

★ **Imprinted:** To bear an indelible and distinguishing mark of influence and effect.

# Living the God Imprinted Life

Rick Leland

*Inspiration Point...Living the God Imprinted Life*

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77 Pershing St.

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rickleland.com

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Dear Reader,

Psalm 115:1 says: “Not to us O LORD. Not to us. But to Your Name we give glory. Because of Your love. Because of Your Mercy. Because of Your faithfulness. Because of Your truth.” I point my finger heavenward, thanking Father God, His Son Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. They have made the impossibility of writing this book possible.

And thank you dear reader. Without you there would be no reason or motivation for the effort.

I thank my wife Nancy who I consider my co-author. My desire was for her name to appear on the cover alongside of mine. She declined.

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I thank the many precious people whose stories appear in this work. People who have allowed me to be a part of their lives. Thank you. You have helped shape my life, as I endeavor to live my God imprinted life.

To everyone: may God grant you the grace, strength, and heart’s desire to more fully live your God imprinted life.

Live God Imprinted,

Rick Leland

**In memory of:**

**Dad and Mom**

**Chester Wayne Leland 1931-2007**

**Marilyn Louise Leland 1931-2007**

## Grace Withers

There was no booming voice declaring: “Thus saith the LORD,” yet I sensed a still, small voice inviting: “Stop.”

I had traveled past the tiny cemetery dozens of times in the previous months. Located on a tree-skirted nub overlooking lush fields and a farm pond, it seemed like an idyllic final resting place.

I responded to the beckoning voice.

Strolling the cemetery, communing with God, my mind engaged in the stone-chiseled words on each grave marker. Yet there was no revelation concerning my journey’s interlude. My conclusion—God was offering a respite from my always-on-the-go schedule. The weather was absolutely perfect; I was thankful for the break.

Wait.

I missed four grave stones in the far corner near the road. Stepping close, honoring the ground of the deceased, my gaze locked on a death-gray stone fringed by four life-filled blooms. My eyes and brain equally pondered the sight. The tombstone’s “1919-1919”

etching spoke of anguished tears cried on the exact spot I stood. Is there any greater pain than losing a baby? Yet, God used this precious one to give me a message.

Her name-- Grace Withers.

“God, You are right-- grace withers.” We let Your grace; Your divine influence on our hearts slip, slide, and totally exit our lives.

The profoundly simple antidote to our grace withering is to focus on fostering grace. Still—grace withers.

One of Jesus’ closest disciples, Peter, wrote a letter to struggling Christians of his era. And even now his words are a fresh challenge: “Grow in grace.” I smile years later thinking of my friend Robert’s plucked-out-of-the-dictionary definition of Biblical “grace.” A new Christian, he needed to know—right now. He plopped open his dictionary, there it was: “Grace: smooth refined motion.”

Rather untheological Robert. But so true.

Can I add something? Let us grow in smooth refined motion—thoughts, words, and deeds.



## Is Your Grace Growing?

Growth must be fed. And growth needs to be directional and intentional. If not it may resemble a weedy, little-attended garden.

What is a person growing? What is grace? A standard response is: “Unmerited favor.” Me? I like the definition that takes a little digging to uncover: “The Divine influence upon the heart and its reflection in the life.”

The mighty Apostle Paul pleaded with God three times to remove a major hinderance from his life: “A thorn in the flesh.” God answered Paul, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” God equates the idea of grace with His power. The “Divine influence” is the power of the Holy Spirit inside. Grace shines forth as this Power touches a heart, kindling and compelling this person to reflect the goodness of God—thoughts, words, and deeds.

## Are You Growing in Grace?

Yes

No

## Growing Your Grace

1. Expect growth. This expectation releases faith into the mix.
2. Good seed: “The seed is the Word of God.” Consistent Bible reading is a must-do key to growing grace.
3. We need good soil. The Bible describes this: “Good ground...those who having heard the Word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with endurance.”
4. Don't miss cultivation and fertilizer. Including prayer. Generous worship to God—songs, our words and simply the way we live everyday are worshipping God. Fellowship—growing together with other Christians is vital.

# The Hug

The hug kind of startled me.

I was visiting the park as part of my vacation experience. As I looked around, I saw a dad pushing his daughter on a swing. Nearby a grandma, daughter, and child laughed playing silly games.

I spotted Cody, alone, shooting hoops. I headed over to the court. “You play basketball pretty good,” I said. “Hey, you’ve been watching me,” he responded.

We played a game of H.O.R.S.E. as we engaged in we’re-strangers conversation: “How old are you? Where do you live?” Then Cody looked up at me, “Do you drink?” What an unusual, disconnected question I thought.

Concerned because a stranger was talking to her son, Cody’s mom marched over from the log cabin across the street. She was sizing me up.

I tried to alleviate her concerns by telling her I was a Christian, active in mentoring youth. And I quickly found out she was Cody’s foster mom.

It happened, unannounced without warning, as I focused on talking to Cody’s mom. He hugged me around my stomach as he briefly pressed his head against my body.

Cody said, “I like you.”

I instinctively responded, “I like you too.”

The Bible says: “Children are a gift from God, they are a real blessing.”

No one had to explain to me why he hugged me; no one had to explain to me why he asked if I drank. Now it adds up.

“Children are a gift from God...”

What is hard for me to add up is the climbing statistics that over half a million children in the U.S. live in foster care.

“Children are a gift...”

“I’ve got to leave,” I told Cody. “No, don’t leave,” he pleaded.

Wow, this is hard. “Children are...”



## The Hugger

I've mentally replayed the scene of my brief time with Cody so many times. Many visits to the park, Cody was never there again.

Sad...but God has sent a stream of hugworthy kids into my life. Marcos is one.

And then there's Dakota. A few nights ago, my wife Nancy commented, "What happened to Dakota?" She was referring to his amazing change in behavior. He had crawled up into her lap, quietly sitting through children's church.

This doesn't seem like much. But we remember when he used to bite Nancy. Another time he was so unruly he had to be removed from the meeting. He became irate, saying, "I hate you." I told Dakota I loved him, adding, "Jesus loves you." He responded, "I hate Jesus." Hugging him, while praying for God's protection against the influence of evil powers, calmed him.

What's happening to Dakota? The love of God is changing him. The love

of God revealed by His Son Jesus. Revealed to those who accept it for a life-purpose. Share it. Let this God-love flow. Some, like Dakota, will need a tangible touch from God.



A hug.

You may say, "Oh no, not me, I'm not a hugger." At our church, Mel was always known as "a hugger." If you didn't want to be hugged you had better avoid Mel. But Mel was so full of the love of Jesus that he just had to hug.

Are you ready to join in on the life-changing-God-hugging experience? Start by being aware of the promptings of God's Spirit. Let Him guide you. I am absolutely convinced that it was God who led me to the park the day I met Cody.

Next. Be ready. You might meet Cody. Or some other child who does not feel like his or her existence on this earth is a "gift from God."

And don't be surprised. Maybe Cody will hug you first.

## Mr. Smiley Face Lives Here

“Why do you have Mr. Smiley Face hanging in the window?” laughed eight-year old Jackie. It must seem strange. My wife had brought another one home; they’re all over the house—Mr. Smiley faces.

You know what his yellow-faced grin looks like. This two-foot tall version with blue legs and arms, wearing pink smiley face emblazoned shoes was pretty much over the edge in the sane home décor category. Hanging there in the living room window in a fish net, he’s a comment magnet.

I don’t particularly like all the smiley faces; they’re O.K., but I love what they symbolize.

In her early 40’s my wife suffered with illness and depression—nothing to smile about. She searched for relief from doctors, psychologists, and self help books.

A psychologist said, “You need to explore the spiritual side of life.”

Her initial reaction to me: “That’s stupid; I just want my health back. I want to be happy.”

Then while searching for self-help books at the library, she “accidentally” picked up a Christian book. An inner journey was sparked.

A Bible verse in the book became her beacon of hope: “This is the day the Lord has made; I will rejoice and be glad in it.”

The journey was long. And then one day she found what she was looking for; she found Jesus.

Mr. Smiley Face symbolizes the joy she discovered.

I smiled and looked at Jackie. I told her the eight-year-old’s version of Mr. Smiley Face’s residence at our home—“Smile, Jesus loves you.”

## A Worn Cliché?

Jesus loves you. Is that true? In many ears this may ring, “Worn cliché.”

Scriptures proclaim: “God is love.”

Jesus is God; so likewise this refers to Jesus. Love is a central attribute of who He is—His deep-seated nature.

Surrounded by people, Jesus was watched closely as he answered a wealthy, politically-powerful young man. He had just asked Jesus what the requirements of following Him whole-heartedly were. Upon hearing the answer, the man chose to reject Jesus.

But so much more than Jesus’ words were recorded that day. Was it a smile? Warm eyes full of deep care and empathy? The tilt of His head? Apparently everyone understood. We are only told, “Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him.”



“Greater love,” Jesus said, “Has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are my friends...I have called you friends.”

Only a few hours later, Jesus walked the streets of Jerusalem. Beaten. Abandoned by nearly every friend. Struggling, near exhaustion, carrying the cross He would be executed upon. Because He loves, He went willing. Because He loves, He went for sinners and saints. Jesus vividly lived out “Greater love.”

Remember Nancy’s verse—Psalm 118:24? “This is the day the Lord has made; I will rejoice and be glad in it?” For her it commemorates the day of greatest love, the day of her salvation. And as Verse 23 says: “This was the Lord’s doing; It is marvelous in our eyes.”

Marvelous. The Greatest love. Friend of Jesus. True, true, true. Yes, Jesus absolutely loves you. Smile, rejoice. Commemorate the love of Jesus in your life. And it doesn’t have to be smiley faces.

May I suggest?

Find something that’s special to you and to Jesus. Don’t let your salvation become a worn cliché.

## Suspicious Situation

Flip to page three of the newspaper—there it is. The police log from a couple nights prior: “11:43 p.m. 100 block N. Main St. Suspicious Situation.”

A police car approached a man walking down the street with tears flowing down his face: “Son is everything alright?” The man explained everything to the police officer just as a second car arrived. No arrests were made. And as they left, one of the officers said, “Boy you really caused a lot of commotion.”

The man wasn’t drunk. No crimes were committed. No, this was my friend John. He told the officer the reason for his crying and hands lifted to the sky: “I’m just worshiping God.”

John, worshiping on Main St.? The church sign in that neighborhood states: “Come Worship 9 & 11.” Inside the church on Sunday morning for an hour or so, isn’t that worship?

Let’s find out. In Genesis 22:5 the word “worship” makes it first appears in the Bible. “First appearance” is always a pay-attention moment for Bible scholars.

It says, “We will worship.” Here Abraham and his only son Isaac are the participants in the worship. But there’s no singing, no preaching, no late night “suspicious situation.” Abraham had heard the voice of God. And as directed by God, he was going up the mountain to kill his son as a human sacrifice.

What!

Abraham raised his hand holding the knife, preparing to obey God to the ultimate. At that very moment God provided an alternative animal sacrifice.

Abraham tapped into the essence of true worship—sacrificial obedience. This means giving up everything to God as we worship Him through our lives continually.

As John discovered, this type of radical, all or nothing worship stirs up commotion.

This also stirs God. “God called to Abraham from heaven...I will surely bless you.” God surely did.

And this is still God’s promise to obedient lifestyle worshipers.



If Jesus had a worship band, what would it sound like?

Jesus sang with His disciples at the conclusion of the Last Supper. Likely with words from the Psalms reflecting adoration towards God.

Still, Jesus took the sound of worshiping to a range way beyond His singing.

## The Sound of True Worship—the Jesus Style

**Like a dog** In the original New Testament language “worship” is defined in the context of a dog kissing and

licking the hand of his master. In total adoration; the dog and true worshipers, recognize their vast subordination to the Hand which provides the substance of life.

**Pure and sweet** Jesus said, “...true worshipers will worship God in spirit and in truth.” This worship springs forth from a pure heart. Sweet and right before God as biblical directives are sought to mold every aspect of your life.

**Questioning** Jesus said, “Not my will but Your will be done.” Always—God’s will be done. The question: “God what do you want me to do?” This is releasing personal choice; embracing God’s choices.

**Pounding** When the soldiers pounded the spikes through Jesus’ hands, the finest beat ever rung out. Jesus’ highest form of worship, His death on the cross, continually reverberates over all the Earth.

**You—Joining Jesus** Worshipers of Jesus can carry on His song, the life He lived. As the Bible says, “Because of God’s great mercy to us, I appeal to you: Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to His service and pleasing to Him. This is true worship to Him.”

## The Ride of Your Life

A right turn and it's two blocks to Lake Michigan. Three bicycle riders, looking Tour de France ready opt to go left. Cruising past a small enclave of shops beckoning tourists to stop and spend, they find their Sunday morning destination—breakfast at an outdoor cafe.

Within whiffing distance of the cyclist's breakfast, other people arrive at their Sunday morning destination—a traditional white steepled church. Inside Pastor Paul Schneider leads the congregation in its first chorus. "In the morning when I rise give me Jesus. Give me Jesus...You can have all this world, give me Jesus."

Me? I was inside the church that morning. Yet, seeing the bicycle riders; I was reminded of my Sunday mornings ten years prior. Then, a long bike ride and breakfast with friends was what the day was all about.

Now, attending church and worshipping God seems normal while the other option is extremely abnormal.

Radical life change is sometimes referred to as a "Damascus road experience."

This references the Apostle Paul's conversion from Christian persecutor to ardent follower of Jesus. Traveling down the Damascus road intent on imprisoning Christians, suddenly a great light struck him, knocking him to the ground.

Lying on the ground he asked the same question I once asked: "Who are you Lord?"

You can hop on your bike every Sunday morning, ride beautiful roads with good companions and eat lots of great waffles. Yet, it's almost guaranteed, you'll someday wonder: "Is this all there is to life?"

You may say that I'm wrong, claiming ultimate satisfaction in non-God pursuits.

That's unfortunate. You're missing the ride of your life.

My suggestion.

Ride your Damascus road. And may God bless you with a time of lying on the ground asking: "Who are you Lord?"

## The Ride Home...to the Glory of All Lands

Are you lost? Maybe you're nearly frozen with the inability to know which direction to go. This can be true of followers of Jesus Christ as well as those who are still on the journey to the Savior.

The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel talked about: "The glory of all lands." Wow, imagine getting to that place. Right here on Earth!

This is a destination God desires for every person. Here the entire spectrum of your life works at the peak of God's intent.

God has given us a clear road map—the Bible. Do you expect to get to your "glory land" with only an occasional glance at the Bible? Are you using the Bible as an instant antidote when a breaking emergency arises? If so, you are likely to miss a large portion of God's direction for your life.



**Read the Bible, expecting these results as you journey to Glory Land:**

- 1.** If you are not yet a follower of Jesus, you will find Him. For those who are Christians, a more intimate relationship with Jesus will unfold.
- 2.** Sins and living outside of God's guidelines will become less enticing. Leading you to a more holy, God pleasing life. This is a position, a place of God's blessing—God's all-encompassing, enriching power flowing into our lives.
- 3.** Scriptures will light up like fireflies, as life applications become almost immediately apparent.
- 4.** Your heart will become more sensitive to loving people. Jesus called this the second most important command in the Bible. Only one notch down from loving God.
- 5.** You will start to recognize God's "still, small voice." His guidance for your life.

## Leftover Meatloaf

“The battle belongs to the LORD,” I said to my wife Nancy as she dashed off to work.

Turning around just before she opened her car door, she said: “But we have leftover meatloaf.”

I knew what she meant— “Invite Ted to dinner.” He was going through the meat grinder of life—outright sin, striving to live up to people’s expectations, and life zapping pride.

He would be the first to admit his sinful activities. Now repentant, he still had to deal with: “A person reaps what they sow.” Sin—big, little, yours, mine or his; there is still a cleanup operation after we get right with God.

