



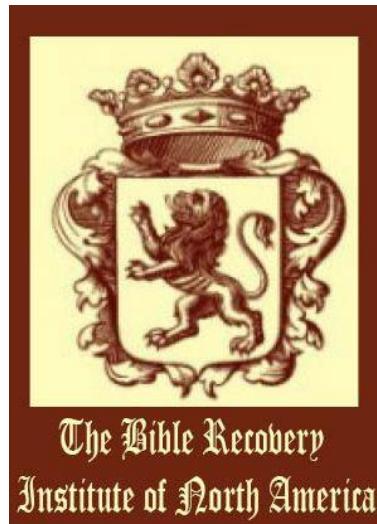
The Bible Question and Answer Book

A collection of two hundred real world, true to life, no holds barred, often messy, sometimes shocking questions from real people searching for honest, straight-forward, biblically-based answers without all the confusing theological mumbo-jumbo.

Michael Blunk

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Institute of North America**

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To my mother, who introduced me to Jesus.

Introduction

As a schoolboy of, say, twelve years old, I harbored a belief that God was a harsh, demanding deity with a full quiver of lightning bolts for striking the heads of those who dared cross Him. As to how this notion of a cold, nearly unapproachable God came into my thinking, I cannot say. Neither our pastor nor my mother taught me to be afraid of God, but fear Him I did. I am not speaking of the awestruck, reverential fear of a George Whitfield or Jonathan Edwards; rather, mine was an unhealthy fear that God would draw upon any reason, triviality, or technicality as a ready excuse for sending someone to Hell.

Shortly after I was baptized, I prayed, “Lord, I know that You can see beyond the present. If I am saved today, but at some time in the future, I will stray from You and lose my salvation, please kill me right now and take me straight to Heaven. It would be better to die young and go to Heaven than to live a long life but end up in Hell. If I am saved today but will lose my salvation tomorrow, take me now. And, please, if you strike me dead, let my death be painless.”

Other times, I feared that I had committed the “unpardonable sin” as spoken of by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 12:31, 32. Without entering into a lengthy theological discussion, this is the sin in which there is no forgiveness. Let me assure you that you have never committed this sin, and neither have I, but as an uneasy adolescent who did not understand the grace of God, I would climb out of my warm bed and anxiously pace the floor fearing that I had committed this unpardonable act.

Later, I began fearing that a religion other than Christianity might be the true pathway to God. I reasoned that I was a Christian because my parents were Christians and Christianity was the dominant religion in America. Had I been born in Saudi Arabia, most likely, I would have been raised as a Muslim. Had I been born in India, I would have been taught Hinduism. I concluded, then, that my Christian beliefs were largely circumstantial. In other words, my spiritual upbringing was substantially determined by the place of my birth, but might either Islam or Hinduism, in fact, be true? Could it be my Christian

upbringing and beliefs were leading me along the road to Hell? How could anyone possibly know who God really is and what He expects from us?

These fears were like the proverbial Sword of Damocles dangling precariously over my head.

I found neither comfort nor joy in the God of my feeble understanding; rather, deep down, I wondered if He was out to get me. I could have taken my fears to my mother or our pastor, but for reasons I cannot explain, I kept these nightmarish fears to myself.

Like many young people raised in church, I walked away from the faith upon reaching young adulthood. It was not as if I suddenly embraced atheism or pursued a lifestyle of reckless abandonment; on the contrary, my behavior seldom raised eyebrows or gave cause to gossip, but mine was a godless morality built upon a foundation of upbringing and tradition. There were times when I secretly wished that I could shed the quiet, compliant image, but unlike the musical anthem of my generation, I was not “born to be wild.” The inner bad boy, had there ever been one inside me, must have been driven to an early retirement.

Upon reaching my thirtieth year, I was troubled by a new set of questions—questions commonly asked by nearly everyone: Who am I? Why am I here? What is my purpose? What happens when I die? Besides the restlessness caused by a constant longing for meaningful answers to life’s thorniest questions, I was battling depression coupled with frequent bouts of panic attacks. All this affected my ability to earn a living, so an avalanche of financial woes heaped upon my already fragile state of well-being drove me further into despair. One afternoon, in May 1989, I cried out, “Lord, I am tired of living life my way. Let’s try living life Your way for a change.” Despite my prayer’s lack of eloquence, God honored that prayer. By His will, I had been born-again. Suddenly, I was a new creation in Christ Jesus and my life would never again be the same.

The celebrated English philosopher and statesman Francis Bacon wrote, “A prudent question is one-half of wisdom.” As for me, I thank God for those nagging questions that haunted my soul by day and disturbed my sleep by night, as it was this feverish longing for sensible, meaningful answers that caused me to reach for our Lord Jesus’ outstretched hand. Along with His gracious, loving hand came a most appreciated bonus—reasonable, logical, “make sense” answers to my questions.

In the years that have followed, God has given me many thrilling teaching and writing opportunities, particularly among prison inmates, substance abusers, and homeless folk. In His goodness, God has also sent me a steady stream of women, men, teens, and young children with their Bible questions. This volume contains more than one hundred-fifty such questions and answers covering topics ranging from alcoholism to sexuality to understanding God’s will. Other than an occasional “off the wall” inquiry, these are questions commonly asked by rank and file Christians and those we refer to as “seekers,” that is, open-minded individuals who are willing to explore the Christian faith. At the risk of sounding like a half-baked advertising slogan, these are real questions posed by real people dealing with real issues.

Although every Christian writer’s work is, to some degree, tainted by personal opinion, I have striven to keep my responses biblically based. As one who maintains a high and lofty view of the scriptures, I believe the Bible is the wholly reliable, divinely inspired, infallible Word of God. The Bible reveals the mind and heart of God and His love for us, so why would any thinking person wish to deviate from or dilute its teachings? Indeed, God has harsh warnings to those who would dare add to or subtract from the scriptures (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Revelation 22:18) and I take these warnings seriously. As such, I have made a point of keeping my responses to readers’ questions biblically based.

Despite two hundred questions and answers, 150,000 plus words, and almost five hundred pages, there are many biblical topics not discussed in this manuscript. This is not an exhaustive work, but I have hopes of adding more questions and answers to this volume.

To aid in your study, a topical index appears in the back of this book. Again, as this is hardly an exhaustive work, you are unlikely to find answers to questions dealing with the finer points of theology. I leave matters such as predestination and eschatology to real Bible scholars. Rather than parsing Greek verbs, I am better suited at answering frequently asked Bible questions in everyday, conversational language.

It is my prayer that this volume will be a blessing to you. Your feedback will be a blessing to me.

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Question 1: Based on my understanding of Matthew 22, it appears as if there will be no marriage, sexual intercourse, or child-rearing in Heaven. What is wrong with marriage, sex, and having kids? I thought God wanted everyone to be married with children. I do not understand why this will be taken from us.

Answer: Many people ask, “If there is no sex in Heaven, where is the reward?” I see this as a legitimate question. I am an old bachelor and, admittedly, somewhat more preoccupied with food these days, but I have not forgotten the thrill of coming home to my pretty young wife. If I ever meet a Christian lady who can tolerate my quirky habits and who does not own a yippy little dog, I would like to remarry, but until then, I will think about dinner. Let us now examine the passage you mentioned:

The same day the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to Him and asked Him, saying: “Teacher, Moses said that if a man dies, having no children, his brother shall marry his wife and raise up offspring for his brother. Now there were with us seven brothers. The first died after he had married, and having no offspring, left his wife to his brother. Likewise the second also, and the third, even to the seventh. Last of all the woman died also. Therefore, in the resurrection, whose wife of the seven will she be? For they all had her.”

Jesus answered and said to them, “You are mistaken, not knowing the Scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels of God in heaven. But concerning the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was spoken to you by God, saying, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living.” And when the multitudes heard this, they were astonished at His teaching (Matthew 22:23-33 NKJV).

Jesus’ teaching was primarily a rebuke aimed toward the Sadducees’ denial of a resurrection after death, but in our Lord’s discourse, He gives us further insight into the

next life. Based on His words, it certainly appears as though we will not be engaged in marriage, sexual intercourse, and the bringing in of children.

Marriage is good. Sexual intimacy is good. Raising children is good. Based upon your inquiry, I am certain you agree with these statements, but in some cases, a life of celibacy is preferable. As an example, the Apostle Paul said those who could remain single should do so (I Corinthians 7:1-6). Paul's life was one of physical beatings, shipwrecks, jailtime, poverty, hunger, danger, threats, and a demanding teaching and writing ministry. These hardships would have been anathema to any hope of a happy homelife. We may conclude, then, that marriage, though admirable, is not for everyone.

In the next life, will God withhold some good that will spoil our happiness? In other words, will life in our glorified bodies be somewhat diminished because of a forced celibacy? I do not think so.

When I was a boy, I built model airplanes. I found building model airplanes enjoyable and entertaining, but as an adult, I learned to pilot light aircraft. Flying a real airplane is far more thrilling than building a plastic replica. Might marriage, sexual intimacy, and child-rearing be a foreshadowing of something far grander in the next life? In our glorified state, might we look back upon marriage, sexual intimacy, and child-rearing as a pilot who recalls building model aircraft as a youth?

Prior to his conversion, St. Augustine was a lusty, promiscuous young man, but as he grew in his intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ, his passion for women diminished. St. Augustine believed he had found something better, or someone better—and so he had. Indeed, if I possessed the spiritual depth of St. Augustine, I would be more content with bachelorhood, but I am no St. Augustine.

When I was a young man, I believed John Lennon and Paul McCartney were musical geniuses, but now that I am older and my passions have matured, I much prefer Mozart,

Chopin, and Rachmaninoff to “We all live in a yellow submarine.” Again, might our future pleasures originate from different passions—passions presently unknown to us.

As we step into eternity outfitted with glorified bodies, I strongly suspect we will want for nothing. Never forget that God is the Author of pleasure (Psalm 16). Our joy will be complete.

Have I properly addressed your question? I hope that I have.

Question 2: My life is getting more and more difficult. My money is all gone, and I live in my freezing car with my mother who is useless. If you knew my mother, you would understand why I feel like I have a four year old. Everything falls on my shoulders and I've taken care of her my entire life—and this has caused me to miss out on everything. My mother is not sick. She is lazy and manipulative. I'm single and would like to be married. My doctor said I am depressed and has warned me that I will die if I do not get some rest. How can I rest? I work hard, and yet I am homeless. Frankly, I am at my wits end, and I'm about to lose my mind. I pray for help and I try my hardest to be a good Christian but I'm a very troubled spirit suffering from a broken heart. I need a miracle. Life is out of control and I do not know what to do. I feel as though God has abandoned me.

Answer: Having served as a chaplain/teacher at a large urban homeless shelter for nine years, I probably have a good understanding of your plight. I am going to give you some simple, common sense advice. What you do with this is up to you.

Firstly, you are not your “lazy and manipulative” mother’s mother. Are you enabling her? Are you fostering her character flaws? Let her go. If she has a retirement income or Social Security benefits, there is no reason why she should be under your care. A local Salvation Army facility or nearby rescue mission can give her a place to live and teach her how to live on her own.

Living in a car is hardly living, so I will suggest you check into a women's shelter until you get back on your feet.

Based upon your letter, I will assume you are gainfully employed, so move out of your car, stop fretting over your unsound mother, and lay out a plan to improve your life.

After years of unemployment and underemployment, I returned to college. At the risk of bandying a rather shopworn cliché, furthering my education was a life-changer. Other than reaching out to Jesus as my Savior, pursuing an education was the best move I ever made. What about you? Many two year community colleges offer degrees in nursing, occupational therapy, physical therapy, and human services that will prepare you for any number of fulfilling and financially rewarding career opportunities. Chances are good, too, that Pell Grants will cover your tuition and books. And talk about a morale booster—I felt so much better about myself after enrolling in school! And the exciting, meaningful doors of opportunity that opened since graduation are too many to mention. How would furthering your education change your life for the better?

If you plan to meet a godly man, you will need to get out of your car and away from your mother, but do not make finding a husband a priority until you have attained some measure of stability in your life. Too many women settle for "second best." I should know. I also teach in a maternity home and my clients are women who chose deadbeats, imbecilic loafers, and abusers over real men who work hard, honor God, and esteem others greater than themselves. If you give yourself to some loathsome, self-centered, godless male, you will likely end up worse off than you are now. You've been warned. Hold out for a good man and do not rush into a spurious romance out of desperation or convenience. Again, you've been warned!

I will not deny that you have a difficult life, but how much of this chaos has been brought about by bad decision-making? Please take no offense. When I was at my lowest point, my wounds were largely self-inflicted. I was my own worst enemy. What about

you? How many of these black clouds hovering over your head are self-created? Are you your own worst enemy? If so, then it is time to become an ally instead of an enemy by submitting to some vital life changes.

In the Book of Ruth, Naomi blamed God for the calamities that shipwrecked her family when, in truth, her woes came about because of her family's disobedience. I have a downloadable, easy to read, easy to understand commentary on Ruth that I would gladly send at your request, but know this—God is still in the business of mending broken dreams and fixing broken lives. Once Naomi submitted to God's will, her days were filled with joy.

Though I do not know you, I perceive you have many admirable traits. No doubt, you are a woman of worth and value, but until you submit to God's will, your life will be turbulent, chaotic, and unfulfilling. A manipulative mother and a highly frustrated daughter huddled in a Buick is not God's best.

Allow me to leave you with some Bible verses that address your situation...

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28 ESV).

The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps (Proverbs 16:9 ESV).

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my eye upon you (Psalm 32:8 ESV).

But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him (I Corinthians 2:9 ESV)."

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way (Psalm 37:23 ESV).

Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand (Proverbs 19:21 ESV).

Surely there is a future, and your hope will not be cut off (Proverbs 23:18 ESV).

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them (Psalm 139:16 ESV).

The Lord of hosts has sworn: "As I have planned, so shall it be, and as I have purposed, so shall it stand (Isaiah 14:24 ESV).

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Ephesians 2:10 ESV).

The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands (Psalm 138:8 ESV).

The steps of a man are established by the Lord, when he delights in his way; though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, for the Lord upholds his hand (Psalm 37:23, 24 ESV).

...making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Ephesians 1:9, 10 ESV).

Editor's Note: You may also receive a free copy of the author's downloadable study in the Book of Ruth. Simply email your request to dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com.

Question 3: I was once in the care of the Salvation Army. There was a wooden cross outside the front door, and the major (preacher) suggested that if anyone were willing, they could pick up that wooden cross and carry it up and down a sidewalk that ran along a busy street. I actually think this was a good idea. What do you think about this?

Answer: I was once employed by a faith-based nonprofit agency that organized a choir made up of women and men who were either in the care of or graduates of the mission's recovery program. From time to time, the choir would receive an invitation to perform in another city. During such an outing, two of the members were arrested for shoplifting. This was not the worst of it.

The CEO admitted that the choir's lead female vocalist was, shall we say, rather friendly with the younger male members of this ensemble. When I was asked to accompany the choir as their spokesperson, I flatly refused. In good conscience, I could not endorse a musical group whose members had the Gospel on their lips but Satan's mischief in their hearts.

Why would non-Christians join a so-called Christian choir and sing songs about a Savior they never trusted? Perhaps they liked the attention of performing in front of crowds. Maybe it was the small stipend each member received. Again, maybe the motivation was an occasional road trip to break up the boredom and routine of the program. Do you think this choir honored our Lord Jesus Christ? Their music may have been good, but the hypocrisy was intolerable.

Those who appear to do the Lord's work often harbor ignoble intentions. While imprisoned, the Apostle Paul wrote, "Some indeed preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? Only *that* in every way, whether

in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice (Philippians 1:15-18 NKJV)."

Based on this passage, the Gospel can be advanced by insincere evangelists with selfish intentions, but what about these double-minded individuals? Will they receive rewards for their work? Will the Master say, "Well done, good and faithful servant?" Or will Jesus say, "Depart from me, for I never knew you!"

You asked whether or not I agreed with your actions. To answer your question, I would have to know your intentions. Did you seek to please the Lord? Did you want to bring the passion of Christ Jesus to the minds of onlookers? Or were you merely seeking accolades and attention? Only God and you know the answer.

As for me, I would like to think your intentions were good. I hope I am right.

We have to pray with our eyes on God, not on the difficulties.
--Oswald Chambers

Question 4: Am I going to heaven? I have been a Christian since 2001 and, since then, I have had my trials but now my heart is hardened, and I no longer fear God like I once did. I have fallen into a carnal nature and spend much of my time dwelling on worldly troubles. I no longer read the Bible. From time to time, I think about going back to church, but I never do. I always feel God pulling me in His direction, but I ignore Him. I am caught up in this world and am miles away from the presence of God. I have no spiritual peace. I wonder if God has turned me over to my carnal nature and has removed the Holy Spirit from within me. This thought makes me depressed, and I fear hearing those dreaded words, "Depart from me, for I never knew you!" If I died tonight, would I go to heaven or would I be sent to hell?

Answer: Let me begin by stating that God is faithful even when we are unfaithful. And let me remind you, too, that we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ—salvation is not a paycheck for a life well lived. On the contrary, salvation is a gift that cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8, 9). No one enters Heaven because of their good works or a meticulous attention to their Christian duties. Salvation is and will always be a gift from God and not a payback from you and me.

There is no “Lord, if You bless me, I will bless You.”

And while I am at it, the Holy Spirit will never depart from you. You may ignore the Spirit and quench the Spirit and grieve the Spirit, but He will never leave you (Ephesians 1:13, 14; II Corinthians 1:22).

Now all of this is conditioned on the premise that your conversion back in 2001 was genuine. Examine yourself. Look deep into the past. If there was a time in which you realized you were lost, repented of your sins, and approached Jesus Christ as Savior, you are a born-again believer. The Apostle Paul wrote, “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13 ESV).” Is this you? Did you ever call upon the Lord Jesus to save you from your sins? If so, you belong to Him and nothing or no one can change this. You belong to Him now. You belonged to Him when your love began growing cold. You belonged to Him when your heart was hardening from indifference. You will belong to Him tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, and throughout eternity.

For those who say, “I don’t feel saved,” let me remind you that salvation is a fact and not a feeling. Our emotions can be misleading. The Bible says Jesus will turn no one away and this is a fact that has no bearing on one’s feelings.

I have reminded others and I will remind you that salvation is not an “on-again off-again” condition. We who have placed our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior are eternally

saved. Paul assures us of this in his letter to the saints in Philippi: “*For I am* confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6 NASB).” When God begins a good work in the life of a believer, He sees that work through to its ultimate completion. The power of the cross supersedes a calloused heart or the abandonment of one’s rightful Christian duties.

The fact that you are expressing concern about your doleful, unhappy state of being is promising.

In many ways, our union with Christ Jesus can be much like a marriage. We begin our walk with Jesus with excitement and wonder—much like the giddiness of the honeymoon days between two passionate newlyweds. For some, unfortunately, the love grows cold over time.

I am not going to give you some sort of formula for rekindling your relationship with our Lord Jesus, but I will make some suggestions.

Begin with prayer. Tell the Father that your love for Jesus has grown cold. Ask Him to reignite the zeal and commitment that should hallmark the lives of all born-again believers. This is the kind of prayer request that God is pleased to grant. He will not turn you away.

Listen to the prompting of the Holy Spirit. All believers are indwelled by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is our divine guide, teacher, comforter, and encourager. Shut out all the noise of the world and listen for His soft voice.

Open up God’s word. God has something to say to you, so open the Bible and rediscover the excitement of His word. Haphazard Bible study yields limited results. I will strongly suggest you begin by reading from the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Proverbs. Read a chapter or more daily. Take notes. Read and study with a

purpose. Biblical illiteracy is a choice. Biblical ignorance is not blissful. Make the right decision by immersing yourself in God's word,

Give thanks with a grateful heart. A thankless heart is the ugly cousin of unbelief. Look around you. See all that God has done for you. As the old hymn says, "Count your blessings, name them one by one. Count your many blessings, see what God has done." A thankful attitude is a potent anodyne for removing the thick layers of indifference from a calloused heart.

Plant yourself in a Christ-honoring, Bible-believing church. The writer of Hebrews warns us against forsaking the assembling of like-minded believers (Hebrews 10:25). We were created for unity. We draw strength from one another. Others will be encouraged by you and your presence. Christianity knows nothing of being a "solitary religion." Be at church this Sunday.

If you say, "I don't feel like praying and reading the Bible and attending church," I will remind you that we must often do what we would prefer not doing. For that matter, I do not like exercising, but I go to the gym regardless. It is for my own good. If you want to heal, do what is right regardless of feelings.

If you ignore everything I say and continue on as you are, you will not die and go to Hell, but your life will be drab, dull, and meaningless. There will be no savor in your existence. And when you breathe your last, you will survey your willful spiritual dryness with sorrow and regret.

In your heart, you know that I have told you the truth, so determine for yourself if you are going to continue frustrating the Holy Spirit or if you are going to fall in love with Jesus Christ all over again. There is no third option.

It is my prayer that you make the right decision.

Editor's note: Biblical ignorance is a willful choice that is easily remedied, so for those interested in free, easy to read, easy to understand, downloadable Bible studies, contact the author at dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com.

Question 5: I have heard talk that a local business is involved in dishonest practices. Word on the street says the business owners are engaging in underhanded activities in order to avoid paying their fair share of taxes. Should I contact the IRS with my suspicions, or should I say nothing until I have proof?

Answer: Admittedly, I may be a bit quaint and out of touch and, yes, I have been called "old-fashion," but I follow this simple rule: Never listen to a conversation that begins with, "Psst! Did you hear about...?"

Gossip is a six letter word that is also a four letter word.

The American humorist Mark Twain said that a lie could travel halfway around the world while truth was still tying its bootlaces.

And, of course, we have that pesky commandment given by God to Moses that warns against bearing false witnesses. In fact, I am confident that, if time permitted, I could find at least two hundred Bible verses condemning rumors, idle gossip, and tale bearing.

I surely misread your inquiry, for it sounded to me as though you are thinking of making a report against someone based on hearsay rather than fact. This must be a typographical error, for I cannot imagine a Christian, trained in the ways of the Bible and filled with God's Holy Spirit, who would levy charges against someone based on rumor or small talk.

But in case you run into someone who would do such a dreadful thing, give them these verses to ponder:

There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers (Proverbs 6:16-19 ESV).

Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight (Proverbs 12:22 ESV).

A false witness will not go unpunished, and he who breathes out lies will perish (Proverbs 19:9 ESV).

No one who practices deceit shall dwell in my house; no one who utters lies shall continue before my eyes (Psalm 101:7 ESV)

Truthful lips endure forever, but a lying tongue is but for a moment (Proverbs 12:19 ESV).

You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44 ESV).

Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another (Ephesians 4:25 ESV).

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor (Exodus 20:16 ESV).

Be not a witness against your neighbor without cause, and do not deceive with your lips (Proverbs 24:28 ESV).

A faithful witness does not lie, but a false witness breathes out lies (Proverbs 14:5 ESV).

The wicked are estranged from the womb; they go astray from birth, speaking lies (Psalm 58:3 ESV).

A lying tongue hates its victims, and a flattering mouth works ruin (Proverbs 26:28 ESV).

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is worthless (James 1:26 ESV).

Keep your tongue from evil and your lips from speaking deceit (Psalm 34:13 ESV).

A truthful witness saves lives, but one who breathes out lies is deceitful (Proverbs 14:25 ESV).

Deliver me, O Lord, from lying lips, from a deceitful tongue (Psalm 120:2 ESV).

Let the lying lips be mute, which speak insolently against the righteous in pride and contempt (Psalm 31:18 ESV).

For "Whoever desires to love life and see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit (I Peter 3:10 ESV);

Question 6: In Ezra 10, the Israelite men were told to abandon their non-Jewish wives and children. What about today? Should Christians do likewise by leaving their non-Christian spouses?

Answer: Before addressing your inquiry, let us first examine the passage in question:

Now while Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and laying himself face down before the house of God, a very large group from Israel, of men, women, and children, gathered to him, for the people wept bitterly. Schcaniah the son of Jehiel, of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. Therefore let us now make a covenant with our God to send away all the [foreign] wives and their children, in accordance with the advice of my lord and of those who tremble [in reverent obedience] at the commandment of our God; and let it be done in accordance with the Law. Stand up, for it is your duty, and we will be with you. Be brave and act. (Ezra 10:1-4 AMP)."

You have posed an interesting question. Firstly, Christians should not marry non-Christians as we are instructed against being unequally yoked (II Corinthians

6:14). Marriage is a type of yoke and believers should only marry other believers. Even so, marriages between believers and non-believers do take place and they are valid marriages in the eyes of God. Leaving a lawfully wedded spouse because he or she does not share the faith is not grounds for divorce.

But what about Ezra 10? Has God changed His mind? Are we to toss out Old Testament teachings and instructions? No, we do not ignore the Old Testament, but let me remind you that ancient Israel was a theocracy and, as such, operated under the Law given by God to Moses. We are not living in ancient Israel. The United States is not a theocracy. As a people, we are not governed by the Law of Moses. We do not give a tenth of our income to Levites. We do not stone people for working on Saturday. We do not send the poor to glean in the fields and we do not slay animals when we sin.

God hates divorce (Matthew 19:8). And with a shameful 50% divorce rate in this country, let us not look for more reasons to shipwreck American families.

Thank you for your question. And if you are married, I hope God blesses your marriage. And if you are not yet married, ask God to guide you to making a proper decision.

Question 7: Jesus said, “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect (Matthew 5:48 NKJV).” I am thoroughly confused. Is it possible to achieve perfection?

Answer: Jesus said we are to be perfect, and He meant exactly what He said. The perfection of humanity is His ultimate goal. He is our Savior, but He goes beyond saving us—as sure as the sun will rise tomorrow morning, He is in the process of making us more like Himself. This process is known as sanctification. Sanctification begins at the moment we confess Him as Savior and ends when we, at long last, see Him face to face. Friend, His purpose is to turn people like you and me into replicas of Himself.

During the Korean War, my father rescued six wounded soldiers trapped under enemy machine gun fire. He saved their lives. For his bravery, my father received one of the military's highest medals. I am quite proud of him for this, but once the fighting was over, my dad and the six men he rescued went their separate ways. I do not think Dad ever saw any of the men he rescued from death after performing his heroic deed.

On an even grander scale, Jesus rescues us from eternal death, but then He goes to work mending us, fixing us, improving us, and making us more like Him. The Apostle Paul wrote, Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come (II Corinthians 5:17 ESV).

The day will come when you and I are perfect, but Jesus has a lot of work ahead of Him before then—but He will complete the task and He gives us His guarantee (Philippians 1:6).

Let me sum this up with a quote from my favorite writer, C.S. Lewis. His explanation of sanctification is classic:

“Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.”

I have known people who insist that simply believing there is a God is sufficient. This is hardly true, for Satan is no atheist. A belief that does not bring about changes in

behavior—changes that make us more like Jesus Christ, serves no purpose other than giving one a false sense of security.

I pray this response has assisted in your understanding of God's purpose.

Loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted is the most terrible poverty.

—Mother Teresa

Question 8: Please help me understand the eighth chapter of Proverbs.

Answer: Referring to Proverbs 8, biblical writer and theologian G. Campbell Morgan declared, "There is nothing greater or grander in all the Biblical literature, as setting forth the beauty and grace of that wisdom which has the fear of Jehovah as its chief part." Wisdom is seeing people, events, and circumstances through God's eyes—not earthly wisdom and not political correctness but understanding all that is about us through divinely ground heavenly lenses. Proverbs 8 proclaims the majestic excellency of godly wisdom.

Proverbs 8

Text taken from the New King James Version

- 1 Does not wisdom cry out,
And understanding lift up her voice?
- 2 She takes her stand on the top of the high hill,
Beside the way, where the paths meet.
- 3 She cries out by the gates, at the entry of the city,
At the entrance of the doors:
- 4 "To you, O men, I call,

And my voice is to the sons of men.

Using a literary tool known as personification, Solomon presents wisdom as a pure and chaste woman who seeks to draw God's holy people away from worldly foolishness.

5 O you simple ones, understand prudence,
And you fools, be of an understanding heart.
6 Listen, for I will speak of excellent things,
And from the opening of my lips will come right things;
7 For my mouth will speak truth;
Wickedness is an abomination to my lips.

Jesus said, I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). In Psalm 119, we read of the excellence of God's word. It is Satan who is the father of lies, for God only deals in honesty. Every word spoken by God is truth. From the Garden of Eden until today, Satan has been in the business of high treason and deception. I fear much of the world is now following Satan. Let us not be misled by his cunning words.

8 All the words of my mouth are with righteousness;
Nothing crooked or perverse is in them.
9 They are all plain to him who understands,
And right to those who find knowledge.
10 Receive my instruction, and not silver,
And knowledge rather than choice gold;
11 For wisdom is better than rubies,
And all the things one may desire cannot be compared with her.

Having the mind of Christ is far more valuable than gold, silver, and precious gems. Better to be a wise person who lives modestly than a rich fool. Come to think of it, Hollywood appears to be heavily populated by rich fools. And have you noted how often these out-of-touch celebrities tell us how we should act, for whom we should cast our ballots, and

how we ought to live? No thanks! I do not need these not-so-bright celebrities steeped in political correctness coaching me!

12 “I, wisdom, dwell with prudence,
And find out knowledge and discretion.

13 The fear of the Lord is to hate evil;
Pride and arrogance and the evil way
And the perverse mouth I hate.

14 Counsel is mine, and sound wisdom;
I am understanding, I have strength.

Have you noted how the ungodly proclaim that evil is good and good is evil? Godly wisdom will prevent us from falling for satanic lies. Having the mind of Christ is an anodyne that will preserve us from the doctrines of humanism and political correctness.

15 By me kings reign,
And rulers decree justice.

16 By me princes rule, and nobles,
All the judges of the earth.

Let us vote for candidates who uphold godly wisdom. There can be no true justice when unjust women and men take office.

17 I love those who love me,
And those who seek me diligently will find me.

18 Riches and honor are with me,
Enduring riches and righteousness.

19 My fruit is better than gold, yes, than fine gold,
And my revenue than choice silver.

20 I traverse the way of righteousness,
In the midst of the paths of justice,

21 That I may cause those who love me to inherit wealth,
That I may fill their treasuries.

Again, we are reminded that wisdom is far better than material wealth. Investors lose money in their speculations. Savings can be gobbled up by unforeseen emergencies. Entire economies can collapse, but God's word will endure.

22 "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way,
Before His works of old.

23 I have been established from everlasting,
From the beginning, before there was ever an earth.

24 When there were no depths I was brought forth,
When there were no fountains abounding with water.

25 Before the mountains were settled,
Before the hills, I was brought forth;

26 While as yet He had not made the earth or the fields,
Or the primal dust of the world.

27 When He prepared the heavens, I was there,
When He drew a circle on the face of the deep,

28 When He established the clouds above,
When He strengthened the fountains of the deep,

29 When He assigned to the sea its limit,
So that the waters would not transgress His command,

When He marked out the foundations of the earth,

30 Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman;
And I was daily His delight,

Rejoicing always before Him,

31 Rejoicing in His inhabited world,
And my delight was with the sons of men.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit all played a role in creation and our Triune Creator is, to be certain, the Author of Wisdom. Created in wisdom, our world fell under a curse when Adam and Eve unwisely sought to usurp God's authority on the deceptive advice of Satan. And though our world groans under the burden of sin, we can still see God's wisdom in creation. The day is coming when He will restore the earth to its previous paradisal state—and never again will Satan deceive its inhabitants.

32 "Now therefore, listen to me, my children,
For blessed are those who keep my ways.

33 Hear instruction and be wise,
And do not disdain it.

34 Blessed is the man who listens to me,
Watching daily at my gates,
Waiting at the posts of my doors.

35 For whoever finds me finds life,
And obtains favor from the Lord;

36 But he who sins against me wrongs his own soul;
All those who hate me love death."

Those who bow to God's wisdom are blessed. They are not beguiled by Satan's empty promises and grandiose lies. Contrariwise, fools who despise God's word dig their own graves.

There is no shortage of self-styled prophets and gurus who speak cunning words that smell of smoke and brimstone, for Satan speaks with a sulfured breath and will lead us to destruction, but godly wisdom will guide us to everlasting joy. May we never give in to the wisdom of the world.

All Christians should be able to articulate reasons why they believe what they believe - not just for the sake of our spiritually confused friends, but also so that we ourselves will have a deeper and more confident faith.

--Lee Strobel

Question 9: Do I have to get up early in order to seek God? What if I work at night and cannot get up early? Will God withhold blessings that I would have otherwise received had I prayed in the morning? I know many verses support this idea, but it seems a bit extreme and purely religious to suggest that getting up early is necessary in order to have a proper relationship with God. Some Christians are quite insistent about the blessings of predawn prayer and speak as if God does not want to meet with us later in the day.

Answer: When I was a wee one, my father worked at a factory and did not come home until midnight. To combat her loneliness, Mom kept me up until my father arrived. Other toddlers were in bed by 7 P.M., but not me--I was a late-nighter.

Being a quiet, compliant child, my parents allowed me to stay up later than my younger brother and sister. I learned that good behavior meant a later bedtime and one of my favorite television shows aired at a time when others my age were already in bed.

In a way, I grew up thinking a later bedtime was a reward for being well-behaved. In my home, this was true.

That was long ago. My brother, sister, and I are the age of your parents. To this day, I am one who enjoys staying up while my brother and sister retire early in the evening. Of course, my brother is up at 4 A.M. and my sister is an early riser, too. I am to understand 5 A.M. finds her out of bed. Frankly, I see no virtue in being up at 4 or 5 A.M. Why would

any thinking person want to rise out of a perfectly comfortable bed while the stars are out?

Like you, I have heard pastors and Bible teachers talk of being up at 3 A.M. in study and prayer, but at 3 A.M., my brain is foggy, and I am not even certain that my heart is beating.

I agree with you about false piety based on the time a person arises from bed; this is tantamount to legalism and you and I will not get caught up in any nonsense that insists spiritual people are up and performing their religious duties at beastly hours.

If my heart is heavy or restless at 4 P.M., I am not going to wait until 4 A.M. to pray for comfort and encouragement based on an illogical belief that a predawn prayer is somehow more spiritual.

The Apostle Paul instructed us to, "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. (I Thessalonians 5:16-18 ESV)." Did Paul say to pray only during predawn hours? Between 3 A.M. and 5 A.M.? Friend, we are to be in a *constant* attitude of prayer--constant implies around the clock.

To insist that one is more holy because he or she is up at 3 A.M. is illogical dribble. Admittedly, vain arguments, meaningless debates, and legalistic posturing appeals to a lot of people, but you and I need not be dragged into such muddle-minded rot. Sadly, Christianity is full of people who enjoy debating peripheral matters. I have little interest in their silly games, and I would suggest you and I turn our attention to more profitable matters.

If my sister and brother and various species of owls want to go about their business while the sun is in hiding, that is their affair, but you and I shall not allow others to judge the level of our commitment to Jesus based upon some strange alarm clock theology.

Question 10: If we are saved by grace rather than by works, how do you explain this fuss about making changes and giving up old habits and doing good deeds? If Christians are expected to make a boatload of changes after conversion, it appears as though works are also a necessary ingredient of salvation.

Answer: We seem to have a dilemma. Christians are saved by faith alone, yet the Bible also teaches that certain behavior is not tolerated and, as such, change is required before the individual can enter into eternal life. Is this a contradiction? No, the Bible does not contradict itself. Let us examine this problem more closely.

Lost sinners are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Works do not secure an individual's salvation (Ephesians 2:8, 9), but works are an outward indicator of the faith within. If the believer's faith in Christ Jesus is genuine, there will be evidence of this faith. I think the Lord's half-brother James made this abundantly clear in his writings:

What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:14-19 NKJV).

If an individual professes a belief in Christ, but continues drinking in excess, engages in ongoing sexual sin, cheating his neighbors, lying as if he had a forked tongue, screaming at restaurant servers, robbing children of their candy, and kicking fuzzy little puppies for sport, I would wonder about the genuineness of such a faith.

I can profess to be a generous person, but if I do not give, what good is my profession?

I can claim to be a loving person, but if I treat those around me with contempt, how shall my claim be substantiated?

I can say I am a follower of Jesus Christ, but if I continue behaving in the manner of a pagan or a non-believer, where is the value of my words?

My life verse, Philippians 1:6 says God will complete the good work He begins in the lives of all believers. Sanctification is the process by which we are made into the image of Christ Jesus. Sanctification begins at conversion, but the process is not completed until we leave these mortal bodies through death and see Him, at long last, face to face.

We are all works in process. For some, God seems to make remarkably speedy progress in the lives of some new converts. For others, this process seems slow and laborious. Change comes about only gradually. And there can be slip-ups, relapses, and an instance of backsliding along the way. Thankfully, God is very patient with us.

Who initiates these changes? The Holy Spirit who indwells all believers makes sanctification possible. Yes, works are involved, but it is the Holy Spirit doing the work. It is the Holy Spirit who molds us, shapes us, and makes us like Jesus Christ.

My mother was diagnosed with bone cancer. Her oncologist initiated treatment. My mom simply allowed her doctor to do his job. What would have happened had my mom resisted the doctor's treatment? She would have died. Friend, would a genuine Christian continually resist the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit?

A few years ago, I decided to learn to play a keyboard. When I was a young man, I learned to play the electric bass, but plucking a stringed instrument is nothing like making music with a long row of black and white keys. I quickly discovered that learning to play a keyboard instrument is a real challenge.

I am hardly ready for Carnegie Hall, but I play far more proficiently than I did when I first set about to learn this instrument. Improvement comes gradually, but as time goes by, my playing sounds better.

Sanctification is not like playing a musical instrument, but in the manner of a budding musician, we should see improvements as time goes on. I was born-again in May 1989. Many decades have passed since my conversion. In this time, I have a much greater understanding of the Bible and God has given me a wider scope of opportunities in which to serve. Had I not moved even one inch forward in my walk with Jesus over the many bygone years, there would be reason to doubt the legitimacy of my conversion.

I will not deny there are spiritual struggles and setbacks; I continue battling issues. My flesh is often aroused when it should not be aroused. There are occasions when I have thoughts that are not befitting a believer. At times, I deal with pessimism. Catch me at the wrong time and I can be petty and cold. There are times when I do not even like myself. But then the Lord steps in, drags me from my miseries, and with my arm draped about His broad shoulders, I limp ahead.

And though I can be a real blighter at times, I am going to cross the finish line. Will I be victorious because of my good deeds and selfless works? Who are we kidding? Sanctification is God's work.

Yes. you might say we are saved by works—His works.

Question 11: What is the significance of Jesus calming the storm?

Answer: Mark Twain once quipped that everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it. Is that so? Obviously, Mark Twain had never read Matthew 8:

Now when He (Jesus) got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to *Him* and awoke Him, saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” But He said to them, “Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?” Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm. So the men marveled, saying, “Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him (Matthew 8:23-27 NKJV)?”

This narrative begins with the disciples following Jesus into a boat. Who were the disciples? In a sense, the twelve disciples were students of Jesus. They were members of His “inner circle.” They traveled with Him. They sat at His feet and listened to His teachings. They were on hand to observe His miracles. At times, they even assisted in His ministry. Each of the twelve enjoyed a level of intimacy with Him. And in the manner of faithful disciples, they followed their Master wherever He went. On this occasion, they followed Him into a boat.

Peter, James, and John, all professional fishermen, were experienced mariners and I suppose the other disciples were reasonably familiar with sailing, but when the sudden storm arose, these rough and ready men were fearing for their lives. They cried, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!”

Jesus arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm.

What manner of man, they asked, is He? Who is this who can calm the winds and the sea? Good question. Over the years, I have had many teachers, some of them experts in their chosen fields, but I have never had a teacher capable of controlling the forces of nature by means of voice commands.

Jesus is God who came to earth clothed in human flesh (John 1). When God speaks, we will do well to listen and obey.

There are many voices vying for our attention these days, but there is only one authoritative voice that can calm stormy seas and, for that matter, stormy lives. You and I will do well to hear, obey, and trust Him.

Catch on fire and people will come for miles to see you burn.
--John Wesley

Question 12: I am an African-American Christian who would like to see racism eradicated from the face of this planet. How can believers in Jesus Christ unite to stand against racism?

Answer: Bigotry is ugly. Racism is a cold slap to God's face, for He created us—all of us—and when one group mistreats another group, God is offended.

I grew up in the south in the turbulent 1960s. At that time, segregation was an accepted fact of life and blacks faced terrible mistreatment. Even so, my parents, both conservative white Republicans, prohibited my brother, sister, and me from using derogatory racial slurs. Hateful speech was simply not allowed in our home. My mother, a devout Christian, understood that racism was not compatible with her Christian faith. My father, a real war hero, saw black soldiers die on the battlefield. Asking a black soldier to die for a country that did not accept him as a full citizen violated my father's sense of right and wrong.

I am an older man and have seen a lot of changes in America. In various careers, I have worked side by side with blacks. Had I been born fifty years earlier, I might have gone throughout my vocational career having never worked with an African American. When I was a boy, blacks were excluded from many careers. Opportunities were limited. After all these years, the ugly face of racism refuses to go away.

Sarah Jeong, a Korean American journalist on the New York *Times* editorial board was hired by the newspaper in spite of outrageous statements aimed, in particular, toward whites. From 2013-2015, Ms. Jeong tweeted such vitriolic statements as "White men are bull____."

"oh man it's kind of sick how much joy i get out of being cruel to old white men".

"are white people genetically predisposed to burn faster in the sun, thus logically being only fit to live underground like groveling goblins".

"White people have stopped breeding. you'll all go extinct soon. that was my plan all along."

"Dumb____ f____ white people marking up the internet with their opinions like dogs p--ing on fire hydrants."

"basically i'm just imagining waking up white every morning with a terrible existential dread that i have no culture."

My ninety-two-year-old father, an "old white man," is a decorated Korean War veteran. Apparently, Ms. Joeng does not believe my father, who risked his life on Korean soil, is fit to live.

Some fifteen years ago, my only niece studied Japanese at a university in Ohio. Wishing to immerse herself in the Japanese language, she took a job in a Japanese restaurant. Her Japanese coworkers called her "round eyes" and refused to let her eat Japanese food.

My sister, a retired schoolteacher, spent her first year teaching in an inner-city school. Her plans to take the children on a fieldtrip failed to launch because certain African-American parents told the principal they did not trust her because she was a white teacher. I remember my sister, then a young woman of about twenty-five, weeping because the parents of the children she loved teaching did not like her because of her race.

Outside of this ministry, much of my writing focuses on critical thinking. My mentor, an African American university professor, took me under her wings, so to speak, and opened new doors of opportunity for me. Thanks to Dr. R, my work shows up in college classrooms from time to time. She is my friend, and she is my hero. I owe this African-American professor a debt I shall never be able to repay.

Dr. R did her undergraduate work at a well-known university in the east. She told me of taunts by two white students—taunts meant to hurt and humiliate. Rather than retaliating verbally, Dr. R outperformed her detractors. She earned higher grades than the two mouthy young men who sought to torment her. For that matter, Dr. R earned the highest grades in all her classes. Bravo! Bravo!

When my daughter was a small girl, I taught a Sunday school class comprised of inner-city boys and girls brought in on a church van. One little African American girl believed God was a white person. This broke my heart. She said she thought white people were prettier than blacks. Such notions can be very damaging. I gently explained that God is neither white nor black and that all skin colors are beautiful. Whether she believed me, I could not say.

I spent four years teaching at a men's prison. The first inmate who approached me in friendship, an African American named Dwayne, became my biggest supporter. Dwayne is to be released later this year and, by God's grace, we are going to serve Jesus as a team. He recently completed a tough, two-year college-level Bible study program and is simply brimming with potential. I should know—I was his proctor and graded all of his papers. I often think of him as a son, but I also think of him as a colleague.

Though I am an older white male, I am convinced many blacks continue facing discrimination, and this is regrettable, but as I consider people like the *New York Times'* Sarah Jeong, I am reminded that politicians and media outlets promote identity politics that foster unmitigated racism. What if Sara Jeong's #cancelwhitepeople had read #cancelblackpeople? Sarah Jeong is a racist with a filthy mouth, but there are those who

argue that a person of color cannot be a racist, therefore, Sarah Jeong gets a free pass from the *New York Times*. People like her are as much a part of the problem as hooded Klansmen burning crosses in Alabama.

Anyone insulting a black man because of his skin color offends the tender heart of God. Anyone who speaks disparagingly of another because of race violates the clear teachings of the scriptures. Frankly, anyone claiming to be a Christ follower yet engages in racist language had better examine his or her heart.

In closing, let me offer these Bible verses:

We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. The one who does not love remains in death (I John 3:14 ESV).

If anyone says, "I love God," but hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen (I John 4:20 ESV).

And now I urge you, dear lady--not as a new commandment to you, but one we have had from the beginning--that we love one another (II John 1:5 ESV).

Question 13: I live in fear that I am not saved and on my way to hell. Years ago, I professed my belief in Jesus Christ as Savior, but the doubts and fears refuse to go away. What if my profession of faith was false? Not a day passes without this fear and dread eating away at my soul.

Answer: Have you ever launched a project that was never completed? Some two years ago, a friend and fellow musician and I began recording an album of original music. He is an amazing guitarist and I play keyboard and electric bass. I also write music and provide vocals. Okay, so two years have passed, and the album remains unfinished.

I keep promising myself that we will finish the music, but our track record thus far is pretty dismal.

Before this, I vowed to learn Spanish. For a time, I was making progress and picking up new words and phrases. So what happened? *Lo siento!* I doubt if I will ever speak Spanish fluently.

What about you? Did you ever launch a project that was never completed?

I have some interesting news for you. Once God begins a project, He sees that project through to its ultimate completion. How do I know? In Philippians 1:6, which happens to be my life verse, the Apostle Paul tells us that once God begins a good work in the life of a believer, He sees that the good work is completed.

When you first professed Jesus as your Savior, God began a good work in you. The Bible promises that God will stay with you and keep you saved. God cannot lie. God cannot break a promise. He began a good work in you. You will cross the finish line.

Friend, there is nothing you can do to forfeit your salvation.

You are saved. Period. No ifs. No maybes.

Your feelings can deceive you. Your emotions can lead you astray. Salvation is a fact. Salvation is not a feeling.

You are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Salvation is a gift of God. Salvation cannot be earned. How do I know? Read Ephesians 2:8, 9. I do not always trust my feelings and emotions, but I can trust the Bible. And you can trust the Bible, too.

Now, ignore those deceptive feelings and begin each day knowing with certainty that you are God's child and nothing or no one can snatch you from His grip! Nothing! No one! And this includes you! You cannot lose your salvation.

Okay, the time to stop worrying is now! You said you placed your faith in Jesus and that settles your salvation. Remember, too, that our works do not save us. We are saved by grace through faith--eternal life is not a paycheck for your good deeds. Rid all doubtful thinking from your mind.

You were created for joy. Real joy. Immense joy. Eternal joy. How can you live a joyous life if your days are steeped in worry? Beginning now, say good-bye to needless worry, trust God, and live joyously knowing that you belong to Him.

Question 14: This might sound kind of crazy, but not long ago, I was feeling depressed, so I bought some weed. Anyway, I ran into a prostitute and we smoked my weed and made love. This is the crazy part—while we were partying, she asked me if I would like to meet God. I told her I would like to meet God, but I thought no one could meet Him until after death, but she said this was not so and to prove her point, she had me recite some really bizarre sounding words and, all of a sudden, I flew out of my body and my spirit was standing in Heaven. I met God, who is a black man dressed in a white robe, and I met Jesus Christ, too. It was all too beautiful! When I tell people about my experience, they think I am crazy, but this is a true story and I want people to know that I met God face to face and He is real. I am hoping you will not write me off as some kind of lunatic.

Answer: Let me begin by saying that I have taken your inquiry most seriously. You wrote in good faith hoping for an honest, reasonable answer and I intend to treat your inquiry accordingly. Do not take offense by the bluntness of my response, but I am not one to mince words in what I see as a life and death matter.

The focus of my doctoral dissertation was a Christian response to the paranormal. I chose the study of reported paranormal activity for two reasons: Firstly, I wanted to write about a topic that would interest people; secondly, I knew a number of people who had experienced seemingly supernatural encounters. In my research, I learned that one in four Americans say they have encountered a ghost. This amounts to over 75 million Americans.

As a believer in the teachings of Scripture, I do not hold to a traditional view of ghosts and haunted sites, but I am not ready to conclude one in four of my neighbors is a salivating lunatic. They may not have seen a ghost, but they have seen *something*.

I believe you saw something, but I can assure you that you did not enter Heaven and you did not meet God. My reasons are as follows:

- The Apostle Paul, a credible witness and the most prolific of the New Testament writers, was briefly taken to Heaven and God did not permit him to write in detail about the experience (II Corinthians 12:1-4). The Apostle Paul suffered horribly for his faith and, in the end, Caesar Nero ordered his execution. Paul was a true Christian hero and, perhaps, the greatest intellect produced by the Christian faith. You might be an agreeable sort of fellow, but you are no Apostle Paul, yet I am to believe your experience based on your word? Let us look at it this way—God would not permit Paul to write about what he saw, but God has made you His spokesperson? Again, I am not knocking you as an individual, but I will stick with the clear teachings of the Bible.
- God is not a black man. God is not a white man. God is Spirit. God does not have a corporeal body (John 4:24). Your account stands in direct conflict with the Bible. The Bible has withstood the scrutiny of skeptics and non-believers for two thousand years. Again, I am not knocking you as a person, but if I have to choose between you or the Bible, I will choose the Bible.
- The prostitute you mentioned is not a prophet. God does not use unrepentant whores or drug dealers or carjackers as prophets. Likewise, you are no prophet.

Exactly what were you planning to tell people? That a hooker opened a portal that ushered you into the throne room of an African deity? And how will this revelation, a revelation that contradicts the teachings of the Bible, help women and men struggling with sin?

In conclusion, I would suspect you were under some demonic influence. Satan is real and deception is his modus operandi—his stock in trade. He is a liar and you, my young friend, have swallowed one of his lies hook, line, and sinker.

You are not evil, but you are deceived and in danger of judgment. I will urge you to repent of your sin and ask Jesus to be your Savior. You should be engaged in systematic Bible study and under the teachings of a mature, Bible-believing pastor and surrounded by loving, understanding Christians. Lay aside the weed, clear your head, give up whores, turn a closed ear to Satan, and walk with Jesus. Do this, and you will have something to say that is worth hearing.

Refuse to be average. Let your heart soar as high as it will.
—A.W. Tozier

Question 15: How do I break this curse of bad luck.

Answer: If I flip a coin, luck has nothing to do with the coin landing on heads or tails. What determines the outcome of the coin toss is the weight of the coin, the density of the air, and the force in which the farthing was tossed. Luck is not a factor.

I do not believe in Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, Big Foot, or luck. I do not believe in Kenneth Copeland, either, but that is another topic.

To ascribe an event, outcome, or circumstance to luck is tantamount to believing in some invisible, impersonal, unavoidable, unstoppable hand of fate. As Almighty God is running the universe, such an invisible, impersonal, unavoidable, unstoppable hand of fate simply does not exist.

If your question is more in the line of, "Lately, nothing has been going my way and I am not sure what to do," let me make a couple of points. As I survey my past, most of my woes have been self-inflicted wounds. When I earned a D in trigonometry, you can bet I had been daydreaming in the classroom. On those occasions when I ran short of cash, let us figure I had mismanaged my money. When another employee was chosen for the promotion, we may assume my job performance was lacking. Bad luck? Who are we kidding? When it appeared that life had dealt me a bad hand, I was, in truth, reaping the harvest I had sown.

How did I break this curse of so-called bad luck? Instead of daydreaming during lectures, I began taking notes and developing good study habits. As luck would have it, I eventually graduated with honors. Lucky break, right? No one is suing me, my credit rating is not too shabby, and I have not bounced a check in years. Good luck? No, I learned to spend less than I make, and I pay my bills in a timely manner. As the old saying goes, the harder I work, the luckier I get.

I am no heartless, glib-mouthed fool. There are people who, through no fault of their own, have endured all manner of unspeakable calamities. My mother has suffered with three life-threatening bouts of cancer. I know a devout Christian couple who lost their precious four-year-old daughter to heart disease. During my years as a chaplain in a homeless shelter, I met legions of sweet little boys and girls who had been brought into this world by absentee fathers and mothers enslaved by meth and heroin. Do you think these children were to blame for the sins of their unfit parents? Absolutely not, but they were paying a price, all the same.

Let us attribute nothing to luck. There is a reason for anything and everything that happens. For those who suffer from situations and circumstances beyond their control, the Apostle Paul wrote, “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28 ESV).”

Your “bad luck” may be

- the expected results of poor planning or sloppy decision-making (Ruth 1).
- a corrective means of godly discipline (Revelation 3:19).
- another example of God using evil circumstances to bring about a greater good (Job 1).

If your “bad luck” is self-inflicted, let me strongly suggest you spend time studying the Book of Proverbs. If you are, like my mother, experiencing dire hardships beyond your control, I will direct you to the Book of Job. And if you suspect the Lord is trying to get your attention, you should be pouring over the Book of Ruth.

Who needs horseshoes, four leaf clovers, and lucky charms when the Bible has answers for all that ail us?

Question 16: Isn’t it enough to love Jesus, or are we expected to follow a lot of rules, too?

Answer: (Jesus said) “If you love Me, keep My commandments (John 14:15 NKJV).”

Seven simple words--words so simple, even a child can understand what Jesus is saying to us. If we love Him, we will do as He tells us to do. And if our love for Him is only half-hearted or lukewarm, we will do as we please with little regard to following His will for our lives. Our love can be measured by our obedience. Our love for Jesus is not determined by grand, pious words or how well we sing praise and worship songs or by a diploma from

a seminary hanging on the wall. The measure of our love for Him is revealed by our obedience.

