

A misty, sunlit dirt road lined with trees and a white fence. The scene is atmospheric, with a bright light source breaking through the fog in the distance. The road is covered in fallen leaves, and a white picket fence runs along the left side. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

**A Survival Manual for a Post-Christian Era**  
By Pastor Denny Johnson

# Developing Your Core Convictions







We are living in an age where literally everything is up for grabs – like the meaning of honor, purity, decency, and godliness. The very foundations of society - the preciousness of sexuality, the permanence of marriage, the definition of family, and the value of children are crumbling. We're not even sure if we are male or female anymore, or what that means. And, of course, to make any definitive statement about Jesus Christ and his unique historical role is the ultimate in being *politically incorrect*.

These pillars of our once-Christian society have been replaced with the platitudes of *postmodernism*, a mishmash of mumbo-jumbo which has virtually rendered the English language useless. That's what happens when you interpret literature according to the *reader's intent* rather than the *author's intent*, which is the logical outcome of *deconstructionism*, a major tenet of postmodernism.

Put succinctly, postmodernism is a frontal assault on the whole idea of objective truth. Reality is seen as nothing more than a social construct, "*subject to change inherent to time and place*" (*Wikipedia*). That's a fancy way of saying that truth is whatever you want it to be!

With pinpoint accuracy, God indicts our rudderless culture with these words, "***Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.***" *Isaiah 5:20*.

"*What is truth?*" Pilate famously asked Jesus in John 18:38, a conversation not recorded in the other gospels. Jesus had just told Pilate, "*I came into this world to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.*"

Are you on the side of truth? That's what this booklet is all about – helping serious Christians put down roots that will enable them to withstand the storms of our post-Christian era.

This booklet is dedicated to the fifteen "*mighty men of valor*" (*I Chronicles 12:21, KJV*) who have served with me as elders of the flock at Annandale Evangelical Free Church since we adopted an elder form of government in 2006:

Chris Strand  
Peter Fiedler  
Jim Welch  
John Goos

Mardon Quandt  
Joel Partridge  
Glen Schultz  
Gary Partridge

Vern Johnson  
Mike Gesler  
Jim Pross  
Kevin Groven

Greg Medvec  
Dan Hedtke  
Andy Fashant

***Gentlemen, I salute you as co-laborers in "raising up a faithful generation"!***

Denny Johnson  
April 15, 2011





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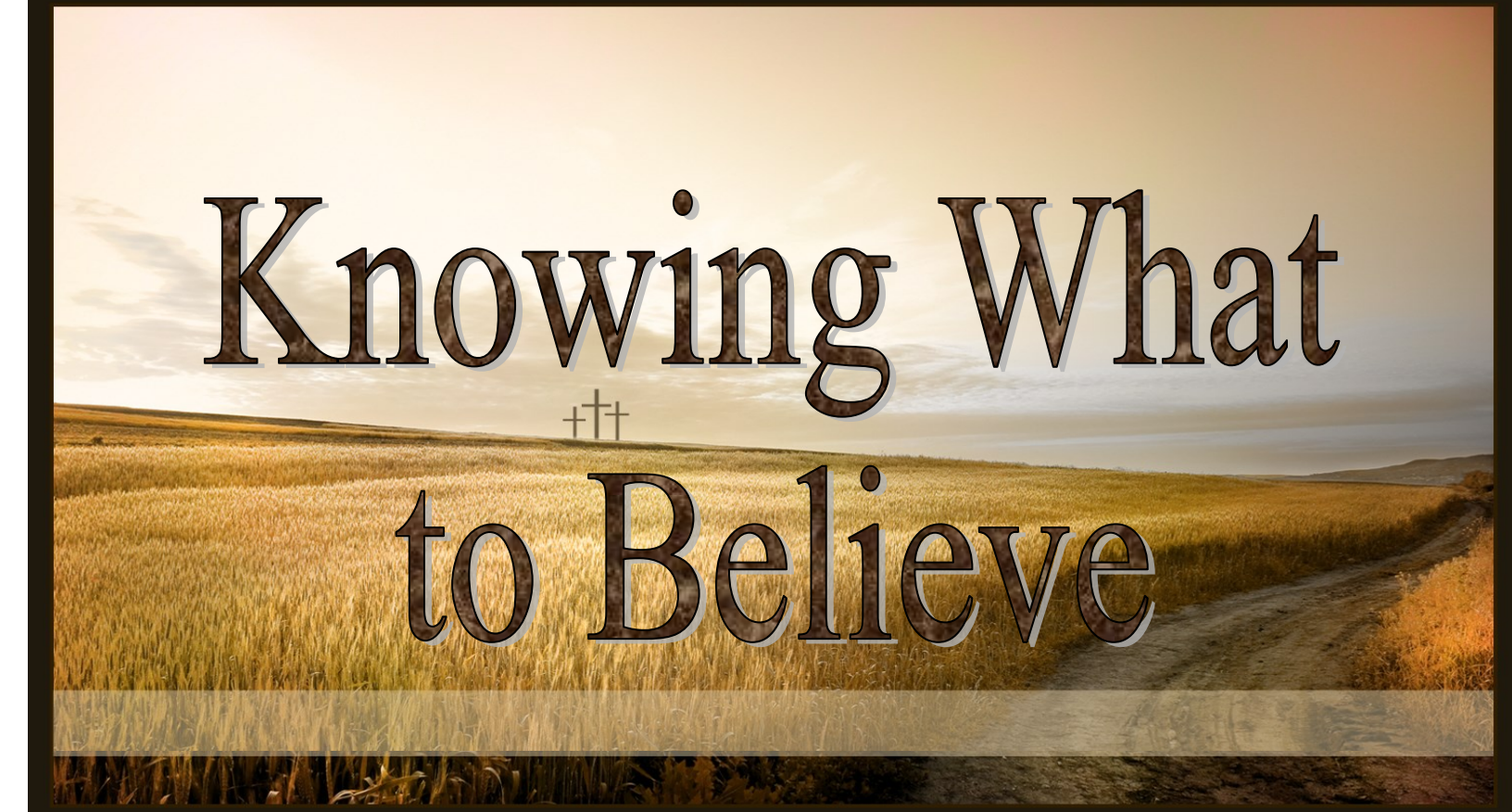
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# Knowing What to Believe

***How on earth are we as professing Christians going to make it if, in fact, we are living in the end times, the general time-period of our Lord's return?*** Especially given that Jesus warned us three times in Matthew 24 that the end times would be an era filled with false prophets and false teachers (vss. 4,11,24)? He also warned, "Because of the increase of wickedness, the love of most will grow cold, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved" (vss. 12,13).

How do we learn to stand firm? Three factors will influence this more than anything else: 1) your beliefs about ***your faith*** (Who will be your Lord?); 2) your beliefs about ***your family*** (How will you handle sex and marriage?); and 3) your beliefs about ***your future*** (What will be your life's mission?). These are your foundations, the anchors that will impact your journey upon this planet more than anything else. We are all at different points along life's journey. Some of us have just set sail, some of us are in the middle of the voyage, and some of us further still. Just remember, today is the first day of the rest of your life! If course corrections are needed, ***start now!***





# Knowing What to Believe...About Your Faith

We are living in a post-Christian era. In a recent Pew Forum Survey, 55% of Americans were unable to name the four gospels, 54% didn't know that Luther launched the Reformation, and amazingly, 30% didn't know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. What?! Three out of ten people in America don't know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? Could this possibly be true?

Surely this is primarily due to a shocking drop in childhood religious education. While only 6% of Americans in a 1952 Gallup poll reported no religious education as a child, this had jumped to 31% by 1987, and today hovers somewhere around half of all Americans.



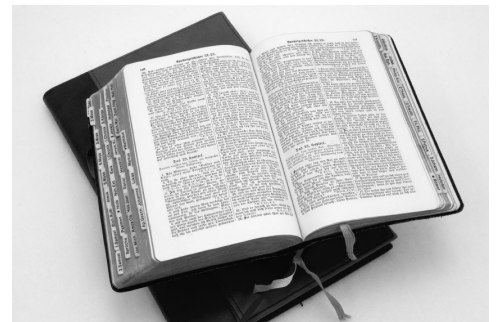
Not only are we living in a biblically illiterate age, what little is known is often nothing more than worn-out clichés, such as “God will never give you more than you can handle” or “God helps those who help themselves”, neither of which have an ounce of biblical support.

***If you want to be one who “stands firm to the end” (Matthew 24:13), your faith must be solidly founded on the person of Jesus Christ. This is core conviction number one!***

Who else is responsible for splitting history in half? He is the reason we have BC and AD! There has simply never been anyone quite like him. No one even comes close to being as great or as good or as just as Jesus. As believers, we will need to remind ourselves often of this fact as we journey through an era where the light of the gospel has grown dim.

## 1. The greatness of Jesus Christ is based on four factors.

a) **His Word.** John 1:1-2 says, “*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.*” It is interesting that Jesus self-identifies as the Word. He is himself a living, walking, breathing representation of God, and he inspired the writing of a collection of 66 books by over 40 authors constructed over a 1500-year period of time, a record that is the complete revelation of His will and His character. This Word finds independent verification in corroborating historical records, archaeological finds, and in prophecies that have been literally and specifically fulfilled.



b) **His Creation.** Jesus was there with God the Father in Genesis 1:1, where it says, “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.*” Everything in the universe bears witness of a careful designer. It is far more logical to believe in a divine Creator than that our universe came to pass through a series of chance processes that evolved simple organisms into more complex organisms. Evolution on this scale defies logic and the Second Law of Thermodynamics (or entropy), the tendency for everything to go from order to disorder.

- c) **His Resurrection.** In Matthew 28:7, the angel at the tomb told the women who were expecting to find a dead body, *“He is not here; he has risen just as he said.”* This foundational truth also has strong historical confirmation in the fact that the followers of Jesus Christ were radically changed from that day forward. Many, if not most of them were martyred for their faith. People will not die for what they know to be a lie. They saw him with their own eyes and believed.
- d) **His Return.** Finally, the greatness of our Lord is evident because of his coming again. When Jesus ascended into heaven, the two angels that were standing there said, *“This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”* Acts 1:11. This doctrine also has the corroborating proof of over a hundred prophecies that have been fulfilled in the last hundred years, all pointing to the soon return of Jesus Christ. I have documented these in a previous booklet. Chief among these prophecies is the greatest historical miracle in modern times, the establishment of the state of Israel after being exiled some 1900 years ago to over 70 countries on every continent on earth. I have seen that amazing land with my own eyes on three occasions, and it is a living testimony to the faithfulness and sovereignty of our Lord.



Back in the 1960s, when the United States lived under the constant threat of a massive nuclear attack, we had a bomb shelter at our little country school where we were to retreat in the event of such an attack. It was a fall-out shelter – the basement of our two-room red brick school.

Where do you go when your faith is tested? What do you do when your values are assaulted? How do you respond when your core beliefs are attacked? I want to encourage you to build a fall-out shelter, a place of refuge where you will go. The foundation of your refuge should be these four pillars demonstrating the integrity of Jesus: His Word, His Creation, His Resurrection, and His Coming Again.

It is also important to know that Jesus is good through and through. He is someone in whom you can find comfort and security.

## 2. His Goodness is based on three factors.



- a) **His Incarnation.** Matthew 1:23 says about the birth of Jesus, *“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel which means, ‘God with us.’”* Do you ever need to know that God is with you? Boy, I sure do. Think about this. Hymn writer Dottie Rambo, says in *If That Isn’t Love*, *“He left the splendor of heaven knowing his destiny was a lonely hill on Golgotha, there to lay down his life for me. If that isn’t love, then the ocean is dry, there’s no star in the sky, and the sparrow can’t fly! If that isn’t love, then heaven’s a myth, there’s no feeling like this, if that isn’t love.”*





b) **His Crucifixion.** In an unusual way, Jesus was the only man who was literally born to die. This was his primary mission as our Savior. I Peter 2:24-25 says, *“He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”* Yes, he died for you and he died for me. Jesus also said, *“Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends.”* John 15:13.

c) **His Preparation of Heaven.** Even better yet, he is preparing a place for you and me. Jesus said, *“In my Father’s house are many rooms...I am going there to prepare a place for you. If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”* John 14:2-3. Jesus Christ has been preparing a place for every believer for the last 2000 years. Think about it – if he created our present world in six days, think what he has waiting for us in heaven, a place he has been working on for twenty centuries. Oh, how good and gracious our Lord Jesus is. In times of trouble and testing, I repeatedly remind myself of this. He is indeed a good Master.

What’s amazing about Jesus is that his goodness is perfectly balanced with his justice. For me, it is a great encouragement to know that he will not indefinitely tolerate evil. He will overcome it. He will destroy it. All wrongs will be made right.

### 3. His Justice is based on three factors.

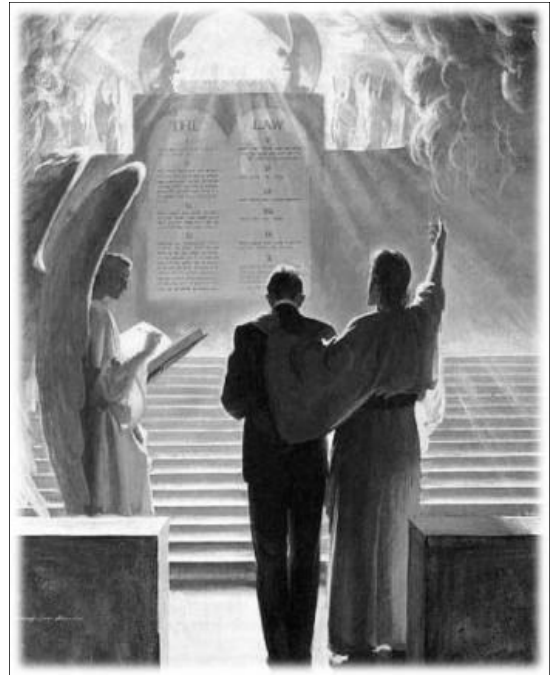
a) **His Atonement.** Man’s sin and rebellion will not be allowed to continue unchecked. Thankfully, Jesus provided a remedy for sin at the Cross, *“a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”* Romans 3:25. By trusting in Jesus to save us, we can have our sins paid in full. The prophet Isaiah describes it like this, *“He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”* Isaiah 53:5. This forgiveness, peace, and healing is available to us when we place our trust in Jesus as our Savior! Isn’t this awesome?!

b) **His Victory.** The Satanic rebellion will also end. Revelation 20:10 says, *“The devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown. They will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”* This is where the devil is headed. Don’t forget that. He is going down! He may be alive today and still deceiving the nations, but he is a defeated foe. Way back in the garden of Eden, God said to the serpent, *“He (the Messiah) will crush your head.”* Genesis 3:15. That’s what Jesus did to Satan on the cross. The



back of his power has been broken, and at the end of the Millennium, he will be finished off. So don't ever cast your lot with him, no matter how attractive he makes temptation look. He is a crafty foe, a foxy enemy. He is subtle and diabolical. He makes temptation look so good. But Satan is going down.

- c) **His Final Judgment.** All evil will be brought to account. Every deed will be weighed by Jesus at the last judgment. What we do and how we live matters.



***For believers, all of our sins have been cleansed by the atoning blood of Christ, so our deeds after our conversion to Christ are weighed solely for the purpose of giving rewards.*** I Corinthians 3:13-15 says of the believer, “*His work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*” Some believers will have many rewards, while others will have fewer.

This is serious stuff, folks. We have to remind ourselves as believers that our deeds matter. This reward day is going to be a glorious day. Everything we’ve done for Christ will stand the test of time, and it will be rewarded in ways that we can’t even imagine. This should inspire us to give it all we’ve got in serving our Master. We want to make our lives count!

***For unbelievers, however, their deeds will be weighed in order that their penalty would be commensurate with their offense.*** Revelation 20:13 says, “*The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what he had done.*” Theologians call this the Great White Throne Judgment. It’s the judgment of unbelievers who will eternally pay for their own sins in hell because they rejected the free offer of forgiveness and grace offered by Jesus Christ.

Believers, we must never forget that we are on the winning team because of the greatness, goodness, and justice of our champion, Jesus Christ. Until you take your dying breath, don’t ever give up the ship! The other side is going down. Humanism, hedonism, post modernism, relativism, and all the other isms are heading toward a dead end. Hang on tight to the most important of all your core convictions, knowing what you believe. It begins and ends with Jesus Christ! Stick with him, and you’ll be a winner too!

# Knowing What to Believe...About Your Family

When I was a teenager, I was taught that the most important question anyone will ever face is, “What will I do with Jesus Christ?” The second most important question, we were taught, is “Who will I marry?” Even though a few decades have passed since then, I couldn’t agree more with this assessment. The whole issue of how you will handle this entire area of your life is of immeasurable importance.

I became a teenager in the summer of 1971, right square in the middle of one of the most turbulent eras in American history. There were race riots across the country, anti-war protests at our universities, and our wounded soldiers returning from Vietnam were spit upon, jeered and humiliated. It was the age of Woodstock, rock and roll, hippies, LSD, the Pill, abortion, and above all, free love.

A huge new study on American religion, *American Grace* by Robert Putnam & David Campbell, concludes that there is one, single earthquake event that towers over everything else in understanding the massive changes in our country in the last sixty years. It’s the sexual revolution in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

To understand the sexual revolution, all you have to do is study how Americans answered one question: Is premarital sex morally wrong? Among Catholics, a poll in 1963 found that 74% believed that premarital sex was wrong - by 1974, that figure was less than half (35%). Among the general public, in 1969, 76% believed premarital sex was wrong, which fell to 53% by 1973, and to 38% by 1982. This simply represents the aging of those who grew up in the 60’s because in the late 60’s, about 80% of young people believed that premarital sex was okay, while about 80% of the elderly said it wasn’t.

Well, we all know what has happened since then – one form of immorality has opened the door to every other form of immorality – homosexuality, adultery, any and every form of pornography, abortion on demand to the tune of 40 million innocent victims, and on and on we could go.

Clearly, what we believe about sex acts as a pivot point for our individual happiness and well-being, as well as our happiness and well-being as a society. This is portrayed in a chart on the following page.

If you believe in sex without boundaries, it soon threatens the sanctity of life and marriage, which de-

## Catholics Who Agree Premarital Sex is Morally Wrong:

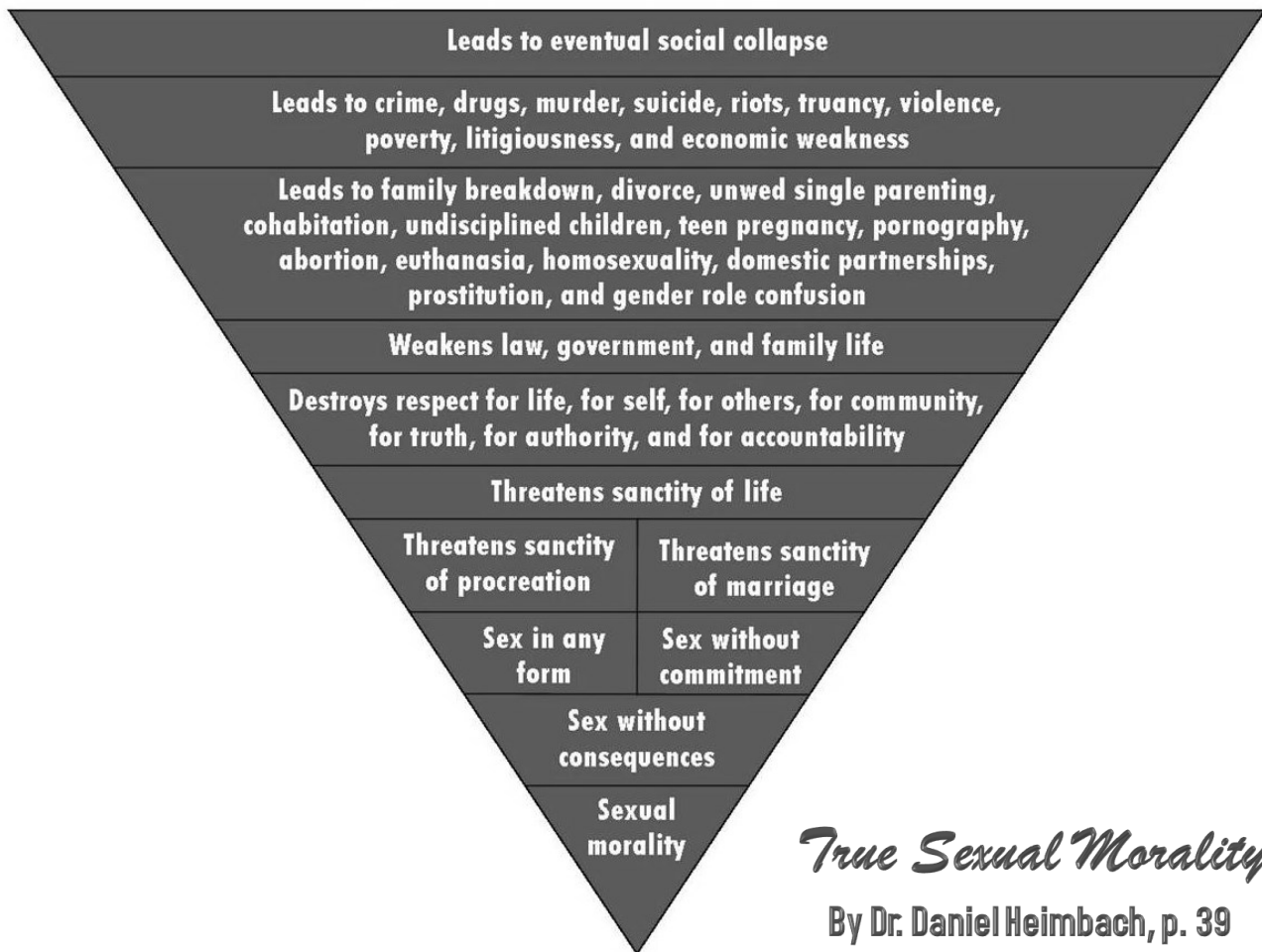
1963	74%
1974	35%

## General Population Who Agree Premari- tal Sex is Morally Wrong:

1969	76%
1973	53%
1982	38%



# Sexual Morality as Pivot Point for the Moral Crisis



stroys self-respect and respect for others, which weakens our government and our families, which leads to a wholesale breakdown in our families, which leads to a wholesale breakdown in our society, which eventually leads to collapse. The Bible teaches three bedrock principles regarding family life that are very important for us to incorporate.

**The first bedrock principle is that sex is precious.** It is far more precious than a houseful of rare diamonds. If you had a houseful of rare diamonds, you'd have to guard it like Fort Knox. And that's what you need to do with your sexuality. You need to guard it like it's the most precious thing in the world - because it is.

When God first designed sex in Genesis chapter 2, this is how he explained it, starting in verse 20: *“For Adam no suitable helper was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. The man said, ‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. She shall be called ‘woman’, for she was taken out of man.’ For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”* God designed sex to be precious, having seven positive qualities.

**First, it is to be personal or relational.** Adam said of his wife that she is *'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'*. Sex is deeply personal and relational. That's why the Bible presents our relationship as believers to Christ as similar to the relationship of a husband to a wife – the most personal of relationships.

**Second, sex is to be exclusive or unique** – the two become one flesh. Jesus said, *"What God has joined together, let no one separate."*

**Third, sex is to be intimate – it is to be profound.** The Bible says, *"A man will leave his father and his mother, and be united to his wife."* Some translations say that he should *'hold fast'* to his wife, which means to cling to someone with deep, genuine affection and loyalty. Nothing is to come between a husband and wife – no divisions, no competing loyalties, no separate priorities. Nothing!

**Fourth, sex is to be fruitful or productive.** After all, this was the very first command that God gives in the Bible – *"Be fruitful and multiply and fill and earth."* *Genesis 1:28*. This is the norm – there are exceptions. God calls some to be single and some to be childless – sometimes by choice, and sometimes not by choice. The apostle Paul hints at this in I Corinthians 7:26 when he says, *"I think that in view of the present distress it is good for a person to remain as he is."* Nevertheless, one of the qualities that makes sex so precious is that it has the potential to be used of God to produce human life. My wife Sue and I experienced this four times and we wouldn't trade that experience for anything in the world.