Ted was putting the battle into the accepting hands of God. Besides that, Nancy was tossing her homemade meatloaf on the table as a formidable weapon.

No she wasn’t going to smack anyone on the head.

The Bible says, “Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.”

When we gathered around leftover meatloaf plus some other tasty dishes that evening. Ted looked broken—body, soul, and spirit. We started slicing the meatloaf, we looked into God’s word, we prayed, we talked, we dreamed about what God had for Ted’s future. Our faith rose, then soared.

As the meatloaf disappeared; Ted, Nancy, and I became a God-believing, resilient cord of three strands.

We didn’t ask, “Does the battle belong to the LORD?” that night. But if we had questioned this close circle of friends, all would have nodded: “Absolutely, yes.”

And if we would have asked, “Is it better to go through battles with friends?” our “absolutely” would have been more absolute and our “yes” would have been more resounding.

How about you? Do you know any battle weary soul who might need some meatloaf tonight?



## A Yummy Recipe...for Reviving Battle Weary Souls

### Two or more people. And Jesus.

Matthew 18:20, Jesus said: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them."

### Two handfuls of the Bible.

Deuteronomy 8:3: "Man shall not live by bread alone; but every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God."

### A big heap of faith in the life-changing power of Jesus.

John 6:33: "For the bread of God is Jesus who comes down from heaven and gives life, God-life, to the world."

### Pour in a good dose of the Holy Spirit (probably more than you think).

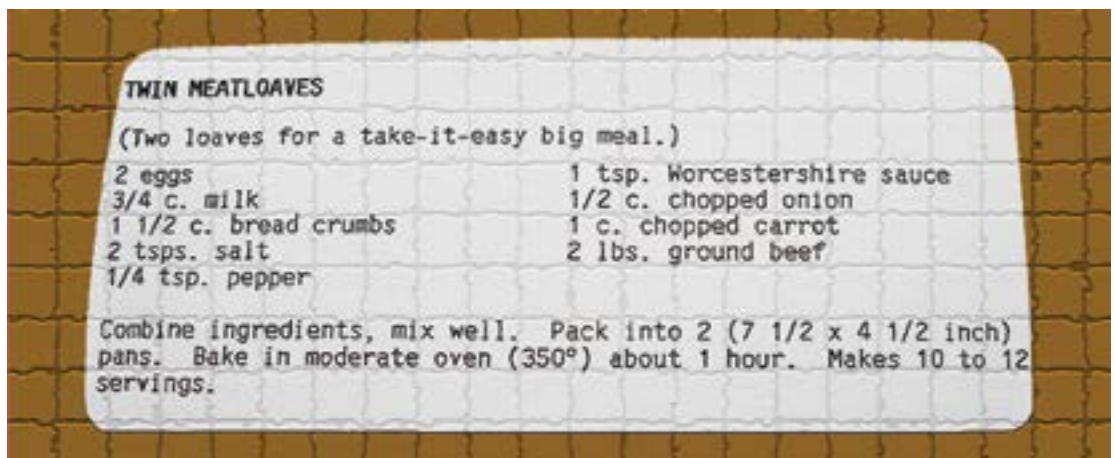
Romans 15:13: "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

### Sweeten liberally with kind, encouraging words.

Proverbs 16:14: "Pleasant words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the bones."

### Serve garnished with the fruit of the Spirit.

Galatians 5:22-23: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control..."



# How Do You Spell Pretty?

She makes me laugh sometimes.

At a school program Dasia grabbed my wife's arm, "Mommy, mommy, mommy!" We love our beautiful, Eight-year old chocolate-skinned friend. But Nancy, who remarked, "I look pretty white and old," isn't mommy.

"She's not thinking," Nancy said, "She's just saying whatever comes into her head."

I remember when this came into her head.

"How do you spell your name?" Dasia asked Nancy. "Don't look; I'm making a picture for you." She worked hard on her crayoned creation. Looking around the room, she could see her picture would be taped to the wall with the others created by Nancy's many young friends.

Dasia announced. "It's ready, it's a picture of us, and it says: Nancy is pretty."

The jubilant little girl with her labor-of-love artwork was momentarily forgotten as Nancy thought: "What will

people think? I can't hang that up; I'm not pretty."

The scene depicted a house adorned with seven hearts. There were three smiling stick figures. A large heart outside the house had the names Dasia, her brother Darryl, and Nancy encircled. Above a crayoned tree it said, "from Dasia to Nancy."

"Nancy is pride" bannered the top of the picture. Dasia hadn't asked how to spell "pretty." So based on her pronunciation, "pri-dee," this is what came out of her head.

Out of her head—what comes out of our heads for pretty?

The Apostle Peter knew pretty. "It's not your outer appearance. Rather let it be the hidden person of the heart, with unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God."

To Dasia; a person who is kind, caring, fun to be with and is interested in her is pretty.

Maybe her head can't spell pretty, but Dasia's heart can.



## Let Your Pretty Rub Off

Dasia still makes me laugh.

A couple of years older now, I can see “pretty” developing in her. Yes, outwardly. But more importantly: “...the hidden person of the heart...”

She’s loving, generous, a willing helper. She has an uncommon desire to understand the things of God. And she’s interested in intellectual pursuits.

What’s her inner-beauty secret? While the answer is multifaceted, a key component is: it’s rubbing off from people who influence her life.

So, if your inner-person rubbed off on others, would that be good or bad?

Good news. God, can change your bad to good. And your good can get better.

Yield to God’s life-changing power. Then you will be more prepared to have the right rub.

## Having the Right Rub

*Use encouraging, life-giving words:*  
“The power of life and death is in the tongue.”

*Intentionally teach God’s principles:*  
God said: “These Words which I command you today shall be in your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children.”

*Let your work-life be God honoring:*  
“One who is slack in his work is a brother to one who destroys.” So—  
“Work as if unto the Lord.”

*Live an exemplary, holy life:*  
Live your life in such a manner that the words of the Apostle Paul could be your words: “Whatever you have learned or received from me, or seen in me—put it into practice.”

## Anxiously Awaiting Ozzie

The heavy metal band Korn banged on their instruments, rasping out lyrics I couldn't understand. I didn't care. I was anxiously awaiting Ozzie Osborne—the headliner.

This was eleven years ago. Screaming, spilled beer, and whiffs of marijuana smoke framed the atmosphere. Even though I was forty-one, this seemed normal.

The Bible says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to destruction.”

My life seemed right. It was hip to be over forty going to a rock concert. My construction business was flourishing. A disciplined exercise routine kept me in top physical shape. I had a beautiful wife. And I was well thought of in the community.

The truth?

I was tired of rock concerts. Work was consuming my life. My exercise program was an egotistical, often pleasureless pursuit. My marriage was a disaster. And if my fifteen year secret addiction ever became public...an instant pile-of-rubble image crash.

Destruction was catching me in the race of life.

At work a few months later, a fellow non-Christian approached me, “Hey, check this out.” A Christian-rock radio station? I didn't know such a thing existed—I got hooked.

Lyrics like, “People say I'm strange; does that make me a stranger? My best friend was born in a manger,” gripped my soul. More importantly the radio preacher's messages injected life into my dying existence.

It could have been just another trip to the lumber yard.

On the radio that day, Pastor Greg Laurie said, “Are you tired of the life you're living? Isn't it time you invited Jesus Christ into your life?”

Right there in my truck, I prayed to Jesus and committed my life to following Him.

Now, I'm anxiously awaiting Jesus.

## Years of Regrets

I started sobbing uncontrollably. Slumping into my seat, I covered my face with my hands. I know people were staring at me.

Everyone was singing the same song at church that day. This was a few months after I had begun my journey with Jesus. The words from the hymn, *All to Him I Owe*, punctured a vein of emotions I had never experienced.

Yes, I felt awe for Jesus because of His life-giving sacrifice. But a crushing weight rested on the layers of my regret for the way I had previously lived.

I know Jesus' death on the cross canceled my sins. Still, the list of regrets is huge. To this day I shake my head thinking; "Why?" Why did I wait so long to put my faith in Jesus? Why did I hurt that person? Why did I do that? Mental scenes pop into my head...40 years of regrets.

I know with God, the past is forgotten. Still, for humans, looking back on life usually presents a clearer vista.

My view includes forty years without Jesus. Not pretty. Then there are the Jesus years. When I carefully scan over these eleven years sometimes tears again come to my eyes. But not tears of regret. Because I can state without reservation: "I have never regretted making the decision to become a follower of Jesus."



And glancing to the future, even with the always-unknowns, a smile comes to my heart. I have Jesus...all to Him I owe.

## 5:55 Diet Part 1

Fat.

I could grab a handful of it protruding from my stomach.

God, help me.

God will. He says, “Call to me I will answer you. I will show you mysterious things you cannot figure out on your own.” With endless get-unfat schemes available, I need help.

“So God, please help me.”

The Bible tells us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. Keeping our bodies in shape is of worthy importance.

This concept popped into my head. Is this from you God? The 5:55 Diet. God, this is a great idea.

The basic concept is to set a numerical goal which doesn't involve counting calories or endlessly hopping on the scales.

So, I'm not counting calories. I rarely weigh myself. Instead, I set a personal goal to run a mile in five minutes and fifty-five seconds within a year.

Thinking about calories and weighing myself causes hunger-stirring, food thoughts and a focus on my fatness. I would rather think about crossing the finish line, lungs burning, glancing at my stopwatch seeing 5:55.

My first trip to the track produced a sobering 7:54 mile.

A few weeks later I was surprised when the only other person at the track noticed my straining as I neared the half mile mark. He yelled, “Steady.” And then as I neared the finish line he yelled again, “You're almost there.” I crossed the line in 6:47.

Bottom line—the getting-in-better-shape agenda needs to be strongly tempered. The Bible says: “For physical training is of some value, but *godliness* has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

Yes! “Godliness.”

That's the true goal. That's true fitness.

With this as our focus, can't you almost hear Jesus? “Steady. You're almost there.”

## 5:55 Diet Part 2

Wow! The 5:55 Diet has proven to be amazing. I have slashed five pounds off in two and a half years.

Well...it isn't exactly an instant fat meltdown, but it is progress. And I confess I haven't even skirted my time goal of 5:55 for the mile.

But hey, I've lost a little weight, I have better strength and strangely enough I still hold out the possibility of running that elusive mile someday. And that has helped me to focus on staying more fit.

Like achieving weight loss goals, strong running takes focus. Loosing your focus typically means: unattained goals.

Failure.

With the same tenacity, a successful God-connected life needs to be a focused life.

## Running to Win

An all-out fast mile is best accomplished on a quarter mile track—four laps to the mile.

### Winning Words

Surely you know that many runners take part in a race, but only one of them wins the prize. Run then, in such a way as to win the prize.

Every athlete in training submits to strict discipline, in order to be crowned with a wreath that will not last; but we do it for one that will last forever.

That is why I run straight for the finish line; that is why I am like a boxer who does not waste his punches.

1 Corinthians 9:24-26

For me, I head over to the local high school track. During each of the four laps, I focus on a different aspect of the effort to maximize the overall achievement.

Each of these focuses can also be utilized to keep our lives strongly heading closer to Jesus.

Let's go.

Four laps. Four running to win laps. Run-to-win-for-Jesus laps.

## Lap 1 ⇒ Steady

Get in a groove. Christians are to be disciples of Jesus—disciplined in the ways of our Master.

This means a steady, consistent faith-life in Bible reading, prayer, and being with other believers.

Be a daily influencer in your sphere of contact. Let God's kingdom come. His will be done. On earth as it is in Heaven. Through your life. **Steady**...every day effort.

## Lap 2 ⇒ Pick it up

Pick up the pace. Allowing an almost imperceptible slacking off in our spiritual pursuits must be thwarted. If not, momentum quickly falters. Or reverses.

This slippage can be almost unnoticeable. While the cumulative effect is extremely obvious. And it eventually knocks many out of the race far from the finish line.

So unfortunate, because God's choicest desires for our lives are reachable.

**Pick it up.** Pick it up. Here a firm choice needs to be made to push/ pursue past the initial comfort level.

More intense prayer or more in-depth

Bible studies are great pickups.

Consider fasting or the adventure of a mission trip for this up shift.

For some people this is the lap when the initial door into ministry opens.

### Winning Words

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us.

Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross...

Hebrews 12:1-2a

Either fulltime or in conjunction with working a secular job.



## Lap 3 ⇒ Go For It

Our mind will start to tell us the vital God-life we desire is not possible. Or the enemy of our soul, the devil, will plant the idea in our head that the effort is not worth it.

There may be a life-achievement God has stirred us to pursue. We're tired; the goal fades towards unobtainable. These are lies. "With God all things are possible."

Jesus set his face like flint, stone-faced with determination, as the time of The Cross approached. Stone-faced focus, with unwavering faith in God.

Do the same: **Go for it.**

## Lap 4 ⇒ Hold On

"Steady" has been achieved. You've pushed the envelope with life-stirring pick-it-up times. Your go-for-it faith has taken you places in your walk with the Lord beyond your imagination.

The years are piling on.

The battles of life still arise. You're near the end. **Hold on.**

In this lap of your life, a strong push towards the finish is paramount.

Your example of perseverance must

shine to the next generation. And to your faltering peers.

Keep your focus. Press on. The finish line is nearly in sight.

You will be seeing Jesus soon. **Hold on.**

Finish strong.

Make the words of the great Apostle Paul your words: "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith."

Set your heart; set your focus on hearing those longed for words from Jesus as you burst across your finish line. "Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

### Winning Words

I have done my best in the race,  
I have run the full distance, and  
I have kept the faith.

And now there is waiting for me  
the victory prize of being put  
right with God, which the Lord,  
the righteous Judge, will give  
me on that Day—and not only  
me, but to all those who wait  
with love for Him to appear.

2 Timothy 4:7-8

## Bible—By Cliff

Ten-year old Michael's soft expressionless demeanor sparked: "I've got my Bible." I noticed the name "Cliff Miller" engraved in the lower right hand corner of Michael's second-hand Bible.

Spark two: "Can you show me Jesus?" He simply wanted to see Jesus' name in his Bible. Before I could help, Michael said, "I've found Jesus." I could see his finger up towards the front of the Bible. It was planted on the word—"G-E-N-E-S-I-S."

Well Michael has many things to learn. He sure is eager.

His attention was drawn next to the inscription of "Cliff Miller." "That's who wrote the Bible," Michael said. "Cliff Miller." I told him that wasn't the case. He doubted what I said. Why would his name be on the book near the spot typically reserved for the author's name?

Michael was heading to the right spot—a Bible study. The evening's focus: "The Holy Bible."

The Bible says: "All Scripture is inspired by God." The original Greek language connotes a God-breathed

creation. God breathed into Holy men's lives as they wrote Holy messages to transform followers of His Holy Word into Holy people.

Some people need volumes of information to aid in their Biblical evaluation process. It's available. All the scientific and historical facts any true seeker could ever desire.

Now Michael, when shown what the Bible said, instantly believed that God inspired every word found in the Holy Bible. Not a doubt.

Sure, a person can doubtfully explore reasons why the Bible can't be true.

And then there's Michael's approach. As Jesus said, "The person who humbles himself like this child is greatest in the Heavenly Kingdom."

And from this Heavenly Kingdom, God's gift to humanity is ours. The Bible—God's powerful, life-changing Word.

Now, we have a responsibility if we desire to extract the most from this precious gift. Our part in it? Choose our reading attitude. Humble, eager to learn; call it a Michael-attitude.

The show-me-Jesus attitude.

## Making the Bible Say What You Want It to Say

“You can make the Bible say anything you want it to say,” my friend said. I agreed. Quite a know-it-all claim from two people who never read the Bible. I didn’t even own a copy.

Three years later I snuck into a Christian bookstore, even keeping the secret from my wife. I looked up and down the rows of Bibles. Opening, reading, pondering.

Instead of a Book flip-pantly spoken of as bogus, in front of me was the key to unlocking what my heart was asking. I had no desire to manipulate this Book’s words to align with my manner of living. I was on the quest of my life.

