ into my heart, everything changed and Jesus became very real for me. My ABC prayer was worded something like this:

"Dear Jesus, please forgive me for sinning against you. I now put my whole faith in You and accept You as Lord and Savior. Thank you for the gift of everlasting life. Amen."

How do I know that this prayerful act of faith enabled me to receive the gift of salvation? Because God never breaks a promise! And He promised that "*Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*" (Romans 10:13).

The day that I made that decision, I was so excited that I immediately went to a friend's house and shared the good news with him. The result? He, too, accepted this gift and became an enthusiastic Christ follower. Now I would love to share my gift with you. If you will sincerely pray the above prayer, you will immediately receive the *perfect gift!*

If you are ready to do so, let me urge you to do it now. But if you still have doubts, then keep reading. This chapter has explained "how" to accept the gift of salvation. Chapters two through eight, written by Robert Laidlaw, provide some rational reasons for "why" you should...

2

IS THERE A GOD?

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE

Suppose a young man sends to his girl friend an expensive diamond ring, packaged in a little case (which the jeweler threw in for nothing). How strange it would seem to him if she said when he met her later, "Oh, that was a neat little box you sent. I'll take good care of it. I promise to keep it wrapped up in a safe place so I won't lose it."

Rather ridiculous, isn't it?

Isn't it just as foolish for men and women to spend so much time and thought on their bodies, which are no more than cases for the real self. The Bible tells us the soul will still exist long after our bodies have crumbled to dust. The soul is of inestimable value. Longfellow expressed it this way:

"Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream,
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

"Life is real, life is earnest,
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul."

In Mark 8:36 our Lord Himself asks, "*What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?*" In Christ's estimate, man's soul is more valuable than the whole world. It is my desire to lead you in thinking about matters which relate to your eternal soul. For instance:

Is there a God?
Is there a Creator who has claims to your soul?
Is the Bible true?
Is man accountable?

Does he have a responsibility to himself, to others, to God? Is there divine forgiveness? Can anything be done about man's failure to meet his responsibilities?

These are some of the questions that most perplex those who think seriously about their eternal souls. So let's consider the first question number. Is there a God? Or, can I know that there is a God?

No matter how my intellect tried in the past to produce reasons proving that there was no God, that "still, small voice" came to me again and again saying that God exists. I have an innate conviction that He exists. I knew, that at least for me, there was a God. And as I looked at others I realized how many were seeking in "religion" to recognize the same "voice" that spoke to me. They also were looking for God. That same voice has probably come to you, in the quiet of life's more sober moments.

I know there are some men who call themselves atheists, who say they don't believe in God. I am persuaded that their problem of unbelief in God to be greater than the problem of belief. To believe that dead matter unaided produced life, that living matter produced mind, that mind produced conscience, and that the chaos of chance produced the cosmos of order as we see it in nature, seems to me to call not for faith, but for credulity.

THE EVIDENCE OF STATISTICS

The president of the New York Scientific Society once gave this example as a reason why he believed there is a God. "Take ten identical coins and mark them one to ten. Place them in your pocket, and then take one out. There is one chance in ten that you will get number one. Now replace it and take another. The chances that number two will follow number one are not one in ten, but one in one hundred. With each new coin taken out the chances that it will follow in the right order are multiplied by ten, so that the chance of all ten following in sequence is one chance in ten billion." Consider the odds of human life developing by chance!

George Gallup, the American statistician, says, "I could prove God statistically. Take the human body alone; the chance that all the functions of the individual would just happen is a statistical monstrosity."

Surely no thoughtful person would wish to base his eternal future on a "statistical monstrosity." Perhaps that's why the Bible says in Psalm 14:1, "*The fool has said in his heart, there is no god.*"

Consider the problem from another viewpoint...

DESIGN DEMANDS A DESIGNER

Imagine that you and I are standing together on the runway of an airport and I say to you, "A lot of people think that a jet is the result of carefully designed plans, but I know better. There was really no intelligence at work on it at all. The metal, by some mysterious process, gradually came out of the ground and fashioned itself into plates; slowly, holes were formed in the edges of these plates and rivets appeared. They flattened themselves out on either side and after a long time, by this same evolutionary process, the engines were in place and one day some men found the plane finished and ready for flight."

You would probably consider me a lunatic! We both know that where there is a design there must be a designer, and, having seen countless other products of the human mind just like the aircraft, you know that it was planned by human intelligence and built by human skill.

Yet, there are highly educated professionals who tell us that the entire universe came into being by chance, that there was really no higher intelligence at work on it. They tell us they know no God but nature.

On the other hand there are many thoughtful, just as highly educated persons who believe that God is and that He reveals Himself in two primary ways. One is in nature

itself, for its orderly laws and principles are expressions of His power and wisdom. The second is in His written Word, the Bible.

All that atheists can offer us is the riddle of design without a designer, creation without a Creator, and effect without cause. Some might contend that we cannot explain God and therefore cannot believe He exists. But I cannot explain electricity and, probably, the greatest scientists cannot really define it. Still, I have no doubt of the existence of electricity, and I affirm my belief every time I flip a switch, listen to a stereo, or start my car. And so do you. I may even be badly mistaken in what I believe about electricity. But it still exists.

Similarly, I believe that God exists because I see the effects of His existence and handiwork all about me. And however little I know of Him, however mistaken or confused I may be, I am still forced to a belief in God's existence.

SCIENTISTS SPEAK

Dr. Arthur Compton, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, has said:

For myself, faith begins with a realization that a supreme intelligence brought the universe into being and created man. It is not difficult for me to have this faith, for it is incontrovertible that where there is a plan there is intelligence. An orderly, unfolding universe testifies to the truth of the most majestic statement ever uttered 'In the beginning God.'

Dr. Wernher Von Braun, states,

It has been frequently said that scientific enlightenment and religious belief are incompatible. I consider it one of the greatest tragedies of our times that this equally stupid and dangerous error is so widely believed.

The late Professor Edwin Conklin, a noted biologist, very aptly said:

The probability of life originating from accident is comparable to the probability of the Unabridged Dictionary resulting from an explosion in a printing shop.

THE BASIC PROBLEM

God exists whether or not people may choose to believe in Him! The reason many people do not believe in God is not so much because it is intellectually impossible to believe in God but because belief in God forces the thoughtful person to face the fact that he is accountable to such a God. Most of those who take refuge in atheism or agnosticism do so because it is a convenient "escape" from the stern reality that man is personally accountable to his Creator. It is usually not so much a case of "I cannot believe" as it is a case of "I do not want to believe."

Will you honestly face these issues and all that they may mean to you as you study the following chapters?

3

CAN GOD BE KNOWN?

Since it seems evident that there is a God and since I consider myself an intelligent being, I must next ask: Is it possible to know Him? I cannot conceive of an intelligent man making anything without a purpose. If he makes shoes, they are to wear or sell; if he bakes bread, it is for himself or someone else to eat. Behind every action there is a motive. Doesn't it seem quite reasonable that God can be known and that He should have a purpose in view for His creation?

I know of two ways by which one can know God as a person and learn of His purpose for our life. First, there is the process of reason. Just as a good detective can tell you many things about my skill, habits and character by examining something I may have made or handled, so can one learn much about God by a careful examination of the universe, the work of His hands.