**Fifth, sex is to be selfless and sacrificial.** I Corinthians 7:4 says, *"The wife's body does not belong to her alone, but also to her husband. In the same way, the husband's body does not belong to him alone, but also to his wife."* Unselfishness is the key to sexual satisfaction as it is to marital satisfaction as a whole. In fact, a couple's sexual relationship is often a microcosm of their marital relationship. Unselfishness is key.

**Sixth, sex is complex and multi-dimensional.** The Bible teaches that God made us with at least three dimensions – bodies (*'soma'* in the Greek), souls (*'psyche'* in the Greek), and spirits (*'pneuma'* in the Greek). When you have sex with someone, there is a uniting of more than just bodies – there is a uniting of souls and spirits. The world doesn't understand this, seeing this as an animal-like act. But animals don't have a soul or a spirit. Humans do. The Bible says, *"May your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ."* *I Thessalonians 5:23*.

**Seventh, sex is complementary – it unites corresponding differences.** It unites beings made for each other. God told Adam, *"It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him."* *Genesis 2:18*. And that helper was Eve, a woman. She was his equal, and yet different. She fit. She was suitable. No other kind of sexual relationship will do.

Now when you put this all together, you can see why sex is so precious. It's one of the most precious gifts that we are given as human beings. God intended it to be personal, exclusive, intimate, fruitful, selfless, complex, and complementary. When it is all those things, it is absolutely beautiful. It's like a house full of rare diamonds. And it is wonderful foundation upon which to build our second bedrock principle.

**The second bedrock principle is that marriage is permanent.** Jesus said, “*What God has joined together, let no one put asunder.*” When you fool around with someone else’s spouse, you are not just messing with that person, you are messing with God himself. Nine chapters of warning after warning are given in Proverbs 1-9 about the consequences of adultery. And by the way, when you have premarital sex, you have no way of knowing for sure if you are messing with someone else’s spouse. There are a hundred different things that could come up to prevent that marriage from occurring, and your partner may go on to marry another person. And they and you are left with the memories of your experience. Does God forgive when we are sincerely repentant? Absolutely. But there may also be lasting emotional scars, as many can attest to.



God intended marriage to be permanent. Proverbs 5:18-19 says, “*Rejoice in the wife of your youth. A loving doe, a graceful deer – may her breasts satisfy you always, may you ever be captivated by her love.*” The word ‘captivated’ means ‘to be intoxicated’ – to be drunk with her love.

Recently my wife and I were having lunch together at the Granite City restaurant in St. Cloud. A guy in his mid-forties and a gal maybe a decade younger were sitting close by - absolutely mesmerized with each other. I said to my wife, “I sure hope that’s a good situation, and isn’t some kind of affair or something.” A smile never left her face. She laughed at every joke he told. I mean, isn’t that a sign of a great wife – still laughing at your jokes many years later?

God intended the marriage partnership to consist of four dimensions. **First, your partner should be your best friend**, because the Bible says “*it is not good for man to be alone*” – your partner should be someone you love to hang out with and do the things that friends do together. **Second, your partner should be your confidante.** The Bible describes this as a “*suitable helper*” – the sharer of your secrets – someone you can bare your soul to. **Third, your partner should be your soul-mate**, because



the Bible says, “*What fellowship can the light have with darkness?*” II Corinthians 6:14. Your partner should be someone you can pursue God with – pray with, worship with, and share your spiritual walk with. And **finally, your partner should be your lover**, someone with whom you are “*one flesh*”. Before marriage, you can work on the first three dimensions. After marriage, you can work on the last dimension – your sexual relationship. That will be the icing on the cake, an unbreakable bond that will cement together an already very strong bond.

Marriage should be permanent – Jesus said, “*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning.*” Matthew 19:8. This was never God’s original plan. Of course we need to be aware that the Lord sees all things. Some of us have had divorce forced upon us. Others of us were guilty of sin in this area, and

we have repented of that and been forgiven of that. Yet, the scars often remain. For those of you who aren't married, but expect to be someday, I want to challenge you to treat sex as the most precious gift in the world and marriage as the most permanent gift in the world.

If you do that, you have built a wonderful foundation upon which to understand **the third bedrock principle – that children are priceless!**

A hundred years ago, a man and wife may not have had two nickels to rub together, but if they had lots of kids, they thought they were millionaires. Today, more and more couples are saying, "I'll take the money." Kids are a hassle. Kids cramp our lifestyle. Kids are messy. They take too much time and energy and they take all your money and on and on we can go.

Across the Western world (the US, Canada, and Europe) birth rates are plummeting. In fact, in the 31 nations of the European union, the fertility rate is 1.38, far below the 2.11 rate that is needed for a culture to sustain itself. They are living off immigrants, mostly Islamic immigrants. Here in the US and Canada, the fertility rate among the Anglo population is 1.6 per couple. If you factor in the Latino population here in the US, it is 2.1, the bare minimum needed to sustain our culture.

On a recent trip to Italy, our host informed us that approximately 80% of the teens and children were immigrants. I asked how that could be and he said, "The Italians want to have fun, and party and stay out late, and not be tied down. They don't have time for babies."

The Bible says something different. Psalm 127:3-5 says, "*Sons are a heritage from the Lord, children a reward from him. Like arrows in the hands of a warrior are sons born in one's youth. Blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them.*" Psalm 128:1-6 says, "*Blessed are all who fear the Lord...your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord...may you live to see your children's children.*"

My wife Sue and I have often talked about the blessings our children have brought into our lives. In fact, as a father, I can't even imagine a life without Bethany, Anna, Carrie, and Kelly. They are the light of my life. They are the center of my hopes and dreams for the future. They are unquestionably the most important legacy that I will leave on this earth.

If you are single and hoping someday to marry, don't leave children out of the equation. And if for some reason you are unable to have children, check out adoption. Children are a heritage from the Lord – they are priceless!

This is powerfully illustrated in a biography I recently read of Ruth von Kleist, the grandmother of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's fiancée. Bonhoeffer was the German pastor who stood up against Hitler, as did Ruth.

Ruth actually was born into an aristocratic Prussian family and related to the famed Otto von Bismarck, acknowledged as the founder of modern Germany. They were strong supporters of another Prussian, Kaiser Wilhelm, who led Germany in WW1. What I found intriguing about the Prussian aristocracy was how they did courtship and marriage. Every fall of the year would begin the ball season – big, fancy dances where eligible bachelors would dance with eligible young ladies, and hopefully strike up a match. Each lady had a dance card which needed to include several gentlemen so nobody was left out.



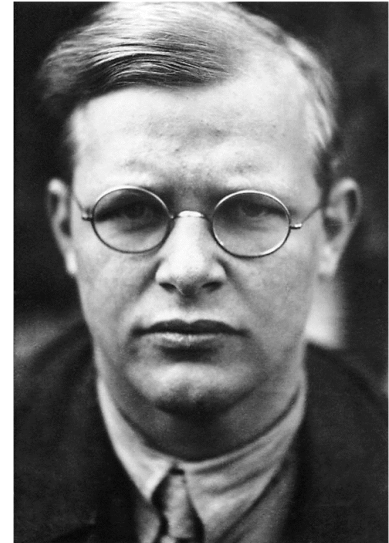
Ruth Von Kleist & Dietrich Bonhoeffer

Ruth's husband died at a young age, so she had to give her approval as each of her five children went through the process of finding a mate. When a suitor named Hans came to ask for the hand of her youngest daughter, she asked him, "Do you love my daughter?" "No," he replied, "But I do know I want to marry her and that I must marry her. I believe that this assurance is the most important basis for a marriage." "Well", Ruth asked, "Do you believe then that my daughter loves you?"

This time he answered, "I have no idea whether or not she loves me. Why, I have hardly spoken a word with her!" Ruth gave her blessing, and two days later, her youngest daughter known as Ruthchen (little Ruth), accepted the proposal of Hans von Wedemeyer and they went on to have a long and happy marriage. Their third child (out of seven) was a godly young lady named Maria von Wedemeyer, who as an 18-year-old fell in love with 36-year-old Dietrich Bonhoeffer.



**Maria Von Wedemeyer**



**Dietrich Bonhoeffer**

History records that there were no finer children in the world than the children produced by the Prussian aristocracy. They were born and bred to lead and to achieve, and that's exactly what they did. The heart of the German officer corps in both the first and second world war came from the Prussian aristocracy. That is why they were such formidable opponents. The German officers were highly disciplined, imaginative and creative – excellent officers in every way. Though many of them were staunchly opposed to Hitler and conspired against him, they were still loyal to the Fatherland and put their brilliance to work in building the German military machine. Virtually single-handedly they fought against the whole world, and almost won.

Why were they so formidable? They followed in the footsteps of a long heritage of traditional biblical Christianity. They treated sex as precious – virginity was carefully guarded by the whole community and society. They treated marriage as permanent – divorce was scandalous and virtually unheard of. And they treated children as priceless – no society invested more of itself into the rearing of their children than the Prussian aristocracy.

Today I want to challenge you to incorporate these same core convictions about family. Not only will you survive, this will enable you to thrive in our humanistic, postmodern relativistic culture.



# Knowing What to Believe...About Your Future

I'm a sucker for personality tests. From the *Taylor-Johnson Temperament Analysis*, I learned that I like to talk through my problems. From the *Myers-Brigg Type Indicator*, I learned that I need to get away from people to recharge my batteries. From the *DISC Personality Inventory*, I learned that I'm a traditionalist that doesn't like a lot of change. From the *MMPI*, I learned that I'm a hypochondriac and obsessive-compulsive – Yuck!

From the *Ministry Match*, I learned that I am highly proactive and perseverant. From *Leading From Your Strengths*, I learned that I am thorough, diplomatic, and analytical. From the *Prepare Premarital Inventory*, I learned that I am a very lucky guy to be married to such a tolerant and exceptional woman!

Now I happen to love these testing tools cause I am 52 years old and much of this is all starting to come together for me. By the time I'm 80 I might have it pretty well figured out.



DISC Personality Test

Do you remember the first time you asked yourself, “Why am I here?” After you have established core convictions about faith and family, I can't think of a better area to invest in than your future. What is your unique purpose on this planet?

Rick Warren points out in his book *The Purpose Driven Life* that the DNA molecules in a human being can unite in an infinite number of ways. The number is 10 to the 2,400,000,000 power. This number is the likelihood that you'd find someone just like you. If you wrote out that number with each zero being an inch wide, you'd need a strip of paper 37,000 miles long.

I think it's safe to say that you are unique. There is no one quite like you, and the Bible teaches that there are three sets of gifts that God gave you that will go a long way in determining your purpose on this earth. Let's look at them one by one.

**First of all, there are gifts that were given to you at creation.** When God created the world, it was determined by him that you would be made in the image of God. In Genesis 1:26-27, God said, “*Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.*’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

Now there are several things that you need to understand about yourself right off the bat. ***Most importantly, you need to understand that you are made in the image of a triune God*** – that's why the plural pronoun is used in this verse. *Let us make man in our image.* God is one being reflected in three persons – God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. You are one being reflected in three parts – you are body - *soma*, soul - *psyche* (your mind, will, and emotions), and spirit - *pneuma* (the part of you that communes with God). I Thessalonians 5:23 says, “*May your whole spirit, soul, and body be kept blameless...*”

**You also need to understand that you are made as the crown of God's creation.** "Let them rule over the fish of the sea..." You are given authority over all the rest of creation. You are more important than the earth – more important than the environment – more important than endangered species.

**Another important fact to know is that God chose your gender.** "Male and female he created them." We are to be content with our gender, we are to be distinct with our gender, and in fact rejoice in our gender. We are not to dress like the other gender or act like the other gender – I Corinthians 11:14 calls that a 'disgrace'.

**Finally, you need to know that God planned you even before the foundations of the world were laid.** Ephesians 1:4 says, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world..."

Being made in the image of God is an awesome thing. It means we have the capacity to love and rejoice and be sad and grieve and feel and think. Nothing else in the universe was made in the image of God except for human beings.



Ethel Waters

You see, what this tells us is that God didn't make any mistakes. Of course, sometimes the circumstances of our lives may cause us to think that.

Ethel Waters, for example, was conceived when her mother was raped as a 13-year old girl. But she went on to be a world-famous soloist with the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

John Walvoord's mother got very sick when she was pregnant with him. The doctor recommended an abortion, which she refused. She went on to live to over 100. John matured into a big, tall man who served as president of Dallas Theological Seminary, as well as becoming an outstanding author and preacher. He died at 92.

Leslie Lynch King's parents split up when he was 16 days old. He moved from home to home until his mother finally remarried a man named Gerald R. Ford. They then renamed her son Gerald R. Ford, who went on to become the 38<sup>th</sup> president of the United States.

Joni Eareckson Tada became a quadriplegic at 17 years of age from a diving accident. She could easily have thought her life was essentially over, but God had other plans.

You are made in the image of God. You are not a mistake. You are not a 'whoops'. Until God calls you home, he has a plan and purpose for you.



Gerald R. Ford

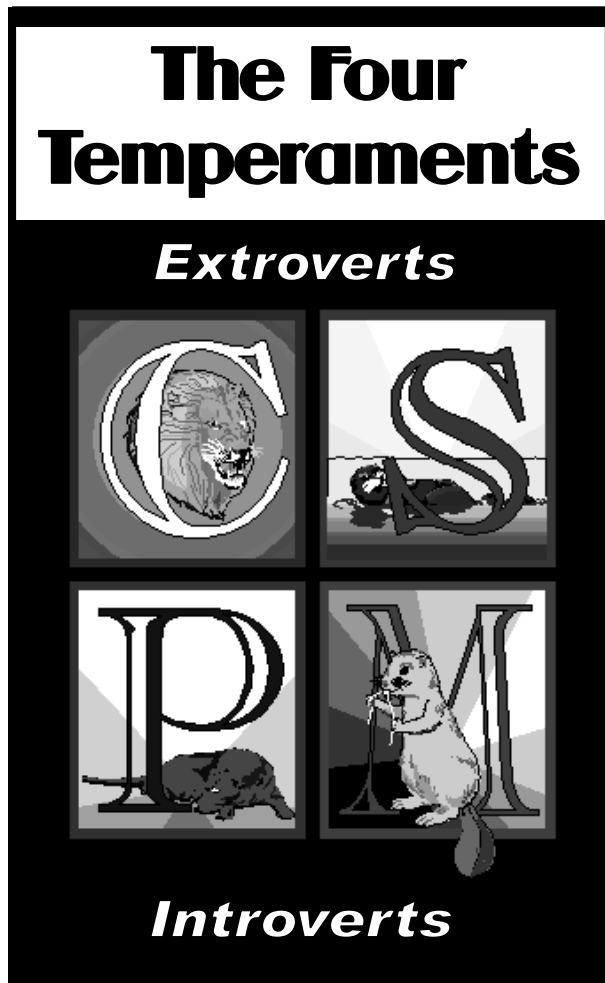
**Second, God gave you gifts at your conception.** Psalm 139:13-

18 says, "For you created my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body...How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand!"

Have you ever thought about the fact that our God is an infinite God, and therefore he can think of an infinite amount of things at the same time? He's not like us. I'm always amazed that my wife can think of about six things at the same time, while I can only think of one. God, however, can think about a zillion things at one time, so therefore it is completely within the realm of possibility for him to think about you continually – as often as there are grains of sand!

To design you, the Bible says that God knit you together using the genetic makeup of your father and your mother. You may resemble your other family members and yet you are uniquely different. You have a specific personality type, with a wide array of strengths and weaknesses. My obsessive compulsive tendencies mean that I have an amazing ability to concentrate – to read, to study, to research, to understand, and to explain. On the other hand, my obsessive compulsive tendencies can easily lead me to be overly-analytical and to try to solve problems in my own human strength.

When we are operating in the spirit, our weaknesses help us to see how much we need God and others. No one has the whole package. We need spouses, family members, co-workers, and friends to help us compensate for our weak areas. They help us make course corrections. In fact, they bring out the best in us.



Think about your main personality strengths. Maybe you're a good leader (lion personality; also known as the *choleric* temperament) or have a great sense of humor (an otter personality; also known as the *sanguine* temperament). Maybe you are loyal and dependable (a golden retriever personality or *phlegmatic* temperament) or maybe you're a great detail person (a beaver personality or *melancholy* temperament).

Although you can't change your basic personality, you can ask God to refine and sharpen you so that you become the best version of yourself. Malachi 3:3 says, "*He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who bring offerings in righteousness.*"

God did this to Abraham Lincoln during his first two years as president. He faced the constant pressures of conducting a war that was going badly for the Union, combined with an unstable marriage and the death of his precious son, Willie. It crushed him. It brought him to his knees. But out of the ashes of these experiences he found the Lord. As he humbled himself, God gave him incredible leadership gifts that were absolutely extraordinary.

Are you ready to let God do that for you? Are you ready to let the refiner's fire burn away the chaff and bring out the best in you?

**Third, God gave you gifts at your conversion.** These are often called spiritual gifts. Twenty-one are mentioned in Scripture. I Corinthians 12:7,11 says, "*Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom,*

to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith...All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.”

**Every believer has at least one spiritual gift**, for the Scripture says, “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given...” This means at least one of these twenty-one gifts are yours:

<b>Spiritual Gifts</b>		
1) Helps	8) Shepherding	15) Discernment
2) Service	9) Giving	16) Leadership
3) Mercy	10) Faith	17) Administration
4) Teaching	11) Evangelism	18) Healing
5) Prophecy	12) Apostle	19) Miracles
6) Exhortation	13) Wisdom	20) Tongues
7) Hospitality	14) Knowledge	21) Interpretation of Tongues
<b>Romans 12:6-8; I Corinthians 12:7-11; Ephesians 4:11-12; I Peter 4:9-12</b>		

**Note too that the gifts are distributed according to the discretion of the Spirit.** God gives you these gifts.

**We must also understand that they are given for the common good.** Spiritual gifts are not given to enrich you or to make you happy or to make you famous or for any selfish purpose. Rather they are given so that you can bless and serve others.

II Timothy 3:2-4 says that in the end times, people will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, and lovers of pleasure. Do you see that happening today? If you are a lover of yourself, we call that narcissism. If you are a lover of money, we call that materialism. If you are a lover of pleasure, we call that hedonism. Many philosophers have noted that these three isms often lead to a fourth - nihilism. Nihilism is meaninglessness. When you become obsessively focused on yourself, and all you can think about is money and pleasure, it isn't long before you are bored out of your gourd. King Solomon discovered that wealth, fame, and a thousand women led to nothing but “*Vanity, vanity, everything is vanity.*” *Ecclesiastes 12:8.*

When Rick Warren penned his excellent book *The Purpose Driven Life*, the first sentence of the book is the most profound that I've ever read about finding fulfillment. Pastor Warren begins by saying, “It's not about you.” Then he continues, “The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It's far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. If you want to know why you were placed on this planet, you must begin with God. You were born by his purpose and for his purpose.”



In the spring of 2006, several from our church had the opportunity to tour the land of Israel. One of the last places we visited was the Yad Vashem Museum, which is Israel's Holocaust museum. As you enter, you go under an arch inscribed with these words, *"I will put my breath in you and you shall live again, and I will set you upon your own soil."* Ezekiel 37:14.

Photographing this arch ended up being a signature moment in my life as the Lord impressed upon me that he was marvelously at work fulfilling prophecies and signaling to the world that his return is near. Arriving home, I preached through Revelation (77 messages) and then through the signs pointing to Christ's soon return (21 messages). That ended up leading to a revision of our church vision statement. Our leadership affirmed that God had called us to "raise up a faithful generation full of truth, purity, and zeal for the Lord". This led to a revision of my own personal vision statement – to give leadership in making this happen.

How about you? What mountain is God calling you to climb? What challenge is God calling you to embrace? What great purpose and destiny does he have for you?







# Knowing When to Separate

Throughout my middle school and high school years, my infant Christian faith was under constant attack by the forces of darkness. If I wanted to survive, I had to learn more than just what I believed; I had to learn when to separate. This is going to be especially important during the end times, as Satan attacks with great fury *“because he knows that his time is short.”* (Revelation 12:12).

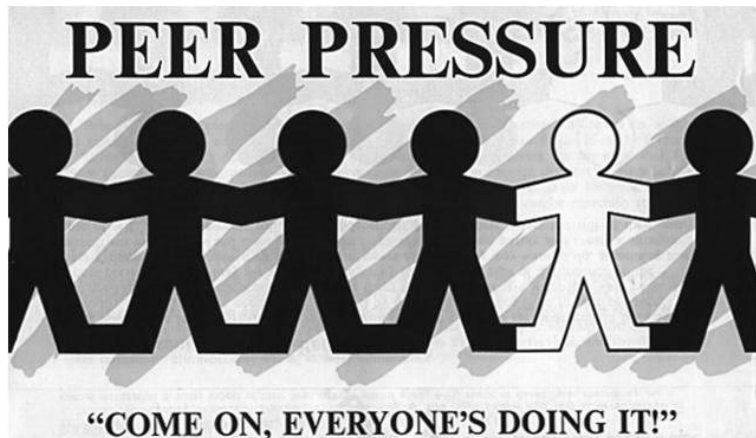
In the Old Testament, the Lord constantly reminds his people that they are to be holy. Being *‘holy’* literally means to be *‘set apart’* (see Isaiah 52:11; Ezekiel 20:34,41). In the New Testament, God’s people are called *‘the church’*, which literally means, *‘the called out ones’*. In II Corinthians 6:14, we are commanded, *“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?”* In this next trilogy of core convictions, I will lay out the three primary groups (peers, persuaders, and the popular) that are most toxic to our faith. We will examine the warnings that are clearly laid out in the Scriptures as to when we are to separate from them.



# Knowing When to Separate...From Your Peers

Eighth grade was a pivotal year in my Christian walk. Early that year, in an attempt to raise my social status, I started to hang out with some kids that were definitely heading in the wrong direction. Thankfully, praying parents and an evangelist coming to our church that spring brought me to my senses. By 9<sup>th</sup> grade, I had pretty well set my sail in a direction far, far, away from drinking parties, sexual temptations, and various other elements of the typical high school social scene.

My guess is that most believers can readily identify with such pivotal moments in their early years. Whether you realized it at the time or not, the trajectory of your life was probably significantly impacted based on how you responded to the peer pressure that you faced. That's because there is one thing that is absolutely certain about human behavior – *you will become like the people you hang out with.* No person is an island. God created us as relational creatures. You can see this in the eyes of a newborn which will automatically latch on to a human face while ignoring virtually everything else.



Interestingly, even Adam succumbed to peer pressure. He knew what God had forbidden, and yet was swept away by the deception of his wife, who was herself swept away by the deception of the serpent.

Joseph's brothers were swayed by Judah to sell Joseph into slavery, even though they knew it would nearly kill their father. Aaron, the priest, was pressured by the crowds to make a golden calf for a god, even though he knew this was clearly wrong. Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, was pressured by his foreign wives to worship false gods. The Lord had repeatedly warned him, yet he did it anyway and paid an awful price.

That's why the very first verses in the Psalms say this, *“Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but his delight is in the law of the Lord.” Psalm 1:1-2.*

In like manner, the book of Proverbs repeatedly warns us against the enticement of peer pressure. In one passage (Proverbs 2:12-19), we see six categories of immoral people to keep your distance from.

**First, we need to be careful of close association with perverse talkers.** Proverbs 2:12 says, *“Wisdom will save you from the ways of wicked men, from men whose words are perverse.”*

There's a little jingle that most of us remember from childhood. It goes like this, “Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.” Baloney! Words do hurt. And words have consequences.

It has been estimated for every word that Hitler wrote in his book *Mein Kampf*, 125 people died in World War II. Proverbs 18:21 says, *“The tongue has the power of life and death.”* The apostle James likened the tongue to a forest fire or a deadly poison. It has that kind of power.

Of course, there are a lot of perverse speakers out there. You may even work for one or with one. Your neighbor may be a perverse speaker, or your relative. They are unavoidable, which is why I Corinthians 5:9-11 reminds us that we will need to do business with them, live next to them, work with them, etc. Where we draw the line is when it comes to close friendships and partnerships, especially with those who profess to be Christians.