My emotions tingled as I exited the store with my new prize.

Initially reading the Bible prompted many what-does-that-mean moments. With God seemingly working in the

background, I made feeble attempts at implementing life-directives from His Word. As the Bible says, “Be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only, deceiving yourself.”

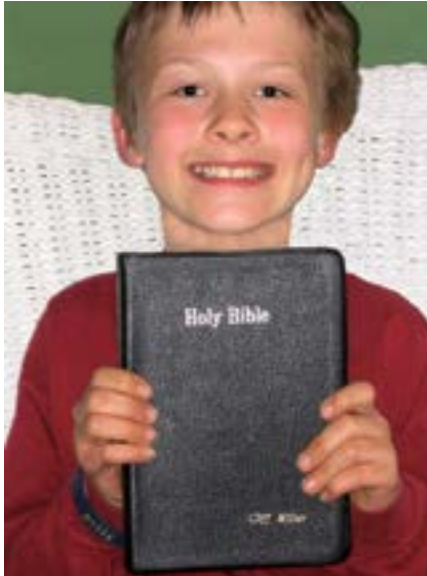
Soon it became obvious; God was not working behind the scenes. God was at the forefront during these initial Bible studies. God was drawing me in. God was expanding my understanding. God was capturing my heart. Life started to change. I

got excited like a child opening presents. Thinking, “Wow! This is working.”

Now eleven years later, a million miles from who I used to be, I still follow a similar pattern. I read the Bible and then do what it says. Yes, I fall short and falter. And flatout fail. And some applications take many attempts. And every application has room

for improvement.

Here’s the key. Read the Bible. Do what it says. Don’t try to change the Bible. Let the Bible change you. Read the Bible. And do what it says.



## Do You Need a Wet Spot?

“I hit a wet spot,” Richard said as he walked through the door. Dark clouds loomed outside, but it appeared the near-drought was continuing.

“What do you mean Richard?” I asked.

He explained the contrast between wet and dry seasons in his ability to produce artwork. For months he was unable to do any of his pen and ink drawings. But today Richard had with him more than a dozen pieces, many which he had produced in the last few days. He had shifted from dry to a flowing wet spot artistically.

Richard’s experience reminds me of what is known as the “desert or wilderness experience.” John Bevere, an author I greatly appreciate, says: “The wilderness—a place or time period through which every Christian must pass as he draws nearer to God...”

And the Bible says: “The LORD your God led you...in the wilderness, to humble you and to test you, to know what was in your heart.”

The spiritual wilderness, like it’s counterpart in the nature, feels like a harsh place.

But it seems to be the only way people seeking truly deep understanding of God and His ways can uncover these mysteries. And in the wilderness, God prepares us for our promisedland.

This is the place in our lives when we can experience the absolute best God has for our lives.

Noticeable in Richard’s art resurgence, are vibrant splashes of colors which were not seen in his past repertoire. His artwork has undoubtedly peaked into a higher realm—quality and quantity wise.

I’ve been through the wilderness. I made it.

So will you.

Believe this scripture with tenacity during the trudges of your journey: “Now thanks be to God who always leads us to triumph in Christ.”

Thank God. He always leads. There’s always victory for those who persevere.

Praise God; Your wet spot awaits.

## Lessons From the Desert

### ...My Desert

When I got saved, became a follower of Jesus Christ, the initial part of my journey was near surreal. My love relationship with Jesus left me exhilarated. I felt an unexplainable, intense love for people. I even slept better.

My life went through a sunburst of change. I was in many ways childlike.



Eventually there came an easing away from this phase of my faith-walk. I came to a time of solidifying of my beliefs, a maturing of my faith; and finding and focusing on God's purpose for my life needed to be established.

Welcome to the Desert.

God never forces a person to go through a desert experience. Many Christians choose to stop on the edge of the desert, camping there the rest of their days. Miles short of the mature Jesus-like life in the Promised Land.

### Desert Lessons

#### 1. Life Change

This means being open to making any changes God desires—in any area of your life. At any time.

Numbers 9:23 says: “Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained...the children of Israel remained encamped and did not journey; but when it was taken up they journeyed. At the command of the LORD they journeyed.”

Expect life-movement. Expect change.

#### 2. Trust

Now we're in the realm of faith.

Where things unseen by our eyes are gradually revealed—in God's timing. Waiting for Him—looking expectantly for His miraculous power to manifest in our lives.

This is learning to trust God; recognizing Him as the provider of all.

Deuteronomy 1:31-32 says: “In the desert; there you saw how the LORD your God carried you as a father carries his son, all the way until you reached this place. In spite of this, you did not trust the LORD your God, who went ahead of you on your journey...to show you the way you should go.”

Totally trusting God through the most parched times is essential to knowing His sure-handed guidance.

### 3. Obey

To obey God seems like an absolute basic tenet of our journey.

True.

But in the desert a fine tuning takes place.

God will reveal sins you didn't even know you had. These are not typically the bigger lifestyle issues, but are seated in the area of our attitudes. Christ-like attitudes need to grow and be fostered in the desert.

Progressive victories toward Christ-likeness in these areas are essential.

### 4. Avoid Grumbling

Numbers 14:27 God said: “How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints...which they are making against Me.”

Complaining and grumbling easily flows from our mouths. And when evaluated: grumbling is actually complaining against God. This is questioning God's ability while exhibiting a lack of fear/reverence toward God. A faltering faith in God's promises and His goodness is revealed.

Stifle grumbling by focusing on thankfulness.



It sweetens the journey. And most importantly, thankfulness is a sweet sound in God's ears.

## 5. Draw Close to God

This is the theme which needs to be like a tent covering the entire desert experience.

Exodus 33:11 says: “The LORD would speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks with his friend. Then Moses returned to camp, his servant Joshua...did not leave the tent.”

Here’s the picture. God and Moses had an astonishingly intimate relationship. They met in a tent. Joshua had the privilege of joining with God and Moses.

When Moses was through meeting with God, Joshua longed to carry on with God.

So he did.

His life was impacted through these draw-close-to-God encounters.

The spiritual might and leadership of Joshua is rivaled by very few. Consequently, God chose him to lead His people into their Promised Land.

Joshua proved valiant in this assignment.

And then as an aged man, still full of vigor, he conquered his personal Promised Land.

Joshua’s secret?

Traveling through the desert, he saw Moses meeting with God. Joshua was determined to experience this same closeness with God. And more.

Joshua discovered the main lesson to be learned as we go through the desert experience.

Become so close to God that you will hear God speak to you: “As a man speaks with his friends.”

# Terminal

“Mommy, did you tell him?” Jessica asked.

I looked at Laura lying in the recliner. Her looks sort of startled me—the rapid change in her health. “Tell me what?” I said.

Jessica’s grandma, also in the room, said, “She’s terminal.”

So am I. So are you. Though we know what was meant—the doctor’s pronouncement that Laura’s death was near.

Terminal? What pops into your brain?

How about this. Terminal—so death is near; you’re at the train terminal of life. There are two lines. We each will get a ticket—either to heaven or to hell.

I asked Laura, “Do you have a ticket to heaven?”

She weakly said, “I think I’m going to heaven.”

Her answer could have put a smile on my face, still I felt compelled to check her ticket stub.

“O.K. now tell me why you think that way,” I said. “I’m going to write down your reasons.”

I attentively listened as I recorded her words. Haltingly she listed her beliefs: “I know God; God knows me and my purpose in life; I want to go.”

While all truthful statements; not one of them is a ticket to heaven.

I dearly love Laura, who is my cousin, and I am thankful that we already had an open dialog about the things of God. Now at age forty-seven the ravages of her disease were extinguishing the remaining flicker of her life.

The first words Jesus spoke when He started His ministry became the focus of my conversation with Laura: “Repent! For the kingdom of God is near.”

Doubting my sensitivity, some might say: “You’re going to launch into repent! With a dying person?”

“Sounds like fire and brimstone.”

Could be...but to me Laura’s response that day made it sound like a ticket to heaven.



## Will You See Her in Heaven?

Life for Laura ended a few weeks later.

Laura's life didn't have a lot of achievements to celebrate. When the presiding Pastor asked for comments on, "what Laura's life meant to you," this became apparent. Two of her daughters presented overly sentimental offerings.

Then silence.

The Pastor shuffled a little; half smiling he said, "I may have to call on some people."

More silence.

Then muffled, halting words came from somewhere in the audience. The Pastor motioned for the person to come forward.

Laura's seven year old grandson Tyler stepped forward. His scrunched face reflected an inner struggle to hold back tears. Half looking at the Pastor, half looking at the floor, Tyler said, "Will we see Grandma in heaven?"

The Pastor grinned: "Yes we will." Smiles appeared on many faces.

I'm sure people were thinking, "That's so cute."

But I was thinking: "Is it true?"

Will you see Laura in heaven? I will. But it's not because of a warm-fuzzy feeling. Or because of a Pastor's words: "We will," spilling out from his charged emotions.

Will you see Laura in heaven?



If your answer is yes, be constantly prepared to give directions. If your answer is anything other than a "yes," it's time you discover the way to Heaven.

Jesus is the way. Jesus said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father (God) except through me."

# A Kernel of Wheat Falls

As I walked up to the casket, bagpipe music softly wailed “Amazing Grace.” I knew Patty was in heaven, still I felt like crying. Is it acceptable to ask, “Why would one of the kindest people I know die at age forty-nine?”

Some eulogies are spread so thick with the frosting of compliments, you wonder if they’re really talking about the person who died.

Admit it; you’ve experienced this.

With Patty, no frosting was needed to sweeten or to smear over flaws in her life.

Days leading to her death, I had been pondering Jesus’ words; letting them infiltrate my brain. “I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Our lives can be like a single kernel of wheat. Focused on our own wants, needs and desires; at the end of life a single life has been bettered—your own.

Then there’s the dying-seed scenario.

Here’s how it works.

Patty never drove. She usually walked or rode her three-wheel bike to her numerous volunteer activities. She helped at a nursing home with her church, at school she mentored children, and if there was a charity walkathon, she was probably involved. Patty was prolific in sending out cards—condolences, get-wells, on and on.

She was even taking piano lessons to fill a need in the small church she attended.

Her pastor said in the eulogy: “Patty probably shared Jesus with more people than I ever will.”

By serving the needs of others, Patty produced many seeds. She improved the lives of countless people.

Most why-death questions are never answered.

But there’s a much more important question which needs an answer.

How? How did you live the life God gave you?

## Live for Glory

Jesus said: “The hour has come that the Son of Man should be glorified.”

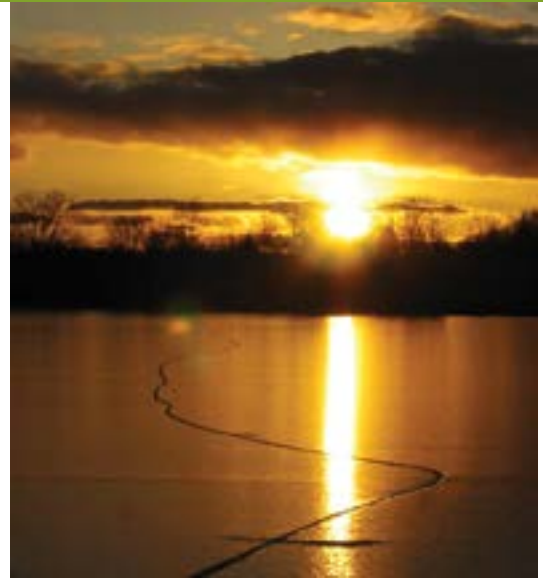
He then unfolds His meaning for glory. “Truly, truly, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds.”

Next He spins human-reasoning upside down. “He who loves his life will lose it and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” He’s equating the hating of your life and a dying-life with living a glorious life.

How do you hate your life? And dying? The extreme difficulty was the same for Jesus. Listen to His words. “Now my soul is troubled and what shall I say? Father (God) save me from this hour? But for this purpose I came to this very hour.”

We also have come to earth to scatter our seed...this very hour. And to die to self-ambition...this very hour. We, like Jesus have a purpose assigned by God.

In the midst of this challenge, we may cry out like Jesus. “My soul is troubled and what shall I say!”



Jesus deflected accolades of glory aimed at Himself towards God. And He reflected the glory of God by the way He lived. His life made God look good. His life made God appealing.

The Apostle Paul knew the key to living this way. “If we suffer with Jesus, that we also may be glorified together. For I consider the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed to us.”

His eyes were on the eternal, on Heaven. Not only will we see unspeakable glory there, it will be our time to shine. We will be glorified with Jesus.

Live for that glory.

## Does God Want You To Be Rich?

I sensed God was saying: “Be quiet.”

The men’s Bible study conversation shifted to God’s blessings. Kevin explained the difference between “blessings” from Old Testament times to the present. “Blessings then were material; today blessings are usually spiritual.” Dave, our leader, affirmed Kevin’s viewpoint. No one objected by voice or wrinkled forehead.

The discussion moved on.

Well, except for the discussion that was bouncing around in my head. That very day I had pondered the question, “Does God want you to be rich?” Money wise—blessed beyond the spiritual.

I silenced my opinion. Dueling Bible scriptures with my Christian brothers would have been pointless.

And none of them knew that my fingers hadn’t felt that satisfying caress of a full-week’s paycheck in months. I had been praying a lot lately for foldable green twenties. And fifties. Not just peace to endure.

Praise God; I had that.

The Bible states: “He who looks into the perfect law of liberty (the Bible) and continues in it and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.”

I looked up “blessed” in a Biblical dictionary. It actually means: “Super-blessed.”

Forgive me if you disagree, but if I’m going to be “super-blessed” from my loving Father God it will include being financially rich...well let’s say richer.

Does that mean all Christians will be rich? Nope.

There are stacks of requirements. As a starting point, do what the mentioned scripture instructs. Read the Bible diligently, do what it says continually, and do the work—God’s work.

Above all, listen to Jesus: “Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you.”

Make the things of God number one. Then...expect earthly blessings.

## God Will Squish Me Through

My next statement may make you burn this book. Please, just rip out this story or send me a stinging e-mail. The statement: I gladly expect to be rich someday. My faith in God's love and grace is for financial increase in addition to spiritual increase.

Faith in God's power.

Now, if I told this to some of my close friends, they would think I was involved with some ungodly, prosperity claiming group. Income-wise, they make more in one year than I have in the previous three. Yet expecting financial increase through faith in God's generosity equals out of bounds to them.

Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

So why would I want to be rich? I want to bless people, use resources

to expand God's earthly influence, be able to finish the work God has started in my life, and allow my life to reflect God's goodness to the doubting who are far from God.

Now what about the camel/needle dilemma? Well, not even a camel's toe could go through the eye of a needle.

"With men this is impossible," Jesus said. "But with God all things are possible."

Me? My faith is for God to enable me to become wealthy. I understand the work-added implication of what Jesus said, "To whom much is given, from him much is required." I'm prepared to pay that price.

And I know God will guide me in its God-honoring use. Finally, I will trust God to impossibly squish me through the eye of a needle, plopping me out on the other side as a saved soul in Heaven.



## Speed, God Loves You

Is going only five miles over the speed limit really speeding? Well, maybe I was going six over. But Allen and I needed a boost to get to church on time.

Now my friend Allen's theology is like a road atlas with pages missing. We both know it; we laugh.

Once again his words launched a missing-page adventure: "If we make the next light it means God likes us."

If that was true we needed God to like us for four lights in a row.

Well, God liked us on the first light, according to the Book of Allen 1:1. But I wasn't converted yet. So I asked: "What about the people going the other way?"

Allen had the answer: "We'll see who God likes best."

Second light—we made it. It's nice thinking God likes me better. So if Allen's theory is correct, God likes me better than the person driving that immaculate Escalade stopped at the red light. Even though my ride is a dented van with over 186,000 miles?

I just made light number three.

God must really like me better. But... that's not really correct.