But the detective who examines only what I make can never say that he knows me. He has learned things about me but before he can say that he knows me, there must be a process of revelation: I must communicate with him; tell him what I think, how I feel and what I want to do.

This self-revelation may be in conversation, in writing, or in some other means of communication. Only then does it become possible for this detective to know me. If God is ever to be known and His thoughts, desires and purposes known, He must take the initiative and make at least a partial revelation of Himself to men.

The second way to know God and His purpose for life is through the study of His Word, the Bible. The Bible claims to be a direct revelation from God, telling us of Himself and His purpose in us. It is a book of such importance that it is surely worthy of your thoughtful investigation. So with the advice of Francis Bacon neither to accept nor reject, but to weigh and consider, let's approach this book with its unusual claims.

Many attacks have been made on the accuracy of the Bible. In recent years, however, archaeologists and others have rallied to the defense of this ancient book. One of the greatest archaeologists is Dr. William F. Albright, who emphatically states after years of study and research, "Biblical historical data are accurate to an extent far surpassing the ideas of any modern critical students who have consistently tended to err on the side of hypercriticism."

Another important voice raised in defense of the accuracy of the Bible is that of the late Dr. Robert Dick Wilson, a qualified scholar who made himself at home in some forty-five languages and dialects so that he could properly investigate the charges made against the Bible. After years of painstaking research, Dr. Wilson had this to say concerning the Old Testament in which he had a particular interest:

The literary forms are in harmony with what comparative literature would lead us to expect. The civil, criminal and constitutional laws agree with what the civilization of the ancient nations surrounding Palestine would

presuppose; while the ceremonial, moral and religious laws are differentiated from those of others by their genesis in a monotheistic belief and a divine revelation. The general correctness of the Hebrew text that has been transmitted to us is established beyond just grounds of controversy. The morphology, syntax, and meaning of the language of the various books conform with what the face of the document demands. The chronological and geographical statements are more accurate and reliable than those afforded by any other ancient documents; and the biographical and other historical narratives harmonize marvelously with the evidence afforded by extra-Biblical documents. We need not and do not fear the truth about the Bible.

Just as a judge must not make his decision when the case is half-heard, neither should we. But, like the judge, we should compare the evidence of the witnesses and weigh and consider every word. Surely the importance of its claim justifies spending the necessary time on the study of its sixty-six books written by at least forty different writers. Some writers were well educated, some barely educated, some kings, some peasants, writing over a period of 1600 years in places separated as far as Babylon in Asia, and Rome in Europe. With such authorship one would expect to find a heterogeneous collection of contradictory statements. Its unity is, therefore, especially striking for each contribution complements the others.

In consideration of these facts I became certain of the truth of 2 Peter 1:21. "*For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*" There was no other reasonable explanation. My belief was confirmed as I read Old Testament prophecy after prophecy that found fulfillment, even to the letter, hundreds of years later. Isaiah 53 foretold the death of Christ with minute accuracy more than 700 years before His crucifixion. Yes, the difficulties in doubting the Book seemed to me greater than those in believing it. I had to be honest with myself, and admit that the problems were all on the side of unbelief. I even went further and said, "I believe the Bible to be the Word of the living God. I can account for it in no other way."

A SERIOUS DIFFICULTY

That admission brought me face to face with a rather serious difficulty. The Bible not only set a standard of righteousness that I had not attained, it pronounced that anything short of this standard was sin.

Remembering that God knows my every thought, and measuring myself by that standard, I found myself wanting. ³⁷'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' ³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment." (Matthew 22:37-38).

Confronted with such a standard, can you claim to have lived up to it throughout your life? I couldn't. Have you put God first in everything? No man can honestly make that claim. Every honest heart echoes Romans 3:10, 23, "*There is no one righteous, no, not one ... All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.*" All have failed to reach God's standard.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF A BROKEN LAW

My honest admission that I had fallen short, that I had broken God's law, led me into further difficulties. This path of honesty lead through a dark cloud, a cloud of condemnation, but it proved to be the shortest way to the light on the other side.

The reasoning that lead to the realization of my guilt and condemnation before God is similar to the following example. The law in England says that all drivers must keep to the left side of the street, while in New York the rule of the road demands that a driver keep to the right side.

Now suppose I go driving in London and keep to the right side. On being brought before the judge, I say, "This is ridiculous. In the United States we are allowed to drive on the right side." "You are not being judged by the laws of America," he replied. "It doesn't matter what the laws of other lands may be, you should have concerned yourself only with the laws which judge you here, where you are."

On my admission of having sinned and broken God's law came God's condemnation of me in Ezekiel 18:4, "*The soul that sins, it shall die.*" Then, as far as God's standards were concerned, and as God's standard was the only one by which I was to be judged in eternity, I was lost.

I began to see that it did not matter what I thought, or what my friends told me; the judgment would be on what God had said, not on what my friends say. Furthermore, because in God's judgment we had all sinned, there was no use in looking to other men for help. They were under the same condemnation as myself.

Have you faced the fact that you have broken the laws by which you are to be judged and that you, too, are lost? Strange as it may seem this is the first step in the road that leads through the dark cloud of condemnation and its penalty of death to a realization that I can have peace with God.

4

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST?

The same Bible, which told me of my sin and confronted me about God's broken law, also told me of Jesus Christ, the Son of God...

WHY JESUS CAME

It is the clear teaching of the Bible that this person, Jesus, is God the Son. He saw that men were lost and that they had forfeited their lives to sin. His life was sinless and spotless. He was willing to give his pure life in place of man's sinful life, that we might go free. Jesus, Himself tells us in John 3:16 that "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*"

CHRIST CLAIMED TO BE GOD

If Jesus Christ is the Son of God, then we can be sure of salvation; but this difficulty faces us: Is Jesus Christ really the Son of God? There are only three possibilities:

- He is the Son of God.
- He is a deceiver.
- He is a lunatic.

In the gospels we find Jesus being confronted by the cleverest men of His day, purposely sent to catch Jesus in His own words. Yet Jesus handled these men so skillfully that they did not dare ask Him any more questions (Matthew 22:46). And when we consider the wisdom of His statements from an intellectual standpoint, we see plainly that He was no lunatic.

Then was His wisdom so great that He used it to deceive the people? Have you ever heard of a young man associating with swindlers and rogues on the street corners and because of that association becoming ennobled, pure, and honest? No! But I know a young man who, by the reception of Christ into his life, was changed from a person who had the basest desires into the noblest of manhood. I simply can't believe that the reception of a deceiver into one's life could account for such a transformation for good.

The other day I heard a man say, "I owe it to Jesus Christ that I can walk down the street with my head held erect and my shoulders squared to the world. I owe it to Him that I can look a pure woman in the face and grip an honest man by the hand."

I call to witness the opinion of the whole civilized world that Jesus Christ was at least a good Man. If so, then an honest Man, and if honest, He must have been what He

claimed to be, the Son of God sent to lay down His sinless life in place of your sinful life and mine.

SOME IMPORTANT TESTIMONIES TO CHRIST

Dr. George Earl Davis, a physicist wrote:

That atheism exists in scientific circles is undeniable. But the popular belief that atheism is more prevalent among scientists than among the unscientific has never been proved and is, in fact, contrary to the impressions gained at first hand by many of the scientists themselves.