If we love Jesus--truly love Him, will we

- engage in illicit sexual promiscuity outside the boundaries of marriage?
- entertain ourselves with the latest ungodly films and music vomited up by Hollywood entertainers?
- ingest harmful narcotics into our bodies?
- vote for political candidates that promote abortion and same-sex marriage?
- express ourselves with profanities?
- remain in bed rather than attending worship service?
- refuse to support our home church and para-church ministries with our finances?
- avoid sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others?
- seek to avenge others when we ought to forgive those who have harmed us?
- cheat our employers by not giving an honest day's work for our wages?
- drive recklessly when there are no traffic cops on the road?
- take something that does not belong to us?
- mentally dwell upon ungodly thoughts and activities?
- speak untruthfully?
- slander others through lies and deception?
- entertain lustful thoughts?

What should and should not a Christian do? The answer is simple: Ask yourself, "If I love Jesus, should I do this?"

Question 17: I have a friend who wants to be a Christian, but she admits that turning her will over to Jesus is preventing her from accepting Him as Savior. Why do people resist the will of God?

Answer: In the wild, a dog is a dangerous, predatory creature. It must possess a killer instinct to survive. Imagine, if you will, capturing a wild dog and bringing it into your home. Even though your intentions are good, the untamed beast will snarl, growl, and snap at your every advance. This new houseguest will urinate on your furniture and steal food from your table. Undoubtedly, your affections for the creature will be unnoticed and go unappreciated and your efforts to train the beast will be fiercely resisted.

Perhaps, over time, the wild dog will respond to your love. But if it does, this will only come about after a lot of effort. In a best case scenario, the dog will become tame and eventually return your love. And over more time, the animal will even take on some human characteristics. The more the dog is around you, the more he will become like you. He will cease being a snapping, snarling, smelly predator and become a trusted friend.

But, again, this will take some time.

And so, it is with us. We might say that sanctification is God's effort in domesticating us. Like the wild dog, we are not easily trained.

Friend, I made a profession of faith over thirty years ago, and I still find myself resisting God's will. I am not alone; many of my Christian brothers and sisters admit to bouts of spiritual stubbornness. Why do we resist Him? I can think of a few reasons. Perhaps it is a lack of faith that causes us to insist on our own ways. Maybe we think we know what is best for us. We have this foolish idea that we are the captains of our fate. Regardless, resisting His will is pure foolishness, for God always knows what is best for us.

Those who submit to Him are happier. They live more contented, fulfilled lives. Our obedient brothers and sisters experience less anxiety and enjoy a measure of peace that carries them through difficult times. But there is a rebel in many of us, and we kick and fight and claw when God's purposes clashes with our wishes.

We can place our will on the altar of sacrifice, but unless we are diligent, our will may decide to jump off of the altar and go its own way. Self-will behaves in this manner.

Thankfully, all is not lost. According to Philippians 1:6, God will complete the good work He began in each of us. For stubborn people like me, the process may take longer, but there will never be a single "unfinished" Christian in God's Kingdom.

Yes, I can be stubborn, and I have my own ideas how God should run His universe, but, deep down, I realize that He knows best. Even stubborn knuckleheads like me will cross the finish line! Good news, isn't it?

I have had more trouble with myself than with any other man.
--Dwight L. Moody

Question 18: Is it wrong to want more money and a better lifestyle? I work at a dead end job, but I have an idea for a business. If my business proved successful, I would give back to God, but I will not lie—I want some of the better things in life for myself. Is this wrong? Am I being greedy? Like I said, if I made a lot of money, I would give generously to God's work.

Answer: I am grateful for the opportunity of addressing your question.

What is wrong with an individual wanting to improve his or her situation? Many good and worthwhile goals are accomplished by those who will not be satisfied by adhering to the status quo. Money is neither good nor bad. It is our attitude toward money that matters. The Apostle Paul warned the love of money is the root of all manner of evil (I

Timothy 6:10). Those who love money more than they love God are idolaters. But, friend, laziness that leads to poverty is certainly no virtue.

Money is a tool. How we handle money is a God-given responsibility. According to the Bible, we should give generously, and we should save wisely, but we can also enjoy a portion of what we have earned. If you are wise, you will immediately begin studying the Book of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs was largely penned by King Solomon, whose wealth was heralded throughout the known world. Here is a small sampling of the financial wisdom he offers:

You lazy fool, look at an ant.

Watch it closely; let it teach you a thing or two.

Nobody has to tell it what to do.

All summer it stores up food;
at harvest it stockpiles provisions.

So how long are you going to laze around doing nothing?

How long before you get out of bed?

A nap here, a nap there, a day off here, a day off there,
sit back, take it easy—do you know what comes next?

Just this: You can look forward to a dirt-poor life,
poverty your permanent houseguest (Proverbs 6:6-11 Message)!

Greed is ugly. Greedy people are never satisfied. They never have enough. Abject greed can drive otherwise honest individuals into engaging in shameful behavior and dishonest practices. And, again, when the accumulation of money becomes one's primary purpose for living, that person is in danger of damnation. God will not be usurped by a contentious desire for wealth.

Job was wealthy. So was Abraham. And King David. These men were righteous in the eyes of God. But there are many villainous characters in the Bible whose god was their possessions. So, again, money is amoral, that is, neither good nor evil in itself. Your

attitude and my attitude toward material possessions makes money either good or bad. For some, wealth is good. For many others, wealth is a cunning and deadly trap that is nearly inescapable.

I have one last word. Do not wait until you are wealthy to engage in wise money management practices. Spend less than you make. Do not make creditors wait for their payments. Practice generosity now. Open a savings account. Search for ways of making your time and talents more fruitful. Seek out investment opportunities. Be faithful with the little you have, and God may reward you with more.

Question 19: Are people basically good or are people basically evil?

Answer: I have seen much good in people, but in my ministry, I have been an eye-witness of much evil, too. With this said, let us begin our discussion with a passage penned by the Prophet Jeremiah:

"The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*,
And desperately wicked;
Who can know it?
I, the Lord, search the heart,
I test the mind,
Even to give every man according to his ways,
According to the fruit of his doings (Jeremiah 17:9, 10 NKJV).

Many years ago, I overheard a friend's wife telling their son to "follow his heart." As it happened, their son was considering marriage. Like many young people pondering matrimony, his mind was wondering, "Should I? Shouldn't I? Is this right? Should I ask her to marry me? Should I wait? Should I walk away?"

My friend's wife is a dear, sweet person, but to tell someone to "follow their heart" is tantamount to saying, "Take your life's savings and invest it in last week's lottery tickets!" No, following one's heart and purchasing lottery tickets are unwise decisions.

A biblical language authority I am not, but there are Hebrew scholars who interpret "desperately evil" as "incurably sick." This sounds rather sobering, does it not?

The Bible is clear in teaching we are all born with a sin nature (Romans 7:14). We must teach our children to add numbers and to read words on printed pages. Furthermore, we must instruct our children in the ways of proper manners and virtue, but no one has to teach a child how to lie, whine, or behave selfishly. Bad behavior comes rather naturally.

Yet, to deny there is goodness in people, even unsaved people, would be a breach in logic. I spent four years teaching in a men's prison and I met men who had committed murder yet possessed admirable qualities. In fact, two men, both convicted of murder, were my unofficial bodyguards. It was rare that I had an officer accompanying me while I walked the prison grounds, but these two inmates would have given their lives to save me had there been a threat to my safety.

So where does this lead us? Man is born with a sin nature. And man's heart, left on its own, is often unable to discern truth from fancy and can lead us to some incredibly bad situations.

Roughly half of marriages end in divorce. Why? Before ordering the cake and mailing the invitations, women and men "follow their hearts" rather than applying logic and reason to the question of matrimony. Remember, Jesus is the Author of Truth. All too often, truth is a million miles from the mushy, ooey-gooey emotions conjured by the incurably corrupt human heart. People who follow their incurably corrupt hearts are prone to making all manner of disastrous decisions.

Even the kindest people are, under certain circumstances, prone to evil thoughts and actions and no one, and I mean no one, is capable of living a life wholly pleasing to God without first reaching out to Christ Jesus as Savior.

I am a clergyman and there are a few people who have a rather elevated opinion of me, but if you knew me the way I know me, you would not be impressed. Even though I am a born-again believer, I am still plagued by that old sin nature that will be with me until I breathe my last. Only then, when God's sanctifying work is complete, will I be made whole. That day is coming for me (Philippians 1: 6) as it is for all believers. For now, I am a work in progress. I have a new nature through Christ Jesus (II Corinthians 5: 17), but I have the old sin nature dwelling in me, too. If you are a believer in Christ Jesus, the same can be said of you.

As to Satan, he is the Father of Lies and God is, by His very immaculate nature, repulsed by any creature steeped in pride, deception, falsehoods, lusts, envy, murder, and the list goes on. Remember, Satan sought to usurp God's authority and, again, this is loathsome to our Holy Father. If you have wondered about Satan's fate, read the last two chapters in Revelation.

Having ministered nine years to drug addicts and four years among felons doing hard time, I have seen Satan's handiwork up close and personal. When Jesus defeats Satan once and for all, I will be cheering our Savior on! I have seen what Satan has done to others. Now I want to see our infernal enemy pay for his deeds.

Let me close by saying there is good in all people but being good is never good enough. What is needed is the divine forgiveness that is granted to all who trust in Jesus as Savior (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

Are you a believer in Christ Jesus? Have you reached out to Him for salvation? If so, let me challenge you to grow in your knowledge of the Bible. There is no virtue in biblical illiteracy. If you are not yet a believer, you are only one heartbeat away from eternal

damnation. Yes, I am aware this sounds harsh, especially in this age of so-called political correctness, but you need not live one more minute without Jesus Christ. Accept Him as Savior and let Him grow you into your full potential!

Question 20: Is it a sin to agree to a website's terms and conditions without first reading their disclaimer? Am I guilty of lying if I say that I have read the disclaimer when I did not?

Answer: One of the finest men I have ever known was an attorney, but lawyers speak in a language all their own. Call it legalese or call it gobblety-gook, but the only people who understand what an attorney has written is another attorney.

These long-winded disclaimers, full of *whereases* and *howsoever*s, are not meant to be understood by lay persons such as you and me. If your conscience would be eased by reading their seemingly endless lines of blah, blah, blah, then do so, but as for me, I do not want to waste my few remaining brain cells pouring over unintelligible website disclaimers.

Even if you took the time to give one of these cryptic disclaimers the good old left to right, would you understand what you read? Probably not, and neither would I. So, while a Pharisee might accuse us of lying for checking the disclaimer acknowledgement box, another Pharisee might accuse us of wasting precious, irreplaceable time if we stopped to eyeball their terms and conditions.

Question 21: Because of illnesses and an accident, my family is experiencing financial hardships. Adding to our problems, I am unemployed. I find it difficult working for others and when I find a job, I have trouble keeping it. I do not know what to do.

Answer: I am grateful for the opportunity of addressing your inquiry.

As I know no more than the scant bit of information you provided, it would not be possible for me to give you more than a general answer; your physical health, level of education, employment history, and job skills—all of which I know nothing about—are factors in finding suitable work. But this is not to say that I am without answers or suggestions. I believe I can offer you some constructive, realistic advice.

In 2018, the economy was robust, and unemployment was at its lowest since 1969. Two years later, the COVID-19 pandemic brought many businesses to their ruin, but even when the economy is struggling, finding work is still something of a numbers game—the more applications you file and the more interviews you attend, the more likely you will secure a job that meets your needs.

If you are not strong enough to work a forty hour week, maybe a part time job would help. Many retailers are glad to have employees willing to work twenty-five hour work weeks, so if you cannot physically work full time, consider part time hours.

When you meet a prospective employer, look professional. My daughter, who holds a responsible management position with her firm, has told me of applicants who arrived for job interviews in sloppy clothes or inappropriate attire. She also told me of people who show up late for job interviews and demonstrate a lack of preparedness. Applicants who make a poor first impression are seldom hired.

Before my daughter was born, I lost my job at a bank. My younger brother, a general contractor in those days, hired me to paint houses. I knew nothing about painting, but by the end of the week, I found myself enjoying the work.

Some hobbies can be turned into income opportunities. My daughter sells handmade crafts online. The same brother I previously mentioned, a gifted composer and musician, recently turned professional. A childhood friend, also a musician, was hired by a church as their organist. Do you have a hobby or interest that offers commercial opportunities?

Jesus said we are to "ask, seek, and knock (Matthew 7:7, 8)." Ask the Lord for guidance and wisdom. Seek opportunities. Knock on doors. Do your part and God will bless your job search. There is an old saying: He who chops his own firewood is twice warmed. There is reward in effort. Looking for work requires determination and frustration lurks behind every rejection, but when you finally land that job and payday comes, you will have no regrets.

There are opportunities out there. Put on a smile, ask God to give you wisdom, and then pursue your quest with enthusiasm and gusto. What are your strengths? What talents and skills can you offer an employer? Who do you know that might assist you with resume writing and job interviewing skills?

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you seek divinely appointed opportunities.

Question 22: What does it mean to be hard-hearted?

Answer: I am a musician, not particularly gifted, but I play keyboard, guitar, and the electric bass. The guitar and electric bass use steel round-wound strings. Over time, the pressure and rough texture of the steel strings causes callouses to form on the player's fingertips. A callous is a thick layer of skin. The thick skin covering the fingertips reduces sensitivity and eases any discomfort caused by the strings' resistance against the fret board. A guitar player with particularly thick callouses can poke a needle into his fingertips and not feel any pain.

In a sense, unbelievers risk having their hearts calloused. Let me explain.

Children tend to be open to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, most people who identify themselves as Christians were introduced to the Gospel at an early age. My mother took me to church when I was five years old. I am glad she did. As a father, I began praying

for my daughter when she was in her mother's womb. And I had her dedicated to the Lord when she was a wee baby.

This is not to say that older people are immune to the Gospel, but cynicism, doubt, pent-up resentments, and skepticism that often come with the years have ways of making older people less receptive to the Gospel. The more they resist the call of God, the more calloused their hearts become. It is as if the voice of God is muffled by a thick layer of insensitivity and unconcern.

The Bible introduces us to many characters with hardened, calloused hearts. In the New Testament, we read of Judas Iscariot, Pontius Pilate, and King Herod who met Jesus face to face, yet they treated Him, God in the flesh and Savior of the world, with loathsome contempt. In the Old Testament, we read of Pharaoh whose hardened, calloused heart brought about his own ruin as well as the destruction of his nation. Later, we are introduced to King Saul whose hardened heart gave reason for God to remove his crown and award the throne to David. There is no shortage of hardened hearts found in the Bible—women and men who resisted God to their own detriment.

Quite simply, a hardened heart is a heart that has insulated itself from the voice of God.

It may well be that the most important ministry is children's ministry. It is vital that we reach young people before a hardening of their hearts prevent them from coming to Jesus Christ as Savior. Say, if you are a parent or grandparent, make certain the little ones know about Jesus. Support your church's youth ministry, too. We are only one generation away from becoming a godless nation—and I fear the church has let down her guard against the tide of secular humanism.

Question 23: I have a friend who has taken on the personality of Harley Quinn. Sarah has changed her hair color and dress to match that of Harley Quinn. She has been experimenting with drugs and her conversations focus on hatred and violence. Sarah no

longer uses her real name, but answers to the name of Harley Quinn. Is this healthy? Is this normal?

Answer: Being an older person whose interests travel in a different direction, I was unfamiliar with this fictional comic book character from the Batman series. Thankfully, a quick Google search brought me current.

It is not uncommon for young people to imitate their pop culture heroes. When I was an adolescent, the Beatles and other British Invasion bands were all the rage. Boys began skipping haircuts and Nehru jackets were in vogue. My father and I had many heated arguments when my unruly hair began tumbling about my shoulders. Four decades later, a bottle of shampoo lasts weeks and weeks. And weeks.

For a time, my daughter dressed in black. Black tee. Black jeans. Black hair. Black eye-liner. I was told this was the Gothic look. I thought it was the *let's-all-dress-in-black-and-pretend-we-are-going-to-a-funeral-look*. Now a successful young woman, my cosmopolitan daughter manages a high end salon in one of Manhattan's posher neighborhoods. In other words, she grew up. And without the wretched midnight-in-a-coalmine clothing, hair, and eye-liner, she is also a remarkably pretty young woman.

I fear for your friend, for she is living a lie. She is not Harley Quinn. Beyond the fantasy world of make-believe, Harley Quinn does not exist. Your friend is vicariously living a flat, meaningless, two dimensional "let's pretend" life conjured from an animator's imagination. And that, my young friend, is hardly living.

There are 6 billion people on this planet and God has a dream for each of these individuals—a plan that will give every man, woman, and child real joy and fulfillment, but as long as your friend is pretending to be something she is not, she will never know the excitement of being who God intended her to be. She has exchanged a truth for a lie and traded what might be for what never will be.

Batman is not real. The Joker is not real. Harley Quinn is not real. There is but one Superhero—the One who conquered death and the grave—the One who will return and destroy Satan and his legions of followers. I can only pray that your young friend will get her nose out of comic books and, at long last, become the woman who God intended her to be (Jeremiah 29:11).

Might you be able to show her the vanity of living in a fantasy land? Will she listen to reason? What a shame this living in a make-believe world is, for life is precious and each moment should be spent with eternity in mind. Is she capable of separating fact from fiction? I pray that she will listen to reason and not toss logic out the window, for her life is much too valuable to waste by pretending to be a non-existent comic book character.

Church attendance is as vital to a disciple as a transfusion of rich, healthy blood to a sick man.

--Dwight L. Moody

Question 24: I have met a girl I really love. I think about her all the time and this worries me, because I have been focusing too much on her and not enough on God. How can I maintain my walk with Jesus while my mind keeps wandering to thoughts about Kati?

Answer: Beginning next week, I will be teaching a four-part series based on the Book of Ruth. I mention this because Ruth is a love story—a romantic adventure between a young Moabite woman and a well-to-do landholder named Boaz. This account has all of the suspense and drama of a glitzy Hollywood production, but this story is real and, at the risk of sounding a bit irreverent, God is the matchmaker. Truly, Ruth and Boaz were a match made in Heaven.

Being something of a crusty old bachelor, my romantic adventures are limited to an occasional dinner with someone who looks like your grandmother (and who always seems to own a small, annoying dog), but I will offer these suggestions:

- She may be your girlfriend, but she is also your sister in Christ Jesus. Behave accordingly.
- Besides exploring new restaurants or doing whatever young people do on dates these days, let me suggest you attend church together.
- When dining out, begin the meal with prayer. Offering thanks to God is a Christian's duty and the two of you praying in a restaurant shows you belong to God. What an encouraging testimony this is to others!
- Avoid movies and other activities or entertainment that promote godlessness. You and your date should pass on films with gratuitous sexual and violence content. For the most part, Hollywood is definitely anti-Christian, so keep your money and do not allow them to adversely influence you.
- While you need not parse Greek verbs or debate the tenants of Calvinism over dinner or coffee, discuss your faith with her and learn about her Christian journey, too.
- God will not bless that which is not holy, so if you want your love to flourish and grow, you and she had better behave as sincere Christian believers. If your conduct is no better than the behavior of pagans, God will not bless this union. Again, do not expect God to bless that which is unholy.

We need one another. God made us for Himself and others. The solitary life leads to isolation and loneliness. Enjoy her company. Have fun. And be genuine.

Oh, if Kati's grandmother is single and reasonably attractive and does not own a yipping dog, have her call me, please. Only kidding! Only kidding!

Question 25: I am a genuine believer of the Gospel, but years of substance abuse and extremely powerful attacks from Satan have taken a toll on my mind and body. This

nightmare started with prescription pain killers. Soon, I was buying heroin and other street drugs. I then enrolled in a Suboxone program. That was four years ago. Besides Suboxone, my doctor felt I needed Adderall. Now I feel as if it is impossible to live clean and sober on my own because of risks associated with withdrawals. As to the Adderall, I cannot live without it. I am a Christian, so why have I not been delivered? Why does it seem impossible to awaken from this nightmare? God's word states that Jesus delivered and healed people. I need healing and I know God could deliver me without the help of doctors or addiction counselors, so why has He abandoned me? Why should I need to reenter a rehab clinic? Can't God fix me without doctors and counselors? Does God need their help? I know that I will never be free until God delivers me supernaturally.

Editor's note: Suboxone is approved to treat opioid dependence. Adderall is prescribed to patients who experience depression in combination with ADHD.

Answer: I have what is sometimes known as white coat syndrome. To my embarrassment, I have an illogical fear of physicians. As senseless as it is, medical doctors make me uneasy. This white coat syndrome is fairly common. Oddly enough, I do not fear dentists; in fact, when I broke a wisdom tooth, as painful a malady as I have ever experienced, I rose up and called the dentist blessed when he entered the room.

Thankfully, I am reasonably healthy and went something like seventeen years without a checkup, but two years ago, a situation arose that demanded I see a physician. The condition was far from serious, but when I arrived for my appointment, you would have thought I was facing the hangman.

I asked the Lord to cure my medical woes. After all, Jesus healed all manner of sick people with a touch of His hand or a word from His mouth. If He could heal others, He could heal me. So, I asked Him to heal me and eliminate the need for a dreaded doctor visit. My plan was perfect: after Jesus supernaturally healed me, I promised to tell everyone how good and wonderful the Lord had been to me. A win-win situation, right? I could forego the unsettling doctor visit and the Lord would have my glowing testimony.

A raging addiction is far more serious than a swollen prostate, and I will agree that the Lord could, according to His divine will, supernaturally heal you, but as one who spent years working with addicts and alcoholics, I will remind you that God uses people like me to help people like you.

Yes, God could cut out the middlemen and I am certain, in some instances, He does just that, but you and I cannot dictate how He chooses to heal. We must jettison the self-will and determine that God is God, and we are not.

Submitting to a physician was a humbling experience, but my swollen prostate is much better. God used a physician and some pills to bring about my relief.

I have known recovering alcoholics and addicts who found freedom from the chaos of chemical dependency through participation in Christ-centered Celebrate Recovery support groups.

I will speak frankly. I am no fan of Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, or like-minded secular drug and alcohol recovery programs. These non-Christian methods have some degree of success, but in helping with their clients' addiction problems, they do nothing for their spiritual problems. In truth, AA and NA literature often contradicts sound biblical teachings. Thanks to AA and NA, there are recovering addicts and alcoholics who are being misled by false teachings wrapped in spiritual sounding gobblety-gook.

You and I cannot bargain with God. God is sovereign and He will do as He determines, and our puny objections will have no bearing on His decisions. As long as God is on the throne, His decisions are final. Our job is to swallow our pride and do as He tells us.

God can and will heal you, but your healing will come about on His terms and not your terms. Pride has no place in recovery. Humble submission will serve you far more.

Where do you begin? Talk with your physician. A medical detox may be necessary. You and I have seen what can happen when an addict is suddenly deprived of his or her choice of drugs. In most cases, a medical detox is the first (and safest) step to recovery. You may require a thirty day or longer residency-based program after a proper medical detox. Afterwards, one or two weekly Celebrate Recovery meetings will give you the support and encouragement needed to stay off the drugs. Besides the support meetings, join a dynamic, loving, Bible believing church. Immerse yourself in Bible study, too. Do this and you will flourish and grow and, in time, you will be leading and encouraging other recovering addicts. Yes, you can become an instrument of the Lord by directing other addicts to the Promised Land of sobriety.

An addict is powerless over his or her addiction. As one who is powerless, forget about making demands or striking deals with God. This will never do.

A year from now, I hope to receive a follow-up letter from you detailing how you have twelve months of sobriety under your belt. And I hope, too, that you can tell me all about your spiritual growth through involvement with Celebrate Recovery.

Question 26: I have heard that God wants us to be content regardless of our situation. This puzzles me, for I believe I am capable of earning more money by leaving my present job, which is working in a warehouse, and launching my own business. You should know that I do not earn enough money to buy a decent automobile. I borrow my dad's car to get back and forth to work. Not much of a job, right? Even so, should I be content with the status quo and give up my entrepreneurial dreams?

Answer: Before I answer, please read the following parable spoken by Jesus. In this passage, you will read about talents. A talent was a large quantity of either gold or silver. In other words, a talent represented a substantial amount of wealth.

“For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, ‘Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.’ His master said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.’ He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.’ But his master answered him, ‘You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:14-30 ESV).’

Jesus commended the two faithful servants who made the most use of what had been entrusted to them. And Jesus condemned the lazy, useless servant who dug a hole and buried that which had been placed in his care.

If you are capable of doing more than getting up at 2:30 AM and working in a warehouse and borrowing your father's car, then do so. There is nothing wrong with warehouse work, but, again, if you can improve your situation with the abilities and skills given to you by God, then make the most of what you have. We must never confuse complacency and mediocrity with godly contentment.

I know what it is like working at a dead end job. While struggling along a most loathsome career path, I decided to study theology. I wanted to serve God in ministry. To fulfill my dream, I returned to the classroom while working full time and devoted myself to making excellent grades, and God blessed my efforts.

The worthless servant was content to bury the talent entrusted in his care. The faithful servants showed ambition, determination, and fortitude. Who did Jesus praise? Who did He condemn?

Now go out and do what you are supposed to do with your life. If you operate within God's will, He will bless your efforts.

Question 27: When I die and go to be with Jesus, how will I be able to enjoy the rewards of Heaven knowing that I have friends and loved ones languishing in hell? I fear their miseries will put an end to my joy. What are your thoughts?

Answer: You have expressed a concern that has troubled legions of believers. Before I address this issue, let us turn to a familiar story recorded in the Book of Acts.

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet

Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this:

"Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter
and like a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he opens not his mouth.

In his humiliation justice was denied him.

Who can describe his generation?
For his life is taken away from the earth."

And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away, and the eunuch saw him no more, and went on his way rejoicing. But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through he preached the gospel to all the towns until he came to Caesarea (Acts 8:26-40 ESV).

In addressing your question, let me point you to five truths:

- God is sovereign. The fulfillment of His plans and purposes are not dependent upon you and me.
- God is far more merciful than you and me. God is more loving than you and me. God is kinder than you and me. Let us never doubt His goodness.
- All who desire joy will find joy. Our sovereign God will see to that.

- The damned are those who entered this place of misery and torment by their own volition. Rebels to the end, the eternally lost are hardened individuals who insisted on clinging to something other than God's joy.
- The joys of Heaven will never be held hostage by the miseries of the damned.

The Ethiopian eunuch had a genuine hunger for God. He diligently searched God's word for the answers he desired. God knew this man's heart. We might say that God *knew the desires* of this man's heart—and the desires of his heart were pure. In response, God sent Philip with the Gospel message. The Ethiopian heard the Gospel message and responded to the good news with great joy.

My friend, Philip was an ambassador of God's love, but salvation is strictly God's business. Had Philip been unwilling to share the Gospel, do you think the Ethiopian would have remained lost and only a heartbeat away from eternal damnation? Heaven forbid! The Ethiopian was not saved because of Philip. Had Philip complained, "I have a headache and I don't like Ethiopians and it is almost time for lunch," God would have sent a more reliable evangelist to do the job. God's plans and purposes will be accomplished with or without our help.

Are you familiar with Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus? You will find this chronicled in Luke 16. The rich man did not enter into a place of torment because he was rich. During his earthly life, the rich man desired the joys that come with wealth over the joys that come from a relationship with God. The rich man was not doomed because of ignorance; on the contrary, he knew the writings of Moses and the prophets. For that matter, the patriarch Abraham was familiar to him, but during the rich man's mortal years, his wealth had been his god. The rich man was a rebel until the end.

My friend, would God allow the miseries of torment brought upon the damned by their own volition to dampen or spoil our eternal joy? I should hope not! Hell will not hold Heaven hostage. The goodness of God is far greater than the miseries chosen by rebels of Jesus Christ.

After His crucifixion, our Lord Jesus descended into Hades and preached the Gospel to those who had died. The souls who responded favorably to His message ascended into Heaven with Him. Do not miss this point: Our Lord Jesus, being fully divine, is not bound by time and space. I believe those who do not hear the Gospel on earth will hear the Gospel regardless. God is sovereign. He will save those who will be saved *with our help or without our help*.

By the way, God's sovereignty does not give us license to do nothing. He intends for us to share our faith with those who do not know Him.

Over the years, I have discovered that few people truly desire joy. They crave wealth or fame or power or sex or, most likely, a combination of these. What they do not desire is joy. The older I grow, the more I desire real, lasting joy. These other trinkets are mere baubles--heaps of dung and scraps of nothingness that cannot satisfy. Do you think God will withhold His joy from you and me? No, for He shall give us our hearts' desire.

Question 28: I am a sixteen year old male who is attracted to both girls and guys. I think my attraction to other males is stronger than my interest in females. Lately, I have been watching a lot of homoerotic pornography. I want to please God, but I want to be true to who I am.

Answer: So, you are sixteen? Wow, do I feel old! Though a long time ago, I distinctly remember my sixteenth year. I was a quiet, awkward sort of kid full of doubts and sorely lacking in confidence. Looking at some old photos, I was not a bad looking young man, but I felt ugly and inferior and, as such, I could scarcely talk with a girl. Much of my shyness stemmed from a belief that I did not measure up to my peers.

I had a couple of major victories when I was sixteen. I flew a small aircraft by myself on my sixteenth birthday. Odd, I did not have a motor vehicle operator's license, so my dad drove me to the airport, but once there, I was able to take a two-seat Cessna 150 up by

myself. I made three takeoffs and landings on my first solo flight. I was scared. I was really scared, but I handled the plane like a seasoned pilot.

Though I was far from being one of the popular kids at school, I earned a bit of recognition for being creative. I excelled in art and some of my drawings appeared on TV and in a local weekly newspaper.

Even so, I was shy and riddled with doubt. I never had a date during my high school years. If a girl even spoke to me, my face would flush, and my voice would crack as I stumbled over my words.

Many decades have passed, but I vividly recall the feelings of uncertainty and disconnection when I was your age. This is one old guy who still remembers what it is like being young, riddled with doubt, overwhelmed with confusion, and plagued by a poor self-image.

I am not a psychologist, but I understand our cognitive development continues until the twenty-fifth year. With this said, I would strongly urge you to stop watching sexually explicit movies. I would say the same if you were straight. Hollywood is not the place to learn about sexuality.

Sexually explicit movies give viewers a distorted view of human sexuality. The producers of such films do not care about you or what becomes of you—they are interested in making money.

Such sexually explicit movies make strong mental impressions that are not easily erased. It is no wonder why King David said, “I will set nothing evil before my eyes.”

God loves you. He wants the best for you. According to the Bible, homosexuality is incompatible with the Christian lifestyle. True, there are so-called politically correct pastors and teachers who make “almost convincing” arguments that even though God says, “No,” He really means, “Yes.” In truth, the Bible repeatedly warns against homosexuality.

I do not accept the “I was born this way” argument. My young friend, I was born socially awkward and steeped in insecurity, but by God’s grace, I grew out of my boyhood timidity and have functioned rather well as an adult. Some people are born with hot tempers. Some people are born with melancholy tendencies. Having worked in addiction and recovery, I understand some people are born with a predisposition to alcohol and substance abuse. Being “born this way” does not mean we must remain like this. Through Christ Jesus, we can shed our fears, our imperfections, and our shortcomings by becoming new creations (II Corinthians 5:17).

God loves us just as we are, but He loves us too much to leave us where He found us. This maxim illustrates God’s sanctifying work in our lives.

Turn off the movies. Again, if you were a sixteen year old boy who liked girls, I would still warn you against viewing sexually explicit movies. You will do well to learn about sexuality from godly sources. In case you did not notice, I have a very dim view of Hollywood.

Distance yourself from homoerotic stimuli and, perhaps, you might discuss this matter with a Christian psychologist. There are also ministries that offer online support. I strongly recommend Focus on the Family, but it will be up to you to reach out to them for support, advice, and encouragement.

Before I go, many Christian ministries are abandoning the clear teachings of the Bible in favor of this assault upon truth known as political correctness. You can find a legion of churches that will affirm the gay/lesbian lifestyle, but if you take the time to read the teachings of the Bible for yourself, you will see these ministries are not faithful to the scriptures. Do not lend your ears to false teachers, for they will mislead you.

I certainly wish you well, my young friend!

Question 29: Can you lose your faith? If you can lose your faith, can you get it back?

Answer: Well over three decades ago, I became a born-again believer. Over the passing years, I have seen the hand of God at work many times in my life, yet there are occasions when my faith waivers. As it would happen, your letter came at a rather appropriate time, for I have been struggling with disappointment. Without going into too much detail, I launched a new ministry project and, frankly, my launch has turned into something of a sputter, a cough, and a wheezy gasp for air! After prayer, hard work, preparation, and some financial expense, my Roman candle that was to light up the night sky has become more like a birthday candle—a flickering birthday candle at that!

And I am wondering, "Where are You, Lord? What happened? This effort was to glorify You, so why have You not blessed my hard work?"

All I hear is silence.

Yes, I am disheartened, and more than a little, but with this said, I am no fool. All things work for the good of those who love the Lord and, friend, I love the Lord, so this disappointment will, somehow, work for my good.

You see, God is faithful even when our faith waivers. Need a verse to back this up? How about II Timothy 2:13 that reads, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself (NASB)."

Admittedly, my disappointment does not compare to a tragedy such as the loss of a child or a biopsy report confirming the oncologist's worst suspicion. There are setbacks and there are setbacks, but no Christian is immune to hurt and disappointment. So, returning to your question: What happens when a Christian parent loses a child and, in hurt and anger, walks away from the faith? What becomes of a godly Christian woman who discovers that her husband has been unfaithful and cries, "God, how could You have allowed this to happen? Don't you care about me?"

Friend, Philippians 1:6 assures us that when God begins a good work in the life of a believer, He will see that work to its completion. The bereaved Christian parent standing over a child's grave screaming curses at God is no less a Christian. Why? Because God is faithful even when we are not faithful.

No born-again believer can lose his or her salvation. Period.

Friend, I have lost a cellphone, car keys, cash, my hair, a wife, and my temper--but I cannot lose my salvation. You see, my salvation rests with Him. We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ--salvation is a gift that cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8, 9). If eternal life could be lost or forfeited, it would hardly be eternal. The Bible knows nothing of "temporary life," but our Lord Jesus is the Author of Eternal Life and He has never lost a saint.

When the Good Shepherd begins the day with one hundred sheep, the same one hundred sheep will be in His loving care at the end of the day. No salivating wolf will sit down to a lambchop dinner on our Good Shepherd's watch!

I do not know if this response has helped you, but I already feel better despite my fizzled out ministry launch. Where is God in all of this? He is near. Maybe I cannot see Him or even sense His presence, but He is near all the same.

Say, what about you? Is your faith being tested? Let us never give up on Him, for He never gives up on us.

Question 30: I am a recovering alcoholic who loves the Lord Jesus. Yesterday, after months of sobriety, I slipped up and drank. I am so sorry that I gave into the temptation and I hope never to do this again, but do you think the Lord is angry with me? Does He still love me?

Answer: I will gladly address your inquiry, for I spent years teaching addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention at an urban homeless shelter and a large men's prison.

It is said that an occasional relapse is a part of recovery. Frankly, I am not in total agreement with this particular bromide, but I know that most recovering addicts experience a setback now and then. You are not the first recovering alcoholic to stumble and you certainly will not be the last.

A word of warning--it is okay to regret a lapse in judgement, but if you hammer away at yourself, the guilt may send you back to the bottle. You have heard it said, "Poor me! Poor me! Pour me another drink!" So, cheer up! All is not lost! On the contrary, you may be assured that the Lord Jesus loves you and He is not angry with you

You took a drink that you should not have taken. You confessed this to the Lord, so get on with your recovery and your life. Guilt is an elixir that can help us understand our trespasses and shortcomings, but medicines are taken by the spoon. If you insist on bathing in your guilt, you will be back on the bottle. You confessed your sin to Jesus. You are forgiven. Move on. Instead of wallowing in guilt, spend the next few minutes thanking Jesus for the great work He is performing in your life.

Let me close with two suggestions. Join a Celebrate Recovery support group that meets at a church near you. Celebrate Recovery, unlike Alcoholics Anonymous, is Christ-centered. Also, request a free downloadable copy of *The Sobriety Book*, a 320 page addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention manual. The resource is yours for the asking.

Question 31: I am a straight male who wishes to remain single. I understand that sexual intercourse between a husband and wife is a gift from God, but this is a gift I do not want. I find the prospect of engaging in sexual intimacy unappealing. Is it wrong to reject God's gift of sexual intimacy and remain single?

Answer: Let us begin with a reading of this passage taken from Matthew's Gospel record:

When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?”

“Haven’t you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.’”

“Why then,” they asked, “did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?”

Jesus replied, “Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry.”

Jesus replied, “Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others—and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it (Matthew 19:1-12 NKJV).”

As you may know, a eunuch is a castrated male. In ancient times, a ruler might have his concubine and royal court attended to by eunuchs. We have reason to believe Daniel the

Prophet had been castrated by King Nebuchadnezzar. It was supposed that a eunuch might prove to be less aggressive, more loyal, and more attentive to his assigned duties. As to the king's harem, a eunuch would show no interest in the monarch's many wives.

In the above passage, Jesus points out that an individual might choose to live as a eunuch for the sake of devotion to God; without a spouse and children vying for his or her attention, a believer would have more time to devote to his or her religious duties. We see this attitude toward sexuality in the Roman Catholic Church. Priests and nuns take a vow of celibacy and, in a sense, live as eunuchs. Unencumbered by the demands of spouses and children, they are considered "married to the church."

Jesus remained single as did the Apostle Paul. Jesus came to seek out and save lost sinners--He did not leave the hallowed halls of Heaven to build a career, find a wife, buy a home in the suburbs, and raise a family. The Apostle Paul may have been married at one time, though this is not certain, but his lifestyle as an itinerate evangelist left little time and opportunity for marriage.

Based on your letter, I strongly suggest your aversion to physical intimacy is based on what psychologists refer to as *sexual disgust*. There are people who, quite simply, find intercourse revolting. Such squeamishness certainly dampens one's sexual appetite.

I am a Bible teacher and not a psychologist, so I will not presume to speak authoritatively on this matter, but if you have no interest in sexual intimacy with a lawfully wedded wife, by all means remain single. Considering the preponderance of divorce and broken homes in America, I have wondered if some people are predisposed to singleness. Perhaps. There is a lot of brokenness among today's couples. And who can say--you might even find a compatible woman who would prefer a platonic relationship that would provide the two of you with companionship and security without the complications that come with sexual intimacy.

Loneliness is a dreadful state of being but living with an incompatible spouse may be worse. If you find physical intimacy revolting, you should remain single, but before committing to a lifetime of celibacy, you might consider discussing your feelings with a trusted Christian pastor.

When a man is at his wits' end it is not a cowardly thing to pray, it is the only way he can get in touch with Reality.

--Oswald Chambers

Question 32: Hello! My name is Camile. I am thirteen-years old and a follower of Jesus Christ. I take my faith seriously. Anyway, what am I to think of a Bible teacher on TV who says he received a supernatural revelation telling him when Jesus will return to earth? Should I believe him?

Answer: Camile, I am going to give you a short answer and a long answer. As I perceive that you are serious about understanding the Bible, I believe you will stick around for the long answer.

Okay, the short answer is this: No one knows the date that Jesus will return, so let us figure this person who claims secret knowledge is just another religious huckster. Run, don't walk, away from these delusional charlatans. The Lord's truth is not in them.

Now for a more detailed answer. I have a dear and faithful Christian friend, well into her nineties, who grew up a Jehovah's Witness. As it happens, her grandfather was the first to bring this cult's peculiar teachings into the state where I live. The organization, known as the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, is famous for their failed prophecies. In fact, the Watchtower predicted the end of the world in 1914, 1915, 1916, 1918, 1925, 1941, and 1975. Oddly enough, the Watchtower condemned other religious cults for making

false claims despite their own long and shameful track record of failed prophetic predictions. You and I will agree that a trash bin is the only place suitable for storing Watchtower books and magazines.

I have a deceased relative who, at one time, fancied herself as a prophetess. In 2011, she predicted that Jesus would return in 2012. She may have been family, but she spoke as a false prophet and God takes a dim view of people who make spurious prophetic claims.

I have a passage from Jeremiah I would like you to read. First, some background. Because of their disobedience, God sent the people of Israel into Babylonian captivity for seventy years. This was a dreadful punishment, but God warned the people this would happen if they did not live according to His commandments. The people turned a deaf ear to God, so God allowed King Nebuchadnezzar to sack Jerusalem and force thousands and thousands of people to live as slaves in Babylon. As you study the Book of Daniel, you will discover that Daniel was a Jewish boy, not much older than you, who was taken from his home in Jerusalem to serve in King Nebuchadnezzar's royal court. For now, we will focus, not on Daniel, but another of God's prophets, a devout man named Jeremiah, and a not-so-devout false prophet named Hananiah. In the following account, the false prophet makes a prediction that brings empty hope to the Jews in captivity. At the end of the story, you will discover how God views those who proclaim sham predictions in His name.

In the same year, in the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah king of Judah, in the fourth year and the fifth month, the [false] prophet Hananiah the son of Azzur, who was from Gibeon [one of the priests' cities], spoke [without godly authority] to me in the house of the Lord in the presence of the priests and all the people, saying: "Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, 'I have broken the yoke of the king of Babylon. Within two years I am going to bring back to this place all the articles of the Lord's house, which Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon took away from this place and carried to Babylon. And I will also bring back to this place Jeconiah the son of Jehoiakim, king of Judah,

along with all the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon,' says the Lord, 'for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon.'"

Then the prophet Jeremiah spoke to the prophet Hananiah in the presence of the priests and all the people who stood in the house of the Lord, and the prophet Jeremiah said, "Amen! May the Lord do so; may the Lord confirm and fulfill your words which you have prophesied to bring back the articles of the Lord's house and all the captives, from Babylon to this place. Nevertheless, listen now to this word which I am about to speak in your hearing and in the hearing of all the people! The prophets who were before me and before you from ancient times prophesied against many lands and against great kingdoms, of war and of disaster and of virulent disease. But as for the prophet who [on the contrary] prophesies of peace, when that prophet's word comes to pass, [only] then will it be known that the Lord has truly sent him."

Then Hananiah the [false] prophet took the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah and smashed it. Hananiah spoke in the presence of all the people, saying, "Thus says the Lord, 'Even so within two full years I will break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations.'" Then the prophet Jeremiah went his way.

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah [some time] after Hananiah the prophet had broken the yoke off the neck of the prophet Jeremiah, saying, "Go and tell Hananiah, 'The Lord says this, "You have broken yokes of wood, but you have made in their place bars of iron." For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, "I have put the iron yoke [of servitude] on the neck of all these nations, that they may serve Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon; and they will serve him. And I have even given him the beasts of the field.'"'" Then the prophet Jeremiah said to Hananiah the prophet, "Listen now, Hananiah, the Lord has not sent you, and you have made this people trust in a lie. Therefore thus says the Lord, 'Behold, I am about to send you away from the face of the earth. This year you will die, because you have spoken and counseled rebellion against the Lord.'" So Hananiah the [false] prophet died [two months later], the same year, in the seventh month (Jeremiah 28:1-17 Amplified Bible).

As He will judge those who lie in His name, God killed Hananiah for giving the Jews false hope through his phony prediction. God does not kill every false prophet, but you can believe false prophets get their just “reward” when they die.

Do not give your attention to those who claim to have secret knowledge or supernatural revelation. There are, quite literally, thousands of religious cults in the world and most of them were founded by some glib-tongued leader who said, “God has given me a divine revelation that no one else knows.”

Camile, the Bible has all that you and I need to know. Let us be good students of God’s word while we withhold our trust and confidence from haughty teachers who speak lies and declare false prophetic utterances.

Have I answered your question? I hope that I have.

Question 33: Is masturbation a sin? I have strong sexual urges—desires hardwired into brain by God, but unless I get married, I am warned against yielding to these passions. This does not seem fair to me. Why would God give me an appetite for that which is forbidden?

Answer: Friend, you have asked a question that I dread answering, but yours is an honest question that deserves a reasonable, biblically sound answer. I could only wish someone else was supplying the reasonable, biblically sound answer, but here you are and here I am, so let us get started.

I have good news and bad news for you. The bad news is that these strong sexual desires seldom go away. I am a bachelor who is fifty years older than you and I wrestle with sexual desires, too. I would consider marrying, but most of the women my age are not any better looking than me, and they all seem to keep these annoying little dogs that

yip and snap and snarl and stick their cold little noses in the most inopportune places. I do not like yippy little dogs. I would just as soon chum around with a rat.

Yes, God gave you these sexual desires just as He gave you an appetite for food and a desire for sleep, but based on the argument posed in your inquiry, it would be God's fault if you or I ate twenty-six slices of triple pepperoni thin crust pizza followed by a forty-eight hour nap. We must control these God-given appetites. Being a bit on the chunky side, I have many battles with my appetite, and I like sleeping in, but God is not going to remove my desire for food, and He expects me out of bed and do my work. I must master these desires and you are not to be a slave to your desires. Agree?

But do not walk out on me yet. Earlier, I said I had bad news and good news. The good news is that I am not going to shy away from your questions about masturbation, but be prepared for a lengthy answer. I cannot summarize my thoughts in twenty-five words or less. With this disclaimer out of the way, I sincerely hope you will stick around until the end.

During an interview with a group of prominent Bible teachers, one of the speakers mentioned that, as a boy, his father had strictly forbidden him from swimming after Sunday worship service. His father, no doubt a dutiful parent, prohibited his son from splashing about in a nearby creek or pond fearing this leisurely, summertime activity would, in some way, profane their observance of the Lord's Day. This ban on Sunday swimming struck me as being rather odd. I have no reason to believe that the father's intentions were less than honorable, but such a ban on Sunday swimming smacks of legalism and I have yet to see chapter and verse condemning a refreshing dip in the pool during that twenty-four hour span that falls between 12 AM and 11:59:59 PM on the first day of the week.

Matters ranging from tattoos to interracial dating to the use of modern Bible translations to military service have been condemned by sincere, faithful Christian believers who allow their personal preferences, politics, and particular prejudices to shape and even taint their thinking. As an example, some believers insist that even moderate alcohol consumption is sinful while other Christians have no moral qualms with wine at the dinner table or a cold beer with their favorite pizza. Because of my professional background, I have witnessed the grim results of alcoholism, but not everyone who enjoys an occasional drink ends up on skid row. What does the Bible say about alcohol? Based on my studies, moderate alcohol consumption is permitted. Feel free to disagree if you wish, but please resist the urge to send hate mail my way.

Legalism is the adding of rites, rituals, and rules that do not appear in the Bible. Practically speaking, legalism is a vain attempt at impressing God and others through the adherence of ungrounded religious traditions or self-manufactured standards of righteousness.

As a child, I grew up in a denomination that did not permit the playing of musical instruments during worship services. The first time our family visited a church featuring piano and organ accompaniment, I secretly feared the ground might open and swallow us all. Later, when I discovered there is no biblical basis for banning musical instruments during worship, I joined a church's praise and worship team.

As a young man, I dated a girl who belonged to a legalistic sect that took an extreme position on personal modesty. Even during the warm summer months, she seldom wore sleeveless dresses or tank tops fearing a possible rebuke if, by chance, she happened to encounter another member of her congregation. Besides the prohibition against bare arms, my eighteen year old girlfriend was warned against trimming her hair and wearing lipstick. A few years later, the pastor of this cultic church was exposed for hiring illegal immigrants as domestic help and secretly dipping into the church's coffers to purchase costly antiques during a European vacation. Shall we conclude that wearing tank tops and lipstick are bad while embezzlement and skirting immigration laws are within the

realm of orthodoxy? Surely, legalism fosters strange behavior among undiscerning Christian believers.

Now when He (Jesus) had spoken, a Pharisee asked Him to have lunch with him; and He went in, and reclined *at the table*. When the Pharisee saw it, he was surprised that He had not first ceremonially washed before the meal. But the Lord said to him, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness. You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also? But give that which is within as charity, and then all things are clean for you. But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every *kind of* garden herb, and *yet* disregard justice and the love of God; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others. Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the chief seats in the synagogues and the respectful greetings in the market places. Woe to you! For you are like concealed tombs, and the people who walk over *them* are unaware of *it*.”

One of the lawyers said to Him in reply, “Teacher, when You say this, You insult us too.” But He said, “Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers. Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and *it was* your fathers *who* killed them. So you are witnesses and approve the deeds of your fathers; because it was they who killed them, and you build *their tombs*. For this reason also the wisdom of God said, ‘I will send to them prophets and apostles, and *some* of them they will kill and *some* they will persecute, so that the blood of all the prophets, shed since the foundation of the world, may be charged against this generation, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the house of God; yes, I tell you, it shall be charged against this generation.’ Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you yourselves did not enter, and you hindered those who were entering.” When He left there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to be very hostile and to question Him

closely on many subjects, plotting against Him to catch *Him* in something He might say (Luke 11:37-52 NASB).

The Pharisees and interpreters of the Mosaic law were steeped in the traditions of men—traditions that had no biblical basis. Jesus had harsh words for these pompous legalists, and I doubt if He has since changed His mind about those who write their own rules.

You ask, “Is masturbation a sin?” What does the Bible say? The Bible is silent on this topic and I refuse to rattle off some half-baked, pseudo-sanctimonious response worthy of a modern day Pharisee. I know what the Bible says about lust, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, and other forms of sexual impurity, but I see nothing in the scriptures that proves masturbation is *always* a sinful act.

Do not think my answer is a sign of liberalism or a disregard for the authority of the Bible. On the contrary, I am about as conservative as you will find; additionally, I adhere to the complete and total authority of the Bible. But I will not knowingly add to or take from the teachings of the scriptures.

Is a grieving widower reliving the pleasures of his wedding night committing a sin? What about a husband and wife who are temporarily separated by distance and wishing to recreate the feelings of intimacy they sorely miss? Is it possible to masturbate without degrading, vile, pornographic, lustful imagery? I rather suppose there is.

Knowing that my response might be construed as unbiblical, I wish I could say, “Yes, masturbation is a sin and God is going to hurl a lightning bolt at your silly head if you keep doing this,” but I am not going to give you an answer that gives me an easy out, so to speak. If there is a passage in the Bible that unequivocally condemns masturbation, I will change my answer, but as I know of no such passage, I will simply say that if you masturbate, do not sin.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, my friend.

Don't tell me what you believe. Show me how you live and I'll tell you what you believe.

--Anonymous

Question 34: When Mom took us away from our father, this was the best thing she could have done, but our pastor (who does not know the whole story) keeps saying God hates divorce. Because the pastor is critical of our family, I dread going to church. What should I do?

Answer: (Jesus said) "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (Matthew 13:35 NASB)."

First, let me say how sorry I am that you have experienced something other than love by your pastor. As Jesus said we would be known by our love, and not by harsh judgment against teenage girls, you have been shabbily treated by a Christian leader who should know better. As a member of the clergy, let me again say how sorry I am that you have been mistreated.

Do not allow this negative experience to distort your devotion to Jesus or cloud your understanding of the Bible.

I am going to tell you that Jesus loves you more than you will know. He understands what you have experienced. During His time on earth, He was often mistreated, too. He is not pleased that someone has treated you so harshly.

In my line of work, I see unfit parents all the time. I have met mothers and fathers who are inexcusably lazy, uncaring, and even violent. As for me, I grew up in a good home with two loving parents and, believe me, my daughter Hannah is more precious to me

than life itself. I want to be a good dad. I think I am a good dad, too. My daughter is a bit older than you. You would probably like her if you knew her. And I am sure she would like you, too.

God does not want to see couples divorced, but He also knows that some marriages should be ended.

Instead of feeling condemned, you should be feeling love, reassurance, and encouragement from your church family.

Would you be comfortable telling your pastor what you have told me? Pastors make mistakes. I have certainly made plenty of mistakes. A good pastor is willing to sit and listen when someone has a concern. If he is a good pastor, he will listen. If he is not a good pastor, then I will suggest you and your family find a Bible-believing church that will love you, nurture you, care for you, and stand alongside of you.

By the way, I am convinced that Jesus has a special place in His heart for teenagers. I really believe this. Last Sunday, the young people at our church led the worship service. They did an excellent job. And their messages did me a lot of good. I learned from them.

Our churches need to make young people feel loved and welcomed. You are important. You are important because Jesus said you are important! Your feelings matter, too.

I am not your pastor, but I want to encourage you. And now, my young friend, please allow me to pray for you...

*Dear Heavenly Father,
Your daughter's feelings have been wounded
And she has been made to feel unworthy*

Because of her parents' divorce.

You are not angry with her.

On the contrary, You love her with all Your heart.

She is precious in Your sight.

You love her more than she will ever understand.

Wrap Your loving arms around this young girl

And let her know beyond doubt that she is loved.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

Question 35: I struggle with self-pity. It seems as though I am always feeling sorry for myself. If I ask God to remove this character flaw, will He honor my request? Will God deliver me from this destructive emotion?

Answer: You have asked an excellent question! So, let us dive right in...

God answers prayers that

- come from women and men born-again through Jesus Christ
- are according to His will
- glorify His holy and righteous name

God answers prayers with a

- yes
- no
- not now

We must remember that God answers prayers according to His timetable. As I am not a patient person, this truth often sticks in my throat, but there is no rushing God. He is never early. He is never late.

Let me point you to one of my favorite parables that address the issue of prayer:

Then he (Jesus) gave them an illustration to show that they must always pray and never lose heart.

"Once upon a time," he said, "there was a magistrate in a town who had neither fear of God nor respect for his fellow-men. There was a widow in the town who kept coming to him, saying, 'Please protect me from the man who is trying to ruin me.' And for a long time he refused. But later he said to himself, 'Although I don't fear God and have no respect for men, yet this woman is such a nuisance that I shall give judgment in her favour, or else her continual visits will be the death of me!'"

Then the Lord said, "Notice how this dishonest magistrate behaved. Do you suppose God, patient as he is, will not see justice done for his chosen, who appeal to him day and night? I assure you he will not delay in seeing justice done. Yet, when the Son of Man comes, will he find men on earth who believe in him (Luke 18:1-8 J.B. Phillips)?"