Allen let's see if I can adjust your theology. Kind of the why-do-red-lights-happen to good people quandary.

There are a lot of slices to this; here's one. The Bible says: "Don't despise discipline from the Lord and don't lose heart when He rebukes you. The person He loves He disciplines." The Bible parallels this to a caring father disciplining a son he loves.

The Bible goes on to say: "God disciplines us for our good so we may share in His holiness."

Encountering red lights in your life?

Could it be you are experiencing God's love? Could it be God desiring for you to experience more of His holiness? The Bible says, "God changes us from glory to glory." Want to experience Godly life change?

Expect red lights.

Godspeed.

## Another Red Light ...Now What?

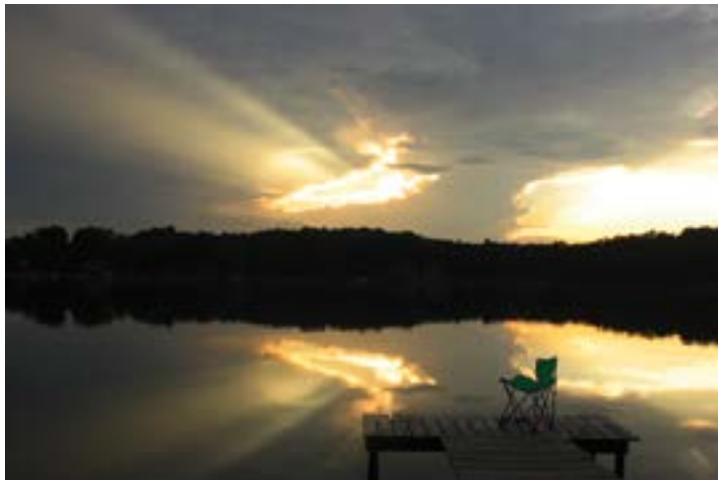
Who likes red lights? They're a nuisance.

Red light after red light impedes our progress. Well...it often seems that way. And every red light means change—a shift in speed, a revision of direction or a dead stop.

God says: “For I am the LORD. I do not change.”

But we, the multi-faceted creatures He created, require transformation. This altering, modifying, and maturing needs to start in the heart.

And as we open up to God this way, our life-adjustments become fruitful and long lasting.



## Changes at the Red Light

### Slow Down

You are flat out living too fast. Important relationships are dropping by the wayside. You've lost your life-direction.

God is a blur. How many red lights will it take for you to slow down? Slow down—now.

### Change Direction

Maybe God wants you to turn right or left. Or turn around. God will bring our lives to a screeching halt if He needs to alter our direction. Hearts always open to God's shifting of direction ride a smoother road.

### Stop. Stop.

Stop. Get out of traffic. Stop. The Bible says, “Be still and know, I am God.”

Stop. Find God in a fresh way. Stop. Get away and be alone with God.

Then your soul and your spirit and your body will be renewed, prepared to continue your journey. And your heart will be re-tuned to hearing God's guiding voice.

## How Does My Hair Look?

“How does my hair look?” Jerry said.

“What should I say?” flashed into my mind. Louder with added force, he repeated, “How does my hair look?”

I quickly responded, “It looks fine.”

I lied. It looked awful.

I thought: “Why is Jerry concerned about how his hair looks?” His clothes were filthy. He smelled. Facial disfigurement and leg sores covered his bloated body. And he sometimes twitched, coming down from his latest drug binge. Now he was checking in at the gospel mission—again.

The Bible says, “God does not see as man sees. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

It would be difficult to consider that Jerry’s heart was possibly more attractive than his hair.

Jerry has traversed more spiritual mountains and valleys in his thirty years than most people in a lifetime. When he is hot for God; he blazes. When he’s cold; he crashes hard.

Through all he knows more scriptures than almost anyone I know—when his mind is clear. And I’ve often thought that we would be ministry partners someday.

But today he was not a pleasant companion. I wondered what would happen if he had one more binge, one more street fight. “Jerry, look at me,” I said. “This may be the last time I see you alive.”

This angered him; practically yelling: “I’m not going to do drugs anymore!”

Was this the real Jerry? What did his heart look like at that instant?

I do not know.

I need to ask God to forgive me; my eyes were focusing on his outward appearance.

I need to go visit Jerry, changing my attire. As the Bible says—“clothe yourself with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, patience; bearing with one another...forgiving as Christ forgave you...beyond all this—wear love.”



# Love—What the Best Dressed Are Wearing

## The Way of LOVE

(From The Message Bible—1 Corinthians 13)

**Love**⇒ Never gives up.

**Love**⇒ Cares more for others than for self.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't want what it doesn't have.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't strut.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't have a swelled head.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't force itself on others.

**Love**⇒ Isn't always "me first."

**Love**⇒ Doesn't fly off the handle.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't keep score of the sins of others.

**Love**⇒ Doesn't revel when others grovel.

**Love**⇒ Takes pleasure in flowering of truth.

**Love**⇒ Puts up with anything.

**Love**⇒ Trust God always.

**Love**⇒ Always looks for the best.

**Love**⇒ Never looks back

**Love**⇒ Keeps going to the end



**"Trust steadily in God, hope unswervingly, love extravagantly. And the best of the three is love."**

1 Corinthians 13:13

## Is This Person God's Miracle?

When the door opened to her compact, abundantly stocked store, Annie warmly welcomed her customer, thinking: “Is this person God’s miracle?” Annie needed a miracle. The store was nearly moneyless with the rent due in a couple days.

Her store, more correctly, as she says, “This is God’s store,” is unique because anyone can walk in, no questions asked; and shop free for clothes, books, toys, small household items, etc.

Annie’s only fund raising effort is the red looks-like-a-child’s-tackle-box attached to the countertop. A note taped near a slot cut into the top says, in English and Spanish: “Donations are used for the rent and utilities.”

No asking, pleading, mailings during the seven years the store has been open. She doesn’t even ask for the hundreds of thousands of items which have been donated to give away.

Well actually Annie does fund raising: “I pray to God.”

This month, for the first time, the situation was pressing. Some days the little box contained a few pennies.

Other days—zero.

Annie prayed and with joyful anticipation her faith held firm. And with all her heart, she believed the words of Jesus: “But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things shall be added to you.”

Thursday night Annie put the closed sign up. One more day for the store and then the rent would be due.

It had been a lean day for donations. Then Annie heard a rap on the door. It was Pastor Jerry from a church two blocks away. He had never been to the store.

Apologizing for his late arrival, he handed Annie an envelope. He left quickly. Alone again, Annie opened the envelope.

Near tears, Annie held a check for \$1000.

She had sought the Kingdom first. And God provided—a miracle.

## Getting Ready to Receive Your Miracle



### Do You Need a Miracle?

Do you need a miracle? Are you looking for one? I know Annie well; she's constantly looking for a miracle.

And she's always experiencing the supernatural power of God. So what's her secret? No secret. God reveals in His Holy Word, principles for unlocking miracles.

### God's Way to Miracles

#### Expect

Expect God to do a miracle. This should not be a flailing, unsubstantiated, random longing. Grip onto what you need God to do in your life. Link this with in-context promises from the Bible. Dig into God's Word. You'll mine something exciting to raise your expectation.

#### Faith

Hebrews says, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Learn to believe the unseen more than you do the seen. Or your feelings. Let your "evidence" be: wholehearted trust of our good God.

#### Sowing and Reaping

Galatians 6:7 says: "Whatever a person sows, that they will also reap." Plant a miracle; receive a miracle. Have you ever allowed God to use you to be someone else's miracle? Have you ever secretly dropped off a stuffed-full box of food at someone's apartment?

Given twenty dollars to a desperate soul needing a twenty-buck miracle?

## Pray

Talk to God. As James 4:2 says: “You do not have because you do not ask.”

The verse continues with this guideline: “You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures.”

Ask for the right reason. And then: “Pray and don’t give up.”



## Be Humble

“God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

Remain in a position to receive abundant grace from God. Matthew 18:45 says, “Therefore whoever humbles himself as this little child is greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven.”

Childlike humility equals number one in God’s Kingdom; this is prime miracle receiving turf.

## Righteous/Holy

Get in and stay in a right standing with God.

Purge sin from your life.

Psalms 24:3-5 says it all. “Who may ascend into the hill of the LORD? Or who may stand in His holy place? The person who has clean hands and a pure heart. He who has not lifted up his soul to an idol. Nor sworn deceitfully. He shall receive blessings from the LORD.”

Clean and pure actions; clean and pure attitudes in our hidden inner life—a beautiful posture to receive a miracle from God.

## **Obey God**

God's direction for our lives or specific requirements He has set before us, often do not compute with our brains.

Hebrews 11:8 says: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place he would receive as an inheritance."

Great...who wouldn't want an inheritance directly from God.

Sounds like a miracle.

Wait...here's the does-not-compute moment, the test of obedience: "And he went out, not knowing where he was going." He didn't know his future. He didn't know his destination. He didn't know how he would make it financially.

God said go. He went. Sheer obedience. And he saw miracle after miracle.

## **The Bottom Line**

Now do as the Bible say: "Be a doer of the Word and not a hearer only... a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does."

Yes—your miracle awaits.

## What Gang Are You In?

His answer kind of made sense; seemed fairly logical.

Three middle school students were riding in my van. I'm not sure why Brandon asked the question: "Do you know how gangs started?"

I filtered the question to mean gangs in the United States: "No I don't."

I want to know the truth. Proverbs, the wisdom book of the Bible, says, "Buy truth, and do not sell it. Get wisdom and instruction and understanding." There is a price to pay for obtaining truth along with wisdom, instruction and understanding. It will cost some time searching for truth; researching the facts.

I listened, allowing Brandon to tell me what he knew about the history of gangs. He answered, "The Mafia started them."

This sort of makes sense; seems reasonably logical.

With no better explanation, I asked, "So where did you find that out?"

Brandon replied, "Some things you just figure out on your own."

Brandon is smart, but now my brain started questioning his answer.

Later, through reading and studying information written by gang experts, I discovered the truth. I spent some time; I bought some truth.

So what did I discover? Brandon was wrong.

Several days later some of the same students gathered at a Bible study. The evening's lesson? The Truth. First we talked about the history of gangs. This engaged their attention as I told them my discoveries.

Realistically, knowing gang history has extremely limited value. What really matters is grasping the words of Jesus. "You will know the truth and the truth will set you free." He's talking about the eternal truths of God.

Life savers. Life changers.

Is there anyone so free of life-obstacles that God's truth is worthless?

God's truth is priceless. Make a wise investment; spend your life pursuing truth.

## **It Costs to Know; It Costs Not to Know**

What's the most expensive thing you've ever bought? "A house," would be a common response. I'm in the process of buying a house—my most costly purchase.

I paid Tex, a professional home inspector, to poke, prod and test things at the house before signing the final purchase agreement. I spent the money because I wanted to know the truth. It cost \$250. But it was worth it. Tex found two hidden flaws. His discoveries saved me \$2350. The truth cost me, but not knowing the truth would have cost me more.

It's the same way with God. It costs to discover His truths. It takes time to read His Word. And pray. And listen to preachers and Bible teachers.

Most people spend more time, effort and money discovering the truth about their stuff. Bad investment. The "stuff" is all going to burn in the end. Guaranteed.

Strange. The vast majority of people say they believe in God, yet they invest almost zero time knowing God, His ways, or even why He created them.

### **The Cost of Not Knowing God's Truth**

**Forfeiting the full spectrum of success**

**Derails the fortitude required to live a noble life**

**Financial insecurity**

**Ruined marriages**

**Broken relationships**

**Premature death**

**Suppressing of God-inspired creativity**

**Children who live far from God**

**Health issues magnified**

**Mental confusion**

**Unstable emotions**

**An unsure outlook regarding life direction**

**Trapped in addictions**

**Fear and worry**

**Eternity in Hell**

## Church of Tears

He was near tears. And then droplets started trickling down his cheeks: “Can I go tonight?”

To ten year old Michael the thought of possibly not going to church that evening was very upsetting.

Someone like Michael was totally off our radar when my friend John and I initiated an adult Bible study targeting non-church goers. We passed out invitations. Posters were placed around town. I even knocked on doors in the neighborhood. In total more than a 150 invitations were distributed.

Months later, besides the group leaders, one person attended regularly. We pushed on, continuing to wait on God.

One evening before the meeting, I was down the street inviting a lady who desperately needed the power of Jesus in her life. Again she declined. Then her eight-year old grandson Tyler said, “Can I go?” I hesitated. Tyler started crying: “I never get to go anywhere.”

I told him the meeting was a serious adult Bible study. He kept crying.

I relented.

The next week I relented again—before the tears. And Tyler and his brother were allowed to attend. And in the following weeks other kids wanted to come. Including Michael. Soon the kids outnumbered the adults. Some would be lying on the floor; others looked like they were totally disengaged in the meeting, yet they returned the next week.

I remember thinking, “God what are you doing?”

The Bible tells us, “We are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works which God prepared before hand that we should walk in them.”

Soon all the adults drifted from the group, except my wife and me. And even more kids started coming.

Now sometimes after “children’s church” I feel like crying. Because now I see what God is doing.

Can you see the good works God has for your life? God has prepared some just for you. Please...please do not miss them. Tears are tears. They dry up. Missing God’s plan for your life lasts forever.



## Church of Tears/The Free Church

More and more children came to The Church of Tears. They all quickly got saved. Instantly they became really holy. All their problems dissolved. Their parent's problems too. God blessed us with tons of money. We had plenty of good helpers. And we all lived happily ever after. The end.

O.K.—Now this is what really happened.

Children kept coming. And we kept thinking of them as: “The children God sent our way so we could teach them Bible lessons.” But they were thinking different.

“We’re going to church,” is what the children would always say. Even though our meetings were not at a church building, but in the small backroom of a downtown ministry.

We saw what God was doing. It’s church to the children—and to God. So it’s church to us—The Free Church.



We’ve seen behavior so terrible; it seemed like demon-casting-out time.

Other times someone will say something so God-like, the words of Jesus come to mind. “Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you, but My Father in heaven.”

Love for the children has gripped me. They’re real; no pretense. If you stink; they tell you. If they love you; they tell you.

My wife Nancy and I have a saying; “If it was easy, everybody would do it.” If doing worthy exploits for God was easy with emotionally gratifying results effortlessly flowing; people would be lining up to get the all-warm-inside Holy Spirit buzz.

Sure, that feeling sometimes accompanies our work. But what really stirs me are the words of Jesus: “Whoever receives one little child like this in My name, receives Me.”

## Give Secretly

“Hey Rudy, this is Rick,” I said, “There’s a family that needs some food.” I have made similar phone calls probably fifty times.

He responded: “How many people in the family?” That’s all he asked. I drive over to his house. Rudy pops the overhead garage door open and helps load the food into my van.

“Thank you so much Rudy,” I said. He shrugs his shoulders—almost resistant to receiving the thanks.

Jesus said: “When you give to the poor; do...so that your giving will be in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you openly.” Rudy’s neighbors are unaware of his generosity. So is his family. Even the people who benefit from his kindness have no idea who he is.

I get the fun of delivering the goodies. Two people are home—two boys, nine and thirteen. The oldest boy says: “You saved our lives.” Not literally, but...

Taking the last box into the house; they practically yelled, “Thank you Rick!”

I told them the food was not from me. I said, “You need to praise God.”

In unison the two boys power punched the air, yelling: “Yeah, praise God!”

I can tell Rudy what happened, yet he will only experience a minuscule amount of the emotional buzz. How exciting is stacking canned goods into a box? And no one will be cheering Rudy on while he shops for food on sale, stocking it away for the next crisis.

If excitement and the praise of people is the motivator for doing good, the heart is askew. And strictly pursuing rewards from God as a counterbalance to our efforts misses God’s way.

God’s way—secret giving equals open reward for a person with a good and honorable heart. Now this type of person’s focus typically is far from doing good for the reward. They are simply loving God and loving people.