Playing sports all through high school, I spent a lot of time in locker rooms. I know how a lot of guys talk about women and the disrespect they have for them, and I know how a lot of guys talk about God, without any respect for Him. Early on, I knew these people could not be my closest friends, or very soon, I would become just like them. *“Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character.’” I Corinthians 15:33.*

**Second, keep your distance from excessive drinkers.**

Verse 13 says, *“...Who leave the straight paths to walk in dark ways.”* One of those dark ways is further described in Proverbs 23:19-20, where it says, *“Listen, my son, and be wise and keep your heart on the right path. Do not join those who drink too much wine.”*

If you get involved in the party scene in high school or college or with the guys after work, or with friends on weekends, there are going to be bad things that are going to start happening in your life. I can guarantee it.

Proverbs 23:29-35 says, *“Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has strife? Who has complaints? Who has needless bruises? Who has bloodshot eyes? Those who linger over wine, who go to sample bowls of mixed wine. Do not gaze at wine when it is red, when it sparkles in the cup, when it goes down smoothly! In the end it bites like a snake and poisons like a viper. Your eyes will see strange sights and your mind imagine confusing things. You will be like one sleeping on the high seas, lying on top of the rigging. ‘They hit me’ you will say ‘but I’m not hurt. They beat me, but I don’t feel it! When will I wake up so I can find another drink?’”*



Put succinctly: If you are looking for trouble and you want some heartache, then start partying the night away! There have been more marriages broken up, more friendships shattered, more money lost, more suicides, more homicides, more bad stuff happen as a result of too much alcohol than just about any other factor out there. Too much booze is a recipe for disaster. Be wise and stay clear.

**Third, stay away from laughing mockers.** Proverbs 2:14 describes them as those *“who delight in doing wrong and rejoice in the perverseness of evil.”* In other words, they don’t have a conscience. There isn’t a tinge of guilt or shame from their behavior. Their consciences have been seared long ago.

One of the qualities of a mocker is a complete disrespect for authority. They don’t respect their parents, or their school authorities, or the police, or their employers, or the government, or the opposite sex or anything else.

The Bible lays out a foundation for respecting authority in the command to honor your father and mother. Ephesians 6:2 describes it as *“the first command with a promise – that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.”*



The way you respond to your parents will tend to be the way you respond to all authority in your life – your teachers, the police, your employer, and any other authority, including God. After all, he’s your heavenly Father.

In my high school, the locker room was always a place of mocking. They mocked the principal, the superintendent, and the teachers. They mocked kids who were too heavy or too clumsy or too short or too tall. They mocked the good students and the poor students and everything in between. The Bible warns, “*Blessed is the man who does not...sit in the seat of mockers.*” *Psalm 1:1*. Keep your distance.

**Fourth, be careful in getting close to clever deceivers.** Proverbs 2:15 identifies them as those “*whose paths are crooked and who are devious in their ways.*”

If you hang around with deceivers, you are going to learn how to deceive, and you may learn to do it well. What’s especially tempting about deceivers is that they may enjoy some initial success. Bernie Madoff, Tom Petters and Denny Hecker were all living high off the hog at one time. Yet, sooner or later, the chickens come home to roost. The Bible puts it this way. “*Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*” *Galatians 6:7-8*.

There is a promise for those who keep honest books, for those whose word is their bond. You will be rewarded. God sees everything. Deceivers soon find out that short-term gain leads to long-term pain!

**Fifth, steer clear of lustful seducers.** Proverbs 2:16 says, “*It (wisdom) will save you also from the adulteress, from the wayward wife with her seductive words.*” Have you ever noticed that excessive drinking, perverse talking, and mocking speech nearly always leads to sexual temptation? Inevitably people who ordinarily would have the good sense to know where to draw boundaries end up in compromising situations.

We know the stories all too well – rapes, STDs, AIDS or unwanted pregnancies, often leading to abortion. Many times there are memories that will haunt you the rest of your life. Far too many people have found the entire course of their life determined by one bad night. As King David found out in his affair with Bathsheba, God is very willing to forgive us of any and all sin, but the consequences may last a lifetime. Steer a wide path around lustful seducers.

**Finally, beware of covenant breakers.** Proverbs 2:17 describes the wayward wife like this, “*(She) has left the partner of her youth and ignored the covenant she made before God. For her house leads down to death and her paths to the spirit of the dead. None who go to her return or attain the paths of life.*”

Too often those of us who are married tend to see our relationship in terms of the horizontal dimension. In other words, I have a tendency to see my marital relationship solely in terms of how this affects my wife. And of course, that’s true. It does affect my wife. But of even greater importance is the vertical dimension – ***the covenant I made with God to be faithful to my wife.*** I promised to cherish her, in sickness and in health, in adversity as well as prosperity. I made this vow to God, and God takes that very, very seriously. If I break that vow, I not only slap my wife in the face, I slap God in the face. That’s a very dangerous thing to do to the Commander in Chief of the Universe.

Here's what I've discovered about myself: If I am in an atmosphere where there is a lot of coarse joking about women and making light of sexual things, that impacts me. I've spent enough time in locker rooms to know that. That's why I've made a point of hanging out with men who respect women, men who love their wives and keep their covenants.

<b>My Top Ten Most Influential Mentors</b>	
<b>Dave Johnson</b>	<b>Chuck Harmon</b>
<b>Lloyd Johnson</b>	<b>Larry Backlund</b>
<b>Don Solstad</b>	<b>Roland Burquest</b>
<b>LaReau Thorwall</b>	<b>Kermit Lundeen</b>
<b>David Larsen</b>	<b>Vern Johnson</b>

My congregation at Annandale Free Church has heard me talk about the ten men who've had the greatest impact on my life: my grandfather, Dave Johnson; my dad, Lloyd Johnson; my father-in-law, Don Solstad; my former district superintendent, LaReau Thorwall; my seminary adviser, David Larsen; my campaign manager (in an ill-fated try for the state legislature), Chuck Harmon; two mentors from my first church, Larry Backlund and Roland Burquest; and two mentors from my present church, Kermit Lundeen and Vern Johnson.

Of the nine who married, each one had a great marriage. It wasn't just an okay marriage or a tolerable marriage, but a great marriage. These men have taught me how to honor my wife - to be kind, good, faithful and loyal to her, and to never entertain any thoughts to the contrary. God honors those who keep their covenants. We are to stay clear of those who don't.

Here's the bottom line, especially for those who are young or who are new believers. Stay clear of perverse speakers, excessive drinkers, laughing mockers, clever deceivers, lustful seducers, and covenant breakers.

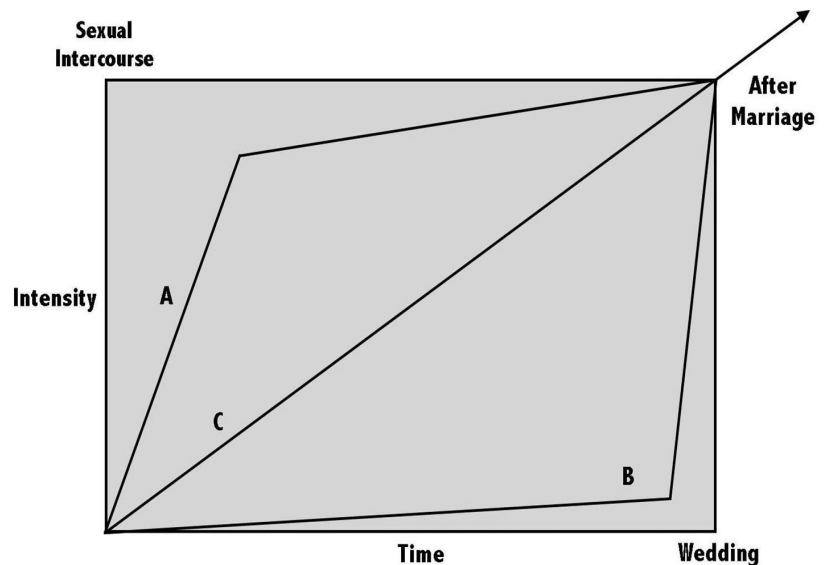
You have to give these friendships up. Proverbs 1:10, 15 says, *“My son, if sinners entice you, do not give in to them...My son, do not go along with them, do not set foot on their paths; for their feet rush into sin.”*

When I was in eighth grade, I was at my most vulnerable point, struggling for peer approval. One day someone from the 'in' crowd said to me, “Denny, you're getting to be a cool guy. You're becoming just like us.” Wow, those words hit me like a ton of bricks. In fact, those words scared the daylights out of me. You see, deep down I didn't want to become like them. I really didn't. I wanted to live for God. Is that your desire? I pray it is.

# Knowing When to Separate...From the Persuaders

During the winter of 1979, I was attending Bethel College and took a night course on “Marriage and Family” which I’ve never forgotten. The instructor was a local marriage counselor, an extremely charming, humorous, and well-prepared man with a good working knowledge of the Scriptures. At least that’s what I thought, until he got to the lecture about the engagement period before marriage.

That evening the professor posed this question to his hundred plus students, “How intimate should a couple be during engagement?” He then said, according to my notes, “Greater intimacy is to be expected in all areas, including the physical area of the relationship.” I have reproduced for you the chart he drew. Line A represents the predominant secular view (today about 50% have sex by the time they have dated for one month, according to a recent poll). Line B represents the traditional Christian view (this same poll found that 9% wait for marriage to have sex). Line C represents the view that he recommended that night. Incidentally, although the chart may lead you to believe otherwise, my professor clearly implied that Line A represented *full* sexual relations before marriage, and Line B represented *complete* purity until marriage.



Of course, as many couples can attest, Line C is a very difficult path to follow. It is essentially half-obedience. Instead of giving engaged couples either a red light or a green light, my instructor was attempting to find a middle road. The Bible refers to such a person as “*a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.*” *James 1:8*. Such compromisers are labeled as “*lukewarm – neither hot nor cold*” in *Revelation 3:16*. God further warns them, “*I am about to spit you out of my mouth.*”

My instructor seemed to acknowledge the likelihood that premarital intercourse would occur, even giving some reasons why it’s not such a bad thing – how it tests compatibility and so on.



When I look back at it now, some 32 years later, it strikes me as a shocking evening, especially since I was in a Christian college environment. There was nothing Christian about such instruction. In fact, as Josh McDowell has shown in his book *Why True Love Waits*, not only is it crystal clear in Scripture that our Lord expects complete purity before marriage, there are also hundreds of practical reasons to wait. Extensive research demonstrates that premarital sex and living together before marriage has a strong negative impact on the future happiness of your marriage.

The damage done to the kingdom of God that evening was incalculable. Our instructor should have been held accountable by the college for his heretical teaching, but he wasn't. The result was two-fold: countless students were led astray, and a professing Christian instructor was given the green light to continue his false teaching.

Unfortunately, the story doesn't end here. Several years later, I was reading the Star Tribune early one morning, and there was an article about this same marriage counselor. He was charged with misconduct at his practice. There's an old saying that says, "If you cross one moral line, it'll be a whole lot easier to cross another one." Apparently, that's what happened to this man.

Here is a question every believer must wrestle with today, "***How do we separate ourselves from worldly ideologies and false teachings, even from allegedly Christian sources?***" This question has huge implications for us, especially as we educate our children and help them choose colleges and graduate schools. As we explore this issue, I want to offer you three biblical principles in evaluating false ideologies based on Colossians 2:6-10.

**First, thoroughly know the truth of God's word.** Verse 6 says this, "*So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.*"

If we are in fact living in the end times, there will be a special need to put Colossians 2:6-7 into practice. ***This means being rooted in your faith.*** You will need to be like a plant that puts down roots. In other words, you need to know the Word of God forward and backward, inside and out. There is no substitute for reading the Word (or if you're not a reader, listening to it on CD), studying it, and discussing it with fellow believers.



The first thing that experts in counterfeit money do is study the real thing. They get to know every detail of a hundred dollar bill. That way, when a fake comes along, it stands out like a sore thumb.

***You also need to be built up in your faith.*** A building is erected step by step, piece by piece. Start by taking your church's membership class or a beginner's Sunday School class. Join a small group that is opening up God's Word and discussing it. Learn the foundations of your faith.

***Then, be strengthened in your faith.*** When I go to *Snap Fitness*, I see these huge weightlifters working out. One guy told me that the most important lesson in weightlifting is to '*use it or lose it!*' The same is true in the spiritual realm - if you aren't exercising your spiritual muscles, those spiritual muscles are going to dry up. We never outgrow our need for the Word. I've been a pastor for thirty years and I still need my daily nourishment from the Word.

***Finally, overflow with thanksgiving.*** You know why? The only people who give thanks are contented people. Discontented people just whine. They whine, complain, gripe, murmur, and grumble. They're never happy. Some of us treat our spouses like that. They never quite measure up. That's a miserable way to live. To grow in the Lord, you have to be thankful, and the best way to express our thankfulness is through the regular practice of worshipping God.

In summary, the first step in learning to evaluate false ideologies is to thoroughly know the truth – be rooted in it, be built up step by step, be strengthened daily using your spiritual muscles, and be overflowing with thanks. That’s step one.

**The second biblical principle in evaluating a false ideology is to carefully identify the marks of false teaching.** Verse 8 says, “*See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*”

There are four marks of false teaching. ***First, it is hollow.*** The Greek word for ‘hollow’ means ‘*devoid of substance*’. I can’t think of a more hollow philosophy than that of evolution, the idea that human life is the product of blind chance. This philosophy will lead to nothing but despair. So does materialism, which ultimately leads to an endless pursuit of stuff - “the one who dies with the most toys wins”.

***The second mark of false teaching is that it is deceptive.*** False ideology nearly always follows a fairly predictable pathway. First it is rejected by society, then tolerated, then accommodated, then accepted, then celebrated, and finally, all opposition is silenced, or at least there is an attempt to silence. The proponents of homosexual behavior have followed this pathway, as have the proponents of evolution and Nazism and anti-Semitism and abortion.

The power of deception explains why doctors like Bernard Nathanson and George Tiller could legally perform 60,000 abortions each here in the United States when only forty years ago it would have been unlawful to perform just one abortion. The blinding impact of deception explains how Nazi officers could gas Jews all day long and then go home to a normal family life. Deception is a cornerstone in virtually any false ideology.

***Third, false ideologies are humanistic in origin.*** Verse 8 says they depend on “*human tradition*”. To a person steeped in humanism, teaching that Christ is the only way to heaven is the height of arrogance. Actually, they would see the exclusive claims of Christ as blatantly discriminatory. They would view the doctrine of hell similarly, a grossly unfair punishment unfit for any human being. Moreover, the atoning work of Christ seems senseless since man is perceived to be essentially good. Why would he need to have his sins forgiven, even if there is such a thing as sin?

***Fourth, false ideologies are worldly.*** Vs. 8 says that they are based on “*the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.*” An excellent example of this has been the highly successful strategy of gay rights activists to radically change America’s perception of homosexual behavior. In a 1987 article entitled *Overhauling Straight America*, Marshall Kirk and Hunter Madsen laid out a six-point strategy:

- Talk about gays and gayness as loudly and often as possible.
- Portray gays as victims, not aggressive challengers.
- Give homosexual protectors a ‘just’ cause.
- Make gays look good.
- Make the victimizers look bad.
- Solicit funds – get corporate America and major foundations to back their cause.

Today, 24 years later, we must admit that they have been remarkably successful, with our nation teetering on endorsing gay marriage. How did they do it? They have clothed their appeals in the civil rights language of the 60’s. They have redefined long-standing moral objections as blatant discrimi-

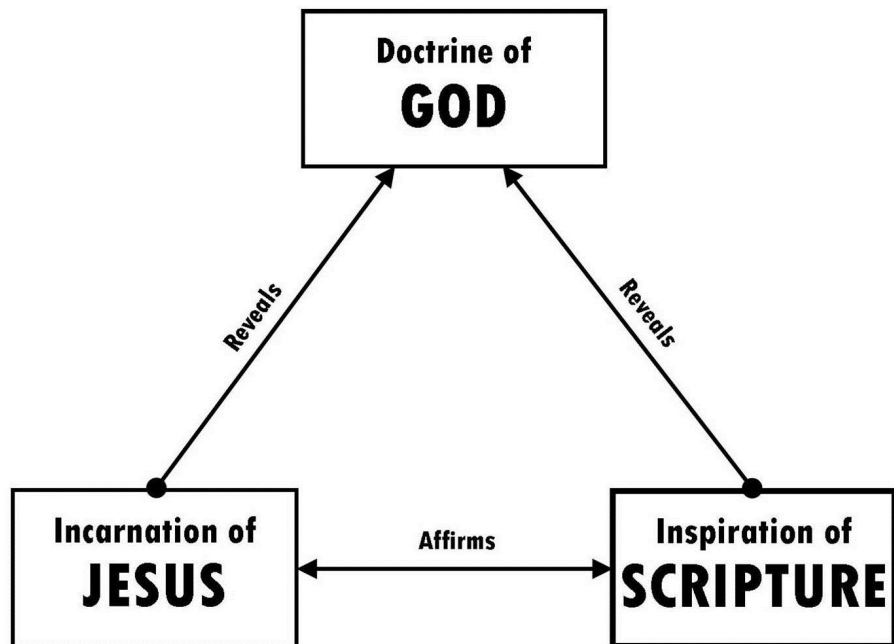


nation. This is essentially what the United Methodist Church is doing right now with its *This I Know* campaign, a carefully orchestrated six-week ‘Bible study’ featuring leading ‘Christian speakers’ and ‘theologians’ who approve of homosexual behavior. Those who disagree are perceived as discriminating bigots, purveyors of hate and judgment who are hopelessly out of touch with our modern, accepting age.

Don’t let them ‘*take you captive*’ as verse 8 says. Beware of the marks of false ideologies – their hollowness, deceptiveness, humanism, and worldliness.

This brings us to the third biblical principle in evaluating false ideologies – **Prayerfully consider the essentials of our faith as you assess when to separate.** Verses 9-10 underscore these essentials, “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.*”

Preeminent among the doctrines is that of God himself, what theologians like to call *theology proper*. Questions such as “Who is God?” and “How is he revealed to us?” are explored. Some of what we know about God is due to *general revelation*, i.e., discernible in the realm of nature. Creation itself reveals the wonder of our God (Romans 1:20), as does our conscience (Romans 2:15).



Most of what we know about God, however, comes from *special revelation*, specifically two sources. The first is the historical person of Jesus Christ, of whom the Scripture says, “*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form*” (Colossians 2:9). Christ is not only the central figure of world history, he is also “*the head over every power and authority.*” Colossians 2:10. This includes the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures, all sixty-six books written by over forty authors, over a 1500-year period of time.

The doctrines of God, Christ, and Scripture are the three cardinal doctrines which we cannot compromise. From these three arise all other doctrines – sin, salvation, man, angels, Holy Spirit, end times, etc.

Here are some key questions to ask in assessing the integrity and belief system of any instructor or institution: Do they believe that God is great (sovereign), good (loving), and just (holy)? Do they believe that God knows the future exhaustively? Do they believe that Jesus Christ is fully God and

fully man? Do they believe that Jesus died on a cross to atone for the sins of all who would believe in him? Do they believe that Jesus rose from the dead and is coming again? Do they believe that Scripture is inerrant (whether it has to do with science, history, or doctrine), sufficient (capable of bringing us to God), and incomparable (the only book able to make us “*complete, equipped for every good work.*” II Timothy 3:16).

If a person is sound on the most important doctrines, he is likely to be sound in everything else. If an institution is solid on the most important doctrines, it is likely to be solid on everything else.

In summary, a few words of counsel are in order. First, when it comes to theological correctness, we must be aware that no one hits the very center of the bull’s eye. We all see through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12). The same Bethel College which hosted the marriage class I mentioned earlier also introduced me to the likes of Dr. John Piper and Dr. Millard Erickson, outstanding godly scholars who have had a lifelong impact on me through their writings. My daughters have attended Oak Hills Christian College, Northwestern College, and Crown College here in Minnesota, as well as Moody Bible Institute in Chicago. Every institution has its weaknesses, but all of these schools have made a laudable impact for the Kingdom of God.

Second, when moving to a new community, choose a church home with great care. Peruse their website, ask about the church in the community, and find out what they are known for. Study their beliefs, take notes on the pastor’s message, and ask questions. No church is perfect and no pastor is perfect, but at least find one that is heading in the right direction.

Finally, if you ever have to leave a church or back away from a close friendship, do so with grace, kindness, and dignity. If you conduct yourself in a winsome way, you will reflect honor on the Lord we serve. Jude 22-23 says this, “*Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.*”

# Knowing When to Separate...From the Popular

Recently my wife came home from her job as a substitute teacher in the Annandale School District to share with me that she had an interesting talk with a fellow teacher that day. Her friend asked her, “If you could have anyone to your home as a dinner guest, who would you have?” My wife mentioned Franklin or Billy Graham, while her friend said she would love to get acquainted with Betty White, the famous actress.



My choice would be Joel Rosenberg, a messianic Jew who is both a prophecy expert and best-selling author (*Epicenter* is my favorite). I'd also love to have lunch with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, former President George W. Bush, or Pastor David Jeremiah.

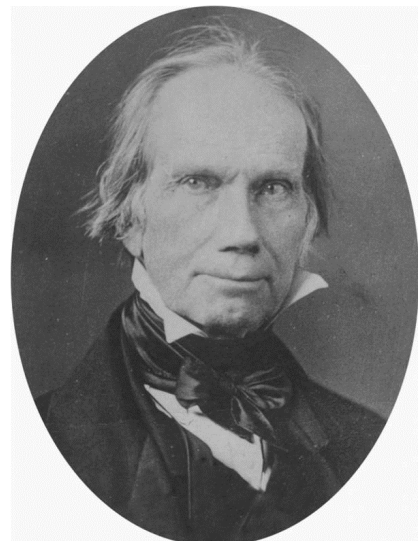
My second tier of celebrities would include former NFL coaches Tony Dungy and Joe Gibbs, Ken Ham, founder of the Creation Museum, seminary president Dr. Al Mohler, and musicians Michael W. Smith and Steven Curtis Chapman. Among those who've passed on, I'd love to visit with President Ronald Reagan, or biblical characters like Daniel, David, and Peter.

These are a few of my heroes among the famous. Who are yours? This is actually a very important question for there is a strong likelihood that your life will tend to embrace many of the same admirable qualities that your heroes possess. Sadly, the opposite is also true. Ungodly heroes will tend to take you down. They will tend to bring out the worst in you. That's why Proverbs 23:17 says, “Do not let your heart envy sinners, but always be zealous for the fear of the Lord.” Proverbs 24:1 says, “Do not envy wicked men, do not desire their company; for their hearts plot violence, and their lips talk about making trouble.”

Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with the wise grows wise; but a companion of fools suffers harm.” Let's look at eight qualities that we are to be wary of.

**First, we are to be wary of the hot-tempered.** Proverbs 22:24 says, “Do not make friends with a hot-tempered man, do not associate with one easily angered, or you may learn his ways and get yourself ensnared.”

In the early 1800s, a young lawyer named Henry Clay was a rising political star, much like Barack Obama in our own age. For four decades he dominated Washington DC serving as speaker of the House, leader in the Senate, and three times running for the presidency. According to several historians, there was only one thing that stood between him and the White House, and that was his temper. Highly intelligent, a dynamic speaker, and brilliant tactician, he simply couldn't overcome all the damage that was done by his short fuse.



Henry Clay

That's why the Bible challenges us to be very careful about getting close to a hot-tempered person or selecting as a hero an angry person. Sooner or later you will be the recipient of that venom, and that isn't going to be any fun.



**Second, we are to be wary of the powerful.**

Proverbs 23:1 says, *“When you sit to dine with a ruler, note well what is before you and put a knife to your throat if you are given to gluttony. Do not crave his delicacies, for that food is deceptive.”*

Lady Diana found out it is much easier to marry a prince than to live with one. Instead of feeling empowered, she felt entrapped by a loveless marriage and a fanatic paparazzi. This drove her into the arms of lover Dodi Fayed, a relationship abruptly ended by a fatal crash in downtown Paris.