My young friend, if a dishonest judge can be made to act for the benefit of a saint, surely God, who is without fault, will see that our petitions are properly addressed.

Let me speak to you about a highly personable matter. Nearly a year ago, a Christian pastor treated me quite shabbily. Ministry is like any other vocation--we have our bad apples, too, and this man wronged me. Though I was the injured party, my anger and resentment were out of bounds. I told the Lord that I did not want to feel so harshly toward this man, but the anger and resentment would not leave. At least, not right away.

So, you struggle with self-pity? And you want deliverance from this? Like the widow in our biblical narrative, keep petitioning God for deliverance from feelings of self-pity. Remember, the Bible promises that our minds will be renewed when we place our faith in Christ Jesus.

Keep pounding on the Throne Room of God and, friend, He will honor your petitions!

Remember, Jesus tells us to ask, seek, and knock. Prayer is a three part process. Ask Him to supply your needs. Seek out solutions to your wants. Knock on doors of opportunity.

Remember, too, that the walls of Jericho did not fall until the seventh day. In this culture of instant gratification, we are unaccustomed to waiting, but there are rewards for those who patiently wait upon the Lord.

In the end, you will not be disappointed.

Question 36: Is it sinful to tease a friend or family member?

Answer: Joking and teasing are common in our family, but when supposedly playful bantering crosses a certain boundary, the joke becomes a jab and humor is transformed into a cold slap in the face.

Back in the 1970's, a third-rate husband and wife music and comedy team known as Sonny and Cher hosted a network variety show. The weekly dribble opened with Cher hurling insults at her showbiz partner/husband Sonny. The routine was not funny and, as the couple's marriage eventually ended in divorce, we can assume there was more than mere playfulness behind Cher's vitriolic barbs. To this day, I shudder whenever I hear husbands and wives engaging in "Sonny and Cher" banter. No, these insults are not funny and such teasing is cruelty masking as humor.

Am I saying that teasing and kidding are wrong? Certainly not! I am a terrible cook and I know I am a terrible cook and I laugh along with the rest of my family when the matter of my culinary bungling becomes the topic of conversation, but when teasing draws blood, the joke becomes a weapon and God's heart is grieved.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22, 23). Please note that the fruit of the Spirit does not include cynicism, sarcasm, stinging insults, and snappy comebacks.

Laughter should be a product of joy, but when laughter comes at the expense of another's feelings, the joke is no longer a joke. Hypocritical teasing that produces tears is no laughing matter.

If you really want to do harm to someone who has wronged you, forget the insults and wisecracks--send them one of Cher's old records. No one who has suffered through such torturous productions as *Half-Breed* or *Gypsies, Tramps, and Thieves* are ever quite the same! Ugh!

Question 37: My son was killed in a motorcycle accident. He was pronounced dead about ten minutes after the accident. What happened to his soul once his heart stopped beating?

Answer: Though I do not know you, my heart was immediately grieved upon reading your letter.

I am a dad. I love my daughter just as you love your son. Thinking of Hannah in harm's way is my worst nightmare.

Both my parents are living. My mom is eighty-eight and my dad is almost ninety-two. Most men my age do not have both parents. If I outlive my parents, which is likely, I will grieve at their passing, yet, we expect to outlive our parents just as we expect our children to outlive us. The death of a child seems particularly tragic. I am reminded that both sets of my grandparents buried a son; one was killed in combat and the other died in an automobile accident. This is surely a brand of grief like no other.

I cannot imagine the pain you have experienced. I wish I had some words of comfort, but any clumsy attempt at soothing your grief might come across as empty or even gratuitous. I am sorry for your loss. May God grant you comfort.

Comfort is not the absence of grief; rather, it is grief with the assurance that the Lord Jesus has not abandoned us.

Are you familiar with the old hymn, *It is Well with My Soul*? The hymn was penned by a Chicago businessman after learning that his three daughters had been lost in a shipping accident.

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

*It is well
With my soul
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

*Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
Let this blest assurance control,
That Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
And hath shed His own blood for my soul.*

The Apostle Paul wrote, “We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord (II Corinthians 5:8 NKJV).”

When King David’s infant son died, the grieving monarch said, “He cannot come to me, but I will go to him.”

The day will come when you and your son are reunited.

Again, may you find a measure of comfort knowing that death does not have the final say. Two thousand years ago, Jesus overcame death and the grave; because He defeated death, we, too, shall live eternally with Him.

Question 38: Can it be that Satan is able to imitate God by creating life? This seems to be the case when Pharaoh's magicians performed miracles in the presence of Moses and Aaron in Exodus 7. I thought only God could create life. Please shed some light on this passage.

Answer: Let us begin our discussion with a reading from the passage you mentioned:

Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, "When Pharaoh speaks to you, saying, 'Show a miracle for yourselves,' then you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast *it* before Pharaoh, *and* let it become a serpent.' " So Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so, just as the Lord commanded. And Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent. But Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers; so the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For every man threw down his rod, and they became serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods. And Pharaoh's heart grew hard, and he did not heed them, as the Lord had said (Exodus 7:8-13 NKJV).

You have asked a most interesting and insightful question. In the Exodus account, Pharaoh's magicians were able to turn their rods into serpents; later, these magicians replicated the first two plagues sent by God. They transformed water into blood, and they worsened Egypt's herptile hysteria by conjuring a fresh batch of warty toads to join the existing legion of croaking frogs that had overtaken the land. It is well worth noting the magicians were unable to imitate the other plagues.

(Jesus said,) “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven *will enter*. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23 NASB emphasis mine).”

Based on the narrative in Exodus and the Lord Jesus’ words recorded in Matthew, Satan and his followers are not without some supernatural abilities. Of course, their powers are limited. Satan is neither all-powerful nor is he all-knowing. In truth, the Lord keeps the old blighter on a long leash. We will give the devil his due but let us not give him more than his due.

Miracles are not the imprimatur of divine authority; as we study end time events recorded in Revelation, we learn that Antichrist will deceive the world with amazing powers.

I wrote my dissertation on the paranormal and, in doing so, exposed some psychics as frauds, but, from time to time, a psychic will make a startling and accurate prediction. God hates fortune telling and we are warned against seeking the assistance or advice or comfort of those who dabble in the so-called magic arts, but it does seem that, on occasion, a psychic demonstrates supernatural abilities. Are their abilities from God? No! No! No! In ancient Israel, purveyors of occultic practices were put to death. God heartily condemns psychics, fortune tellers, and witches. Their powers come from Satan.

Again, by Jesus’ own words, unrepentant miracle workers claiming to be Christ followers will be turned away as disingenuous apostates. And the Book of Revelation tells us that Antichrist will dazzle the world with his sleight of hand before being cast into the Lake of Fire.

The righteous person will be known as one who holds true to God's word. False teachers may be able to produce miracles, but they remain false teachers. The genuine man or woman of God may not be able to turn water into wine, but a godly servant may help turn a drug addict into a sober neighbor. This is the kind of miracle we need in today's broken world.

Have I sufficiently answered your question? I hope that I have.

Question 39: How do we reconcile capital punishment with "thou shalt not kill?"

Answer: You have asked a tough question. With this said, allow me to give you a short answer followed by a longer answer. The short answer is yes, God has made provisions for capital punishment. Here are Paul's words that confirm that a government has a moral right to put a criminal to death:

For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil (Romans 13:3, 4 NKJV).

Let me remind you that the command "Thou shalt not kill" is more properly rendered, "You shall not murder." Killing can include self-defense and as a Christian who values the Second Amendment, I will not roll over and play dead if a crazed killer kicks in my door.

During my four year teaching stint at a large men's prison, I met and befriended a number of inmates serving long sentences for murder. Fifty years ago, these men would have likely received death sentences. With their lives spared, I have seen killers turn to Jesus Christ for salvation. Today, I have a friend who, after serving a long prison sentence for a triple homicide, is working as an evangelist. I am glad his life was spared. He is bringing

others to Jesus through his ministry. He would not be preaching the Gospel had he been put to death by the state.

Paul wrote that the government has authority to execute criminals, but Paul himself was unjustly put to death by a corrupt Roman government. And Jesus' trial was a farce and a sham—there was no justice when Roman guards nailed our Savior to that crudely fashioned wooden cross. In this nation, wealthy people can afford better lawyers and better lawyers see fewer clients going off to prison or, for that matter, death row. Not every multi-millionaire walks away with a *Get Out of Jail Free* card, but poorer people relying on pro-bono public defenders are more likely to receive harsher sentences. I personally know a woman who was given a much harsher sentence because of a weak defense. What she did was terribly wrong, but the sentence she received may have been excessive. I am no lawyer, and I am no expert in criminology, but had she been able to afford a good lawyer, I believe she would have received a shorter sentence.

Is our criminal justice system fair? No, but it is probably better than what we would find in many other countries and it could be far, far worse, too.

Many criminals put to death spend ten or fifteen or more years on death row before their sentences are finally carried out. I knew a death row inmate who died of natural causes after spending fifteen years in a death row prison cell in Florida. Although we had a long distance friendship of sorts, he was an evil man and, frankly, I somewhat believe that God struck him dead when the state of Florida kept delaying his execution. This man never repented of his crimes and what he did is too disgusting for me to describe in this response to you. In his case, I think the world is better off with him gone. He never showed remorse for his vile actions and he had no use for God.

I have a friend who is serving a sentence of life without parole. He killed his father, his mother, a police officer, and the police officer's pregnant wife. He murdered five people. He will die in prison and this is good, yet I do not think he should be sitting on death row, for he is mentally ill and unable to function without medication. In truth, I have

had conversations with him, and he comes across as somewhat shy and gentle. Is he evil? No, but I think his mental state is fragile and volatile and he should never be allowed to roam free.

Can God redeem a hardened criminal? Yes! Is capital punishment justified? In some cases, I think it is. As for me, I am glad that it is not my job to determine who should be allowed to live and who should be put to death. My job is to give out the Gospel.

Have I answered your question? Perhaps, but in a less than definitive way. I am more concerned with another form of injustice. Last year, twenty-two inmates were put to death in U.S. prisons. Twenty-two. How many unborn babies died in Planned Parenthood clinics and other affiliated abortuaries? 600,000. Ugh! What is called "reproductive rights" is nothing more than wholesale infanticide. Some radical leftists mockingly refer to unborn babies as "crotch goblins" along with other ugly euphemisms.

God help us.

Question 40: Was the "Satanic Panic" of the 1980's biblically justified, or was this craze a misguided sham like the Salem Witch Trials? I am asking because a lot of tragedies involving innocent lives came about because of this moral panic.

Editor's note: The Satanic Panic describes a peculiar hysteria that led to ungrounded accusations and false allegations involving satanic ritualism.

Answer: I was around in the 1980's and have a vague recollection of this so-called Satanic Panic.

My favorite writer, C.S. Lewis, said we can fall into two regrettable mindsets when considering the devil--we can ignore him completely or we can give him too much of our attention. While serving as a chaplain at a large urban homeless shelter, I had a seminary

student serving under me who did not believe in Satan. Owing to his liberal theological background, he had been taught that Satan is no more than a fanciful literary tool used by Bible writers to personify evil. An example of "personification" would be the late jazz musician, B.B. King, who referred to his guitar as "Lucille." Even though his Gibson was made of mahogany and rosewood and metal hardware, he gave his beloved instrument a woman's name. My student did not believe there was an actual Satan, rather, he believed Satan was a literary tool used by Bible writers to describe evil. I was fond of this student, but he did not know the Bible and he was wrong about Satan. Satan is a person—a living, evil entity who opposes God and leads a powerful army of other fallen angels. To deny the existence of Satan is a grave theological error.

On the other hand, I have met believers who give too much attention to Satan. This, too, is both foolish and regrettable. We must remember that Satan is a mere creature--a created being who is tethered and restrained by a long leash. Satan's powers are limited. His doom has already been spelled out in the pages of Scripture. He is not all-powerful. He does not share God's unique attributes, and we are not to focus our attention on him.

Believers are to be faithful purveyors of the Gospel of Jesus Christ—not spiritual vigilantes on a witch hunt.

As you grow older, you will likely discover that the church seems to go through fads and phases. A number of years ago, we had legions of people claiming to have visited Heaven. Most of their stories went far beyond bizarre, and all of these people were either delusional or straight out liars. And then we had the positive confession movement whose message was every Christian should live in a mansion and drive a luxury automobile and enjoy robust health until they were 110. Going back into the 1970s, I recall the so-called Charismatic Movement—I vividly remember hearing an alleged message from the Holy Spirit telling Baptists they should become Catholics. Phases and fads are the follies and foibles of biblical ignorance and spiritual immaturity.

Based on the content of your letter, I doubt if you will fall for any of this nonsense. As Christians, we should be the most logical people on earth—not the most gullible.

Thank you for your excellent question! I am convinced that intelligent people ask the best questions.

Nobody is beyond the reach of the Gospel.

--Lee Strobel

Question 41: What is a Christian's proper attitude toward money?

Answer: Tobacco is a deadly plant. According to a well-respected European medical journal, tobacco is responsible for more deaths than any other herb. Tobacco smokers risk cancer, heart disease, lung disease, and many other dangerous medical disorders. There are a thousand reasons why people should not smoke tobacco. But according to the same medical journal, tobacco is also used in treating certain illnesses. As strange as this may sound, some medicines are made with tobacco. The plant that has caused the death of millions can be used to heal people, too. Tobacco is not an evil plant, but when tobacco is misused, the plant becomes a deadly threat.

We might say the same about money. Money is useful for buying food, paying the high costs of education, providing a safe and comfortable home, caring for our loved ones, offering financial assistance to those who are truly in need, allowing our local churches to share the Gospel within their communities, and supporting missionary efforts around the world. Money certainly has many good and noble uses, but money is easily misused. In fact, the Apostle Paul warned, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (I Timothy 6:10 NKJV).”

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

Once again, money is not the root of evil; rather, it is the love of money that leads to envy, thievery, deception, and idolatry. Many people of modest means spend their lives dreaming of riches. It is that craving for instant wealth that motivates millions of people to waste billions of dollars on worthless lottery tickets. In some extreme cases, an unhealthy appetite for money fuels people to lie, cheat, steal, and even kill. And many wealthy people—people who have more money than they will ever use, place their trust, faith, and hope in dollars instead of God. You might say that money becomes their god. As a rule, wealthy people are less generous than people of average earnings. The very people who could do so much good in the name of Jesus Christ tend to hoard their money. They are miserly. These wealthy people may think that money is a blessing, but, in truth, their money is more often a curse that brings about their spiritual ruin.

He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity (Ecclesiastes 5:10 ESV).

Keep your life free from love of money, and be content with what you have, for he has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5 ESV).”

We commonly hear of famous celebrities who take their own lives. Upon reaching the so-called pinnacle of success, they discovered that their enormous mansions, exotic motorcars, and lavish lifestyles left them feeling empty and unfulfilled. And so, in despair, they ended their lives. Money is not a god. Money has never made anyone perpetually happy. But when properly handled, money can be used to accomplish much good. It is our individual attitude toward money that determines if wealth is a blessing or a curse.

(Jesus said,) “Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19-21 ESV).

As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life (I Timothy 6:17-19 ESV).

Is wealth good? Is wealth evil? The answer is up to you.

Question 42: Why do some people believe in ghosts?

Answer: One in four Americans claim to have encountered a ghost. In other words, 75 million Americans believe they have experienced a ghostly presence. This is an amazing number of people. Can 75 million people be wrong? Can one in four of our friends and neighbors be mistaken? Is it possible that ghosts really exist?

The Bible tells us that we should not believe in ghosts. Instead, we are told, “And just as it is destined for people to die once, and after this comes judgment (Hebrews 9:27 NASB).” Christians who die are immediately ushered into the presence of God. And we must also understand that those who spent their entire lives in hostility toward God are not free to wander about in cemeteries or to haunt spooky old houses. On the contrary, they are taken to a place to await God’s final judgment. As followers of Jesus Christ, you and I can be assured that our final breath on earth will be followed by our first refreshing breath in the glorious presence of God. This is good news that should ease our worries and concerns about death. And this should motivate us to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ with others.

But what about the one in four people who believe they have experienced a ghostly encounter? Let us remember the Bible teaches that Satan is a liar. He masquerades as an “angel of light” but he and his demons are cunning deceivers who would steer us far from God’s truths. Many Bible teachers believe that ghostly sightings are, in fact, examples of demonic activities. The devil wants people to be misled about death and dying. Ghostly sightings may very well be “staged” by the devil and his demons in order to mislead us. Regardless, let us remember that our eternal destiny is with our Lord Jesus Christ. A musty old attic or a forlorn looking graveyard will not be our final home.

Question 43: I object to these hypocritical Christians who come to God simply because they fear going to Hell. If they are to call themselves Christians, they should love God for who He is and not for what He might or might not do for them. Do you agree?

Answer: The philosopher Kant believed we could only approach God through pure, spotless, selfless motivations. If Kant were correct, who among us could approach Him?

Let us appeal to reason: If God were proud, He would indeed accept us only on Kant’s terms, but God is not proud. He will stoop down to receive us—even if one’s motives are no better than to escape the sentence of damnation.

I am convinced God sends no one to Hell—those who pass through the infernal gates do so by their own volition. They are rebels who refuse to lay down their arms. C.S. Lewis reminded us that, in the end, there will only be two kinds of people: those who kneel before God saying “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God sadly says, “Thy will be done.” It is certainly remarkable that God has created beings who can defy Him.

What joy would a rebel find in Heaven? There is nothing in Heaven that would appeal to an avaricious individual. I find it curious that those who spend their lives avoiding God would think of living eternally in His presence. Indeed, Hell is a place where God is not. Is this not what the rebel wants? A godless eternity?

I have known men and women who do all they can to avoid even the briefest, most casual encounters with God. Would you consign such a person—a person repulsed by any mention of God—to an eternity in His presence? To such a person, Heaven would be Hell.

Let me return to the matter of those who approach God out of fear. Before merging into traffic, I fasten my safety restraint harness. Why? I fear becoming another traffic fatality statistic. A justifiable fear of intruders is reason enough to bolt the doors while I sleep. I own a handgun for protection—and for those who loath the U.S. Constitution, save your hate mail. As long as criminals roam the streets, I will remain armed. I eat healthily and exercise routinely fearing heart disease. I work, in part, to avoid the ills of poverty and, being restless by nature, I fear idleness. Years ago, a fear of lung cancer motivated me to stop smoking. So, what if a person comes to God out of fear or for purely selfish reasons? If God is not too proud to accept these individuals, why should you object?

I have never known a man to marry a woman on wholly altruistic grounds. He may love her and place her happiness and well-being above his own, but unless his veins flow with ice water, he will expect his passions to be returned.

I have answered your question forthrightly and honestly. Now I will challenge you to set aside your opinions regarding the motivations of others and consider your personal reasons for either accepting or rejecting the Lord Jesus Christ.

Question 44: Though my drug abuse and sexually deviant days are behind me, I continue struggling with thoughts and dreams about my past behavior. I know Jesus has forgiven me, so why must I relive these painful memories over and over?

Answer: After seventy years, my father can vividly recall the horrors he witnessed on the battlefield. I have heard him speak of the unsettling sensation of machine gun bullets whizzing over his back even while seated in a recliner watching television with Mom. For

reasons we may never understand, the human mind's ability to store and replay our most nightmarish memories can haunt our days and nights.

Even though you are now living a drug-free, sexually pure life, you would do well to join a Celebrate Recovery group that meets weekly at a church near you. This Christ-centered program deals with all manner of addictive behavior and you will learn new ways of coping with old habits and hang-ups. If you are currently attending AA or NA meetings, you are getting regurgitated pep talks, but what is needed are wise biblical strategies. Say good-bye to secularism and pop psychology by joining other like-minded believers at Celebrate Recovery.

Continue pounding on the doors of God's Throne Room. Tell Him all about your sorrows. Be like the persistent widow in Luke 18:1-8. Do not give up and do not give in to despair. Remember, if you ask God for bread, He will not give you a stone.

I will advise you to renew your mind with systematic Bible study. I am speaking of more than light devotional reading. Be a diligent, faithful, enthusiastic student of God's word. Dig through the scriptures as if you were mining for gold. God's word is truth (Psalm 119) and by filling your mind with God's truths, these nightmarish images will be crowded out, so to speak.

Are you attending weekly worship services at a Christ-honoring, Bible-believing church? There is no substitute for church attendance. We forsake the assembling of our Christian sisters and brothers at our peril (Hebrews 10:25). Christianity is not a solitary religion. We are created for community.

The Apostle Paul suffered from an ongoing malady described as "a thorn in the flesh." His prayers for deliverance seemed to fall on deaf ears, but hear what the Apostle had to say:

And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be

exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Corinthians 12:7-10 NKJV).

Lean on Him. Let His strength be your strength. Do not grow weary in your prayers, Bible study, fellowshipping, and corporate worship, for if you stay the course and refuse to give in, you will reap a harvest of success (Galatians 6:9).

May the Lord bless you and keep you.

Question 45: I am a single male. I would love to meet a Christian woman and be married. Is my desire for companionship and sexual intimacy sinful?

Answer: Sex is not vulgar.

Sex is not dirty.

Sex is not obscene.

God created sex. This is His invention. To think of sex as some vulgar act is to denigrate one of God's greatest creative achievements.

Like His other gifts, sex can be misused. Sexual intercourse is reserved for a man and woman joined in marriage. Intercourse outside of these perimeters is forbidden by God.

Sexual arousal is no more sinful than a hunger for food—just make certain the menu is pleasing to the Lord!

Ask God to send a godly woman into your life. Fall in love with this lovely Christian woman, get married, and name your first child after me.

We are not diplomats but prophets, and our message is not a compromise but an ultimatum.

--A.W. Tozier

Question 46: I am a young Christian woman dating a man whose behavior might be considered narcissistic. Any advice?

Answer: Yes, I have some advice—dump the blighter!

Better to live in a musty attic than to share a home with a contentious, disagreeable spouse (Proverbs 21:9).

The term narcissist is based upon a mythological Greek character who fell in love with his own reflection. So, what are common traits of a narcissist? Here are some telltale characteristics:

- a grandiose sense of self-importance and unmatched superiority
- a preoccupation with fantasies about unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love
- a belief in their own special abilities and uniqueness
- a belief that they can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people or institutions
- a need for excessive admiration
- a sense of entitlement
- a need to be the center of attention

- a lack of empathy
- an envy toward others or a belief that others are envious of them
- a demonstration of arrogant and haughty behaviors or attitudes

Though I am not a psychologist, I am to understand sociopaths are extreme narcissists. During my years as a teacher of prison inmates, I worked with two brothers, both serving long sentences for a violent crime they jointly committed, who were classified as sociopaths. I was told these brothers were incapable of feeling any measure of empathy toward others.

Many years ago, I knew a young man whose hobby was herpetology. He kept venomous snakes. I am all in favor of hobbies, but one of his venomous snakes sunk a poison-filled fang into his finger and the finger had to be surgically removed.

I mention this unfortunate incident because keeping the company of a narcissist is much like maintaining the society of a poisonous snake. Friend, sooner or later, you will be bitten, and the bite is going to hurt. The best policy is to steer clear of those who are capable of loving only themselves.

Question 47: I am a young believer. It seems as though there is a lot of confusion about the Holy Spirit. Some Christians ignore Him. Others seem preoccupied by the Holy Spirit. Please help me sort through this confusion.

Answer: You have posed an interesting matter, my young friend!

I believe a proper understanding of the person and ministry of the Holy Spirit is woefully lacking among Christian believers. We cannot have "too much" of the Holy Spirit; rather, we are far more likely to disregard the Spirit's work in the life of a believer.

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

Religion is demanding. Religion shouts, “Work harder! Try harder! Do more! Be good! Be more than good—be better! Go! Go! Go!” Religion expects us to lift ourselves out of the mire, so to speak, and for those who fail to show signs of improvement, their only hope is to work harder, try harder, and do more, more, more! Oh, if you cannot lift yourself out of the pit, you will probably go to hell. This is religion. Do or die. Is this what we want? If so, there are literally thousands of world religions, cults. and isms ready to crack the whip and run us through the gauntlet of a grueling, works-based regimen.

I am a borderline workaholic and the son of a textbook workaholic. I find much satisfaction in work, but there is no way that I, or anyone else, can work long enough or hard enough to earn God’s favor. God demands absolute perfection. I cannot give Him absolute perfection. I might give Him a reasonably good effort, but He will not be satisfied by any less than complete and total perfection. As God demands total perfection, my lone hope is found in Christ Jesus. Only Christ Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life. Having placed my faith in Him as Savior, the righteousness of Christ is credited to me. The theological term for this is *imputation*. In practical terms, when God looks at me, He sees the immaculate righteousness of His Son. I cannot be good enough to please God, but by His grace, the perfect righteousness of Christ, which is credited to me, fully satisfies the exacting demands of our God. I cannot give God all that He demands, but Jesus can, and He will, and He does.

The world needs less religion and more of Jesus. According to Scripture, being good is never good enough, but being clothed in the righteousness of Christ is always good enough. Religion will not save us. Religion can only frustrate us, and, in the end, religion will do nothing but condemn us. Let us not frustrate the grace of God with the exhausting demands of mere religion.

Through the power of the Holy Spirit, our lives will be fruitful—fulfilling, satisfying,

meaningful, and purposeful. On our own, we are nothing and our lives will be spent in vain, but empowered by God's Holy Spirit, our lives will shine with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

(Jesus said) I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing (John 15:5 NASB).

God knows that, on our own, you and I are incapable of producing spiritual fruit that calms our souls, brings comfort to others, and honors Christ Jesus. Apart from Him, we are like a small heap of dead twigs, but when we abide in Him and He in us, we bear much fruit.

What is the secret of living a successful Christian life? There is no secret. We are to draw close to Him and allow the Spirit of God to transform us into the likeness of our great God and Savior.

Do not quench the Spirit (I Thessalonians 5:19 NKJV).

Do you recall the story in which Peter, upon seeing the Lord Jesus walking on water, climbs out of the boat and treads along the waves in a like manner (Matthew 14)? Peter does well until he takes his eyes off Jesus. At the risk of stating the obvious, we begin to sink into the depths of life's trying circumstances the moment we take our eyes off Jesus. Removing our focus from Jesus quenches the life-calming work of the Spirit. We cannot be at peace when our gaze is steadfastly locked upon the neighbor who angered us, the employer who humiliated us, the spouse who wounded us, the child who mocked us, or a past that haunts us. We quench the Spirit when we focus on the illness rather than the Great Physician. We quench the Spirit when we yield to negativity. We quench the Spirit when we turn to our stock portfolio for comfort. We quench the Spirit by giving in to our lusts and ungodly desires. We quench the Spirit when wallowing in past guilt. We quench the Spirit when we give our attention to Hollywood while ignoring the voice of God speaking to us from the pages of the scriptures and in prayer.

But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him (I Corinthians 6:17 NASB).

The moment you or I shift our focus from Jesus, we quench the work of God's Holy Spirit; conversely, we become one spirit with Him when we join ourselves to Him. This intimacy with the Savior eases our anxieties, calms our fears, and soothes our rattled emotions. Having drawn close to Jesus, the Spirit of God is free to mend the brokenness in the lives of the hurting, suffering believers. Of course, those who insist on clinging to a pettiness of mind will stifle the ministry of God's Holy Spirit. In doing so, the anger will remain, the hurt will keep hurting, the anxiety will continue eroding the soul, and the spiritual growth for which we long will be stunted. Surely, it is far better to join ourselves closely to Him.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new (II Corinthians 5:17 NKJV).

Because of my age, I am frequently drawn to relics from my youth. But old is not always good. My old way of living was unpleasing to God. My old way of thinking blinded me to truth. My old habits were destructive. My old life was marked with doubt, fear, anger, and failure. True, in the past, I had more hair and less stomach, but as far as the "good old days" are concerned, they were not so good.

Through Christ Jesus, we are made new. We can, of course, insist on clinging to past hurts, past doubts, past habits, past fears, and past emotions, but why quench the Spirit when He would make us new, whole, and better than ever? In this newness comes joy. God is the Author of joy. He would not have us groveling about as joyless, hopeless, dirty-faced beggars unloved and unwanted. Such is not His will for our lives. C.S. Lewis wrote, "No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened." We must choose between quenching the Spirit by holding fast to the miseries of the past or by allowing the Spirit to bring about a renewal in our lives.

As we wrap up our discussion, please allow me to make this final point: There is no strict methodology to personal growth and emotional healing. That which draws us closer to Jesus Christ should be encouraged. That which distances us from the Savior should be shunned.

Let us abandon methodology and, instead, embrace Jesus Christ. We do not need another program—we need the One who is mighty to save.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus surrounded Himself with twelve carefully chosen disciples, but of the twelve, only three, Peter, James, and John, were in His inner circle of friends. Matthew, Thomas, Andrew, and the other disciples were on-hand to witness stunning miracles, sat under the divine teachings of the world's greatest intellect, and helped turn the world upside down with the radical message of grace, but for all that they saw with their eyes and did with their hands, it was Peter, James, and John who enjoyed a rare, heart-to-heart level of intimacy with their Master that very few will ever know. At the risk of sounding lofty and even presumptuous, I want to know Jesus in the same manner of Peter, James, and John. Is this possible? I am not there yet, but with God, there are no impossibilities.

Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.

--John Wesley

Question 48: I am passionate about automobiles, but should we be concerned with pollution caused by fossil fuels?

Answer: Sunday afternoon, I met a man and woman driving a '69 Road Runner and a '70 Cuda. I was almost drooling as I eyed these two classic muscle cars; I am an older guy, so these machines are straight out of my generation. If you are unfamiliar with the Plymouth Road Runner and Barracuda, let me suggest you Google these two mystical, magical, mighty, marvelous Mopar muscle cars and see what the fuss is all about!

I am amazed that some of the so-called critics of fossil fuels live in palatial mansions and tool about in jets. My carbon footprint is much smaller than Al Gore's carbon footprint. And I do not spend my time scolding and lecturing others. What a pack of politically-correct phonies! Ugh!

As Christians, we understand that the planet was created by our Father. We should respect His handiwork and avoid wasting our resources. Even so, let us be prudent, but not fanatical. Fifty years ago, we were warned that fossil fuels had nearly been depleted. This, of course, was an untrue statement. Fifty years ago, the so-called experts also warned that an ice age was coming. Fifty years passed without an ice age. These climate change fanatics do not understand real science. Thus far, their predictions have been woefully lacking!

Be responsible and respect our planet, but it is okay to enjoy cars. As for me, I have been dreaming about that Road Runner!

Question 49: I made a promise to God and then I broke that promise. What will happen?

Answer: Oh, my! I knew a young man, just about your age, who broke a vow and a week later, his eyeballs turned orange, hair grew out of his ears, and he could not sing *Amazing Grace* without stuttering. His girlfriend left him, and, in disgrace, he moved to Lower Slobovia, joined the circus, and was never to be heard from again. Only kidding! Only kidding!

King Solomon wrote, “It is better that you should not vow than that you should vow and not pay (Ecclesiastes 5:5 ESV).” We ought not make vain promises to God or anyone else.

Even so, let me assure you that God is not angry with you. As the future is no mystery to Him, He knew you would not keep your promise. As such, you have disappointed no one but yourself.

Am I saying God took no notice of your broken vow? No. Breaking promises is a serious matter, but God does not harbor resentments. Confess your sin to Him. Tell Him what you did. He already knows, of course, but when you confess the breaking of this promise, you are agreeing with Him that your misdeed was wrong.

Jesus said our “yes” should mean “yes” and our “no” should mean “no” (Matthew 5:37). Believers should not speak out of both sides of their mouths as do phonies and hypocrites.

Aren’t you glad that God is quick to forgive?

Question 50: Did God make mosquitoes?

Answer: When I was a kid, and that was a long time ago, I considered summer to be the grandest season of the year. Now that I am the age of your grandparents, I still think summer is wonderful! I love the long days, balmy evenings, and warm weather activities such as baseball and picnics. But with summer comes mosquitoes and mosquitoes are annoying pests that behave as though we should share out blood with them! Ugh! The red swollen bumps they leave on our skin are bad enough, but mosquitoes spread disease and death in many parts of the world.

So, why would a good God create mosquitoes?

When God created the earth, He looked at His creation and said that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). The world of Adam and Eve was paradise. No illness. No disease. No hunger. No crime. No suffering. And no mosquitoes!

Today, we still live in a beautiful world and there is much wonderment around us, but our planet is no longer paradise. There is hunger and disease and suffering and death and, yes, there are swarms of mosquitoes creating their own special brand of mischief. What happened?

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and brought sin into the world, our planet was placed under a curse (Genesis 3:17). The Apostle Paul said that our planet groans under the burden of sin (Romans 8:19-25). Sin, not pollution or climate change, is our world's greatest enemy.

But the good news is that Jesus is coming back, and when He returns, He is going to set everything right once again. In other words, King Jesus is going to fix our broken planet. There are so many Bible passages about His future kingdom, I hardly know where to begin, but two of my favorites are Isaiah 60 and the final two chapters in Revelation.

Under the reign of King Jesus, there will be no wars or hunger or poverty. Children will live in safety. No child will go to bed hungry. No child will suffer from illness. The earth will become paradise once again. And that will be the end of those pesky mosquitoes!

Until King Jesus returns, let us pray, study the Bible, worship God, share the Gospel with others, show kindness and compassion to our neighbors, work hard in school, honor our parents, and keep a bottle of mosquito repellent on hand for those glorious summer picnics!

How wonderful it is to be a follower of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! No matter what happens today, we live in the assurance that our future shines brightly with His unbreakable promises!

Question 51: Please explain the difference between God's love of the world in general and His love of those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus as Savior.

Answer: Say, have I ever told you about my daughter Hannah? Of course, I have not, for we do not know each other, but since you are here, let me tell you about my girl. She has an IQ that is through the roof! Smart? This girl has brains to spare! And talk about gifted! She is an artist who has a flair for color and design. When I was her age, I was wandering aimlessly about with a mess of bleached hair brushing my shoulders and an electric guitar dangling around my neck, but Hannah's ambition, if I may borrow from a Shakespearean quote, "is made of sterner stuff." Friend, I do not make a lot of money, but if Hannah had a need, up to half my kingdom would be hers. She is my daughter and I love her.

For nine years, I was a chaplain in a homeless shelter. I was attached to some of our resident clients. There were those in our care scarcely more than children, in their late teens or early twenties, who had lost their way through the abuse of drugs and alcohol. I was good to them. From time to time, I bought candy or little gifts out of my salary. I cared about them. I wanted them to succeed. I demonstrated love in ways appropriate for a clergyman, but I never offered any of them up to half my kingdom.

If Hannah needed a kidney, she could have one of mine. In fact, I would take a bullet for that girl any day of the week. You may be a decent sort of person, but if you asked me for a kidney, I would say, "Yes, you may have one of my kidneys, but you must first wait for me to die. At that point, you can have both of them!"

My love for Hannah is higher and loftier than my love for others. She is, after all, my daughter.

Maybe, in a rough and ready sort of way, I have illustrated the two levels of God's love. Yes, He loves the world. God sends rain to grow the crops. God directs the sun

over the horizon each morning so that the world does not turn into an ice ball. He gives us radiant sunsets and sweet, juicy blackberries and the uplifting sounds of birds singing and distant stars to light the night sky and majestic redwood trees and all manner of good gifts. Even hardened atheists can enjoy delicious foods and glorious sunrises and the happy sounds of children playing.

But God has a special love for those who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. I can be a cranky old blighter at times, but God looks at me with a smile and says, "I love Michael. He is one of mine. I have plans for Michael. Plans to prosper him—not to harm him. I have plans to give him hope and a future. Yes, Michael is one of my kids and the devil will never steal him from Me."

If you are a believer, and I will assume that you are, God's love for you is greater than you will ever know in this lifetime. On the other hand, God is good to those who shun Him, but the Apostle Paul called such people *children of wrath*. If they do not accept His merciful love, the day will come when they must accept His judgment.

We who are saved are in God's inner circle. This is a good place to be, but we are not here by our own merit. We are saved because Jesus took a bullet for us, so to speak, two thousand years ago. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends (John 15:13 KJV).

God loves the world, but He has a special place in His heart for those of us who cling to Christ Jesus as Savior. The day will come when He calls us home to live eternally with Him.

Today, may you and I be particularly mindful of and take great pleasure in His lavish, sacrificial love.

Question 52: Who is Lucifer? Was he a good angel who turned bad? When did his evil transformation occur? How did he turn Adam and Eve against God?

Answer: You have asked an interesting series of questions; let us first begin with the Fall of Lucifer. Referring to the New King James Version, let us read of this account in Isaiah 14:

“How you are fallen from heaven,
O Lucifer, son of the morning!
How you are cut down to the ground,
You who weakened the nations!
For you have said in your heart:
'I will ascend into heaven,
I will exalt my throne above the stars of God;
I will also sit on the mount of the congregation
On the farthest sides of the north;
I will ascend above the heights of the clouds,
I will be like the Most High.'

Yet you shall be brought down to Sheol,
To the lowest depths of the Pit.

When did this occur? When did Lucifer, a splendidly beautiful angel, seek to usurp God's authority? The Bible does not say, but I will assume that Lucifer was expelled from Heaven before Adam's creation.

Lucifer's rebellion was motivated by pride. He craved the glory and adoration that belongs to God alone. The proper office of any created being is to worship its Creator, but this fallen angel wants what belongs to God. Satan desires God's glory for himself. He is a boastful, prideful, and incredibly cunning devil who wages war against God and His people.

In the opening pages of Genesis, we read of the paradise God created for the first couple, Adam and Eve. Adam and Eve knew no illness, faced no risks from injury or disease, had no fear of foreign invaders, or reason to worry about a lack of material needs. Additionally, they enjoyed an intimate fellowship with their Creator. The Bible also tells us that Adam and Eve had dominion over the earth. Do not fall into the trap of believing that the first couple was ignorant or childlike--of the six billion people who live on earth today, there is not a more perfect couple, intellectually and physically, than Adam and Eve. And do not fall into the foolish belief that they were glorified gardeners. As God had given them dominion over the earth, Adam and Eve possessed powers that are beyond the understanding and reach of today's earth dwellers.

Sadly, their desire to upstage God's authority led to the Fall and the curse of sin ended the paradisal state of the planet. Stripped of their immortality and steeped in sin, the original glory from their creation departed Adam and Eve. By the time we reach the fourth chapter, we learn that the sin nature had now infected Adam and Eve's offspring.

Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, "I have gotten a man with the help of the Lord." And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a worker of the ground. In the course of time Cain brought to the Lord an offering of the fruit of the ground, and Abel also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard. So Cain was very angry, and his face fell. The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry, and why has your face fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is contrary to you, but you must rule over it."

Cain spoke to Abel his brother. And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" He said, "I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What

have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground (Genesis 4:1-10 ESV).

This passage raises a lot of questions. As examples, why were sacrifices offered? Why did God, who accepted Abel's sacrifice, refuse Cain's offering? Throughout the Bible, we learn that, without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness of sin (Hebrews 9:22). As people with an inborn sin nature, we tend to take the matter of sin rather lightly, but sin is wholly repulsive to our Creator. How can I say this? If you will pardon the figurative language, sin makes God sick to His stomach. Because of the immaculate purity of His divine nature, our Creator God recoils from sin in total disgust. Do not be foolish in thinking that God is too delicate or overly sensitive--the problem is that we are entirely comfortable in our sin. In spite of our often cavalier attitude toward sin, sin is serious business and only the shedding of blood can bring about the forgiveness of sin.

With this said, Cain offered God a bloodless sacrifice. Although his mother and father's sin had brought an end to earth's paradisal state as well as their own immortality, Cain most likely considered the matter of sin's ravages against the people and the planet they inhabited as inconsequential; this we know with certainty: Cain's bloodless sacrifice was unpleasing to God. On the other hand, Abel's sacrifice was a foreshadowing of the ultimate sacrifice made by our Lord Jesus on that cruel Roman cross--the perfect sacrifice, wholly pleasing to God, who takes away our sin.

In his anger, Cain slew his younger brother Abel.

Mankind's history is punctuated by wars, killing, cruelty, greed, avarice, and injustice. Satan is the god of this world and, indeed, his hand is in all that is evil, and he has billions of willing accomplices who would crucify the Lord Jesus all over again if they could.

Now for the good news: read the two final chapters of Revelation and learn for yourself how Satan and his armies are defeated. Yes, in the end, our side wins!

Question 53: Was it wrong for Abram to invite Lot to the land promised to him by God?

Answer: You have asked an interesting question. One of my favorite Bible teachers, the late Dr. J. Vernon McGee, believed Abram was wrong in bringing Lot with him and I will assume that many other good teachers agree with Dr. McGee. As for me, I am not so eager to criticize Abram for inviting Lot along for the journey. I base this on a passage in Hebrews:

By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:8-10 NASB).

Hebrews 11:8 says Abraham, when he was called, *obeyed* by going. Nothing in this passage indicates that the patriarch had acted disobediently. Additionally, the Apostle Peter referred to Lot as a righteous man.

Admittedly, Abraham was not without fault, but he lived an exemplary life and is a sterling example of a man who believed the promises of God. If only I were more like him!

Question 54: I am struggling to understand God's plan and what I am meant to do. I am in college, and during my first year, Leah and I became close. Our relationship had its ups and downs, but God always led us back together and stronger than we had been before. Then, near the end of last semester, we parted company. This was her decision. I began the new semester determined not to rekindle our relationship. After a little while, I started to feel that God was leading me to speak to her again, but I did not want to, so I ignored these feelings. For weeks, it kept eating at me, and as I read my Bible, prayed,

and thought about it, I asked God for a direct yes or no: a sign to tell me if this was what He wanted me to do. I understand that asking God for signs is not a reliable means of discerning His will, for natural phenomena can be easily misconstrued as a divine response and this can lead a spiritually immature person into a dilemma. Well, I finally broke down and began a conversation with her after God “gave me a sign.” You see, my alarm clock was malfunctioning, so I asked God to wake me up at exactly 8 AM and He did. Maybe He did. I was awake at 8 AM without an alarm rousing me out of bed. Next, I “just happened” to run into Leah at the library. What are the chances of that? We had a brief but friendly conversation. If reuniting with Leah was God’s idea, I asked Him to let me know by arranging another chance meeting with her. A couple of weeks later, I “just happened” to see Leah again in the library. We had another pleasant, though brief, conversation. I could not help but thinking God was arranging these meetings. I then ran into Leah in the cafeteria. We had another friendly conversation. This made me think God was orchestrating these “chance” encounters. Everything was going well, and we began meeting and talking on a routine basis, and then something happened. Leah became angry and spoke rudely to me. I was dumbfounded. Later, she half-apologized saying she had been dealing with some other issues. I accepted her apology, but a week later, when I ran into her at the library and told her I believed God was bringing us back together, she became upset and said she did not want to see me or speak with me again. What is going on? I believe God was arranging these “chance” meetings with Leah, but now Leah will not even acknowledge a friendly hello. She wants nothing to do with me. The Bible says God is not the author of confusion, so why all this confusion? I am at a loss.

Answer: My young friend, I fear you may have sought advice from the wrong person, for I am a grouchy old bachelor who wouldn’t know a cupid’s arrow if it struck me in the....well, we shan’t go there.

All this talk about signs and heartbreak and young love certainly brought back a flood of memories from my youth. I believe I could have written a similar letter to yours forty years ago. Of course, the pretty young girls who were forever breaking my heart are now

frumpy old grandmothers with yippy little dogs squirming in their expansive laps. Makes me glad I am a cranky old bachelor.

You appear to be a decent sort of fellow and I would not want to injure your feelings for all the love-potion in the world, but I am hard pressed to believe these signs are, in fact, signs. On the contrary, I rather suspect you are reading too much into coincidence and circumstance.

I will agree that God is not the author of confusion, but I would say your interpretation of these so-called signs is wistful.

I am reminded of a story about a man who believed it was God's will that he swap the faithful old Buick station wagon for something newer and sportier. On the morning he intended to shop for a new car, he noted the sun's bright yellow radiance. As he sipped his morning coffee from a bright yellow mug, he smiled thinking how adorable his wife appeared in her frilly yellow nightgown. He then noted the bright yellow yokes of the breakfast eggs and sensed the pleasing scent of the yellow lemons in the fruit bowl. When he arrived at the dealership, the salesman who greeted him was wearing a bright yellow tie. "It must be God's will," he thought, "for me to buy a yellow car." And he did. He bought a sporty yellow convertible. The car turned out to be a lemon. So much for signs.

If you love this girl, stop playing around with signs and chance meetings. Simply tell her you love her. If she is not interested, honor her wishes and leave her alone.

I suppose I am going to sound like an old guy, but I am an old guy, so put up with me a few moments longer. Focus on your relationship with Jesus Christ. Spend more time in the Bible and more time in prayer. As you are a college student, double-down on your studies. You cannot be an honor student if you are giddy with romance. Do not rush God. If Leah is not the right girl, God will send the right girl your way when the time is appropriate.

You impress me as being a bright, sincere young man. If I had a nineteen-year-old daughter who was ill-tempered, homely, and single, I would introduce you to her. Only kidding! Only kidding!

Okay, grow in Christ Jesus, make good grades, and memorize Jeremiah 29:11. And be careful about buying a yellow car or involving yourself with a temperamental girlfriend.

I wish you well, my lovestruck young friend.

Question 55: Where was God and what was He doing prior to creation?

Answer: You and I live in physical bodies. Unlike God, who is ever-present, our existence is confined to one place at any given moment in time. And speaking of time, you and I experience time successively. We live moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year. We experience time in a linear fashion.

God is not confined to a corporeal body. And God, who created time, exists outside of time. All times are present to God. He has no beginning. He has no end. God does not experience time moment by moment. God does not live within linear time, nor is God confined to one location.

Can we fully understand the other dimensional truths about God? No. We, who are finite creatures, cannot comprehend the One who has always been. Where was He before creation? Where was He *not*?

God will not be pinned down to a particular location or to a given point in time. He will not fit within whatever confines we might attempt to place Him.

We will do well to remember that God is not like us.

Have I answered your question? Probably not. But I have told you the truth.

Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.

--St. Augustine

Question 56: This is a strange question. When I was about five years old, I realized that stimulating my nipples was pleasant. I stopped doing it but recently, I have been reminded of it. A Christian website says nipples are sexual organs, so would the stimulation of my nipples outside of the marriage bed be sinful? I have never heard the topic addressed.

Answer: Anatomy is not my strong point. With that being said, I do not believe that nipples are sexual organs. The female breast may be a milk-producing organ, but to call the nipple a sexual organ sounds dodgy to me. Anyway, I am a Bible teacher. If you want a definitive answer about anatomy, talk to your doctor. Better yet, enroll in medical school and take an entire course on upper torso anatomy. Sounds fascinating to me...yawn!

So, you find massaging your nipples invigorating? Pleasant? I find steamy hot water, particularly my morning shower, to be pleasurable. I find a pot of steamy hot coffee after my steamy hot shower equally pleasurable. I have a thing about steamy hot water, with or without coffee beans. A pleasurable sensation does not necessarily mean the stimulation is erotic or, for that matter, sinful. Why do we think that pleasure equates to sin? The Psalms tell us that God is the Author of pleasure (Psalm 16). Admittedly, pleasures can be abused, but I am not your mother and I have not been called by God to tell you that massaging your nipples is a sin.

Almost anything can be erotic in someone's eyes. For example, I once dated a girl who admitted that wearing sleeveless garments made her "feel sexy." Shall we impose a ban on tank tops and sun dresses? Have women lost the right to bare arms? I have a male friend who said that women in tailored business suits were his particular fancy. Okay, shall we do away with women's business attire while we sew sleeves onto tank tops? Say, more than a few men are aroused by women's shoes. Now we ban tank tops, business attire, and Jimmy Choo heels, right? C'mon, this gets to be rather silly and I want no part of it!

Having read Orwell's *1984* more than once, let someone else play the role of a sanctified Big Brother. This is not my office.

Question 57: Isn't it enough that I believe in God without accepting Christianity's set of cumbersome and often confusing doctrines?

Answer: There is a vast difference between believing in God and believing God. One who believes in God is not an atheist. Guess what? Satan is not an atheist, so simply believing in the existence of a divine creator will not get you far. Believing God is altogether different. Those who believe God have faith in His word. He tells us to place our hope in Jesus Christ as Savior. Those who are saved believe the Gospel, that is, their faith is in the historic fact that Jesus died on a cruel Roman cross for their sins and physically arose from the grave three days after His burial.

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to

the present, but some have fallen asleep. After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time (I Corinthians 15:1-8 NKJV).

Do you believe this? Do you believe Jesus Christ died for our sins? Is your eternal hope based on the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus? If so, you belong to Him and the matter of your salvation has been settled.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this *is* not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9 NASB).

Salvation is a gift that cannot be earned; let us cast out nonsense that says eternal life is a paycheck for being a good person or, for that matter, being a deist who believes in the existence of God. Believe God. Believe His word. Let us not complicate God's plan of salvation through vain philosophical meanderings or by tacking on the rites, rituals, and rules of mere religion. Salvation is based on what God has done for us and not what we are to do for Him. Let there be no confusion. Let there be no distorting the truth. Is your trust in Him rather than in some philosophical argument or in a solemn church ceremony or in the performance of good works? If you answered "no," you are only a heartbeat from damnation, but if you said "yes," you are a born-again believer who has been adopted into God's kingdom. A born-again believer can never become "unborn." You belong to Him forever more.

This is not the end of the story, for after the rebirth comes sanctification, that is, the transformation of the believer into the likeness of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:6), but the matter of one's right standing with God is forever settled. After this, we can talk doctrine.

Question 58: In God's universal grand scheme, do our prayers really matter? As I see it, He has already decided what He will do, and our input is not necessary.

Answer: In the 1960's, network television gave men of all ages their ultimate fantasy—a drop-dead gorgeous blonde genie in a bottle capable of granting her master's every wish and desire. To be sure, this genie was a looker! And when the master found himself occupied with other matters, his stunningly beautiful grantor of wishes waited patiently in her commodious bottle until needed. As an adolescent, I gravitated to the show, *I Dream of Jeannie*, with no small measure of wistful fondness. The TV production was not without its humorous situations, but I tuned in because Barbara Eden was among the most beautiful women who ever graced the small screen. I was not alone. Each week, millions of the male species, from fourteen to ninety-four, were fixed in front of their televisions. As I said, Barbara Eden could turn heads at fifty paces, and we could not get enough of her. Deep down, we all wished for our own genies. But what does Barbara Eden and genies have to do with prayer?

I think many people regard God as a genie—a divine grantor of wishes. Try imagining how many times a day Father God receives these outrageous requests:

- "Lord, let me buy the winning lottery ticket!"
- "Lord, my Chevy is looking a bit shopworn. How about a Lamborghini?"
- "Lord, I really need a six-bedroom house in a gated community! After all, I might get married and have lots of kids one day!"
- "Lord, I was too busy to study. Please give me an A on today's calculus exam."
- "Lord, I need to lose twenty pounds, but please don't ask me to give up jelly donuts."
- "Lord, please don't let the pastor find out that it was me who started the rumor about his wife and the music director."
- "Lord, please don't let the boss notice that I took a three hour lunch."
- "Lord, even though I was doing sixty in a twenty-five mile per hour zone, please don't let that angry looking cop give me a ticket."
- "Lord, even though I only have \$15.29 in my checking account, please don't let my rent payment bounce."
- "Lord, can you make my wife/husband look like _____?"

Friend, I could pray every hour on the hour for ten years, but God is not going to make me look like Brad Pitt or George Clooney.

So why bother to pray? In Matthew 7:7, 8, Jesus commands us to pray. If the Lord Jesus says we are to pray, we are to pray. But when we make our requests in Jesus' name, our requests should be of a nature that brings glory to God (John 14:13, 14).

When my daughter was a wee one, I did not give her everything she wanted. Frankly, some of her requests would have been harmful to her growth and development. Friend, I am an old blister with a lot of miles on my biological odometer, but if I make a childish request that is not in my best interest, God will give my muddle-minded petition the old heave-ho. At times, God's most gracious response is denying a foolish prayer request.

This matter is much too large for whatever few paragraphs I might offer, so let me make some suggestions. Armed with a concordance, begin researching verses pertaining to prayer. Keep a prayer journal. Write down your requests and record how God responds. You will be amazed at what you discover.

Many years ago, I made a series of foolish errors with my federal income tax returns. It was not my intention to cheat the government, for at the time, I was not making much money and my tax liability was small, but, nonetheless, I grossly mishandled my tax filings. I will not go into detail, but I might have found myself in real hot water with the IRS. Believe me, I was scared. Frightfully scared. More than once, I dreamed of stern-faced federal agents at my door! I was so fearful, I could do nothing. You might say I was paralyzed. God came to my rescue. In His mercy, I was able to resolve my issue with the IRS and I even received a refund! A refund! Instead of a judgment or a garnishment or even worse, I was given money back! And this was God's doing!

That was many, many years ago, but I will never forget how God rescued me from the mess I had made. Oh, for the record, I file my taxes on time and I am careful to see that everything on the forms is just right!

I wanted to attend seminary. God answered that prayer. I wanted to enter full time ministry. God answered that prayer. I wanted a good relationship with my daughter. God answered that prayer. I wanted my mom to survive bone marrow cancer. God answered that prayer. I wanted a Jeep Wrangler—red with a five speed manual transmission and big knobby tires. I am still waiting on the Jeep. Perhaps God thinks my present buggy is sufficient. It is.

My friend, if you never bother to learn about prayer, you will cheat yourself out of a storehouse of blessings. I have told you a little about prayer. If you are wise, you will begin pouring over the scriptures and making life-altering discoveries on your own.

Question 59: I feel cold and indifferent. I do not read my Bible. I do not pray. I feel spiritually numb. Does this mean that my name has been removed from the Book of Life?