Still God has said what He will do—secret giving equals open reward.

Could you use a reward, a blessing from God?

In faith—give secretly.

## How Does God Rewards Us?

The Bible refers to God's rewards repeatedly. So what would God's rewards look like?

Certainly there are tangible rewards on Earth. In abundance. But have you adequately considered Heaven's extensive rewards? These are a bonus beyond making it to Heaven.

Jesus said in Revelation: "Behold, I am coming soon!...I will give everyone according to what he has done."

Jesus will be the Master of Ceremonies presiding over the distribution of awards. That out-of-this world event, with hundreds of millions of people in attendance, is called the Bema.

At the Bema crowns will be awarded. Categories include crowns of righteousness, of life and of glory. "Treasures in Heaven" are also in the line up. Though not specified; they're guaranteed to be beyond-imagination magnificent. Also Jesus will offer His personal words of acknowledgment: "Well done good and faithful servant..."

Job assignments will also be in the mix of heavenly rewards. The Bible tells us that we will rule and reign with Christ. Our heavenly position

will be determined according to how well we carried out our earthly assignment.

Now, rewards are not based on the quantity of our labor. Actually many efforts, seemingly reward-worthy, will be burned up as rubbish. Wrong motives, wrong attitude, not kingdom of God advancing, etc.

The prime basis for rewards is how well your God given talents were maximized to glorify God.

Think about it though. Won't simply seeing Jesus face to face make every effort for God instantly so worth it? And then to be given rewards besides.

God is so good!



## Preach to the Hungry

They clung together across the street—nearly obscured by darkness. Four older teenagers; one yelled, “Do you have any food?”

I was dropping off kids from church. I replied, “Yeah, I’ve got some food. Come over to the van.” I had delivered food to adults in the neighborhood before; still their request surprised me. My mom’s homemade cookies, which the church kids frequently munched on, seemed to be what they were really asking for.

Truthfully—there wasn’t any food, not even one cookie.

When they asked, I instantly thought: “Spiritual food.”

Minutes later I was back at the van. They stood in a line paying me uncommon attention. I confessed, “I don’t have any food.” And in a flurry of words I promised to bring them a batch of Mom’s cookies. I added: “But I do have some spiritual food.”

Surprisingly; Robert, Steven, Cody, and Allen held rank. I grabbed a pocket-size New Testament from the van, holding it out: “Here’s some spiritual food.”

Completely opposite my expectations, Steven reached for it, instantly hiding it in his pocket. Of the four, he was the only one I had ever talked with before.

Our longest conversation had lasted about forty-five seconds. I had brought up God; Steven seemed disinterested.

The Bible says: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season...” The four teenagers continued to hold rank. And focus. This was definitely an in-season moment. I was ready; the sermon from church was fresh in my mind.

The under-the-street-lights mini-sermon lasted less than eight minutes. By the grace of God, four people unexpectedly received and enjoyed spiritual food.

Jesus said, “This gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the entire world.”

Your assignment—stay ready. Stay ready, prepared to speak about the goodness of God to those who are hungry.

## You're a Preacher, Yes You Are

When you picture “preaching,” quit thinking: “Person up front on Sunday who talks.” Just before Jesus left Earth, He issued The Great Commission. Or should we call it Your Earthly Assignment. “Go into the entire world and preach the Good News to every creature.”

### Preaching 1...2...3

**1.** Preaching is simply proclaiming the Good News. Not loud or harsh, but as a reflection of who you are. And a reflection of your audience. Verbally tell the Good News wherever you're at.

The Good News is specifically the story of Jesus, but the entire Bible is good news. God is good. With your words make the things of God attractive. And when God opens the door, preach the way to new life in Jesus Christ. Be yourself. Be led by the Holy Spirit.

**2.** Preaching literally means: “To herald, to proclaim, to publish.” Preaching includes setting forth the

We do not preach ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” made His light shine in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God... we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that this all-surpassing power is from God. Not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:5-7

Good News in a written format. God has gifted some people to be much more effective in writing than speaking. The possibilities are vast. From a letter to a best seller, blogging, text messages, your local newspaper...

**3.** Preaching equals proclaiming. What does the way you live proclaim? Sadly too many people through their living preach the Good News of Jesus as either bad news or no news at all. Or irrelevant news. Living an authentic Jesus-like life is preaching at it's finest.

### Now Do It⇨Preach

“Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved. How then can they call on the One they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And can they hear without someone preaching to them...how beautiful are the feet of those who bring Good News!”

## Facing the Giants

The front row—that’s where Phillip wanted to sit to watch the movie *Facing the Giants*. Not my preferred location. Yet with all the realistic football scenes, it was as if we were in the games.

The movie instantly gripped me. I was near tears many times. I was thinking: “What will Phillip think if I start crying?”

And then, other times we both laughed out loud.

I’m Phillip’s mentor; he’s almost sixteen. I’ve told him several times: “Phillip it matters a lot to me how your life turns out.” Actually—more than he could understand.

The message of the football-themed movie was: “We can face seemingly impossible giants in our lives with the everything-possible-power of God.” As Philippians 4:13 says: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Driving home that dark, cold-rainy evening I said to Phillip, “I’m facing a giant in my life.” Then I told him that earlier in the day I had sent a letter to the world’s largest Christian book



publisher to entice their interest in publishing a book I want to write.

He responded, “I want to buy a copy.” With doubtless faith he already sees my dream-book as a hold-in-the-hands reality.

Now that’s the kind of friend you want in your life; someone who already sees your giants whipped, your goals attained. You know what? That’s exactly the faith I have for Phillip’s life—for God to be his strength to achieve his plans, hopes, and dreams.

Jesus said, “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in Heaven.”

Hey Phillip, I agree with you; you agree with me. Let’s go kill some giants, achieve the impossible—you, me and God.

## Was It a Giant? Was It a Grasshopper?

Statistics reveal, the overwhelming majority of human worries turn out far better than the mentally agonized projection. The tendency is to magnify something the size of a grasshopper into a giant.

The biblical account of the Jewish people's time on the edge of their Promised Land is a classic example. Twelve men made a scouting journey to appraise the difficulty of actually crossing over into their Promised Land. All twelve came back proclaiming the magnificence of their conquest goal.

This was absolutely God's choicest destination for their life. Yet ten of the team insisted attaining victory was impossible. "We saw giants...we were like grasshoppers in our own sight.

Their negative, no faith perception had dramatically magnified the challenge ahead. These men saw themselves as mere grasshoppers.

Don't do that—be like Caleb.

He was part of the scouting party also. He saw the exact same scene as the others. Yet he said, "Let's go up at once and take possession, for we are well able to overcome it."

Instantly, resistance surged against him.

Caleb became so disgusted he tore his clothes. And made his appeal: "The LORD is with us. Do not fear them."

Their response? "Stone him!"

Undaunted, Caleb continued to proclaim: "The LORD is with us. Do not fear them." This separated him from the negative crowd and narrowed the group down to the few who were ready to live out their trust in God.

With God-empowered bravery the giants were conquered. Pursuit of; became reality, as they possessed the Promised Land.

The same can be said of each one of us as we pursue our personal "Promised Land." Our God-given dreams and hopes can remain unfulfilled if we succumb to worry and fear. And doubt.

Ten people may tell us that our idea will fail. Even when we know it is God-inspired.

May I offer this tried and true encouragement from Caleb?

"The Lord is with us. Do not fear."

## The Love Letter

“I really need you to do me a favor,” John said. “What do you want?” I responded to my good friend.

John hesitated for a moment; I prodded. His favor? Drive him to deliver a five-page hand written love letter. He told me his love-grown-cold woe between himself and his girlfriend Ashley.

He said, “If it’s over, I’m going out with a bang.” I agreed; let’s do it.

When I arrived to pick him up, John said, “I feel like a moron.” Uncharacteristically nervous and impulsive, he was apologizing, asking what to do, and thanking me in rapid succession.

What won’t a person go through to restore a love relationship?

Jesus must have felt the same tug when He said: “But you walked away from your first love—why? What’s going on with you, anyway?”

With similar thoughts scattering through his head, John bought three roses, then wrapped the love letter onto the stem with green ribbon.

After a courage-gathering drive past Ashley’s house, John went up to the door. He shoved the delivery into the hands of an unsuspecting guest, blurting, “Give this to Ashley.”

John ran and jumped into the van, “Peel out, let’s go!” I laughed, but I didn’t peel out.

John pushed through his emotional obstacles to restore love.

Won’t Jesus do anything to restore a love relationship with one of us? His very nature is revealed in the verse: “God is love.” Jesus is love.

As we drove, John started regaining his composure, until I asked, “What if she doesn’t answer?”

Practically popping his seat belt loose, he replied, “She better!”

That’s one question we never have to wonder. “What if Jesus doesn’t answer?”

So stop.

Don’t let your love with Jesus grow cold. Pray. Your love letter will be instantly delivered to the One who loves you—Jesus.



## Don't Freeze Jesus Out

The thrill. The chill. The spill. This is the pattern. I've seen it so many times.

### The Thrill

A person gets introduced to Jesus Christ. A commitment is made to become His follower. The God-life plunge is taken. And day to day existence takes a dramatic upswing.

Love for Jesus and His ways are emotionally stimulating.

### The Chill

Usually slow erosion. Very similar to deteriorating human relationships. Awe and even congenial manners slip.

Time spent developing the bond becomes less of a priority. The emotional buzz of the initial encounter is replaced by steady block-on-block long term commitment.

Yet, for too many people, when the thrill is gone; so are they. Jesus gets frozen out.

### The Spill

I've seen this scenario happen way, way too many times.

The chill sets in. Jesus is either out of

the picture or so fuzzy, His influence is insignificant.

Then it happens. The initially thrilled person's life actually becomes worse off. This spill-scenario holds true to some degree regardless of a person's pre-Jesus life.

I can't think of one instance where someone's life improved when they put Jesus on the backburner. Actually, I've never even seen a person's situation remain status quo.

The spill will happen.



**Jesus said: "Hey, I'm standing outside the door knocking. Whoever hears My voice and then opens the door, I'll come right in. We'll have a meal together."**

## How Does a Person Stay Close, In Love With Jesus?



### The Thrill

The concept of having a close, intimate relationship with a person who we do not see falls outside of the spectrum of natural thinking. That's why we need to continually improve our spiritual thinking. This is the plane on which a vital God-life is lived out.

It is possible to keep a relationship with Jesus thrilling. It's been said, "Boring people get bored." If your part of the Jesus-connection is boring, the results are predictable.

Keep it an adventure. Always be seeking to know Jesus better through prayer and reading the Bible. Always keep your heart open to change. Godly change will keep you stretched

spiritually, but alive as you ride the wave of God working in your life. Be interested in what Jesus is consumed with. If you're interested in sin. He's not. If not dealt with, sin can lead to relational meltdown.

And sin will look unappealing when you stay in touch with what Jesus is doing in your immediate surroundings. Get in touch; stay in touch. Get involved; stay involved.

Join in as a partner—a junior partner. Imagine linking with Jesus on projects. Joining with the amazing God-Jesus, fighting the forces of evil on planet earth. Always assured of ultimate victory. His goodness, His ways continue to surge...and you're on the team.

This is the thrill! Live it!

### The Chill

Freeze out; remove from your life those things which are contrary to the teachings of Jesus. If you're a believer, the Holy Spirit is living right inside you. He is your Helper. Shaping you, guiding you into being more Jesus-like. The Holy Spirit leads you into all truth. The Bible says, "The truth will set you free."

Now this freeze-out scenario is an ongoing process. One step at a time. And then another step. If you slip, get back on your feet; get back on track.

Put the big chill on ungodly junk in your life and your love for Jesus will grow.

### **The Spill**

The Apostle Paul said, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith.” His life had been spilled out as an enthusiastic offering of love to God.

Passionately serve The Master, Jesus and your love for Him will also be passionate. Your focus will be on Him.

Not on yourself.

In fact you will discover empathy with John the Baptist when he said: “He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease.” And this decrease, this emptying of self in anticipation of Jesus increasing, is done in faith.

Pour out your life for Jesus.

Now, expectantly wait for His near-tangible outpouring; the cup-runs-over kind of love, grace, and mercy which will spill into your heart.

## Muito Bom

When he touched my hand, he touched my heart.

My destination was the prayer chapel—my focus as well. Walking across the missionary compound, a small hand found my hand.

Unexpectedly I was holding hands with one of the children who lived there.

Thousands of miles from home, just off the east coast of Africa; the affection was welcomed.

I stumbled through some elementary conversation which consisted more of gestures and smiles than of the Portuguese language. Name and age are always easy to interpret. My new friend was ten-year old Fanuel.

I struggled to communicate. “Father?” No. “Mother?” No. With his answers, a stark sadness came over Fanuel’s face. Piercing my heart. He turned; looking away from me.

Now what do I say? What do I say to a child whose parents are probably dead? A child who has probably lived on the streets, hoping to bury these unpleasant, haunting memories.

“God help me,” I silently prayed.

“Fanuel” I said. He looked at me. God let my eyes communicate love: “Fanuel, es muito bom.” Translation: Fanuel is very good.

He almost started crying. So did I.

The simple phrase: “Fanuel is very good” impacted him in a way I never could have imagined.

Later as I thought over his reaction, I realized that I may have been the only person in his life to ever tell him he was good.

The wisdom of the Bible says, “Pleasant words are as dripping honey, sweet to the soul.”

Two and a half weeks later, I hugged Fanuel and gently rubbed his short, bristly hair. I kneeled in the sand, looking him in the eyes for the last time: “Fanuel es muito bom.”

I smiled inside as I saw the sweetness in his soul.

## God said... You said...

God said: “Let there be light,” and there was light. God said...and it was so.

God spoke; by His words all of creation came into being. Mighty power discharges from God’s words.

Mighty power discharges from your words.

Jesus said, “For by your words you will be justified and by your words you will be condemned.”

*Justified* has a specific legal connotation. Meaning acquitted; declared righteous—right standing before God. *Condemned* in a like manner has a legal association. By our own words, we can prepare ourselves for life eternally separated from God. Condemned.

Mighty power discharges from your words. “The power of life and death are in the tongue.”

The life-side is revealed in Romans 10:9. “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and you believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”

Our words pack so much power that words spoken are an integral part of launching a human soul into Heaven. “You will be saved.” Our words set in motion the miracle of creating a saved soul. Many consider this to be the most amazing of all earthly miracles.



## Mighty Power Discharges From Your Words

What power are your words discharging?

What are you saying about God?

What are you saying about other people?

What are you saying about yourself?

## Bad Luck

He was serious as...as sin.

“Let me tell you something; this is something you need to know,” Ty said. He knows his stuff. He’s been working at my favorite lumberyard for years.

“It’s bad luck to start a job on Friday.”

Hmm.

The ten plus inches of fresh snow, which was already delaying delivery of the first truckload of lumber to my job site, made me think.

But bad luck? Should trust in luck, determine the direction for a Friday?

The Bible says: “Some trust in their war chariots and others in their horses, but we trust in the power of the LORD our God.” Maybe in carpenter’s language it might mean we trust in our huge four-wheel drive trucks and our competent workers. Plus more; say—luck.

“Ty you need to write this down,” I said. “I don’t believe in luck; I trust in God.” He laughed.

I told him to deliver the lumber.

The truck backed into the driveway. Adam, the driver, slowly tilted the bed of the truck forming a ramp to slide the steel-banded load from truck to the snow covered concrete.

Suddenly, as the wood started to slide off the truck, the steel bands broke. The bundle exploded, missing lumber towards the house.

Adam bolted from the truck with an I’m-getting-fired look on his face. It quickly turned to a grin; I started laughing. Heavy timbers rested, actually touching the house, but no damage.

Lumberyard chatter would surely conclude that the dreaded Friday bad luck had capriciously turned good.

Bible truth declares: “I will say of the LORD: He is my refuge, my fortress. In God I will trust...blessed is the man who trusts in God.”