Be careful about setting up the powerful and mighty as your heroes. It may not be all it's cracked up to be.

**The same is true for the third quality to be wary of - greed.**

Proverbs 23:4-5 says, *“Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint. Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle.”*

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to be Donald Trump or Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg? And yet it's amazing how many instant millionaire lottery winners end up being destroyed by their wealth. The Internet is full of their stories, like Evelyn Adams, winner of the New Jersey lottery twice (1985, 1986) to the tune of \$5.4 million. Today she's broke. Or take William Post who won \$16.2 million in the Pennsylvania lottery (1988) – now he lives on Social Security. How about Suzaane Mullins, who won \$4.2 million in the Virginia lottery (1993)? Now she's in debt to the tune of \$197,000. Or consider Ken Proxmire, who won \$1 million in the Michigan lottery and is now bankrupt. Then there is Willie Hurt, who won \$3.1 million in 1989. Two years later he was broke and charged with murder.



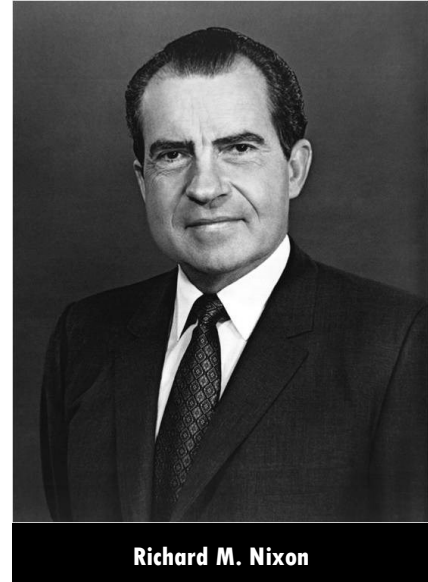
II Timothy 6:10 says, *“The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”*

**The fourth quality to be wary of is selfishness.** Proverbs 23:6-7 says, *“Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. ‘Eat and drink,’ he says to you, but his heart is not with you. You will vomit up the little you have eaten and will have wasted your compliments.”*

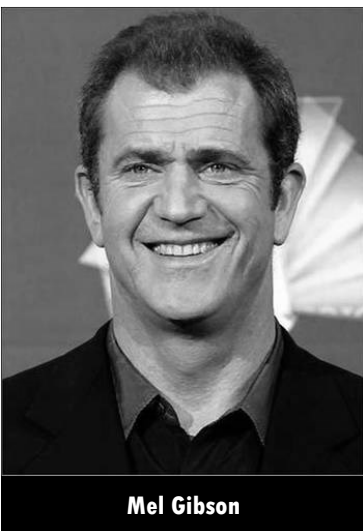
Elizabeth Edwards, who recently died of cancer, found out what it was like to live with a man who was completely self-absorbed. For years she had gone along with ego-driven husband, former vice presidential nominee Senator John Edwards, thinking that if she tied her star to his, she might just make it all the way to the top. And then the truth came out. John was living a double life. At the same time he was pretending to be the doting husband of a cancer-stricken wife, he had a girlfriend on the side. This was a man who could have a \$400 haircut, and yet make helping the poor the centerpiece of his campaign.

The same thing was true of Richard M. Nixon. My grandma loved Richard Nixon, and a lot of other people did too. To her dying day, I don't think Grandma ever believed that Nixon flat out lied to the American people about his role in Watergate. But he did. And he led a lot of bright young people astray, like Chuck Colson, who once said, "I'd have run over my own grandmother to get Dick Nixon re-elected." Be careful of making self-absorbed people into heroes.

**The same thing can be said about the fifth quality to be wary of – foolishness.** Proverbs 23:9 says, *"Do not speak to a fool, for he will scorn the wisdom of your words."*



Richard M. Nixon



Mel Gibson

When Mel Gibson was producing his movie, *The Passion of the Christ*, I was never more proud of him. I saw him in an interview on one of the talk shows and he was magnificent. He seemed to possess a genuine faith, and with his money, fame, and abundant connections, he was poised to really make a mark for Christ in our culture.

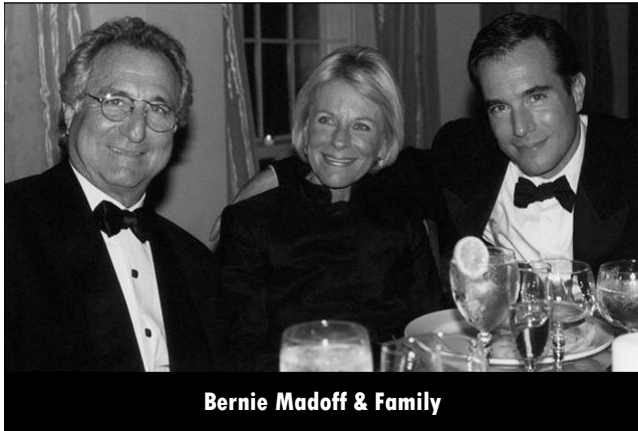
And yet since that movie came out, Mel's life has seemed to be in a tailspin. From his public drunkenness and his anti-Semitic remarks to his decision to divorce his wife of 26 years, Robyn, with whom he had seven children, Mel has made one foolish decision after another. Recently he was charged with abuse of his girlfriend, seemingly the last straw in derailing his fledgling movie career.

His best friends don't know what to do with him. Proverbs 23:9 has been incarnated into his life, as he has scorned the wisdom of friends who've tried to talk some sense into him. Be careful, so careful, of idolizing foolish people.

**Sixth, I want to caution you to be wary of the dishonest.** Proverbs 23:10-11 reads, *"Do not move an ancient boundary stone or encroach on the fields of the fatherless, for their Defender is strong; he will take up their case against you."*

Moving an ancient boundary stone is mentioned several times in the book of Proverbs as a very grave offense, but it isn't as bad as stealing from orphans. For every widow and every single mom and every child whose had a parent die or disappear, verse 11 is a tremendous promise. You have a Defender prepared to fight for you!

This is something Bernie Madoff should have factored into his Ponzi scheme. For many years, Madoff was living a con-man's dream. He had people falling over each other to invest their money



with him. For many of them, Madoff was a hero, a god unto himself. Sadly, not only were his investors hurt, but even more deeply - his family. His son, Mark, committed suicide last December 11th, two years to the day that Bernie was arrested. This was the fourth suicide that has been directly attributed to the collapse of the Madoff empire. Back in February 2010, Mark's wife, Stephanie, filed to have her last name changed to Morgan. There was a time when she was proud to be a Madoff, but those days have long since passed.

**The seventh quality to be wary of is immodesty.** Proverbs 11:22 says, *“A beautiful woman lacking discretion and modesty is like a fine gold ring in a pig’s snout.”* (LB)

When I was in high school, Camp Shamineau, our Free Church Bible Camp in Minnesota, posted this verse on their dock at the beach. I would venture to guess that almost every one who went to camp during those years can remember that sign. It's one of those things that has a way of sticking in your mind.

Fifty years ago, there probably wasn't a lady anywhere in the world who was more photographed than Marilyn Monroe. Though lacking many of the qualities that propel people to fame, she more than made up for these deficiencies with the one commodity that is more valued than any other in Hollywood – physical beauty. And yet in 1962, with Marilyn only 36 years old and at the height of her fame, it all came crashing down when her life was suddenly cut short by a tragic drug overdose.



**Marilyn Monroe**



**Anna Nicole Smith**

Forty plus years later, a similar fate awaited another blonde beauty, 39-year old Anna Nicole Smith, who also died from a drug overdose. These two lady icons represent a trail of tears that typically follows those who are the standard-bearers for immodesty. Be wary, the Scriptures warn, of idolizing and envying them, lest you be drawn into their same fate.



**Finally, be wary of the addicted.** Proverbs 20:1 says, “*Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.*”



**President Franklin Pierce**

There is a long list of the rich and famous whose lives have been cut short by alcoholism, including such notables as writers Truman Capote (1984), F. Scott Fitzgerald (1940), Ernest Hemingway (1961), and Edgar Allan Poe (1849); actors Errol Flynn (1959), W.C. Fields (1946), and William Holden (1981); President Franklin Pierce (1869), and singer Hank Williams (1953).

If you add in those who've died from drug overdoses, the list is even longer, including actors Judy Garland (1969), John Belushi (1985), River Phoenix (1993), and Heath Ledger (2008).

Be careful who you put up on that pedestal in your heart. Be careful whose poster you put up in your room. Be careful whose autograph you collect. Be careful who you idolize and fawn over and drool over. From Farrah Fawcett to Jessica Simpson; from Donny Osmond to Michael Jackson; from Mickey Mantle to Alex Rodriguez; from Joe Namath to Tom Brady, be careful of the people you admire and look up to.

Interestingly, when you search the Scriptures looking for notable people who left an ungodly legacy, you don't have to look far. In Genesis we find Nimrod the great hunter, in Exodus there is Pharaoh, while in I Samuel you find the account of a giant named Goliath.

Far more dangerous for the Israelites, however, were those who arose from their own ranks (Deuteronomy 13) or from the neighboring nations (Joshua 23). Ezra, in particular, was concerned about foreign women seducing the young Jewish men (Ezra 9:11-12).

If I were to leave you with one quality to look for in a hero, it's the rare and priceless quality of humility. Each of the eight negative qualities that we examined has its roots in pride. For some reason, we are attracted to people who exude confidence, magnetism, and charisma. Instead, we should champion the quality of humility, which is defined as '*confidence properly placed*'. It is essentially the ability to "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*" *Proverbs 3:5*. This is a priceless quality to desire in a hero, because the Bible says, "*God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*" *James 4:6*.



**Heath Ledger**



# Knowing How to Engage

Jesus calls us as his people to make an impact on the world around us, a calling which will always be in a certain amount of tension with biblical commands to separate. Put succinctly, we are to be in the world, yet not of the world. We are to influence the world, while not allowing the world to influence us - not an easy assignment!

The calling to engage goes all the way back to Abraham, when God promised him, *“All peoples will be blessed through you.”* Genesis 12:3. In the New Testament, Jesus instructs us, *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again?...you are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”* Matthew 5:13-16.

So how exactly are we to be salt and light in our culture? The Scriptures call us to do this in three primary ways: 1) by evangelizing (sharing the gospel wherever we are); 2) by edifying (building people up wherever we go); and 3) by empathizing (loving people whoever they are). By adopting these core convictions, you will have the thrill of changing the world, one person at a

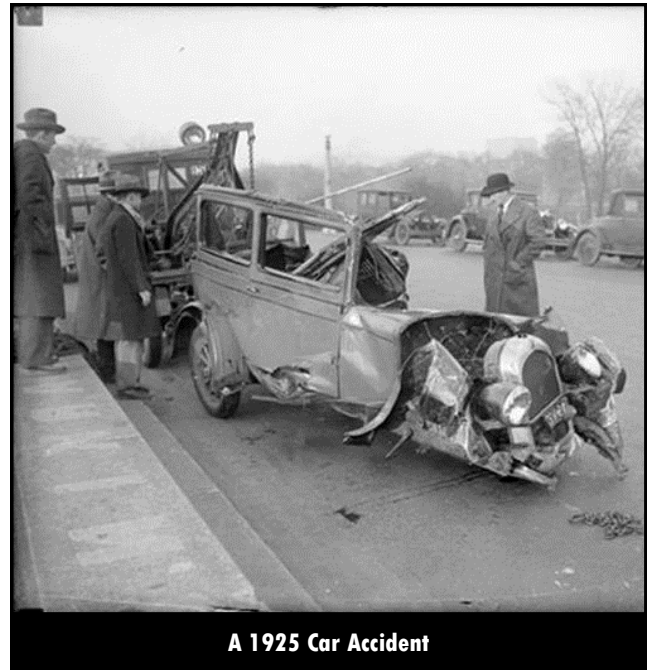


# Knowing How to Engage...By Evangelizing

My grandmother functioned as an unofficial historian for my father's side of the family. Going through her mementoes is like stepping back in time. She kept birth certificates going back to the 1860s and travel tickets from the 1890s detailing the Johnson clan's long journey from the Swedish countryside to the city of Minneapolis. She also kept a diary which was not only deeply moving but painstakingly thorough. As I was reading it recently, one event especially touched my heart.

It was an account of the death of my grandmother's brother, Fillmore, in a car accident near Crosby, Minnesota where he was working with the iron ore mines. Grandma agonized over his death mostly because she just wasn't sure if he was prepared to meet the Lord. She had never heard him profess his faith.

The only thing that gave her any comfort was when her older sister Ellen reminded her that shortly before their father, Charles Larson, had passed away, he gathered his family around him. As he looked into the faces of seven children and a wife who was pregnant with triplets, he shared the gospel with them, pleading with them to confess their sins to Jesus and invite him into their lives. Then he took each child separately and led that child in a prayer to ask Jesus into their lives.



Of course we know that such things cannot be forced. God has given each of us a free will. But my grandma was comforted to know that on that occasion Fillmore was brought face to face with the gospel and invited to embrace it as his own. He had heard the gospel many times at the little country church where their family attended, but on that occasion, Fillmore heard it from his father's own lips.

A few months later, the seven children looked at their father lying in a casket, with two of his three triplets in either of his arms. Amazingly, they were born at the very time he died, with two perishing immediately while the third died two weeks later. As the seven children viewed this heartbreaking scene, they could not help but have remembered that day not long ago when their dad had personally told them about Jesus and challenged them to believe.

Can there be anything more important? How could my great-grandfather Charles Larson have died without knowing that he had done everything in his power to ensure that his family circle would be unbroken in heaven? If Jesus is the only way to heaven, how dare we not point that out to our loved ones?



Is it not an act of love to warn everyone that there is a final day of reckoning (Revelation 20:11-15)? After all, Ezekiel 33:1-6 says, *"The word of the Lord came to me: '...When...the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not take warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on*



*his own head...If he had taken warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes the life of one of them, that man will be taken away because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood."*

I don't want any blood on my hands. The apostle Paul said, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes."* Romans 1:16. I don't want to be ashamed to talk to my family, my friends, my co-workers, or anyone else God brings across my path. I can remember on one occasion that the Lord woke me up three times in the dead of night convicting me to warn a relative that he was leading his family in the wrong direction. I said, "Lord, I don't want to do that." But after the third time, I said, "Okay, Lord, I will do this so I can get some sleep." With grace and humility I wrote him an email with the warning God had placed on my heart. Although he didn't want to hear this, the Lord assured me that the Spirit is still at work in his life (Isaiah 55:10-11).

There is nothing more important than sharing the gospel. We see this in the mission of Jesus and his disciples. We also see this in the mission that Christ left for us.

## **The Mission of Jesus: To Seek and to Save the Lost**

If ever there was a man who had a crystal clear mission, it was Jesus Christ. After all, right after Joseph found out Mary was pregnant, an angel appeared to him and said, *"Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."* Matthew 1:20-21.

From that mission ***Jesus never deviated!*** He told Nicodemus that he must be born again (John 3:3). He told the woman at the well that he offered living water (John 4:10). He told the rich young ruler to give away his wealth and live for God (Luke 18:22). He visited Zacchaeus at his home and then told him why he came: *"The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."* Luke 19:10.

It's a brave thing to tell someone they are lost, especially a man. Let's face it men, even if we are hopelessly lost without a clue, our pride as men keeps us from admitting it!

Of course, we are all lost at some point in time. Romans 3:10 says, *"There is no one righteous. Not even one."* So many today wrestle with the whole idea of right and wrong. According to a recent Faith Matters poll, 42% of Americans don't believe that there are clear guidelines for good and evil. What is good? What is evil? Right now, confusion reigns!

Even harder to accept is that being spiritually lost can and will lead to eternal separation from God. And yet this is precisely what Jesus taught. He spoke of two possible destinies, one of everlasting happiness in the presence of God and his angels (Luke 15:10) and one of everlasting misery in the company of the devil and his angels (Matthew 25:41).

Jesus spoke of two ways, the narrow way that leads to life, and the wide way that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14). Jesus taught that at the final judgment there would be a separation between the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:31-46) and a separation of the wheat from the tares (Matthew 13:36-43). The good will be separated from the evil, according to John 5:29. The just will be separated from the unjust, according to Acts 24:15.

Despite the many references of Jesus to heaven and hell, only 60% of Americans believe in heaven, while 49% believe in hell. Asked if they were confident of life after death, Americans were split right down the middle, with only 52% answering yes.

Of course, if the skeptics are right and this life is all there is, this whole discussion is meaningless. We die like animals and soon return to dust. That's it. But if they are wrong, and Jesus is who he said he is, and the Bible is true, how tragic it will be for the person who refused to believe! It's the ultimate gamble, far more risky than anything you can do in Vegas.

In the first five seconds after death, all of us will know if Jesus was blowing smoke or not. That's why Pastor Nicky Gumbel of Alpha Ministries says, "If the gospel is true, it is of supreme importance. If it isn't true, it is of no importance at all. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important."

## The Mission of the Disciples: Be Fishers of Men

*"As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me', Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him" Matthew 4:18-19.*

The disciples were absolutely convinced that the words of Jesus were true when he said, *"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."* John 14:6. In fact, the leader of the disciples, Peter, would later declare, *"Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved."* Acts 4:12.

There is no other way! Of course, this is hotly disputed today. In fact, only 13% of Americans agreed that one religion was true and others were not. Even among those who call themselves Christian, about 80% believe that non-Christians can go to heaven.

In 1924, a very enlightening poll was done among high school students in Muncie, Indiana. They were asked if Christianity is the one and only true religion. 94% agreed. In 1977, the identical question was asked again of all Muncie high school students. This time only 38% agreed. If Muncie is truly reflective of our nation, that same question today would only generate a 10-15% positive response.

And yet, can an honest reading of Scripture come to any other conclusion? Could Jesus and his disciples have been any more clear that Jesus is *the way* and *the only way* to heaven?

### **Poll of all high school students in Muncie, Indiana**

**The question: Is Christianity the one and only true religion?**

<b>1924</b>	<b>94% agreed</b>
<b>1977</b>	<b>38% agreed</b>

This brings us to our mission today. Jesus came to seek and save the lost. The disciples were called to be fishers of men. In Mark 16:15-16, Jesus gave us our marching orders. He said, shortly before he ascended into heaven, *"Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation (KJV – to every creature). Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."*



## Our Mission: To Share the Good News with Everybody

This includes men, women, boys, and girls. It also includes people of every color, every race, every ethnic background, and every socio-economic level. We are to tell everyone the good news about Jesus.

How we tell them is just as important as what we tell them. **First, we are to be prayerful.** Colossians 4:2-3 says, “Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message.” God is the one who opens doors and softens hearts. It isn’t going to be your persuasive words or your charming personality. Every Christian should keep a prayer list of at least five to ten people that you want to accept Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Learn from men like George Mueller who kept track of over 40,000 prayers that were specifically answered, including every single person for whom he prayed for their salvation. Prayer opens doors.

**Second, be personal.** I Peter 3:15 says, “Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.” This is personal because it refers to the hope that **you have**. Be prepared to share how you came to Jesus and why you came to Jesus. If you want an example of this, read Paul’s testimony before King Agrippa in Acts 26. We need to prepare a thirty second version of our story, a three minute version, and a thirty minute version, because you never know how much time you are going to have.

**Third, be biblical.** Romans 10:9-10 says, “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. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.” I recommend using a little booklet like *The Four Spiritual Laws* or Billy Graham’s *Steps to Peace with God*. Or better yet, memorize several Bible verses that can lead a person to Jesus, like the so-called “Romans road” (3:23; 6:23; 10:9, 10).

**Fourth, be bold.** In Acts 4:29, Peter prayed for his fellow believers, “Enable your servants to speak your word with great boldness.” After all, the stakes are high, as heaven and hell are in the balance. Why should we be afraid to stand up for the one who stood up for us?

**Finally, be respectful.** The Bible is very clear that some will oppose the gospel. II Timothy 2:24-26 helps us in having the right attitude. It says, “The Lord’s servant must not quarrel; instead he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will.”

A few years ago we did a campaign in our church called *The Forty Days of Purpose*, with material produced by Saddleback Church and Pastor Rick Warren. I will never forget the video in which Rick talks about visiting with his dad as his dad was dying, and his dad pleaded with Rick to just “win one more for Jesus”! Rick got all choked up because he took that as the defining mission of his life: **to win one more for Jesus**. Are you prepared to go and do likewise?

# Knowing How to Engage...By Edifying

The movie *Amazing Grace* chronicles the true story of William Wilberforce and his mentor, Pastor John Newton. Newton actually penned the words of the beloved hymn from which the movie is named. It happened shortly after the Lord spared his life during a violent storm at sea in 1747. Once a drunken slave trader, Newton ended up having a profound impact on abolishing slavery in the British Empire.

Wilberforce, who served in Parliament, was greatly influenced by Newton as he led the battle against the slave trade. It took twenty years to halt the trade and another twenty-five years before all slaves in the British Empire were freed. On his deathbed in 1833, Wilberforce received word that Parliament had finally acted, granting freedom to over 700,000 British slaves. Thirty years later, at a far higher cost, Abraham Lincoln would issue the Emancipation Proclamation freeing all American slaves. This time American evangelical Christians were out in front, pushing for this change. In fact, in 1835, two-thirds of the abolition society was made up of ministers of the gospel.

Of course, things like this have been happening since the day Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. Do you remember that story? Beginning in Luke 10:25, an expert in the Jewish law came up to Jesus to test him. *“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” he asked. Jesus asked him what was written in the law. He replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart...and your neighbor as yourself.”*

*“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”*

Jesus told him about the Good Samaritan. A man was beaten up by robbers and left for dead. A priest came by, followed by a Levite, but neither helped him. Finally along came a Samaritan (a despised ethnic group) who did help the man. He bandaged his wounds, took him to an inn, and paid for his lodging. He promised more help when he returned. Jesus pointedly asked the lawyer, *“which...do you think was a neighbor to the man?” The expert in the law replied, “the one who had mercy on him.” Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.”*

There are three principles in this account about making a lasting impact on this world in the name of Christ.

**The first is this – Be a Good Samaritan.** Jesus said, after he told the parable of the Good Samaritan, *“Go and do likewise.”* For the next two thousand years, followers of Christ would do exactly that.



**William Booth**, who founded the Salvation Army in 1887, wanted first to save souls, and then he wanted to give homeless men a place to sleep and food to eat.

**George Mueller**, who founded huge orphanages in the city of Bristol, England, housed thousands of orphans, a ministry run entirely by faith offerings. Their first priority, however, was to lead these young souls to Jesus.

In 1844, **Sir George Williams**, just 23, founded the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). In 1855, **Emma Roberts** co-founded the YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association). Both were launched to meet the spiritual needs of millions of poor people in urban areas and also to minister to their physical needs.



**William Booth**



**Henry Dunant**

In 1864, **Henry Dunant**, Swiss banker and strong evangelical Christian, helped to launch the Red Cross after he witnessed a terrible battle in Italy while on his way to visit Napoleon III.

**Florence Nightingale**, the founder of modern nursing, was a devout Christian with a few unorthodox beliefs.

**Mother Teresa** was driven by the love of Christ to help the destitute and dying on the miserable streets of Calcutta, India.



**Mother Teresa**

History records the fact that there were no hospitals as we know them until Christians came along and started them. Charles Rosenberg has documented the creation of hospitals in the US, saying they were “framed and motivated by the responsibilities of Christian stewardship.” The same was true in most countries. Christians like **Louis Pasteur** founded the study of bacteriology, and a Quaker named **Joseph Lister** founded the practice of antiseptic surgery.

Missionaries spearheaded modern medical care in many nations, such as China. Even as late as 1935, half of the hospitals in China were run by Christian missionaries. Ruth Tucker calls medical missions “without a doubt the greatest humanitarian effort the world has ever known.”

Wherever Christians have gone, they have been Good Samaritans. How about you? How are you being a Good Samaritan in meeting the needs of people all around you?