Answer: A husband sat down on the sofa and turned on the television. A few moments later, his wife walked in and took a seat on a recliner. During a commercial break, the wife looked wistfully at her husband and said, “I remember a time when you and I would cuddle together on the sofa.”

Without missing a beat, the husband answered, “I’m still here. You are the one who moved.”

When our fellowship with God is broken and we are distanced from Him, we can be assured that it was not He who moved.

In *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis wrote of the peaks and valleys we experience in our walk. Many believers go through times of spiritual dryness followed by times of spiritual renewal. This rollercoaster ride may be caused by laziness, that is, we close our Bibles, mutter mechanical prayers, and sleep through the pastor’s sermon, or the ups and

downs might be the result of physiological maladies. Insomnia, hypertension, or digestive problems can also adversely affect an individual's outlook. Regardless of the reason, recognizing this feeling of spiritual dryness should have us pounding on God's Throne Room seeking relief.

Let me remind you that a believer's salvation is based on fact rather than feeling. Feelings can be deceiving.

If you are a born-again believer, your name has not been removed from the Book of Life. No one who has been saved is ever "unsaved."

When I was a boy, I lived in fear of losing my salvation. I would pray, "Lord, You know the future. If I am saved today, but I will lose my salvation later in life, please take me now. I would rather die young and go to Heaven than to be an old man on his way to Hell. Oh, if you kill me now, please let it be painless." Maybe this sounds funny, but I lived under that proverbial sword of Damocles and this is no way for a believer to live.

(Jesus said,) "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one (John 10:27-30 NKJV emphasis mine)."

No one can snatch you out of your Heavenly Father's hand, and no one includes you. Friend, there is no eraser big enough to remove your name from the Book of Life, for your name has been indelibly written by a pen dipped in the Blood of Christ Jesus.

Isn't it wonderful that He is faithful even when we are unfaithful?

What am I going to tell you beyond this? Read your Bible? Pray frequently? Stop snoozing while your pastor speaks? You already know to do this.

Go to the Lord and tell Him of your indifference. Tell Him that you long to be near Him. Tell Him that you miss the intimacy you once enjoyed. I do not think your prayer will fall on deaf ears.

Question 60: The Bible speaks of the heart of man being deceitful and wicked. How, then, can a corrupt being respond favorably to the Gospel message?

Answer: My friend, you have posed an interesting question; relying upon the clear teachings of the scriptures and God's good grace, we will explore the implications of this matter.

"The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it (Jeremiah 17:9 NASB)?

Adolf Hitler never thought of himself as an evil man; on the contrary, he said the German people did not deserve one so brilliant as himself. Without God, sinful people fancy themselves as wise and wonderful. They are deceived by their own corrupt hearts. Their deceitful hearts tell them that evil is good and good is evil. Without the influence of God, man is a loathsome, morally sick creature.

No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day (John 6:44 NASB).

Unless God intervened, we would have nothing to do with Him. Thankfully, He graciously steps in on our behalf. The Holy Spirit convicts us of our sin and the Father draws lost sinners like you and me to His Son, Jesus Christ. We have all three Persons of the Triune Godhead working for our salvation. Yes, our hearts are evil continually, but when the Spirit of God draws us out of the spiritual darkness, we can respond to God's gift of

salvation. When we are born-again, we receive a new nature—and with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our hearts are no longer evil continually. No, we are not sinless at this point, but the process of sanctification, that is, being made into the likeness of Jesus Christ, is already at work (Philippians 1:6).

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8, 9 NASB).

The doctrine of grace sets Christianity apart from all other faith systems—and this frees us from a need to peddle magazines door to door as do Jehovah's Witnesses, aim our prayers toward a certain compass heading as do Muslims, or clothe ourselves with some religiously significant underwear as is the custom of some Mormons. Salvation is a gift rather than a paycheck.

In his instructions to the church in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul was abundantly clear that salvation is a gift that cannot be earned—by faith, one merely opens his or her hands to receive God's gift of eternal life. Prior to his understanding that "the just shall live by faith," Martin Luther, then a zealous monk, did all that was in his power to earn God's favor through around the clock good works. "I was a good monk, and I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer, I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading, and other work...I almost fasted myself to death, for again and again I went for three days without taking a drop of water or a morsel of food. I was very serious about it."

As if the scales dropped from his eyes, Martin Luther came to understand that salvation is a gift that is received by faith. At this revelation, this fanatical monk, wearied by his efforts in self-righteousness, abandoned all attempts of earning God's favor through the futility of meritorious works. "Hereby it appears that the doctrine of the gospel (which of all others is most sweet and full of most singular consolation) speaks nothing of our works

or of the works of the law, but of the inscrutable mercy and love of God towards most wretched and miserable sinners. Our most merciful Father, seeing us to be oppressed and overwhelmed with the curse of the law, and that we could never be delivered from it of our own power, sent His only Son into the world and laid upon Him all the sins of all men, saying, be Thou Peter that denier; Paul that persecutor and cruel oppressor; David that adulterer; that sinner who did eat the fruit in Eden; that thief who hanged upon the cross, and be Thou that person who has committed the sins of all me; see therefore, that Thou pay and satisfy for them."

No one has a right to boast of his or her righteousness. If we boast, we had better boast of our Lord Jesus, who was crucified to pay our sin debt.

My friend, you and I must take on the attitude of beggars who have found a source of bread--and now we must share this bounty with other beggars. But we must also take on the attitude of children adopted into God's family. As such, we are welcome in God's Throne Room at all times and He is never too busy for us.

He loves us, not because we are good, but because He is good. Again, if we are to boast, let us boast of Him rather than ourselves.

Have I sufficiently answered your question? I hope that I have!

Go and serve our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, my friend!

Question 61: Referring to Jesus' parable in Matthew 25, what became of the unprofitable servant?

Answer: Let us begin by examining the text.

(Jesus said.) "For it is just like a man about to go on a journey, who called his own slaves and entrusted his possessions to them. To one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. Immediately the one who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and gained five more talents. In the same manner the one who had received the two talents gained two more. But he who received the one talent went away, and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money.

"Now after a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. The one who had received the five talents came up and brought five more talents, saying, 'Master, you entrusted five talents to me. See, I have gained five more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

"Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.'

"And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground. See, you have what is yours.'

"But his master answered and said to him, 'You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow and gather where I scattered no seed. Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my money back with interest. Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.'

"For to everyone who has, more shall be given, and he will have an abundance; but

from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. Throw out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:14-30 NASB).

I know of many people who are great at turning a profit, yet their lives do not reflect devotion to Jesus Christ, so I do not believe this parable is simply a lesson in wise investing.

Perhaps a key to a proper understanding of our Lord's parable is found in the phrase, "...enter into the joy of your master." We were created for joy and, to be sure, God is the Author of joy. We may find momentary happiness in the world's offerings, but the world cannot give lasting joy. We see this in the celebrities who, after achieving all the world has to offer, take their own lives. Their success turned to ashes and the happiness they sought withered away. Only Jesus can offer real, lasting joy.

The first two servants, faithful to their master, entered into his joy. The third servant, a worthless sort of fellow, insulted his master and was sent away.

In 1989, I bowed to Jesus and asked Him to be my Savior. Friend, that was over thirty years ago and, since my conversion, my life has been for the better. This is not to say I have traveled merrily along life these past thirty plus years without encountering roadblocks, potholes, obstacles, and detours, but after being born-again, my life took on meaning and purpose hitherto unknown. I know who I am, why I am here, and where I am going. My life is centered on Him. Friend, there is joy in belonging to Christ Jesus.

I shared the Gospel with an old friend shortly after my conversion; though he was polite and listened to my message, he had no use for the Gospel. It was as if he took the good news of the Gospel and buried it in a hole and covered the hole with dirt. And, friend, he has lived a life that would hardly be described as joyful. Oh, I am not giving up on him and, in fact, I believe the day will come when he will repent of his old ways and turn to

Jesus for salvation, but you and I are well aware that many people walk away after hearing the Gospel.

By God's grace, I have had many thrilling opportunities to serve Christ Jesus. I am not a five talent Christian, but maybe I am a two talent servant. Anyway, for all my shortcomings, I have never buried the Gospel in a hole. I have turned a modest profit for my Master. What joy there is in serving Him!

Say, is there joy in your life? Are you making good use of all that God has given you?

Question 62: The Bible speaks of male giants, but were there female giants, too?

Answer: Imagine this scene at the Philistine Hospital. Having just delivered a young couple's baby boy, the doctor says, "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Anakin! You are the proud parents of a thirty-six pound, nine ounce baby boy! He's quite a big, strapping fellow! Have you settled upon a name?"

Mrs. Anakin replied, "We like the name Goliath!"

The doctor nodded and said, "Goliath is a fine name! Your son might do well in the military. I would imagine the Philistine army would be proud to have your son battling the Israelites. And if not, the Green Bay Packers might be interested in him for his size! Anyway, you have a fine, hefty son and when he grows up, he will make a name for himself!"

Okay, so Goliath's birth may not have occurred quite like this, but I would think that as there were male giants, there may have been female giants, too.

I am personally inclined to believe giants were more common prior to the flood.

As I have not fully formulated my beliefs about giants (though I believe they existed), let me suggest video teachings by Dr. Chuck Missler and Dr. Henry Morris on the topic of giants. I greatly respect both of these brilliant teachers.

This much is certain, Goliath's great size did him no good when David faced him, and when God is with you and me, we will overcome the giant-sized challenges that stand in our way! Right? Amen!

Question 63: How do we distinguish a genuine Christian from a counterfeit Christian?

Answer: Obviously, you and I do not want to be misled by false teachers and, friend, there are many wolves in sheep's clothing in front of TV cameras or behind pulpits and lecterns. Too, we do not want to marry or enter into a business partnership with a pseudo-Christian.

I once befriended a man visiting our church. He appeared to be a spiritual giant. I watched the tears flow as he petitioned the Lord for the souls of lost women and men. Perhaps a year later, he married a lovely young single mother of three adorable boys and, almost overnight, he proved to be an abusive husband and father. Never have I met such a phony in my life.

His estranged wife told me of the abuse and his contempt for the people in our church. She described him as nothing less than evil. Sadly, our pastor got a glimpse into the true nature of this human chameleon before the wedding, but he performed the ceremony regardless thinking the young man would change. If anything, the man in question went from bad to worse.

Here is my point: The young man appeared so genuine—so real. I had believed him to be a solid, mature Christian and I am not easily fooled. For that matter, I tend to be somewhat skeptical until I have reason to set aside my doubt.

It is not our office to sit in judgment of everyone we meet. I have a relative, now deceased, who believed she had a supernatural ability to know who was genuinely saved and who was not. Knowing her as I did, I rather doubt the validity of her so-called “spiritual discernment.” She was something of a religious kook. If this sounds harsh, please forgive me, but she predicted the Rapture in 2012 and, obviously, her “thus saith the Lord prophecy” crumbled into a heap of disrepute. If you have any doubt about the Lord’s contempt for false prophets, please read Jeremiah 28.

But, again, I do not think it is our duty to say who is saved and who is not saved. God knows who is genuine and who is counterfeit. We must reject teachers who spew out nonsense and, again, we do not want to build binding relationships with phony believers, but we can be content knowing the Lord knows His own.

You see, we run the risk of setting ourselves up as standards of righteousness. We tend to doubt the sincerity of those who do not measure up to ourselves. This is dangerous. If the lady in the next pew or the deacon passing the collection plate has a trait or a tendency or a quirk that offends us, we might write them off as spiritually immature or even a counterfeit believer when, if we knew their hearts, we might discover they are mighty prayer warriors or generous to a fault.

Again, the Lord knows His own. Jesus said, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23 NKJV)!’ Based on Jesus’s warning, these false believers will have impressive spiritual resumes. Degrees and titles and personal reputations do not make true disciples of Christ.

Let us make certain our faith is genuine. I cannot control what my neighbor does or says, but I can choose to pray faithfully, study dutifully, give generously, serve joyfully, love selflessly, and live honorably. I must manage my own affairs before I interfere in the affairs of others.

Question 64: Why do most people prefer the ways of the world to Jesus Christ?

Answer: 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. Because narrow *is* the gate and difficult *is* the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13, 14 NKJV).”

A child will choose a chocolate bar over a garden salad. A lazy piker would rather have an easy handout instead of a challenging opportunity. A mercenary prefers treasures on earth to treasures in heaven. An addict will trade all that he or she has for the toxins found in needles, pipes, and pills. The promiscuous choose short-term sexual gratification over the holy sanctity of the marriage bed. The ignorant laugh at the genius of Mozart while bobbing their silly heads to the vitriolic profanities of Snoop Dogg. The slovenly prefer a cushy sofa, triple meat pizzas, and back-to-back football to sunshine, fresh air, and a walk in the park. And the muddle-minded who have iPhones for brains prefer online relationships to real, face-to-face interactions with friends and family.

I will steer clear of the free will versus sovereignty of God debate, for the Bible teaches that both are true, but the unregenerate man wants nothing to do with God. We will never desire Him until He supernaturally replaces our stony hearts with hearts of flesh (Ezekiel 36:20), and we cannot be made into new creations without the work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-11).

The *Prince of Preachers*, Charles Spurgeon, wrote, “It is a peculiar feature in our holy religion that it begins its work within, and acts first upon the heart. Other religions, like

that of the Pharisees, begin with outward forms and ceremonies, perhaps hoping to work inwardly from without, although the process never ends so, for the outside of the cup and of the platter is made clean, but the inside still, remains full of rottenness as before. No truth is more sure than this concerning all the sons of men, "Ye must be born again;" there must be an entire and radical change of man's nature, or else where God is he can never come: the gospel does not flinch from this, but enforces the declaration. The Holy Spirit does not attempt to improve human nature into something better, but lays the axe at the root of the trees, and declares that we must become new creatures, and that by a supernatural work of the omnipotent God.

"Scripture does not mince matters, or say that some men may be better than others naturally, and by an improvement of their excellencies may at last become good enough for God; far from it, it declares concerning all, "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven." True religion begins, then, with the heart, and the heart is the ruling power of manhood. You may enlighten a man's understanding and you have done much, but as long as his heart is wrong, the enlightenment of the understanding only enables him to sin with a greater weight of responsibility resting upon him. He knows good to be good, but he prefers the evil; he sees the light, but he loves the darkness, and turns from the truth because his heart is alienated from God. If the heart be renewed, the judgment will ere long follow in the same track; but as long as the heart is wrong the affections govern the will and bias the character of the man towards evil. If a man loves evil he is evil; if he hates God he is God's enemy, whatever his outward professions, whatever his knowledge, whatever his apparent good qualities. 'As a man thinketh in his heart so is he.' The heart is more nearly the man than any other of the faculties and powers which God has bestowed upon our nature.

"What if I say that the heart is the Eve in the little garden of our nature, and she it is that first plucks the evil fruit, and though the understanding follows the affections, even as Adam followed Eve, yet the first power for good or evil lies in the affections. The heart, when renewed by grace, is the best part of manhood; unrenewed, it is the very worst.

Æsop, when his master ordered him to provide nothing for a feast but the best things in the market, brought him nothing but tongues, and when the next day he ordered him to buy nothing but the worst things in the market, still brought nothing but tongues; and I would venture to correct or spiritualise the story, by exchanging hearts for tongues, for there is nothing better in the world than hearts renewed, and nothing worse than hearts unregenerate."

Remembering the story of the prodigal son, the wayward young man was never comfortable in the pigsty, because he was a son and not a pig. Conversely, a pig dragged from the mire, cleaned, perfumed, and made to live in the father's house would have been a most miserable creature, for pigs prefer pigsties.

Why do most people prefer the ways of the world to a life with Jesus? It is all a matter of the heart.

Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God.
--Martin Luther

Question 65: Why did Kobe Bryant's daughter die? Why did God take one so young?

Answer: On the day Kobe Bryant's daughter died in the tragic helicopter accident, 7,451 other Americans also died. Some were younger than the famed athlete's child, though most were older.

When God placed the first couple, Adam and Eve, in the Garden of Eden, the world was a safe, commodious place. Adam and Eve were impervious to all manner of diseases, accidents, injuries, illnesses, hunger, aging, and even death. Earth was paradise and the

first couple was, by today's standards, super-human. This was according to God's intentions.

Here is a truth that I hope you and I never forget: God did not create man and woman so that they would eventually die. He did not create them to die from cancer. He did not create them to die in helicopter accidents. He created them for immortality. God intended Adam and Eve to live forever.

So what happened? Adam and Eve sought to usurp God's authority. In other words, they declared their independence from their Creator. Adam and Eve were rebels. They defied God. They sought to become gods. And when they did so, they ushered sin into the world. Paradise was lost and the planet became cursed by the taint of sin.

The earth, though still a beautiful place, is no longer a safe place.

I live in a downtown high rise building. From my window, I see glorious sunrises most mornings, but if I look below, I see people--drug peddlers, heroin addicts, and thugs who would think nothing of knocking a victim on the head for a wallet or a purse. My building has a fenced parking lot and twenty-four hour security; even so, I am careful coming and going. Once known as the "high-rent district," my neighborhood is now a high-crime area.

If I were to be mugged by a heroin addict, would this be God's fault? Or if a drunk driver struck me down, would God be to blame? Friend, if I am mugged, it will not be God doing the mugging and if I am mowed down in a traffic accident, it will not be due to God's reckless driving. Bad happens because people are bad. Bad happens because mankind's sinfulness polluted the planet.

So here is a second truth we must never forget: God is not to blame for all that goes wrong in the world. God does not sit in Heaven making helicopters crash. God does not encourage burly men to rape unsuspecting women. God does not beg women to abort

their precious, unborn babies. God does not tell teenagers to experiment with drugs. God does not give thugs handguns and then tell them to mow down their enemies or rob liquor stores.

On the battlefield, my father was pinned down by Communist machine gun fire. By God's grace, he lived through the war; otherwise, someone else would be answering your question. Others around him died, but he survived and, at the age of ninety-one, he continues getting around fairly well. I am saying this to illustrate that God does offer us protection from evil and harm, according to His will. Do not forget the *according to His will* disclaimer.

A few weeks ago, I met a former combat veteran approaching his 102nd birthday. God's canopy of protection allowed him to survive many fierce battles and his health is remarkably good for a man who has lived more than a century.

My grandchild died in the womb about six weeks after conception. Why this tragic loss? I do not know. Oddly enough, when my wife was pregnant with our daughter, her doctor said she would never carry our baby to term, but she did! So, why did my baby live and my grand baby die? I do not know. God is sovereign. He chose to protect my unborn daughter. He chose to protect my dad on the battlefield. And, at the present, my health is better than most my age, and it appears as though God has placed His hedge of protection around me, too. I can name a number of students I knew in high school who are dead. For reasons known only to God, He has chosen to preserve and protect me. God works according to His will, not your will or my will.

But, friend, if a drunk driver or a heroin addict were to take my life, please do not blame God for my death. And if a tumor appears on my brain, please know that God did not place the tumor there. I live in a cursed creation. People die from cancer every day. Am I to suppose that I should somehow be immune to this?

God does not owe any of us eighty or ninety years of long life. He does not owe any of us a lifetime of perfect health. Each day, God shows us mercy upon mercy, but, in truth, we live in a cursed creation and young people, as well as middle age and old people, die. Do not blame God for death. Man ushered death into the world. Not God. Man brought about the curse upon creation. Not God. We need to be careful when pointing fingers at God. As a comic once wrote, "We have met the enemy, and he is us." If you want to know why there are rapes and murders and robberies and abortions and muggings and drunken driving accidents, take a close look at your fellow human beings. We are the enemy. The enemy is you and me.

By the grace of God, my only daughter is safe and doing well. By God's grace, my aging parents are getting along well for their years. For my age, I am healthy, energetic, and can outwork many people half my age. And I thank God for His blessings, but when something evil or tragic occurs, please remind me not to blame God. God is not the Author of addiction, violence, disease, war, hatred, bigotry, perversion, pornography, abortion, and greed. God has never robbed a bank. God has never operated a motorcar while under the influence of alcohol or narcotics. God has never sold a packet of cocaine to a high school kid. Shall you and I point accusing fingers toward God?

Here is a third truth that you and I must remember: God did not turn this world upside down with war and disease and all the other ills that pollute our planet; on the contrary, He is coming back to fix the mess that you and I created. Yes, Jesus is coming back to clean up our messes! And when He does, the world will be made right once again.

In the meantime, by trusting in the Lord Jesus as Savior, we can be assured of eternal life with Him. The earth is not our home. We were made for Heaven. And when we breathe our last here on earth, we will open our eyes to Him in the glories of Heaven.

May we never doubt the goodness of God.

Question 66: My husband's eating disorder and his lying are ruining our marriage. We tried counseling, but the problems persist. I want a divorce, but I am told his eating and lying habits are not proper grounds for divorce.

Answer: I have long believed that the only winners in a divorce are the lawyers.

In addressing your inquiry, I would have preferred more information such as the degree of your husband's obesity, the frequency of his lying, and if other adverse issues are, in fact, playing havoc with your marriage. Is his lying primarily associated by a misrepresentation of what he eats? Does he lie about other matters? Is his weight endangering his life? Has bodyfat made your husband physically unattractive? I wish I knew more, for I am fearful about giving advice based on scant information. Even so, I will tell you what I know.

For many, food is addictive. Overeating becomes a habit that defies control. As such, I frequently recommend Celebrate Recovery for people battling addictions. For those who make a habit of overeating, food is much more than fuel for the body; food can be like a drug. Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered program that tackles all manner of addictions, may provide the help and encouragement you and your husband need. Celebrate Recovery offers weekly support group meetings at churches across the continent and around the world.

Let us hear what the Lord Jesus has to say to you:

Now it came to pass, when Jesus had finished these sayings, *that* He departed from Galilee and came to the region of Judea beyond the Jordan. And great multitudes followed Him, and He healed them there. The Pharisees also came to Him, testing Him, and saying to Him, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for *just* any reason?"

And He answered and said to them, "Have you not read that He who made *them* at the beginning 'made them male and female,' and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave

his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh? So then, they are no longer two but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let not man separate."

They said to Him, "Why then did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?"

He said to them, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery (Matthew 19:1-9 NKJV)."

Divorce is ugly. Divorce is no quick and easy fix to your marital woes. God is in the business of mending broken lives and broken marriages, so give Him a chance to heal these wounds.

Where I was born and where and how I have lived is unimportant. It is what I have done with where I have been that should be of interest.
--Dwight L. Moody

Question 67: I serve the Lord out of obligation and a sense of duty. I do not find pleasure or satisfaction in what I do. How can I overcome this spiritual dryness?"

Answer: With my daughter's birthday just days away, I sent money—the perfect gift idea for those who do not like to shop. I also sent a check to my automobile insurance carrier. I derived much satisfaction in sending money to my daughter. I did not take pleasure in remitting a premium payment to my insurer.

I love my daughter. I do not love my insurance company. My daughter brings me joy. My insurance company keeps me legal.

Serving the Lord Jesus out of a sense of obligation will leave one feeling dry and empty. While I do not know you, I might reasonably conclude that you have "lost your first love." I am making a reference to our Lord Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus (Revelation 2). I will urge you to read and reread this letter to the Ephesians. From a doctrinal standpoint, the Ephesian Christians were orthodox in every sense, but they had allowed their hearts to grow cold. They had lost their first love or, we might say, their *best* love.

As an anodyne to spiritual coldness, I will also suggest you spend time in serious Bible study. This would be an excellent time to focus your attention on, say, the Gospel of Luke. Reacquaint yourself with Jesus. Get to know Him. Rediscover who He is and all that He has done for you. To know Him is to love Him. If you love Him, you will serve Him with joy.

Are you being spiritually nurtured by a knowledgeable, God-honoring pastor? Are you worshipping with loving, faithful, Bible-believing Christians each week? Seek out someone whose passion for the Lord Jesus is contagious.

Go to Him in prayer. Share your feelings with Him. Tell Him about this spiritual dryness. He will listen. Ask Him to rekindle the love that has grown cold. Our Savior is understanding and though you may feel cold and indifferent, concerns for your spiritual health and well-being are before Him. And take time to count your many blessings. Consider all He has done for you. A healthy dose of gratitude has a way of bolstering one's faith and devotion.

Prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and corporate worship may sound mundane, but our spiritual health depends upon these fundamental practices.

As birthdays and Christmases come around, I will continue remembering Hannah with gifts. This gives me pleasure. I will continue paying my car insurance, too, but I will do so begrudgingly. I love my daughter; I do not love my insurance company. I do not take great pleasure in their statisticians, underwriters, and claims representatives. Their actuarial tables leave me cold.

Love Jesus. Pay your insurance premiums.

Question 68: What is wisdom and how do I get it?

Answer: Knowledge is an accumulation of facts, but wisdom is the ability to see people, events, and circumstances through God's eyes. Without godly wisdom, people are susceptible to lies, fallacies, and corrupted thinking. C.S. Lewis reminded us that corruption of the intellect leads to corruption of the will. Among the ungodly, there is a contempt for logic and reason. Consider today's social climate that esteems so-called political correctness over logic, evidence, truth, and sound reasoning. Political correctness is based on misguided and ungrounded feelings and emotions—not factual evidence and certainly not on biblical precepts. Political correctness is diametrically opposed to wisdom.

I met a man opposed to the eating of meat due to what he perceived as cruelty to animals, but he was an unwavering advocate for abortion. Personally, I have no problem with vegans—I tend to eat little meat myself, but I cannot understand anyone more concerned about livestock than unborn babies.

God is the Author of Wisdom. Satan is the author of political correctness and all other brands of Orwellian "new think."

Again, wisdom gives us the mind of Christ; through wisdom, we can rightfully understand our fellow human-beings, the confusing events of the world, and our personal circumstances. Wisdom is a shield against deception.

But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him (James 1:5 NASB).

According to the above passage, wisdom is given to God's people who ask for wisdom in faith. Rather than asking God for luxury automobiles and six-bedroom mini-mansions, we should be asking for wisdom.

I believe in the power of knowledge. Understanding facts is vital, but to properly discern knowledge, we need wisdom.

Question 69: Because I was once sexually molested, does this mean I am no longer a virgin? I wrote to you about this once before, and you told me that I am a virgin, but I need further reassurance. I want to know with certainty that I am still pure.

Answer: Let us approach this logically.

If a drunk driver slams into my car, this does not make me a dangerous driver.

If a thief steals my belongings, this does not make me a cheat and a pilferer.

If I am attacked by a mugger, this does not make me a street thug.

The victim of a sexual predator does not share in the attacker's sin. The attacker's evil is not imputed to the victim.

Virginity is freely given—not taken by force. Without consent, one cannot lose his or her virginity. With this said, do not lend your attention to Satan's lies. His whispers of doubt and condemnation smell of smoke and brimstone. Shut him down and, for your own sake, please consider this matter settled.

Question 70: Because I have such a strong need for acceptance, I tend to shy away from people fearing their rejection. This overwhelming desire for validation from others causes me to seek solitude, for if I do not feel that others like me and accept me, I do not want to be around them. I have become a loner and I know that this is not in accordance with God's will for my life.

Answer: I have an acquaintance who is an amateur herpetologist. If you are unfamiliar with this word, a herpetologist is one who studies reptiles. This lover of all that is scaly and cold-blooded has a particular fondness for snakes. Most people will do all they can to avoid the society of snakes, but these long, slithering creatures are not without points of interest. For starters, snakes swallow their food whole. They do not chew their food. This may explain why pit vipers never purchase dental floss. Snakes smell with their tongues. This is why snakes constantly flick their lovely little forked appendages. As to reproducing, I find this particular fact rather odd: Some snakes are live bearers while other snakes lay eggs. Believe it or not, some snakes are quite docile. Note I said *some* snakes are docile. Try befriending a cobra or a mamba and this will be your last deed on earth.

Unlike humans and many species of animals, snakes are solitary creatures. Snakes have no need for community. They do not feel lonely when isolated from other snakes. Snakes will, by and large, tolerate the presence of other snakes, but as to one snake craving the company of another, loneliness is unknown among these legless reptilian creatures.

You and I were created for community. Ages ago, God declared that it was not good for Adam to be alone, so He fashioned Eve as a helpmate and companion.

I spent four years teaching in a men's prison. Inmates who violate prison rules are often placed in solitary confinement. It has been determined that solitary confinement, if used excessively, can produce grave physiological and psychological consequences. We were created by God to be with others. Being deprived of the company of others is a woeful form of punishment.

I know about loneliness. After twenty-two years of marriage, I suddenly found myself alone. Adjusting to my newfound loneliness was far from easy. I could hardly stand walking into that empty house. I began working off the clock and hanging out in coffee shops.

To this day, I spend a lot of time patronizing coffee shops. As a writer, I can work whenever and wherever, and I sometimes work in the privacy of my small apartment, but my craving for the company of others often sends me to the nearest coffee shop. I like espresso, to be sure, but I frequent coffee shops because I want to be around other people. The baristas know me by name, and I find comfort settling in at a cozy table with my laptop and my cappuccino while other coffee lovers mill about.

There is nothing odd about wanting to be a likable person. Most people tend to gravitate toward those who are funny, kind, generous, intelligent, witty, and friendly. But, my young friend, you should not live in fear that others may not like you. First of all, this is most likely not true. Why should others not like you? Do not become a slave to your fears and groundless insecurities.

As a believer in Christ Jesus, you already have the love and acceptance of God. Do not miss this point: The Creator of the universe knows you and He loves you. He accepts

you. You are the apple of His eye. He thinks of you and makes plans for you (Jeremiah 29:11). He wants the best for you. And He desires intimacy with you.

In Psalm 118:6, we read, The LORD is for me; I will not fear; What can man do to me (NASB)?

A few years ago, while working as a chaplain in a large, urban homeless shelter, one of Hollywood's biggest actresses stopped by for a visit. Not being up on Hollywood, I had no idea about my famous guest's identity. In fact, I thought she was a college kid. I did not know that she was among the most celebrated names in Tinseltown. After our meeting, she hugged me and cooed, "You are such a special man!" I found this a bit amusing, for I can be an old grump at times, but I accepted her complement. Thirty minutes later, I learned that the young lady I had entertained was then Hollywood's highest paid actress. Since then, if anyone is critical of me, I respond by reminding them that, according to a certain famous blonde actress, I am the real Tabasco, so to speak!

Friend, we do not need the approval of celebrities or street sweepers when we have God's love.

Learn to find your worth and identity in Him and you will not be stressed by what others may think of you. And never, ever pretend to be someone you are not in a vain, misguided attempt at making yourself more palatable to others.

Now go out there and feel good knowing that God has a special love just for you!

My worldview, my philosophy, my attitudes, my relationships, my parenting, my marriage—everything has been transformed by my relationship with Christ.
--Lee Strobel

Question 71: Once the pigs drowned, where did the demons go?

Answer: The account of Jesus casting the legion of demons into a herd of swine is found in Matthew 8:30-37, Mark 5:1-20, and Luke 8:26-39. Let us examine the biblical text according to Luke's Gospel record.

Then they (Jesus and His disciples) sailed to the country of the Gerasenes, which is opposite Galilee. And when He stepped out onto the land, a man from the city met Him who was possessed with demons; and he had not put on clothing for a long time and was not living in a house, but among the tombs. And seeing Jesus, he cried out and fell down before Him, and said with a loud voice, "What business do You have with me, Jesus, Son of the Most High God? I beg You, do not torment me!" For He *had already* commanded the unclean spirit to come out of the man. For it had seized him many times; and he was bound with chains and shackles and kept under guard, and *yet* he would break the restraints and be driven by the demon into the desert. And Jesus asked him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Legion"; because many demons had entered him. And they were begging Him not to command them to go away into the abyss.

Now there was a herd of many pigs feeding there on the mountain; and *the demons* begged Him to permit them to enter the pigs. And He gave them permission. And the demons came out of the man and entered the pigs; and the herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and was drowned.

Now when the herdsmen saw what had happened, they ran away and reported *everything* in the city, and in the country. And *the people* came out to see what had happened; and they came to Jesus and found the man from whom the demons had gone out, sitting down at the feet of Jesus, clothed and in his right mind; and they became frightened. Those who had seen *everything* reported to them how the man who had been demon-possessed had been made well. And all the people of

the territory of the Gerasenes and the surrounding region asked Him to leave them, because they were overwhelmed by great fear; and He got into a boat and returned. But the man from whom the demons had gone out was begging Him that he might accompany Him; but Jesus sent him away, saying, "Return to your home and describe what great things God has done for you." So he went away, proclaiming throughout the city what great things Jesus had done for him (Luke 8:26-39 NASB).

As to the fate of the demons after the herd of swine plummeted into the waters, I could not say. God sends some demons to a place of confinement (II Peter 2:4), and, perhaps, this is where they went. The demons who are currently in chains, so to speak, will be released at a future date for a final round of evil intent before their ultimate and everlasting destruction.

Did the demons go into this great abyss after the pigs drowned? Perhaps they left the swine to search out another victim to bodily possess. As this passage offers no clue, your guess is as good as mine.

I am amazed that many mainline Protestants deny the existence of Satan and his vast army of demons. A seminary student who worked under me believed the devil was merely a literary personification. Friend, the Bible teaches that Satan and demons are real and I have seen this unholy army at work with my own eyes.

Satan's doom has already been foretold in the pages of Scripture. For now, he is a mad dog on a long leash. Be assured that Satan is a lackey, a mere created being, whose destruction is assured by the unfaltering word of Scripture. His end is swiftly approaching, and, for this undeniable truth, we can praise God!

Question 72: I am unhappy knowing there are suffering people in this world. If it were possible, I would suffer eternally if my agony would end all of the suffering taking place in the world today. How can anyone find joy when millions of people are burdened by

hunger, disease, repression, loneliness, and poverty? I wish I could take on the world's suffering so that others could be happy and free. And why should the Lord save me when others are lost? I do not deserve salvation. I am unworthy, so why am I on my way to Heaven when millions are doomed to Hell?

Answer: My young friend, God has given you eternal life and, yet you are unhappy? Of course, you do not deserve salvation. Neither do I. If you and I deserved eternal life, then God's gift of grace would not be a gift—rather, eternal life would be nothing more than a paycheck, and if we deserved salvation, this would negate the death of Jesus on a cruel Roman cross (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

My friend, how could you possibly suffer for the sins of the world when Christ Jesus has already done this? And do you not know that those who sincerely desire joy will find it?

Suffering in hell for the benefit of others is not in your job description. Your job is to rejoice and be glad and spread this joy to others.

Reading your letter, as sensitive as it is and as sincere as you are, I am given to believe there is no happiness in your life. Do you think you will attract nonbelievers with such melancholy? Did not Jesus say He came to give life and to give life abundantly (John 10:10)? Where is your abundance? Or is the cupboard bare?

If I were a non-Christian and read your letter, I might say to myself, "Of what good is Christianity? This young Christian sounds positively miserable! If I become a Christian, will I be as unhappy and morose? Maybe Buddhists are a happier lot. Where is the nearest temple?"

Please do not misunderstand me, but you sound as though you have a guilt complex or a messiah complex—and neither is healthy.

Jesus loves you. *Do not miss this point.* He loves you so much, He wants you to live eternally with Him. And there is more. He wants a close and vibrant relationship with you right now. Today! This minute!

Jesus did not come to make you sad. He did not come to fill your mind with guilt or your heart with grief. The Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice!" You might try giving joy a chance.

Rejoicing implies happiness. How can you not be happy knowing that Jesus loves you and He has thrilling, meaningful, and purposeful plans for your life?

Seriously, you need to rethink your relationship with our wonderful, loving Savior! You must drop the melancholy spirit and be filled with God's Holy Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22). Where is the fruit of the Spirit in your life? Is the fruit bowl empty? Does your fruit consist of sour grapes and under-ripe persimmons?

If there is no joy in your life, you have missed the point of the Gospel. Gospel means "good news." Be happy in Jesus.

Is there a vibrant, Bible-believing church near you? Let me suggest you sit under the teachings of an anointed pastor and surround yourself with loving Christ-followers. I fear you have had too much "religion" and not enough relationship. Again, be happy in Jesus!

Write me back if you wish. I will be praying for you, my young friend!

Question 73: Is the Bible written for everyone or should the Bible be read and studied by trained clergy only? Can a nonbeliever benefit from reading the Bible?

Answer: Just for the moment, please humor me by reading two paragraphs; the first paragraph comes from the Book of Luke, one of the four Gospel accounts recorded in the New Testament. The second paragraph was copied from the U.S. Tax Code. Please give your attention to both passages.

Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise (Luke 10:30-37 ESV).”

(1) In general the term “distributed amount” means, with respect to any calendar year, the sum of— (A) the deduction for dividends paid (as defined in section 561) during such calendar year (but computed without regard to that portion of such deduction which is attributable to the amount excluded under section 857(b)(2)(D)), and (B) any amount on which tax is imposed under subsection (b)(1) or (b)(3)(A) of section 857 for any taxable year ending in such calendar year (U.S. Tax Code).

Of the two paragraphs, which is the more readable? Which passage is easier to understand? Which of these excerpts speak to your heart? Of the two writings, which is the more meaningful?

Very well, for those who have hitherto avoided Bible study based on the misconception that the scriptures are beyond reasonable comprehension and defy human

understanding, I hope to have shot down their flimsy little excuse. As for the U.S. Tax Code, this brand of gobblety-gook is a mystery to all except the oddest of bureaucrats and a handful of high dollar attorneys. Speaking personally, I greatly prefer reading from the Gospel of Luke to Article VI, Section 8 (A), Subsection C (1) revised 2019.

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16, 17 NASB).

All Scripture, not just the passages that happen to suit an individual's preferences or politics, was penned by writers who were inspired by God. Led by the Holy Spirit, the Bible writers recorded God's thoughts and intentions in their own words. The Bible provides us with an accurate, reasonable, readable, and comprehensible understanding into the mind and will of God. And how does this understanding benefit us? The lessons to be learned from a proper understanding of the Bible are too numerous to list, but diligent Bible study will show us right from wrong and good from bad. Through the pages of Scripture, we can grasp an intelligible understanding of God's will for our lives. Prophetic passages allow us glimpses into the future. We discover godly wisdom in the proverbs and find comfort in the psalms. The Gospels bring us good news. The epistles instruct us in sound doctrine while spelling out the keys to successful Christian living. From Genesis to Revelation, the scriptures point to Jesus. If you will permit a play on words, the Bible is a *Him Book*. It is all about Him.

But this does not answer your question. Is the Bible for everyone? How about a "yes and no" answer.

There have been atheists, such as C.S. Lewis, Lee Strobel, and Sir William Ramsey, who set out to disprove the Bible only to become Christian converts. The evidence for the Bible's reliability and accuracy overwhelmed these atheists, so God can and does speak to non-believers through the Bible.

But no atheist will ever derive comfort from Psalm 23. An unbeliever cannot say to God, "You are my Shepherd, and I shall not be in want!" The lush Bible promises do not belong to unbelievers. These beloved passages of hope and comfort belong to those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus as Savior. No atheist can make a claim on the words that mean so much to people like you and me. Would you agree?

Question 74: Please explain Romans 12:12-16.

Answer: Let us take a look at the text in question.

For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus (Romans 2:12-16 ESV).

The Law, mentioned in verse 12, refers to right and wrong. Through Moses, God's Law contained some general commands and some specific commands. We would expect prohibitions against stealing, lying, and murdering, but God also gave the Jews unique laws regulating their diet and their workweek. Gentiles, who had never read the writings of Moses, knew in their hearts that stealing, lying, and murdering were wrong. They were also aware that cowardice was abominable, and they well understood that stinginess was shameful. Some sins we instinctively know are wrong. Besides these general commands involving right and wrong, the Jews had been given specific laws. They were to abstain from certain food animals. They were to give a portion of their earnings to the Levites. And there were specific rules governing their Sabbath Day activities. Obviously, without the writings of Moses, the Gentiles would not have been aware of these specific

commandments, but no one needs to teach us that spreading falsehoods, committing murders, and stealing the property of others are wrong.

Even those who have never read the Bible have more than a rudimentary understanding of good versus evil.

Question 75: Recently, I was approached by a homeless man. He walked up to my car and asked me for money. I was parked in a fairly isolated area of the parking lot, and I was alone. I became fearful, and I wanted out of this situation. I politely declined his request for money, and I left. However, despite feeling quite terrified, I know that God says to give to those who ask. Now, I am afraid that God might be unhappy with me, and I am concerned over what the correct course of action should have been. What should I have done? Should I have given money despite my fears?

Answer: My young, well-intentioned friend, you are not just to hand over money to anyone who asks, unless, of course, that anyone happens to be holding a Smith & Wesson Model 99. If the beggar is armed and you are staring at the business end of a handgun, fork over the loot; otherwise, use some common sense in your charitable giving.

Jesus said we are to be wise as serpents and as gentle as doves (Matthew 10:16). In other words, we are to make shrewd, common-sense decisions without becoming crass and cynical.

Based on your inquiry, this panhandler intimidated you. You were fearful. May I assume, then, that the beggar was an able-bodied man? He was large enough to intimidate you, right? If he was big enough and strong enough to intimidate you, he is big enough and strong enough to work.

My friend, I spent several years working at a homeless shelter. In many cases, homelessness is a decision. People choose to be homeless. If you give a homeless man

a \$5 bill, you may be buying his next high. If you give money to, say, the Salvation Army, you are helping homeless people in a more efficient, beneficial way. You are buying food for hungry families rather than beer and weed for able-bodied beggars.

90% of the homeless people I served smoked cigarettes. Many would buy a pack of Marlboro before they would spend money on a sandwich. And, friend, I could not tell you how many penniless people I served who had alcohol on their breath and/or drugs coursing through their veins. Drugs are not free. Friend, did you know drug dealers often peddle their poisons at homeless camps? Or beneath highway overpasses? Or even outside of homeless shelters? I speak from experience.

In II Thessalonians 3:10, the Apostle Paul warned the church against supporting lazy, idle-minded believers. Those who refused to work were not to be invited to the dinner table. Friend, we are not called to reward laziness. This is enabling. I am amazed at the worthless politicians who want to give away "free stuff" to people who prefer watching daytime television trash instead of holding down a job and earning a paycheck. Why are these politicians enabling those who want to take without earning? And who foots the tab for these freebies? People like you and me who work and pay taxes.

Working is a privilege. A job is a blessing. Enabling is a curse. Endorsing idleness is Satan's business. As such, I never, ever give money to panhandlers. I routinely support a Christian maternity home that provides food, shelter, job training, life skills training, biblically-based counseling, and other forms of care to expectant mothers and mothers with young children. I take no small amount of pleasure in giving them a portion of my time and money. These young moms and their precious kids are amazing.

Have I answered your question? I hope I have, my young friend!

Question 76: How can those who are physically attractive use their good looks to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

Answer: No one confuses me for Brad Pitt or George Clooney, but I was once mistaken for Denzel Washington's gardener.

Recently, I was in the home of a man who is struggling with alcoholism and substance abuse. On the wall was an oil painting of his mother as a young woman. In her day, she was a looker—a very pretty girl. Of course, today, she looks like any other frumpy, gray-haired grandma. With the passing of the years, the stunning young woman on canvas has long lost her ability to wow people with her beauty.

As a young blighter, I was a fairly good looking kid. Having worked as a professional musician, I have a few old publicity photos left over from the bell-bottom days. Looking back on these early 1970s snapshots, I am reminded how time and gravity have taken a toll. I am no longer the cute, shaggy-headed bloke with the electric guitar around his neck. I am the old guy with bags beneath his eyes. The last time a pretty girl spoke to me, she was asking if I wanted my senior citizen discount.

I am smarter today than when I was twenty-one. I am a better musician and a much better writer, too. In fact, I do almost all things better today than I did forty years ago. My looks have faded, but I am wiser, smarter, and I think I am more talented. My faith in Christ Jesus has grown, too. Yes, I had more hair and less stomach in those days, but I have more of the right stuff today.

Looks fade. This much is obvious.

If a person is blessed with good looks, the handsome guy or pretty girl must remember that physical beauty is fleeting.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The fruit of the Spirit does not include clear skin, shiny hair, or excellent bone structure.

Are you a handsome fellow? If so, enjoy an occasional gaze into the mirror, but remember, one day, you may jolly well end up looking like me. Yes, I am your future, so you might want to work on developing those qualities that do not fade over time. Seek to build up worthy attributes that will improve as you age. If you live long enough, the bags beneath the eyes and the wrinkles on the face are inevitable. On the other hand, your character and your abilities can improve over time. I am a better man today than when I was a few decades ago!

And if you go bald, do not fear! A bottle of shampoo lasts me four years! Think of the money I save!

Faith, mighty faith, the promise sees, And looks to God alone; Laughs at impossibilities, And cries it shall be done.

--Charles Wesley

Question 77: Is it a sin to wear shoes inside a church? Isn't a church considered holy ground?

Answer: Over the years, I have been asked about the spiritual implications of tattoos and jewelry and animated cartoons and even the use of slang.

"Is it proper for a Christian to wear a beard?"

"Should a Christian attend rock music concerts?"

"I am a Christian woman. Is it a sin for me to wear a bikini to the beach?"

I was once asked if slicing bread with a knife is sinful. No kidding. And to think some people say there is no such thing as a stupid question.

The Bible does give us a moral code, but the scriptures are certainly much, much more than just a moral code. Any attempt at reducing Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts is a grave injustice to our great faith.

So what about this matter of shoes inside a church? Later today, I plan to attend worship service, and I am reasonably certain there will not be one barefooted worshiper in the building. Good! I am in no mood to sense the odor of someone's smelly feet.

Let's not talk about shoes. Rather, let's talk about weightier matters.

"Is it a sin not to read and study the Bible?" --Yes

"Is it a sin to ignore my prayers?" --Yes

"Is it a sin to be unloving toward my neighbor?" --Yes

"Is being stingy a sin?" --Yes

"Is it a sin to ignore the needs of others?" --Yes

"Is it a sin to be filled with anger, lust, and greed?" --Yes

"Is it a sin to trivialize the Gospel of Jesus Christ?" --Yes

Are matters involving shoes and tattoos and beards and hair color important? No.

Again, let us not trivialize our faith--a faith that gives hope and meaning and purpose to millions and millions of lost sinners. Before Jesus came into my life, I was hopeless,

helpless, and clueless--a lost cause! And, friend, the problems I faced had nothing to do with shoes or beards or tattoos or cosmetics.

If you prefer going about with bare feet, this is your business and the issue is of no concern to me, but I will strongly suggest you focus your attention on matters of importance. How is your Bible study? How is your prayer life? Do you love Jesus? Are you good to your neighbors? Are you generous? Are you supporting worthy Christian ministries through sacrificial giving? Do those around you see Jesus in your eyes? How do you treat your family members? Does your life reflect love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control?

Focus your mind and your efforts on matters of importance. Steer clear of aimless legalism.

I wish you well.

Question 78: Is it wrong to say, "Holy Cow," or "Holy Guacamole," or other such light-hearted phrases? As Halloween is approaching, would wearing a cow with a halo costume be considered sacrilegious?

Answer: Holy editorial content policy!

Considering the cost of a good rib-eye steak these days, I can understand why some might consider the cow holy. Speaking personally, I rarely eat meat, but I am rather keen on guacamole. What is Mexican cooking without guacamole? I cannot say with absolute certainty that guacamole is holy, but the good old green gooey stuff tastes rather heavenly. Would you agree?

I suppose there are some sour-faced souls who might criticize holy slang as unholy, but if you want to say "holy great response" or "holy brilliant wordsmith" after reading my answer, I will not mind in the slightest.

Oh, if you dress as a cow on Halloween night and see the butcher coming, head to the udder side of the street.

Question 79: How do I die for Christ?

Answer: Thank you for your inquiry. Let me suggest we rephrase your question: How do I die to self and live for Christ?

We will find our answers, of course, in the pages of God's written word, the Bible.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer (Romans 12:12 ESV).

Nothing destroys hope quite like an unhealthy dose of doubt. To believe, and this is not referring to some half-hearted faith, but to really and truly belief fosters a brand of iron-clad hope that allows ordinary saints such as you and me to endure patiently even when the devil's rockets are exploding all about us. And as hell's artillery shells rain down causing the rubble to dance at our feet, we are to maintain close and frequent communications with our heavenly Commander-in-Chief. It is impossible to rejoice in doubt. Doubt breeds fear. Fear may cause us to withdraw from our Heavenly Father. Let us remember, then, that God does not lie, we are not following cleverly devised myths, and come what may, we will be victorious. Believe. Rejoice. Be patient. Pray. This is how we die to self and live for Jesus Christ.

As to prayer, C.S. Lewis explained, "An ordinary simple Christian kneels down to say his prayers. He is trying to get into touch with God. But if he is a Christian he knows that what is prompting him to pray is also God: God, so to speak, inside him. But he also knows

that all his real knowledge of God comes through Christ, the Man who was God—that Christ is standing beside him, helping him to pray, praying for him. You see what is happening. God is the thing to which he is praying—the goal he is trying to reach. God is also the thing inside him which is pushing him on—the motive power. God is also the road or bridge along which he is being pushed to that goal. So that the whole threefold life of the three-personal Being is actually going on in that ordinary little bedroom where an ordinary man is saying his prayers. The man is being caught up into the higher kinds of life—what I called *Zoe* or spiritual life: he is being pulled into God, by God, while still remaining himself.”

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12-14 NKJV).

Knowing the prize that God had in store for him, the Apostle Paul vowed to press ahead, forgetting about past humiliations and failures, as he continued persevering toward the goal line.

Imagine a motorist racing along the highway, blind to the road ahead, with both eyes steadfastly fixed on the rear view mirror. Such a driver would certainly be an accident looking for a place to happen. A safe driver looks ahead with only an occasional glance to the rear. As an uneasy motorist who dislikes high speed traffic, my prayer is that the drivers all about me are alert and keeping their eyes focused on the road. As Christ followers, we are to keep looking forward. The goal is ahead of us. If we must take an occasional peep into the past, let us revisit a previous time in which God blessed us. In my own life, I can recall circumstances in which His faithfulness was my only hope. God blessed me yesterday and I have every reason to believe He will bless me again today and tomorrow. Are you in agreement with me?

Many of us are inclined to revisit past mistakes and failures. As believers, once we have repented of a sin, there is no need to relive the shame and humiliation again and again. If I may speak openly, I am inclined to recoil in shame from remembrances of sins that have long been forgiven by Christ Jesus. The Bible assures me that God no longer remembers my past sins, but my memory is not so easily wiped clean. What about you? Perhaps you are such a person who also makes a point of revisiting past humiliations. What are we to do? May we remind ourselves again and again that the Lord Jesus' sacrifice on that cruel Roman cross took away our sin. Where did He cast that sin? Our discarded sin was tossed into the Sea of Forgetfulness. Why, then, must we drop our nets into the cold, deep waters? Is there gain in shameful remembrances? Is there profit in revisiting past sorrows? As God has forgiven us, we can surely forgive ourselves. Let us hear the words of the Apostle Paul who urged us to look ahead as we continue pressing forward. This is how we live for Jesus Christ.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long (Psalm 25:4, 5 ESV).

How do we know the ways of God? How are we to understand His plan for our lives? God speaks to us through His written word. He opens our minds as we explore the pages of Scripture. He reveals Himself to those whose Bibles gather no dust. In His word, God speaks to us, and in prayer, we speak to Him. Prayer without Bible study makes for a one-sided conversation. I say this respectfully, but those who pray while ignoring Bible study are doing all of the talking. Is this right? Certainly not, for we mere mortals must learn the value of keeping quiet and giving God the floor, otherwise, how will we know His will? How can we share in His wisdom? As many of us have already discovered, a life lived outside of God's will is not very fulfilling. Our own paths have led us in circles of futility and disappointment. At the time of my conversion, I cried out, "God, I am tired of living life my way! Let's try living life Your way for a change!" God honored that prayer. Decades later, there is no denying that I am still a flawed individual, but I wake up each

morning knowing who I am, where I am going, and why I am here--and I strongly believe the best is yet to come!

But let all who take refuge in you rejoice; let them ever sing for joy, and spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may exult in you (Psalm 15:11 ESV).

As the True and Living God is almighty in power and wisdom, we can take refuge in Him and in Him we will find comfort and restoration. Let us, therefore, love Him and rejoice in His mercy, grace, and protection. This is not to say that believers are immune from all manner of pain, but this is to say that heartaches, disappointments, and sufferings work together for the ultimate good of those who love the Lord and are called according to God's purpose for them (Romans 8:28). When, at long last, we stand before Him, we will look back on the tragic occurrences of this life and understand how each instance of sadness played a positive role in our transformation. There is an overwhelming measure of comfort in this truth, for what we fail to understand today will be revealed to us in the brightness of the morning, and as utterly fantastic as this may seem, we will embrace His answer and praise Him for our former sufferings. Because of the crystal clarity that eternity will afford, I strongly suspect my first words in Heaven will be, "I understand!"

I will greatly rejoice in the Lord; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels (Isaiah 61:10 ESV).

If I were to gaze into a spiritual mirror, what would I see? I would see a man who wrestles with anger, struggles in his faith, and whose faults and shortcomings could fill a thick volume. What about you? If you stood next to me, what would the spiritual mirror reveal about you? Thankfully, God does not see a couple of shabby, flaw-ridden characters, for we have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. As such, you and I should live for Him!

Yes, we should live as women and men who are grateful to our Lord Jesus Christ for His gift of eternal life. Eternal life is not a paycheck for a life well lived. We cannot earn God's favor; we simply open our hands to receive (Ephesians 2:8, 9). With hearts brimming in gratitude and rejoicing, there will be no room for anger, bitterness, and resentment.

...we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope (Romans 5:3, 4 NASB)...

This passage troubles me, for the Apostle Paul says I am to demonstrate elation and jubilation in the midst of tribulation. Frankly, I find it easier to whimper and whine during times of trials. Perhaps, in days of trouble, you behave as badly as me. We must understand that perseverance, character, and hope are the byproducts of patient endurance. In other words, tribulations serve to make us better. Just as fire removes impurities from gold, God may place us in the hot seat, so to speak, in order to remove the dross from our character. Through His sanctifying work, our impurities are being removed allowing us to live more faithfully for Him.