Dr. Paul Clarence Aebersold, a biophysicist, said,

Francis Bacon, English philosopher and statesman, said more than three centuries ago, "A little philosophy inclines a man to atheism; a depth of philosophy brings him to religion." Bacon was unquestionably right. Today thousands of scientists, educators and professional men would gladly add their affirmation to the claims of Christ.

Dr. William G. Pollard, Former Executive Director of Oak Ridge Institute of Nuclear Studies, has written,

Physics is just as much based on faith as Christianity. Christianity's factual and intellectual basis is just as broad as modern physics. While both begin in faith, both lead to knowledge for those involved.

Vaughn Shoemaker, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist, has written,

Far more important to me than the appreciated lines in Who's Who -- far, far more important -- is the sure knowledge of having one's name written in the Lamb's Book of Life. The praise of man is much like perfume -- pleasant and sweet to the sense of smell, but not to be swallowed. Only as we pour such praise at the feet of Jesus Christ, to whom we owe everything, does it [life] have its rightful place.

Robert E. (Bobbie) Richards, former Olympic track star, said:

My only reason for being in sports is to give my testimony to youth of all the world that Jesus Christ can save us from sin, and that one can be a Christian and still excel in good, creative things. Young people need to realize that God unleashed a tremendous spiritual power when Jesus Christ died on Calvary.

Lt Gen. William K. Harrison (Ret.), former Senior Delegate of the United Nations Command Truce Team in Korea and later Commander-in-Chief of the Caribbean Command, wrote:

It is wonderful to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and I am exceedingly thankful that God has graciously led me to saving faith in Christ. God gives

us who believe in Christ, a daily, personal experience which is convincing evidence of the reality of the new life in Christ.

I am convinced that the Scripture is true, that Jesus Christ was and is the Son of God, and that God so loved me that Jesus was sent to suffer the full penalty of my sins -- death, that I might go free. And I understand that Jesus willingly came. In order to retain my self-respect as an intelligent being, I must accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior. If I would retain any ideal or love for nobleness in life, I dare not reject a love that led Christ to such a death as He died on Calvary's cross for me. I have no option; my whole being goes out to receive such a Savior. Does not yours?

Will you honestly face the fact that Jesus Christ claimed to be the Son of God, the fact that history concedes He lived an unequalled life, and the fact that the Bible teaches Jesus Christ died for your sins on Calvary's cross? In our next two chapters we will consider some of the more common mistakes people make when considering Christ.

5

SOME COMMON MISTAKES

Having considered the fact that there is a God and that the Bible is the Word of God, we are faced with the reality that each one of us has broken the laws of God. Each one of us must now be aware that he has sinned and stands exposed to the judgment of God. We have also examined the unique history of Jesus Christ and the clear meaning of His death on the cross for human sin.

We must now consider some of the more common misconceptions people have regarding these issues. Although it is plausible that the Bible is true, aren't alternative views also plausible?

IS SINCERITY ENOUGH?

After explaining my convictions to a friend, he said, "You're right, but so am I, although I don't see things like you do. It seems to me that it doesn't matter so much what a man believes, so long as he is sincere in his belief."

Let's test that statement. One Sunday morning a neighbor of mine said to his wife and family, "Let's go for a drive." Traveling north, they came to a railroad crossing. Sincerely believing there would be no train on a Sunday morning, he attempted to drive across without looking. He was killed on the spot by an oncoming train while a son received a broken arm and his little daughter was seriously injured and lay in a body cast for months. Did his sincere belief that all was clear save him? No, it did not.

I know a nurse who, on night duty, sincerely believed she held the right medicine in her hand. But she was wrong, and in twenty minutes her patient was dead in spite of frantic efforts to save him.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING RIGHT

Of course we need sincerity, but we must sincerely believe truth, not error. In fact having sincere belief in error can be the very means of deceiving us and finally destroying us.

The Bible leaves no room for doubt. In John 14:6, Christ says, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.*" Acts 4:12 says, "*There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.*"

If you can get to heaven in any other way you will be a witness throughout eternity to the fact that Jesus Christ lied when He said He was the only way. But since He gives full evidence of being the Son of God, isn't it folly to attempt coming to God by any other way than Christ Himself?

The real reason we want some other way is because the way of the cross is a humbling way and we are proud at heart. But remember the way of the cross was a

humbling way for Christ also, as we read in Philippians 2:5-8. *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: [6] Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, [7] but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. [8] And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross!"*

WILL REFORMATION DO? (What If I Change?)

Some people have suggested that all a person needs to do is sincerely change, do better in the future, and live down the past. This is supposed to make a person ready for heaven. Will it work?

Assume that the manager of a business goes to his accountant and finds that his company owes \$150,000 to manufacturers and other suppliers. He says, "Write letters to all those people and tell them that we are not going to trouble about the past, that we have turned over new pages in our ledger, but we promise to pay 100 cents on the dollar in all future business, and from now on live up to the highest standard of business integrity."

The accountant would think his employer had gone mad, and would refuse to put such a proposition to the creditors. Yet thousands of otherwise sensible people are trying to get to heaven by just such a proposal, offering to meet their obligations toward God for the future, but refusing to worry about the past at all. In Ecclesiastes 3:15 we read, *"God requires that which is past."* Even if we assume that we can somehow begin to live an absolutely perfect life, which is certainly impossible for us, we are still sinners.

God's righteousness demands that no past account is considered settled till it has been paid in full and every claim of justice met. The murderer may cover his sin and live the life of a model citizen for a decade after his crime, but man's law, when he is located, condemns him to death. Though he has murdered no one for ten long years, it still judges him a murderer.

To hide past sin, either thoughts, words, or deeds, by what seems to be an absolutely perfect life, still leaves us sinners. In God's sight the past and future are as open as the present. According to God's standard of holiness, we have all sinned, and we must bring sin out into the open and have it dealt with righteously.

The Bible declares that Jesus Christ is the only One who could pay this penalty. *"We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son"* (Romans 5:10). Yes, the Lord Jesus Christ gave up His life in place of ours that we might go free. Our past sin is paid for, and God, against whom we have sinned, has given us His receipt, showing His satisfaction with the completed work of Christ on the cross in that He raised Him from the dead.

Christ, once crucified, is now our living Savior. He died to save us from the penalty of sin and now He lives to deliver us from the power of sin.

JESUS PAID IT ALL

But why did Christ need to die? Couldn't He have saved us without that?

Man had broken God's law and the penalty was death. How could Christ righteously deliver us without meeting our full penalty? If He paid anything less than the full price, there would still be judgment for us to meet? But because He died, the law we broke can judge us no more. The Bible says in Romans 8:1, *"There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus."*

On one occasion an unfinished court case had to be extended another day. So that no outside influence could be brought to bear, the jury was sequestered overnight. When they arrived at court the next morning, the judge said, "The case is dismissed; the

prisoner has been called to a higher court." The accused had died in his cell during the night and, since the law cannot judge a dead man, there was no use going on with the case.

If a man should murder one person he may receive the death penalty. But if he should murder six people he can still die only once because this is the utmost penalty of the law. No matter what a man's sins may be, the law knows no greater penalty than to take his life.

Therefore, it doesn't matter that there are sins in my life that I have long since forgotten. I fear none of them for I have confidence that the Lord Jesus Christ, my substitute, suffered the utmost penalty of the law on my account -- freeing me absolutely from all the claims the law had against me, both great and small.