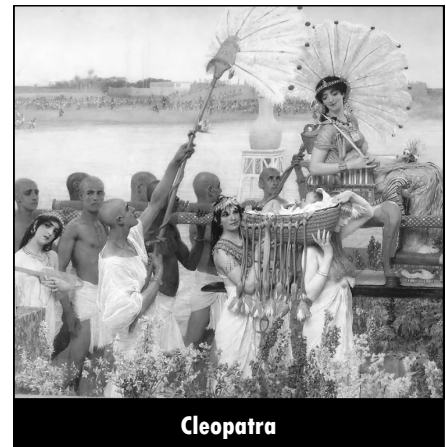
**Second, be a brother or sister, especially in your church family.** Galatians 6:10 says, “*Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*”

As we love our fellow believers, we testify to the world of the wonder of God’s love. *“If we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us...we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.” I John 4:12,14.* Even the bond we have as families and married couples testifies to a lost world. After all, the Bible says, *“Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loves the church and gave himself up for her.” Ephesians 5:25.*

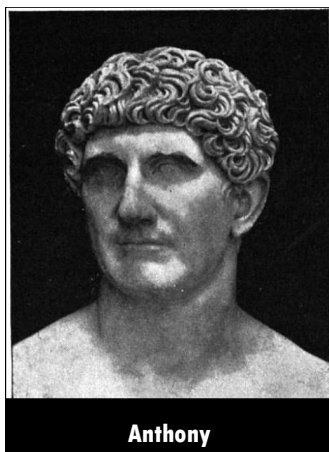
**God calls us to honor and defend children,** both within the church and within our greater society. History confirms that wherever the Christian church has gone, it has defended the rights of children. George Grant wrote a book entitled *Third Time Around* telling how the church has twice before successfully fought against the practice of abortion. Once again we are in the forefront of the battle here in the U.S. While Planned Parenthood clinics operate with the full support of the government, over 3000 pro-life Crisis Pregnancy Centers have been launched by the church, fully funded by the donations of concerned Christians.

**God calls us to honor and defend women,** both within the church and within society at large. While in ancient India, China, Rome, and Greece, a woman was the property of her husband, wherever the church has penetrated the culture, the role of women has been elevated. Christian missionaries in China and India led the fight against the appalling practice of killing baby girls. In Africa, wives and concubines of the chieftain were often killed when he died – until Christian missionaries preached against it.

**God calls us to honor and defend the elderly** Again we should do this both within the Christian community and our society at large. Throughout history, many tribes and peoples killed off their elderly, much as they have killed off their unwanted babies. Thankfully, this often changed when Christian missionaries arrived.



**Cleopatra**



**Anthony**

**God calls us to honor and defend the sacredness of life itself.** Gladiators fought, cannibals ate, and suicide flourished in many societies - until Christianity came along. Do you realize that Pontius Pilate committed suicide, as did Roman senators Brutus and Cassius as well as Mark Antony and Cleopatra, Emperor Nero, Emperor Hadrian, and the Stoic philosopher Seneca? All of these were leading figures who lived within a century of Christ. Fortunately, as Christianity penetrated the Roman world, this common practice of suicide became increasingly rare.

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**God calls us to honor and defend the dignity of sex.** Wherever Christianity flourished, prostitution ended or at least declined sharply. Sex became sacred and virginity was guarded. Among the Greeks and Romans, all kinds of sexual perversion were rampant, especially at their religious festivals. Historian Will Durant reports that rich men in Greece would pay up to \$3600 in today's dollars to have sex with another man. Cato complained that a pretty boy cost more than a farm. But...when Christianity penetrated the culture, homosexual practice ended, or at least was driven underground. Moreover, adultery was seen not as a private affair but as a crime against the whole society because it destroyed the family unit and hurt children.

Today, the world is watching us as believers. They are watching to see if there really is brotherly and sisterly love among us. The love we have for our spouses, our children, our elderly, and our fellow believers speaks volumes to them. When we honor the dignity of sex and the sacredness of life it testifies to them that we are who we claim to be.

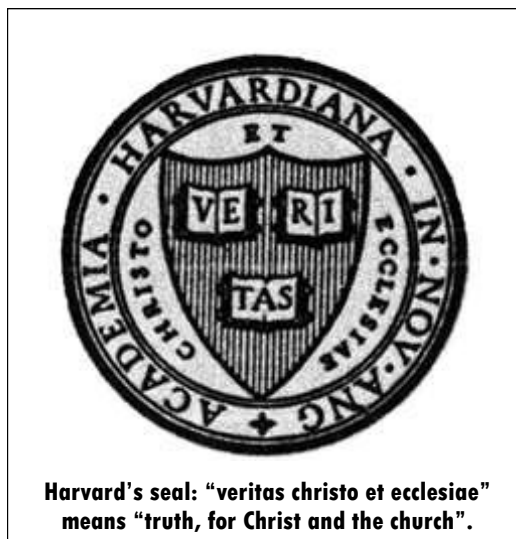
**Third, be Jesus to others.** In Matthew 25, Jesus challenges his followers to care for the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned, and for strangers. He then added this stunning statement, "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.*" *Matthew 25:40.*

Wherever Christianity has gone, it has done exactly that. For example, take the **codification of languages**. Many of the world's languages were first set to writing by Christian missionaries and that's still happening today through ministries like Wycliffe Bible Translators.

A Christian named Johann Gutenberg invented **the printing press**, then announced, "I know what I want to do: I wish to print the Bible." And that's exactly what he did. Today the Bible is the most printed book in history; no other book comes even close.

Evangelical Christians led the drive for **education** in the wake of the Reformation, especially through the efforts of John Calvin. Calvinist theologians had an enormous impact on private and Christian education here in America, which was all there was until public education was launched in 1837. And yet, President John Quincy Adams stated that in the early 1800s, only four Americans out of a thousand were illiterate. Today with trillions invested in education, we have at least 40 million in America who are illiterate, a rate that has increased at least thirty-fold since the days of John Quincy Adams.

Almost every one of America's first 123 **colleges and universities** had Christian origins, including Harvard and Yale. Harvard stated that "The great end of all education is to know the Lord Jesus Christ who is eternal life." Dartmouth was founded to train missionaries to the Indians. The College of William and Mary was created "that the Christian faith might be propagated". The president of Princeton, John Witherspoon said, "Cursed be all learning that is contrary to the cross of Christ." Can you imagine these educational leaders seeing what is happening at these institutions today?



No wonder our *Founding Fathers* were overwhelmingly influenced by Christianity. At least 50 of the 56 men who signed the Declaration of Independence were Christians. Calvinist theology undergirded virtually everything they did. The idea that “all men are created equal” comes from Acts 10:34 “*God shows no partiality*”. The idea of individual liberty is based on II Corinthians 3:17, “*Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.*” The idea of separating power into executive, judicial, and legislative branches arises from Scriptural teaching on the innate sinfulness of human beings. The legal foundation of our country was erected on the Ten Commandments.



The Founding Fathers

Even the modern pursuit of *science* is based on the premise that our God is a rational being who can be rationally understood. Bible-believing Christians founded the disciplines of calculus (Isaac Newton), chemistry (Robert Boyle), electronics (John Ambrose Fleming), genetics (Gregor Mendel), geology (Louis Agassiz), and oceanography (Matthew Maury). This would never have happened in a culture dominated by Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, or animism.

In the field of *economics*, evangelical Christians trumpeted the concept of private property. After all, the commandment “*Thou shalt not steal*” is based on the premise that you can privately own something of value. When the Pilgrims first landed in 1620 they practiced socialism, and the community virtually starved to death. By 1623 they had switched to a capitalistic model with each person responsible for his own parcel of land. Once they did that, the community thrived. All of this was based on II Thessalonians 3:10, “*If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.*”



The Duma in Milan, Italy

In the realm of the *fine arts*, again Christians have had an enormous impact. In the summer of 2010, I had the opportunity to tour many of the finest museums and cathedrals of Europe, and marveled at the many artists who found their inspiration in Jesus. My favorite cathedral was the Duma in Milan, Italy, a magnificent edifice created to glorify God.





Bach

When it comes to Christianity's impact on *music*, we need look no further than to Johann Sebastian Bach, father of 23 children and widely acknowledged as the greatest musician who ever lived. He dedicated every single note he ever wrote to the glory of Jesus Christ. Over and over again on his music pieces one finds "**S.D.G.**" (*Soli Deo Gloria* 'solely to the glory of God'). At the beginning of most songs, one finds "**J.J.**" (*Jesu Juban* 'Help me, Jesus'). Bach's stand for Jesus was an enormously powerful influence on composers who followed him like Beethoven, Mozart, Chopin, Wagner, Brahms, and many others.

Today we stand on the shoulders of so many outstanding Christians who have gone before us. May they inspire us to bloom where we are planted. Most of us will never be pastors or missionaries. But we can still glorify God wherever we are. Every day we should dedicate all that we do to the glory of God, just like Bach. "**S.D.G.**" *should be our battle cry!*

When we close ranks as believers to do this, we can move an entire culture, as happened on the Fiji Islands. When H.L. Hastings visited the Fiji Islands in 1844, he found that human life was cheap. In fact, you could buy a human being for \$7 or one musket. And once you bought him, you could work him, whip him, starve him, or eat him – whatever was your preference.

A few decades later, H.L. Hastings returned to the Fiji Islands and found that the price of human beings had gone up. You couldn't buy one for \$7 anymore. In fact, you couldn't buy one for \$7 million. Why? Because across the Fiji Islands there were now 1,200 Christian chapels where the gospel of Christ was proclaimed. People had been taught that life is precious. We are bought with a price, not with silver or gold, but with the invaluable blood of Jesus Christ.

A handful of missionaries and pastors didn't make this happen. Rather it was thousands of everyday Christian people who were committed to living "**S.D.G.**" Are you ready to follow their example?

# Knowing How to Engage...By Empathizing

When Sergeant Jacob DeShazer was captured by the Japanese early in World War II, he was seething with hatred. A B-25 bombardier in the famed Doolittle Raid, DeShazer dreamed day and night of revenge against his captors. Then one day a Bible was brought into prison. Hungry for any literature, Jacob devoured it. Surprisingly, he found that his heart was melted by the words of Jesus as he died on the cross, “*Father, forgive them for they do not know what they do*”. (Luke 23:34) In an instant, the mountain of hatred disappeared. Soon thereafter a guard slammed the cell door on DeShazer’s bare leg and began kicking at his foot with his boots. The old DeShazer would have cursed him out, but this time he said nothing, reminded of Jesus’ words “Love your enemies.”



After the war, Jacob went back to Japan as a missionary and his conversion story was printed in a tract. A brokenhearted Japanese man read that tract and gave his heart to Christ. His name was Captain Mitsuo Fuchida, the Japanese officer who spearheaded the attack on Pearl Harbor. The very man who had



once yelled out, “Tora, Tora, Tora!” now began to preach the gospel all over Japan and America. He even returned to Pearl Harbor on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack with a gift for the survivors. It was a Bible with Luke 23:34 inscribed in it: “*Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.*” Fuchida’s story is told in the book *God’s Samurai*.

What made this all possible? The example of our Savior, Jesus Christ, who as he hung on the cross suffering for our sins, did the most unusual thing in the world, something that went against every instinct of humanity. He looked down on the very people who had just nailed

him to a cross and he had compassion on them. That kind of love changes things. It changes people and it revolutionizes a culture! After all, ***the world around us doesn’t care how much we know, until they know how much we care!*** That’s why the Bible says, “*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.*” *I Corinthians 13:1.*

Make love one of your core convictions. **Start first by loving those who love you.** We begin here because this should be the easiest group to love. After all, we’re just returning kindness to ones who have shown us kindness. A beautiful picture of this is the love of Jesus toward his friends Mary and Martha when their brother Lazarus died.

The account of this scene in John chapter 11 is powerful and moving. Jesus’ friend Lazarus gets sick and his sisters send word to Jesus, who surprisingly delays his coming – for four days. One of the fascinating things to understand about Jewish culture at this time was the belief that after death a person’s spirit would hover around the body for three days. On the fourth day, however, noticing the body beginning to decompose, the spirit departed. Death at that point was considered irreversible.

Of course, all of this was leading to a great miracle, but surprisingly, instead of getting right down to the task of raising Lazarus from the dead, first he consoled Mary. Verse 33 says, *“When Jesus saw her weeping...he was deeply moved in spirit...Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’”*

The reason I call this surprising is because Jesus could have just skipped all of this crying and weeping business and simply announced to the crowd, “Have no fear, I am here!” But he didn’t do that. He empathized with Mary, weeping with her and consoling her. A watchful crowd was deeply touched by his merciful heart.

Love has a way of doing that. The great Princeton professor and theologian B.B. Warfield left his mark as a stalwart defender of the inerrancy of Scripture in the early 1900s, right at the time when many denominations were drifting into liberalism. And yet Warfield’s most lasting legacy may have come from the way he cared for his wife, between classes and writing, for 44 years. He actually learned that she had a debilitating disease on their honeymoon.



Robertson McQuilken & his wife Muriel

The same thing was true of Robertson McQuilken, who resigned the presidency of Columbia Bible School so he could care for his wife who had contracted Alzheimer’s. He refused to institutionalize her while insisting that he be her first caregiver. He reportedly said, “My wife has cared for me the last forty years. If I cared for her for the next 40, I would never be out of her debt.” Now that touches a person’s heart. In a day and age when so many marriages are breaking up because “my needs aren’t being met”, marital love that is truly unconditional melts hearts and warms souls and opens people up to the gospel. Don’t forget, first of all, to love those who love you. Empathizing with others starts first in your own home.

**The second step to take is to love those who know you.** Romans 12:9-10,15-17 says this: *“Love must be sincere...be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves...rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another...be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone.”*

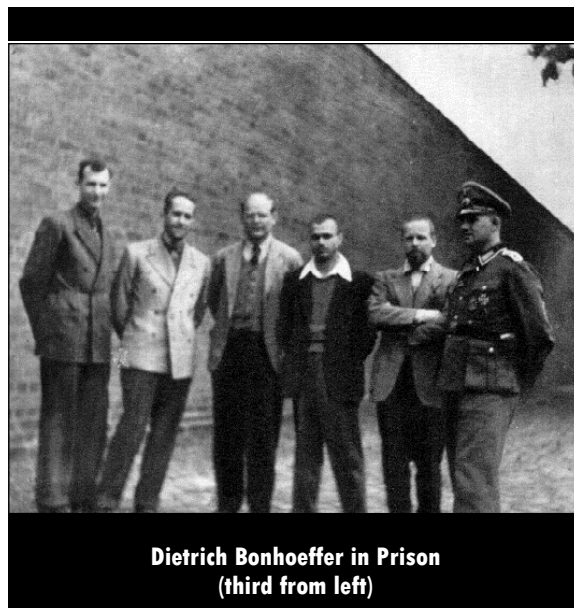
We are to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. We can again learn some lessons from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who stood up to the Nazis in World War II. Bonhoeffer is fascinating to me because of the way he handled a growing hostility toward biblical Christianity in Nazi Germany. We too are going to have to wrestle with greater animosity toward our faith.

In his early years, Bonhoeffer was known more as a great professor and scholar. Several people commented on the fact that it was hard to get close to him. Many were intimidated by him. Others simply felt he was distant and stand-offish. But as the persecution of notable Christians intensified and the threats grew, God did a work in melting his icy exterior. Dietrich mentored many young pastors and they were extremely loyal to him because they knew he loved them.

Then he fell in love with young Maria Wedemeyer. This seemed to trigger an even greater outpouring of affection for friend and foe alike. He was very careful in criticizing friends who had succumbed to the Nazi pressure even though he himself had reluctantly joined the Resistance.

When he was finally arrested in 1943, even though he was tortured to no end, he never gave up a single name, convincing the Nazis that his concerns were limited to religious matters.

Bonhoeffer even had a golden opportunity to escape prison in late 1944, which would end up being his last chance at freedom. A prison guard, Corporal Knobloch, was ready to help him. They had a fool-proof plan in place. But Dietrich backed out at the last minute because the warden had vowed to retaliate against the families of any prisoners who escaped. Even though his family had signaled their approval, when it came right down to it he couldn't do it. The brilliant young professor so admired for his great intellect and knowledge had come full circle. In his last couple of years, he absolutely radiated the love of Jesus.



**Dietrich Bonhoeffer in Prison**  
(third from left)

By personal order of Hitler, Dietrich was hung by thin wire, a particularly brutal form of strangulation reserved for proven conspirators. Of his execution morning, the camp doctor wrote this, "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer kneeling on the floor praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this most lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

I Corinthians 13:2-3 says, *"If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing."*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom the camp doctor described as a "lovable man", embodied the teaching of these two verses. His love extended even to those who had compromised with the Nazis, giving them the benefit of the doubt. And when it came to his fellow conspirators, he never betrayed a single name, even those he barely knew. He even extended grace to his captors, and won many of them over. This brings us to the third and greatest form of love.

**The third and most difficult step is to love those who've hurt you.** Romans 12:17-21 says, *"Do not repay anyone evil for evil...if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay', says the Lord. On the contrary, if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."*

It's hard to love those who've hurt you. It's so difficult I recommend starting first with the little hurts. I can remember a seminary roommate of mine named Ross, who would occasionally invite homeless people or hitchhikers back to our room. I'd wake up in the morning only to find a stranger sleeping in Ross's bed, and Ross sleeping on the floor. Although I was uncomfortable with this, I let it pass until one of them stole all my money while I was in the bathroom. Now I have to admit it was only a paltry \$11, but hey, you could buy a tank of gas for that in those days. Anyway, I let Ross have it, giving him a piece of my mind I could ill afford to lose.

You can guess what happened. An awkward silence ensued for several days, until one day when I was studying in the library, the Spirit convicted me right then and there. I knew God wanted me to track down Ross and apologize. So I did. A few months later we parted ways as friends, thanks to God's grace.

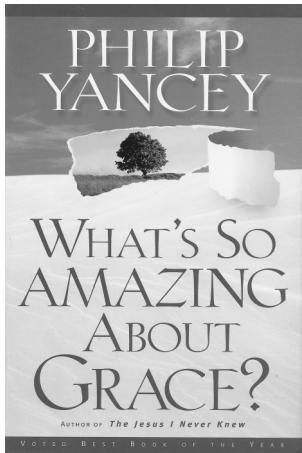
Now I wish I could say I've always been that noble and humble, but I haven't. I've miserably failed at times. But I relate this story because loving those who've hurt us starts at this level. We'll never be able to get to the point where we can forgive a spouse who's been unfaithful to us or a boss who has unfairly fired us or a parent who has walked out on us or a friend who has betrayed us if we are not willing to start at the level where Ross and I were.

Perhaps the Lord is impressing upon your heart right now a person you need to forgive. Don't wait! Track them down right now, and extend grace to them, the same kind of grace that God so generously has extended to you.

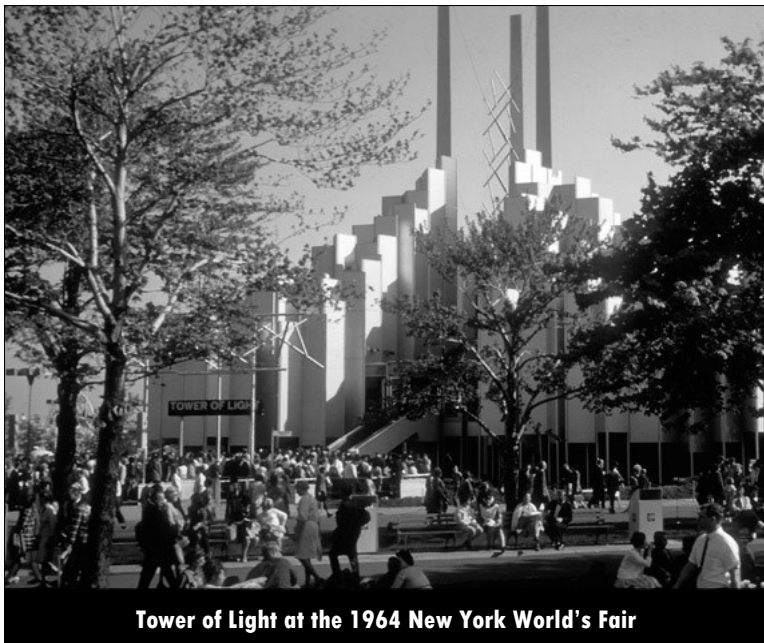
Philip Yancey calls grace the "last best word" in the English language. Technically, grace means "unmerited favor". It's completely free, and undeserved. When a bill collector extends the date of payment, we call it a "grace period". When a tip is left for the server, it's called a "gratuity", not something that is owed, but something that is given out of appreciation. When someone prays before a meal, they 'say grace', out of thankfulness for the Lord's provision. Are you ready to extend unmerited favor to others?

Some sixty years ago, missionaries Loretta Anderson and Doris Cos did exactly that when they ventured deep into the jungles of Peru and headed straight for the camp of Chief Tariri, the chief of a whole tribe of headhunters. Surrounding his hut were decorated poles with the heads of ten chieftains whom he had killed. The Peruvian army was terrified of him and basically just left him alone. But when these two female Wycliffe Bible translators walked right up to his hut, for some reason their boldness disarmed him.

A strange and unknown form of love piqued Tariri's curiosity. He had never experienced this and it melted his heart of stone. These two ladies spent months in his village, knowing every day that the



least little misstep may cost them their lives. They learned his language and they began to speak to him about One who loved him so much he went to the stake for him. Finally, one day the chief surrendered his heart to Jesus. Eventually he led over two hundred of his fellow tribesmen to Christ. A few years later, it was this Peruvian headhunter who pulled the switch at the New York World's Fair Tower of Light (1964). Chief Tariri had met the Light of the world, Jesus Christ, because of two young ladies who dared to love him with the love of Jesus. Are you ready to make that kind of love one of your core convictions?



Tower of Light at the 1964 New York World's Fair





# Knowing Where to Turn

No believer will survive in our post-Christian era without a strong and stable support system. God created us as social creatures, craving relationships. He designed us to do life together with others. Just as a wolf will prey on an animal separated from the herd, so will Satan prey on us when we venture too far from our support system.

For the believer, your support system must consist of three levels: First, and most critically, your heavenly Father (learn how to find your joy and security in Him); second, your faithful few (an inner circle who know you and love you just the way you are); and third, your fellowship of believers (a church family who will anchor you in your walk with Christ). To neglect any of these three is to place your soul in mortal danger. ***Be connected!***





# Knowing Where to Turn... To Your Father

Are you happy? Would your friends describe you as happy? A few years ago, I read a booklet written by a former pastor of my childhood church who described my family as the Jolly Johnsons. That warmed my heart because that's the kind of home I grew up in. There was always lots of laughter, practical jokes and funny stories. To this day, I love family get-togethers where my siblings will regale us with tales of their adventures at school, my brother as a school psychologist, and my sister as a first-grade teacher.

Some wistfully recall singular moments in their lives as their happiest moments. I heard a speaker once who described in great detail being a starting point guard at the Minnesota State High School Basketball Tournament. As he excitedly recalled playing in the opening game in front of a crowd of over 10,000 in legendary Williams Arena, you could almost smell the popcorn. Finding himself with the ball in his hands after the opening tip, he took a couple dribbles and launched a twenty-foot jumper. Nothing but net! As he recalled the stands breaking into a deafening roar, he looked at us and said, "It doesn't get any better than that!"

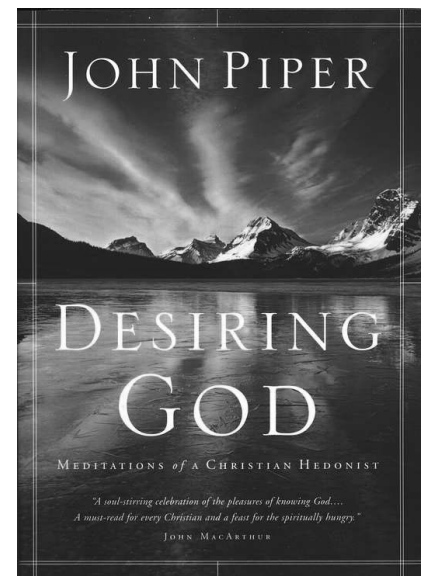


Really? Is true happiness restricted to a handful of climactic moments in our lives? Or can we enjoy a deep-seated, long-term, continual sense of well-being? That's what the Scriptures seem to point to. Although we must be careful not to expect a non-stop 'high', I believe we as God's people can daily live at a higher level of existence than the people of the world. Would you like to move in this direction?