(Jesus said) "I have said these things to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world (John 16:33 ESV)."

Jesus overcame death and the grave and Rome was powerless in stopping Him. No other teacher, philosopher, or leader can make a similar claim. Jesus stands alone among the many voices vying for our attention. By placing our faith in Him, we, too, will overcome whatever fiery trials come our way. Jesus died for us, therefore, we shall live for Him.

As a reminder, we can bolt across the finish line with our heads held high or we can stumble to the goal whimpering and whining, but come what may, we will not be defeated.

(God declared) “Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known (Jeremiah 33:3 ESV).”

How do we overcome anger? How do we rid ourselves of bitterness? How do we find meaning in life? How do we recover from hurt? How do we live victoriously? By calling on God, He will answer you and me. Through prayer, Bible study, and heeding the voice of the Holy Spirit who dwells within each believer, God will reveal great and hidden truths hitherto unknown to us.

How do we die to self and live for Jesus Christ? Here are some thoughts worthy of our consideration...

- If you have Jesus and nothing else, you are wealthier than the billionaire who has everything but Jesus.
- Prayer and Bible study are essential if we want to understand God’s will for our lives. To live victoriously, we must remain in constant communication with Heaven.
- If our hearts are filled with joy and hope, there will be little room left for anger, bitterness, and resentment.
- Anger is a thief. Anger insists upon occupying our thoughts and taking command of our emotions. Anger demands constant attention. Anger dampens our enthusiasm and sends hope circling around the drain. Anger is a thief that robs us of the joy that God desires for all of His children.
- When we forgive those who have brought harm to us, we are most like Jesus. To live for Him is to live like Him.

To live for Jesus is to die to self. Pride is a curse that encourages people to live for themselves and their own pleasures. Men and women steeped in pride have an elevated opinion of themselves. They attribute the blessings of God as well-deserved byproducts of their own cleverness and hard work. Prideful people live with a sense of arrogance and superiority; caught up in the myth of self-importance, they hunger and thirst for recognition. Admiration is the opium of the proud.

Everyone who is arrogant in heart is an abomination to the Lord; be assured, he will not go unpunished (Proverbs 16:5 ESV).

A proud man thinks too highly of himself and too little of God. Jesus warned that we cannot serve two masters, so the proud man chooses to serve himself. He lavishes himself with praise while seeking the attention of others. He sees others as his inferiors and is open in his haughty disdain toward his neighbors.

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall (Proverbs 16:18 ESV).

The proud have hearts carved of granite. The arrogant cannot demonstrate proper gratitude to the Father of all blessings, for they convince themselves that all they have and enjoy comes to them by their own hand. They lay claim to the blessings of God and credit themselves where credit is most certainly not due.

Pride is an abomination in the eyes of the Lord. Pride is the most evil of all sin. The arrogant seek to rob God of His glory. God will share His glory with no one. It is foolish to think the Creator will abdicate His throne to a mere created being. This will never happen. A haughty spirit is detestable. Arrogance grieves the heart of God. As God judges sin, the proud unknowingly place themselves in frightfully precarious positions. The proud are in grave danger of damnation.

Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches (Jeremiah 9:23 ESV)...

If we are to boast, let us boast of God our Father who offered His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who paid the penalty for our sin and who sent the Holy Spirit, our divine comforter, to dwell within us.

King Solomon, once the wisest monarch in the known world, fell into foolishness and folly. Samson, whose physical strength astounded his enemies, was made into a slave. And Pharaoh, who opposed Moses, saw the bankruptcy of his entire nation--a land once rich and fertile. God's dealings with the proud are harsh and decisive.

God stands with the humble. He is pleased with those who esteem others greater than themselves. A humble man sees his faults and accepts the forgiveness of God with joy and appreciation. He lifts his hands in praise to his Savior. He would rather please God than bask in the adoration of others.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant (I Corinthians 13:4 ESV)...

The humble neither boast of themselves nor envy the blessings of others. The proud look down on others; the arrogant are quick in condemning those they consider inferior. The proud place their achievements on display and are angered when others fail to demonstrate proper notice.

The proud man justifies his anger. He sees the chastisement of others as his proper office. He considers himself to be a yardstick of success and a standard by which lesser individuals should strive to achieve. When he lashes out against another, he fancies such an outburst of temper is his rightful duty. And while he deceives himself with his misguided sense of self-importance, he is plotting his own destruction.

To die to self means setting aside our desires and ambitions and following that path that He has mapped out for our lives. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us that God has a plan for your life and my life. If we follow His plan, a plan that will prosper us, a plan to give us hope and a future, we will live for Him.

Have I answered your question, my friend? I hope that I have. Now go and live your life for Jesus Christ.

Question 80: Is dark humor sinful?

Answer: Dark humor, sometimes called black comedy or gallows humor, employs the use of morbid subject matter for purposes of levity. A condemned prisoner, when asked by his executioner if he had any last words, simply replied, "This is going to be a tough day."

It is reported that Sir Thomas More, a Catholic theologian who was put to death by King Henry VIII, said, upon ascending the gallows, "I am trusting you, Lieutenant, to assist in getting me up the steps, but I will come down on my own."

Speaking personally, I find the dark humor in C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* delightful. I am not alone, for this work is an inspiring favorite among Christian readers.

Orwell's frightfully prophetic *Animal Farm* is a classic example of dark humor that invokes thoughtful consideration in matters of political repression. Anyone who has made a serious study of Orwell's writings will reject the rigidity of political correctness that opens the door to thought-control and totalitarianism.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens used dark humor in Scrooge's praise of London's notorious workhouses and debtors' prisons.

There are occasions in which dark humor can be unspeakably vile. The parents of a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl who had recently committed suicide received vulgar online taunts from their daughter's bullies. I never knew middle school kids could be this heartless. May God help anyone who can find humor in the bullying death of an eighth-grade girl.

Dark humor can be an effective literary tool that invokes thought and discussion in matters that are often considered taboo, but dark humor that is simply cruel, hurtful, or vulgar, is unworthy of a Christ follower (Psalm 101:3). Comedians who rely upon dark humor for nothing more than its “shock value” are not funny. They are simply vulgarians entertaining barbarians.

Question 81: Who among the Lord’s disciples was at the Crucifixion?

Answer: The Crucifixion represents the pinnacle of God's love. The Crucifixion also reveals the depths of man's depravity. At the cross, our Lord Jesus demonstrated His love for lost sinners such as you and me by His willingness to die for us. And at the cross, the depravity of man is illustrated by the leering, blood-thirsty mob shouting for the death of their sinless, blameless Messiah.

For three hours, God blanketed the Crucifixion in darkness, and the scriptures omit many of the gruesome details surrounding our Lord's death. We are told just enough and no more.

Among the Lord Jesus' disciples, who witnessed the Crucifixion?

"When Jesus saw his mother there, and the disciple whom he loved standing nearby, he said to her, 'Woman, here is your son,' and to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' From that time on, this disciple took her into his home (John 19:26, 27)."

Other than John, as to the whereabouts of the Lord's disciples, I could not say. Perhaps Peter and the other nine were watching from a distance. Again, this would be speculative, and I have no firm answer.

This I can tell you: My sins and your sins were at the Crucifixion (Colossians 2:14). Our sins bore down on the bloodied shoulders of our Lord Jesus. As we, the redeemed, owe Him our lives, let us be grateful for God's lavish love.

Question 82: Godless, vulgar, blaspheming public figures who mock Christianity and promote all kinds of evil make me angry. Hearing them insult Jesus and His followers make me sick to my stomach. I know there is righteous anger, but how can I prevent my anger from being destructive? I do not want my indignation to be sinful, for then, I would be no better off than the unholy mockers who stir up my emotions.

Answer: You do not know me, and I do not know you, but, perhaps, we are both a couple of hot-headed Christians who cringe at the deeds of the ungodly. Evil is offensive. Evil is disgusting. Today, we live in a society in which mindless politicians, radical educators, overpaid sports figures, and the indulgent Hollywood crowd praise evil as good while scorning our Judeo Christian heritage. I can scarcely give even a moment of my attention to the morally twisted actors and celebrities steeped in their politically correct perversions of morality and justice. At times, these muddle-minded loudmouths make my blood boil. Do I hear an "amen" from you?

Well, maybe we had better cool our tempers.

Unbridled anger often triggers extreme acts of bitterness, hatred, and violence--outbursts that frequently result in all manner of tragic episodes. God does not want us hating our enemies and He, not us, can deal with the ungodly. In the following narrative, taken from I Samuel 25, David, motivated by revenge and fueled by white-hot anger, vows to slay his adversary, a rancher named Nabal, along with Nabal's hired servants. Nabal, as you will soon learn, was a greedy, selfish, ungodly man. Thankfully, a virtuous, clear-thinking woman named Abigail intervenes and prevents what we would call a mass murder.

To fully appreciate this story, let us explore the background and circumstances leading up to this account. Saul, the first King of Israel, had acted disobediently and, as such, had fallen out of favor with God. God swore that the crown would go to David. King Saul refused to accept God's decree; to prevent David from becoming his successor, King Saul hunted David and his small band of followers as if they were criminals.

David and his small army, encamped near a large ranch in Carmel, hid in the wilderness of Paran from King Saul and his larger army of fighting men. Saul would have stopped at nothing to rid himself of David and his loyal band of men. David and his small army lived off the land, so to speak, in order to survive. No doubt, they fed on game, fish, and whatever grains and fruits could be harvested in the wild.

Nabal, whose name means *fool*, was an unsavory character who owned a successful ranch. Nabal lived up to his name. He was a fool--but he was a well-to-do fool whose riches came from his vast holdings of land and chattel. In ancient times, ranchers such as Nabal were at the mercy of thieves and marauders who would steal grain and livestock and had no qualms with the killing of the landowners and their servants who stood in their way.

David and his army were honorable men. Though they camped near Nabal's ranch, they respected his property. Additionally, David and his men served as a shield and protector. Thieves bent on pillaging and bloodshed would have had no desire to face David's band of soldiers. There can be no doubt that Nabal's entire operation was the beneficiary of David's presence.

Then David rose and went down to the wilderness of Paran. And there was a man in Maon whose business was in Carmel. The man was very rich; he had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. He was shearing his sheep in Carmel. Now the name of the man was Nabal, and the name of his wife Abigail. The woman was discerning and beautiful, but the man was harsh and badly behaved; he was a Calebite. David heard in the wilderness that Nabal was shearing his sheep. So David sent ten young men.

And David said to the young men, “Go up to Carmel, and go to Nabal and greet him in my name. And thus you shall greet him: ‘Peace be to you, and peace be to your house, and peace be to all that you have. I hear that you have shearers. Now your shepherds have been with us, and we did them no harm, and they missed nothing all the time they were in Carmel. Ask your young men, and they will tell you. Therefore let my young men find favor in your eyes, for we come on a feast day. Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to your son David. (I Samuel 25: 1-8 NKJV).”

Instructing them to demonstrate tact and cordiality, David's ambassadors of good-will were to peaceably approach Nabal with a simple request: “Please give whatever you have at hand to your servants and to our son David.” The request was entirely reasonable, for David and his men had guarded Nabal's servants and livestock from bloodthirsty plunderers. The season's financial success was due, in part, to the vigilance of David's honorable men and the time had come for Nabal to return the favor.

When David's young men came, they said all this to Nabal in the name of David, and then they waited. And Nabal answered David's servants, “Who is David? Who is the son of Jesse? There are many servants these days who are breaking away from their masters. Shall I take my bread and my water and my meat that I have killed for my shearers and give it to men who come from I do not know where (I Samuel 25:9-11 NKJV)?”

Nabal spoke as a fool. “Who is David?” he incredulously asked. David, who had slain the giant named Goliath with a well-placed stone to the forehead, was known and celebrated throughout Israel as a brave and mighty man of God. Instead of treating his guests with civility and respect, Nabal implies that their master may be nothing more than a runaway slave. A fool's tongue is seldom guarded. Instead of expressing gratitude for their valuable services, Nabal responded to the delegation's cordial greeting by hurling insults.

So David's young men turned away and came back and told him all this. And David said to his men, "Every man strap on his sword!" And every man of them strapped on his sword. David also strapped on his sword. And about four hundred men went up after David, while two hundred remained with the baggage. But one of the young men told Abigail, Nabal's wife, "Behold, David sent messengers out of the wilderness to greet our master, and he railed at them. Yet the men were very good to us, and we suffered no harm, and we did not miss anything when we were in the fields, as long as we went with them. They were a wall to us both by night and by day, all the while we were with them keeping the sheep. Now therefore know this and consider what you should do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his house, and he is such a worthless man that one cannot speak to him (I Samuel 25:12-17 NKJV)."

One of Nabal's hired hands, knowing that his wicked, ungodly employer was a senseless, unreasonable buffoon, reported this breach of civility and honor to Abigail. Abigail was no fool, though she had married one. Most of us know through first-hand experience that negotiating with a hot-headed tyrant is futile. Even at the risk of peril, men and women like Nabal are neither interested in truth nor in the cause of justice. As such, Nabal's servant feared the dire consequences that would likely follow his employer's shabby treatment of David's men.

Then Abigail made haste and took two hundred loaves and two skins of wine and five sheep already prepared and five seahs of parched grain and a hundred clusters of raisins and two hundred cakes of figs, and laid them on donkeys. And she said to her young men, "Go on before me; behold, I come after you." But she did not tell her husband Nabal. And as she rode on the donkey and came down under cover of the mountain, behold, David and his men came down toward her, and she met them. Now David had said, "Surely in vain have I guarded all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belonged to him, and he has returned me evil for good. God do so to the enemies of David and more also, if by morning I leave so much as one male of all who belong to him (I Samuel 25:18-22 NKJV)."

Wasting no time, Abigail prepared a lavish peace offering to appease David and his soldiers, for it was this prudent woman's intention to right the grave wrong of her blithering husband and avert the very real possibility of bloodshed. Do you often wonder why the world seems to be overly populated by Nabals while the Abigails are grossly underrepresented? In my own life, I have played the role of a Nabal—angry, vile, and unreasonable. Perhaps you have Nabal tendencies of your own. I certainly do.

Perhaps you have also noticed that, in his anger, David is demonstrating some Nabal-like tendencies, too. Not only had he vowed to slay Nabal, he had also sworn to kill every male in Nabal's household. Let us make no mistake about it--if David carries out his threat, he will be guilty of mass murder. Anger that is uncontrolled is a deadly force that has resulted in unspeakably bloody horrors that defy understanding and reason.

Are you wondering why, among David's band of faithful soldiers, no one was raising an objection over this murderous threat? This question crossed my mind, too. Their loyalty to David is commendable, but their leader is determined to commit a horrific act and is there no one to speak reason? Anyone in a position of leadership will do well to surround himself or herself with sensible people who are willing to speak up even in tense situations.

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and got down from the donkey and fell before David on her face and bowed to the ground. She fell at his feet and said, "On me alone, my lord, be the guilt. Please let your servant speak in your ears, and hear the words of your servant. Let not my lord regard this worthless fellow, Nabal, for as his name is, so is he. Nabal is his name, and folly is with him. But I your servant did not see the young men of my lord, whom you sent. Now then, my lord, as the Lord lives, and as your soul lives, because the Lord has restrained you from bloodguilt and from saving with your own hand, now then let your enemies and those who seek to do evil to my lord be as Nabal. And now let this present that your servant has brought to my lord be given to the young men who follow my lord. Please forgive the trespass of your servant. For the Lord will certainly make my lord a sure house, because my lord is

fighting the battles of the Lord, and evil shall not be found in you so long as you live. If men rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, the life of my lord shall be bound in the bundle of the living in the care of the Lord your God. And the lives of your enemies he shall sling out as from the hollow of a sling. And when the Lord has done to my lord according to all the good that he has spoken concerning you and has appointed you prince over Israel, my lord shall have no cause of grief or pangs of conscience for having shed blood without cause or for my lord working salvation himself. And when the Lord has dealt well with my lord, then remember your servant (I Samuel 25:23-31 NKJV)."

The quality lacking in David and his soldiers is found in this singular woman Abigail. We will continue looking at the wisdom of Abigail in a moment, but did you notice that she was entirely familiar with David. Abigail had heard the thrilling recollections of David's heroic deeds. She understood, too, that David was ordained by God to be Israel's next king. This remarkable woman knew that the armed warrior breathing fire and revenge was, in his better moments, truly a man after God's own heart. Indeed, David's reputation was known throughout Israel, but her foolish husband Nabal mockingly asked, "Who is David?"

Years later, David's son Solomon would pen the words, "A soft answer turns away wrath (Proverbs 15:1)." Solomon's inspiration may have come from the story of Abigail's wise and prudent handling of his father. Though free from guilt, she takes a measure of responsibility for her worthless husband's actions. Abigail's humility is not wasted on David. He realizes that this beautiful woman, married to a fool, speaks words of godly wisdom—and this is precisely where David and Nabal differ. Both men have acted rashly, but, to his credit, David is willing to hear the voice of reason while Nabal is content wallowing in his own folly.

Just as Abigail humbly accepted responsibility for her husband's appalling behavior, centuries later, a wise and honorable prophet of God named Daniel, held captive by his Babylonian oppressors, identified himself with his own sinful countrymen. It is interesting

to note that Daniel ranks among the noblest of all whose lives are chronicled in the pages of Scripture. This is significant because Abigail and Daniel point us to Jesus Christ; though He was without sin, He identified Himself with sinful people and suffered an agonizing death on a cruel Roman cross. Three days later, He walked out of a borrowed tomb and, today, our Living Savior intercedes on our behalf. His sacrifice took away the sin of the world and His bodily resurrection proved His power over death and the grave.

If I may paraphrase Abigail, she went on to say, "My husband, true to his name, is a fool. Do not give him your attention and do not get caught up in his folly. God has sent me to say that you are a better man, David, and if you slay him, your sterling reputation will be tarnished. Why all of this fuss over Nabal? Knowing him as I do, my useless husband is not worth all this. Put away your sword and let God fight your battles. Sheath your temper, too, and allow God to deal with your enemies. Erase this useless man's memory from your mind. God has bigger and better plans for you!"

In our lives, we encounter fools such as Nabal. Some are mere annoyances. Others would deprive us of our rights or our property; others, still, would do us harm. Our greatest risk comes from a desire to exact revenge by our own hands. We must distance ourselves from these Nabals and never allow them to take control of our emotions. If necessary, we can pursue lawful, honorable means of fending off their threats, but we are not to stoop to their level. We are not to respond to folly with folly. When one argues with a fool, onlookers are often confused as to who is, in fact, the fool.

Though this has been previously mentioned, let us never forget that, in his anger, David was on the cusp of committing mass murder. Had he followed through with his threats, we can only speculate as to the woeful outcomes that would have surely followed. The prisons are populated with women and men who, in anger and rage, took another's life. In many cases, their actions were not premeditated. I spent four years teaching in a men's prison and I seldom encountered an inmate that I would describe as a "monster." Even so, an out-of-control anger has led to countless murder convictions. Let no one among us who wrestles with runaway emotions think that they are incapable of committing

dreadful acts while under the spell of anger. Too, Jesus warned that we can be guilty of murder without raising a hand to another (Matthew 5:21, 22).

And David said to Abigail, “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me! Blessed be your discretion, and blessed be you, who have kept me this day from bloodguilt and from working salvation with my own hand! For as surely as the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, who has restrained me from hurting you, unless you had hurried and come to meet me, truly by morning there had not been left to Nabal so much as one male.” Then David received from her hand what she had brought him. And he said to her, “Go up in peace to your house. See, I have obeyed your voice, and I have granted your petition (I Samuel 25:32-35 NKJV).”

Blessed are peacemakers like Abigail. This lone woman, acting as God’s messenger, disarmed a celebrated giant slayer and two hundred fighting men. Against all odds, Abigail averted a bloodbath. May we never underestimate what a faithful woman or man may accomplish when acting in accordance with God’s will.

Like the prodigal son who finally came to his senses, David came to his senses, too, by abandoning his quest for bloody revenge. If I may now paraphrase David, he said, “Praise the God of Israel for sending you to show me the recklessness of my plans for bloodshed! Had you not intervened, I would have wrongfully slain your husband and every male servant in his employ. In my anger, I devised a plan for revenge—a plan that was vile and evil—a plan that was far from God’s will. Truly, you are a woman of wisdom. I have heard your prudent words and will now act upon them. Go in peace, Abigail.”

Let us give credit to David for heeding Abigail’s wisdom. Even in his anger, he was not deaf to the truth. Godly women and men must be prepared to receive the truth at all times. Conversely, the ungodly have little use for truth. To those who mock God and disdain that which is good, truth and wisdom are repugnant. In today’s world, we see legions abandoning God’s eternal truths for the sake of ever-changing climates of opinion and the doctrines of so-called political correctness. Such people exchange truth for lies.

In doing so, they embrace evil and jeer at Christian virtue. We see this fatal flaw in the warped, twisted thinking of Nabal. Like all who are steeped in nonsense and irrationality, Nabal was deaf to his wife's good counsel.

And Abigail came to Nabal, and behold, he was holding a feast in his house, like the feast of a king. And Nabal's heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk. So she told him nothing at all until the morning light. In the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone. And about ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died (I Samuel 25:36-38).

Back at the ranch, Nabal hosted an "eat, drink, and be merry" party to celebrate his good fortune; quite naturally, he was his own guest of honor. Instead of renewing his mind on God's truths, Nabal chose to saturate his brain with alcohol. For those familiar with the Book of Daniel, you will note the parallel found in Daniel 5. Nabal's party mirrors Belshazzar's drunken feast. Both of these celebratory events ended with the deaths of their extraordinarily foolish hosts. Nabal also appears to be very much like the rich fool portrayed in our Lord Jesus' parable recorded in Luke 12:

Then He (Jesus) spoke a parable to them, saying: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. And he thought within himself, saying, 'What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?' So he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry." But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided (Luke 12:16-20)?"'

Might Nabal have been the source of our Lord's inspiration? Perhaps. We may know with certainty that living for self leads to tragic endings.

When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, “Blessed be the Lord who has avenged the insult I received at the hand of Nabal, and has kept back his servant from wrongdoing (I Samuel 25:39 NKJV)...”

Realizing that God had called upon Abigail to prevent him from murdering Nabal and his servants, David demonstrated his gratitude through praise. God attended to Nabal just as He ultimately deals with all ungodly fools, for vengeance is His work and not our work. A short time later, David and Abigail were married. It is reasonable to assume that this remarkable woman was a positive and stabilizing influence in King David’s long life.

This is God's world, and the problems of the world are His to resolve. God does not need us to be His hot-tempered avengers. He has a way of dealing with fools who refuse to repent of their ungodly ways—and He does not need our help or assistance. Vengeance is His work. As for us, let us determine to leave the fate of wicked in His capable hands.

Rather than hating the ungodly, let us pray for their restoration. In truth, the ungodly are a pitiful lot. Standing on the cusp of damnation, the evil women and men of this world are only one heartbeat away from never-ending misery—an endless age in which they are separated from God's love, God's goodness, God's mercy, and God's comfort. Hate them? Friend, we had better pray for them!

The Word of God well understood and religiously obeyed is the shortest route to spiritual perfection. And we must not select a few favorite passages to the exclusion of others. Nothing less than a whole Bible can make a whole Christian.

--A.W. Tozier

Question 83: If I am unaware of a sin that I have committed, is that sin held against me? In other words, am I accountable for committing a sin in ignorance?

Answer: You have posed an interesting question.

I have no way of knowing with absolute certainty, but I strongly suggest that many, if not most, of our sins are committed with little or no awareness on our part. If I lose my patience in heavy traffic or speak brusquely to an overworked server, I am generally aware of my ill-behavior, but only God knows the many times I have sinned with little or no notice of my actions.

Referring to Jesus, John the Baptist proclaimed, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)." For those who trust in Jesus as Savior, all sin, past, present, and future is forgiven. And all sin includes sin we fail to notice.

God does not hold your sin against you; on the contrary, your sin has been taken away.

God does not take away our sin because we are deserving or because we try really hard to do what is right. Our sin is taken away because Jesus is our Savior. You and I stand forgiven of all sin.

I remind myself and others that even though we are forgiven, we may not escape the consequences of our sin. I taught prison inmates for four years. Many of the inmates I met had converted to Christianity. By grace through faith in Christ Jesus, these men had been forgiven by God for their sinful behavior, but the state government was not quite so forgiving. These men had to complete their prison sentences.

Let us remember that we can never be good enough, kind enough, smart enough, or generous enough to merit God's favor. Eternal life is a gift that cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8, 9). We are saved because God is good. He is gracious. He is loving. He is kind. He is mighty to save.

You and I are saved for no reason other than we have placed our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior. We will continue sinning and, as I suggested, many of our sinful acts will be

committed without notice or acknowledgment by us, but God's grace exceeds our disgrace. Will you join me in a prayer of thanksgiving and praise?

Dear Heavenly Father,

*My friend and I wish to thank You for being good to us.
We are not deserving of Your lush, abundant mercy.
We are unable to work our way into Heaven.
We sin consciously and unconsciously.
We do not love You enough.
We do not appreciate You enough.
We do not serve You with the diligence and effort You deserve.
But You love us regardless.
By faith, we asked Jesus to save us.
And through His death, burial, and resurrection,
We are saved and will live eternally with You.
How wonderful You are!
How merciful You are!*

*In the Name of Jesus we pray,
Amen!*

Question 84: I am experiencing difficult times. Might God be testing me? If so, for what purpose?

Answer: God does not tempt us with evil (James 1:3), but God will test us or allow us to be tested. The Lord permitted Satan to test Job and the Apostle Paul also suffered at the hands of Satan (II Corinthians 12).

As you will recall, God told Abraham to sacrifice his only son Isaac (Genesis 22), but when the time came for the knife to come down, God stopped him. God never intended for Isaac to die, but this test proved Abraham's faith.

Teachers give their students tests in order to show what the students already know.

I fear I have failed a good many tests from God—tests which revealed that my faith is not as strong as it should be. Even so, God has and never will abandon me, and He still loves me despite my weaknesses and shortcomings.

If your current situation is a test, what can you learn about yourself? What will you learn about Him?

At this moment in time, my life is going pretty well. It is easy to feel content and confident when all is right, but how will I react when I experience my next loss or setback? To be sure, this current “God is in His heaven and all is right with the world” state will not last indefinitely. Will I pass the next test?

And your current state of difficulty need not last indefinitely, either. Draw closer to Jesus. Study His word. Talk with Him. Listen to Him. Surround yourself with solid Christian brothers and sisters. And steer clear of those who will attack your faith and seek to tear you down.

If what you are enduring is a test, and maybe it is, I believe you will pass with a good grade. But do your part. God will do His part. He is faithful. You be faithful, too.

Keep me posted, my friend.

Question 86: I know that God loves us, but is He proud of His creation? Does He take pride in all that He has made?

Answer: I have been giving your question some thoughtful consideration. The key to addressing your inquiry is in settling on a definition of *pride*.

At creation, God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good (Genesis 1:31a NASB). Surely, God takes pleasure in that which is good. As to whether God is "proud" of His creation, I might be more inclined to say, "God derives pleasure in His creation."

Pride is a fatal flaw in humans (Proverbs 6:16-19). On the other hand, God alone has the right to be proud, for He is all that He knows Himself to be, yet I am reminded that Jesus said, "I am gentle and humble of heart (Matthew 11:29)."

On the matter of pride, C.S. Lewis wrote, "There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which everyone in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves. There is no fault which makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves. And the more we have it ourselves, the more we dislike it in others."

Pride, that foolish, irrational, overly inflated sense of one's own value and worth, is the deadliest of all sins. There is only One True Self that is beyond all other selves. I am, of course, speaking of God. And as His value and worth cannot be foolishly, irrationally, or inflated beyond its proper measure, God's character cannot be sullied by false pride.

Question 87: I placed my faith in Jesus as Savior because I wanted His gift of eternal life. In Christ, I know that my eternal future is secure, for my sins have been forgiven and I shall go to be with Him in a place where there is no suffering, pain, loneliness, hurt, sorrow, or death. My question is this: Might it be said that I became a Christian because of what is in it for me? Could it be argued that my primary motive in becoming a Christian is selfishness? If so, would this make me some kind of religious mercenary?

Answer: You have posed a singularly interesting question; as you have a sincere desire for a biblically-based answer, may God give me the wisdom to address this issue.

The English theologian William Law (1686–1761) said man's proper office is to be obedient to his Creator. Indeed, God has said He desires our obedience more than our sacrifices (I Samuel 15:22). An obedient saint is far more worthy than a merely busy saint. And I am certain you are familiar with our Lord Jesus' rebuke of those disobedient persons who served out of ill motives: "'Many will tell me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name, in your name cast out demons, and in your name do many mighty works (Matthew 7:22 WEB)?'" These lost souls had performed many notable works in His name, but they had never submitted to Him in obedience. Jesus will welcome all obedient saints into His kingdom; for those insincere phonies, He will send them away with a sharp, damning rebuke. I think we can say, then, that obedience to God is our first obligation.

Very well, then. Jesus said, "Come to Me." We come to Him out of obedience. We place our faith in Him because He has called us to Himself. To place our faith in Jesus as Savior is to obey Him—and we are to obey Him because He is Lord, and we are His creatures. Obedience is our calling. Obedience is our duty. Again, He says, "Come to Me." So, we come to Him, right? This is our only proper course. Will you agree?

God's love for you and me motivated Him to send Jesus to rescue us from our sin (John 3:16). Keep this in mind as I take you down a side road. Recently, the head of a public relations firm hired me for a writing assignment. I found the work interesting and challenging and highly profitable, too. In fact, as we settled the bill, I thanked my employer for her generosity. She did not seek me out because she loved me. She did not give me a nice payday because I occupy an ooey-gooey place in her heart. She contacted me because I could fulfill her company's need as a writer.

In contrast, God reached out to you and me in love. He does not need us. He did not draw us to Himself because He had a need for someone with our particular talents and abilities. Let me speak frankly--you and I may serve Him, but He can get along quite well without us. God is dependent upon no one. By His very nature, God can have no needs. So, why are you and I saved? We are saved because of God's lavish love for us! And with His love comes pleasures and rewards (I Corinthians 3:14). Would God offer His people bountiful rewards if receiving such rewards made them mercenary? Heaven forbid!

We fall in love and marry because we have needs that only our spouses can satisfy. No one says, "I do," without expecting love, physical affection, companionship, and mutual support in return. If a man had no desire for love, no taste for sex, no need for companionship, and no desire for support, he would likely remain celibate throughout his life.

Now I will ask you a question. Do you think God needs us? Do you think Jesus died on the cross because we might be able to do Him some good in return? The answer, of course, is a resounding, "No!" God has no needs.

Okay, it is abundantly clear that God loves us from only the purest motives. Will you agree to this point? If so, then God's love for us, untainted by selfish desires, is the noblest love in the universe. Very well, then. God wants to give Himself to us. He is our highest good. By making a gift of Himself to us, He can offer us no better gift. Obviously, He has our best interests at heart, right? We may conclude, then, that we are meant to enjoy His lavish love. God expects us to find pleasure and joy and happiness in Him. Consider how often the Apostle Paul tells us to rejoice (Philippians). Consider, too, the frequency in which the Psalms teach us to rejoice and be happy. Friend, we were created for joy and God is the Author of joy, happiness, fulfillment, and pleasure. Those who never give thanks fail to appreciate all God has done for them.

Let me take this concept to another level: God has gone out of His way, so to speak, to make us joyful creatures. Experience tells us there is much pain and suffering in this world; even so, we know that, in the end, we shall overcome. We are the victors. Nothing or no one will snatch us from His grip. And, in the end, we will see Jesus. So, if this is not cause for rejoicing, one must surely have ice water flowing in his or her veins.

Are you a joyous believer? According to your letter, you are. Good! Your joy is in accordance with God's will.

When God saves us, He saves us from damnation. He rescues us from the jaws of eternal destruction. Hell is for Satan and his demons. Those who enter into everlasting judgment do so by their own volition. God takes no pleasure in the death of any lost sinner. Is it wrong to come to Jesus in order to escape damnation? No. As the writer of Hebrews rhetorically asked, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" And this brings us back to the matter of obedience. God calls us because He desires no one to be eternally separated from Him.

You and I are saved because He called us to Himself. We were as dirty-faced orphans. He adopted us into His family. We were lost. He found us. Let us delight and take pleasure in His goodness. How can our hearts be stoic or indifferent when the Creator of the universe has lavished His love on you and me?

Question 88: I have been a single Christian for many years. Recently, I have had a desire to find a wife and get married. Let me be frank in saying I am leaning toward matrimony, in part, because I long for sexual intimacy. Is this wrong? Am I being carnal?

Answer: Back in the bell-bottom days, I worked as a musician. As a mop-headed kid clutching my fire-glo red Rickenbacker, I belonged to the musicians' union and worked from a local booking agency. Although I no longer play cover tunes for

intoxicated patrons, I would guess that 95% of all pop, rock, and country music is about love, or, more often, lust.

As most big name performers seldom remained married to the same spouse for more than six or seven months, what are we going to learn about love from silly pop stars? Nothing. A bass guitarist who is five times divorced and currently having an affair with the drummer's girlfriend is not qualified to teach us about love.

I practice what I preach. As an amateur composer, I have never written a love song. Why? I am a crusty old bachelor. I will probably die a crusty old bachelor. No one has nominated me for a top ten slot among America's most eligible bachelors. Really, what do I know about romance?

With this bit of tongue and cheek confession behind me, I will answer your question with a question. If you are longing for companionship, why not seek out a godly Christian woman and get married? Have lots of babies, too, and name one of them after me if you are so inclined.

When I am hungry, I go to the fridge. When my nose itches, I scratch it. If I were lonely and looking for a wife, I would go to a Christian dating website. Have you considered this?

Question 89: I recently read of a pastor taking his own life. Why would any of God's people commit suicide?

Answer: You have asked a challenging question.

According to some studies, the suicide rate is lower among Christians than nonbelievers. Another study suggests that the suicide rate among religious people in Asia is higher than secular-minded Asians while the suicide rate among Latin American

women and men of faith is lower than non-believers. There appears to be no agreement among researchers.

I am not a big fan of polls and surveys but let us take a look at this issue.

Despair is a dreadful feeling brought about by the false belief that a particular problem or situation is beyond all hope. In other words, despair leads its victims to believe the problem or situation cannot be fixed and the pain cannot be ameliorated. Sadly, the person in despair is convinced that the suffering is never-ending, and the situation is beyond hope. Death appears to be the only escape.

No matter how dire the situation, God's children can be assured that every action, every situation, every disaster, every hurt, every wound, every disappointment, every tear, every sorrow, every trial, every difficulty, and every struggle works together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

God can and will overcome every evil with good.

I strongly believe that, when we meet Jesus face to face, every hurtful wound we suffered in this life will be made right. In fact, I am convinced we will embrace the pain of this temporal life during the endless, eternal age to come because God will "undo" all evil suffering with perfect, complete, divine good. Today's anguish is tomorrow's victory. Today's tears are tomorrow's joys. Today's loss is tomorrow's gain.

If every Christian understood this truth, there would be no suicide among believers.

Friend, I have failed to mention that suicide may be brought about by illness—either physiological or psychological or, perhaps, both. Rather than casting judgement on those who die by their own hand, let us seek to bring comfort and healing to those parents, children, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, friends, and loved ones left behind.

May you and I be ambassadors of Jesus' love and faithful purveyors of the Gospel message that brings hope and comfort to hurting people. We have answers to the world's problems. Let us not keep these answers to ourselves.

Question 90: Is it okay to watch Scooby-Doo?

Answer: When my daughter Hannah was a wee little girl, she loved the Scooby-Doo cartoon series. Each episode followed a similar routine with the ghost or the ghoul or the monster being exposed as a conniving fraud in the final scene.

In my estimation, these cartoons were rather innocuous. My only concern was this: Hannah had a certain fondness for Shaggy. I worried that she might grow up, fall in love, and marry a character long on appetite and short on brains. To be sure, she married a young man with a famous appetite, but unlike Shaggy, he is well-groomed and intelligent.

Please know that God did not appoint me to be your censor, and I have little use for religious authoritarianism or Pharisaical legalism. No doubt, much of what comes out of Hollywood is garbage ranging from sheer stupidity to godless indoctrination. Because of my age (I am an older person), I tend to gravitate to movies and television shows from the past. Additionally, I have learned how to entertain myself without the aid of glitz celebrities and cutesy pop stars. And as a man who is unafraid to think and places a premium on truth and authenticity, I have a low tolerance for Hollywood nonsense. Nothing grates my nerves quite like daytime television.

Say what you will, our friend Shaggy had an enviable metabolism. He could eat what he wanted, as much as he wanted, and as often as he wanted without gaining so much as a single, superfluous ounce. I have a hefty appetite, too, but my belly is not flat like Shaggy's. But I am smarter and better groomed.

Question 91: The Apostle Paul said he was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. In what sense was he Christ's prisoner?

Answer: Only once in my life have I ever been truly, completely, and wholly infatuated by a woman. Friend, after meeting her, I could not get her off my mind. My infatuation grew into an obsession. Try as I might, I could not keep from longing for her. I remember telling God that, without her, my life would not be worth living.

I was her prisoner. I was her slave, her servant, her lackey, her chattel, her property.

I would imagine this is how the Apostle Paul felt about Jesus. After years of mere religion steeped in ritualism and bound by Law he could not keep, Paul fell in love with the living, resurrected, glorious Savior.

Paul was a prisoner of Jesus Christ. Once he encountered Jesus, he could think of none other. Of his past, he compared his learning, his credentials, his accomplishments, and his faithful rendering of the rituals of Judaism to animal dung (Philippians 3:8).

As I have frequently mentioned, I spent four years teaching in a men's prison. The prisoners I met did not want to be prisoners. The men I knew longed for those iron gates to swing wide and let them be free. Some of the men who attended my classes knew they would die in prison. To think one will never again breathe the air of freedom must be wearisome—even terrifying.

Paul was captivated by Jesus. Paul was our Lord Jesus' prisoner. This condition did not grieve Paul. On the contrary, only as a prisoner of Jesus Christ could Paul discover what true freedom really is.

As I march toward the close of my earthly life, the more captivated by Jesus I become. Everyone is a slave or a prisoner to some object or some person or some idea.

There are people who are prisoners of their own greed. They are held captive by their insatiable lusts for wealth and an unholy desire for materialism. Others are prisoners of a leader, an idol, a hero, or a romantic interest. Others, still, are prisoners of some ridiculous form of ideology. Their thinking is held captive by corrupt indoctrination or the nonsensical incongruities of political correctness. There are slaves to alcohol, heroin, and cocaine. There are captives of pornography. Others are fettered and chained by haunting doubts and nightmarish fears. And everyone who does not have Jesus as Savior is a prisoner to sin.

So, friend, we are all prisoners. We are all held captive by something or someone, but when we surrender to Jesus and become His prisoner, He gives us our freedom. We surrender ourselves to Him and, in return, He breaks the shackles of sin and makes us free. To understand true freedom, let me suggest a study in Paul's letter to the Galatians.

In Christ, a prisoner knows freedom. Paradoxical? Yes, but anyone who is truly a prisoner of Jesus Christ knows this to be true.

There is always the danger that we may just do the work for the sake of the work. This is where the respect and the love and the devotion come in - that we do it to God, to Christ, and that's why we try to do it as beautifully as possible.
--Mother Teresa

Question 92: What is repentance?

Answer: As your question is straightforward and to the point, I will respond with a concise answer.

In Christian theology, to repent is to agree with God that a particular action is sinful followed by a turning away from that offense.

As an illustration, a motorist who has been drinking nearly slams his car into a tree. Shaken by the incident, he stops the car, pockets the keys, and says, "Driving while drinking is a fool's game. Rather than risk an accident, I will park my car and walk to my destination." The inebriated motorist knows that what he has done is wrong and this realization motivates him to stop driving until he has regained his sobriety. This is what repentance looks like.

Many of the Apostle Paul's converts had been idol worshippers. When these idolators turned to Jesus as Savior, they turned away from idolatry. This is repentance.

Question 93: God hates me. I go to church, and I tithe, but my life is garbage, and nothing works out in my favor. What have I done to deserve this? Why has God turned His back on me? Why are others blessed while I struggle day in and day out?

Answer: Let me begin by saying God does not hate you. On the contrary, I am to tell you that He loves you.

You have attempted summing up your life in a scant forty-nine words. Admittedly, you have not given me much information to work with, but that is okay, for I have asked my Heavenly Father to guide me in formulating an answer that will give you genuine hope and encouragement.

Several years ago, I felt much the way you feel now. I had convinced myself that God did not care about me. He had His favorites, I reasoned, and my name was not found on His short list. I was depressed. I struggled financially. I was under-employed. I was without hope and the future appeared bleak. There was no joy in my life.

I was eaten up with frustration. Life had not gone the way I had hoped. I envied those whose hard work and ambitions were paying dividends. God had given me a reasonable

measure of ability, so why was I struggling with a dead end job? Why was I driving an old car that leaked oil and coolant? Why did I dread the first of each month when the landlord came looking for his rent?

People all around were succeeding. Me? A loser. Where were God's blessings? Why did others prosper while I kept falling behind? I sensed my wife's love for me was growing cold. I could hardly fault her. She resented me. I resented me, too. We had that much in common. She eventually left me.

At the age of forty-nine, I returned to school. By working during the day and taking online classes, I eventually earned a doctorate in theology. This was the first real goal I had achieved in years. I, who had once mopped floors in a furniture store to earn extra money, had earned a fancy diploma. Wow! That felt good!

I began full time ministry making a whopping \$4.08 an hour. Minimum wage, at that time, was \$7.75 hourly. As you can see, I was still under-employed, but the agency gave me a room and an opportunity to serve full time as a chaplain. I had no health insurance, and, being a conservative evangelical, I was not always treated well, but I wanted to serve so badly, I stuck it out. Very few people leaving seminary would have tolerated the miserly pay and workplace hostility, but very few people leave seminary at the age of fifty-five. I was happy to have a job, such as it was.

Over the years, God has opened an unbelievable number of doors for me. My work has taken me to some interesting places, and I have had my share of adventures. I no longer wonder who I am and why am I here. God took me, a guy who was a part time furniture store janitor, and put me to work teaching and writing in His service.

Best of all, I know beyond doubt that I have a purpose. My life matters. I serve Him. And I know that He loves me.

So why am I telling you all of this? I found rebirth in the midst of my thorniest frustrations. Before entering ministry, I felt as you feel now. In other words, I was like you.

Let your frustration drive you to making some life changes. Knock on God's door. Tell Him, "Lord, I am frustrated and miserable and depressed—what would You have me do? Tithing and attending church isn't doing the job. I am ready for a major life change. You came to the rescue of this crusty old clergyman in Louisville, so come to my rescue, too!"

Jeremiah 29:11 says that God has plans for each of us—plans to prosper us. Plans not to harm us. Plans to give us hope and a future. God cannot break His promises. It is your move—go to God without delay and ask Him for your marching orders. "Lord, You have a plan for my life. What is it, please? What would You have me do? I am ready to move forward."

Are you a member of a solid, Bible-believing church? Do you have a godly, mature pastor or mentor? If you are attending a wishy-washy church filled with Christianettes led by a preacherette who dishes out perky little sermonettes, then get out of this Laodicean outpost and worship at a real Church that teaches from the Bible and honors Jesus Christ. Surround yourself with genuine Christians. I know what I am talking about. Please understand that God put mature, godly mentors in my life and now I have the opportunity of mentoring others.

The sun that melts the wax hardens the clay. Allow this frustration and dissatisfaction to motivate you. God has a plan for your life. Again, go to Him and pick up your orders.

Question 94: Are we to keep the Ten Commandments?

Answer: Let us open our discussion with this passage from Paul's letter to the church in Colossae.

When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross (Colossians 2:13, 14 NASB).

My hair began thinning at an early age. It was bound to have happened. Baldness is a common trait among the male members of our family. As my hairline receded, my forehead seemed to grow. I assumed, however, that the hair loss was limited to the front of my scalp. One day, I was in an office in which hung two large convex mirrors. By looking into one mirror that reflected the other mirror, I could see the back of my head. There, before my unbelieving eyes, was a huge bald spot on the crown of my head! I was shocked! Yes, I fully knew that my hair was thinning in the front, but I had falsely believed that I still had plenty of hair in the back. The mirrors revealed that I had a lot less hair than I had previously thought.

My friend, the mirror did not make me bald. The mirror only revealed the pitiable state of my shedding scalp.

And so it is with the Ten Commandments. The Law is like a mirror—it reveals the true state of our moral condition. The Law says I am to love the Lord with every fiber of my being and, of course, I do love God, but there are days when my love is cold, and my focus is on self rather than on Him. I do not love Him every moment of the day and with everything within me. And I do not know anyone who does. There are times when I love God for what He can do for me. Let me state this another way: I am incapable of loving God as He should be loved. And, for this, I have violated the first of His commandments.

And what about loving my neighbor as myself? True, there are some people who will say that I am a pretty nice sort of bloke, but, friend, there are times when my primary interest is in myself. There are a few people that I love enough to die for—my daughter being one of them, but do I really and truly love all of my neighbors as I love myself? No! Again, my interests are often directed to myself and to my family—I do not love all of my neighbors as I love myself. And so, I have broken the second most important commandment.

I have never taken another person's life, but I have been guilty of harboring such white-hot, raging anger toward others that I murdered them in my heart.

I am good to my parents. I love my mom and dad. I see them nearly every day. Ignore them? Of course not. I love them dearly. But when I was younger, I was often unkind to them. And so, I have not always honored my parents as God commanded.

I am far too embarrassed to tell you how I have been guilty of lust and covetousness.

If my salvation depended upon keeping God's Law, I would be Hell-bound for certain.

In May 1989, I placed my faith in Jesus as Savior. At that moment in time, all of my sins, past, present, and future, were forgiven. Being incapable of keeping God's Law, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was my only recourse.

Jesus, who is both God and man, never violated a single commandment. He lived a perfect, sinless life. And when He was nailed to the cross, He was paying the penalty for my wretchedness.

I pity those who say their religion is in the keeping of the Ten Commandments. Only One was able to keep God's Law perfectly and without infraction. As for you and me and the other 6 billion people on this planet, we need a Savior and only the blood of Christ will wash away our sins.

The Ten Commandments condemn us. Jesus forgives us.

Let me remind you, too, that His physical, bodily resurrection assures us that we, too, will overcome the grip of death and the grave. We shall live with Him forever.

I cannot say enough about the glories of His death, burial, and resurrection. I cannot say enough about the goodness of Jesus Christ and His bountiful love for us. I am incapable of telling you how wonderful He really is, but He is all that I have said that He is and much, much more.

Question 95: What does it mean to reject Jesus Christ?

Answer: What does it mean to reject our Lord Jesus Christ? You have asked a vital question deserving of a biblically-based answer. In the following account, the Lord Jesus stirs the hostility of His detractors by simply stating the truth. Truth is surely an anger trigger among those who prefer lies and darkness. Note how His enemies rejected Him and, in doing so, rejected God's eternal, undeniable, life-altering truths.

So Jesus was saying to those Jews who had believed Him, “If you continue in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” They answered Him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone; how is it that You say, ‘You will become free’ (John 8:31-33 NASB)?”

What an incredulous claim! “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never yet been enslaved to anyone...” The descendants of Abraham had been slaves to the Egyptians and Babylonians, and, at the time of our Savior’s incarnation, the people of Israel lived under the iron-fisted domination of their Roman conquerors. Additionally, the Jews were

enslaved by corrupt religious leaders, particularly the Sadducees and Pharisees, and the Law of Moses which they were unable to keep.

As I gazed from my window this morning, I did not see Roman soldiers patrolling the streets, but we in this nation are, nonetheless, an enslaved people. Americans are slaves to entertainment—much of it idiotic and corruptible; we are slaves to lies and propaganda from the mainstream press, our insatiable desire to spend, politicians who embrace evil while mocking our nation's Judeo-Christian heritage, and a haunting fear of insulting the wild-eyed purveyors of so called political correctness. We are slaves to alcohol and drugs and too much medication. We are slaves to excesses at the dinner table. We are enslaved by fads and trends and the shifting sands of whatever climate of opinion happens to be in vogue. We are slaves to a society steeped in broken homes, divorce, mediocre schools, abortion on demand, violent sports, and heroes undeserving of the adoration heaped upon them. We are slaves to sin—sin that creates a great yawning chasm separating us from God—sin that can only be cleansed by the blood of our Savior, Jesus Christ. To reject Jesus as Savior is to embrace an endless eternity of slavery.

Jesus answered them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is the slave of sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son does remain forever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed. I know that you are Abraham’s descendants; yet you seek to kill Me, because My word has no place in you. I speak the things which I have seen with My Father; therefore you also do the things which you heard from your father (John 8:34-38 NASB).”

Truth is an anger trigger. Among those who prefer lies and mindless propaganda, truth is a virtue that is hated and despised. As Jesus spoke only the truth, a hostile religious establishment sought to kill Him. Nothing has changed; today, Jesus’ words are condemned as “hate speech.” Watch for increasing oppression in the U.S. against those who proclaim the pure Gospel truth.

They answered and said to Him, “Abraham is our father.” Jesus said to them, “If you are Abraham’s children, do the deeds of Abraham. But as it is, you are seeking to kill Me, a man who has told you the truth, which I heard from God; this Abraham did not do. You are doing the deeds of your father.” They said to Him, “We were not born of fornication; we have one Father: God.” Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love Me, for I proceeded forth and have come from God, for I have not even come on My own initiative, but He sent Me. Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you cannot hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me. Which one of you convicts Me of sin? If I speak truth, why do you not believe Me? He who is of God hears the words of God; for this reason you do not hear them, because you are not of God (John 8:39-47 NASB).”

All roads do not lead to God. There are many streets and avenues and boulevards paved by Satan. And Jesus knew nothing of the so-called “brotherhood of man.” To His detractors, He said, “You are not of God,” and, “You are of your father the devil...” In rejecting the Lord Jesus, the religious leaders revealed their hatred of the truth and their allegiance to Satan. Two thousand years later, we have politicians, teachers, entertainers, social workers, and even pastors who reject the teachings of Jesus Christ. Some may give Him a form of superficial “lip service,” so to speak, but their hearts are joined in unholy matrimony to the world, the flesh, and the devil. They reject Jesus because the truth is not in them. On the contrary, truth is a trigger that stirs the wrath of the ungodly, and this smoke and brimstone anger motivates them to lash out at those who stand for the clear teachings of Jesus.

The Jews answered and said to Him, “Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?” Jesus answered, “I do not have a demon; but I honor My Father, and you dishonor Me. But I do not seek My glory; there is One who seeks and judges. Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death.” The Jews

said to Him, “Now we know that You have a demon. Abraham died, and the prophets also; and You say, ‘If anyone keeps My word, he will never taste of death.’ Surely You are not greater than our father Abraham, who died? The prophets died too; whom do You make Yourself out to be?” Jesus answered, “If I glorify Myself, My glory is nothing; it is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’; and you have not come to know Him, but I know Him; and if I say that I do not know Him, I will be a liar like you, but I do know Him and keep His word. Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.” So the Jews said to Him, “You are not yet fifty years old, and have You seen Abraham?” Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am.” Therefore they picked up stones to throw at Him, but Jesus hid Himself and went out of the temple (John 8:48-59 NASB).

Samaritans were a people hated by the Jews. Their attempt at labeling Jesus as a Samaritan was intended as an insult. Jesus refused to dignify this racially-charged slur with a rebuttal.

The religious leaders well understood that Jesus was claiming deity in His bold and stunning declaration, “Before Abraham was born, I am.” The divine name of God, YHWH, means “I am who I am.” In language His enemies understood, Jesus declared, “I am God.”

Today, there are many religious cults and isms that reject the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let no one be deceived; one cannot claim to be a follower of Jesus while rejecting His divine nature. As C.S. Lewis wrote, “I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at

his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to."

Those who reject our Lord Jesus Christ do so at their eternal peril. Again, quoting from C.S. Lewis, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. Those who knock, it is opened."

I've never really been one to try to be politically correct. I just feel truth is truth, and sometimes I probably offend some people.
-Franklin Graham

Question 96: Is it a sin to say, "Oh, my goodness?"

Answer: "Oh, my goodness," is a colloquialism.

A colloquialism or colloquial language is primarily a linguistic tool commonly employed in everyday, casual conversation. Such idioms are normally used in informal verbal communications. As with slang, the many commonly used colloquial phrases rise and fall in popularity over time. Additionally, various geographical regions play host to their own often unique forms of idiomatic speech. Colloquialisms are not recommended for use in formal or scholarly forms of verbal and written communications.

Did you understand this gobblety-gook? Oh, my goodness, neither did I!

I suppose a rather grim legalist or, perhaps, a stone-faced grammarian might object, but colloquialisms untainted by profanities are, in my opinion, rather harmless. I am not comfortable with "Oh, my God," but "Oh, my goodness" seems innocuous.

I will remind you that the Apostle Paul's favorite idiomatic colloquialism was "Heaven forbid!"

If you approve of my answer, give me an "Oh, my goodness—you are right!"

Question 97: Must I glorify God in all that I do? If so, how do I do this?

Answer: If you can learn to floss your teeth or trim your toenails in a manner that glorifies God, I would be most interested in knowing your techniques. Perhaps you can also teach me to hallow the Holy Name of our Creator while removing gobs of lint from the good old belly button.

I knew an alcoholic who thought he was glorifying God while pickling his liver at the corner tavern. As he guzzled beers and munched on stale pretzels, he talked to his fellow boozers about "the man upstairs." I kid you not. Those were his words.