SALVATION MUST BE PERSONALLY RECEIVED

Because of the greatness of Jesus Christ's sacrifice, some have suggested that if Christ died for all, then everyone must be saved. But God does not say that. He says there is salvation for all but that not all are saved.

Let me illustrate. Picture a bitterly cold winter. Many are in dire straights because of successive unemployment. The city officials provide free meals for any in need. You meet a man on the street who says he is starving. Naturally, you ask if he doesn't believe the notices posted all over the city that there is enough food for all provided free? "Yes," he replies, "I believe that's true, in a general sort of way, but I am still hungry." You tell him that he will remain hungry in spite of the provision if he doesn't eat and drink personally of what is provided for all.

Although the death of Christ provides salvation for whoever comes, only those are saved who personally receive Christ and believe that He died in their place. I must take Christ as MY Savior, or His death will avail me nothing -- just as a man could die of thirst beside a spring of water if he refused to drink its life-giving stream for himself.

HOW CAN ONE DEATH ATONE FOR ALL MANKIND?

Some may still question: "How can the Lord Jesus Christ's one life be considered the substitute for the lives of so many, so that God offers salvation to whosoever repents and believes in Christ?" That's a fair question. Christ was God manifest in the flesh -- Divinity in humanity -- so that the life He gave was an infinite life, able to meet the needs of any number of finite lives.

Get a sheet of paper and write down all the big figures you can think of -- millions or more -- and add them up. Now you have a big number; then multiply your sum by 10, a hundred, or a million if you like. Use as many sheets of paper as you want. When you're done, you still have a finite number -- a number that has bounds set about it. It has a beginning and an end no matter how large it may be. No, by adding finite things together no man has ever been able to make that which is infinite. The infinite life of Christ given for sinners is more than sufficient to save all who accept Him as the One who died for them.

In this chapter we have tried to face honestly some of the questions people raise when faced with their need of Jesus Christ to be their Savior and Lord. In our next chapter we are going to look at some more common objections to this truth.

Have you squarely faced your doubts and difficulties? If not, will you do so now?

6

MORE MISCONCEPTIONS

In our last chapter we considered some of the issues men face when they realize the demands of the gospel of Christ. In this chapter we are to consider some more of these common objections to the Bible message of sin and of salvation through Christ alone.

COULD GOD NOT HAVE PREVENTED SIN?

Why didn't God make men incapable of disobeying His will and therefore incapable of sinning? That question is like asking why doesn't God draw a crooked straight line or a round square, or make an object pitch black and pure white at the same time. Man is a creature with the power of intelligent choice, so the question really is: Why didn't God make a creature with the power of intelligent choice and yet without the power of intelligent choice?

For example, if I put my two little boys into an hypnotic state, thus robbing them of the power of intelligent choice, and then made commands like, "Sit on those chairs until I return," "Get up and eat," "Stop eating," and "Kiss me good night," unfeeling arms would go around my neck and unresponsive lips would be pressed to mine. I would have a prompt and perfect obedience to my every directive, but would I find satisfaction in it? No!

I want my boys to have free will, thus being capable of disobeying me, but who willingly obey because of our mutual love for each other. Hopefully my instructions would always be for their own good and not just mine. I cannot conceive of God being satisfied with anything less.

God does not want puppets who jump in a given direction according to the wire that is pulled, nor does He want robots in the form of "people" who mechanically and absolutely obey His will as do the planets that whirl through space. God can find satisfaction in nothing less than spontaneous, heart-felt decisions to live to please and honor Him. But it is obvious that this same power enables us to defy and dishonor Him if we so choose.

MAN AND THE UNIVERSE

What does God care about this little world of ours compared with the vastness of the universe? Think of even our own solar system, with the planet Neptune thirty times as far away from the sun as our earth, so that it takes 164 of our years to make one of Neptune's and, beyond this, suns with planets revolving around them as our solar system revolves around the sun! Of what importance can our earth be to God, and of how much less importance can man be?

The vastness of the heavens robbed a young astronomer of faith, for how could God trouble Himself about man, who is less than a grain of sand in comparison? But his

thirst for knowledge would not let him rest. The heavens were available for study at night; how should the free hours of the day be spent? Why not a microscope? New worlds were opened at his feet -- worlds as wonderful as those above, and slowly his faith came back. Yes, the God who could attend to such minute details as to make a drop of ditch water throb with miniature life was sure to be interested in man, the highest form of His creation. He found balance instead of bias, and balance brought him back to God. John 3:16 was true after all. Are you balanced or biased? Can you see the present in its true relation to the future?

BALANCE OR BIAS?

Benjamin Franklin said we are all biased. When he had an important decision to make, he took a sheet of paper and headed two columns, respectively, "Pro" and "Con," then thought the matter out carefully. When he arrived at a reason "for," he put it under "Pro;" when he discovered one "against," it went under "Con." After his lists were as complete as he could make them, he went through them, saying, "This `Pro' is as strong as those two `Cons' and this `Con' is of as much value as those three `Pros,'" until he had balanced off all that he could. Then he gave his decision for, or against, according to the reasons still left.

A good pattern? Perhaps! Are you willing to give the question of your future destiny unbiased consideration?

THE LOGIC OF FAITH

Is faith logical? Yes, it is logical. It is a mistake to think that faith is opposed to reason. Faith and reason go hand in hand, but faith goes on when reason can go no farther. Reason, to a great extent, is dependent on faith, for without knowledge it is impossible to reason, and knowledge is largely a matter of faith in human testimony. For instance, I believe that strychnine administered in a large enough dose will poison a human being but I have never seen the experiment performed. Yet, I have such faith in the written testimony of men that I would not take a dose of strychnine for a million dollars.

If you check your facts carefully, you will find that most of what you know is a matter of faith in human testimony, written or spoken, as you have not verified them for yourself. Then, having accepted the testimony of other men so freely on other matters, will you not accept the testimony of thousands of Christians when they affirm that they have verified the things written in God's Word and proven them to be true?

ETERNAL PUNISHMENT FOR SIN

Why should God judge my sin worthy of death? I cannot answer that, but I would suggest that because of His infinite holiness no sin could exist in His presence. Our problem is that we don't understand infinite, perfect holiness.

In some primitive cultures a native chief may club his wife to death on slight provocation without committing a crime and without falling in the slightest degree in the estimation of his people. The same act in another land would result in arrest, conviction and punishment for murder. People in different cultures are thus able to view the same act quite differently.

People and God obviously view acts on earth quite differently. Think what some sin, which appears to us as nothing, must look like to an infinitely holy God -- "*For God is light, and in Him is no darkness at all*" (I John 1:5). The contrast is understandable. Think

what would it be like for someone, who has not believed God and accepted the only way of salvation, to stand before God. God's absolute holiness would show this person's sin in all its awfulness. It becomes quite easy to understand the penalty of eternal punishment.

In Revelation 6:16, God tells us of the feelings of those who refuse to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior and persist in going into eternity in their sins. They call on the mountains and the rocks to fall on them and hide them from the face of Him that sits on the throne. And yet it is the presence of this same Christ that will make heaven so wonderful for those who have accepted Him as Savior and Lord.

You can also see the absurdity of God taking all to heaven. Heaven is a condition as well as a place. The presence of the Lord Jesus Christ will fill heaven. That same Presence will make a hell of remorse in the hearts of any who, still in their sins, stand in the infinite light of His holiness for judgment. Be quite reasonable -- could you really stand in the presence of the One whose love you had rejected, and whose great sacrifice you had not counted worthy of your of your acceptance?