**Step one is to understand that it is good to want to be happy.** Psalm 16:9 says, "Therefore, my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will rest secure." I want to challenge you to memorize Psalm 16 and ask God to help you live it out because this Psalm is dedicated to teaching God's people to be a happy people.

If you want to read a great book on this subject, get a copy of *Desiring God* by Pastor John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. Pastor John calls on us as God's people to be "Christian Hedonists". Not a hedonist like Hugh Hefner, the *Playboy* editor, but someone who wholeheartedly seeks to find their joy and happiness in God.

I grew up in a church that struggled with legalism. We had far more don'ts than dos. Don't smoke, don't dance, don't play cards, don't go to movies, and so on. What helped me was being surrounded by a very fun-loving and happy Christian family. And yet, Pastor John takes this to a whole new level: finding joy through a singular pursuit of God himself, the One who created us with all the pleasure sensors in our minds!



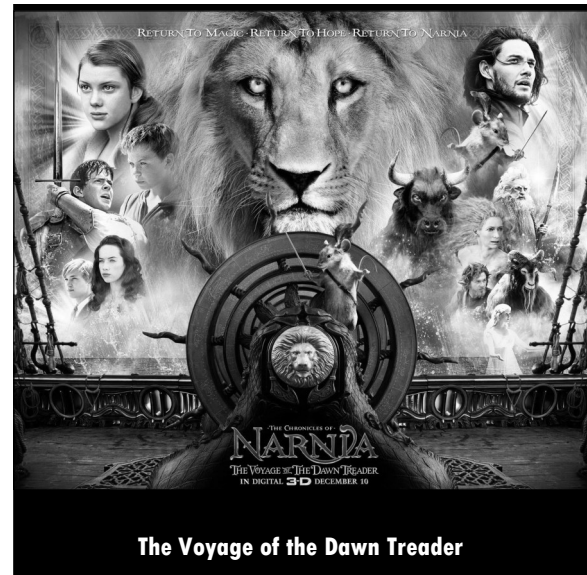
To this day, when I find myself overwhelmed by the negativity and evil of our world, I'll often take *Desiring God* off the shelf and read a couple of chapters. It helps to reset my thinking. I'm reminded that God himself is a supremely happy being, and he wants us to be too.

**This leads to step two: seek the deepest and most lasting happiness you can find.** Psalm 16:11 says, “*You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.*”

*Being filled with joy* refers to the *deepest* possible happiness that a person can have. Enjoying *eternal pleasures* refers to the most *lasting* happiness a person can have. After all, what can be longer lasting than pleasure that is eternal?

Recently I saw the third movie in the *Chronicles of Narnia* series – *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. The author of Narnia is, of course, C.S. Lewis, the great professor at Oxford. The question that historians have always asked about Lewis is why, in his mid-fifties, did he, a childless professor, decide to write a series of allegories, fantasy books for children? Did he just want to outdo his friend Tolkien, who had written *The Lord of the Rings* series, or was there a deeper motive?

In his autobiography, *Surprised By Joy*, C.S. Lewis describes himself as being on a lifelong pursuit of happiness. He wanted to recapture the joy of his childhood when he and his brother, Warren or Warnie, were comrades in arms, confidants who shared their deepest longings and secrets. Even at eight years old Lewis had a vivid imagination, creating in his mind the magical land of Boxen that was populated by talking animals. One day this would all be refashioned as the land of Narnia.



When Lewis was ten, this enchanting world came to an abrupt end with the death of his mother. Five years later, he announced to all that he had become an atheist. He emphatically stated that he was very angry at God for not existing. He became fascinated with Norse mythology.

It wasn't until he turned thirty-two that he returned to the Christianity of his youth, partly due to Tolkien. What brought him back? A longing for a restoration of the wondrous joy he had known as a child. Ironically, after running away from God for years and trying to find happiness in everything else, he came to discover that lasting happiness is found only in the Creator of the Universe. He was, in a very personal way, “surprised by joy”.

Years later, Lewis would write, “Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a vacation at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” Are you far too easily pleased? Are you trying to find happiness in all of the stuff of this world? That's a dead end street.

**Step three is to remember that the deepest and most lasting happiness is found only in God.** Psalm 16:2 says, “*I said to the Lord, “You are my Lord; apart from you I have no good thing.”*”

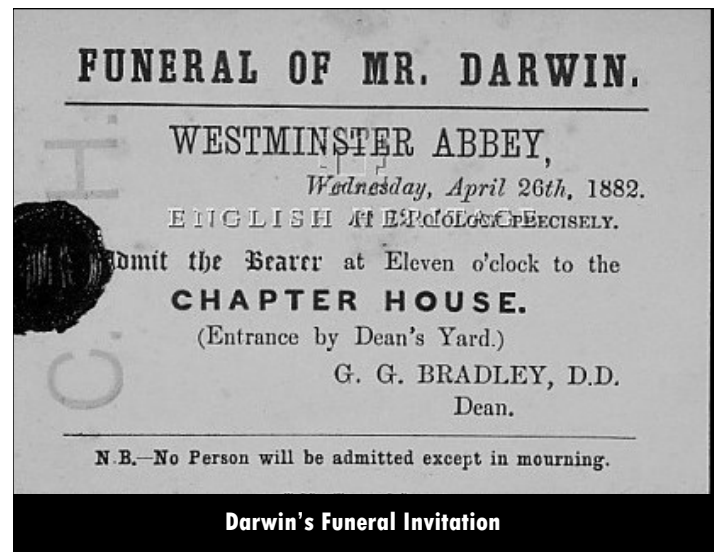
Some try to find lasting happiness in money. Yet, look at all the lottery winners who have seen their pot of gold turn into a curse. Others try to find lasting happiness in marrying an attractive spouse. Yet, look at the TV and movie stars who trade in their partners the way some of us used to trade baseball cards. Some think they are missing some elusive quality – the right face, the right body, the right personality, the right career – which is keeping them from lasting happiness. They are always searching, but never satisfied.

In fact, many of us can identify with Charles Darwin, who is often recognized as the father of the modern theory of evolution. By the end of his life, he was a famous man, with a reputation as a brilliant scientist and best-selling author. Yet, in his older years, he writes this: *“Up to the age of 30 or beyond it, poetry of many kinds...gave me great pleasure, and even as a schoolboy I took intense delight in Shakespeare...But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry; I have tried to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me...My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts...The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness.”*

Worse yet, Darwin just missed it. He tried to find happiness as a scientist, an explorer, a world traveler, an author, and a speaker. He was nearly worshiped by some. Yet he died having abandoned the God of his youth. As a young man, he had wrestled with becoming a minister. Late in his life, he seldom joined his family for church, and started calling himself an agnostic. Psalm 16:4 says this about Darwin, *“The sorrows of those will increase who run after other gods.”*

Yes, indeed, if you want to find deep happiness, lasting happiness, you’ll find that only in God.

**This brings us to step four which is to share your happiness in God by loving others.** Psalm 16:3 says, *“As for the saints who are in the land, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight.”*



Happiness is contagious. If you hang around people who are full of joy and happiness, you are very likely to catch a good dose of it.

I love to see my wife and children happy. I love to see them smiling and laughing with their friends and family. I love to hear lots of laughter in the house. When there is no longer laughter bouncing around the walls of our house, it’s going to be a dull house.

As a pastor, I love to see my church family happy and joyful. That’s the way it should be. God’s people should be the happiest people on earth. After all, we are in the presence of One who can fill us with joy, One who is the author of eternal pleasures.

Here’s a noble endeavor: Whenever you reach out to minister to another person in the name of Jesus, make it one of your primary goals to make them smile. Try to make them laugh. Try to lift their spirits. Try to bring joy to them. After all, the gospel of Jesus Christ is good news!

**Finally, step five in becoming a supremely happy person is to never forget that you worship whatever brings you happiness.** Psalm 16:7,8 says, *“I will praise the Lord, who counsels me; even at*



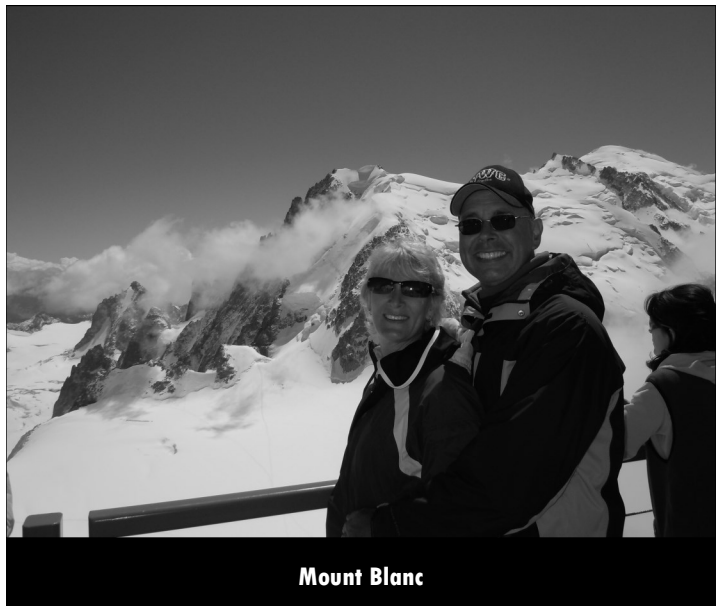
*night my heart instructs me. I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken."*

When God brings us joy, we worship him by praising his works and talking about him continually. We do the same thing with people who bring us joy. For example, one of our family highlights this past year was watching my youngest daughter, Kelly, defeat her nemesis Jackie Stifter of Glencoe-Silver Lake at the high school sectional tennis finals. Seven times previously, Stifter had defeated our daughter, but not this night. Kelly's 6-2, 6-2 win propelled her team to the state tennis tournament. How did my wife and I react? We praised her winning play over and over again, with a front-page photo in our local paper, *The Annandale Advocate*, giving us many additional opportunities to talk about her marvelous feat.

That's what happens with things that give us joy. You can't stop talking about it. You may as well try to plug a volcano or tell the clouds to stop raining. ***When you are really happy, you can't not talk about it.*** In fact, that's a critical part of what makes you even more happy: recounting the event over and over again.

That's true with God, too. When God has changed your life, you can't stop talking about it. You have to praise him. You have to worship him. Trying to stop is like trying to hush a stadium after the home team has scored the winning touchdown!

Another happy moment that Sue and I shared last year was our ascent up the tallest mountain in Europe, Mount Blanc. The lady at the bottom warned us, "It's a cloudy day. You may not be able to see anything up there." But we couldn't go any other day, so we went anyway. And sure enough, when we got off the gondola the whole area was enveloped in clouds.



Then after about fifteen minutes it happened. The clouds cleared and a most brilliant and glorious sun broke through and lit up the valleys all around us. It was absolutely spectacular. Even to this day we can't stop talking about it. My, what an awesome God we have that made this incredibly beautiful planet.

Now if someone had a microphone and followed Sue and me around the rest of that day our conversation would have sounded redundant. Over and over again we talked about the glory of that moment. The same thing happens when a waitress brings out a plate of BBQ ribs at Famous Dave's. I cannot be silent! I've got to say something. Or when Joe Mauer hits a towering home run for the Minnesota Twins. You can't just sit there! You have to say something!



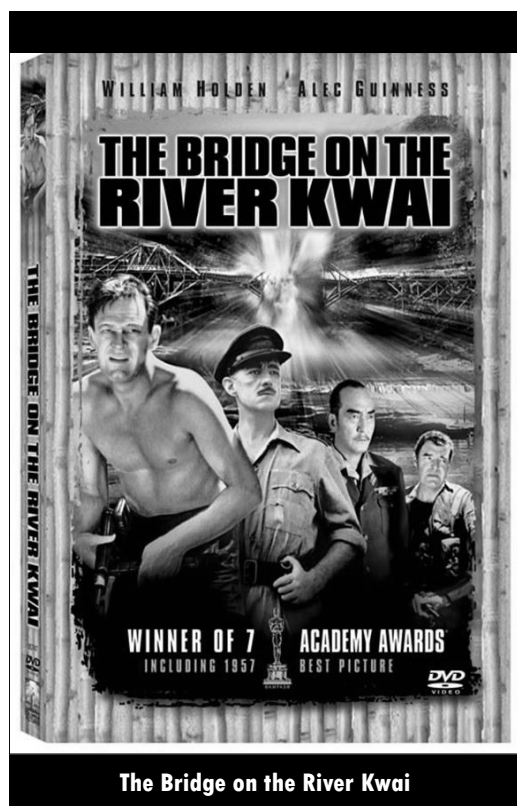
Psalm 19:1 says, *“The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”* And you know what? This is just referring to the things that we can see in our present universe. The Hubble Telescope has allowed us to see deeper and deeper into space and what they are finding is astounding. I see this as just a preview of what is to come. The Bible says this about heaven: *“Eye has not seen, nor ear has heard; neither has it entered the heart of any man the things that God has prepared for those who love him.”* *1 Corinthians 2:9.*

For the first thousand years in glory, I am convinced our jaws will never cease dropping. Wow, look at that! Man, can you believe that? Boy, does that taste good! Ooh, does that smell good! My, those sounds are magical! We are destined to be happy for all eternity, so let’s make it a point to start now. Let’s move our praying and Bible reading and worshiping from “have to” to “get to” to “want to” to “love to”! Let’s find our greatest joy in Him!



# Knowing Where to Turn...To Your Faithful Few

Ernest Gordon wanted nothing more than to get the war over, go into business, and make a fortune! At 6'2" and 200 pounds, he was nicknamed Rosie because of his good health and warm personality. Then over the horizon, three Japanese tankers appeared and messed up his plans. Gordon's tiny ship was soon captured. It was the spring of 1942 and the Japanese were victorious everywhere they turned.



The Bridge on the River Kwai

Gordon and his British comrades ended up at a POW camp in northern Thailand building railroads and bridges. One of these bridges would later be immortalized in the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. Doing heavy labor for twelve hours a day in 120-degree heat on a starvation diet soon reduced Ernest and his men to walking skeletons.

The gruesome conditions were compounded by a dog-eat-dog despair that overcame the men. When someone would die, his fellow prisoners would strip the body bare and then trade whatever they could scavenge for extra food. It became a survival of the fittest, and unfortunately, Gordon was fading fast. In fact, he became so sick he was near death, which was compounded by the fact that the Japanese gave no rations to the sick. It was considered a waste of food.

Then one day Ernest was visited by two of his shipmates. They couldn't believe it was the same Rosie they once knew. Quickly they banded together with others, vowing that Rosie would live. Everyone saved a bit from the meager rations to pass on to Rosie, and miraculously, he began to get stronger.

Years later, Gordon would pen his story, called *To End All Wars*. In 2001, his book was made into a movie starring Kiefer Sutherland. I have to warn you, it's a brutal movie but it's actually quite accurate. Yet, I still don't think they did justice to the difference that the gospel played in Gordon's recovery. Ernest Gordon was so radically changed by Christ that he aborted his plans to go into business and went to seminary instead. In fact, he would migrate to America and become dean of the chapel at Princeton University.

There was never any doubt in Ernest Gordon's mind that he owed the rest of his life to a faithful few, a small group of men who vowed he would not die. They were there for him in every way – bathing him, massaging him, feeding him, comforting him, and serving him.



Of course, we are all indebted to a faithful few – parents, siblings, teachers, neighbors, and friends. And yet when we get out on our own, we often forget this. Rugged individualism is embedded in the American culture. In biographies you often read about “self-made” men and women, but no one is self-made. I am well aware of that fact as a pastor, for I stand on the shoulders of others through various building projects and late night meetings as well as all of the ups and downs of pastoral life.

Even Jesus relied on a faithful few. In his divine nature, he was self-sufficient, for that is one of God’s core attributes, but in his human nature, he craved relationships every bit as much as food, water, sleep, and air. As humans we can live without being married, we can live if we are orphaned, we can live without siblings, but we can’t live without some level of interaction with other human beings at some point and time.



Ernest Gordon

In that sense, Jesus needed a faithful few. That’s why he called twelve disciples onto himself. Why twelve? Well, it’s hard to have more than about twelve close, personal friends, unless you’re Sid Hartman. Sid, the Star Tribune sports columnist, is always referring to this celebrity or that celebrity as his “close, personal friend”, but have you ever noticed that it’s really hard to be close to a large number of people? That’s why among Jesus’ friends there were three that seemed to be part of an inner circle for him: Peter, James, and John. These were the men that he summoned to himself at his hour of greatest trial. As he agonized in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing the cross was ahead of him, Jesus made three requests of his faithful few.

**First, he requested their companionship.** Matthew 26:36 says, *“Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, ‘Sit here while I go over there and pray.’ He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, ‘My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.’”*



Stay here and keep watch with me. Do you ever need someone to keep watch with you? Jesus did, and if Jesus needed this, what does that say about you and me? This is especially true when we are going through a crisis.

In the Chinese language, the word crisis is made up of two characters: the character for ‘life’ and the character for ‘stinks’. Maybe that’s where you are at today. Maybe you are thinking, “Life stinks.” If that’s the case, you are probably going to need people around you, friends who don’t necessarily have advice to offer, but will just be there.

Do you remember the biblical character Job? He lost his children, then his servants, then his livestock, then his herdsmen, then his home, and finally his health. Just when he hit rock bottom, a most amazing thing happened. Job 2:11-13 says, *“When Job’s three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him...They sat on the ground with him for seven days and seven nights. No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”*

The Hebrew word for ‘sympathize’ is ‘*nud*’ and it refers to body movement – shaking back and forth, nodding the head. You see this sometimes when people experience trauma and go into shock. They rock themselves back and forth like a mother does with her baby.

Imagine this scene. Job’s friends sat with him for seven days and seven nights, in silence. Even to this day, the Jewish people speak of “*sitting sheva*”, which literally means to “sit sevens”. This expression comes from the ancient Jewish practice of sitting with someone who mourns for a period of one week. According to Jewish tradition, people who come to comfort someone in mourning should not speak until the mourner speaks.

Let’s face it, this doesn’t compute with our fast-paced lifestyle today. First the idea of sitting around for long periods of time and doing nothing is simply intolerable to most of us. As is the idea of not talking, since we are wired to give advice and solve problems and offer solutions. And yet, anyone who has recently experienced great loss can readily identify with this. Simple companionship is priceless when our hearts are heavy.

**Second, there was an acute need for deliverance.** Jesus requested that his friends pray. Verse 40 says, “*Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?’ he asked Peter. ‘Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak.’*”



Garden of Gethsemane

A huge spiritual war was raging at that very moment. Earlier that evening, Jesus said to Peter, “*Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.*” Luke 22:31.

That very night, Satan and all his demons were trying to crush Jesus. The battle was so fierce in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus was actually sweating drops of blood. Satan was also trying to crush the church before it even started. That’s why he aimed for the jugular, the man who would lead the small, beleaguered church, Peter himself. Satan wanted to sift him like wheat.

You know what turned the battle? It was prayer. Prayer turned the tide of the entire battle. It always does. Let me give you a recent example in which God used many people from our church as prayer warriors.

Last November (2010), a 19-year old young lady named Amy Johnson came to a Celebrate Recovery (CR) group meeting at our church. CR is designed to help people overcome their ‘hurts, habits, and hang-ups’ through Christ’s power. A lady from our church, Audrey Elfering, met Amy that night and befriended her. Shelley Karja, CR ladies leader, gave her a Celebrate Recovery Bible.



Amy Johnson

The next Sunday, Amy came to our church for the first time and sat between Audrey and her husband Gene. After the service, Audrey shared her story of how she had come to Jesus. Surprisingly, when Audrey asked Amy about Jesus, she said she had never heard of him!

At a subsequent CR meeting in December, Amy connected with another lady from our church, Teri Pribyl. They instantly clicked and developed a mother-daughter type of relationship. That night Amy shared her whole story with the CR ladies, a tragic story, as she was raised in an environment where there was a lot of chemical abuse, immorality, and spiritual bondage. Later that evening she prayed with yet another Christian lady in our community, Pam Wurm, to receive Jesus as her Savior.

During this whole time, a concerted ministry of prayer was being waged on Amy's behalf and gradually the chains of darkness started to be broken. Teri had the great joy of nurturing Amy in her newfound faith, as did the young adults ministry at our church led by our Family Ministries Pastor, Aaron White. The chains of spiritual bondage were falling off for Amy.

That's why all of us were taken back when her life was suddenly cut short on Wednesday night, January 19, only hours after she had attended a young adults Bible study at our church. It was an apparent suicide. All of us were left asking 'Why?'

Unquestionably suicide is an enormous sin, but it is not the unforgivable sin. Amy was facing pressures on every side, including legal investigations into her past activities. Authorities were asking her to retrace her steps and relive some very painful memories. She would possibly have to testify against others. Something snapped that night. Exactly what happened in the spirit realm is hidden from us for now, but someday we will know the whole story.

What we do know for sure is this. From the night she started coming to CR, Amy experienced unconditional love as she had never known before, as well as an avalanche of prayer from well over a dozen followers of Jesus. The gospel was shared with her and she grabbed it, received it, and held on tight.

Following her untimely and tragic death, two services were held. One was in a neighboring town where Pastor Aaron had the opportunity to share the gospel to well over a hundred friends and family members of Amy's. A second service was held at Annandale Free where the Spirit again moved in a powerful way. I even had the joy, along with several others, of praying with a young man who came to Christ that night.

At times we had difficulty seeing God's hand after Amy's death, just as the disciples struggled after our Lord's death on the cross. And yet our Lord is one who continually turns the tables on the Enemy's attempt to wreak havoc. He often uses a faithful few to do that. In Amy's case, a faithful few prayed for her, loved on her, and helped to deliver her from the kingdom of darkness.

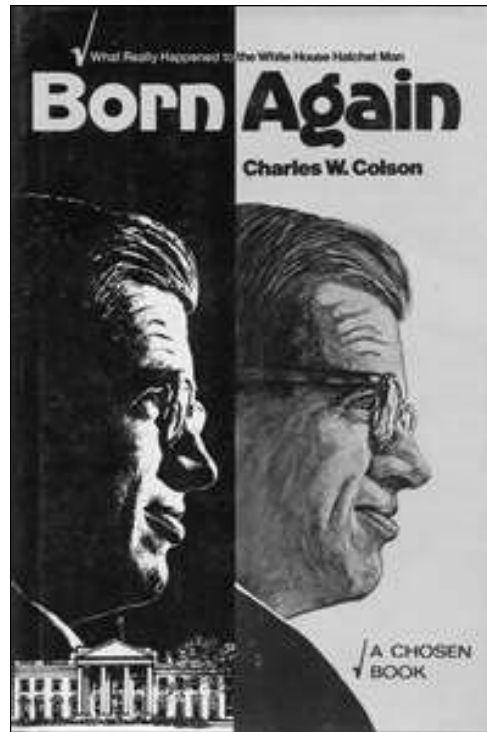
Romans 8:28 says, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."*

**Third, there was a need for support.** After his arrest, Jesus faced the greatest trial of his life. If he were only 100% man, he may well have faltered due to the fickleness of his friends, for right after he was arrested, the Bible says, “*Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.*” *Matthew 26:56*. Thankfully, Jesus is also 100% God, which enabled him to endure this awful storm. In fact, he even told the disciples ahead of time what would happen. Back in verse 31, Jesus had told them, “*This very night you will all fall away on account of me.*”

Then as if to add insult to injury, that same night “*a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest.*” *Luke 22:24*. Can you imagine anything more disheartening for our Lord to endure? Right when he’s at his lowest moment, his friends are arguing over who’s the top dog.

In his humanness, Jesus needed what we all need when the chips are down – good people who will stand with us, shoulder to shoulder. That’s what Chuck Colson needed after he was sentenced to prison for his Watergate crimes. In his autobiography *Born Again*, Chuck describes what it meant to him when his friend, Al Quie, offered to serve his time. Al, who was at that time a congressman and who would later serve as governor of Minnesota, had found an old law statute that allowed one man to serve another’s sentence. He was dead serious in making this offer. Chuck turned him down, but he never forgot that. You see, that’s laying it on the line. That’s taking a risk.