Yes, we can bring glory to Jesus Christ through the everyday experiences in our lives. I do not think He expects us to sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* while smearing deodorant under our arms or to recite Psalm 23 while sloshing Listerine around the mouth, but the whole of our lives should reflect a sincere awe and wonderment of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In John 14, Jesus says, "If you love Me, you will keep my commandments." How are you doing with that? Are you keeping His commandments? Say, what about me? How am I doing in keeping His commandments? Friend, I must admit that I have my lapses and moments of weakness. Perhaps the same is true of you. Thankfully, God's grace is greater than our disgrace.

We can glorify our merciful and loving Savior by stepping around these silly traps baited with petty legalism. So, as believers who wish to honor God with our words, let us not engage in mindless discussions or foolish debates that are steeped in sugarcoated nonsense.

Question 98: How should I prepare for my new role as an usher in our church?

Answer: Let me begin by saying I pray the Lord will be with you as you serve your church in this vital capacity. Most likely, you will be the first contact visitors meet. How you treat your guests will greatly determine whether or not their experience is positive. Treat them as you would wish to be treated if you were a visitor and your work will be a blessing to all who make your acquaintance.

In church government, elders normally take on teaching duties while deacons often perform hospitality roles. Never underestimate the importance of your work.

Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain (I Timothy 3:8 ESV).

As a representative of the church and an ambassador of Jesus Christ, your conduct must be above reproach. This office is strictly reserved for honorable persons. Additionally, your speech should be honest and straightforward. Say what you mean and mean what you say. Season your words with kindness. You must neither be a reckless consumer of alcohol nor an abuser of other chemical depressants and stimulants—temperance and moderation should define your habits and ways. And in money and business, your reputation should be hallmarked by honesty, fair-dealings, and generosity. Greed and underhandedness have no place in the character of a deacon. A questionable character will cast an evil shadow upon the congregation.

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

All Christians, particularly those who hold offices in their local congregations, should be led, guided, and filled with the Holy Spirit of God who empowers each of the saints for service. Do not rely upon your own abilities, rather, depend upon the Holy Spirit to make you a truly effective usher.

Approach your duties with excitement and enthusiasm; when a believer is wholly sold-out for the cause of Jesus Christ, the possibilities are limitless.

Question 99: Years ago, I placed my faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, but there are days when I do not feel saved. Is it possible that I am not truly saved?

Answer: I suppose most believers have, from time to time, harbored doubts about their salvation, but we must remember that salvation is based on truth rather than feelings. Truth withstands the attacks led by doubt and fear, but feelings can be deceptive. Experience teaches that emotions are often misleading. A slight headache or lack of sleep can adversely affect one's outlook and behavior. After a restless night of tossing and turning, one may wake up feeling unduly cross and moody. Our emotions are a gift from God, but like many good gifts, they have their proper role, and their role is not to rule us.

I read in horror of a thirteen-year-old girl who hanged herself after relentless bullying by her schoolmates. Classroom tormentors convinced this little girl that she was ugly, unwanted, and unfit to live. Emotionally distraught, the child believed the wretched lies said about her. The facts are this: Rosalie was a sweet little girl who had a keen mind, a beautiful smile, and a million reasons to live. Her death was a tragedy that should have and could have been avoided. Armed with lies and contempt that must have smelled like

the devil's armpit, Rosalie's heartless bullies played havoc with the child's fragile emotions. Driven by fear that the tormenting would never end, she took her life.

I once had a teaching assistant, a retired psychologist, who made a habit of asking the class, "How does this make you feel?" After hearing this standby cliché one too many times, I interrupted by saying, "I do not care how this makes you feel. I want to know what you think." Let us deal in facts, not feelings. Let the sacred voice of truth rise above the din of runaway emotionalism.

For "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13 ESV)."

If you and I could live perfect, sinless lives, we could soar to Heaven with the wind under our outstretched wings; however, we are incapable of living a life of perfect obedience. We have no wings. There will be no soaring for the likes of us. We are in desperate need of a Savior.

Do not be fooled into thinking God will judge us favorably if the good that we do outweighs the bad we have done. There is not a single verse in the Bible that teaches we can earn salvation by being good enough or working hard enough. The cults and isms may teach this brand of theological dribble, but throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament, we learn "the just shall live by faith." No one enters Heaven on their own merit. Being good is never good enough.

Here is the dilemma: If we cannot live sinless, perfect lives and if Almighty God is unimpressed with our attempts at self-righteousness, what hope do we have? Our hope is in no one other than Jesus Christ. Those of us who have called out to Him for salvation will be saved.

You asked, "Years ago, I placed my faith in Jesus Christ as Savior, but there are days when I do not feel saved. Is it possible that I am not truly saved?" Forget about your feelings. What does the Bible say? The Bible says everyone who calls on the name of

the Lord will be saved. Did you come to understand that you were a lost sinner? Did you turn to Jesus for salvation? Did you place your faith in Him as Savior? Is your trust in Him rather than in your own feeble attempts at righteousness? If you answered yes, how could He have *not* saved you? How could you possibly remain lost and bound for Hell? Are the scriptures unreliable? Did the Apostle Paul lie to the believers in Rome and, indeed, to all of us when he proclaimed that everyone who called upon the name of the Lord will be saved? Heaven forbid!

Forget feelings—trust in the facts.

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; the one who comes to Me will not be hungry, and the one who believes in Me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have indeed seen Me, and *yet* you do not believe. Everything that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I certainly will not cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of everything that He has given Me I will lose nothing, but will raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of My Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him will have eternal life, and I Myself will raise him up on the last day (John 6:35-40 emphasis mine).”

Perhaps you have known the pain of rejection. Many of us have been abandoned by someone we loved and trusted, but Jesus says all who come to Him for salvation will be accepted. He turns no one away. And, by our Savior’s own sacred promise, no one who is saved will ever be “unsaved.” If we can trust in Jesus as Savior, we can trust Him to keep us saved. This is a fact fully supported by the immutable teachings of the Bible. Feelings and emotions are not always reliable, but may we never doubt God’s truths.

Doubt is not uncommon among Christ’s followers. The great American evangelist Billy Graham said, “The Christian life is not a constant high. I have my moments of deep discouragement. I have to go to God in prayer with tears in my eyes, and say, O God, forgive me, or Help me.” Thankfully, feelings of doubt and discouragement cannot undo

the good work God began in us when we placed our faith in Christ Jesus as Savior. Quoting again from the late Dr. Graham, “Salvation is an act of God. It is initiated by God, wrought by God, and sustained by God.”

I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:3-6 NKJV emphasis mine).

When God begins a good work in the life of a new believer, He will see His work to its completion. In other words, there will be no unfinished or abandoned projects in God’s kingdom. When you and I placed our faith in Christ Jesus as Savior, God began molding us into the image of His Son. This is known as sanctification. God is in the process of making us Christ-like. We will never achieve our highest level of Christ-likeness on this side of eternity, but the day will come when we, at long last, achieve sinless perfection—and we will also have a perfect, immortal, glorified body made for eternity. Again, at the risk of redundancy, once God begins a good work in the life of a believer, He will see that this work is completed. If God threw up His hands and gave up on just one believer, His promises would mean nothing, and His word would be suspect. Thankfully, God cannot lie, and His word is truth. Pure, untainted, immutable, undeniable truth.

So, you say you do not feel saved? What do feelings matter when the facts point in your favor? God means what He says, and He says what He means. No one is saved today and lost tomorrow. Eternal life is just that—eternal. The doubt that plagues you is nothing but the stench of the devil’s breath. Turn the infernal blighter away and the disgusting odor will leave.

(Jesus said,) “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one

is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. I and My Father are one (John 10:27-30 emphasis mine)."

How can a believer lose his or her salvation if he or she will never perish? How can a believer forfeit his or her eternal inheritance when no one is capable of snatching him or her out of the Father's hand? If we trust Scripture rather than these wearisome feelings of doubt and insecurity, we will live in the bold confidence of a highly beloved son or daughter whose rightful destiny is Heaven.

Therefore He is also able to save forever those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25 NASB).

Why should we live in fear? Why should we question the faithfulness of God? Why should we doubt the validity of our salvation? The writer of Hebrews clearly states that Jesus is able to save those who come to God through Him forever. Forever is forever. Once again, are we to listen to runaway emotions or shall we trust the truths of Scripture? God cannot lie, but our emotions can certainly lead us astray.

(Jesus said,) "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (Matthew 7:21-23 NKJV)!"

The church is not immune to fakes and phonies whose false confessions make them imposters cluttering our pews. Many years ago, I met a man who, on the surface, appeared to be a genuine follower of Jesus Christ. I was moved by his passion for others and his devotion to Jesus Christ. Later, I learned that he had abandoned his wife after a brief marriage punctuated by cruelty, deception, and relentless threats. He was a wolf in sheep's clothing, and, in hindsight, I doubt if the man had a sincere bone in his body. Like so many clones of Judas Iscariot, the church is plagued by rogues masquerading as

Christian believers, but you yourself know if your profession of faith in Christ was sincere. Did you realize you were a helpless sinner? Did you come to believe you needed Jesus, the Son of God, to save you from your sins? Did you believe He and He alone could rescue you from the wrath to come? If so, the Lord Jesus will not turn you away.

But someone may *well* say, "You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works (James 2:18 NASB)."

Let me close by saying that no one is saved by good deeds and works of righteousness (Ephesians 2:8, 9) but good deeds and works reveal the depth of the Christian's faith. A Christian who is stingy with his money, slovenly in his duties, disdainful toward others, willfully ignorant of God's word, and vulgar in his behavior should examine himself and the genuineness of his faith. Our works are an outward manifestation of the faith within us. Our works cannot save us, but our works reveal who we really are. Those who love Jesus cannot help but serve Him. If you love Jesus, your love will show.

Never doubt the goodness of God. Do not question the sincerity of God. Believe all of God's lavish promises. No one slips through His fingers. He who saved you and me will keep us saved. Now let us consider this matter settled.

Question 100: Is it possible to know God's will for our lives? If so, how can we discover what He would have us to do?

Answer: It was the celebrated historian and businessman James Truslow Adams who made "The American Dream" a part of our national lingo. In *The Epic of America*, he defined the American Dream as "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are,

regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position." In spite of our national faults, America remains a land of opportunity where ambition is neither mocked nor jeered—a nation in which dreams, even far-fetched dreams, are realized.

For many, a sprawling home in a prestigious neighborhood is the ultimate trophy—a brick and mortar monument attesting to one's ambition and industry. This may explain why a middle-aged couple whose children have left the nest would feel cramped in anything less than a three thousand square foot house. For others, the American Dream has little to do with the accumulation of wealth or conspicuous materialism; self-fulfillment is the prize that stirs these dreamers to action. This may be illustrated by the occasional CPA or attorney who, over the protests of well-meaning family and friends, abandons a perfectly good professional career to pursue acting or writing or even a two year stint in the Peace Corp. Particularly among Third World immigrants arriving in the United States, the American Dream is often expressed as a yearning hope that their children may come to know the abundant blessings of living in a nation of nearly unlimited freedom and opportunity. Indeed, this is a land of diverse people whose individual perceptions of the American Dream are equally diverse.

For much of the world's population, the American Dream represents mankind's loftiest ideals—an opportunity to pursue one's personal ambitions in an atmosphere of expansive freedom. The American Dreams says nothing is impossible to those who are willing to try, try, and try again. In other words, hard work and perseverance are the two necessary ingredients for the realization of the American Dream. But might there be a higher expression of hope—an even loftier pinnacle of personal fulfillment that soars above the most far-flung of all our American Dreams?

The answer is a bold, resounding "Yes!" There is a much grander dream that originates beyond the borders of our fifty states—a dream born in the fertile infinity of our Creator's mind.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV)."

The God who made us and the God who loves us is also the God who has a dream for each of us. Unlike the dreams conjured in our limited imaginations, His dreams for you and me

- are always attainable—if He tells us to fly, He will give us wings
- satisfy our heart's deepest longings—money and fame can leave us empty and unfulfilled, but God's grand design for our lives satisfies as no mere earthly trinket can
- yield rewards that follow us into eternity—earthly treasures are divided among our surviving heirs, but God's rewards are stored in Heaven's vaults

With God, all things are possible, but without God, there are a lot of impossibilities. Out of some 330,000,000 plus Americans, only one can occupy the White House at a time. In sports, there can be only one winning pitcher in Game Seven of the World Series, and in a nation preoccupied by beauty, youth, and glamor, only one will be crowned Miss America. To be sure, there is a crowded field of frustrated runners-up, honorable mentions, and unsung heroes whose lifelong dreams will remain forever out of reach. Their lack of ultimate success may have nothing to do with personal inability or scarcity of talent; conversely, blue ribbons are occasionally awarded to those who are not the best and the brightest. Mediocrity frequently crosses the finish line first. Being the best does not necessarily guarantee top honors in politics, business, academics, art, sports, or entertainment.

Not every human ambition will be realized. Not every personal longing will be satisfied. Most dreams will remain just that—dreams. But if we set aside our personal ambitions and accept the divinely appointed ambitions originating from the hallowed halls of God's Throne Room, we simply cannot fail.

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

God knows nothing of failure. Is anything impossible to the One who spoke this vast universe into existence? He is the God of possibilities—not impossibilities. Because of this truth, the Apostle Paul boldly proclaimed that he could accomplish all that God had set before him through the power of Jesus Christ. Despite his impressive professional and educational credentials, he refused to rely upon his own intellect or cunning in order to fulfill his divinely appointed purpose. When God handed Paul his marching orders, He also granted him access to the infinite power of the One who conquered death and the grave. As long as Paul remained obedient to God's will and purpose for his life, he could fully rely upon the unwavering strength of Christ Jesus to overcome the obstacles and roadblocks that would stand in the way of ultimate success. Of triumph and the accomplishment of *all things*, Paul spoke truthfully, for at the end of his earthly life, he was able to declare an uncompromised victory by saying, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith (II Timothy 4:7)."

God has a dream for you and me. His dream is our blueprint for living. His master plan gives us direction and defines the divinely-inspired goals we are to pursue. God's dream reveals the nature and purpose of our life's work. Here we must be warned: God's dream for you and me may stand in the way of our own personal ambitions. This is understandable. Americans typically define success in terms of wealth and status. What is it that most of us want? A big house in a prestigious neighborhood? A vault filled with money? Status? Position? The envy of others? In our saner moments, we realize these are mere trinkets—baubles and playthings capable of satisfying only the mercenary of heart.

The inherent flaw in American Christianity is worldliness. Crass materialism has invaded the church. The pulpit has been tainted by Armani-clad purveyors of greed who teach that prestigious homes with plenty of unoccupied bedrooms and luxury motorcars are the imprimaturs of God's approval, but the Bible clearly teaches this brand of thinking is mere folly.

Wealth is amoral, that is, it is neither good nor evil in itself, but the lust for wealth, as the Apostle Paul warned, is the root of all manner of evil (I Timothy 6:10). A life dedicated solely to the accumulation of wealth, prestige, and status is a life wasted.

This is not a condemnation aimed at the rich. Abraham was a wealthy man. So was Job. And so was David, but these men, first and foremost, pursued a right relationship with God. Their lives were not solely dedicated to the accumulation of wealth. Abraham, Job, and David were upright men who treasured God above gold. Any dream that is primarily focused on the accumulation of wealth, prestige, and status is not of God. Jesus instructed us to seek first the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

When we lay our personal ambitions at His feet, we submit ourselves to Him. And what does He do? He molds us. He transforms us. He makes us new. He gives us purpose. He infuses meaning into our lives. He adopts us into His family. And then, when we least expect it, we suddenly discover that by surrendering ourselves to Him, He, in turn, gives us back to ourselves. And this “new self” that He gives us is far, far better than the old self we yielded to Him.

A wild dog, mangy and flea-bitten, is nothing but a snapping, snarling, salivating predator in search of its next meal, but when trained and cared for by man, the irrational beast is transformed into a creature worthy of humanly affection. Over time, the domesticated animal takes on some of the attributes of its master. And so it is with you and me. On our own, we are selfish, indulgent, foolish creatures in search of our next dollar or our next drink or our next sexual encounter, but in yielding to Him, we are transformed into dazzling new creations beloved by Him; according to the promises of Scripture, we become His highly prized sons and daughters. The son of the King is a prince. The daughter of the King is a princess. This is the rightful destiny of those who have trusted in Christ Jesus as Savior. Conversely, those who withhold themselves from God are as dirty-faced beggars clutching their gaudy little trinkets. We who have given ourselves over to Him need never to grovel about in the mire of this fallen world, for we are royal children.

God wants what is best for you and me. Quite likely, what we think is best for us is not what God knows to be best for us. The choice boils down to this: Will we take His hand and follow where He leads, or will we chase after that which will leave us eternally unfulfilled? Will we accept His superior goodness, or will we pursue our inferior lusts? Do we trust the infinitely wise and powerful Creator, or will we yield to our own spurious instincts? The answer is not as obvious as it may appear, for very few people experience the joy of living as sold-out, whole-hearted followers of our Lord Jesus Christ. Apathy, not persecution, is the enemy of the American church; this will explain why many who identify themselves as women and men of faith limit their Christianity to an hour or so on Sunday mornings.

We will never realize God's best until we silence the raging lusts of the flesh. Deep down, we are rebels seeking to usurp God's authority. We insist upon living life as if He had nothing to say—or as if He did not even exist. Until we lay down our arms and surrender to Him, our instincts will lead us along perilous detours that were never intended for our travel.

As He (Jesus) was setting out on a journey, a man ran up to Him and knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Jesus said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments, 'Do not murder, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother.'" And he said to Him, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." Looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But at these words he was saddened, and he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property.

And Jesus, looking around, said to His disciples, "How hard it will be for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were amazed at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of

God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." They were even more astonished and said to Him, "Then who can be saved?" Looking at them, Jesus said, "With people it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God (Mark 10:17-27 NASB)."

God has a dream—a divine master plan—for each of our lives. His dream for your life is unlikely to be identical to the dream He has for the woman or man sitting next to you. We will do well to understand that God's best for you may not be His best for your neighbor. In the above passage, God's best for the rich man was two-fold: first, he was to give his wealth to the poor; after this, he would join the other twelve followers of Jesus and, perhaps, serve as a replacement for Judas Iscariot, who was a betrayer.

Sadly, the rich man would not trust in the goodness and wisdom of God. God had a perfect, divine master plan for the rich man—a dream that would have made him infinitely happy and eternally fulfilled, but the rich man had a plan of his own. His plan was to keep his money. He preferred gold to God. In the end, the rich man turned away from Jesus. He said no to God. Two thousand years later, the story remains the same—what we own most often owns us. We are servants to our worldly goods and slaves of our own base desires. Jesus says, "Come, follow Me," but our rebellious hearts, steeped in fear, doubt, and unbelief, stand against the ultimate fulfilling of our divinely-appointed destinies. As such, most will never know *all of the good* that God intended for us to enjoy. Those whose hands are already filled with earthly spoils have no room for the priceless treasures found only in God's coffers. How odd, indeed, that many who claim to want "more out of life," are willing to settle for "treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal (Matthew 6:19)." In truth, the crass materialists who hunger for the so-called good life never quite find it.

So, we ask, "What is God's will for my life? Where do I begin?" Reasonable, reliable answers pertaining to life's stickiest questions are found in the Bible. This may come as bad news to lazy saints in search of quick, easy answers, but knowing God's will and living life to its fullest demands an understanding of the scriptures.

Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (Psalm 119:105).

As God does not want His children stumbling about in a state of clueless ignorance, the basic truths about His divine will for our lives are clearly spelled out in the Bible. We simply need to open the book and read. Other answers to life's questions are made known by the providential hand of God. God plants dreams and desires in our hearts that conform to His will; God also opens doors of opportunities that reveal the master plan He has devised for each of us. Thankfully, He also slams shut doors to pathways that lead to failure and misery. God wants what is best for you and me.

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

We are not to grieve the Holy Spirit who indwells every born-again believer in Christ Jesus. Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to lead us, guide us, teach us, correct us, and comfort us. He is our ever-present Counselor who, along with God the Father and God the Son, make up the Triune Godhead. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, we would find living the Christian life an impossibility. The Holy Spirit will never abandon a believer, but we can grieve the Holy Spirit through willful, deliberate sin and a slovenly approach to our rightful Christian duties. Do not be misunderstood—our works and deeds do not save us, but our works and deeds are outward manifestations of the faith within us. The genuineness of our faith is revealed by the love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control in our lives. It is God's will that we follow the leading of the Holy Spirit who will always guide us along the pathways of righteousness.

As to understanding God's will, we begin with the basics. Once we have mastered the basics of knowing God's will, He will reveal more to us.

The thief (Satan) cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy: I (Jesus) am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly (John 10:10).

It is God's will that you live an abundant life. Abundance signifies a life that is rich in blessings—a life abounding with *more than enough* blessings. An abundant life

- is a life abounding in love
- is a life hallmarked by purpose
- is a life overflowing with joy
- is a life brimming with peace
- is a life filled with hope

We crave love. God offers love abundantly. We long for purpose. God gives meaning to a meaningless life. We desire joy. It is God's will that we live in a state of everlasting joy. We long for peace amidst the turbulence. God's peace transcends all the world's calamities. Without hope, life becomes a weighty burden. God gives hope to the hopeless regardless of situation or circumstance. Love, purpose, joy, peace, and hope are the five necessary components of an abundant life—a life of happiness and contentment—a life worth living. This is God's will for you and me.

American poet Edward Arlington Robinson's *Richard Cory* reveals the meaningless of a life that, based on external circumstances, is the envy of others.

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
'Good-morning,' and he glittered when he walked.

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace:
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

We remember the rich, the famous, the celebrated—people who seemingly possessed everything the world has to offer—who, by bullet or by destructive lifestyle, dug for themselves an early grave. For these tragic figures, the lives they led, though envied by the masses, afforded them no real or lasting pleasure. Steeped in despair, they ultimately chose six feet of dank earth to the stark emptiness of fame, fortune, and finery.

Do not be arrogant nor put your hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but put your hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment (I Timothy 6:17 NIV).

If crimped sheet metal and molded plastic could make us happy and give us hope, God would have sent us a Maserati dealership, but He offers us something far better because our happiness and hope depends upon something better; He gives us His love. The Creator of the universe—the One who spoke each star and planet into existence, loves us *individually*. He loves us madly. He loves us passionately. He loves us without reservation. His is a radical, abandoned, incomparable kind of love. For those of us brought up by loving parents, the concept of a loving Heavenly Father is easier to comprehend. Even so, God's love exceeds even that of the most patient, indulgent parent.

For many of us, some secret sin or a history of alcoholism or substance abuse or, perhaps, a criminal record have made us believe we are worthless, useless, beyond redemption, and even unlovable. Such feelings are lies that smell of smoke and brimstone.

It is God's will that you bask in the warmth of His devoted love. You are loved and He wants you to know this. You need not worry about earning His love. He loves you, not because you are good, but *He loves you because He is good.*

"And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty (II Corinthians 6:18 NASB).

It is God's will that you live like a highly beloved prince or princess. In practical terms, this means that you need never doubt your worth and value according to the One whose affections matter most. The love of others can be capricious or conditional, but the love of God is pure and wholly reliable. Unlike the love struck schoolgirl plucking petals from a daisy as she whispers, "He loves me, he loves me not...", God is never stingy or miserly with His love.

Would God wish evil on one whom He loves? Heaven forbid! Because He loves us, our best interests are always before Him, and as He alone knows what is truly best, the master plan He has for us cannot fail to bring us peace, joy, and unimaginable happiness for the eternal ages to come.

Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (Hebrews 4:16 NIV).

Have you groveled about the mire as an abandoned, dirty-faced beggar? Do you see yourself as abandoned and unloved? Have you lived in the cold shadows of doubt, despair, and discontentment? God wants to change all this, for it is His will that you live

each day in the confident assurance of a highly-favored child of the King. This immutable truth is the foundational keystone in God's master plan for your life.

When we become followers of Jesus Christ, our sins, past, present, and future, are forgiven. Period. End of discussion. John the Baptist said that Jesus takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29). It is God's will that we live as women and men who were, are, and will be forever forgiven. With that said, God wants us to confess our sins to Him. When we confess our sins to our Heavenly Father, we are acknowledging our misdeeds, that is, taking ownership and responsibility of our sins before Him. We are not confessing our sins for the sake of forgiveness—we have already been forgiven, but we are to confess our wrongdoings because we *recognize* that our actions were sinful.

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body (Philippians 3:20, 21 NIV).

As we are now citizens of Heaven, we must adopt an entirely new attitude toward this earthly existence. In the truest sense, as the sons and daughters of God, we are foreigners in this strange and hostile land who, step by step, are making our way back home. The world and all its trappings should no longer captivate our hearts. We are in the world, but we must never be *of the world*. So why are we here? The Apostle Paul wrote that we are ambassadors of Jesus Christ (II Corinthians 5:20). An ambassador is a representative of another. For the remainder of our days on earth, we are to represent Jesus Christ.

It is God's will that we live a life of purpose and meaning. The reason we are here is quite simple and straight-forward: we are His duly appointed ambassadors. We are His assigned representatives on earth. We do His assigned work. Others come to know Him through us.

This is not to say everyone is called to full time ministry, but we are each called to be full time Christians. Christianity is more than a Sunday morning affair. We have been called to represent Him in the workplace. We are asked to represent Him in our neighborhoods. We are to represent Him in the classroom. We should represent Him at the ballot box. We are to serve the cause of Jesus Christ in our careers. God needs Christian physicians and teachers but let us not forget that He has a vitally important place for Christian cranberry pickers and street sweepers, too. It is God's will that we represent Him in all that we do and in whatever we have been called to do.

Jesus said, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matthew 5:16 NASB)." Each morning, millions climb gloomily out of bed wondering, "Why am I here? What is life all about?" Earning a paycheck is important and God does not condone laziness, but making money, paying bills, and dreaming of retirement is no proper way to live. We have a purpose. We have a reason for crawling out of a warm bed each morning. We are God's ambassadors. We represent the King of the universe.

Many people approach the last days of their lives with misgivings and regrets. What have they to show for their seventy, eighty, or even ninety years? A house? Stock certificates? A pension? Addressing a crowd of many thousand hearers, Jesus rhetorically asked if there was not a greater purpose than merely seeking after the rudimentary needs of life:

Then he (Jesus) said to them, "Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' This is

how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God (Luke 12:15-21 NIV)."

Our life's work is more than the acquiring of a mortgage-free home or a tidy retirement fund. A debt-free home and money in the bank are worthwhile *secondary* goals, but what really matters is our service to Jesus Christ. If we seek first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness, our earthly needs will be met according to His will (Luke 12:31). Additionally, as we faithfully represent the Lord Jesus Christ in our day to day walk, we prudently store away treasures in Heaven that will be ours to eternally enjoy (Luke 12:33).

Once again, we are citizens of Heaven. The earth is not our home. We are sojourners—pilgrims on our way to our Father's house—foreigners in a strange and hostile land. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are His duly appointed ambassadors, and in our service to Him, we find real significance and purpose in life. We need not wonder about the meaning of our earthly existence—we need not wonder why we are here, for our identity is found in Him. What is God's will? It is God's will that we faithfully represent Him on earth. And if we refuse? Living for anything or anyone less than Jesus Christ is grounds for a lifetime of regret.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice (Philippians 4:4 ESV).

It is God's will that we experience joy. What is joy? For the believer, joy is a buoyancy of spirit that rises above the trials, troubles, and tribulations common to our fallen world. Joy is neither blind optimism of better days to come nor a self-induced numbness against the harsh realities of life; rather, joy is found in knowing that nothing or no one will stand between us and the love of God (Romans 8:38, 39). He truly, absolutely, and genuinely loves us. We belong to Him. Knowing this, we may be assured that nothing can happen that has not been filtered through His nail-pierced hands.

Who or what are our greatest threats? Terrorists? Rogue nations with nuclear capabilities? Rampant crime? Natural disasters? This world is a dangerous place, but

the uncertainties in this life should serve to remind us that our hearts and affections belong, not here on earth, but above. Those who attempt to create their own little “heaven on earth” are delusional and destined to disappointment. No leader, political party, or world organization is capable of fixing the mounting problems that plague our reeling planet. The magnitude of our troubles exceeds our capabilities for creating workable solutions. Apart from Him, we have no cure for all that ails us.

So how are we to live in a state of continual, unshakable joy? The answer is found in the final two chapters of Revelation. Would you like to know what is on God’s agenda? God has an impressive “To Do” list: Satan is defeated. Death is conquered. Earth is transformed into paradise. Death, disease, war, famine, crime, hunger, and disaster are no more. God wipes away every tear. In short, our side wins. Do we dare believe this to be true, or is this mere “pie in the sky by and by” wishful thinking? Let the evidence speak for itself. The Bible contains hundreds of prophetic passages that were fulfilled *to the letter*. Thus far, the Bible’s prophetic track record is flawless; as such, we have no reason to doubt the eventual fulfillment of Scripture’s final prophecies. Again, our side wins. God, once and for all, overcomes evil with good. A happy ending, which is really a brand new beginning, awaits us. Knowing this, we can live in perpetual joy.

Jesus said, "Behold, I am coming soon (Revelation 22:12 NIV)!"

A life filled with joy is possible because God has the present situation well in hand. We may be assured that He does not sit in Heaven wringing His hands wondering about His next move. God, who exists beyond the boundaries of time, sees an end that is yet future for us—an end that He has meticulously orchestrated. Jesus will return. He is coming soon. He is coming for you and me. And when He returns, He is going to fix our broken planet. Nothing or no one will frustrate His plans.

It is God’s will that we live joyous lives. He never intended for us to be burdened by the woes of this world. The proverbial sword of Damocles has been removed. The danger is no longer real. The shadow of death is just that—a shadow! We are not to live in doubt.

Corrie Ten Boom, the brave Dutch heroine who helped smuggle over eight hundred Jews from Nazi-occupied Holland during World War II, proclaimed, "There are no 'if's' in God's world. And no places that are safer than other places. The center of His will is our only safety—let us pray that we may always know it!"

Many among those I serve have sought peace in a bottle, a pill, a pipe, or a needle. At first, these dangerous stimulants or depressants provided temporary relief from the burdens of life, but as the effects of these drugs began to fade, the anxieties returned—and with a vengeance. As their addictions worsened, their physical and mental well-being increasingly deteriorated. The only cure, or so it seemed, was larger and more frequent doses of the poisons that were killing them. But this was no cure at all. And so, their anxieties increased. Their situations became unmanageable. They were powerless over their addictions. There was no peace in their lives.

The life of an addict is wearisome. Particularly among high functioning alcoholics and substance abusers, the normal problems of maintaining a home, keeping relationships, and managing a career are compounded by the countless woes that come with addiction. The only peace an addict experiences is self-induced and short-lived. Once the effects of the drugs wear off, the anxieties return, and they are more threatening than before. Such a lifestyle of constant inner turmoil is not in accordance with God's master plan for their lives.

Jesus said, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)." For many among us, His gracious words tell of rest from the double-life of an addict. With freedom from addiction comes peace. Peace that comes from normalcy. Peace that comes with renewal. It is not God's intended purpose for anyone to live in the grip of addiction. Peace and tranquility are components of God's master plan.

Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will not be shaken. My salvation and my honor depend

on God; he is my mighty rock, my refuge. Trust in him at all times, O people; pour out your hearts to him, for God is our refuge (Psalm 62:5-8 NIV).

What is God's will? It is God's will that we live free of the ravages of alcoholism and substance abuse. No alcoholic or addict will experience true inner peace until the addiction has been overcome; the disease of addiction, progressive and chronic, is a thief that robs us of our health, ambitions, and relationships—a thief that takes all that we have and leaves us empty and alone. Through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, any addict can be at peace with God, with others, and with themselves. No longer under the heartless dominion of addiction, their formerly unmanageable lives become lives marked by quiet tranquility. Accept the promise of Jesus: Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid (John 14:27). This is God's will for your life.

Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12 NIV).

Many years ago, police cars were equipped with one-way radios. Police officers could only receive transmissions from the station dispatchers; the radios placed in their automobiles were incapable of transmitting messages back to the station. Many of us consider prayer in the same light. We send messages to God, but we never expect to hear back from Him.

Far too many people believe a prayer is like a message in a bottle; we send out a prayer with some vague hope that it will somehow find its destination. How odd, indeed, that most of us fail to realize prayer is more like conversation. We meet God in prayer. We speak to Him. He speaks to us. Prayer is a two-way conversation. And though we are unlikely to hear the audible voice of God, He will converse with us all the same.

What is God's will for you and me? It is God's will that we speak with Him through prayer. The Apostle Paul said we are to be "faithful in prayer (Romans 12:12)." This would indicate that God wants to hear from us regularly and routinely. Satan wishes to keep us

from praying, and I fear he is successful in his scheming. He convinces some that God prefers not to be bothered. This is, of course, utter nonsense and the devil's advice is best ignored, for just as loving parents enjoy conversing with their children, our loving Heavenly Father wants to remain in close and constant contact with His children.

Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God (Psalm 42:5 NIV).

When speaking with God, we should tell Him we love Him. We are also to glorify Him through our praises. We recognize God's wondrous attributes through praise. God is deserving of our adoration; additionally, by recognizing the goodness of God, our faith in Him is multiplied. The more we know of Him, the more we can trust Him, and the more we trust Him, the smaller our problems appear before us.

Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known (Jeremiah 33:3 ESV).

"Call to me and I will answer you," says our Heavenly Father. Pray to Him and He will reveal "great and hidden things that you have not known." What is God's will for our lives? It is God's will that we bring our questions, problems, concerns, and decisions to Him. God has answers. Ask Him.

Then He (Jesus) spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart, saying: "There was in a certain city a judge who did not fear God nor regard man. Now there was a widow in that city; and she came to him, saying, 'Get justice for me from my adversary.' And he would not for a while; but afterward he said within himself, 'Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me.'" Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them (Luke 18: 1-7 NKJV)?"

The unjust judge was a corrupt official who had little regard for the righteousness of God while shamefully ignoring the needs of those whom he had been sworn to serve. In ancient Palestine, widows congregated around the bottom rung of the social ladder. Most likely, the widow in this parable was long on poverty and short on clout. She had been wronged and the only one who could bring about justice was this oily magistrate. Like all seedy politicians, he had no interest in carrying out his duties. The unjust judge sat back and did nothing. But the widow was persistent. She petitioned the unjust judge again and again; eventually, she wore him down. Reluctantly, the unjust judge acted on the woman's behalf saying, "Though I do not fear God nor regard man, yet because this widow troubles me I will avenge her, lest by her continual coming she weary me."

If, through persistence, a corrupt official can be made to do what is right, we can certainly expect God, who is wholly just and filled with compassion, to do right by us. Why should we doubt? God loves us. He is good. As such, we may count on Him to act on our behalf. He delights in coming to the rescue of His children. Praying often and with confidence is part of God's master plan for our lives.

Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him (Matthew 7:9-11 NKJV)!

If earthly parents, who are inherently flawed creatures, know how to give good gifts to their children, then logic tells us that our Heavenly Father, who is perfect in all ways, knows how to give even better gifts to His children. The most well-meaning parents make mistakes, but our Heavenly Father knows exactly what we need—and it is God's will that we bring our needs to Him.

And I (Jesus) tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Luke 11:9 ESV).

Should I marry? Which college should I attend? Should I accept this job offer? Is this the right house for our family? Should I go into business for myself? Life is full of tough questions and the decisions we make often affect us for many years to come. Bad decisions lead to regrets and, frankly, some individuals appear to be particularly prone to making poor choices in situations that matter most. As we all wish to avoid the dire consequences of bad decision making, we can rest easier knowing that bringing our questions and problems to Him is in accordance with God's master plan for our lives.

The first step is simple; we ask. We bring our questions and needs to the Throne Room of God. And why not? By His very nature, God knows everything. He sees all situations, from beginning to end, with crystal clarity. Nothing befuddles Him. No task is too difficult. No problem is too complex. No question is too arduous. And so, we come to Him with our petitions. Because He is good, He will not turn us away.

After we ask, we are to seek out answers. Life's thorniest issues are addressed in the pages of Scripture. The Bible, then, should be our primary source for answers, but not every decision can be based upon a particular chapter and verse. As an example, accepting or declining a job promotion that requires relocating to another city may necessitate the methodical weighing of all the pluses and minuses before a final decision to stay or to move can be made. If we ask God for wisdom in our decision making, He will faithfully honor that request (James 1:5). Wisdom is the understanding of people, events, and circumstances through God's eyes, in other words, a wise person sees the world through Heaven's lens.

Seeking out assistance and answers may also require that we consult others who are known to be reliable and knowledgeable. Bakers know about bread. Jewelers know about jewelry. A wise motorist does not ask a bricklayer to rebuild an automobile transmission and a parttime thrift store cashier has no business removing diseased gallbladders. Far too many people are eager to give out worthless advice on matters about which they know nothing. Oddly enough, there appears to be an abundance of folk

who willingly lend their ears to these questionable advisers. It is not God's will that we follow the directions of the uninformed.

As we seek out answers, we knock to open doors of opportunity. Knocking comes in the form of submitting employment applications or meeting college admission representatives or negotiating terms with bankers or consulting godly marriage counselors. In other words, we are to be active participants in the goal-reaching process—we do something—we proceed forward—we knock on appropriate doors of opportunity with expectations of achieving favorable results.

Are you in need of employment? Submit resumes and job applications. Meet with perspective employers. Knock on their doors. Have you dreamed of becoming an architect? Schedule a visit with a college admissions counselor. Apply for grants and financial aid. Are you struggling with an addiction? Join a Christian support group such as Celebrate Recovery. Do something. Be active. Participate. Try, try, and try again. Prayer is neither a coin nor is God a vending machine. When in need, it is His will that we actively participate by asking, seeking, and knocking.

By the by, God answers every prayer. Of this truth, you may be assured. Of course, He does not answer every prayer with a yes. God sometimes says no to our requests. God is sovereign and it is well within His rights to deny our petitions. He knows what is best for you and me. Let us avoid any kind of foolishness that attempts to make God a genie in a bottle. Finally, God answers some prayers with a "not now." Our timing may be off. God is never late with His answers; likewise, He is never early with His answers. Those of us who have walked with Him for some time will attest that God can neither be rushed nor hurried.

(Jesus said) "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one (John 10:27-30 ESV)."

Living with the unwavering assurance that we belong to none other than Christ Jesus should afford all who trust in Him as Savior a brand of fearless, unshakable confidence that allows us to *boldly* face the problems each day brings. The Bible teaches that

- we are to listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd while ignoring the clamor of voices of those who would seek to mislead or harm us—Jesus referred to these deceivers as wolves garbed in sheep's clothing
- He knows us individually—we have not been forgotten, abandoned, set aside, overlooked, neglected, or ignored—we are highly prized by the One who loves us most
- we are to follow Him knowing that He will walk beside us every step of the way
- He gives His children the gift of eternal life—we shall live forever with Him
- we are imperishable—Satan can deceive and confuse us, but he cannot destroy us
- no one can remove us from His loving care—we belong to the Lord Jesus and nothing or no one can steal us from Him
- we were presented as blameless sons and daughters by Christ Jesus to God the Father—again, nothing or no one will stand between us and our Heavenly Father
- no one is greater than God—if God be for us, who can be against us?
- God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ are One in nature, essence, and purpose—the Creator who spoke the vast universe into existence has adopted you into His family and He does not take kindly to those who seek to bring harm to His beloved sons and daughters

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8 ESV).

It is God's will that we keep our minds from wandering through the spiritual back alleys of all that which is unjust, impure, and shameful; rather, we are to meditate on truth, honor,

justice, purity, beauty, and good. We find encouragement when our minds are focused on thoughts that are praiseworthy.

I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you (Psalm 119:11 ESV).

We are to meditate on the teachings of the Bible. By internalizing God's word, we have, so to speak, a moral compass that will steer us away from places we ought not to go.

There are those among us who are new to the faith; as such, our newcomer friends are unfamiliar with the teachings of Scripture. New believers often find that two books in particular, Mark and Proverbs, are easily read and easily understood. Mark is an action-packed, fast-paced Gospel record of the earthly life and ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ. Proverbs is God's treasury of wisdom; Proverbs is both practical and entertaining—a literary masterpiece that has captivated readers for over two thousand years. Biblical illiteracy is not part of God's will for our lives; meditating on God's word uplifts us and shields us from the vicious attacks of a hostile, unbelieving world.

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

In this chaotic world, we must keep our minds focused on God. Meditating upon Him is as a soothing balm for healing our troubled hearts. God says, "Be still..." When the pace becomes maddening and life's problems hit us from all sides, God says we are to stop what we are doing, find a quiet place, and direct our praiseworthy thoughts upon Him. As we exalt our Creator, He will refresh us, and our souls will find rest.

Though much more can be said on this matter, let us be reminded that, in His divine goodness, God stands ready to make a way for us to live lives hallmarked by meaning and purpose. The Apostle Paul found meaning and purpose while confined to Rome's notorious Mamertine Prison. Joseph, the Son of Jacob, found meaning and purpose

while locked away in Pharaoh's dank and dark dungeon. The Prophet Daniel found meaning and purpose though a captive held by godless Babylonian invaders. God often chooses to perform His works of restoration, renewal, and redemption in strange, inhospitable places. God will meet us wherever we are. No one is a lost cause. On the contrary, God offers hope to women and men regardless of situation, status, and circumstance.

This offer, however, is limited to those few uncompromising souls unwilling to settle for less. What about you? What do you want? Sadly, most people are not interested in experiencing God's best for their lives. In the words of C.S. Lewis, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Question 101: I am confused. Should we pray about our needs or merely trust God, who knows all things, to satisfy that which is lacking in our lives?

Answer: You have asked an excellent question!

"Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you (Matthew 6:31-33 NKJV).

Jesus is telling us that our prayers are not to be stricken with doubt, panic, or worry. As believers, we are adopted into God's family—we are His children—and children of the King are princes and princesses. Whoever heard of a prince or a princess groveling about in the manner of a dirty-faced orphan?

Granted, if someone is truly starving, the next meal is certainly a matter of urgent prayer, but for many of us, we have food to spare and, as such, we should not be fretful over trivialities.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you (Matthew 7:7 NKJV).

If I may use a colloquialism, Jesus is telling us to apply some shoe leather to our prayers. We are to do more than ask. We are to seek answers and knock on doors of opportunity. Prayer is not passive. Prayer is active. We are commanded to do more than merely ask—after we make our requests known, we seek out answers, and we bang on doors where the answers to our prayers may be found. By the way, whining and complaining are not biblically authorized components of prayer.

Prayer is conversation between Father God and His children. We speak, God listens. God speaks, we listen. In prayer, we voice our needs, offer our praise, share our love, and express our gratitude. Through the scriptures and the leading of the Holy Spirit, God speaks to us with words of love, comfort, guidance, and assurance. Prayer should be personal, honest, intimate, and frequent. As a reminder, little good comes from a haphazard prayer life.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6, 7 NKJV).

We are to ask, but we are to ask in faith—not in doubt steeped in anxiety, doubt, or unbelief.

Question 102: Why was the Apostle Paul angered by the demon-possessed girl we read about in Acts 16?

Answer: You have posed an excellent question. Let us begin by examining the text you mentioned.

It happened that as we were on our way to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave-girl who had a spirit of divination [that is, a demonic spirit claiming to foretell the future and discover hidden knowledge], and she brought her owners a good profit by fortune-telling. She followed after Paul and us and kept screaming *and* shouting, “These men are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming to you the way of salvation!” She continued doing this for several days. Then Paul, being greatly annoyed *and* worn out, turned and said to the spirit [inside her], “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ [as His representative] to come out of her!” And it came out at that very moment (Acts 16:16-18 AMP).

Paul was not angry with the demon-possessed girl; on the contrary, he freed her from the evil spirit’s influence and, in doing so, saved her life. I have been a Christian for over three decades and once, and only once in this time, have I seen a demonically-possessed individual, and this was one of the most frightening sights my eyes have ever seen. As to the slave-girl possessed by a demon, I would suggest that she was grateful to the Apostle Paul for the remainder of her life.

But I will not beg your question. I am no Greek scholar, but in the original Greek, the demon-possessed woman said, “These men are servants of the Most High God! They are proclaiming to you *way of salvation!*” Notice the difference? Our translators have added the article “the” before “way of salvation,” but it may be more accurate to believe she was saying, “They are proclaiming to you *a way of salvation.*” In other words, she may have been saying, “Jesus is one of many ways to salvation.” Jesus is not a way of salvation. He is the only way of salvation. Her satanically-inspired proclamation, “*a way of salvation,*” would have been heretical and this would have offended Paul.

There is another possibility. Paul did not want the endorsement of a demonic woman. If I were running for a political office, I would not want the endorsement of the Ku Klux Klan, the American Communist Party, Planned Parenthood, Antifa, BLM, or, any Marxist organization. A glowing endorsement from the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan might garner a few votes from idiots garbed in white robes, but the vast majority of decent people would be put off by the association. I do not think Paul wanted a demon-possessed girl giving him two thumbs up.

In the end, the young woman was free of the demons who had tormented her and the oily mercenaries who were making merchandise of her. When we meet this young woman in Heaven, I am sure she will tell us she appreciated the Apostle Paul's godly intervention.

Have I answered your question? I certainly hope that I have. Keep asking good questions and continue learning. Biblical illiteracy is a choice—a choice we ought not make.

We implore the mercy of God, not that He may leave us at peace in our vices, but that He may deliver us from them.
... Blaise Pascal

Question 103: What does it mean for a Christian to be introspective?

Answer: We will begin with a look at one of the psalms penned by King David.

O Lord, You have searched me and known *me*.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.

You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.

For *there is* not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether.

You have hedged me behind and before,
And laid Your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is high, I cannot *attain* it.

Where can I go from Your Spirit?

Or where can I flee from Your presence?

If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there;

If I make my bed in hell, behold, You *are there*.

If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall fall on me,"
Even the night shall be light about me;
Indeed, the darkness shall not hide from You,
But the night shines as the day;

The darkness and the light *are* both alike *to* You.
For You formed my inward parts;
You covered me in my mother's womb.

I will praise You, for I am fearfully *and* wonderfully made;
Marvelous are Your works,
And *that* my soul knows very well.

My frame was not hidden from You,
When I was made in secret,
And skillfully wrought in the lowest parts of the earth.
Your eyes saw my substance, being yet unformed.
And in Your book they all were written,

The days fashioned for me,
When as yet *there were* none of them.
How precious also are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!
If I should count them, they would be more in number than the sand;
When I awake, I am still with You.
Oh, that You would slay the wicked, O God!
Depart from me, therefore, you bloodthirsty men.
For they speak against You wickedly;
Your enemies take *Your name* in vain.
Do I not hate them, O Lord, who hate You?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against You?
I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.
Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if *there is any* wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139 NKJV).

I believe self-examination can be healthy, but if introspection only leads to a continued, ongoing, never-ending focus on self, I will warn that it is better to fix our thoughts in awe on the Lord Jesus, our great God and Savior, than to steadfastly gaze at one's mirror image. Are there any among us so forthright and honest as to assess one's self with razor-sharp precision? Do we truly know ourselves? I rather doubt that we do.

A preoccupation with self can be dangerous. If such an inner focus leads to pride, this is disdainful to God. And if this inner focus leads to self-loathing, this is also an affront to our Creator. Again, let us be aware of our weaknesses and foibles, but let us look upon Him and not devote an inordinate measure of time and attention to self.

Psalm 139 reveals that God knows us better than we know ourselves. And following the psalmist's lead, let us ask God to lay before us our weaknesses and shortcomings. Let us also ask Him to be gentle and merciful by showing us only the knowledge we can comprehend at the time. Frankly, if He told me all my faults at once, I would likely despair. As He is indeed merciful, He will dole out the truth in portions we can accept.

If introspection leads to a preoccupation with self, we will do better by focusing on Him. With this said, I am grateful for your question and may the Lord bless you and keep you.

Question 104: As followers of Jesus Christ, shouldn't we place more emphasis on Easter than Christmas?

Answer: Since becoming a follower of Jesus Christ over three decades ago, I have heard the arguments against celebrating Christmas. Yes, I know it is most unlikely that Jesus was born on December 25 and, yes, I am aware that decorating trees may have pagan origins. No, I do not like hokey Christmas music that focuses on roasting chestnuts and bells that jingle or Christmas movies that make no mention of our Lord Jesus Christ. I also know people spend too much money buying Christmas gifts and these same people gain too much weight eating Christmas goodies. I am waiting for someone to tell me something I do not already know about Christmas, but I stopped bashing Christmas revelers long ago, for I noticed that Christmas brings out the best in some people. Maybe I am delusional, but the folk we encounter on the streets and in restaurants and the malls seem a bit friendlier about the time December rolls around. I am a sucker for outdoor lights and decorations, and I will never forget the first time I saw *The Rockettes Christmas Show* at the historic Radio City Music Hall and *The Nutcracker* performed at the Kennedy Center in New York. I laughed and giggled and squealed like a jolly schoolboy—I had so much fun, I returned to Manhattan the following year to see these holiday performances again. Did I mention the Rockettes' nativity scene featured live camels? How cool is that?

With this said, I will agree that Easter is the holiday that is most meaningful to born-again believers. Muhammad, Confucius, Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, Charles Taze Russell, and a legion of other false prophets are dead and moldering in their graves, but the Lord Jesus, and He alone, conquered death and the grave. While the fakes and the phonies are lost and gone forever, our glorious Savior lives making intercession for the saints. Let us consider some relevant passages from God's written word:

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you (Romans 8:11 ESV).

Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; the one who believes in Me will live, even if he dies (John 11:25 NASB)."

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (II Peter 2:3 ESV).

Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Romans 8:34 ESV).

Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him, knowing that Christ, having been raised from the dead, dies no more. Death no longer has dominion over Him. For *the death* that He died, He died to sin once for all; but *the life* that He lives, He lives to God. Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 6:8-11 NKJV).

Because He walked out of the tomb in His physical, resurrected body, we, too, shall live forever with Him. No other so-called prophet, leader, avatar, or messiah can make such a stunning claim and it must be remembered, too, that this miraculous resurrection did

not occur in secret. Over five hundred eyewitnesses saw the risen Savior after His death on a Roman cross (I Corinthians 15:3-9). Born-again believers in Christ Jesus understand that nothing in Santa's bag of baubles and trinkets compares to eternal life in a glorified body that is impervious to illness, injury, age, and death.

The bodily resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of our great faith. Without the resurrection, we would remain lost in our sins while facing a bleak, miserable eternity. Thankfully, there is more to Christianity than eggnog and tinsel. Much more.

Lord, I know not what I ought to ask of you.
O, Father, give to your child what he himself knows not how to ask.
Teach me to pray. Pray yourself in me.
... François Fenelon

Question 105: I live in fear that God is angry with me. I do not do enough for Him and there are times when my thoughts and my devotions stray. How can I be certain that God is not mad at me? How can I know He will not turn me away? My fear of being rejected by Him occasionally leads me to bouts of anxiety and depression. I do not want God to hate me.

Answer: First and foremost, let me assure you with biblical authority that God is not angry with you!

Jesus said, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28 NASB)." From the tone of your letter, you are weary and heavy-laden with worry and feelings of inadequacy. Okay, let us deal with this issue.

When we come to our Savior who takes away our sin, we place our trust in Him in faith. In other words, we believe that He is the Son of God who died on a Roman cross, was buried, and rose again from the grave (I Corinthians 15:1-3). His death settled our sin debt, and His resurrection assures us of eternal life with Him. We accept this Gospel message by faith. By this, our salvation is settled. Period.

Our works cannot save us (Ephesians 2:8, 9). To think that we can earn God's love or gain eternal life by being "good enough" is contrary to the message of grace.

In truth, you are not good enough to merit eternal life. Neither am I. To think we can please God by our own efforts is, quite simply, nonsense. The righteousness of the unrepentant, that is, those who think they can merit God's favor apart from Jesus Christ, is like a pile of filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6).

But all is not lost, for the righteousness of Jesus is good enough and when we place our faith in Him as Savior, we cast off those filthy rags and are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Stop relying on your own efforts to please God. Your self-righteousness is not good enough. It is insufficient and woefully lacking. Remember, those who believe in Jesus as Savior rely on His righteousness. He transfers His perfect righteousness to our accounts, so to speak, and His righteousness is good enough and God is satisfied. In theology, this is known as imputation. Christ imputes His righteousness to you and me.

God wants you to cease with the worry. Instead of serving Him in dread, serve Him with gladness. Come into His presence with singing and joy (Psalm 100). We are His sheep, and He is our Good Shepherd. And the Good Shepherd gave His life for His sheep. By His grace, we avoid winding up as lamb chops on the devil's banquet table.

Repent of your worry, and when I say repent, I am telling you to change the direction of your thinking. God is not a cruel ogre with a fist full of lightning bolts aimed at your head. He is a loving, caring, compassionate Father who wants the best for His children.

Say, I am a dad and I love my daughter Hannah dearly. I light up like a Christmas tree whenever she telephones, or we visit. Now if I can love my daughter with such abandonment, surely God is capable of an even higher love!

Jeremiah 29:11 is a promise from God. He has plans for you and me. Plans to prosper us. Plans not to harm us. Plans to give us hope and a future. God's plans for you do not include this unhealthy worry.

Let godly wisdom prevail by allowing the Holy Spirit to renew your mind. As the Apostle Paul said, "Rejoice! Again, I say rejoice!" All this worry will make you miserable and who wants to live a miserable life?

Question 106: I am a single Christian woman who hopes to meet a marriage-minded Christian man. I have a question about lust. If I find a particular man attractive, does this mean I am guilty of sin? If I am drawn to an eligible Christian man because of his good looks, is this lust?

Answer: Let us see what the Bible says about lust.

But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28 ESV).

If this is your understanding of lust, you may wish to date someone unattractive; with this in mind, I may be the answer to your prayer. I am single and, trust me, I am not the kind of man who gets second looks from the ladies. Some mornings, I look like a misshapen glob of Gorgonzola or, perhaps, some chewed up varmint that a tomcat abandoned by the patio door. No one confuses me for one of Hollywood's leading men. The last time a pretty young woman spoke kindly to me, the conversation went something like this: "Would you like anchovies on your Caesar salad, sir?"