7

SALVATION BY SUBSTITUTION

In our previous chapters we sought to demonstrate the fact that God does exist and that He has revealed in the Bible His holy claims on men and women. We were shown that "*all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God*" (Romans 3:23). We have been faced with Jesus Christ, God's Son, who came to this earth to die for the sin of man. We have also considered numerous objections raised by people who have other ideas about God's plan of salvation.

In this chapter we are going to think through the wisdom and the wonder of God's plan of salvation for sinful people. In a word, it is salvation by substitution.

HOW IT WORKS

God's love said, "Pardon the sinner" but His righteousness said, "Punish the sinner." How could the two be reconciled? How could God satisfy both His love and His holiness when dealing with the sinner? The solution, of course, was in the death of His Son on the sinner's behalf.

"But," one may object, "doesn't Christianity fail at its very foundation by basing everything on substitution, for substitution will not stand thoughtful investigation. It makes Christ, the Innocent, bear the penalty for the guilty, and thus lets the guilty go free. It is diametrically opposed to our very idea of justice, for we believe that justice should protect the innocent and bring full penalty upon the guilty.

God's perfect justice and perfect mercy are both revealed at the cross. He does not take the innocent and compel him to bear the penalty of the guilty.

God acts like the judge in this story. Two young men studied law together; one rose to a seat on the bench while the other took to drink and wasted his life. On one occasion this poor fellow was brought before his old companion, charged with a crime, and the lawyers present wondered what kind of justice would be administered by the judge. To their surprise, he sentenced his one-time companion to the heaviest penalty the law would allow and then paid the fine himself and set his old friend free.

God, against whom we have sinned, in justice sat on His judgment throne and passed the heaviest penalty He could -- the sentence of death upon the sinner. Then, in mercy, He stepped down from His throne and took the sinner's place, bearing the full penalty Himself. II Corinthians 5:19 tells us "*that God was in Christ*," not "through" Christ but "in" Christ, "*reconciling the world unto himself*."

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one God. The same God against whom we had sinned, passed the judgment, paid the penalty, and now offers full and free pardon, based upon absolute righteousness. That is why the apostle Paul in Romans 1:16, 17 says, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ ... For therein is the*

righteousness of God revealed... I, too, can say I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ, for no man can honestly find a flaw in the righteous forgiveness offered by God to man.

A FINISHED WORK

Is acceptance of Christ as my Savior all that is necessary to save me for all eternity? Yes! I admit the very simplicity of it seems to make it hard to grasp. But if I owe \$500 and have nothing with which to pay and a friend pays the debt for me and gives me the receipt, I don't worry about it anymore. I can look my creditor straight in the face for I hold his signed receipt. As Jesus Christ gave His life in place of mine, He said, "*It is finished,*" meaning that the work of atonement was completed and God gave me His receipt. The assurance that He was satisfied with Christ's finished work is shown in Christ's resurrection from the dead on the third day.

"I just don't see it," said a cabinet maker as a friend tried to explain this to him. At last an inspiration came to his friend, who, lifting a plane, made as though he would plane the top of a beautifully polished table that stood near. "Stop!" cried the cabinet maker. "Don't you see that's finished? You'll ruin it if you use that plane on it."

"Why," replied his friend, "that's just what I have been trying to show you about Christ's work of redemption. It was finished when He gave His life for you and if you try to add to that finished work, you only spoil it. Just accept it as it stands -- His life for yours, and you go free." Like a flash he saw it and received Jesus Christ into his life as his Savior.

MORAL LIFE AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

There is one more difficulty. I know a noble, true, kind, generous man who has not accepted Christ as his Savior. Do you mean to tell me that in eternity he will be lost while this other man who has received Jesus Christ into his life as his personal Savior, although not nearly such a fine fellow, has eternal life?

I struggled with that for years until I read about biogenesis. Biogenesis is the biological doctrine that living organisms can be generated only by pre-existing living organisms. In other words, there can be no life without previous life. That means there is no such thing as spontaneous life. Dead matter cannot live of itself. (If it ever is to have life, it must get life by coming into contact with something that is already living.)

Christ said, "*That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again*" (John 3:6, 7). And so with the apostle in I John 5:12 when he said, "*He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life.*" The greatest error of our day is an endeavor to evade the law of biogenesis. The contrast between a highly developed moral man and a Christian is not in degree but in kind -- the one has a high grade of human life; the other has spiritual life. The difference is so radical that the one can never grow out of the other for Christ said even to such an upright man as Nicodemus in John 3:7, "*You must be born again.*" It is as if He were saying, "A further development of your old life will not suffice. What you need is a new, divine life by receiving Me."

A SIGNIFICANT CONTRAST

It does not matter how much more beautiful the diamond is than the humblest plant; one has life and the other does not. Polish the diamond as we will, it is still dead.

There is really no basis of comparison, for the one has life while the other has none -- not even in the slightest degree.

The same difference exists between the man with spiritual life and the man who is dead toward God. Moral polish, though it ought to be found in the spiritual man, does not give him his spiritual life. Only by contact with the source of spiritual life can any man pass that otherwise insurmountable barrier between the natural and the spiritual, "*for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made us free from the law of sin and death*" (Romans 8:2).

The door between the mineral and vegetable kingdoms is shut so that no mineral can open it. That is, a lump of clay cannot of itself develop into a plant. But the roots of a plant can penetrate the clay, absorb its elements, and transform the lifeless into the living.

In much the same way, the door from the natural to the spiritual is shut, and no one can open it. This world of natural men is separated from the spiritual world by barriers which have never yet been crossed from the human side. No mental energy, no moral effort, no evolution of character can endow any human soul with the attribute of spiritual life. But, thank God, the Lord Jesus Christ came down from that spiritual world to give us life.

And here the reality goes far beyond the illustration. The plant cannot give the clay life; it can only take the substance of the clay into itself. But Christ gives spiritual life to individuals having only natural life.

The basic principle, of course, still holds true. Life comes only from life. In spite of accounts of the "creation of life" by scientists (for sober analysis shows the accounts to be greatly exaggerated), life cannot spring up of itself. Spiritual life cannot develop out of anything that is not spiritual life. Christ is the Source of spiritual life. "*He that has the Son has life; and he that has not the Son of God [whatever else he may have] has not life*" (I John 5:12) ...for "*the law of the Spirit of life [is] in Christ Jesus*" (Romans 8:2).

THE VITAL DIFFERENCE

We are definitely aware that there is a difference between what is alive and what is not alive. No man has ever taken the non-living atoms of carbon, hydrogen, oxygen and nitrogen and made something living out of them. But God did. Because God created life, a living thing can take non-living material and make it a part of itself, a part of a living organism. To draw an analogy from this example, as matter was transformed into life by the power of God, so the natural man is transformed into spiritual life by the same power of God. "*If anyone is in union with Christ, he is a new being! His old life has passed away; a new life has begun*" (II Corinthians 5:17). As a living thing grows, so a Christian, a new spiritual life, grows. This is why Jesus spoke of the "new birth" see (John 3:1-11). The Bible, elsewhere, says, "*As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that you may grow thereby*" (I Peter 2:2).

The Bible uses other terms for this transformation: "*have eternal life*" -- "*are saved*" -- "*are born again*" -- "*have salvation*" -- "*are regenerated*." They all point to the same glorious fact, that a sinful man can be brought into a divine relationship with God, which will result in continued spiritual growth through all time.