Now that’s how I determine the direction for a Friday.

## Don't Think "Luck"

Thinking *unlucky* or saying, "It was luck," is not in alignment with the Bible. Why do I say that? The word *luck* is not in the Bible. Reading the Scriptures reveals that God is very cause and effect oriented.

## A Better Way to Think and Live

**God blesses people**⇒ Being blessed by God is largely attributed to being in the position to receive. Godly obedience is a huge factor. Just like an earthly father/child relationship, obedience has rewards.

**Hard work**⇒ The Bible says, "Faith without works is dead." And, "He who looks into the perfect law of liberty (The Bible) and continues in it and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work will be blessed in what he does." Doing as the Bible dictates is integrated with an ongoing work effort. Resulting in being blessed.

**Call to God**⇒ Once I was looking at a costly repair bill for my van. Money and skills were very limited. I prayed to God using the scripture: "Call to Me. I will answer you and show you

great and mighty things you could not figure out on your own."

Almost instantly a very unconventional solution popped into my brain. It was simple—saving me hundreds of dollars. Not luck, God answered my prayer.

**Do the work God created you for**⇒ The Bible says, "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance that we should walk in them." Discerning and fulfilling the purpose God desires for our earthly-journey is a guaranteed life-enhancing plan.

**The devil is our enemy**⇒ The Bible reveals the devil's goal: "The thief (devil) does not come except to steal, and to kill and to destroy." So a situation referred to as unlucky, may be the devil. His evil injecting as much life-havoc as possible.

**I don't know** ⇒ The Scriptures say of God: "Who can explain His decisions? Who can understand His ways?" God knows why things happen; we don't. Always love God and His ways. And then trust God...in everything. "And He shall make your paths smooth and straight."

# You Called God Awesome

Ethan jeered as if I had committed a theological snafu: “You called God awesome.”

This *awesome* was part of my evening meal blessing. With the “amen” barely past my lips, my fourteen-year old nephew gave his editorial.

It was a week long summer gathering at my father-in-law’s lake house. At every evening meal he would stoically nod at me, “You going to pray?”

How do you pray when most of the people gathered are not Christians? Especially since others besides Ethan have felt entitled to comment immediately following the prayers’ conclusions.

Now Ethan toned his remark as a question. He never goes to church, so *awesome* relates to his world. He might think about his dad’s new laptop computer, his brother’s two-thousand dollar digital camera, or movie special effects.

So praying: “God, You are awesome,” introduced Ethan to an unfamiliar way of thinking about God.

And he’s probably never read the

many biblical references to God like this one out of Deuteronomy. “For the LORD your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God...”

Who can even exactly say what the word *awesome* implies?

How about this from Webster’s Dictionary? “To express a profoundly humble and reverential attitude in the presence of deity; abashed fear inspired by authoritative power.”

Can we even approach the thought of our own littleness set before God—the creator of the universe? Some adjustments need to be made in the way we think of God. In the way we think of ourselves.

And it’s so easy to simply call God awesome. Yet someone like Ethan will not connect to our meaning. But what if I, what if you, lived a life reflecting the awesomeness of God?

God, today—help me to cast a glint of who You truly are into my world. God, help my life to say: “God is awesome.”



## Before God Became Awesome

There was a time when God was not awesome. Not universally un-awesome.

But to me.



## How God Became Awesome

First God had to arrive as a tiny blip on the radar screen of my life. The Bible says that God draws and enables a person to find Him. He initiates the process.

For me, I had zero interest in God. Then God surprised me by stirring a longing inside. In my heart—a desire to know about God.

Then I stuck my toe into the spiritual waters to see if God was real, if His claims had real-life validity.

My plan, followed for decades, left me with shrugged shoulders: “Is this all there is?” I was questioning my once satisfying life-scheme.

As I pursued God; fresh, tangible results were unfurling. My thinking radically shifted as life sparked with significant and exciting meaning. God was becoming real.

So I dove in full-tilt. I committed myself to being a follower of Jesus. I surmised, if business success meant giving it your all, would following Jesus be any different?

Jesus died for me on that cross; He deserves my best...well actually more. Big commitment to God’s life-direction equals ever increasing revelation and recognition of God’s awesomeness.

How did God become awesome to me? This grew from the seed God planted. As this starting-seed was nurtured, it grew. And grew some more. And will continue to grow as both God and I foster the process.

# The Teeter Doesn't Totter

“They broke it,” my wife said.

“Are you serious?” I said, looking at the broken teeter-totter plank.

She’s great with unruly children. But even she seemed slightly frazzled by the six children she had rounded up for a church party.

Despite all the disciplining challenges, we understood clearly why we had brought the children. Our desire is that they will become our spiritual children by influencing them to become followers of Jesus. And then someday, the words of the Apostle John could become ours: “I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

A featured event of the evening was the bashing of a piñata. We were watching closely.

When the busting-blow burst the piñata, it became a grab-shove moment.

Even the church kids turned unruly.

Our most challenging, Daniel, was in the middle of the fray. He’s a 190 pound twelve-year old hulk.

He quickly scooped up half a bag of candy. Then he guarded another sizable pile with his body like a hockey goalie sprawling on an inches-from-the-net puck.

To a girl, who looked tiny compared to Daniel, he said, “Here, this is for you.”

A couple of church kids lunged once more as he fended them off. He then helped fill her still empty bag with candy from the guarded pile.

I’ll never know what teeter-tottered Daniel’s behavior from being the teeter-totter destroyer to being the role model for piñata etiquette.

Believe me, after that he didn’t suddenly turn saintly. But for us, it was a no-greater-joy moment.

Where will these children’s lives teeter-totter to? That’s unanswerable.

But all of us are on one side or the other as we influence children in the teeter-totter between good and evil.

Which side are you on?

## Daniel's Song

The tears from the other end of the phone nearly obscured the message. And the static in my head declared: “No, this can’t be happening,” momentarily freezing my ability to respond.

Now fourteen, Daniel had been hit by a drunk driver while walking on the shoulder of the road. He had been airlifted to a metropolitan hospital thirty miles north.

Psalm 118:17 became my prayer through the night at the hospital. “Daniel... will not die, but live. And tell of the works of the LORD.” My faith in God remained firm all night, opposed to the words of the doctors. To the degree that it was difficult to absorb the words from Daniel’s mother seven hours later.

“He’s gone.”

The weight of his death piled on heavier than any I had ever experienced. I was Daniel’s pastor. We’re family—my third cousin. Daniel was my spiritual son. Beyond all, it felt like I had lost a son.



I’m a man of faith, the pastor and now I have more questions than answers. My faith had been so strong: Daniel will live—“and tell of the works of the LORD.”

Through all, experience has taught me, God will provide answers.

Two hours later I received an e-mail from Bryan Corbin, a writing colleague whose work I greatly admire. Bryan knew nothing of my situation.

These are his words. “I queried the Lord yesterday about the difference between faith and trust—this is what I heard. ***Faith is what is required to believe in the things we’ve yet to see, while trust is what is required when what we see doesn’t seem to support what we’ve had the faith to believe.***”

The answer, the message was clear—trust God. In all.

Psalm 27:13-14 says: “I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD.”

## Picture This

Wow! Only \$234. I needed a digital camera. An internet search churned up this incredible “deal.” The company’s website stated: “Commitment to complete customer satisfaction.” So I clicked my credit card information into cyberspace.

A few days later I received an e-mail from the company: “Regarding your order, call Johnny...”

When I contacted Johnny, he informed me that the ordered camera was programmed in Japanese and prodded me to purchase one programmed in English. Johnny said, “We’ve got a deal for \$325.”

I paused, slowly gathering my thoughts. “Johnny,” I said “Are you telling me it’s going to cost me ninety dollars to have the camera programmed into English?”

He responded with a significantly raised voice, “Are you calling me a liar?” Several times I tried to get him to explain. He kept repeating, “Are you calling me a liar?” Exasperated, I said, “Cancel the order.”

Johnny tersely said, “Fine.”

No, it wasn’t fine.

I cannot separate a camera purchase gone awry from the filter of the Bible’s timeless truths. I sat in my office with my Bible, considering my response. The Bible says, “Don’t let the sun do down on your anger.”

Guilty. Was Johnny? The Bible tells me not to judge him.

I started praying, “God forgive me.” I forgave Johnny and asked God to bless him. I renounced anger, telling God I would resist its reappearance.

Why would I do this?

Jesus said: “If you have anything against anyone, forgive them, so your Father (God) in Heaven may also forgive your failings and shortcomings. But if you do not forgive, neither will your Father in Heaven forgive your failings and shortcomings.”

Holding anger and unforgiveness towards another person is tragic. It short-circuits God from pardoning the mess-ups in our lives. I can’t afford that possibility. Can you?

No one can. Picture this—we must forgive others.

## Owe No One Anything Except...

I owe a favor. Owe a visit. Owe money.

Owe an apology. Owe forgiveness.

Lists can grow long with unfinished, owing-business.

And the Bible commands: “Owe no one anything except to love one another.”

Then the Bible expounds further: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.”

Love, true God-style love fulfills our obligations, which can weigh on us like legal burdens.

With love as our action-motivator, owing dissipates. An owed favor is a smile-time of giving from the heart. An owed visit can be a time to share love, not a burden. Money owed can be discussed lovingly with intent to repay. If strife still arises, continue to love. And then, how can the situation not improve?

Owed apologies can drag out for years. Love is able to place the well-being of others above emotions and hurts. Yes, apologies can be extremely

difficult to carry out. But these owed-apologies many times live in the dominion of unforgiveness.

Unforgiveness is clearly spelled out in the Bible as a disastrous place to live.



Bottom line, Jesus paid the ultimate love payment when He died on that cross. His love canceled the unpayable debt we owed because of our sins. Jesus did this for us—undeserving sinners.

His great love needs to compel us to be generous in our love towards one another.

## Kissing the Cat

“I finally got my son to go to the doctor,” Jan said.

What’s wrong with him? “I think he has tapeworms.” She added: “I told him he got them from kissing the cat.”

I almost laughed.

Then Stacy said, “Tell him to eat pumpkin seeds. That will cut the tapeworms right out of him.” Jan agreed.

Now not laughing out loud was nearly impossible.

I’m thinking, “Do people really get tapeworms.” I’ve never known anyone. Then toss in some cat kissing and a bag of pumpkin seeds; I’m in the middle of a fact/fiction quandary.

The Bible says in Job 15:2: “Should a wise person answer with empty knowledge. And fill themselves with the east wind?” The scripture is saying, empty knowledge, a supposed truth with no fact is not the way of a wise person. This is full of wind—worthless.

I didn’t say anything. But too many times I’ve tossed out my view—thinking it was truth.

I definitely had an opinion. And from there I’m so easily catapulted into forming an opinion of Jan. Soon I was engaging in something I’ve been making a determined effort to stymie in my life.

Judging people. The Bible is pretty plain about it—don’t do it.

Later, I gathered the facts. Yes, people get tapeworms. Yes, pumpkins seeds are a folk remedy with high merit. Now as far as the danger of kissing cats; I’m still not sure.

But this I do know. Using empty knowledge to form an assumption about a person can be a disease far more harmful than tapeworms. And then our mental thoughts become words. And more. As the book of Job also says: “I could heap up words against you and shake my head at you.”

And then Job adds: “But I would strengthen you with my mouth.” He was a wise man—thoughts and words.

God, help me be the same.

## Kissing Truth and Mercy

David wrote in a Psalm: “Mercy and truth have met together; righteousness and peace have kissed.”

What is he saying?

The correct blend of mercy and truth produces a love-environment which fosters right-living before God, peace with God. And peace with people.

Here’s how it works. Hammer a person with pure truth— you need to do this, you need to change that— resistance will likely rise up quickly. Rebellion. Sure, everything said may be pure truth. But because of bluntness, it’s too bitter to absorb.

Also too much mercy likewise misses the mark of creating peaceful, right living. Mercy off balance leads to ignoring situations which need correction.

The emotions of an overly mercy-filled heart, make the lips of correction silent. Or ineffective. Even harmful.

Then there is mercy and truth correctly blended— “I’ll love you forever; I’m on your side.” But listen up! Your actions are destructive. They are not acceptable to me or God.



And these are the reasons behind what I’m saying. I really care about what happens to you. What can I do to help you?

Hug time.

The final part of David’s Psalm says; “Righteousness will go before Him and shall make His footsteps our path.”

David is speaking of Jesus, whose life exemplifies the kissing of truth and mercy. He stood firm, boldly for truth. And with ultimate mercy He endured the Cross.

Make Jesus’ footsteps your path.

## Is My Mom Dying?

She grabbed me and started crying. My mom had just returned home from a stay in the hospital.

I held her as she cried. When she stopped, the only question I could think to ask was, “What’s wrong?” With a tube feeding oxygen into her nose and a scowl on her face—directed at me, she cried some more.

Sometimes questioning can seem uncompassionate. But my mind was pondering “What’s really going on?” And I was eager to inject a huge dose of trust in God and Bible-believing faith into the situation.

A week prior when I visited her, she said, “I’m feeling great.” Mom was on the go. And at age seventy-five she was learning computer skills for the first time. She had some health issues, but overall, life was good.

What happened?

She contracted the common flu and then started thinking pneumonia might be next. Soon, she was in the hospital.

The doctor proclaimed: “Congestive heart failure.”

Mom believed the doctor. Then fear unfurled its effects into her life.

I knew fear was seriously undermining my mom’s health. It had before.

There’s a Bible verse I have often recited to my Mom. “For God did not give us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.”

A week later, I spoke with my mom after her appointment with a heart specialist. She reported: “I don’t have congestive heart failure.” Now her vigor was rapidly returning.

The new facts caused the fear to dissipate.

That method sometimes works.

And sometimes “the facts” remain frightening.

Regardless, God has provided a far superior approach. When “fear” enters into a situation, immediately reject it as not being from God. Keep rejecting it! Keep saying and believing what God has given every believer—“power, love and a sound mind.”



## Killing the Spirit of Fear...Before It Kills You

What is this “Spirit of fear”?

I had read the Bible passage numerous times: “For God has not given us the spirit of fear.” But this time my brain reacted differently.

The word “spirit” here is not referencing a mental disposition or a feeling. The word “spirit” is *pneuma* in the original Greek biblical text. The same word used in Holy Spirit. Something alive. Never a depersonalized feeling or force. An actual living presence.

The spirit of fear—an evil entity from the darkside.

So is an evil fear-spirit responsible every time a person feels fear or is startled?

No.

But consider this. Dr. Henry Wright in his book *A Most Excellent Way*, says: “Fear is the number one plague of America, and it’s the number one plague of the World.”

Fear kills health, relationships, successful careers, life dreams. And so much more.

The conclusion of the above Bible verse offers this antidote to fear: “(Spirit) of power and of love and of sound mind.” This is what God has given us to combat fear.

### Killing Fear

#### Power

The Scripture is not referring to mere human strength.

This is the Spirit of power. Power from God to do what is humanly impossible. Power through faith to believe God is our protector. To believe God is working circumstances out for our good. Power that endures.

When linked with Godly obedience, this power opens doors into the goodness of life. Power which guides us away from destructive, fearful outcomes.

This is “dynamite” power actually able to blow-up fear.

Kill it.

Power to trust God to carry us through danger, to a place of blessing unachievable by our own abilities.

## Love

The Bible says, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear.” What is perfect love? This perfect love is Jesus.

Here’s how it works.

Think of the most feared dilemma in your immediate horizon. What is it? Allow your mind to ponder this fear.

Now God’s Word in this scripture has point-blank stated that the perfect love of Jesus will literally kick this fear out the door.

Now allow yourself to feel the perfect love of Jesus.

Let His love enter the situation. Knowing without any reservation, He loves you far beyond human limitations. He’s proven it by His sacrifice on that Cross. Jesus’ love never ends, never fails.

You may have to linger, feeling the love of Jesus.