But do not get your matrimonial hopes up quite yet. I have my faults. For starters, I am stubborn, opinionated, and no fun at all—the consummate bore. I could never abide a woman who likes country music or pop music or romantic comedies or tear-jerker movies or the Hallmark Channel or karaoke or club dancing or overly sentimental greeting cards

or yippy little dogs or speaking “baby talk” or taking leisurely walks in the rain. If you think I am an unromantic old grouch, you are right. I am an unromantic old grouch. Humph!

But before you pop the question and send out the invitations, let me suggest that Jesus does not expect you to pick a homely man as your husband. For that matter, finding someone attractive is a far cry from lustfulness.

Lust is an unusually pronounced and unbridled sexual desire that is lived out, so to speak, in the imagination of the individual. Finding someone handsome or pretty is not lust. I think my daughter is pretty—but that is a proud father and not a pervert speaking.

If your present understanding of lust were true, attractive people would be doomed to loneliness and homely blighters like me would be the toast of the town.

Whew! I just saved you from marrying some overweight slob with flabby shoulders who refuses to pluck the bristly hair growing out of his ears. You owe me one, kiddo!

Question 107: Why did God allow my mom and dad to get a divorce? You should know that my mom is a believer, but my dad is a nonbeliever.

Answer: I am sorry that your parents have separated, and I am equally sorry for the pain you are experiencing. I really am. I have often said the only winners in a divorce are the lawyers.

God's heart grieves with each divorce. My young friend, God wants families to stay together. When a family is ripped apart, everyone suffers. This is not to say everyone's life is forever ruined, but only a fool would downplay the ill that comes from a divorce. Admittedly, there are rare times when divorce is justified, but in most cases, divorce is the regrettable result of petty self-interests and other ignoble causes.

Why did this happen? Could God have intervened by stopping your parents from separating? Let us talk this through: God has given you and me and everyone else a free will. In other words, He allows us to make many of our own choices. Ideally, we will choose to act in ways that are in accordance with His will, but far too often, we choose to be rebellious and ignore God's will for our own selfish reasons. If we were robots, we would do exactly as God wished, but God did not want to populate this planet with programmed robots who had no will of their own.

True, if we had no free will, there would be no divorce, no war, no poverty, no crime, and no million other bad deeds and situations, but our devotion to Him and others would be mechanical and not from the heart. God allows us to make decisions on our own. When we make good decisions, that is, decisions that are in accordance with God's will, we are blessed in many wonderful ways. But when we choose to act independently of Him, we pay a price. Even so, God can take bad situations and turn them into good situations (Romans 8:28-30).

Your world has been turned upside down. It may be that you are in for a long and bumpy ride, but know this: God wants what is best for you. And He will overcome evil with good.

Please keep the lines of communication open with both your mom and dad. Pray for them. Perhaps they will reconcile. Perhaps not. Either way, love your mom and dad as much as you can. If your dad is the one who is primarily at fault, do not hate him.

I wish I had something neat and tidy like *Five Easy Steps for Kids Going Through Divorce*, but there are no easy steps and divorce is never neat and tidy. I can tell you this; if this divorce has caused an ache in your heart, there is an ache in God's heart, too.

At this time, you need encouragement. I have no magic answers, but I do know that if you take your burdens to Jesus, He will not turn His back on you.

One day, you will likely marry. When you marry, make certain that your marriage is built on a foundation of love and mutual devotion to Jesus Christ. Marriages between believers and nonbelievers often have unhappy endings.

My young friend, it is my prayer that God will provide you with comfort and encouragement.

Question 108: I am a teenage girl, though I doubt if this matters, and I have a question for you. Is having the fruit of the spirit something that immediately happens once a believer asks Christ to come into his or her life or is it something that takes time to develop?"

Answer: Good question! Thanks to a familiar Bible story, a story that happens to be a favorite of mine, I can give you a definitive answer and, for the record, I love hearing from teenagers.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:1-10 NIV)."

During Jesus' earthly ministry known as the Incarnation, the nation of Israel was under Roman rule. The Roman government recruited Jews to collect taxes; these tax collectors were known as publicans. Publicans were despised by their countrymen, for they used all manner of threats, violent acts, and various forms of extortion in their collection methods. Rome told the publicans how much to collect and anything above what Rome expected went directly into the publicans' deep pockets.

Publicans betrayed their own people for a foreign power—and their dirty business made them wealthy.

Zacchaeus was no ordinary tax collector. He was the *chief* tax collector and, my young friend, we can be certain he was the most hated man in his home city of Jericho. No doubt, he lived in the town's biggest home and enjoyed every luxury of that day while his neighbors looked on with disgust and contempt.

After his encounter with the Lord Jesus, Zacchaeus was a born-again believer. As a brand new follower of Jesus Christ, Zacchaeus began giving away his ill-gotten wealth. Immediately, he gave half of his money to the poor and, on top of this, he began refunding money he had wrongly taken from his neighbors.

That morning, Zacchaeus was the wealthiest man in Jericho. That evening, Zacchaeus may have been the poorest man in Jericho. Poor in monetary wealth, yes, but richly abundant in the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

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

According to your inquiry, you are a teenager. You need not wait until you are old to demonstrate a Spirit-filled life, my young friend. Zacchaeus received the Gospel joyfully and allowed the Spirit of God to work in his life. His transformation was immediate.

God has many uses for young believers. Your energy and enthusiasm can make a great difference in promoting the cause of Jesus Christ.

I waited until I was thirty-five years old before yielding my will to Him. Do not follow my lead by wasting your valuable teenage and young adult years. Tell Him you love Him and want to serve Him and then, according to Jeremiah 29:11, He will reveal His plans for your life. Friend, His plans will turn your life into an adventure.

I cannot regain those lost years I spent in trivial pursuit, but if you give yourself whole-heartedly to Him now, you can live a life that will make an astounding impact for time and eternity. Do not waste this precious time of your life. Make the most of your youth by dedicating your life to Him. Do this, and when you are old like me, you will not have the regrets I have.

Thank you for your excellent question.

Question 109: Please tell me more about Jacob and Esau. Why were these brothers unable to get along with one another?

Answer: As I find the story of Jacob and Esau fascinating, it will be a pleasure exploring the lives of these two brothers with you.

Now these are the records of the generations of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham became the father of Isaac; and Isaac was forty years old when he took Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, the sister of Laban the Aramean, to be his wife. Isaac prayed to the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren;

and the Lord answered him and Rebekah his wife conceived. But the children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is so, why then am I this way?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. The Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb;
And two peoples will be separated from your body;
And one people shall be stronger than the other;
And the older shall serve the younger."

When her days to be delivered were fulfilled, behold, there were twins in her womb. Now the first came forth red, all over like a hairy garment; and they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came forth with his hand holding on to Esau's heel, so his name was called Jacob; and Isaac was sixty years old when she gave birth to them.

When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the field, but Jacob was a peaceful man, living in tents. Now Isaac loved Esau, because he had a taste for game, but Rebekah loved Jacob. When Jacob had cooked stew, Esau came in from the field and he was famished; and Esau said to Jacob, "Please let me have a swallow of that red stuff there, for I am famished." Therefore his name was called Edom. But Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "Behold, I am about to die; so of what use then is the birthright to me?" And Jacob said, "First swear to me"; so he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew; and he ate and drank, and rose and went on his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright (Genesis 25:19-34 NASB).

Even in the womb, Esau and Jacob were at odds with one another. We can only imagine the inner turmoil experienced by poor Rebekah. Unable to reconcile what was taking place within her body, she appealed to the Lord. His response must have sounded incredulous, for beyond the fact that she was carrying twins, both sons were destined to father great nations. As to the jostling about in her womb, the worst was yet to come. Throughout much of their lives, this rivalrous jockeying for position would continue

between the brothers. Later, there would be an uneasy truce, but this would not last, for the rivalry between Esau and Jacob's offspring would intensify for generations to come.

Esau was the first son to leave Rebekah's womb. Esau means red and hairy. I suppose we have all seen our fair share of ugly babies, but Esau would have taken the blue ribbon in any homely baby contest.

As the firstborn exited his mother's womb, a tiny fist belonging to Jacob held fast to Esau's heel. It was as if Jacob was saying, "Not so fast, big brother! Step aside and make way for me!" By the by, Jacob means "grabber." He was a rather cunning opportunist.

Isaac, the son of Abraham and Rebekah's husband, was partial to Esau while Jacob was a momma's boy. Jacob was content playing the role of a quiet homebody; Esau was a rugged outdoorsman who hunted game. The twin's father had a special fondness for wild game; as such, Isaac favored his big, red, hairy apelike boy. Conversely, Rebekah was partial to her homebody son. Perhaps Jacob was helpful with the cooking and the gardening. Too, his manners may have been better. Being a big hairy galoot, Esau probably shed worse than a dog or a cat. Jacob did not leave hair on Rebekah's furniture. If I had a big hairy son who was always bringing home dead rabbits and quail, I would likely follow Rebekah's lead and side with the homebody who did not leave his hairy excesses on the furniture.

One afternoon, Esau returned from a hunting trip. Seeing that Jacob had a pot of stew simmering over the fire, he asked his younger brother for a serving. Not one to miss an opportunity, Jacob offered Esau a bowl of stew in exchange for his birthright. The big, dumb, hairy brother agreed to Jacob's terms and foolishly forfeited his birthright for a rather modest meal of bread and lintel stew.

In ancient times, the birthright gave the oldest son the lion's share of the family fortune. As in the case of Esau and Jacob, even more than wealth and position were at stake. The promised Messiah, who was to come from the line of Abraham, was to be a direct

descendant of Isaac's favored son. By all rights, this honor belonged to Esau, but as Esau cared more about his empty belly than family honor and the fulfillment of Messianic prophecy, he forfeited the blessings and privileges of his birthright for a hunk of bread and a bowl of red stew.

In truth, Esau despised God.

Surely there is none among us who would knowingly swap his or her heavenly heritage for a bowl of red stew, yet as I critically survey my own life, I recall times when I was more concerned with satisfying my immediate wants than in my eternal inheritance. As believers in Christ Jesus, we cannot lose our salvation, and as I am prone to an occasional bout of muddle-mindedness, I thank God that my eternal security is in His able hands, but I am not immune to times of shortsightedness—times when I am so overly focused on the here and now, I lose sight of the eternal ages to come. And so, in the spirit of Esau, I have ravenously pursued heaping bowls of red stew when my soul would have been better nourished by prayer, study, and meditation.

We live in a world inhabited by connoisseurs of red stew. With only an occasional fleeting thought as to what may await them at the close of this life, billions of women and men chase after bowls of red stew as though a steady diet of red stew was a worthy end in itself.

I do not know a cheese grater from a paring knife, but I believe I can list the ingredients that go into every pot of red stew.

2 cups of faithlessness The writer of Hebrews asked, "...how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? It was declared at first by the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard, while God also bore witness by signs and wonders and various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (Hebrews 2:3, 4 ESV). God has not hidden Himself in a closet. His fingerprints are all over creation, yet the majority of the world lives as though He does not exist.

There is no better testimony to the existence of God than the Bible. This miraculous book, penned over a span of 1500 years by forty writers living on three continents, is historically detailed and meticulously accurate. Formerly hostile critics such as Sir William Ramsey, C.S. Lewis, Lee Strobel, and many others abandoned atheism after examining the volumes of irrefutable evidence proving the Bible's accuracy.

Is it so hard to believe that creation has a Creator? Why do we doubt? Charles Darwin, who, by the way, considered dark skinned persons vastly inferior to Caucasians, said his theory would stand or fall on the eventual discovery of transitional fossils. Darwin died in 1882 and, to this day, no archeological spade has unearthed the elusive transitional fossil. Do not miss this point: No single transitional fossil has been cataloged by any of the world's universities or museums. So much for Darwinism.

And do not be misled by those who say creationism is unscientific. There are notable scientists around the world who are followers of Jesus Christ. I have personally met such scientists. And there are others who do not identify with any particular faith, yet they adhere to a belief in an Intelligent Designer.

In our cause and effect universe, God is the cause, and we are the effect. Experientially, we acknowledge that something does not come from nothing. Matter is not self-existing, and we understand order does not originate from chaos, so those who do not believe are those who *willingly* choose not to believe.

Again, God's fingerprints are everywhere. We live in a universe that operates with clockwork precision. We are not here by accident; indeed, we are here by design. Furthermore, God has given us His written word—a complete coherent collection of Christ-centered prose, poetry, and prophecy penned by divinely inspired writers who could see into the past as well as into the future. And our faith is further bolstered by the testimonies of those whose lives have been radically transformed by the Lord Jesus Christ. As one who taught in a large men's prison for several years, I know men with

shameful records whose lives now speak of the goodness and mercy of our Savior. I have never met a person who climbed out of the sewer to become a benefactor thanks to the tenants of atheism, humanism, secularism, or Marxism, but I could introduce you to brutal felons who became gentle saints through the life-transforming Blood of Jesus Christ. King David said those who disbelieve in God are fools; indeed, atheism is no more sensible than Mickey Mouse denying Walt Disney.

1 Cup Greed Jesus rhetorically asked, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him the Son of Man also will be ashamed when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels (Mark 8:36-38 NKJV).” Money, in and of itself, is amoral, that is, money is neither good nor evil, but wealth can be a cunning snare for trapping the affections of those whose souls have been stained by greed and whose hearts yearn for Vanity Fair’s choicest, costliest, gaudiest baubles. Misguided women and men devote the sum total of their one and only lives to the percurrent of excessive consumption—palatial homes with multiple unoccupied bedrooms, overpriced crimped sheet metal made mobile by four rubber tires to park in driveways, electronic gadgetry capable of producing mindless entertainment on demand, and heaps of marginally useful “stuff” for filling shelves, cabinets, drawers, closets, and attics.

This is not a rant against capitalism. I am convinced capitalism pulls more people from the degradation of poverty than socialism or communism, but unbridled greed coupled with a longing for conspicuous consumption anchors the affections of mercenary souls to this world. The Apostle John warned, “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever (I John 2:15-17 NASB).”

Our Lord Jesus tells us, “Do not store up for yourselves [material] treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in and steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart [your wishes, your desires; that on which your life centers] will be also (Matthew 6:19-21 AMP).”

According to an article in *The London Economic*, poorer people give a greater portion of their income to charitable causes. Oddly, wealthier people are more tight-fisted. This much is certain—your pastor is not a charity case and supporting ministries that further the Gospel of Jesus Christ is every Christian’s obligation. It is said that when John D. Rockefeller died, someone asked how much money he left behind. His accountant replied, “He left it all.”

Those who do not rob God send their wealth ahead of them; those who keep their precious money hidden in vaults deny themselves lavish blessings for the moment and never-ending blessings of an even grander scale throughout the eternal ages to come.

2 ½ Cups Pride (Undiluted) Years ago, I received a letter from an inmate who killed five people while driving under the influence of alcohol. Because of his reckless behavior, a mother and her four young children, all under the age of ten, died in a grisly car crash on a busy interstate highway. He survived. His innocent victims did not. What he did was horribly evil.

While his crime borders on the unspeakable, this is not the worst act he could have committed. There is one sin that God finds more repulsive than all the others—a sin so wickedly vile, it ranks number one among all the sins loathsome to God. That sin is pride.

Before his fall, an angel named Lucifer declared that he would be like God. And when Lucifer attempted to make himself an equal of God, he was cast out of heaven. Call him what you wish: Satan, the devil, the deceiver, the prince of darkness, the father of lies,

the evil one—his pride led to his fall. And his pride will ultimately lead to his final destruction.

Eve's sin was not primarily one of disobedience. The serpent told Eve that the forbidden fruit would make her like God.

God is God. We are His creatures. The proper role of a created being is obedience to its Creator. Pride tells us that we are the masters of our fate. Pride tells us that we are free to do as we wish. Pride tells us to worship ourselves. Pride tells us we are like God.

In most churches, if the pastor stood in the pulpit intoxicated by alcohol, the elders of the church might seek to have him dismissed—and rightly so. But if the pastor stood in the pulpit filled with pride, the elders would likely say nothing. Pride, you see, is what we view as a “polite” sin. But in God's eyes, pride is the most loathsome of all sins.

In the sixth chapter of Proverbs, the writer lists seven sins God hates, and pride is number one.

God will exalt those who are humble. Humility means thinking less of ourselves and more of God. And if we think we are humble enough, we can be certain that we are not. Those few who achieve humility are not likely to notice.

Pride leads to destruction. Indeed, on what grounds should any of us think more of ourselves? All we have we owe to Him. If we must boast, let us boast of Jesus Christ our Savior. To boast of our talents, our skills, our achievements, our holdings, our education, and our appearance is kindling for the flames of destruction.

1 Cup Ingratitude No proper kettle of red stew should lack the lip-smacking goodness of ingratitude. Ingratitude gives foolish people plenty of reason to believe each heavenly blessing is a mere entitlement. God or society owes them something, or so they believe, and whatever they have is no more than what is rightfully theirs. Among those who fancy

themselves as deserving, what they have is generally not enough to satisfy. The more they have, the more they believe they should have.

An entitlement mentality is a cancer that eats away at the godly contentment that should manifest itself in all people—particularly women and men who identify themselves as followers of Jesus Christ.

Ingratitude is the ugly cousin of faithlessness. This truth is illustrated in the following passage taken from Luke's Gospel record. "And as he (Jesus) entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance and lifted up their voices, saying, 'Jesus, Master, have mercy on us.' When he saw them he said to them, 'Go and show yourselves to the priests.' And as they went they were cleansed. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus answered, 'Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine? Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?' And he said to him, 'Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well (Luke 17:12-19 ESV).'"

Even a dog knows to wag its tail over the supper dish, but the sons and daughters of Esau are thankless fools who, according to their twisted thinking, are deserving of all they have. Such ingrates will never know happiness and the satisfaction that comes with godly contentment.

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

In the spirit of Esau, the carnally minded individual has little regard for God and gives even less thought to eternity. This connoisseur of red stew lives under the authority of

his or her own desires. The works of the flesh stand in direct contrast with the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other shameful acts are the herbs and spices that transform an ordinary red stew into a gastronomic masterpiece.

The Apostle Paul is abundantly clear in stating that those who continually practice such evil deeds will not do so with impunity; unregenerate persons who produce toxic weeds rather than luscious fruit face a perilous eternity of sorrow, loneliness, and regret. Apart from Christ Jesus, there can be no lasting joy. Apart from Christ Jesus, anger, bitterness, resentment, and envy find their unholy sanctuary in a simmering cauldron of red stew.

As to our twin brothers, Jacob's sons fathered the Twelve Tribes of Israel. From Jacob's line came our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus. As to Esau, his descendants, known as Edomites, were a hostile people who waged war with Israel. Proving that a rotten apple never falls far from the tree, King Herod, the tyrannical ruler who ordered John the Baptist's execution, was a descendant of Esau. The godless despot also played a role in the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

Rather than settling for a bowl of red stew, the Lord Jesus invites us to dine at His banquet table. Red stew only feeds the flesh, but our Savior nourishes the soul. To be sure, a bowl of red stew can never satisfy as only Jesus can satisfy, and though we are unworthy on our own, He clothes us in His righteousness so that we can celebrate with Him forever. Come and dine!

Question 110: I have trouble sleeping. Please ask Jesus to help me sleep.

Answer: Last evening, as I pondered your inquiry, I asked the Lord to give you a good night's rest. I typically fall asleep fairly quickly, but, for some unexplained reason, I

experienced a very restless night. Maybe last night's tossing and turning will help me better understand your plight.

I am not an expert in sleep. As mentioned, I generally fall asleep in little time. I am a light sleeper and I wake often, but I usually doze off again within minutes.

Let me make some suggestions. Melatonin is a natural remedy that aids sleep. I frequently take melatonin to help me sleep if I am feeling restless. Melatonin is nonaddictive and can be purchased at any drug store or grocery outlet.

Many doctors recommend quiet activities prior to bedtime. You might consider reading from the Psalms while sipping a soothing cup of herbal tea. Maybe some soft music before bedtime would help you relax. I enjoy listening to instrumental versions of traditional hymns. Those who struggle with insomnia may find subdued lighting helpful. I am not a fan of video games, but if I were, I would avoid playing *Zombie Invaders from Alpha Centauri* or *World War XXXIV* before calling it a night.

Are you a coffee or soda drinker? Go easy on the caffeinated beverages later in the afternoon.

I tend to fall asleep to recorded Bible teachings. I find it relaxing to doze off to the voice of a favorite Bible teacher. I make a point of not sleeping during my own pastor's Sunday morning sermons and I encourage audiences to remain awake when I teach, but once the sun has gone down and the moon is up, sermons are my nighttime lullabies.

Be still, and know that I am God (Psalm 46:10a NKJV).

And, by all means, pray before going to sleep. From time to time, I have unsettling dreams. A bad dream can spoil a night's rest. If I am prone to experiencing unpleasant dreams, I ask God to guard my rest.

Difficulty with sleep may be caused by a physiological problem that can be treated with medication. I am not a medical doctor, but I am in favor of seeking professional help if professional help is warranted. If the melatonin and quiet time before bed yields no favorable results, maybe it is time to visit your doctor.

It is my prayer that God will give you rest.

By the way, if you are so inclined, drop me a line with an update. As my own mother suffers from insomnia, I am well acquainted with this unsettling malady.

Feed on Christ, and then go and live your life, and it is Christ in you that lives your life, that helps the poor, that tells the truth, that fights the battle, and that wins the crown.

-- Philips Brooks

Question 111: As I have an overly active imagination, how can I know if the Holy Spirit is leading me, or if these promptings are counterfeits conjured inside my head?

Answer: What a great question, friend!

The Holy Spirit will never lead us in a direction that violates the clear teachings of the Bible. As an example, the Bible says believers should not marry non-believers; in other words, we are not to be "unequally yoked" to one who ignores the Gospel and has little regard for our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. So, if you are strongly attracted to someone who is not a believer and are having thoughts of marriage, these thoughts are not of God.

Many years ago, I knew an older married woman who was having an affair with a man she had met at church. In her words, this affair was not sinful "because they had met at

church." Indeed! This is nonsensical dribble of the worst kind, and mature believers must avoid such twisted, illogical thinking.

Consider Paul's words to a young pastor named Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16, 17 NKJV)." If an inner prompting says yes and the Bible says no, give that unholy thought the good old heave-ho and go with God's word!

Wisdom is the ability to see people, events, and circumstances as God sees them. By studying God's word and through the transforming power of God's Holy Spirit, our thinking goes through a holy renewal process. Again, Paul wrote: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2 ESV)."

Godly wisdom is ours for the asking: If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind (James 1:5, 6 NKJV).

Christianity is all about having a relationship with Jesus Christ. As in any healthy relationship, the closer we become to someone, the more we understand that person. The closer we grow to Jesus, the more we will understand His will for our lives. He wants what is best for us. He has plans for us to prosper (Jeremiah 29:11), but to really understand the mind of Christ, we must be willing to listen.

In some cases, a believer might seek the advice of a mature Christian, but never allow yourself to be in bondage to anyone other than Christ Jesus. Never blindly follow anyone regardless of their charisma or reputation. I have known of celebrated pastors and Bible teachers bloated with pride who behaved like rock stars. This is precisely how religious

cults get started. You have one Savior, Christ Jesus and you are not to be a slave to any man. If God has something to say to you, He can speak to you directly.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, my friend!

Editor's note: Please refer to Question 100 for a more detailed discussion on the matter of knowing God's will.

Question 112: Is friendship with a non-believer an example of worldly behavior?

Answer: You and I have something in common. We are both surrounded by non-Christians. The moment you and I step foot out of church, we enter into a world dominated by and teeming with non-believers. This is good, for we never run short of lost women and men who desperately need what we have.

Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5:20 NASB).

If we treat the majority of people as though they are vile and unworthy of our civility, we will never be ambassadors of Jesus Christ.

Jesus said we are to love our enemies and to do good to those who oppose us. Now, to be perfectly honest, I find loving those who oppose me a difficult order to follow, but loving our enemies means that we are praying for their redemption--not their demise. How can we love our enemies unless we first engage with them?

A number of years ago, I began teaching a drug and alcohol recovery program at a men's prison. A member of my group, a Muslim, attended our weekly class. I reject the teachings of Islam, but I treated my Muslim student with courtesy and respect. I did not

demean him, nor did I mock his beliefs. On the contrary, I found him to be an engaging, personable, likeable chap. We became friends. After a couple of years, he converted to Christianity and asked me to help him enroll in a Bible school. When I asked what brought about this change in his beliefs, he said my kindness was a major factor. To this date, our friendship continues, and he is now an ordained clergyman.

Had I treated him as an enemy, he might be practicing Islam, or, more likely, God would have recruited another Christian to befriend this inmate and the blessings I received would have gone to another.

Now, we are not to take on the bad habits of our non-believing acquaintances. As an example, I am not going to pal around with drunks in a seedy tavern or meet a sexually deviant neighbor in a porn shop, but if I treat lost souls with civility, I am more likely to gain their trust and respect.

Rather than giving you specific Scripture verses, let me challenge you to consider the earthly ministry of our Lord Jesus. Our Savior earned the trust of prostitutes and tax extortionists—not because He stooped to their levels of behavior, but because He genuinely cared about them.

Those who opposed Jesus were typically self-righteous hypocrites who believed they were better than others. Self-righteous hypocrites exist today, and they are probably the most difficult people to reach.

You and I are beggars. We have found a source of bread and now we want to share this bread with other hungry beggars. Let us never presume we are above those living in sin. We are, after all, sinners saved by grace through faith in Jesus (Ephesians 2:8, 9). The goodness in us is not our own—we have been given the righteousness of Christ.

Let us declare today a special holiday—*Be Kind to a Lost Sinner Day*. May we share the love of Jesus Christ with someone who needs Him.

Question 113: Over ten years ago, I made a vow of celibacy in order to atone for my sins. Each day, I do all that I can to faithfully honor and obey the Ten Commandments and I begin every morning in fervent prayer pleading for forgiveness. At times, I will spend hours gazing at a crucifix as penance for my transgressions. Even though I have given up hope of meeting a woman and enjoying her company (for I am very lonely), I want to please God through strict self-denial. Despite my answering the call to a life of holiness, there is much turmoil within, and, at times, the inner conflict is suffocating. I have been known to pray hours and hours at a time until relief finally comes and I feel spiritually cleansed, but the journey can be difficult, and I could use some encouragement. Knowing my life of denial is pleasing to God is all that keeps me going.

Answer: I want to say this lovingly, yet I do not want to mince words: Rather than enjoying an intimate, saving relationship with Jesus Christ, you have conjured a worthless, frustrating, stifling do-it-yourself religion that is nothing more than a hopelessly feeble attempt at self-righteousness. Friend, you have too much faith in yourself and in your religious rituals and not enough faith in our great God and Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Thankfully, there is a cure.

You mentioned you are lonely. This is hardly surprising, for you have surrounded yourself with rites, rules, and ritualism. There is no lasting comfort to be found in gazing at a crucifix and are you certain, absolutely certain, God has called you to a life of celibacy?

Friend, please read no malice into my words, but if I were an atheist and happened to come across your letter, I would say, "Poor, miserable soul! His God must be a vicious, vindictive, hard-to-please taskmaster! What a dreary life he leads, and this God of his must be merciless and cruel. No, thanks! I want no part of his wretched religion. I will not devote my life to a harsh, unyielding deity whose browbeaten followers mope about in fear and dread!"

The next day he (John the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29 ESV)!"

According to the Gospel, Jesus' death on the cross satisfies the believer's sin debt once and for all—for those who trust in Him rather than in themselves, their sins, past, present, and future, have already been forgiven and there is no need to stare at crucifixes for hours at a time.

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8. 9 NASB).

What does the Bible say, friend? Was Jesus' sacrifice on the cross insufficient or lacking in any way? Must you add your own works to His sacrifice in order to appease God? What are you thinking?

Where is the joy in your walk with the Lord? Obviously, there is none. Friend, reading your pitiful letter depressed me to the core of my being! Do you doubt the Lord Jesus' love for you? Do you not understand that we can only please God by placing our faith solely in Christ Jesus as Savior? Such ritualistic busywork, which has sent legions of "holier-than-thou" men and women to Hell, has no place in the Christian walk.

Jesus loves you. He loves you with all of His heart. And He has big, big plans for your life (Jeremiah 29:11). Rather than this foolish attempt at beating yourself into shape, let Him mold you into His image through His Holy Spirit. This is called sanctification. Instead of allowing God to transform your life, you are relying on religion, rituals, and rules to make you a better person. What a waste of emotion and energy! Let Him make you a better person. He is the potter. You are the clay. The clay never molds itself.

Put your crucifix and candles in a drawer and open God's word. Obviously, you do not understand the life-giving message of grace. Grace is God's unmerited favor. Stop trying to earn God's favor. Begin a study in the Book of Galatians. Etch Paul's message of

freedom and grace to the saints in Galatia on your parched heart and weary mind! Grace, not self-righteousness, will be a balm for your aching soul!

A relationship with Jesus satisfies. A fashioned image on a crucifix is just that—an image you can hold in your hand, but not in your heart; Jesus is real. He is not made of wood or stone or metal, and He wants an intimate, personal relationship with you. An intimate relationship with the Living Savior will help ease the loneliness that is your ever-present companion. Perhaps, in time, and after you have abandoned the futility of self-righteousness, you may be ready to meet a godly woman.

Do not think in the manner of a fool. Salvation is a free gift. Salvation cannot be earned. Eternal life is not a paycheck for a life of ritual and duty.

Martin Luther, the great Christian reformer, abandoned his futile works of righteousness when he came to understand “the just shall live by faith.” Upon denouncing the folly of a life of strict self-denial in favor of God’s refreshing message of grace, he proclaimed, “Is it not wonderful news to believe that salvation lies outside ourselves?”

Oh, what a dungeon you have made for yourself! Get out! Jesus has the key to your self-made prison cell, and He is springing the iron door wide open! Step out of the bondage and into the freedom of His love and joy! Be miserable no longer!

Accept Jesus as your Savior today, my friend! Give up your rules and rituals and rites and place your trust solely in Him. He will accept you as an adopted son into His family. Why live like a hired-hand when you can be family? Oh, you are missing out on so very much! Say farewell to your false religion and come to Jesus and know real joy and peace!

In closing, let me urge you to join a Bible-believing church that lifts up the Name of Jesus and shares Christ-like love with one another. I attend such a church—a church where the

Bible is faithfully taught, and disciples are made. Surround yourself with mature saints who will love you and nurture you.

If you lived in my area, I would be your friend, but wherever you are, I am convinced that God will help you make Christian friends and ease the pangs of loneliness in your life.

I have told you the truth based upon the writings of Scripture. Now it is up to you to accept the truth or continue living in bondage. In reflection, I believe you will come to see that you have been living in a dank and dark dungeon of loneliness and despair. God has so much in store for you. Please open your heart and accept the grace and mercy and forgiveness and the joy He has reserved for you! A relationship is far better than mere religion! I should know. I have experienced both.

May the Lord radically transform your life and make you a new creation in Christ Jesus!

Question 114: In what order were the books of the Bible written?

Answer: Long ago, when I had more hair and less belly, I rented an apartment from a rather silly, muddle-minded, obnoxious, highly-opinionated know-it-all whose goal in life was to give poor blisters like me stomach ulcers. She was loud, invasive, and garrulous—these were her finer points. As a landlord, she was the worst. While I was away earning a living, she allowed her ten year old son into my apartment so that he could help himself to whatever was in my refrigerator. Once, I discovered her snooping through my laundry. As to nosy landlords helping themselves to a man's undergarments, what can I say? Is nothing sacred? I mean, is there not a clause in the Bill of Rights prohibiting such intrusions? Needless to say, I soon found myself looking for a new address.

During my brief residency, she and her son spoiled my peace with their many heated arguments. I would hear their back and forth screaming four or five times a week. Frankly, she reminded me of a braying donkey. I pitied her ten-year-old son for

having a nincompoop as a mother. I do believe the boy possessed better manners and more common sense than she—and even at that, he was something of a juvenile wart. I found him stashing his girly magazines in my apartment.

As she knew I was a Christian, she asked me to teach her son (I seem to recall that his name was Malcolm) the sixty-six books of the Bible. Why would she want me to teach him the sixty-six books of the Bible, I wondered? Madam Landlady and her sole heir did not attend church. The woman appeared to have no religious convictions. What good would come of Malcolm's ability to recite the books of the Bible? Rather than teaching him to recite the sixty-six books that comprise the Canon of Scripture, I suggested she allow me to take him to church. The boy needed to learn about Jesus. He needed to know the Gospel.

She was not interested in Malcolm attending church. She allowed him to watch soft pornography, but she could see no reason for him to attend church with me. Even so, she thought it would be good if he memorized the books of the Bible in their sequential order.

Friend, this is nonsense of the worst kind. The Bible is not a book to be trivialized. The Bible is a book to be studied and understood and taken to heart. I say this because I am hoping you have a good reason for wanting to know the chronological order of the Bible's sixty-six books. Here is what you asked for....

Old Testament

Job--Unknown

Genesis--1445-1405 B.C.

Exodus --1445-1405 B.C.

Leviticus --1445-1405 B.C.

Numbers--1445-1405 B.C.

Deuteronomy--1445-1405 B.C.

Psalms--1410-450 B.C.
Joshua--1405-1385 B.C.
Judges--ca. 1043 B.C.
Ruth--ca. 1030-1010 B.C.
Song of Solomon--971-965 B.C.
Proverbs--ca. 971-686 B.C.
Ecclesiastes--940-931 B.C.
1 Samuel--931-722 B.C.
2 Samuel--931-722 B.C.
Obadiah--850-840 B.C.
Joel--835-796 B.C.
Jonah--ca. 775 B.C.
Amos--ca. 750 B.C.
Hosea--750-710 B.C.
Micah--735-710 B.C.
Isaiah--700-681 B.C.
Nahum--ca. 650 B.C.
Zephaniah--635-625 B.C.
Habakkuk--615-605 B.C.
Ezekiel--590-570 B.C.
Lamentations--586 B.C.
Jeremiah--586-570 B.C.
1 Kings--561-538 B.C.
2 Kings--561-538 B.C.
Daniel 536-530 B.C.
Haggai--ca. 520 B.C.
Zechariah--480-470 B.C.
Ezra--457-444 B.C.
1 Chronicles--450-430 B.C.
2 Chronicles--450-430 B.C.
Esther--450-331 B.C.

Malachi--433-424 B.C.

Nehemiah--424-400 B.C.

New Testament

James--A.D. 44-49

Galatians--A.D. 49-50

Matthew--A.D. 50-60

Mark--A.D. 50-60

1 Thessalonians--A.D. 51

2 Thessalonians--A.D. 51-52

1 Corinthians--A.D. 55

2 Corinthians--A.D. 55-56

Romans-- A.D. 56

Luke--A.D. 60-61

Ephesians--A.D. 60-62

Philippians--A.D. 60-62

Philemon--A.D. 60-62

Colossians--A.D. 60-62

Acts--A.D. 62

1 Timothy--A.D. 62-64

Titus--A.D. 62-64

1 Peter--A.D. 64-65

2 Timothy--A.D. 66-67

2 Peter--A.D. 67-68

Hebrews--A.D. 67-69

Jude--A.D. 68-70

John--A.D. 80-90

1 John--A.D. 90-95

2 John--A.D. 90-95

3 John--A.D. 90-95

Revelation--A.D. 94-96

Now that you have your list, let me challenge you to put this information to good use.

Question 115: How can I wake people up and tell them there are more important things in life than dating and pursuing relationships and having fun? The world is on fire, but here in Europe, everyone is so busy having a good time, no one seems to notice. Maybe it is just as bad in America. Regardless, how can I stir these godless people to their senses?

Answer: While in New York a couple of weeks ago, I saw a man preaching in one of the city's many busy subway stations. He was warning people about the agonies of hell. From my observations, no one was listening. No one was giving him their attention. I suppose the occasional onlooker found him to be something of an oddity. I would not question this man's intentions, but I would certainly question his methods.

Rather than screaming and shaking a fist at lost women and men, the Apostle Paul engaged others through meaningful conversation. This New York subway street preacher was no Apostle Paul.

Has God called you to preach? As believers, each of us is called to serve in some way or another, but we are gifted by God to serve in different capacities. During my eight years as chaplain for a large urban homeless shelter, I had a steady stream of would-be preachers knocking on my door wanting me to place them in the mission's pulpit. Frankly, many of these wild-eyed preaching candidates were on the looney side, so I simply turned them away with a "Don't call us, we'll call you." Owing to the gift of spiritual discernment, I knew beyond doubt some of these screwball wannabes had not been called by God to preach.

If some sour-faced street preacher was standing along a busy thoroughfare shouting, “Hear me! Here me! Wipe that silly smile off your face and come to Jesus! Give up your interest in the opposite sex and forget about having fun and dating and don’t even think about falling in love and marrying or you will burn in Hell,” I strongly suspect Jesus would not be pleased.

God created us for companionship and community. Christianity is not a practice in dreary isolation. We need the company of one another—and this includes romantic relationships that lead to fruitful and faithful marriages. Friend, if your message is “Come to Jesus and forget about dating and relationships,” I think you need a new message.

Who told you that God is opposed to people having fun and finding pleasure in living? Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the psalmist wrote that God is the Author of Pleasure (Psalm 16). No one void of joy is fit to preach.

Obviously, I do not know you and I do not know about your walk with the Lord Jesus, but I will encourage you to seek out the company of a mature, Bible-believing Christian who might serve as a spiritual mentor.

Serving God is our supreme satisfaction, but only when we are following the path He has set before us (Jeremiah 29:11). Pray that God will reveal His will to you.

Question 116: I was raised a Hindu, but I met Jesus through dreams and visions. During my encounters with Jesus, He tells me stories and gives me revelations, but I often come under Satanic attacks. I also find myself slipping back into my old sinful ways. Getting back to these Satanic attacks, the devil often inflicts severe physical pain upon me. The devil wakes me from my sleep and I often go without rest. Why would Jesus allow me to suffer at the hands of the devil? Also, some Christian friends believe my visions and dreams are not from God. I only know that I need deliverance.

Answer: I would never presume to dictate what God can and cannot do. He is God and I am not. This is not to say God is wholly unknowable and unpredictable, for we have God's promise that He will never mislead His people, and we can be certain that God will never act in a way that violates the teachings of the Bible. As a biblical writer and teacher, I would not deny that God can, if He so chooses, speak to women and men through dreams and visions, but when dreams and visions contradict the clear teachings of the Bible, we must conclude that such signs are not of God.

Not long ago, a young man told me he had been whisked away into Heaven. This rapturous event allegedly occurred while smoking marijuana with a prostitute. He went into great detail as to what he saw during his so-called heavenly sojourn. Frankly, I did not believe him, for I do not believe God would honor a pot-smoking fornicator with a roundtrip ticket to Heaven. This young man had the audacity to think Almighty God had appointed him as a holy prophet or heavenly ambassador. I warned this foolish young man to keep his mouth shut. He had absolutely nothing to say to Christ's followers. On the contrary, I told him to repent of his heresies and seek forgiveness. False prophets are in danger of God's severest judgment (Jeremiah 28).

I have known wild-eyed fanatics who could not say if the Book of Philemon was in the Old Testament or the New Testament because they were too bent on chasing after elusive signs and wonders to read and study the scriptures. In their muddled minds, prayer and Bible study did not afford the kind of thrill and excitement they craved. No, they sought after jaw-dropping, spine-tingling, supernatural experiences, for systematic Bible study and focused prayer requires too much effort and lacks the kind of spiritual thrills they so desperately desire.

I once knew a highly excitable young woman who supposed herself to be an anointed prophetess. According to an alleged vision given to her by God, I was to open a sprawling spiritual retreat center that would lead multitudes of God's people to lofty levels of spirituality. At the time, I was a shaggy-headed bass guitarist in my early twenties and woefully ignorant of God's word. Despite my spiritual immaturity, I hastily concluded this

fanatical nutcase did not speak for God. Weeks later, she was arrested for attacking a Roman Catholic priest after he refused her sexual advances.

Again, I believe God may speak to people through dreams and visions, but if these supernatural messages are not aligned with the clear teachings of the Bible, then these spurious communications must be attributed to something or someone other than God.

I trust the Bible. I do not trust the dreams and visions you report. In truth, I believe you have been deluded by Satan. If you were knowledgeable of the scriptures, you would understand that these experiences are unholy and smell of smoke and brimstone. Rather than studying the Bible, you have allowed yourself to believe He was speaking to you through supernatural revelations.

Repent of your sin and ask Jesus for forgiveness. Turn away from this occultic dabbling and trust in Him to save you from eternal damnation. If you call upon Him for salvation, He will not turn you away (Romans 10:13). Ask God to give you relief from the demonic influences in your life and renounce your spiritual laziness. Vow to be a faithful Christian who learns from God through systematic Bible study and routine prayer. I fear you have given Satan a stronghold, but our merciful God will free you from his torment.

Friend, you need a spiritual mentor. Seek out a godly pastor who loves Jesus and is no stranger to God's word. Surround yourself with faithful Christian believers who will love you and nurture you. Most of all, lend yourself to knowing the Bible.

Question 117: Should I tithe?

Answer: If you are an orthodox Jew, I will suggest you discuss the matter of giving with your rabbi, but if you are a Christian, I will remind you that we no longer live under the Law.

“Speak thus to the Levites, and say to them: ‘When you take from the children of Israel the tithes which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord, a tenth of the tithe (Numbers 18:26 NKJV).”

As soon as the commandment was circulated, the children of Israel brought in abundance the firstfruits of grain and wine, oil and honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything (II Chronicles 31:5 NKJV).

And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s. It is holy to the Lord. If a man wants at all to redeem any of his tithes, he shall add one-fifth to it. And concerning the tithe of the herd or the flock, of whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the Lord (Leviticus 27:30-32 NKJV).

According to the Law, there were, in fact, three tithes: A tithe was given to the Levites, who served as priests, another tithe supported the temple and celebratory feasts, and a third tithe was levied to assist Israel’s poor. Dr. J. Vernon McGee estimated these three tithes totaled nearly 30%. Other scholars suggest a slightly lower amount, but this much is certain, faithful Jews gave far more than 10%. I tend to think of Old Testament tithing as ancient Israel’s income tax code. If you are a Christian who lives anywhere other than an ancient Israeli theocracy, you are exempt from the Old Testament’s ordinances that govern tithing.

But you are not exempt from giving.

Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver (II Corinthians 9:7 ESV).

Speaking personally, I pay taxes to our government because this is the law and tax evaders risk losing their liberties. Having taught in a men’s prison, I have determined that I would not enjoy living behind razor wire and iron gates. Conversely, I give to the cause

of Jesus Christ because I love Him and giving makes me happy. Offering financial support to faithful ministries is more than a duty—it is an honor and a blessing. Anyone who gives begrudgingly may as well not give at all.

To those who ask, “How much should I give?”, I will ask, “How much do you love the Lord Jesus?” Obviously, a large family that gets by on a modest income cannot give as great a percentage as, say, a well-to-do couple with few obligations, but, again, the question of “how much do I give?” is based upon “how much do I love my Savior?”

Should one’s giving be limited to one’s home church? Again, this is a matter that is between the Christian giver and the Holy Spirit. As for me, I look for ways to maximize the impact of my giving. To borrow from a common colloquialism, I want to get the “biggest bang for my buck” through my giving. As such, I support ministries that are faithful to the Gospel—godly ministries that provide solid spiritual nurturing that strengthens, teaches, and edifies our brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. I will not support any ministry headed by an Armani-clad personality with a private jet.

My final word on giving is this: The amount you give and to whom you give your offerings is a mirror reflection of your Christian faith and character.

Question 118: I moved a homeless person into my home, for I know that living on the streets is dangerous and humiliating, but he took advantage of my generosity. He spent the money I gave him on drugs and alcohol. He found a temporary job, but rather than saving his wages for a place of his own, he bought an iPhone. I feel as though I have been disrespected. I offered help to this individual and this is how he repaid my kindness.

Answer: Having served as a homeless shelter chaplain, I can assure you that, for many, homelessness is a choice they willingly make. This is not to say we give up on those living on the streets; on the contrary, homeless folk need our help, but our help should be

in the form of nourishing food, hot baths, warm beds, and spiritual nurturing. The cash you give to a homeless person may be spent purchasing marijuana or liquor.

I offered to move a woman living in our low barrier shelter, which was, in fact, a large noisy dorm that afforded minimum privacy, to a semi-private room in our drug and alcohol recovery program. She refused. "If I join the recovery program," she explained, "I won't be allowed to smoke weed." Rather than giving up marijuana, she chose to live in a crowded dorm where brawls and bedbugs ruled the day. An isolated incident? I could give you dozens of similar accounts.

Those who hand cash to homeless individuals are often guilty of funding the very habits that sent them to the streets. In recovery, we call such people *enablers*. The donors' good intentions are negated by the recipients' bad choices.

Jesus said, "Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves (Matthew 10:16 ESV)." Where is the wisdom in enabling the bad decisions and harmful addictions of others?

For those who wish to help the homeless, consider donations of cash, food, and clothing articles to a Gospel rescue mission. God expects His people to help the poor, but money that finds its home in a liquor store's cash register is not the kind of help responsible, thinking Christians are to offer.

Question 119: I am angered by those who treat our God disrespectfully. Their words and their actions make my blood boil. Is it wrong for us to show them our contempt? Why doesn't God topple these evil people? Why does He allow them to continue their war against us?

Answer: I will readily admit to my disdain of Hollywood, politically-correct academia, far-left politicians, and godless, immoral organizations such as Planned Parenthood and

Black Lives Matter, for they uniformly promote evil over good while mocking our Lord Jesus Christ and His followers. These days, I can scarcely read the headlines for the relentless attacks against our faith and freedoms. Do these purveyors of politically-correct propaganda make me sick to my stomach? You bet they do, and I suspect you feel as I do, but lashing out against those who are against us is not our proper office.

Unlike other religions, Christianity does not behead its opponents and we are not called to bomb non-Christian houses of worship. We do not make converts with hand grenades and AK-47s.

Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you (Psalm 139:21 ESV)?

I read the psalms and say to myself, "Yes, King David, I know how you feel! I loathe these goggle-eyed, imbecilic mockers, too!" And then I come to my senses, for Jesus commanded us to love our enemies. We are to pray for their restoration—not their untimely deaths.

Here is a fact: God does not need you or me to defend His name and His honor. Can a gnat defend a lion? Can a minnow defend a whale? If every man, woman, and child on this sin-sickened planet raised an angered fist and, in unison, cursed the name of Jesus Christ, would His majesty and splendor be diminished in any way? The answer, of course, is no.

I fear the darkest days are ahead of us, and Satan is working overtime in his efforts to snare as many unsuspecting souls as he can, but God has the devil on a long leash and, in the end, our side is victorious. If you need encouragement, read the final two chapters in Revelation.

I appreciate your question, for I sense I am addressing someone who shares my concerns, but let us not be brought to shame by unbridled anger. God has this situation

well in hand. You and I are not His enforcers; on the contrary, we are to be ambassadors of His love, grace, and mercy.

A loving Personality dominates the Bible, walking among the trees of the garden and breathing fragrance over every scene. Always a living Person is present, speaking, pleading, loving, working, and manifesting himself whenever and wherever his people have the receptivity necessary to receive the manifestation.
... A. W. Tozer

Question 120: I am convinced Alcoholics Anonymous' teachings are incompatible with Christian theology, yet many churches and Christian nonprofit organizations host onsite AA groups or refer their members to AA meetings. Can this be right?

Answer: Bravo! Bravo! You have posed a question that I have waited ten years to answer!

Alcoholics Anonymous is a religion. Alcoholics Anonymous is a religion that is not compatible with Christianity. Many members proudly say, "AA is my religion," and the organization has their own brand of theology.

With this said, shame on any pastor or church or parachurch organization that allows AA teachings on their premises or refers their members or clients to AA meetings.

I was once hired as a chaplain by a faith-based nonprofit agency. Not having a background in addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention, I was somewhat ignorant of the Alcoholics Anonymous' so-called *Big Book* teachings. The agency claimed to be a Christian ministry, but I soon discovered what was being taught ran contrary to biblical teachings and the commands of Jesus Christ.

I objected to the *Big Book*'s non-Christian theology. In response to my concerns, I was told, "You just can't spring Jesus on people."

I steadfastly refused to use AA materials in my teachings, and this resulted in many heated conflicts. I presented the organization with Christian alternatives to AA materials. My suggestions were ignored. After nearly nine years of wrestling with the agency's steadfast refusal to adopt a Christ-centered program along with other objectional anti-Christian policies that were in place, I resigned.

Several years ago, I was asked to take over an AA program operating in a men's prison. I eagerly accepted the offer to lead, but rather than using the AA *Big Book*, I penned my own biblically-based program, and our group grew from thirty to ninety participants. AA material is riddled with logical incongruities and, in the end, does not address some of life's deepest and most troubling questions.

I am not here to promote my own Christ-centered addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention program manual (available without charge to those who ask), but I am here to promote the use of the Bible instead of the so-called *Big Book*—a Christless approach to recovery.

In contrast to Alcoholics Anonymous, Celebrate Recovery is a Christian addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention program that is enjoying real success around the world. I am to understand there are more Celebrate Recovery chapters than AA groups. I certainly hope these statistics are true.

I am grateful for your inquiry. It is good knowing other Christian believers are concerned about anti-Christian influences tainting the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Question 121: If Jesus takes away our sin, why do I continue sinning?

Answer: What? Are you still sinning? Golly, I have not sinned since my conversion in May 1989. Even now, I am able to walk on water and, if all goes well, I will raise my first corpse from the dead in a few weeks.

Okay, I am only kidding!

Why do you and I sin? We were born with a sin nature. As grievous as it sounds, sin is part of our spiritual DNA.

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29)." And it is true. He took our sin upon Himself. The weight of my sin no longer condemns me. The burden of your sin no longer condemns you. And if you and I were to die this very moment, we would stand in His presence, free of condemnation, imputed with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Sanctification is the process in which we are transformed into the likeness of Jesus Christ. Sanctification is a lifelong process. You might say we are saints "in the making." And here is the best news yet—when God looks at you or me, He sees us as a finished project. He sees us how we will be and not as we are now. Too, we can be assured that nothing or no one will steal us from Him, for the Apostle Paul wrote, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter. Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39 KJV)."

Friend, I may not be that much now, but when God is finished with me, I am going to shine! I am going to be somebody! *Whoooo-hoooo!*

Okay, today I am still struggling with my sin nature. I deal with lust, doubt, selfishness, anger, and a host of other ugly sins. Even on my best days, I sin. But I am not condemned, because Jesus took my sin from me and I stand before Him guiltless.

Paul told us that in Adam, all have sinned. We inherited Adam's sin nature (Romans 5:12). But the Second Adam, Jesus Christ, was the sinless, immaculate sacrifice that took our sin away. And as we keep sinning, He keeps on taking it away.

He must really, really love us to do all this for you and me.

Something else I have learned—being good is never good enough, but being forgiven is.

As we grow in His grace, maybe we sin a wee bit less. I have been a Christian over thirty years and my improvements seem to come slowly, but, again, the day will come when His job of making me into the image of His Son will be complete.

Have I answered your question? I hope I have.

Question 122: If we are saved by faith and faith alone, why was it necessary for Jesus to die? It would seem that simply believing in Him would be sufficient.

Answer: Much of my work is done on a laptop computer. When I recently retired from my chaplaincy to devote more time to writing, I gave up my office. My office is now a coffee shop. Most days, I take my laptop to a coffee shop and do my work. I like working from a coffee shop. My laptop is fairly new, and I take good care of it. I take good care of everything. I can expect my gear to last if I take proper care of it. Agree?

A few days ago, I had a pile of work needing my attention. I grabbed a cappuccino, found a comfortable table, and fired up my laptop. Never once did I think, "I sure hope my computer works today." My computer always works. And, for this reason, I have faith in my computer, but on this day, something was wrong. I could not access my email account. I rebooted. Nothing. No email. I rebooted again. What was wrong?

My young friend, I had every reason to believe that my laptop would work, but faith is only as good as the object of one's faith.

I can have faith that my car will start, but if the battery is dead or if there is no gasoline in the tank, all of the faith in the world will not engage the motor.

Let me say this again: Our faith is only as good as the object of our faith. No amount of faith will light a room if the bulb is spent or if the electricity is out. No amount of faith will produce music if the guitar has no strings. No amount of faith will fill an empty belly if the plate is empty or if the kitchen is bare.

You are correct when you say we are saved by faith, but it is our Lord Jesus Christ's death, burial, and resurrection that is the object of our faith (I Corinthians 15:1-4). The fact that He overcame the ravages of sin, the despair of death, and the hopelessness of the grave proves that our sins are forgiven, and we will live forever with Him.

You and I are not saved by our works, but we are saved by *His* works.

Millions of people have placed their faith in Muhammad, Buddha, Mary Baker Eddy, Joseph Smith, Confucius, and Charles Taze Russell—and their faith is sincere, but faith in a false Savior leads to a false salvation. Jesus alone is worthy of our trust. We read, "And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12 NASB)."

An inmate told me about an ill-conceived plan to rob a bank that led to his arrest, conviction, and incarceration. Believing their scheme was foolproof, he and his partners had faith in their plan, but instead of netting a quarter million greenbacks, he got twenty-five years in prison. His faith in the bank heist placed him behind bars for a quarter century.

If Jesus had not died on the cross and had He not risen from the tomb, our faith in Him would be useless. But because He died for our sins and conquered death by walking out of the tomb three days later, He is worthy of our faith and, indeed, we are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

You asked a great question. I hope and pray that my answer is a worthy response to such a good question. Keep on thinking, my young, curious friend, for God can make good use of people who dare to think.

Question 123: Please help me understand the difference between the spirit of the law and the letter of the law.