Have you entered into this relationship? If not, will you think through carefully all that it can mean for you, both for time and for eternity?



YOUR NEXT MOVE

In our last chapter we saw how God could be both a holy Judge and a loving Father to those that believe in Jesus (Romans 3:26). By passing the maximum penalty against sin that His holiness could demand and by paying that penalty Himself, God satisfied the claims of both His justice and His love.

We also learned that nothing can be added to the finished work of Christ on Calvary's cross. Salvation must be received as a gift by the sinner because it cannot be earned. In addition we learned that when a person receives Christ as Savior and Lord, a new kind of life is imparted by God -- spiritual life. Spiritual life is something far different from moral life. It is not something that can be evolved but it is received in a moment, bringing the regenerated person into the very family of God.

SALVATION IS MORE THAN A COLD CONTRACT

Have you received the Lord Jesus Christ as Savior? It is not enough to know the right facts -- that, according to Ephesians 2:1, you are "*dead in trespasses and sin*," that Jesus Christ gave His life in your place, and that by receiving Him as your Savior you have eternal salvation. No, you must act on those facts by experiencing a personal encounter with God.

A wealthy man loses all his money and, rather than sacrifice his social position, agrees to give the hand of his daughter to a rich man for a significant sum of money. At first she refuses vehemently because she despises the man; but, when her father shows her the expediency of the marriage, that it is his only hope of being saved from utter want, she consents and goes through the marriage ceremony. According to the law of the land she becomes the rich man's wife.

But does her heart really belong to her husband? Surely not!

You see it now, don't you? The Lord desires a true love relationship. When a man and woman would be truly one, they receive each other into those innermost recesses of their hearts in a deep, true way -- a way that cannot fully be expressed in words. The wife tries to please the husband and the husband tries to please his wife.

Similarly, Christ desires a true love relationship with us. We all have that innermost recess of our beings which is sacred to us, where emotions stir and that no one else could possibly understand. But Jesus Christ, God's Son, does, and because of His love for us, He claims the right to enter. The love He has shown by His death on the cross for us entitles Him to that place. Will you withhold it?

CHRIST DESERVES MY LOVE

When I think that Christ's love for me was so great that He left His Father's glory and came to earth, becoming truly human to suffer and die in my place so that I could

have eternal life, my heart softens toward Him. Imagine that you were lying sick and helpless in a burning building. But fortunately, a friend rushed in, wrapped blankets around you and carried you to safety. In the process he was burned and scarred about the face and arms. Think about how your heart would go out to him!

And now we are face to face with the Savior. We see Him suffering in the garden of Gethsemane in anticipation of His death on the cross for us. We see Him in Pilate's judgment hall, the soldiers striking Him in the face, saying, "*Prophesy, who smote you?*" We see them crowning His holy brow with a crown of thorns and smiting Him on the head with a reed. Bleeding and bruised, He is taken from judgment to Calvary. As he is lifted up to die between two thieves, with great spikes through His hands and feet, the people gather around to mock and revile Him, though He is pouring out His life to redeem them. Then we begin to understand what self-sacrificing love really means as we hear Him cry, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*"

But if we entered sympathetically into those physical sufferings of Christ until tears streamed down our cheeks, and that was all, we have failed miserably to comprehend the true significance of the cross. We still haven't grasped the deeper suffering of Jesus.

THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

We read in II Corinthians 5:21 that God "*hath made him [Christ] to be sin for us, who knew no sin.*" Here we witness the soul-suffering of Jesus Christ as He, the Holy One who loathed sin, was "*made sin for us.*"

With the higher development of the physical organism, there is a greater capacity for pain. Likewise, the higher the development of moral character, the greater the capacity for soul-suffering.

Picture a venerable old gentleman who is justly proud of his honored name -- a man who would sooner lose his right hand than use it to do a dishonorable deed. His son and heir goes astray and, in a drunken brawl, murders someone. The old man is crushed. He no longer walks erect, his head is bowed in shame, and soon his soul-suffering brings his gray hairs in sorrow to the grave.

Think what sin must be like in all its awfulness to an absolutely holy God! Now we understand why, in the garden of Gethsemane, Christ turns in loathing from sin and cries out in the agony of His soul, "*My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me: nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt*" (Matthew 26:39).

Yet in spite of that agonized cry from Gethsemane, "*God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son*" to be "*made sin*" for us, "*that whosoever believed in him should not perish, but have everlasting life*" (John 3:16; II Corinthians 5:21).

ACTION MUST FOLLOW

Now do you understand why, if I would retain any nobleness of character, I dare not reject One who has endured so much for me? My intellect has reasoned it all out; my emotions have been deeply stirred; and now they both appeal to my will for a decision. To be true to my God and myself I have only one course open and I must take it. I have made my choice and today Jesus Christ is my personal Savior and my Lord.

Because of His love for me, because of the way He has blessed me here and, because of my assurance of a gracious hereafter, my heart's desire is that you might share in the blessings I enjoy. Christ has done all. He has borne the penalty of your sin; He has been raised by the power of God; now He presents Himself to you. Will you accept Him as Savior and Lord?

You may be saying: "It seems so mysterious, the mystery of it baffles me." I do not ask you to understand the mystery of it. I cannot fully understand its mystery myself, nor can any Christian in this life. I am asking you to rejoice in its fact.

Electricity remains a mystery. We have discovered many of the laws which govern it but we cannot tell what it really is. You and I do not worry about the mystery of electricity as we make use of its benefits.

You must have known men and women who accepted Jesus Christ as their Savior and were so changed as to be new creatures in Christ. Will you let these personal observations influence you?

Yes, it is just as simple as switching on an electric light. Come, saying, "O God, I cannot understand the mystery of it all. I cannot understand why You care for me enough to send Jesus Christ to bear the penalty of my sins. But, with all my lack of understanding, I willingly yield to You absolutely. I trust in the fact of Christ's death for me and the promise that You made in John 3:16, *"that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."*

Just as you leave the mystery of electrical current with the engineer and take the benefits of light to yourself, so leave the mystery of salvation with God and take the infinite benefits of a personal Savior to yourself. Yield to Him now. He wants to come into your life. Say, and mean it, "I am yours, Lord Jesus, yielded totally to you; and You are mine."

ASHAMED OF CHRIST?

Now for another important issue -- the pride we should have of Christ. Romans 10:9 reads, *"That if thou wilt confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus, and wilt believe in your heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the scripture saith, Whosoever believeth on him shall not be ashamed."*

If you have accepted Christ, go and tell someone. Do not be ashamed to confess Him. Why should you be?

Suppose I had been convicted of a capital crime. But, while awaiting execution, the governor of the state gave me a full pardon and put me on the state payroll so that I owed him both my life and my livelihood. What would you think if, when the governor entered the office where I worked, I turned my back on him and refused to recognize his presence? Or if, hearing two men slandering the governor, I remained quiet for fear of being thought partisan? If such rudeness and reluctance are inexcusable relative to a fellow human being, how can the refusal to acknowledge the Son of God, who has granted me eternal life at such cost to Himself, be tolerated?

THE SOLDIER'S CHOICE

I was talking to a young soldier about accepting the Lord Jesus Christ, but like most men, he tried to evade the straight issue with the promise, "I'll think it over."