The lyrics of a Rich Mullins’ song have helped me. “So hold me Jesus, ‘cause I’m shaking like a leaf. You have been King of my glory. Won’t You be my Prince of Peace?”



And now reciprocate; return this love back to Jesus. Say, “Jesus, I love you.”

Then let your love reach out. If other people are involved in your fear, love each one. Mentally try to comprehend the challenges they are going through. Their own need for love. Love them.

Love even though it may be extremely difficult. Place their interests above your own. But also know that sometimes the best love is firm love. Love to resolve issues in a God honoring manner.

Love is powerful. Know and sense the everlasting love of Jesus. Love Jesus extravagantly. And then continually grow in love—as Jesus loves. Fear will be cast out.

## Sound Mind

Our brain is the entry point for fear into our lives. The Bible says, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” Even casual observation alerts us to the huge doses of fear in this world.

A brain armed to combat fear needs to get rid of stinking thinking. Quit thinking like people who don’t know Jesus. Get brainwashed by ingesting the Bible. Pour it in. And when fear attempts to manifest, pour out the good promises from the Bible. Say them out loud. Kill fear this way.

When you get enough of God’s Word inside of you, your sound mind will almost instantly react with God’s truth as a fear arises.

Another way to maintain a sound mind is to put on the Helmet of Salvation. Listed in the section of the Bible know as “The Whole Armor of God.” This is a compilation of spiritual weapons for combating the many evil forces which attack us. The Helmet of Salvation particularly aids in the sound-mind category since it covers the brain.

When fear tries to inject it’s negativity into your life, put the Helmet

on. Especially for fears in the realm of “you’re not going to make it” or “that’s impossible, you’re going to fail.”

Not true.

So put on the Helmet of Salvation. Start thinking salvation-thoughts. I’m saved. I’m going to Heaven. Think about how awesome Heaven is going to be. Think of how grateful you are to Jesus for making the way. You’ll be seeing Him. And God. And your mansion.

Determine to think like this and earthly concerns will fade. You will be reminded how truly brief our time on Earth is. Why fear so many things? We know we win it all in the end.

And then when your thoughts return to earth, you will feel refreshed. Ready to press on. Your mind will feel protected from fear. Fear is stymied by the Helmet of Salvation.

**Remember:** “For God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” Fully accept what God has given us.

Reject the rest.

## The Religious Urge

Her soft, caring voice lifted my spirits. “I’m glad you called,” Marsden said.

I’ve made thousands of phone calls to newspaper editors to entice them to run my column *Inspiration Point*. Marsden had previously allowed me to send her my information, which included five columns.

Marsden continued: “They’re lovely.” I’m thinking, “Yes, she’s going to run my column.” Then the tone of her voice shifted, “But they’re so religious.” She paused... “We live in a secular world.”

I disagree.

The Bible declares: “The whole earth is full of God’s glory”

We live in a God-imprinted world.

I did not tell her this. I took a tack she could relate to. First I said, “I’m not trying to convince you to run my column.” I surmised the answer was already “no.” I told Marsden that I have talked to thousands of editors. The vast majority include faith sections in their publications. And even more newspapers are addressing their reader’s spiritual interests.

Adding: “Even the Wall Street Journal has a faith section.” I was simply being factual—in an easy going manner.

Then Marsden, who was previously convinced I was “too religious,” totally surprised me. “I’ll talk to the publisher,” she said. “We feel like we should do something regarding faith.”

Many people are like Marsden. They maintain that we live in a predominantly secular world. But then they encounter the urge to: “Do something regarding faith.”

The Bible says: “God’s invisible qualities—His eternal power and His divine nature, are clearly seen. They are perceived in the things that God has made. So people have no excuse at all!”

God reveals Himself to all—by His creation. This is a prime way God initiates the faith-urge which so many people experience. God’s the One pushing for the relationship, the connection, the desire for people to know Him.

Why struggle against God? Engage in the God-life which keeps enticing you. And as you sense God drawing you, ask Him for the next step.

## The Urge...The Surge...The Splurge

Finding a person who flatout doesn't believe in God is unusual.

God's influence is impossible to deny. Even if you say, "There is no God." You can't say, "God has no influence." Well you could say it, but that would be a false claim.

Consider God. Consider the urge, the surge, and the splurge.

**The Urge**⇒ The urge to know God is in every person. The Bible says everyone has a measure of faith—somewhere.

People who are resisting the urge to truly connect with God will say: "I believe in God." Jesus' brother James wrote, "You believe there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe—and tremble." So if your urge only takes you that far—not good.

Take the next step.

**The Surge**⇒ Just a small surge. As the Bible says: "Taste and see that the LORD is good." Take a nibble. God says, "Draw near to me and I'll draw near to you." Surge just a little towards God and something good will happen. Guaranteed.

**The Splurge**⇒ What exactly does it mean to splurge on God?

God said of King David: "I have found...a man after My own heart." David exemplifies a person splurging on his relationship with God.

Hear David's words from the Psalms:

"When my heart whispered, 'Seek God,' my whole being replied, I'm seeking Him!"

"God—You're my God! I can't get enough of you! I've worked up such hunger and thirst for God..."

"Keep your eyes open for GOD, watch for his works; be alert for signs of His presence."

Career, fitness goals, relationships, etc; flourish when effort is splurged on them. God is the same...well, nearly.

His difference?

God will always give more to a relationship than we do.

I urge you—splurge!

## Cutting Depression

“I was depressed, so I cut my hair,”  
Lisa said.

Did that help?

“I made a mess of it,” she said. “And then I had to look in the Yellow Pages to find a cheap place so I could get it fixed.”

If it was only that easy to alleviate depression.

Have you noticed? Depression seems epidemic. So much so that the World Health Organization predicts by 2030 depression will be the second leading cause of illness in the world.

What’s the answer?

Can I offer you two approaches?

Here’s an idea from *The Oprah Magazine*. “One study suggests that exercise can be as effective as drugs in treating major depression disorders.” The Bible concurs with this: “Bodily exercise is of some value.”

The scripture continues: “But godliness has value for all things, holding promises for both the present age and the life to come.”

The things of God need to be the greater focus.

David, one of the Bible’s greatest men, wrote three times in the course of less than a page: “Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?” David was talking to himself, voicing his depressive state.

Each time in these three passages he answered his own question with this response: “Put your hope in God.”

He didn’t hope in family or friends to pull him out of his quandary. Not in a new haircut. Not in shopping. Not in drugs. Not in a psychiatrist. And not in himself.

His hope was in God.

God will love, when no one else seems to—including ourselves. Emotionally uplifting experiences fade. But God is everlasting. When human wisdom fails, God’s word, the Bible, provides the ultimate advice.

God says, “Draw near to Me and I will draw near to you.”

Close to God is where true hope is discovered.

## Cutting Depression Part 2

The World Bank requested researchers at Harvard University and the World Health Organization to conduct a study of economic development's impact on future patterns of disease.

The study predicts: "If world economic growth is poor or moderate (or strong), by 2030 the three leading causes of illness will be AIDS, depression and heart disease."

This study had one suggestion for combating depression—"We need to publish more research on...mental health." Not much immediate help.

But what does a person do today?

Depression is awful! God has answers.

## Cutting Depression God's Way

### Trust God

The Bible says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him and he will direct your path."

It seems too simplistic to be realistic. But who or what are you trusting to help break you free from depression?

Trusting God through a situation can be extremely difficult.

Still; trust, trust; trust God. Trusting God must be the umbrella that covers your depression busting plan.

### Squelch Self-focus

Yes we need to take care of life-business. But too much self-focus is a breeding ground for depression.

Saul, the first king in the Bible, certainly exhibited signs of depression. Saul had his moments of greatness, but much of his life was smothered in self-focus. It would be easy to imagine his life radically turned around if he had shifted his sight on the betterment of his kingdom and God's Kingdom.

He didn't. Saul ended his life by suicide.

Too much self-focus is extremely unhealthy.

Focus on loving God and being a blessing to other people. One small effort in this direction will launch you in the right direction.



## Live With a Clear Purpose

The Bible says: “And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.”

We are called to do God’s purpose here on Earth. We are to glorify God. We are to live a life which makes God look good—really, really good.

## Fear

Fear is a disease incubating pod.

Medical science has shown that fear stifles the immune system.

A close friend battled depression for years. We actually determined she wasn’t struggling with depression nearly as much as the fear of depression. This becomes a harsh cycle to break.

The Bible says: “Fear not, fear not, fear not, fear not...” You must make a God-empowered stand against it. And if you fall, get up and continue to stand against the evils of fear.

And further, “For we are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

Before our birth God had a good work assigned to our life. Pursue that job assignment with all the gusto you can muster. And go much further than your own strength; trust God to do the impossible through your life.

Going full-tilt after a dream, a purpose God has put in your heart is surefire anti-depression medicine.



## You Are Loved

The Bible says, “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ. Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?”

Can I add? “Or depression?”

The scripture answers it own question. Nothing...“Shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

This tremendous love is always available.

And here’s another Scripture from the same section. “Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him (Jesus) who loved us.”

Yes! Victory!

We are more than conquerors, conquerors of depression through the love of Jesus and the power of God.

## A Sizeable Five Word Prayer

“I can’t do it,” Steven said. This was his abrupt ending. He claimed he lacked the ability to lead our group of seven in prayer.

He only managed five words: “God, come be with us.”

This was Steven’s second time at the Free Church. His looks fully met the God-looks-on-the-inside criteria. His mopy hair covered a good portion of his facial features. Yet it didn’t cover his black AC/DC t-shirt or the jewelry-metal stabbed through his lip.

At the first meeting, he was listening intently. And as we drove to church for his second visit, he said: “Dude, I’ve been praying every night; things have been happening.” He linked his prayers to fewer skate boarding accidents. Plus another benefit: “My family’s getting some food tomorrow.”

It seemed right to ask Steven to initiate our discussion group with prayer.

He agreed, but bailed out in a few seconds. No, “Amen.”

No, “In the name of Jesus.” Merely, “God, come be with us.”

The Bible tells of an angel appearing to Joseph, the husband of Mary. This is the main thrust of the angel’s pronouncement: “Behold, the virgin (Mary) will be with child and will give birth to a Son and they will call Him Emmanuel—which means God with us.”

This Son was named Jesus.

And Steven had unknowingly wrapped into his prayer the essence of who Jesus was on Earth. His prayer also pinpoints a desire of humans over the span of history—the vital longing to connect with God.

The Bible says: “Pray without ceasing.”

Sure, Steven didn’t do that. Yet his simple words verbalized exactly what we all increasingly need in our lives. “God, come be with us.”

I said to Steven, “That’s an excellent prayer; God will answer it.”

## ...More Sizeable Five Word Prayers



*God help me be patient*

*God give me pleasant words*

*God please increase my faith*

*God help me glorify You*

*God bless my beautiful wife*

*God keep my children safe*

*God be with my travels*

*God help! Please rescue me*

*God draw close to me*

*God thanks for the food*

*God help! I feel alone.*

*God draw\_\_\_\_\_to Jesus*

*Jesus save my sinning soul*

*God help our financial situation*

*God I'll love you forever*

*God send Your healing power*

*Jesus You died for me*

*God give me Your wisdom*

*God bless all my friends*

*God lead me; guide me*

*God help me love people*

*God give me Your strength*

*God Your creation is awesome*

*God bless my fellow workers*

*God bless Mom and Dad*

*God make the Bible understandable*

*God always keep me humble*

# Is There Cappuccino In Heaven?

“I hope they have cappuccino in Heaven,” Aaron said.

I almost laughed, frowning at the same time. It was a funny statement, but I was wondering if it was wise for an eight-year old to be a cappuccino consumer.

Aaron was looking at me, wondering if I knew if there was cappuccino in Heaven. A response immediately popped into my head. “Aaron you’re shooting way too low with your expectations of Heaven.”

His church attendance has been spotty most of his life, so he’s limited on his biblical knowledge of heaven. So it is understandable that his pinnacle of heavenly-beverage magnificence is dispensed from a gas station vending machine.

Pondering my concept of Heaven, I had to ask myself: “Are my expectations too low?”

How about yours?

Aaron, here are three Bible verses which reveal a small glimpse of Heaven.

Revelation 21:4, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain.”

Revelation 21:18, “The construction of its wall was of jasper and the city was pure gold, like clear glass.”

Revelation 21:23, “The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminates it. The Lamb (Jesus) is its light.”

That’s just the beginning. It will take an eternity to discover all that God has prepared for those who love Him.

And there may be cappuccino. Can you imagine how heavenly it will be?

All this is insignificant compared to the eternal question. Are you going?

Jesus said: “Come! And let him who hears: Come! And let him who thirsts: Come! Whoever desires let him take the water of life freely.”

That Water of Life is Jesus. And Jesus says to each one of us...Come!

## Is There Cappuccino In Hell?

I'm not fond of talking or thinking about Hell. Yet, if we avoid and ignore the truth will Hell disappear?

## Things to Know About Hell

### God Doesn't Want Anyone

**Going to Hell.** 1 Peter 3:9 says: "The Lord is... longsuffering towards us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."

God does not want any human to perish—for their final, eternal destination to be Hell. The amount of godly effort being thrust forth over the planet to prevent this is mind boggling. God and His people are toiling 24/7.

**Avoid Hell at All Cost.** Jesus said: "If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish than your whole body be cast into Hell." Please...do not rip your eye out of your head, but this is straight-up truth about sin.

**Many, Many People Will End Up In Hell.** Jesus said: "Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction and there are many who

go in by it." When I ponder this broad way to destruction, to Hell; faces of people I love pop into my mind. The terrible image in my mind is my call to action.

...Our call to action. Roadblocks are needed on that wide road. Prayer. Living a Jesus-influenced life as a beacon to the lost. Making a bold, focused stand against evil.

**Hell Is Awful.** Jesus said: "So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Wailing forever—an absolutely agonizing existence.

**God Doesn't Want Anyone In Hell.** God sent Jesus, who said: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

And that's the Good News. Jesus died on that Cross, making a clear path to Heaven.

## A Friendship Spiraling Toward Meaninglessness

Robert will never know how many times I have cried. With desperate prayers and enduring, seemingly endless faith; I maintained hope that Robert could get off drugs and live for God.

Now an almost more difficult thought arises: “God are you releasing me? Have I done everything possible to help Robert?”

Sometimes while crying for him, I would get a picture in my mind, a vision for his future. I would see him drug free, living sold-out for God—serving God in ministry.

As we drove that morning, we were both silent.

Finally I said, “What happened Robert?”

He indignantly replied, “I don’t want to talk about it.”

I pushed. He rebelled, “You always want to nitpick.”

This was our fourth drive to a drug rehab facility in eight years. Still, he wasn’t getting better—just worse.

A scripture Robert probably has memorized says: “Know the truth and the truth will set you free.” That is what I wanted to talk about—truth.

Robert didn’t want truth. It was becoming apparent our friendship was spiraling toward meaninglessness.

Now I had to face a truth in my life.

When do you step away, leave a relationship with someone you are trying to help?

The Bible says: “For the earth which drinks in the rain that often comes upon it, and bears herbs useful... but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near being cursed, whose end is to be burned.”

All I see for produce in the Robert-garden is thorns and briers. And I fear for his end.

God only gives us so many hours a day to work for Him. We need to pray more often: “God, help me know which gardening, which efforts will produce the most for Your Kingdom.”

## Dear Robert...

Dear Robert,

I thought I would just forget about you. Hoping God would send someone else your way. It's not working. The last time we were together, it seemed like our friendship was spiraling toward meaninglessness. But I can't let go of the hope for a meaningful relationship.

You're part of some of my best God-experiences. Remember when we prayed weekly for revival? Down in that unfinished room at Riverside Church. God was so real. We could feel Him right there when we prayed.

Remember all the times we've laughed. And a few times, you just about punched me. I probably deserved it.