That’s what Ernest Gordon’s friends did when they saved a portion of their own meager rations, and fed him and nursed him back to health. They took a risk. They laid it on the line.

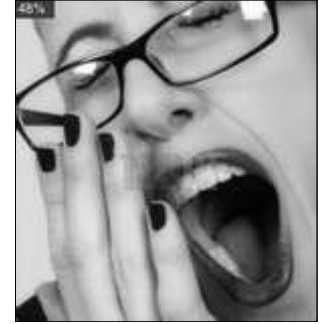


Are you ready to do that for your friends? Even more important is the question, “Are you cultivating a friendship circle that will be a ‘faithful few’ for you?” That’s what Jesus did with his disciples. Although they failed him at Gethsemane, a few months later they would stand tall under enormous pressure as they launched the Church at Pentecost. You can read their story in the book of Acts. Christ’s investment paid rich dividends. It will for you too. Take the initiative now and invest in a ‘faithful few’.

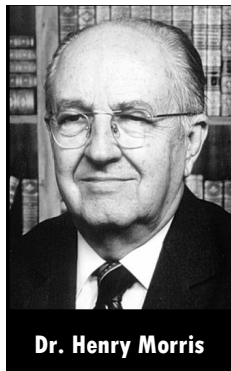
# Knowing Where to Turn... To Your Fellowship

For many people today, the word “church” elicits nothing more than a big yawn. If they had to summarize church in one word, that word would be “boring”. Others have mostly negative memories of church. For many, their one-word description of church would be “hypocrisy”. Thankfully, there are many others who, like me, have had mostly positive experiences with church.

It’s not that I haven’t seen hypocrisy, legalism, and boredom in the church. It’s definitely alive and well in just about any church. Yet, my experience has been that these negative factors have simply been overwhelmed by the positive. Put quite simply, I’ve never been a part of any organization that even comes close to the church. Why is that? Because I have found that the church is the only institution in society that is directly addressing three fundamental needs of mankind.

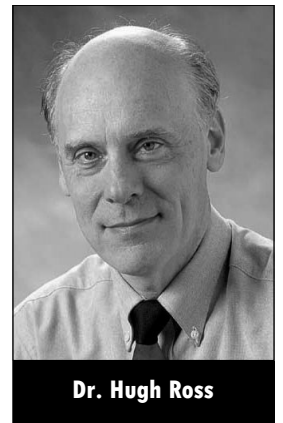


**First, only the church is addressing the need for answers.** We desperately need clarity in a world that is often very confusing and foggy. Historically, the church has been a beacon for truth since the time of Christ. In Acts 2, right after the church is first formed, the Bible says, “*They devoted themselves to the apostle’s teaching.*” (vs. 42). This means that they passionately pursued the teaching that was founded on the Scriptures, the Word of God.

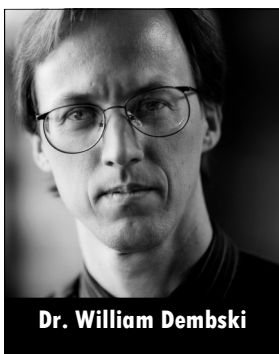


Dr. Henry Morris

Only in the Bible do we find fundamental answers to the major questions of life, such as, “*Where did we come from?*” Genesis 1:1 says, “*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” Genesis 1:27 says, “*God created man in his own image.*” No other institution speaks with authority on such topics. In fact, secular educators maintain that the universe evolved by chance processes some 10-15 billion years ago. Moreover, man evolved from lower primates, from monkeys, gorillas, and orangutans.



Dr. Hugh Ross



Dr. William Dembski

The church points us in another, more credible direction. Young-earth creationists like Dr. Henry Morris, old-earth creationists like Dr. Hugh Ross, and proponents of intelligent design like Dr. William Dembski all adhere closely to the teachings of Genesis 1-2, seeing God as the author and sustainer of all creation. Personally, I am more partial to the young-earth view (that the universe originated approximately six to ten thousand years ago), but I deeply respect any scientist who deals seriously with the high degree of design that is embedded within the cosmos.

Equally important is the question, “*Where are we going?*” Only the church has a credible explanation of life after death. According to John 1:12, all who receive Christ are children of God, bound for heaven. Revelation 21 and 22 describe this heaven as an indescribable paradise. Romans 3:25 teaches that if we have faith in Christ’s blood, he will atone or cover over our sins. I Corinthians 15 trumpets the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, the firstfruits of millions of his followers who will also rise from the dead through believing in Him. Where else are you going to hear this unless it is from the church?



Secularists have no credible answers to inquiries about the afterlife. All you have to do is view a movie like *Hereafter* to see that their guesses about what lies beyond the grave are nothing more than stabs in the dark.

Another critical question is, “**Why are we here?**” The world doesn’t have a clue as to why we are here. Some have a materialistic worldview (seeking to get rich); others are hedonists (seeking to have fun), while still others are more noble, pursuing altruism (serving their fellow man). Only the church speaks with authority as to our purpose on this earth. Colossians 3:17 says, “*Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.*” The Westminster Confession puts it this way, “The chief end of man is to know God and enjoy him forever.” Psalm 16 teaches us, “*In your presence is fullness of joy and pleasures forevermore.*”

In the name of Jesus, we do our jobs and love our spouses and raise our children and encourage our friends and bless our enemies. Again, let me ask you, “Who else on this earth can tell us why we’re here on this planet?” Only the church has real answers.

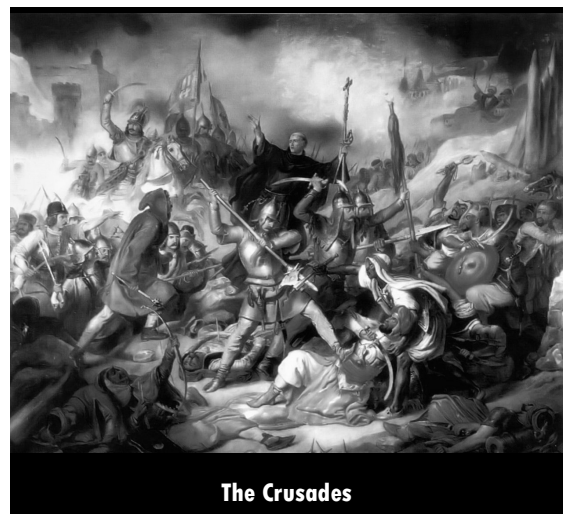
That’s the first reason we need the church. **The second reason we need the church is for support.** I need warmth in the midst of a world that can be very cold and heartless. The church has provided this since day one. Acts 2:42 says, “*They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship.*” They passionately pursued the whole idea of fellowship, which is defined as “camaraderie, companionship, supportive friendship”. Verse 44 says, “*All the believers were together.*” Verse 46 says, “*Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.*”

Clearly, God has created us as social creatures. Whether you want to admit it or not, we all crave relationships. From the time I was a little boy, the deepest, most enduring, most meaningful friendships I have ever established have been within my church family.

Now I realize there are hypocrites in the church because I see it in myself. I wrestle with impatience, especially when I’m driving, or anger when I don’t get my way, or self-righteousness when I compare my views to others. All of us are tainted by sin, which means that every church is going to struggle at some level with practicing what we preach.

Here’s what keeps me going when I am let down by a fellow Christian’s words or conduct. After thirty years of pastoral ministry, I can honestly say that for every act of nastiness which I’ve witnessed within the church, I’ve seen ten acts of kindness. I’ve seen thousands of dollars donated and hundreds of hours invested expecting absolutely nothing in return. I would challenge anyone to find another institution or organization where such jaw-dropping acts of kindness and service are so commonplace.

Are professing Christians sometimes viciously nasty? Absolutely, there is no way you can whitewash such events as the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Salem witch trials, or the numerous TV evangelists who’ve fallen into sin. I would guess that God himself is deeply ashamed at various acts that have been done in His name. Yet, when you place this side by side with the thousands of hospitals, universities, scientific institu-



**The Crusades**

tions, literacy campaigns, relief centers, and charitable organizations that have been spearheaded by the church, there is no comparison. And we haven't even mentioned the countless works of art, music, literature, and architecture that have been done in the name of Christ. What other institution in the history of the world can boast such a track record for the good of all society?

In the summer of 1982, just a few weeks after Sue and I were married, we left to go to school in Deerfield, Illinois. Foolishly, I had lined up no housing whatsoever, assuring my new bride that there was plenty of housing in the northern suburbs of Chicago. "Piece of cake", I told her. Big, big mistake! There was nothing available, and we were on the phone all day long. After a couple days in campus housing we literally had nowhere to go. Sue's former pastor was now serving a church a few miles away, and as this was our only lead at all, we went to the church to discuss our dilemma. Unfortunately, the pastor was on vacation. Now what do we do? On a whim we decided to stop at the church parsonage where the youth pastor lived. I explained our situation, that we were 500 miles from home, newly married, and didn't have an extra dime to our names. Pastor Gary Mayes didn't bat an eye. He just pointed to a spare bedroom and welcomed us in. He had no idea if this was for two days or two months.

I'll never forget the kindness of Gary and his wife, Margaret. It only ended up being a couple of days before we were able to sublease something temporarily, but I'll never forget these two servants of the King. The warmth of their hospitality was such a contrast to the cold, calloused big-city suburbs that I can feel it to this day.

It was the church where we found support. In their book, *The Unshakable Truth*, Josh and Sean McDowell point out ten relational needs that the church helps to meet, needs that are universal among men and women. They are the need for comfort, attention, acceptance, appreciation, support, encouragement, affection, approval, security, and respect.

## Ten Relational Needs the Church Helps to Meet

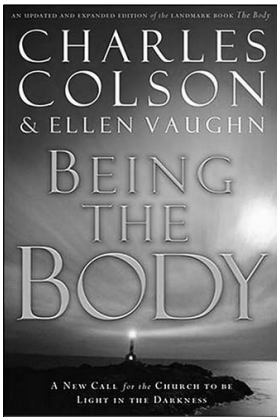
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|-----------------|------------------|
| 1) Comfort      | 6) Encouragement |
| 2) Attention    | 7) Affection     |
| 3) Acceptance   | 8) Approval      |
| 4) Appreciation | 9) Security      |
| 5) Support      | 10) Respect      |

**The third need the church addresses is the need for God.** I need light in the midst of a world that is often very dark and depressing. In Acts 2:38, Peter trumpets the message of the church very succinctly, "*Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.*"

Who else is doing this? What other organization or institution is calling people to God in our society today? The government wants to leave God out of everything. They want us to be a completely secular state. The entertainment industry seldom refers to God except as a swear word. Science wants to explain things using natural, not supernatural means. Even secular treatment centers for drugs and alcohol ignore the One in whom is found lasting deliverance.

The apostle Peter pleaded, "*Save yourself from this corrupt generation.*" He knew that no human is likely to do this on his own. That's why the early church leaders taught, "God is our Father, but

the church is our mother.” The church nurtures us, cares for us, burps us, feeds us, and when we fall, the church helps us get up again. Some of us have had that experience with the church, but others haven’t. If you haven’t, I want to apologize to you and ask you to give us another chance.



My prayer is that you will find the same strength and comfort found by Irina Ratushinskaya, whose story is told in Chuck Colson’s excellent book on the church, called *Being The Body*.

Irina grew up in the port city of Odessa, Ukraine which was part of the Soviet Union at that time. As a young school girl she was repeatedly taught that God did not exist. She was told about a Baptist woman who had roasted her child in an oven. One year, they held a play depicting priests as oafs and fools. Her teacher told her, “Only silly, ignorant old women believe in God.”

That day Irina thought to herself, “When they told me there were no ghosts, they only had to say it once, but they tell us nearly every day that God doesn’t exist. He must be very powerful for them to fear Him so greatly.” Right then it started to snow, and she bowed her head and she prayed, “Okay, God, if you are so powerful, make it keep snowing.”

That was Irina’s first prayer. It snowed for three days straight, the largest snowfall in Odessa for sixty years. Needless to say, Irina was convinced, even though she knew absolutely nothing about God since she had no way of getting a Bible. She could, however, read the great Russian authors like Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Pushkin and that was enough to nourish her newfound faith. Pushkin told her the truth lay in the Russian Orthodox Church, so she joined the church. Even though the Orthodox church had a checkered history, persecution had driven out all the nominal believers. Only devout believers, ready to die for Christ, were left. They gently nurtured Irina’s new faith.




She was 23 when she was given her first Bible, printed in Old Church Slavonic. She had to learn the Slavonic alphabet first, which took her a month and a half. Only then could she finally read and understand what was written. Somewhere along the line she started writing poems about her faith and one of them fell into the hands of the secret police. She was arrested and sentenced to seven years hard labor. Nearly starving to death, she joined with other believers, finding peace in the Lord. In fact, God became very real to her, and her Christian friends were a warm and loving presence in the midst of a freezing prison. By 1986, her story got out to the West and when Reagan was scheduled to meet Russian leader Gorbachev at the Reykjavik summit, two days before their meeting, Irina was released. Immediately she was besieged by thousands of letters from Christians all over the world who were praying for her release.

Five years later, these same prayers led to the collapse of the whole Soviet Union. The church had overcome all of the godless forces of Communism without a shot being fired.

This is a story of the church at its finest. Here we find a church that offered a young girl answers to the deepest questions in her soul. Here is a church that offered warmth and support to nurture her newfound faith. Here is a church that prayed for God to comfort her during her greatest trial.

Don’t neglect the church. Every Christian needs the church just as much as he needs food to eat and air to breathe. God is our Father, but the church is our mother. Will you stand with the church?



# Knowing Why to Persevere

Winston Churchill is widely recognized as one of the most influential figures in the twentieth century, primarily due to his inspirational leadership early in World War II. He became prime minister during Britain's darkest hour, when his small island nation stood alone before the Nazi onslaught. Churchill may be best remembered for a speech he gave on October 29, 1941, at Harrow School where he had attended as a youth. He concluded his brief speech with words, "Never, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, ever, give up. Never give up. Never give up. Never give up". Then he sat down.

If we as believers are to survive the onslaught of evil in our post-Christian era, we must rise to the challenge of Mr. Churchill. We must never give up! Three inspirational forces should help every believer to keep the flame burning and the flag flying – ***your hope*** (the promise of Christ to return); ***your home*** (your spouse, family, and closest friends who are journeying with you); and ***your heroes*** (great believers, past and present, who have lit the way for us)!

Several years ago, a guide led us through the Titanic museum in Branson, Missouri. At the end of the tour, I thanked him for sharing about the faith of one man who led another to Christ while they were dying in the water. Finding out I was an evangelical pastor, he gripped my hand as we were leaving, looked me in the eyes, and said, "If we don't see each other again, I'll meet you in the air."

***Yes, indeed, keep the faith, brave Christian, no matter what lies ahead of us, and I'll meet you in the air!***

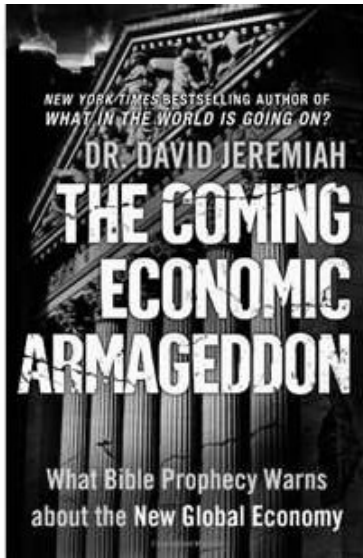




# Knowing Why to Persevere...Because of Your Hope

It's a scary time to be alive! Threats besiege us from every direction!

Consider, for example, threats from weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). A couple years ago, 85 national security experts were surveyed. They estimated that by the year 2015 the risk of attack by a WMD was approximately 70%. The risk of radiological, chemical, or biological attack was set at 40%, and the risk from conventional nuclear weapons was judged to be 29%. Will Iran have the bomb by 2015? Experts say it is virtually certain, though Israel's cyber-attack on their nuke program appears to have set them back.



Or consider the threat of financial meltdown. Our national debt is \$14 trillion and climbing fast. That's why Pastor David Jeremiah wrote a book entitled *The Coming Economic Armageddon*. He wished to both warn and prepare God's people for the coming storm.

Or consider the collapse of biblical morality in our nation. Inundated by pornography, and on the verge of endorsing gay marriage, the US is spiraling downward. When the family disintegrates, everyone suffers.

Or how about threats from soaring health care costs or the recent upheaval in the Middle East? Everywhere we turn, the world seems to be growing more unstable, which can so easily trigger despair among God's people. That's why I believe that the doctrine of the Second Coming of Jesus Christ is more important today than it has ever been. Embracing this doctrine needs to be one of our core convictions as Christians today, for three reasons.

**First, because it fills us with anticipation.** I Thessalonians 4:13-14 says, "*Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep, or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him.*"

Here's an amazing paradox. The very things that are spreading anxiety, fear, and despair throughout our society signal to us as Christians that the personal and bodily return of Jesus Christ to our earth is near. Jesus said in Luke 21:28, "*When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.*"

I'll never forget when Reign Ministries founder Louie Inks spoke at our 2008 Church Missions Conference, right in the middle of the September stock market crash. Louie said, "Yesterday the stocks were down 500 points. Today another 400 points. Isn't it exciting?"

Yes, indeed, the very things that send shivers of fear down the spine of an unbeliever should send the thrill of anticipation down the spine of a believer. Anticipation is defined as "pleasurable expectation". So what's pleasurable expectation? The fact that "*God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep.*" I Thessalonians 4:14. "*Falling asleep*" is a figure of speech often used in Scripture of someone who has died.



I can guarantee that this is going to be the most exhilarating moment of your life if you are a believer. On this earth, we look forward to things like Christmas, marriage, having children, and going on a vacation. All of these things pale in comparison to the day that Jesus returns, bringing all the believers who've died with him.

As Tony Campolo loves to say, "It's Friday, but Sunday's a-coming!" We may journey through some dark valleys on our earthly journey, but dawn is coming, and it is going to be a bright and glorious new morning. God's people should always be filled with anticipation.

**Secondly, Christ's solemn promise to return should fill us with certainty.** I Thessalonians 4:15-18 says, "*According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven... and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore comfort one another with these words.*"

There are not many things on this earth that are rock solid. Some of us have had earthly pillars such as our marriage or our job or our health suddenly crumble. If anything, the future will only bring more uncertainty as virtually every expert out there is predicting massive, all-encompassing changes over the next decade.

That's why we can take great comfort in the promises of Jesus for our future. I Thessalonians 4:15 begins, "*According to the Lord's own word...*" Jesus Christ is going to re-enter the realm of space and time that he once occupied some 2000 years ago. Verse 16 assures us that this will be preceded by a loud command, the voice of the archangel, and a trumpet call. It will all happen suddenly and instantaneously. I Corinthians 15:51, 52 says, "*Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed.*"

Do you know how fast the twinkling of an eye is? Faster than you can blink. Faster than you can snap your finger. Faster than a speeding bullet.

Here's what's going to happen, according to our Lord's own word. The bodily remains of every believer who has ever died are going to be reunited with the spirit which at one time inhabited that body. Instantly, these bodily remains are going to be refashioned into a body like Christ had after he rose from the dead. It will be a glorified body, both immortal and indestructible.

In I Corinthians 15:37, the apostle Paul likens this change to that of a seed that is planted in the ground. It remains dormant for a period of time and then suddenly, it comes to life and it sprouts. A new plant shoots up. Just as a plant shares the same properties as its seed, so our new glorified bodies will share the same properties of our present bodies. But there will also be significant differences. The best thing is that our new bodies will never die, age, or wear out.

Amazingly, the Bible teaches in I Thessalonians 4:17 that there will be one generation of believers, and only one generation, that will not die. This verse says, *“After that (i.e., after the dead in Christ rise from their graves), we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.”* The verb for **“caught up”** is the Latin word **“rapturo”** from which we get the English word **“Rapture”**. When we are raptured, we will be caught up to meet the Lord in the air.



Bible teacher Warren Wiersbe tells about the summer church camp that decided to play a trick on its director. The director had to run into town to get some supplies, and while he was gone, the staff and campers put together an elaborate hoax. When the director returned, everyone was ‘missing’, clothing was laying all over like people had ‘passed through’ it. He looked out over the lake and there a lone motorboat was going in circles without anyone in it. He goes into the kitchen, and food is cooking on the stoves, but no one is around. And then, amazingly, at the very time he’s in the kitchen, he gets a phone call from someone in town who says to him, “What is going on? What’s happening? There are people missing all over.”

Later, after the cat was out of the bag, the director said, “I’ve got to admit, it really shook me up for a minute.” Can you imagine this? Who wouldn’t be shook up? And yet, some day this is going to happen! In the twinkling of an eye, millions of people will just disappear. They will be caught up, snatched up to be with Jesus in the air and instantly their bodies will be transformed into new immortal bodies that will never die.

We live in a day and age when so many are filled with despair. So many have lost hope. So many have become cynical. It’s time for God’s people to rest in his promises. The Bible says, *“According to the Lord’s own word...”* You can bank on this! This is a guarantee made by God himself. Jesus is coming back! And it may be very soon.

**The third reason to focus on the Lord’s return is because it will fill you with confidence.** I Thessalonians 5:1-4 says, *“Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, ‘Peace and safety’, destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief.”*

God’s people should not be in darkness when it comes to the matter of prophecies about Christ’s return. Although no one knows the day nor the hour of the Lord’s return, we will know the general season. God’s people will not be surprised like a thief because we are watching for our Lord. We can see the signs, just as the wise men did at Christ’s first coming.

In the mid-1940's two events occurred that indelibly marked our age as *absolutely unique* in the course of human history. The first occurred on July 16, 1945 with the explosion of *the first atomic bomb* at Los Alamos, New Mexico. Everyone there that day knew instantly that this was a game changer. The world would never be the same. We simply can't put the nuclear genie back in the bottle. After the explosions at Hiroshima and Nagasaki ended World War II, General Douglas MacArthur, at the surrender ceremony aboard the USS Missouri, said this: "We have had our last chance. If we do not devise some greater and more equitable system, Armageddon will be at our door."



**The Atomic Bomb**

The second event occurred less than three years later. On May 14, 1948, *Israel once again became a nation*, some 2900 years since it had last existed as a united and sovereign nation and some 2600 years after the prophet Ezekiel foretold that the dry bones would once again put on flesh (Ezekiel 37).

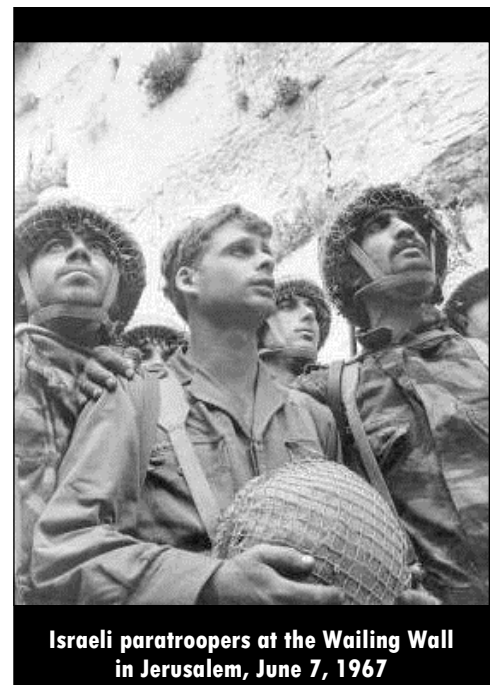


**Israel Becomes a Nation**

Every Christian on earth should have woken up and taken notice on that day, for the rebirth of Israel is one of the most prophesied events in all the Bible. It is also repeatedly linked with the Second Coming of Christ.

Nineteen years later a third lightning bolt occurred when *Israel regained full sovereignty over the city of Jerusalem* on June 7, 1967. Jesus himself had prophesied in Luke 21:24, "Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled." Wikipedia says that Jerusalem has been captured or recaptured 44 times in history. In 1967, we witnessed the last time. The Eternal City is back under Jewish control for the first time since the biblical era.