"Harry," I said, "let me illustrate."

"Suppose you are out with the men one night raiding the enemy's position and, on the way back, you get hit. Bill Smith stops long enough to pick you up and carry you back and, for his trouble, he gets two bullets in the back. You are both taken to a hospital. Two months later the doctor comes along, helping a man who limps badly and moves with evident difficulty."

"They stop at your bedside and the doctor says, 'Harry, I want to introduce you to Bill Smith, the man who risked his life to save you.' But you fold your arms and say, 'I don't know whether I want to meet him today or not. I'll think it over.'"

"You wouldn't say that, Harry, would you? You would grab him by the hand and try to tell him something of the gratitude you felt. I want to introduce you now to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Man from glory, who not only risked His life, but sacrificed it to save you, and you propose to turn your back on Him and say you'll think it over?"

"No," he said, "I'll accept Him." Together we knelt while he told the Lord that he, there and then, accepted Him as his personal Savior. Are you "thinking it over," or have you faced the issue squarely and decided right?

9

DEALING WITH DOUBTS

Have you decided yet?

In the opening chapter, we looked at how one accepts Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In the next eight chapters we studied some rational reasons why that decision should be made. While salvation requires a step of faith, it does not demand a blind leap of faith. It is the most sensible move a thinking person could make. It appeals to both the heart and the mind.

But still you may hesitate. And perhaps you wonder why. Why not jump at the free gift of abundant, eternal life?

THE WAR WITHIN

There may be a spiritual battle going on within you. On one hand, God is beckoning for you to come to Him. Simultaneously, Satan, the deceiver, is trying to persuade you not to go. And thus you feel inner anguish and confusion. You can end the war by your choice to follow Jesus.

Some time ago I shared the plan of salvation with a friend. He wanted to pray to accept Christ but something held him back. "Let me go home and think about it and I'll talk to you tomorrow," he said. Not wanting to pressure him, I told him that would be fine.

But the next day, the same thing happened. And it continued to occur for over a week. Finally, I explained the inner spiritual struggle that I thought he may be experiencing and urged him to simply, but sincerely, repeat after me the A.B.C. prayer of faith that is found in chapter one.

After he finished praying, there was a pause. Then he suddenly bellowed, "Kick me! Would you please kick me?!"

Seeing the bewildered look on my face, he explained, "This is great! But I should have accepted Jesus a week ago and saved myself all of the turmoil I have been going through."

While it is reasonable to put some time and thought into exploring the claims of Christ, you must finally come to the place where you decide to follow Him. Until you do, you are choosing to reject Him. You cannot straddle the fence. In John 3, Jesus said, *"¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son."*

HOW MUCH FAITH IS NEEDED?

"But I'm not sure I have enough faith to be saved," you admit. "All of this makes sense and I want to believe, but I don't have 100% certainty that this is the way to go. How much faith do I need?"

Don't make the mistake of putting your faith in your faith. That is, don't get preoccupied with how weak or strong your faith is. You only need enough to choose, as an act of your will, to trust in Jesus as your Savior.

Let me illustrate. I grew up with a pond on our property. When winter hit, I would sometimes wonder if the ice was thick enough to hold me up. So at first, I would cautiously crawl slowly out on the ice. Carefully balancing my weight, I would listen intently for any sound of cracking. Finally, I would gain confidence, stand, jump... and then put on my ice skates.

Please note that I didn't stand on the shore examining my faith in the ice. No, I examined the ice.

In the same way, you may cautiously put your life in the hands of God. Though you may have some doubts, you have enough faith to choose to prayerfully accept Jesus as your Savior and Lord. Once in His hands, you will discover that He will never drop you or let you down.

If you haven't yet prayed the A.B.C. prayer of faith, why not bow your head and do it now? It is time to experience the miracle!

DO CHRISTIANS EVER DOUBT?

Let me assume that you have placed your faith in Jesus as your Savior. You want to believe that you are now a Christian but sometimes you don't "feel" saved. Are you?

Most of this book has dealt with the intellectual doubts of honest skeptics. Now we will address the emotional doubts of sincere Christians...

Many individuals go through times in their lives when they question whether or not they are genuinely children of God. The apostle John wrote the book of I John to help people answer that crucial question. At the conclusion of this short letter he said:

"I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may KNOW that you have eternal life."

In order for you to become a "know-so" Christian, he provides two crucial tests that you can take that will determine if your doubts are valid. If you pass the tests, your doubts are illegitimate and should be discarded. Since that is often easier said than done, he not only shows you how to "put your doubts to the test," he also explains how to "put your hearts at rest."

Put Your Doubts to the Test

TEST #1: Do You Believe In Jesus?

John confirms that those who trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior become children of God. In John 1:12, he wrote, "Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the rights to become children of God." Consider these further verses from I John:

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God (5:1).

And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son... (3:23).

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God (4:15).

TEST #2: Do You Live Like Jesus?

While salvation does not result from a good life, a good life does result from salvation (see Ephesians 2:8-10). When you get saved, God transforms your inner self and actually lives within you through His Spirit. Through His work within you, you will gain the desire and ability to live more like Jesus Christ.

The genuine believer loves God and tries to live according to His will. There is a craving to please God and avoid the things that God hates. There is a thirst to be close to the Lord and be like the Lord. Though your growth will be gradual, you will come to resemble Jesus in the way you think and act. Count on it, you will become more righteous and loving.

The following verses from I John demonstrate how righteousness is one of the marks of a changed life:

If you know that He is righteous, you know that every one also who practices righteousness is born of him (2:29).

No one who is born of God makes a practice of sinning (3:9, Williams translation).

No one born of God [deliberately and knowingly] habitually practices sin (3:9, Amplified Version).

We know that any one born of God does not continue to [habitually] sin (I John 5:18).

A true believer is characterized by righteousness. You won't be perfect until heaven. And there will be plenty of times when you blow it big time. But if you sincerely trusted in Christ, you should be able to note positive directional changes in your life. As Jesus said in Matthew 7:16, "*By their fruit you will recognize them.*" There will also be an increase in your love. "*We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death*" (I John 3:14).

GRADE YOURSELF: If you, in prayer, have "trusted" in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, then you have passed test #1. For it is only by this act of faith that one can be saved. The result will be that the Spirit of God will take up residence in you and your life will progressively grow more Christ-like in righteousness and love. If your life is characterized by these truths, then you have passed the second test.

John stresses in his first chapter that no Christian can claim to have no sin, but at the same time his life should be changing. John Newton stated, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am."

PUT YOUR HEARTS AT REST

Some people pass these tests (they have trusted in Christ for salvation and now, consequently, live a changed Christ-like life) but still "feel" doubts. In his book, *Welcome to the Church*, Terry Powell says,

Sometimes, when a person comes to Christ, it is an emotionally charged experience. But ecstatic feelings don't last forever, and God never intended that feelings control our behavior or our daily walk with Him.

Let's face it: not even spiritual giants sit on a "spiritual cloud 9" all the time. Tomorrow, if you don't feel close to the Lord, does that mean your conversion experience was phony and really didn't happen? Of course not! If you don't feel that God still loves you after you've failed, does that mean He has actually cast you out of His family? No!