Remember driving into Kalamazoo; you decided you would rather live there on the street than at our place. We were silent—nothing to say. The sun was coming up. Could God even make a more beautiful sunrise? It wasn't the exploding colors. It was that perfectly formed white cross created by jet exhausts. Four hundred and fifty feet tall set against the blaze of reds, yellows and oranges.

I felt the awe of God. And at the same time the thoughts of whether I would ever see you alive again doused my delight. Robert, I've seen you obnoxious and offensive. And I've seen you so close to God that your life stirred me to know God and experience Him more.

Robert, the Bible says: "For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." God will never withdraw His gifts and calling from your life.

God will wait for you...so will I.

I love you,  
Rick

## Make a Move for God

“Hey I kind of had an idea,” my wife Nancy said. She explained. While driving to town, a “For Sale” sign in front of a small white house, drew her eye. Suddenly a thought popped into her head: “Maybe God wants us to move.”

We live in an idyllic setting. Woods in back of the house. A lake in front. And the best neighbors on planet Earth. Come on Nancy, we’ve lived here twenty-four years. Why would we want to move near the highway, close to town?

Nancy provokingly described her reasoning. Swiftly, unexpectedly; her words started resonating inside me.

Suddenly this Scripture had a fresh, personal application: “Let us lay aside every weight...which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”

Yes. I was feeling the weight, experienced while spending way too much time trying to maintain our property. And our finances remained crimped—literally ensnared because of housing costs.

Quickly we decided to sell our home and shop for a place with minimal maintenance. One significantly less expensive would be our uncompromising objective.

Bottom line-- Nancy and I want to finish the race that God has for our lives. We need to pare down distractions.

Are you being distracted from the course God has for you?

Consider this—it may be time for a major life move. So do like Jesus—“Who for the joy that was

set before Him endured the cross.” He got happy by looking past the race-hurdles and focused on victoriously crossing the finish line.

Making a big life-change is hard work—physically and mentally. Refuse to allow your mind to dwell on the challenges. Instead, set your sights on the new place of blessing God has for your life.





## Did God Say Move?

My wife and I made one of the most radical decisions of our lifetime in the span of a few hours. A decision vitally effecting us for the rest of our lives.

How could a major decision be arrived at so rapidly? It appears to be rash. Foolish? Could this swift change of life-direction be God's leading?

"How do you know God's voice?" Not audibly, but a sensing; a knowing of God's leading.

## How God Speaks

**The Bible.** The Bible is God's Word directing our lives. Regarding our decision, I knew every reason for our big move was absolutely God honoring because of His already-written Words.

**An Inner Knowing.** The Bible says: "It's God's Spirit in a person, the breath of the Almighty One, that makes wise human insight possible." God will put a feeling, by His Holy Spirit, inside a person. A gentle, knowing feeling. Scriptures call this "wisdom that is from above," marked distinctly by a sense of peace. Peace flowed into me when I pondered our decision.

## Advice from Godly People.

God's voice will come through sound advice from godly people. The Bible says: "Many advisers make victory sure."

**Agreement with a Spouse.** My wife and I readily agreed. In the spiritual sense, spouses are "one flesh." Disagreeing would be confusing. Initial disagreement does not instantly indicate a thumbs-down. But ultimately a peaceable agreement must be reached.

The Bible tells of young Samuel who heard a voice late at night. Confused, he approached his mentor. Eli, "Perceived that the LORD had called the boy." He told Samuel how to respond. So the next time Samuel heard the voice, he said: "Speak, for Your servant hears."

Samuel put himself humbly in position to hear God's voice. And then he obeyed what God told him to do. Samuel went on to be a great leader of his nation. Integrity and obedience were hallmarks of his life.

Samuel tapped into an essential hearing-God's-voice formula:

**+Openness to hearing God  
+ Full obedience to God's guidance  
= God's voice leading to the place of  
our full potential**

## Oh What Do I Deserve?

“I got what I deserved,” Jeff said.

I laughed.

We had just put ourselves through the arduous task of running three miles absolutely as fast as possible. And I’m still questioning what prompted me to bust-a-gut with two-hundred people, actually paying for the privilege of having sore legs for the next three days.

After running races, a ritual takes place. You walk up to acquaintances, asking: “So how was your race? What was your time?” Jeff’s response surprised me. A more typical response would include a reason/excuse for a slower than expected time.

Not Jeff, he admitted his pre-race training and race day effort had added up correctly: “I got what I deserved.”

“Jeff,” I said “That’s so true, isn’t it?”

His words stuck in my head for the next couple of days...what I deserve.

The Bible says, “You O LORD, are a God full of compassion, and gracious, longsuffering and abundant in mercy

and truth.” My mind locked onto the concept of abundant mercy.

One of my favorite preachers defines mercy this way. “Not getting what you deserve. Getting what you don’t deserve.”

Even in something as inconsequential as running a road race, I started to see the mercy of God. Does a person deserve the ability to run? Does a person deserve to have the money to enter the event? Does a person deserve...?

The planet has many people who are better humans, more godly than myself; yet they lack the blessings God has released into my life.

This is His mercy.

The above Scripture continues as a prayer: “Oh God, turn to me and have mercy on me! Give Your strength to Your servant.”

Need more mercy in your life? Ask in prayer. Expect to receive His mercy. And then be abundantly thankful to God.

## Hey! The Mercy of God Is Following Me

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life.” These words are found near the end of the 23rd Psalm.

Let’s just consider the mercy aspect of this verse.

Imagine everyday, everywhere when you turned around you would see mercy right behind you. God’s mercy.

Undeserved goodness from God; following you. Daily impacting your life.

The 23rd Psalm lavishly reveals God’s mercy.

### Mercy from God

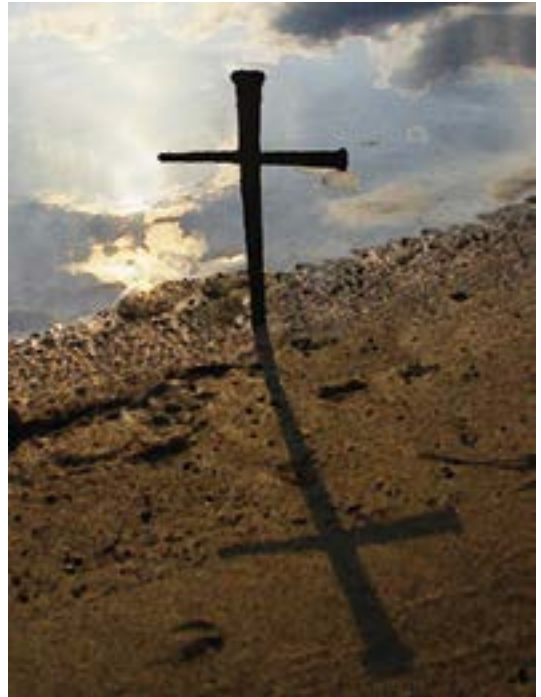
#### **“The Lord is my Shepherd.”**

God chose to have a relationship with humans. Even when we’re rebellious, God draws us into communion with Himself as He cares for us.

#### **“I shall not want.”**

Even in distress and financial struggles God can give His peace to sustain us. As we trust Him. And deeply knowing God causes many of our “wants” to dissipate.

**“He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside still waters.”** God leads to tender places of rest and quietness. Though many refuse this. Yet He promises: “Peace which transcends all understanding.” God mercifully even set aside a day for rest.



#### **“He restores my soul.”**

The ultimate of God’s mercy is restoring a sinful soul. His great mercy required the sacrifice of His Son Jesus. Through Him a soul is fully restored, prepared to enter Heaven.

**“He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake.”**

God, by His Holy Spirit, is continually prompting us in right-living. Not a heavy-handed agenda, but so we can have a life imprinted with His blessing and approval.

**“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.”**

God has allowed His followers to be spiritually attuned to life. He brings understanding regarding the source and methods of evil. So we are not scared by mere “shadows of death.”

We understand the devil’s shadow-facades as false danger. An illusion of danger.

**“For You are with me;”**

God’s always with us.

We have ready access to our Heavenly Father. He knows our steps will tread through the dominion of evil. God is right there with us.



**“Your rod and Your staff they comfort me.”**

God stands ready to give our evil enemy a stiff swat.

God told us, “No weapon formed against us shall prosper.”

And when we need it, His merciful staff can prod us gently back on track. Other times His merciful rod can give us a swat. “For whom the LORD loves He chastens.”

This type of love will sooner or later be recognized as merciful and comforting.

**“You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;”**

Even when people come against us, as evil tries to flourish, we can experience God’s bounty. Right in the middle of this swirl of activity.

We must stay obedient to God.

And as evil enemies make the world look dimmer and dimmer we can shine brighter and brighter. Because of God flowing through our lives.

**"You anoint my head with oil;  
my cup runs over."**

Before our birth, God set a plan and a purpose for our lives.

His oil represents the anointing, the Holy Spirit empowerment to achieve what God prepared for our lives.

And His desire is for us to live in cup-running-over success.

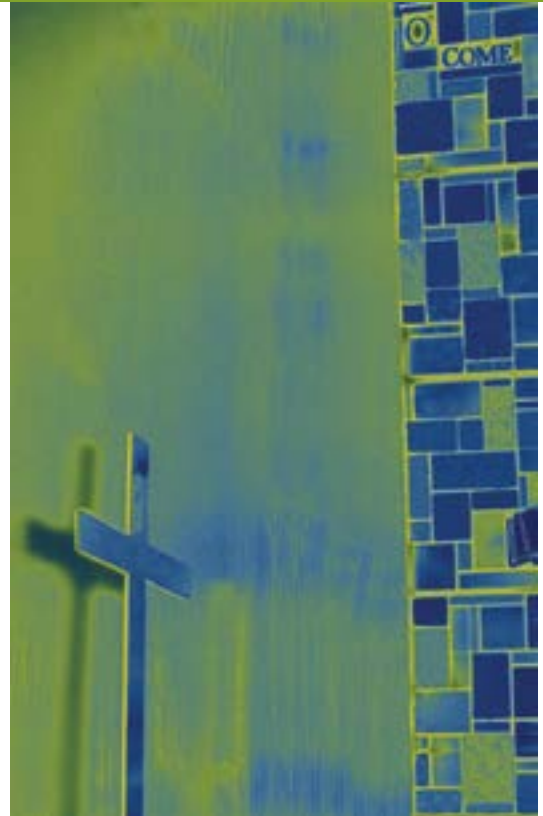
**"Surely goodness and mercy  
shall follow me all the days of  
my life."**

Hey! The mercy of God is following me. And His goodness.

**"And I will dwell in the house  
of the LORD forever."**

Our mercy-following-us God has prepared an everlasting home where we can dwell with Him forever. In Heaven.

By God's mercy, His followers will see Him face to face.



## We Brainwash Children

“What are you going to do, brainwash the kids?” Gabe said. His sarcastic laughter revealed his non-approving bent.

I didn’t respond.

I had just informed Gabe; because of Saturday’s commitment to lead the children’s service at the Free Church, attending a family get-together would be impossible.

He was half-joking, half-serious when he referred to our gathering of children to study God’s word and engage in some wholesome activities, as a brainwashing session.

If I would have responded to Gabe, I might have said, “Yes we brainwash children, that’s exactly what we are doing.”

I’m serious.

There’s even a Biblical mandate to do so: “Do not be conformed to this world—fashioned after and adapted to its external and superficial ways. But be transformed, changed by the entire renewal of your mind.”

Even Gabe knows our efforts are not

by force. Actually, it’s very common for the kids to come running full-tilt towards my vehicle when I arrive in their neighborhood for pickup.

But he probably hasn’t fully considered this. Everyone is being brainwashed in some way by everything they encounter daily. T.V., music, computer feed, books, people—the list is nearly endless.

Yes, we brainwash the children. To follow the ways of God, to love God, to love people, to say kind words, to respect authority, to be generous, to be truthful, to honor their parents...

And like the children, we all need some degree of brainwashing—some renewing of our minds. It’s an ongoing procedure. And like the children, we decide which sources will be the instruments of this life-changing process.

The children are choosing to let God and His Word be their brainwasher.

The Bible offers a superb goal: “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ.” Yes, let us all start thinking the way Jesus would think.

## Washed

Stu grinned, “Jesus is washed up.”

His comment regarding the art gallery painting launched my indignant mind into a multitude of directions to offer a quick counter response.

But I was silent.

The splashy watercolor depicted a laundromat scene. A mother and her son were standing inches away from an array of front load, glass-doored washers. Mom diligently focused on her laundering duties at the upper level washers, while her son stood eye level to the lower washers.

The scene portrayed one peculiarity. The son stared intently at one of the glass-faced washers as if he were looking into a mirror. Instead of his reflection, there was the image of Jesus—He appeared to be inside the washer.

Even though mom and son were standing close, they seemed to be in different worlds.

Just like them, my companion and I stood close; yet we’re miles apart in our spiritual worlds.

The Bible talks about this great gulf: “An unspiritual man does not accept the spiritual things, things of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them.”

For Stu, who I consider a good friend, his mind has not pierced the part of my world which gives my life substance and meaning. Without Jesus in my life, I would be washed-up.

I turned to Stu, offering my own appraisal of the painting: “Jesus washes away sins.”

Now I had the grin, my pun was even true. Still my smile emanated from a deeper level. I remember the joy of feeling the dirt and grime of my life washed clean by Jesus.

No washing machine needed. A true miracle cleansing by His living water, freely available to whoever asks.

Brain-washing and laundromats aren’t concepts typically associated with spiritual matters.

Or are they?

Though not mentioned specifically in the Bible, there are innumerable references to sin as a dirt-like spot separating us from God.

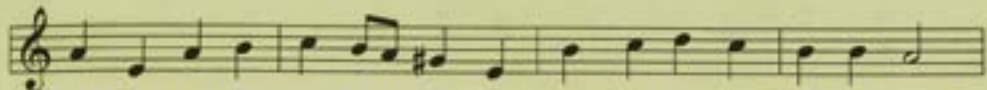
And just as innumerable are references to washing, to cleansing. God Himself pleads: “Come now, and let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet; they shall be white as snow.”

people—washed inside and out by the Holy Spirit. Our Savior Jesus poured out new life so generously. God’s gift has restored our relationship with Him...”

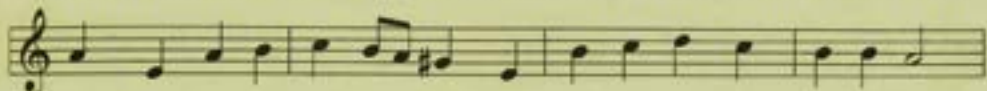
Let us look to the Bible for our one true and eternal cleansing:

“When God, our kind and loving Savior, our Deliverer, stepped in; He saved us...it was all His doing. Not because of our good deeds...we had nothing to do with it. He gave us a good bath and we came out new

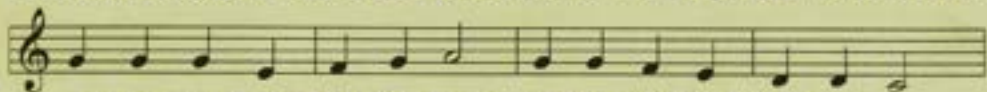
## On My Heart Imprint Your Image



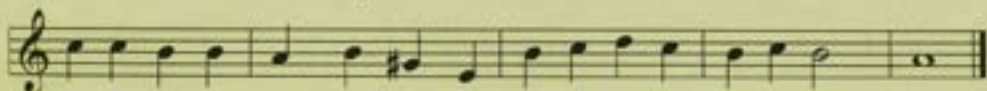
On my heart imprint Your image, Blessed Jesus, King of grace,



That life's riches, cares and pleasure Never may Your work erase;



Let the clear inscription be: Jesus, crucified for me.



Is my life, my hope's foundation, And my glory and salvation!

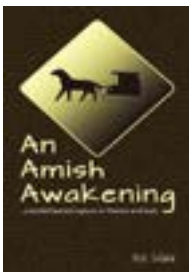


# Other Books by Rick Leland

## The Jesus at Walmart Trilogy



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