These three events, along with dozens of fulfilled prophecies in the last century, should fill every Christian with confidence that we are living in the end times. The Bible says, "You, brothers, are not in darkness, that this day should surprise you like a thief." As Christians, we must learn to view the events of history not as isolated, random happenings but as part of an orchestrated plan that is being assembled by the sovereign God of the universe who knows exactly what he is doing. In fact, he foretold it thousands of years ago.



**Israeli paratroopers at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, June 7, 1967**

As I pen these words, our world is experiencing tremendous upheaval in the Middle East with regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt and massive demonstrations elsewhere. Many believers are wondering once again if such events are providential.

Most assuredly, the answer to that question is yes. Like pieces on a chess board, God is assembling rulers and nations for a grand finale. The great Russian-Islamic coalition of nations foretold in Ezekiel chapter 38 is coming together. At the same time, Israel is becoming more and more isolated, with her primary ally, the United States, becoming economically, militarily, and morally weaker. The Muslim world is steadily drifting from secularism to extremism. We've seen that already in Iran, Turkey, Morocco, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. We are likely to see more of this in Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan.



As lovers of America, we mourn over the decline of our nation. As lovers of Israel, we are concerned with rising animosity toward the Jews. As lovers of peace, we are concerned by the clamor of militants. Yet, here is the bottom line for us as God's people. We must never be overtaken by despair, cynicism, or confusion. Rather we are to be a people filled with anticipation, certainty, and confidence, for our redemption draws near. Christ is coming, God is in control, and the Spirit is at work. Are you ready to rest in that today?

# Knowing Why to Persevere...Because of Your Home

Peter Vins followed in the footsteps of seven generations of pastors who preceded him in his family. In 1926, he felt the call of God to go to Siberia as a missionary, a tough assignment. Nine years earlier the Bolshevik Revolution had brought Communism to Russia. Soon after arriving, Peter fell in love with a Russian girl named Lydia Zharikova. He solemnly warned her, "If you are willing to die in the mud, the swamps, and the forests of Siberia, then marry me."

If anyone ever tries to tell you that Christians are wimps, tell them about Peter Vins. In 1930, he was arrested for preaching the gospel, imprisoned for three years, then re-arrested in 1935. His wife had sewed Bible verses to the inside of his clothing so he'd have some spiritual food in prison. Every day that they could, his wife and young son would walk down to the prison to see if they could visit him. They'd leave a parcel for him with a guard at the gate and then sit for awhile on a bench near the prison. From the fourth floor, Peter would wave at them until finally the guards built covers for the windows so he couldn't see out. That was the last time they ever saw him. It wasn't until 1995 that his son, Georgi, was allowed to see KGB files that verified that he had been executed way back in 1936.



Georgi Vins

Amazingly, Lydia and Georgi carried on the torch of the gospel. Years later, Lydia was arrested at age 63 and sentenced to three years in a labor camp for her ministry to prisoners and their families. Georgi became a Baptist pastor himself and was imprisoned three times, for a total of eight years. The torch continued to be passed down to Georgi's son, Peter, named for his martyred grandfather. He too was sent to prison for preaching the gospel.

Right before Jimmy Carter met with Brezhnev in 1979, Georgi and his family were released to the US in exchange for two convicted Russian spies. Georgi continued to work with the persecuted church until Communism fell. Then he went back to Russia to preach again until he finally went to be with the Lord in 1998. Wikipedia says that his son Peter moved back to Russia where he is still living today.

What an inspiration the Vins family is to us as believers today! Ten consecutive generations faithfully proclaimed the gospel no matter what sacrifices were asked of them. How were they able to pass on the torch for well over two centuries? One thing that immediately stands out is the unconditional commitment of each husband to his wife and each wife to her husband. Peter and Lydia saw this in their parents and grandparents, and they successfully passed this on to their children and grandchildren.

Successfully passing on a godly heritage starts with an unconditional covenant when we marry. Peter Vins was able to survive his years in a Siberian prison due to his hope and his home. He was secure in the love of Jesus and in the love of his family. Lydia, Georgi, and grandson Peter would follow in his footsteps, finding support in both their hope and their home. Building that kind of home starts with unconditional love between husband and wife, the kind that is pictured in Malachi 2:10-16. If you want to build this kind of unconditional love, you need to join together in three pursuits.

**First, husbands and wives need to pursue God together.** Malachi 2:10 says, "*Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?*"

God's people in the time of the prophet Malachi were in deep trouble. The men were abandoning

their Jewish wives and marrying foreign women who didn't love God. The prophet warned them not to break faith with their godly wives, reminding them that they share a common faith. God is the Father of both of them. He is their Creator. It was before Him that they took a solemn vow when they married, a holy covenant.

Before you say "I do", make sure your partner is someone with whom you can pursue God. Look for a soulmate. This is the type of relationship that Peter and Lydia had. They were not only Christians, but committed Christians. They were not only committed Christians, but they shared a common burden for the people of Siberia. Their hearts were aflame with a common vision.

Prayer is a key element in melting our hearts together. Every Christian couple needs to anchor their relationship in prayer. A man by the name of John Yates was so convinced of this that he made two promises to his wife on his wedding day. He vowed first to be a faithful, loving husband to her. Second, he promised to pray together with her every night before they went to sleep. Years later he wrote, "We had no idea how important the second promise would be in helping us to keep the first promise, as we prayed together for the first time as husband and wife in a romantic, honeymoon setting on the Florida coast."

When I first read this, I promised my wife to do this with her. Two decades later, Sue and I have reaped amazing benefits from this practice. For one, I've discovered that it's really hard to pray with someone you're angry at. It's taught us not to let the sun go down upon our wrath as the Scripture teaches. There's been a couple of times where I've had to pray, "Lord, help her to see the light!" And she's prayed the same thing for me!

I've also discovered that praying together adds one more layer of the divine bonding that the Holy Spirit uses to strengthen Christian marriages. Husbands, when you are a faithful prayer warrior for your family, you extend an umbrella of protection under which your wife and children can find rest and refuge. You also teach them, by example, to cast their cares upon God. Have you ever realized how many things you can't control, like your kids? But you can give them to God, and that's a good place to leave all your cares and concerns.

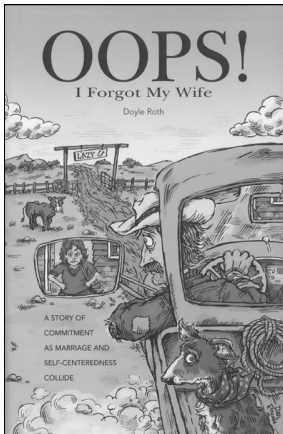
Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, "*Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.*" When a husband, wife, and God form a cord of three strands, they bond themselves tightly to each other, like a cord or rope. A godly heritage will be formed that will be passed down to three or four or five generations or more. This is what happens when a husband and wife covenant to pursue God together. Are you committed to doing this in your marriage?

**Second, husbands and wives need to pursue each other.** Malachi 2:14-15 says, "*...The Lord is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made them one?*"

When I was a little boy, my favorite TV shows were ones where there was a happy home. I loved the way Daniel Boone treated his wife, Becky, with such tenderness and respect (on *Daniel Boone*). I was fascinated with the warm relationship between Pa and Ma Ingalls on *Little House on the Prairie*. I found comfort and security in the obvious affection between the mother and father on *Father Knows Best*. Today our TV shows and movies mirror the society at large. The problems, difficulties, and challenges of marriage get far



more air time than the blessings and benefits. One of the key issues is that many couples, once married, stop pursuing each other.



I love the book *Oops, I Forgot My Wife* by Doyle Roth. He puts his finger on a key problem with us men. When we are courting our wives, we put everything into it. But once we've 'bagged our prey', we can easily move on to other pursuits.

A few years ago we hosted author Willard Harley at our church for a seminar. In his book *His Needs, Her Needs*, Dr. Harley notes that every married couple needs fifteen hours a week together doing enjoyable activities in order for their marriage to remain strong and vibrant. A couple that plays together stays together.



In all my counseling of pre-married couples, not once have I ever had to tell them to spend more time together. They automatically carve out the time, and amazingly, it's almost always at least fifteen hours a week. On the other hand, just about every married couple that has come to see me with conflict has a problem in this area. Almost without exception, they've stopped having fun together. Most of the time, they've simply started to live separate lives. What was once fifteen hours together weekly fell to ten hours and then to five hours. Before they knew it, they were like two ships passing in the night, basically like strangers co-existing.

Husbands and wives, we have to keep pursuing each other! Don't ever put that on the back-burner. Make it a front-burner issue. You'll be glad you did.

**Third, couples need to pursue the Word together.** Malachi 2:16 says, "*I hate divorce' says the Lord God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,' says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.*"

If you wish to create a marriage that is truly indestructible, you need to pursue God's Word with your partner. What you will discover in the Scriptures is the greatest love story ever told.

In the beginning, God built a beautiful home for his people called the Garden of Eden, but his people were unfaithful to him. They fell into sin. But God didn't give up on his people. In fact, he sent his Son from the throne-room of heaven to come to earth. His Son laid down his life to win God's people back. Now, his Son is preparing a home for his people, which he calls his bride. Yet, even now, God does not force our hand. He just gently extends his love, seeking to woo us to His side. The choice is ours.

According to Ephesians 5, husbands are to take their cues from God, laying down their lives for their wives. Wives are to take their cues from God's people, graciously responding to the love extended by their husbands.

How are we to understand our roles apart from God's Word? How can we as husbands learn to emulate God unless we pursue His Word, seeking to understand every nuance of his character? How can our wives begin to understand their biblical role apart from understanding how God's people are to respond to his love? As we read, study, and discuss the Word together and with other believers, we constantly absorb how to be better husbands and better wives.

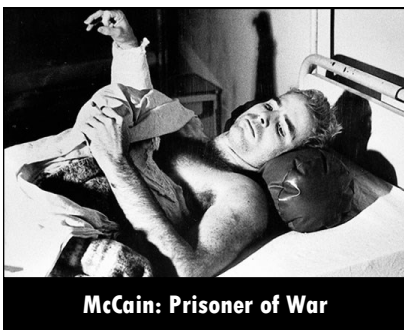
Truly happy marriages seem to be increasingly rare today. But that doesn't need to be. As husbands



and wives pursue God and his Word together, many find their relationship being taken to a whole new level. Malachi 2:15 says, *“Has not the Lord made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his.”*

Don't just drift along in your marriage anymore. Don't settle for a so-so relationship when it can be so much more. Sadly, the world is littered today with shattered relationships which began with so much promise. I was reminded of this fact during our most recent presidential campaign.

I'll never forget the forum that Pastor Rick Warren of Saddleback Church hosted for candidates Obama and McCain. One of the most interesting questions that Pastor Rick asked them both was to describe their greatest moral failure. Senator Obama talked about giving in to peer pressure as a young man and experimenting with drugs. Senator McCain, however, talked about the failure of his first marriage, for which he took full responsibility. In fact, he was surprisingly candid in portraying himself as a man of amazing self-discipline who blew it big time in this one critical area.



**McCain: Prisoner of War**

Of McCain's heroic qualities there is no doubt. Shot down while piloting his A-4 Skyhawk during the Vietnam War, his North Vietnamese captors were prepared to release him as a gesture of mercy because his father was a high ranking officer. He had fractured both arms and a leg while ejecting from his plane. Then he nearly drowned in the lake he parachuted into. Then the North Vietnamese crushed his shoulder with a rifle butt, and bayoneted him. Despite being near death, they denied him medical treatment.

Fifty pounds lighter and near death, McCain refused to be released and prepared to suffer with his men rather than enjoy special treatment. He went through two years of solitary confinement and torture so severe that even to this day he can't lift his hands above shoulder-level. He suffered beatings two to three times a week for five years as a North Vietnamese prisoner-of-war knowing that he could have avoided it all with a nod of his head. That's the kind of self-discipline he had.

When he got back home in 1973, McCain found out that in 1969 his wife, Carol, a former model, had been in a car accident and was going through her own recovery. For whatever reason, this highly disciplined officer, who had sacrificed so much for his country and his men, found it hard to do the same for his wife. In 1976, he began having extramarital affairs. In 1980, he asked Carol for a divorce, something he now calls his greatest moral failure.

It didn't need to happen. Carol received him with open arms and was prepared to make a new start. But John did not reciprocate. He took pleasure in other pursuits, and neglected that which was most important.



**John McCain with his first wife Carol and their boys after returning from war**

If you are married today, don't let that happen. God can heal any marriage when both partners are prepared to make a new start. Make it one of your core convictions to invest in your marriage by pursuing God, each other, and God's Word together.

# Knowing Why to Persevere...Because of Your Heroes

You can tell a lot about a person by the way they die. Some were kind and sweet like President James K. Polk, whose last words were to his wife, “I love you, Sarah. For all eternity, I love you.” Or Napoleon Bonaparte, whose very last word was, “Josephine”.

Some were in despair, like Poet Emily Dickinson, whose last words were, “I must go in, the fog is rising.” Or Edgar Allan Poe – his last words - “Lord, help my poor soul.” Writer Thomas Hobbes said at the end, “I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark.”

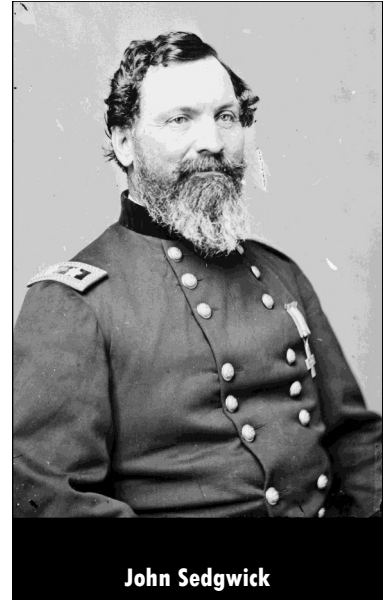
Some were surprised, like General John Sedgwick. He pointed to the Confederates across the field, unaware that his last words would be, “They couldn’t hit an elephant at this distance.”

Some were regretful, like Humphrey Bogart – his last words, “I should never have switched from Scotch to Martinis.”

Some were funny without intending to be. When Lady Astor woke up briefly during her last illness and saw all her family around her bed, her last words were, “Am I dying, or is this my birthday?” Or take writer Oscar Wilde whose last words were, “Either that wallpaper goes, or I do.”

Some were intentionally funny, like George Appel, who was executed in an electric chair in New York in 1928 – his last words, “Well, gentlemen, you are about to see a baked Appel.” Or James French, who was also executed in an electric chair in Oklahoma in 1966 – his last words, “How’s this for a headline for tomorrow’s paper? ‘French fries’.”

Some tried to be light and chipper, like Bing Crosby - his last words, “That was a great game of golf, fellas”. Others are dead serious, like President Grover Cleveland, who said, “I have tried so hard to do the right.” Or Winston Churchill, “I am bored with it all.”



John Sedgwick



Karla Faye Tucker Brown

Some were hopeful, like President Andrew Jackson, whose last words were, “Oh, do not cry - be good children and we will all meet in heaven.” Or Stonewall Jackson who said, “Let us cross over the river and sit in the shade of the trees.” Or President George Washington’s last words, “I die hard, but am not afraid to go.”

Some were downright inspirational, like Karla Faye Tucker Brown, who came to know Jesus while on death row. As her family and friends gathered around her right before she was executed in 1998, her last words were, “I am going to be face to face with Jesus now. I love you all very much. I will see you all when you get there. I will wait for you.”

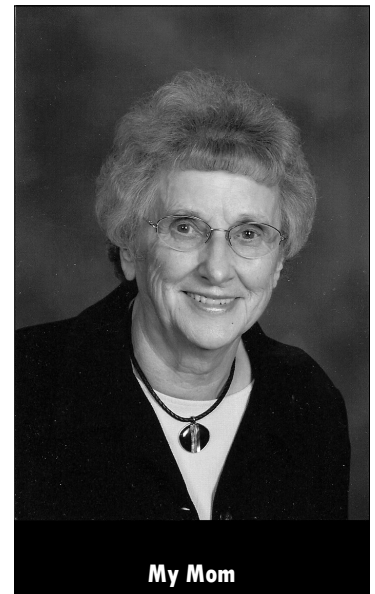
The Bible speaks of “a great cloud of witnesses” who have preceded us to heaven. Karla Faye Tucker is there, as are Presidents Washington and Jackson, as well as the Confederate General Stonewall Jackson. In fact, all of our believing friends and loved ones are already there. Hebrews 12:1-2 puts it this way: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.”*

In the previous chapter, Hebrews 11, we see the names of these witnesses, the heroes of the Old Testament. They are examples for us, models for us, champions for Christ whose stories are told to inspire us and to cheer us on. When you study Hebrews 11, you find three kinds of heroes that we should seek to emulate.

**First, there are those who have courageously conquered kingdoms.** Hebrews 11:32-33 says, *“And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised.”*

David was a young shepherd boy who faced down Goliath, the giant, when the rest of the Israelite camp was cowering in fear. David walked right up to the nine-foot brute and said, *“This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you.” I Samuel 17:46.* That takes courage, and yet it never seems to have occurred to David not to trust the Lord.

Think for a moment of believers in your life who have courageously conquered kingdoms. I’ve been inspired by my mother, especially after my dad died of cancer at age 45. Today I look back in awe at how she handled herself. She organized a big auction to sell a lot of Dad’s stuff and then promptly built a house all on her own. Meanwhile, she continued to run my father’s bus business with our local school district. She would negotiate contracts with the school board, discipline kids, hire drivers, and deal with upset parents. In her spare time she did her church work, and all that time she continued to be the world’s best mom. For twenty years she ran Dad’s business all on her own and then sold it to my brother-in-law. Today, I tip my hat to her, and I encourage you to do the same to all those believers in your life who’ve inspired you with courage.



**My Mom**



**Dr. James Dobson**

Or consider well-known Christians who’ve inspired you. One of my favorites is Dr. James Dobson. For nearly forty years, he has ‘turned our hearts toward home’. For forty years, there has been no greater champion in the pro-life movement than Dr. Dobson. For forty years, there has been no greater defender of traditional marriage than Dr. Dobson. His enemies have vilified him, protested against him, and threatened him in every possible way, yet he has steadfastly stood for what is good, decent, virtuous, and moral. Praise God for Dr. Dobson and others who have inspired us to live with courage as we follow Christ.

**A second group of heroes are those who have decisively defeated despair.** Hebrews 11:34 refers to great men of faith who have “*quenched the fury of the flames.*” This is undoubtedly a reference to Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three young Jewish men who were arrested by King Nebuchadnezzar for not bowing down to his statue. They said to him, “*O Nebuchadnezzar... If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it...But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up.*”

You may remember what happened. The king stoked the fiery furnace seven times hotter than usual and threw the three men in there. It was so hot, even some of the soldiers who threw them in were killed by the flames. And yet, when the king looked, he saw four men in the furnace. In all likelihood this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Christ. Jesus was right there with our faithful trio. When the king brought them out of the fire, not a hair on their heads was singed. Their robes weren't scorched. They didn't even have the smell of fire on them. God rescued them. At a time when so many others would have fainted with fear, these three men decisively defeated despair.

Consider ones who've modeled this kind of triumph over despair for you. My grandmother, Grace Johnson, is my heroine in this area. She saw enough death and tragedy in her life for ten normal people. She lost one child at full term, a second at eight years old, and a third, my father, at 45. Over and over again, as you read through her diary, her recurring phrase is, “I don't know what we would have done without the Lord.”

Even when she was dying at St. Gabriel's Hospital in Little Falls, she kept her eyes on Jesus. When Sue and I arrived in the middle of the night, the first thing she said to me was, “Now, Dennis (it was Dennis when she was serious, Denny the rest of the time), I don't want you to pray that I get better. I'm ready to go home now.” And she was. A few hours later, she slipped into the presence of her Savior. When I think of someone who decisively defeated despair in whatever shape or form it came in, I think of Grandma Grace. How about you? Do you have any heroes or heroines like that?



Grandma Grace

When I think of well-known Christians who've decisively defeated despair, I think of Chuck Colson. He was about as low as you can get in 1974 as the Watergate scandal blew up. Chuck not only lost his job, he was the laughing stock of the whole country. Finding himself behind bars, he asked God for a fresh start, and God led him to launch Prison Fellowship. He also wrote several books and hosted *Break Point*, a Christian radio show. Now 79 years old, there isn't a more respected Christian in America than Chuck Colson. He is an overcomer, always decisively defeating despair.

**A third set of heroes are those who've faithfully faced their final days on this earth.** Hebrews 11 mentions three of them in verses 20-22, “*By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith, Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.*”

Bible scholar Matthew Henry once said, “The grace of faith is of universal use through the Christian’s life, especially so when we come to die. Faith has its great work to do at the very last, to help believers to finish well, to die to the Lord so as to honor him, to leave a witness behind them of the truth of God’s Word and the excellency of His ways.”

Pastor John MacArthur says, “God is glorified when His people leave this world with their flags flying at full mast.” Three men in the Bible who did this are Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Isaac fought with God over who to give his birthright to. He favored Esau, but God wanted Jacob. Only as he faced death did Isaac finally acquiesce to God’s plan and bless Jacob with sincerity. Isaac came around late, but he came around.

Jacob, meanwhile, had his own lessons to learn. He was a deceiver, a conniver who got outconnived by his sons when they sold his favorite, Joseph, into slavery. Nevertheless, Jacob got to give a final blessing to all his sons, and to Joseph, a double blessing. Each of Joseph’s sons would get his own tribe.

Joseph spent all his adult life in Egypt, far away from the Promised Land. Yet, on his deathbed, he prophesied by faith that there would be an exodus of the Israelites back to their homeland. He even believed that his own bones would return to that land.

All three men sometimes wavered in their faith, but at death they were strong and confident. Do you have any examples in your life like that? Early in 2010, my long-time mentor, Kermit Lundeen, passed away. From the moment he discovered he had pancreatic cancer a few

months earlier, I never saw him blink. He quietly got his affairs in order and never ceased to cheerfully banter with visitors and staff at the Annandale Care Home where he was put on hospice watch. During one of my last visits, I said to him, “Kermit, today is Wednesday, it’s lunch day”. For several years, we had enjoyed a weekly meal together. Not missing a beat, my faithful friend said, “I suppose it’s my turn to buy.”



**Kermit Lundeen**

Another man in our church who showed me how to die was Art Quiggle. Art fought a long battle with cancer and I remember the day he called me to say, “It’s the end of the line for me. Can you come over?” When I got there, he said, “I manage an account that covered my brother’s expenses when he was a missionary. Can you guarantee me that it will be used for world missions?” I said, “You bet I can.” Art never saw it, but these generous funds continued to bless missionaries around the world for many years.

Speaking of missions, I want to close by telling you about a man who would have ended up in Hebrews 11 if he had lived a few thousand years ago. His name is Bill Bright.

Saved at the age of 23, Bill Bright was never content to be a half-hearted Christian. From day one, he was sold out – lock, stock, and barrel - for Jesus Christ. He founded Campus Crusade for Christ, which now has 27,000 full-time staff and another 225,000 volunteer staff in over 190 countries.

And yet, I don't think his light ever shined brighter than it did after he was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis. It is one of the most dreaded of diseases. Basically, the lungs simply lose their elasticity and unless a person's heart gives out or some other organ fails, death is by suffocation, slow suffocation. Doctors say there is no more difficult way to die.



And yet his friends report that his spirit was upbeat and strong right to the end. Only a week before he died, a good friend called him on the phone. Bill said the last two years were the most productive of his life. He had been able to write more, direct more things, and launch more initiatives than ever before. And he kept praising God, even while gasping for breath. Chuck Colson said in a tribute, "Bill's life will continue to inspire Christians not only to live well but to die well."

When I think of Bill Bright, I remember the countless letters I've received as a pastor over the years from Crusade headquarters. Each would end like this, "Yours for fulfilling the Great Commission in our generation, Sincerely, Bill Bright."

Today Bill is part of that great cloud of witnesses gathered around the throne in heaven. Let them inspire you to never give up. May we all be able to say, along with the apostle Paul in II Timothy 4:7-8, "*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.*"

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