Where do illegitimate doubts come from? In some cases, there is a physical cause. Hypoglycemia, chemical imbalances, electrolyte disturbances, fatigue, and many other ailments can cause depression and dark, skeptical feelings. There could even be psychological causes. For example, a person growing up in a dysfunctional home can struggle believing that there is a heavenly Father Who loves unconditionally.

Usually, however, there are spiritual causes. Unconfessed sin (I John 1), will take you out of fellowship with God. Though He hasn't left you, since you have turned away from Him, you may not feel His presence. So, confess your sins and restore your closeness to Christ.

The doubt source may be satanic (I John 4:1; I Peter 5:8; II Cor. 11:14). Our enemy, the devil is a deceiver who tells you lies so that you lose your spiritual confidence. Refuse to believe him!

Whatever the source, the primary way to handle doubts is by purposely "aiming your faith." Choose to believe God's promises rather than your feelings. Carefully read the following verses:

This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence whenever our hearts condemn us. For God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything (I John 3:19-20).

How do we "set our hearts (or feelings) at rest whenever our hearts condemn us (when they tell you that you are not really saved)? Recognize that *God is greater than our hearts!* Our feelings are up and down. They are unreliable. But God never lies! Since He always keeps His promises, it is wise to meditate on those promises and choose to believe them. Start with the following promises:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. (John 10:27-29)

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." (Hebrews 13:5)

He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5:12-13)

Let me close this chapter with a story -- one that doesn't show me in the most favorable light...

When I was a child, I was creative in teasing my sister, Becky. On one occasion, I told her that she wasn't really a part of our family. We had found her on the side of the road and brought her home to live with us.

Full of bravado, she loudly denied my charges. But I knew that I had struck a nerve and so, when she left the room, I followed her. She entered the laundry room where my mother was ironing, shut the door, and let her emotions out.

"Mom," I heard her whimper, "Ron says that I'm not really a Sheveland. He says you found me. Is that true?"

Of course my mother comforted her by telling the history of her birth into our family. My sister's doubts vanished when she chose to believe a reliable source (Mom) and ignore an unreliable source (me!).

If you want to live a confident Christian life, ignore inner accusations and trust God. You have been born into His family and you will be there forever!

10

ON THE GROW!

If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you have made the most important commitment a person can make. You have experienced what the Bible calls a new birth (John 3:3).

In the physical realm, you entered life as a baby and then, with proper nurture, began to grow toward maturity. In the same way, as a baby Christian, you should strive to become a mature follower of Jesus (I Peter 2:2). This final chapter provides some suggestions that will get you growing!

SPEND TIME WITH GOD

Let God Speak to You through the Bible

You will want to spend time daily with God's Word. Where do you start? I recommend beginning with the gospel of John. If you read a chapter a day you will finish its 21 chapters in 3 weeks -- just about the ideal time-span required for establishing a new habit.

As you read each chapter, ask yourself, "What does this passage say?" This question will help you objectively probe the chapter for its principal points.

Then ask, "What does this passage say to me?" This second question will help you personalize the chapter and apply it to your life. Many people have found it beneficial to jot their conclusions in a "Bible Study Diary."

The Bible is totally dependable. Its contents were breathed out by God Himself and as a result its truths are perfect. It is also timeless. The themes of Scripture are relevant for every age. The Word of God is intimate. View it as the Lord's "love letter" to you. Furthermore, it is profitable. From it you will gain the nutrition you need to grow spiritually strong.

Read it. Study it. Memorize it. Ponder it. Practice it.

When I was a young Christian, I found this quote and wrote it in my Bible, "God says it, I believe it, and that settles it!" Allow it to speak authoritatively to you.

Speak to God through Prayer

As you allow God to talk to you through Scripture, you will want to respond to Him through prayer. Balanced praying can be yours through what has been called the "A.C.T.S" outline:

Adoration: Begin your prayer by praising God for who He is and the wonderful things He does. Please read Psalm 145:3; 147:1, 5.

Confession: Specifically confess any sins that have crept into your attitudes or behavior. Please read I John 1:9.

Thanksgiving: Give your gratitude for the many gifts and blessings He has given you. Please read I Thessalonians 5:18.

Supplication: Feel free to share your needs and requests with the Lord. He loves to give! And don't forget to pray for others, as well. Please read John 15:7; Philippians 4:6-7.

Don't try to make a speech -- just converse naturally with a Heavenly Father who wants to spend personal time with His child. And expect wonderful results. Ephesians 3:20 says that God gives "*above and beyond what we ask or think.*"

That doesn't mean that you will always receive exactly what you request. God will not be your genie in a bottle. In accordance with His great wisdom, He may say "yes," "no," or "wait." Or He may improve upon your plan. But whatever He does will be for your good and His glory.

SPEND TIME WITH GOD'S FAMILY

Upon salvation, you not only receive God as your Father -- you also become part of the family of God! As a result, you will want to develop strong, personal relationships with Christian brothers and sisters. To start with, you will want to look for a spiritually mature believer who is willing to guide you through the first steps of the Christian life.

You will also want to obey God's command to become active in a church. Choose a congregation that believes all of the Bible is true and authoritative. Unfortunately, that's not always the case. Find one that truly treats Jesus Christ as its Lord.

Just like individuals, all churches have their own personality. So visit a few and find a style that feels comfortable. Do you enjoy its music? Can you adapt to its size? Does the preacher communicate well? Is it close enough to attend regularly and easily bring your neighbors?

Don't even bother searching for a perfect church. Every fellowship is filled with hurting people with failings -- just like you! So please be patient, flexible and forgiving.

Once you pick a church, be committed at various levels. For example, you can come *closer* to God as you go to your church's celebration services. You can grow *deeper* in maturity as you participate in growth groups. And you will go *further* in making an impact as you work with others on a serve team. So maximize your spiritual development if you become regularly involved in the following three spheres of participation: celebration, class, and cell.

Celebration Services: The worship service is the time for all of a church's participants to gather. These cheerful "big events" will give you the lift you need to face the upcoming week. Inspiring music and practical Biblical messages will stir your heart.

Growth Groups: Most congregations provide Bible classes or small groups for all age levels. They provide a warm, caring environment where students can grow through fellowship, social activities, and Bible study.

Serve Teams: Just like a sports team has many positions or an orchestra has various instruments, God has wired and gifted you in some unique area of ministry. Mutual effectiveness and accountability will be provided if you can partner with other believers in your service.

Let me issue a warning! It will be difficult to quickly feel at home in a new church. If you haven't been to church much, you may initially perceive it as a totally different culture. If you were ever "the new kid in school," you know the awkward sensation of feeling like you don't belong and wanting to quit. But be patient and give it plenty of time. You will be glad you did. You will come to love your church family.

As soon as possible, you will want to inquire about baptism. Though this can be a touchy and controversial issue, as you explore what the Bible says, you will discover how important it is. In that baptism is commanded by Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:19), it is not an option for His followers. Obedient believers will be baptized in order to give an outward picture of the salvation they experienced when they put their faith in Christ.

SPEND TIME WITH THOSE WHO DON'T KNOW GOD

Now that you have become a "born again" Christian, wouldn't you like to help your friends also discover this beautiful new relationship with Christ? Make a list of people you would like to contact and start praying for them. Then take the initiative to share how you became a Christian and how they, too, can prayerfully invite Jesus to become the Savior and Lord of their lives.

If this book has been helpful to you, you may want to obtain copies to share with others. You, too, can offer *The Perfect Gift*.

Pass on
The Perfect Gift

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