Answer: In ancient times, a religious sect known as the Pharisees established themselves as experts in rule-keeping; unfortunately, their hearts were cold, and their understanding of God's Law was tainted by their self-serving vanity. Jesus compared such religious phonies to ornate sepulchers—beautiful on the outside, but within these tombs were the bones of decaying corpses. Jesus exposed these proud-as-peacock Pharisees as being all show while lacking in real substance.

Now it happened on another Sabbath, also, that He entered the synagogue and taught. And a man was there whose right hand was withered. So the scribes and Pharisees watched Him closely, whether He would heal on the Sabbath, that they might find an accusation against Him. But He knew their thoughts, and said to the man who had the withered hand, "Arise and stand here." And he arose and stood. Then Jesus said

to them, "I will ask you one thing: Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy?" And when He had looked around at them all, He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." And he did so, and his hand was restored as whole as the other. But they were filled with rage, and discussed with one another what they might do to Jesus (Luke 6:6-11 NKJV).

The Pharisees were indignant because Jesus dared to restore a man's withered hand on the Sabbath. Such hypocrisy! The Law, which forbade work on the Sabbath, nonetheless allowed a farmer to rescue an ox trapped in a ditch on the Sabbath, but these zealous Pharisees would not give a fellow human in need the same consideration—and they dared to condemn our Lord Jesus because of His compassion and His willingness to heal. This illustrates how the Pharisees followed the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit of the law.

People who are ignorant of the Bible often fall prey to strange ideas about Christianity. Many years ago, a young woman with whom I was well familiar phoned me with a question that went something like this: "I baked a loaf of bread for dinner. As I was preparing to slice the loaf, my boyfriend said, 'Don't do that! It is a sin to slice bread. Bread symbolizes Jesus' body and when you slice bread with a knife, it is as if you are stabbing Jesus.' Is this true, Chaplain? Is it a sin to slice bread with a knife?"

This young woman had three children by three men who refused to pay child support. She was currently under investigation by Child Protective Services because her oldest daughter had been abused by one of her former boyfriends. As if all this were not enough, she was unable to pass a drug test, but her concern was the possible irreverential treatment of a baguette.

Such muddle-minded nonsense falls under the choking-on-a-gnat-while-swallowing-a-camel syndrome. This kind of twisted logic would be comical were it not so tragic. Note how such vain attempts at self-righteousness are based on mindless rule-keeping and

outward appearances. Missing from those who practice legalism is a genuine love of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Legalism is an outmoded relic of empty religion that is steeped in self-righteousness and is a cold slap in the face of grace.

Yes, there are rules—do's and don'ts that come with keeping Christ's commands, but never allow the letter of the law to interfere with the spirit of the law.

Question 124: After His crucifixion, was Jesus raised from the dead as a spirit or a ghost or did He walk out of the tomb in a physical body?

Answer: The Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, a heretical cult founded by Charles Taze Russell, teaches its members, known as Jehovah's Witnesses, that Jesus exited the tomb in a spiritual or ghostly form, but the bodily resurrection of our great God and Savior is the cornerstone of the Christian faith. Jesus came out of the tomb in a physical body capable of supernatural feats that reflect the kind of bodies we shall possess on the other side of eternity.

Now on the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they, and certain other women with them, came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. But they found the stone rolled away from the tomb. Then they went in and did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. And it happened, as they were greatly perplexed about this, that behold, two men stood by them in shining garments. Then, as they were afraid and bowed their faces to the earth, they said to them, "Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but is risen! Remember how He spoke to you when He was still in Galilee, saying, 'The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again.' " And they remembered His words. Then they returned from the tomb and told all these things to the eleven and to all the rest. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the

other women with them, who told these things to the apostles. And their words seemed to them like idle tales, and they did not believe them. But Peter arose and ran to the tomb; and stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying by themselves; and he departed, marveling to himself at what had happened (Luke 24:1-12 NKJV).

The empty tomb supports the Christian belief in a bodily resurrection; had only His spirit left the tomb, His dead body would have remained behind. This would have spelled the end of Christianity, for had His corpse remained in the tomb, the hostile religious establishment would have made a public display of His mangled body for all to see so as to squelch His disciples' reports that their Master had risen.

The Passover of the Jews was near, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem. And within the temple grounds He found those who were selling oxen, sheep, and doves, and the money changers seated at their tables. And He made a whip of cords, and drove them all out of the temple area, with the sheep and the oxen; and He poured out the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables; and to those who were selling the doves He said, "Take these things away from here; stop making My Father's house a place of business!" His disciples remembered that it was written: "Zeal for Your house will consume me." The Jews then said to Him, "What sign do You show us as your authority for doing these things?" Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." The Jews then said, "It took forty-six years to build this temple, and yet You will raise it up in three days?" But He was speaking about the temple of His body. So when He was raised from the dead, His disciples remembered that He said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken (John 2:13-22 NASB).

After confronting the corrupt religious leaders for turning the sacred temple into a type of market specializing in sacrificial animals, Jesus established His authority by predicting His own bodily resurrection. He said, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." He was, of course, speaking about His body. Three days after His horrific death

on a cruel Roman cross, Jesus walked out of the tomb in His resurrected body. Because He lives, we shall live forever, too.

Now as they said these things, Jesus Himself stood in the midst of them, and said to them, "Peace to you." But they were terrified and frightened, and supposed they had seen a spirit. And He said to them, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His feet. But while they still did not believe for joy, and marveled, He said to them, "Have you any food here?" So they gave Him a piece of a broiled fish and some honeycomb. And He took it and ate in their presence (Luke 24:36-43 NKJV).

Watchtower founder Charles Taze Russell was not the first to deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus. On the contrary, it was the Lord's small band of followers who first doubted this foundational truth. Appearing before them, the frightened disciples believed they were seeing Jesus' spirit, but He corrected their erroneous thinking with, "Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts? Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself. Handle Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have." To solidify this truth, He ate fish and honeycomb in their presence.

Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves; and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Then Peter answered and said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, let us make here three tabernacles: one for You, one for Moses, and one for Elijah (Matthew 17:1-4 NKJV)."

Many Bible teachers believe the transfiguration of Jesus reveals the future glory of His resurrected followers. Here we see humanity perfected—shining like the sun and radiant with light. I strongly suspect this was how Adam and Eve appeared before the Fall.

Speaking personally, there is not much glory to my physical body. I have too many wrinkles and not enough hair. I am reasonably healthy for my age, but I do not shine like the sun. I have more of an overcast complexion.

But the day will come when we shall be like Him. The Apostle John wrote, “Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be. We know that when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is. And everyone who has this hope *set* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure (I John 3:2, 3 NASB).”

This is good news for you and me, for we will be raised in the likeness of our Savior. The Apostle Paul wrote, “So it is with the resurrection of the dead. The [human] body that is sown is perishable and mortal, it is raised imperishable and immortal (I Corinthians 15:42 AMP emphasis mine).” Imperishable and immortal means we will live in bodies that are impervious to illness, disease, aging, injury, accident, and death.

Our physical bodies, such as they are, are not equipped for the rigors of eternity, but when we are raised by God, our mortal bodies will be transformed into immortal bodies to which there can come no harm. Because Jesus conquered death and the grave, we, too, shall live forever with Him in glory.

I pray you now understand why the doctrine of our Lord’s bodily resurrection is a foundational truth that is not up for debate.

I am grateful for your question.

Question 125: Is it a sin for me to think I play video games better than my friend?

Answer: My young, nimble-fingered friend, whatever game you play, you are going to be better than me. I have never been a gamer.

Back in the bell-bottom days, when I was young like you, about the only gaming to be found was pinball. I liked playing pinball, but I was pretty lousy. I never had the right kind of motor skills to be a good player.

A few years later, the first computer-generated games were released. Remember Atari? I was pretty rotten at Atari. About this time, there were video arcades that offered all manner of games that fed on patrons' quarters. My girlfriend and I would play these now ancient arcade games and, alas, I was no better with these than I was with Atari and pinball. Chalk it up to clumsiness or a lack of hand-and-eye coordination. I couldn't win.

So, you must be pretty good, right? I suppose you are. And if you are better than your best friend or that cute red-haired girl in your English class, so be it.

And this leads us to the matter of pride. C.S. Lewis wrote, "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you." Humility is the virtue all Christians should cultivate.

Do you know about false modesty? People often confuse false modesty with genuine humility, but the two are not one in the same. False modesty is a pretty girl pretending that she is ugly. False modesty is a gifted musician who calls himself a hack. False modesty is a scholar who says she is stupid. False modesty is not a virtue. False modesty is the ugly cousin of pride.

God does not want us to lie about our gifts and talents, but neither does God want us bloated with self-conceit or strutting about in the likeness of a proud peacock. Are you a good gamer? It is okay to say so. Just avoid feeling superior to others.

Pride is the ugliest sin there is (Proverbs 6:16-19). As to the skills and talents we possess, we must remember these are gifts from God. Let us give Him credit for our abilities and accomplishments.

This is all that I have to say on the matter, my young friend. If you have another question, look me up again.

Question 126: What is meant by the name of Jesus is above all other names?

Answer: Before answering your excellent question, let us consult the passage you have referenced.

Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:9-11 ESV).

If we randomly approached people on the street with the question, "Who is Jesus?", here are some likely responses:

"Jesus was a good man."

"I think Jesus was a prophet."

"Jesus was a miracle worker. He had supernatural powers."

"Jesus was a great moral philosopher."

To be sure, these responses are true, but they are woefully limited. To say Jesus was a good man is tantamount to saying the Atlantic Ocean is wet or Alaska is cold in the winter. Let us not attempt to tag Him with such ridiculously inadequate understatements.

Jesus is eternal God, at One with God the Father and God the Holy Spirit, who has no beginning (John 1:1). Two thousand years ago, God the Son left the hallowed halls of Heaven, clothed Himself in human flesh, and, figuratively speaking, pitched His tent among us. He became fully human while remaining fully God.

When we refer to Jesus as the Son of God, we are not saying that He was, at one time, a baby God who grew up under the care of God the Father. This would be theological nonsense. Our Lord's Jewish audience well understood that His claim to be the Son of God meant He was of the same divine nature and essence of God the Father.

As Jesus told Thomas, when you have seen the Son, you have also seen the Father. If you want to know the heart of God, look no further than Jesus (John 14:9, 10).

Years ago, I saw a blasphemous movie called *Oh, God!* that starred George Burns and John Denver. George Burns played God. When asked if Jesus was the Son of God, the actor replied, "Yes, Jesus is my son just as Muhammad is my son and Confucius is my son." Friend, Jesus is not to be lumped together with Muhammad or Confucius or Mary Baker Eddy or Charles Taze Russell or Joseph Smith or anyone else.

Jesus is the One and Only. He is Creator. He sustains the universe. He overcame death and the grave. I do not think Muhammad or Joseph Smith could make such claims.

Indeed, the time will come when every knee will reverentially bow, and every tongue will openly confess that Jesus is Lord.

Say, are you a follower of Jesus? Have you trusted in Him as your Savior? We cannot be saved by our own good deeds and efforts (John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8, 9), for salvation is a free gift given to those who simply hold out their hands in faith to receive eternal life.

Muhammad will give you a long list of rules, Charles Taze Russell will give you magazines, and Joseph Smith will give you a fanciful book of myths, but Jesus gives life eternal to all who come to Him in faith.

Oh, that I could fully explain the magnificence of our Lord Jesus!

Question 127: People say I am judgmental. Deep down, I suppose they are right. What does the Bible say about being judgmental? How can I overcome this flaw in my character?

Answer: Yesterday, I decided to end my financial support of a particular ministry. It was recently discovered that the founder of this ministry, a man I greatly respected, was guilty of sexual sin. My decision was not based on a whispered rumor; the board of directors issued a statement admitting to their founder's indiscretions. I made a decision—a judgement call—to halt all future giving to this ministry. Sadly, the founder's teachings are now stained by his sexual misconduct.

Am I being judgmental?

We make judgements every day. The car we own, the food we eat, the clothes we wear, the church we attend, the candidates we support, and the thousands of other decisions we have made and will make are based on personal judgments.

I steadfastly refuse to vote for any candidate who supports abortion, for I have judged that the killing of the unborn is a grievous sin. I will have no part in promoting political candidates who have no regard for the innocent unborn. I suppose these candidates would consider me judgmental, and I am okay with this. As God loves all babies, born and unborn, I will stand with Him and not with Planned Parenthood.

Shall we define judgmental? One who is considered judgmental is seen as being overly critical in matters that are usually unimportant or inconsequential. A judgmental person might say,

“I wish the preacher would not wear that ugly striped tie!”

“Uncle Henry bought a two-seat sports car. I wish he would act his age!”

“My son is dating a horrid girl with tattoos up and down her arms! Ugh!”

“I wish couples would not hold hands in public! It is unbecoming!”

“I turned down a dinner invitation with Lori and Dan! They talk about nothing but their new baby boy!”

“You can raise your kids as you see fit, but no daughter of mine would leave the house with orange hair!”

“I heard that your son is taking classes at the community college. Isn’t he smart enough to enroll in a real college?”

“What? She named her daughter *Elisha*? I have never liked names that begin with E.”

This is what being judgmental sounds like.

This is not to say we are to remain quiet or roll over and play dead when facing matters that are important. Last week, while delivering a teaching, I spoke critically of certain contemporary praise and worship songs whose lyrics are unbiblical. During the same message, I also faulted politicians who are hostile toward Israel. Standing against sin is not being judgmental. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, prophets of God were told to proclaim warnings of divine judgment against people and nations guilty of sinful behavior. Indeed, even our Lord Jesus issued a stinging rebuke to a congregation of phony believers in Asia-Minor. Here is the Savior’s stern warning dictated to the Apostle John who was exiled on the Isle of Patmos:

“And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write,

‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: “I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, *that* the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the

door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches (Revelation 3:14-22 NKJV).'"

Our God judges sin and, as believers, we are to reject that which is evil, but lambasting a pastor because of his poor taste in neckties or looking down upon an older man who, at long last, can afford the kind of car he has long dreamed of owning is judgmental nonsense. We ought not behave in this manner.

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. You will note that nit-picking and whiny complaints are not included in the fruit basket.

Let me strongly suggest you read the Apostle Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth. Many of the believers in Corinth were silly, carnal, and immature, but Paul demonstrated a generous portion of love, patience, and grace in addressing their shortcomings. May you and I do likewise.

Question 128: What is meant by "the God of my understanding?" I heard this phrase used at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Answer: Alcoholics Anonymous and other secularly-minded Twelve Step advocates teach their adherents to invoke the "God of my understanding" for help in achieving an alcohol-free life. This phrase can be taken two ways. Some interpret the "God of my understanding" as meaning we are to approach God with whatever knowledge of Him we happen to possess at a given point in time. Obviously, an alcoholic who neither made a habit of attending church nor reading the Bible would, at best, possess only a rudimentary

understanding of the Person and Nature of God; hence, the alcoholic would approach God according to his or her own limited understanding. Such an example is found in Luke's account of the crucifixion:

Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise (Luke 23: 39-43 NKJV)."

By profession, he was a thief and not a trained theologian, but as the condemned man agonized on that roughly hewn cross, he appealed to Jesus with more faith than knowledge. We may reasonably conclude that the repentant thief reached out to the God of his understanding.

Sadly, the "God of my understanding" has been used by a host of recovery programs as a license for creating a so-called higher power or personal deity based upon the individual's tastes and desires. Such an approach is an affront to logic, for God is not who we happen to think He is; rather, He is who He knows Himself to be. I have known people who believe that Jesus is a conservative Republican; I have known others who insist the Jesus is a liberal Democrat. In truth, we cannot create a god of our liking; otherwise, each person would have his or her own personal deity and then we would be required to reject the Bible while embracing the tenants of polytheism. This is foolishness at its worst.

Insanity abounds in the field of addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention. As an example, one secularly-minded Twelve Step organization tells its followers that appointing a favorite actor as one's higher power is a viable alternative to the more traditional reliance upon our Creator God. In other words, alcoholics can turn, not to

Heaven, but to Hollywood for hope, restoration, and healing. This theological foolishness is tantamount to idolatry. Frankly, the overpaid egomaniacs who represent the majority of Hollywood are incapable of helping women and men enslaved by the bottle, the needle, the pipe, and the pill.

Based upon literature common among many recovery groups, Satan is qualified to be one's higher power. Indeed, he is powerful. He is more powerful than any of us. He is an astute observer of human nature. He is well-versed in matters of science, politics, art, history, and religion. Frankly, the devil has a rather impressive professional resume; he has acquired a vast amount of knowledge over time, but do we dare reach out to him as a "higher power" in our distress?

We often think of idolatry as a practice common among primitive or ancient peoples, but idolatry is just as prevalent in Manhattan as it is in some remote jungle island. Those who trust in wealth and position or political power are as much idolaters as those bowing to statues fashioned from wood or stone. Again, God is who He knows Himself to be. Our understanding of Him may or may not be accurate.

In the following passage, we shall meet two foolish idolaters. One makes an idol of metal while the other fashions an idol from the same log he used in baking his bread.

The blacksmith with the tongs works one (an idol) in the coals,
Fashions it with hammers,
And works it with the strength of his arms.
Even so, he is hungry, and his strength fails;
He drinks no water and is faint.
The craftsman stretches out *his* rule,
He marks one out with chalk;
He fashions it with a plane,
He marks it out with the compass,
And makes it like the figure of a man,

According to the beauty of a man, that it may remain in the house.
He cuts down cedars for himself,
And takes the cypress and the oak;
He secures *it* for himself among the trees of the forest.
He plants a pine, and the rain nourishes *it*.
Then it shall be for a man to burn,
For he will take some of it and warm himself;
Yes, he kindles *it* and bakes bread;
Indeed he makes a god and worships *it*;
He makes it a carved image, and falls down to it.
He burns half of it in the fire;
With this half he eats meat;
He roasts a roast, and is satisfied.
He even warms *himself* and says,
“Ah! I am warm,
I have seen the fire.”
And the rest of it he makes into a god,
His carved image.
He falls down before it and worships *it*,
Prays to it and says,
“Deliver me, for you *are* my god!”
They do not know nor understand;
For He has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see,
And their hearts, so that they cannot understand.
And no one considers in his heart,
Nor *is there* knowledge nor understanding to say,
“I have burned half of it in the fire,
Yes, I have also baked bread on its coals;
I have roasted meat and eaten *it*;
And shall I make the rest of it an abomination?
Shall I fall down before a block of wood?”

He feeds on ashes;
A deceived heart has turned him aside;
And he cannot deliver his soul,
Nor say, "*Is there not a lie in my right hand (Isaiah 44: 12-20 NKJV)?*"

The metal idol was the god of the blacksmith's understanding; the wooden idol was the god of the carpenter's understanding. Again, according to many recovery groups, the idol of metal and the idol of wood are legitimate expressions of faith. This may be in keeping with today's climate of opinion, but worshipping gods of brass and wood is simply foolish. The god of the blacksmith's understanding was nothing but a chunk of tin. The god of the carpenter's understanding was a mere block of cedar. Images made of metal and wood might serve as bookends or paperweights, but beyond that, they are worthless. Teachers and counselors who foolishly advocate faith in a god of one's own making are void of logic and reason.

Let us momentarily return our attention to the repentant thief. We may take comfort knowing that God, in His compassion, did not turn a deaf ear to this dying man on account of his theological ignorance. Indeed, God is as merciful today as He was two thousand years ago. He continues to meet lost women and men right where they are, but He will not leave them wallowing in their ignorance. After conversion comes spiritual growth; with spiritual growth comes understanding. With understanding comes maturity. Ignorance is not bliss. Let us have nothing to do with this "God of my understanding" nonsense.

Question 129: What happens when I repent of my sins and then commit the same sins over and over again. When I repent, I feel guilty and I want to do better, but then I fall back into my old ways. My problem is with pornography. When I yield to these old temptations, does this mean I was insincere when I earlier repented?

Answer: In a few months, I will celebrate twenty years of freedom from tobacco. Like a lot of smokers, I began smoking in my teen years. Growing up in a tobacco producing state, cigarette smoking was commonplace and socially acceptable. During my college days, I recall classrooms with ashtrays. I also remember when smoking was allowed on flights.

I cannot recall how many times I “quit” before I truly quit. Once, I relapsed after a year of strict abstinence. On another occasion, I went back to smoking after abstaining from tobacco for over three years. At last, with God’s help and a supply of Nicorette Gum, I broke the chains and fetters of addiction and now my lungs are healthy and strong. For my age, I enjoy good health. Had I continued smoking, I would probably be tethered to an oxygen tank and suffer from heart disease. Freedom from addiction has its rewards.

We need not waste words discussing the sincerity or genuineness of your past repents. You are addicted to pornography and it is time to take firm and decisive action.

I do not want readers to think I am stuck on a treadmill, but I find myself once again recommending Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered program, that helps people with habits, hurts, and hang-ups. Many people associate Celebrate Recovery with alcoholism and substance abuse, but you will also find weekly group meeting attendees who are seeking help with non-chemical addictions. Pornography is a rampant problem among men, and it is here that you will find biblically-based hope, encouragement, and useful tools for combatting this hard-fisted addiction.

An online search should reveal a Celebrate Recovery meeting location in your area.

With God’s help, you can be free from the grip of pornography. God does not want you held prisoner by those who profit financially from this gigantic web of dehumanizing exploitation that reeks of smoke and brimstone—Jesus died so that you can live free.

Question 130: As I read the thrilling accounts in the New Testament, I am amazed by the radical transformations in the lives of the first Christian converts, but today's church members seem to lack the zeal and power common among the early believers. What has happened? I want to live a life of holiness, but most of those around me are content in their lukewarmness. Where have we gone wrong? What is the cure?

Answer: Shortly after my conversion in May 1989, I began attending an evangelical church within walking distance of my home. Though not quite a megachurch, the growing congregation was predominantly young, suburban, prosperous, and upwardly mobile. By chance, I overheard a thirtyish couple discussing the Second Coming of the Lord Jesus. The husband said, "I hope Jesus does not come back until our kids have graduated from college and settled into their careers." I could scarcely believe my ears. This affluent young couple was convinced that Jesus' return would spoil their grand plans and ambitions. Yes, His return would put an end to their children's pursuit of the American Dream.

This couple had already made their Heaven on earth—and their idea of Heaven on earth kept Jesus safe in His heaven and not bungling matters on their earth.

The majority of Americans identify themselves as Christian, yet this nation elects politicians who support abortion, secularly-minded public schools, same-sex marriage, identity politics, and a host of social ills that come with so-called political correctness. Yes, the majority of Americans see themselves as women and men of faith, but for many of these people, their half-hearted convictions are left at home when they cast their votes. A young man once told me that anyone who attended church more than twice a year, I will assume he was speaking of Christmas and Easter, was a religious fanatic. It is okay to believe, but do not believe *too much*.

The American church is, by and large, anemic, drowsy, biblically illiterate, content with the status quo, and woefully impotent. Once, the Apostle Peter said, "Silver and gold I

do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk (Acts 3:6 NKJV)." Today, we have silver and gold, but our pews are filled with sickly little congregants who, if it were not for our Lord's hedge of protection, would become devil fodder. Where is the zeal? Where is the evidence of real transformation? We are a people hallmarked by indifference.

The pulpit has become a place where solid Bible teachings have given way to pop psychology. Meaningful hymns have been replaced with cutesy, catchy, simplistic, and often theologically nonsensical praise and worship ditties composed by uninspired hacks who employ maybe a dozen repetitious words and three chords. By and large, the people exiting the churches are no different than they were coming in. Where is the growth? Where is the renewal? Where is the power? Come to think of it, what have they done to the Lord Jesus? Instead of proclaiming Him as their Lord and Savior, they say He is a superstar. How the Spirit of God must grieve by our lack of reverence!

With all this said, people like me and, perhaps you, run the risk of feeling superior to our carnally-minded brothers and sisters in Christ. I have spent a good many words pointing an accusing finger at the church, but the church does not belong to me. The church belongs to Jesus and He will deal with His people as He determines. My job is to be obedient and to do the tasks assigned to me. Feeling smug and superior is not in my job description. Arrogance is not among the fruit of the Spirit.

The church in Corinth was very much like today's American church—carnal, ignorant, petty, and steeped in sin, yet the Apostle Paul called the Corinthian believers his brothers and sisters in Christ (I Corinthians 1:11). Instead of throwing rocks at the church, let us love our fellow believers despite their spiritual shortcomings, for we, too, are not without our faults, foibles, and follies. We must not endorse or encourage godlessness in the church, but let us vow to demonstrate love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. May we avoid behaving like the smug Pharisee who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector (Luke 18:11 ESV)."

The state of the American church is a rather thorny issue that is much too complex for me to tackle, but by yielding myself to the leading of the Holy Spirit while not spending an inordinate amount of time fretting over the shortcomings of others, I can be a blessing of salt and light rather than a curse of bitterness and cynicism. If you have other ideas on this matter, write me with your thoughts.

The most eloquent prayer is the prayer through hands that heal and bless. The highest form of worship is the worship of unselfish Christian service. The greatest form of praise is the sound of consecrated feet seeking out the lost and helpless.
-- Billy Graham

Question 131: Please help me. I once asked Jesus to save me, but I do not believe I am saved. Because of my work schedule and my finances, I have been unable to attend church and tithe. Could this be what is standing in the way of my salvation?

Answer: Jesus said, “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out (John 6:37 ESV).” In two thousand years, the Lord Jesus has never turned anyone away. Let us not gloss over this most remarkable fact—millions and millions and even more millions of lost sinners of every age, race, and nationality have called out to Jesus for salvation and, in a span of two millennia, He has yet to refuse so much as a single person. Jesus has a perfect, unparalleled, 100% success rate. No sinner is too insignificant or too lost or too far gone or too vile for Him to save.

Gracious? He most certainly is. Forgiving? Jesus does not hold grudges. Caring? I have it on good authority that He loves you more than you will ever know.

What is the problem? You do not feel saved? When do feelings have anything to do with salvation? Forget feelings—let us focus on the facts. Anyone who reaches out to Jesus for salvation receives forgiveness. There are no ifs, ands, or buts. There are no sneaky

little howsoever. There is no fine print. God the Father gave you to His Son. The Holy Spirit convicted you of your sin. As a result of this divine prompting, you asked Jesus to save you, right? Surely, you do not think you are the first person in two thousand years to be turned away by Jesus.

I am reminded of a story about a dear Christian woman who was telling her son, who was home from university, about her salvation through Jesus Christ. Feeling worldly and superior because of his education, he interrupted his mother saying, "In this vast universe, do you think your little soul matters much to God?" Undaunted by her boy's cynicism, the wise mother replied, "I will admit that my soul may not amount to much, but if Jesus breaks His promise by refusing to save me, think how this will damage His reputation. Jesus stands to lose more than me."

The Bible does not lie. God does not break promises. At one time, you placed your faith in Jesus as Savior. You sought forgiveness for your sins. You looked to Him for eternal life. Is this so? Based upon the clear teachings of Scripture, you are saved regardless of your uneasy emotional state. Remember, salvation is a fact based upon an unbreakable promise, not a feeling.

Church attendance is important, but church attendance will not save you. If your schedule keeps you out of church Sunday mornings, look for Bible-believing churches that offer Saturday evening or mid-week services. Giving is important, too, but no one is saved by stuffing large bills in collection boxes. Jesus is mighty to save, and your salvation rests with Him and not on you.

Stop with the worry and rejoice knowing that you are now adopted into God's family. God loves His sons and daughters. He loves you. Not only does He love you, but our Heavenly Father also wants you to live a life of meaning and purpose. He wants you to grow and flourish. This is a fact, and this rock-solid, undeniable fact should ease your troubled spirit.

Before I go, allow me to make a few suggestions. Spend some time reading the Gospel of Luke. As you read, take time to meditate on our Lord Jesus' gracious teachings. I will suggest you keep notes while you study. As you search out a Bible-believing church, there are excellent teachings on YouTube. Dr. Charles Stanley is as fine a Bible teacher as I know, and his gentle, patient approach to the scriptures would do you much good. And, by all means, go to God in prayer. Tell Him of your uneasiness. Let Him soothe your rankled emotions. As a child of God, you are not to grovel about as a dirty-faced beggar. He has much better in store for you. Believe this.

Question 132: Any academic and career recommendations for a young Christian preparing to enter college?

Answer: I have looked into a mirror and wished I had more hair.

I have sat alone and wished I had more friends.

I have checked my wallet and wished I had more money.

I have lost my temper and wished I had more patience.

But what I really want is my spent youth.

As a young man, I spent my days in trivial pursuits. In truth, I had more opportunities than many young people my age, but rather than making the most with all that I had been given, I wasted these once-in-a-lifetime opportunities on meaningless ventures that were simply heaps of nothingness.

Rather than pursuing God's will as a young man, I chased after trinkets and baubles. As I survey those early years, that fleeting season brimming with hope and possibilities, I am filled with shame and regret as I ponder all that which I might have accomplished.

It is not my place to tell you where to attend school or what course of study you should follow. This is a matter between God and you, but I can tell you this: Dedicate your life to the service of Jesus Christ. Serve Him faithfully and diligently and, when you are my age, you will not look back at your youth with regret.

Life is not about amassing money. Life is not about the pursuit of pleasure. Life is not about making a name or reputation. The only life that truly counts is the life spent following God's will.

Knowing that he would soon be put to death by order of Caesar Nero, the Apostle Paul, held captive in a cold dank dungeon within the bowels of the Mamertine Prison, wrote, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing (II Timothy 4:7, 8 KJV)."

Live your life in such a manner that, if you knew you would soon be taking your final breath, you could smile and say, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."

I have told you the truth.

Question 133: I have been approached about a transfer to a different department within the firm where I am employed. I like working with my current team, but a transfer to a different department would mean more money and greater mobility. I believe I am capable of handling this new assignment, but how can I know if this is the right move?

Answer: On two occasions, I have heard prominent Bible teachers say, "If you are engaged in a dead end job and unhappy in your work, remember, God has placed you

there for a reason." Is that so, Pastor? Then why did you give up your parttime job cleaning grease traps at the fast food restaurant to attend seminary?

If you have an opportunity to expand yourself career-wise, then it may well be that God is opening a new door that will provide you with more money and more satisfaction and more influence—an opportunity to grow and make better use of those God-given skills and talents. By earning a bigger paycheck, you can increase your financial support of God's work. By engaging in more fulfilling work, you will have all the more reason to praise God for his goodness. And only God knows what new opportunities await you in this new position.

I generally offer Bible verses to support my answers to readers, but rather than suggesting a verse or two, let me support my response with the entire Book of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs promotes hard work, ambition, and the proper handling of money. The Book of Proverbs also has some rather testy remarks toward those who are lazy. From the tone of your letter, you do not sound like a sluggard to me. Good!

In the pursuit of our needs, wants, goals, desires, and ambitions, Jesus said we are to ask, seek, and knock. Ask God if this opportunity is right for you. Seek out the possibilities. Knock on the employer's door and make a case for yourself.

Never behave in the manner of the worthless servant who buried his Master's wealth in a handkerchief:

(Jesus said,) "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them. And he who had

received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me five talents; here, I have made five talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, 'Master, you delivered to me two talents; here, I have made two talents more.' His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.' He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no seed, so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.' But his master answered him, 'You wicked and slothful servant! You knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:14-30 ESV).'

Now, let us see if you are ready for God to open a new door of opportunity! How exciting!

Question 134: I thought I was saved by the blood of Jesus Christ because I accepted Him as my Savior, but my pastor recently preached from Galatians 5:21 and this passage warns that I will not go to heaven because I am a drunk. Try as I might, I cannot stop drinking. I am one of those unfortunate people who has no control over alcohol. Since this wretched alcoholism is not my fault, how can Galatians 5:21 be true? So, what if I cannot control my drinking—won't the blood of Jesus Christ cover this sin, too? I am both discouraged and disgusted by YouTube videos of Bible teachers who argue that as I have not changed my fleshly ways, I was never saved in the beginning. I am tired of being

judged by these know-it-all Christian pastors and, furthermore, I think the Apostle Paul was wrong.

Answer: Before I respond, let us look at the passage from Galatians as well as another truth penned by the Apostle Paul:

Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told *you* in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God (Galatians 5:19-21 NKJV).

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13 NKJV).

Who I am is not particularly important, but maybe my background is worth mentioning; I spent four years teaching addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention at a men's prison and nine years working with female addicts at a large urban homeless shelter. Friend, I have met hardcore alcoholics and addicts in my day.

When God called me to ministry, He did not appoint me as Heaven's gatekeeper. God never intended me to say, "Madam, I have deemed you worthy of heaven. Please report to Pearly Gate 3," or, "Oops! Sorry! Looks like another son of perdition. Sir, please join the other damned souls lining up to your left."

But I would like to ask you why you are still drinking?

Please do not tell me that you cannot break the habit, because we who have been born-again can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens us. This is what Paul told the saints living in Philippi and I am inclined to believe Paul and, indeed, every writer who contributed to the Canon of Scripture.

If you say you are incapable of sobriety, you are saying Paul is a liar and I do not think you want to bring such a railing charge against the New Testament's most prolific contributor.

If you belong to Jesus, you have the Holy Spirit living in you. And if you have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, you can stop drinking. It may not be easy, but you can achieve sobriety through Christ Jesus who strengthens you.

I will say this plainly: If you are a born-again believer and are incapable of living a sober life, then Paul misspoke and the Bible is wrong and if Christ Jesus cannot strengthen you against the temptation of the bottle, then what good is Christianity?

If God cannot save a saint from the grip of alcohol, then maybe God cannot save any of us from the grip of Satan.

As I see it, there are two options: You are incapable of sobriety and the Bible is wrong, or you have not put forth the effort and, as such, have hampered God from delivering you from the grip of alcoholism.

In my career, I never met anyone who, by the power of God, could not break free from the shackles of alcoholism.

If you are truly the exception to the "I can do all things through Christ Jesus" mantra, then what good is Christianity?

Do you know what I think? I think you can quit and live a sober life. By relying on the strength of Jesus Christ, you can stop drinking.

Stop saying you cannot live a sober life. This is a lie that smells of smoke and brimstone. Because many Alcoholics Anonymous' teachings are contrary to sound biblical truths, I will recommend you join Celebrate Recovery, a Christ-centered addiction, recovery, and

relapse prevention ministry. Find a Celebrate Recovery group in your area and begin attending their meetings without delay.

Take God at His word. All things are possible for born-again believers. Do you believe God knows what He is talking about? I am certain that you do, so take Him at His word and get serious about sobriety.

Millions of recovering alcoholics are rooting for you and you will find sobriety has its rewards.

Read whatever chapter of scripture you will, and be ever so delighted with it - yet it will leave you as poor, as empty and unchanged as it found you unless it has turned you wholly and solely to the Spirit of God, and brought you into full union with and dependence upon God.

-- William Law

Question 135: Please identify Sheba, Dedan, and the merchants of Tarshish spoken of in Ezekiel 38:13.

Answer: Let us look at this Old Testament passage.

'This is what the Lord God says: "It will come about on that day, that thoughts will come into your mind and you will devise an evil plan, and you will say, 'I will go up against the land of unwalled villages. I will go against those who are at rest, who live securely, all of them living without walls and having no bars or gates, to capture spoils and to seize plunder, to turn your hand against the ruins that are *now* inhabited, and against the people who are gathered from the nations, who have acquired livestock and goods, who live at the center of the world.' Sheba and Dedan and the merchants of Tarshish with all its villages will say to you, 'Have you come to capture spoils? Have you

assembled your contingent to seize plunder, to carry away silver and gold, to take away livestock and goods, to capture great spoils (Ezekiel 38:10-13 NASB)?””

Though I have a keen interest in biblical prophecy, I will make no claim as to being an expert. I believe the events in Ezekiel 38 occur before, not after, Christ’s Millennial Reign and that the attack against Israel will be initiated by Russia. Sheba and Dedan may be the Arabians and Edomites, both sworn enemies of Israel, while the merchants mentioned in this passage refer to greedy mercenaries looking to cash in on the spoils of war. Thankfully, God’s protection will preserve Israel from destruction.

I am dismayed by the legion of godless pop culture icons, educators, and political leaders who treat Israel with contempt. As our nation pulls its support from Israel, I fear God will punish America. Believe me, anti-Semitism is alive and growing in the U.S. and this spreading hostility toward Israel is readily embraced by the truth-hating, logic-bashing, brainwashed, mindless, wild-eyed politically correct mob.

Question 136: I am twenty-five and I am pretty certain that I have committed the unpardonable sin. I have blasphemous thoughts that just pop into my head. If there is no hope for me and I cannot be saved and am doomed to Hell, why do I still desire God?

Answer: I have some good news for you, friend. You have not committed the unpardonable sin and unless you have discovered the secret of time travel, it would be *impossible* for you to have committed the unpardonable sin.

Then one was brought to Him who was demon-possessed, blind and mute; and He (Jesus) healed him, so that the blind and mute man both spoke and saw. And all the multitudes were amazed and said, “Could this be the Son of David?” Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, “This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.”

But Jesus knew their thoughts, and said to them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation, and every city or house divided against itself will not stand. If Satan casts out Satan, he is divided against himself. How then will his kingdom stand? And if I cast out demons by Beelzebub, by whom do your sons cast them out? Therefore they shall be your judges. But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, surely the kingdom of God has come upon you. Or how can one enter a strong man’s house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man? And then he will plunder his house. He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters abroad.

“Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come (Matthew 12:22-32 NKJV).

In order for you to have committed the unpardonable sin, you would have had to travel back about two thousand years to make a face to face accusation against our Lord Jesus. Have you seen our Savior in the flesh performing miracles? As you stood in His presence, did you accuse Jesus of healing the sick and diseased and the demonically-possessed by the power of Satan? Unless you are able to cross two millennia with the greatest of ease, you have not committed the unpardonable sin.

As a youth, I, too, worried that I had committed the unpardonable sin. I vividly recall climbing out of my warm bed late one night pacing the floor thinking that I was destined to everlasting torment. Why I did not seek an answer from our pastor, I could not say, but I am glad you have reached out with your concerns.

Is it possible for demons to “whisper” evil thoughts or induce all manner of fear into the minds of believers? I am inclined to think so. When such a thought pops into your mind, say, “This thought is not of God and I reject it.”

Martin Luther said thoughts are like birds, we cannot stop birds from flying over our heads, but we need not permit these birds to build nests in our hair.

Are you troubled? Read the final two chapters in Revelation. You will discover that Satan is ultimately defeated and that we will live forever with the One who loves us most.

Friend, are you a member of a Bible-believing church? If not, you should be. Surround yourself with mature, loving believers who will lift you up and strengthen you. Begin a routine Bible study. Set aside time for prayer. Let God remove these fears so that you can love Him and serve Him with joy and gladness.

God is not angry with you, but if you act upon the godly advice I have offered, the devil will be mad at both of us. Good! Let us tick off the old blighter!

Question 137: My family has been plagued by cancer and automobile accidents. Our bills are piling up and I am unemployed. I find keeping a job difficult. I have other problems, too, but I suppose this is enough for now. I could use prayer and godly advice.

Answer: I am grateful for the opportunity of addressing your inquiry.

As I do not know you beyond the scant information you provided, it is not possible for me to give you a definitive answer. Your physical health, education, past experience, attitude, and your available job skills--all of which I know nothing about--will be factors in finding suitable work. But this is not to say that I am without answers or suggestions. I believe I can offer you some constructive, realistic advice.

Regardless of the economy and jobless rate, finding work is still something of a numbers game--the more applications you file, the greater likelihood of finding a job that meets your needs.

If you are not healthy enough to work a forty hour week, maybe a part time job would help. Many retailers are glad to have employees willing to work twenty-five hour work weeks, so if you cannot physically work full time, consider part time hours.

When you meet a prospective employer, look professional. My daughter, who fills job openings in her district, tells me of applicants who arrive in sloppy clothes or inappropriate attire. I have also heard of slothful applicants who arrive late and are ill-prepared for their interviews.

Many years ago, I lost my job as a bank loan officer. My brother, who, at the time, was a general contractor, hired me to paint houses. I knew nothing about painting houses, but by the end of the week, I found myself enjoying the work and my paint brush and I kept the creditors at bay.

Some hobbies can evolve into income opportunities. I have a boyhood friend who made a living as a pianist and organist. Do you have a hobby or interest that also has some commercial opportunities?

Jesus said we are to "ask, seek, and knock." Ask the Lord for guidance and wisdom. Seek opportunities. Knock on doors. There is an old saying: He who chops his own firewood is twice warmed. There is reward in effort. Looking for work requires effort, but when payday comes, you will have no regrets.

But are you ready? Maybe some corrective measures are in order:

Who can understand *his* errors?

Cleanse me from secret faults (Psalm 19:12 NKJV).

What secret faults may be holding you back? Maybe it is time to take a close self-examination or, as some might say, a personal inventory. Are there behavior quirks that

may be blocking your success? Ask God to reveal shortcomings in your personality that employers may find unbecoming and then go to work making needed improvements.

Okay, I have given you a starting point. If you are “unemployable,” now is the time to reinvent yourself.

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you seek divinely appointed opportunities.

Question 138: From God's perspective, what is the difference between a man or woman who enjoys an occasional alcoholic beverage and a drunkard?

Answer: What a question! You realize, of course, that no matter how I answer your inquiry, half of the church is going to disagree with me. But that is okay, for I deal in truth and not in public opinion.

First, some background. I have worked in the area of addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention for years. I spent eight years serving in a homeless shelter and four years teaching in a men's prison. I will go to my grave writing and teaching on this topic.

I attend a church that opposes any form of alcohol consumption. I like my church and I respect my pastor, but, frankly, I disagree. According to my understanding of the Bible, measured, responsible, moderate consumption of alcohol is permissible. Indeed, Jesus' first miracle was turning water into wine--and I am unconvinced this was simply grape juice.

Half of my favorite Bible teachers are unopposed to moderate alcohol consumption and the other half are fervently against any consumption of alcohol whatsoever. I am certain you, too, have noticed how divisive of a topic this is.

Most people who identify themselves as social drinkers will stop at one or two drinks. A binge drinker is one who, on occasion, drinks excessively and irresponsibly. On the other hand, a true alcoholic is one who is *addicted* to alcohol.

A true alcoholic will drink until the bottle is dry or until he or she passes out. In other words, a true alcoholic has no brakes.

For the alcoholic, it is said that one drink is too many and that a thousand drinks are never enough. And this is certainly true, for unlike the average social drinker, an alcoholic cannot stop at one drink. With each drink, the desire for the next drink intensifies. Rather than satisfying the physical craving for alcohol, drinking only increases the desire for alcohol. Having a drink in order to quench the craving for alcohol is tantamount to using gasoline to extinguish a raging fire. Again, an alcoholic will drink until he or she passes out or until there is nothing left to drink. Alcoholics may tell themselves that they can stop after one or two drinks, but they are only deceiving themselves. Once he or she takes that first drink, the bottle has won the battle.

No cocktail can make a problem go away. No drink can cure loneliness, anger, resentment, disappointment, or depression. Alcohol only masks the hurt. Once the chemical-induced high begins to fade, the negative feelings return. As a balm, alcohol and drugs offer only short term relief with long term and often fatal side effects. As the alcoholic's body builds a tolerance to drink, more alcohol is required to satisfy the cravings. Increased consumption equals increased health risks; as the alcoholic or the substance abuser's addiction worsens, so do their problems. To their dismay, the so-called cure they had hoped would drive away their problems only made their problems worse—and more numerable.

In the strictest sense, the alcoholic is powerless over alcohol. And when the bottle is calling the shots, chaos is the expected result. A chaotic life is a life that is no longer manageable. What does such a life look like? One alcoholic described her unmanaged life as follows:

- I couldn't manage to feed my child
- I couldn't manage to get to work on time
- I couldn't manage to deal with my emotions
- I couldn't manage to get out of bed
- I couldn't manage my rage and anger
- I couldn't manage my relationships
- I couldn't manage to say no
- I couldn't manage to think about others

These symptoms are obviously not true for the casual drinker. In my work, I have known legions of alcoholics and I have known legions of responsible, reasonable, casual drinkers. And, so, in the end, I find no prohibition against a measured use of alcohol in the Bible. For those who disagree, that is okay.

Question 139: I suffer from apeirophobia, that is, a fear of infinity. The thought of life everlasting, a promise that is dear to most Christians, frightens me. I do not want to live forever. I can think about eternity for a moment or two and panic attacks follow. How can I get over my fear of a never-ending existence?

Answer: Today is my amazing daughter's birthday. A few days ago, I dropped a birthday card in the mail. Early this morning, I transferred some "birthday cash" into her bank account. Over morning coffee, we chatted by phone as I joyously relived the events surrounding her birth. Before we ended our telephone conversation, I made a gallant attempt at expressing the magnitude of my love for her. Even on my worse day, I would cheerfully take a bullet for that girl. She is my daughter and I love her more than life itself.

Now that you have heard from me, I would like for you to hear the words of our Lord Jesus.

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:7-12 NKJV).

If I, being a vile creature with a sin nature, can give good gifts to my daughter, think of the love and good gifts our Heavenly Father bestows and will continue bestowing upon us.

You have no reason to fear life everlasting with the One who loves you most.

This is purely conjecture on my part, but I do not see our eternal state as a never-ending succession of days. At present, you and I experience time in a linear manner. We live moment by moment, hour by hour, day by day, week by week, month by month, and year by year, but as God exists outside of time, I believe we, too, will step out of time into an everlasting state of being that is not measurable. In our glorified state, I believe all time will be before us just as the past, present, and future are seen by God. If I am right, and, by the way, I heard this theory from C.S. Lewis, surely one of Christianity's greatest thinkers, your fear of an infinite number of days or years or seasons or whatever measurements comes to mind is wholly ungrounded. Physicists understand that time itself is not eternal, therefore, time as we know it will come to an end and, as I said, we will enter into a glorious, everlasting, joyous state of timelessness. Time is measured by change and once we have achieved sinless perfection, there will be no more change—simply unalterable perfection accompanied by immeasurable joy. Would you want to miss this? Surely not!

I am heading into the homestretch of this earthly life and, my young friend, the best is yet to come. I will see you in Paradise.

God never made a promise that was too good to be true.
--Dwight L. Moody

Question 140: How can I be forgiven? And how can I make the guilty feelings I have go away?

Answer: I will let you in on a secret—I love receiving questions from young people. Admittedly, I have a lot of years behind me, but I feel young on the inside even if I look old on the outside.

If there was a time when you trusted in Jesus as your Savior, you were immediately adopted into God's family and nothing or no one can ever remove you from Him (Philippians 1:6). Your sins were taken away and your eternal future was made secure. And if you have not yet trusted in Jesus as your Savior, then you and I can attend to this right now.

There is no magic formula or mysterious ritual to salvation. Realizing we are incapable of saving ourselves, we turn away from our sinful past and place our trust in Jesus to save us. And He does. Let us go back about two thousand years. The Apostle Paul and his friend Silas are locked away in a jail located in the city of Philippi. Read what happens next:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, "Do not harm yourself, for we

are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God (Acts 16:25-34 ESV).

The Philippian jailer heard the testimony of Paul and Silas, believed their Gospel message, and was immediately saved.

Again, if there was a time when you placed your hope in the Lord Jesus Christ, you became a daughter of God. But what if you have never accepted the Lord Jesus’ forgiveness? You can do so right now.

First of all, you and I cannot earn God’s love. We can never be good enough to deserve His gift of eternal life. But why worry about trying to earn God’s favor when the desire of His heart is to give us eternal life? A gift cannot be bought or earned. We are saved by grace and not by keeping rules or performing rituals—salvation is a free gift that is never deserved (Ephesians 2:8, 9). God has done the hard part—all that you and I do is simply hold out our hands and receive His free gift. And, again, once you have placed your trust in Jesus as Savior, you become His daughter. As He is King, this would make you His princess and a princess should never grovel about like a beggar.

When we turn to Jesus, we turn away from our former life of sin. This renouncing of our former ways is called repentance.

So, realizing you cannot save yourself, will you trust Him to be your rescuer? If you said yes, you belong to Him and you are as much a Christian as Mother Theresa or even the Apostle Paul.

I have a daughter who is a bit older than you. Do you know why I love my daughter? I love her because she *is* my daughter. She has no need to earn my love or to deserve my love—I love her simply because she is my daughter and that is reason enough. And God loves you because you are His beloved daughter.

Some religions teach that you must earn God's love by performing good deeds, but as a believer in Jesus Christ, He loves you because you belong to Him.

Now, as a young person, I will strongly suggest you go to Him and ask Him to reveal His plans for your life. Perhaps you are unaware, but God has plans just for you—a blueprint for your life that will lead to hope and an amazing future. Rather than trudging along not knowing where you are headed, God will lead you on a pathway that will guarantee a life of meaning and fulfillment (Jeremiah 29:11). How can you know God's will for your life? Listen closely to Him and, at the right time, He will reveal His plans to you.

You asked me about these feelings of guilt that have been troubling you. I have some thoughts about guilt that I wish to share with you. Guilt comes when we realize we have acted wrongly. In this sense, guilt is good, for this dose of guilt helps us to understand our bad behavior. You might even say guilt helps us to see ourselves and our actions with an uncomfortable amount of clarity, but once we realize we have sinned, we admit to our mistakes and then rejoice knowing that God has already forgiven us. When we are saved, all of our sins, past, present, and future, are immediately forgiven. The sins you and I will commit next week, next month, and next year have already been forgiven.

Do not languish in your guilt. Do not wallow about in your sorrow. A spoonful of guilt is like a medicine that gives us clarity and understanding, but no one fills their bathtub with medicine. Too much guilt leads to depression and despair, and God does not want you moping about with a burdened heart.

As I see the situation, answering your inquiry may be the most important activity of my day. Why? Because you are young, and God obviously has big, big plans for your life. With this said, if any part of my answer confuses you, please write again. You are important and your life matters.

Question 141: I know that the Apostle Paul was guilty of murdering Christians before he became a believer, but was his suffering as an apostle a form of punishment for his past deeds?

Answer: Prior to his conversion, the Apostle Paul was a fiery religious zealot not unlike the modern day terrorists who force conversions and subdue opponents with hand grenades and assault rifles. As to his former crimes, Paul referred to himself as the chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). Charles Haddon Spurgeon wrote, “It is possible that he literally exceeded every other sinner, dared more, and sunk deeper in crime than any of his fellows among the sons of men.” As to Paul’s suffering, the Lord Jesus told a saint named Ananias that Paul was a chosen instrument called to suffer for His name’s sake (Acts 9). The Lord Jesus did not speak of this as punishment; on the contrary, I gather that our Savior considers persecution to be a badge of honor.

It is true that Paul’s hands were stained by the blood of innocent Christians, but it is equally true that Paul may have suffered more for Jesus than any other believer since the founding of the church. Defending his apostleship against glib-tongued heretics bent on misleading the saints in Corinth, Paul wrote:

But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I am speaking in foolishness—I too am bold. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?—I am speaking as if insane—I more so; in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a

night and a day I have spent adrift at sea. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern (II Corinthians 11:21b-29 NASB)?

In the end, Paul was led out of the notorious Mamertine Prison in Rome and, by order of Caesar Nero, he was beheaded. My worst day would be comparable to one of Paul's better days.

Today's glitzy televangelists who tool about in limos and private jets live sumptuously, but Paul lived for Jesus Christ. Every gruesome scar on his body was a testimony of his faithfulness.

But was some of this suffering brought on by Paul's past sins? No. When our Lord Jesus was nailed to that cruel Roman cross, He bore our punishment.

But He (Jesus) was pierced for our offenses,
He was crushed for our wrongdoings;
The punishment for our well-being was *laid* upon Him,
And by His wounds we are healed (Isaiah 53:5 NASB).

Jesus has already bore our punishment and God will not punish the same sin twice.

It is true that God will correct His saints, but divine discipline is not to be compared with God's wrath (Revelation 3:19).

There are, of course, expected consequences that follow our decisions and modes of behavior. I know many men in prison who now belong to Jesus Christ. Jesus has forgiven their sins, but the state is not quite so charitable. These men, whose terrible sins have been washed away by the Blood of Jesus, will be required to satisfy the penalties handed down by earthly judges.

As Paul languished in a dank prison cell, might he have remembered the frightened faces of those whom he had once terrorized? I could not say with certainty. From time to time, I will recall some cruel act or injurious words that I inflicted on others and these recollections cause me to recoil in horror. Yes, Jesus has forgiven me of these vile sins, but how many still bear the mental scars and hurtful memories that are the regrettable byproducts of my unguarded temper and untamed tongue? I need a Savior who can rescue me from the wrath to come, for my good deeds cannot undo my filthy sins (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Thankfully, Jesus has satisfied my sin debt and I stand forgiven.

I will let you in on a little secret—this is the kind of question I most enjoy answering. I hope my response pleases you as much as I enjoyed formulating the reply.

Question 142: How would you describe a gullible Christian?

Answer: What an interesting question!

A gullible individual is one who is inclined to believe almost anything without taking the time to ask

- Is this probable?
- Is this reasonable?
- Is this logical?
- Is this verifiable?
- Is this true?

I formerly taught prison inmates to think critically, that is, to think about their thinking for the purpose of improving their thinking. Better thinking leads to better decision-making and better decision-making leads to better outcomes. Better outcomes lead to a happier, more fulfilled life. Logic and reason with an insatiable hunger for the truth are the critical thinker's best friends. Gullibility is the opposite of critical thinking and, at the risk of sounding like a cynical old man (which I do not think I am), I believe gullible-minded persons greatly outnumber true critical thinkers.

In this touchy-feely age of political correctness, truth is being forced aside for some misguided sense of "let's not offend people with the facts" syndrome which, I assure you, is turning a generation's collective thinking into something akin to a sweet, ooey-gooey marshmallow. As a predictable result, truth has become the new "hate speech" and facts that contradict whatever climate of opinion is in vogue are conveniently swept under the rug.

As God has given us the Bible, there should be no gullible Christians; I am sorry to say, however, that gullibility is rampant in the faith. The Bible is infallible, that is, without error—the Bible is our source of absolute truth, but as most Christians are biblically illiterate, there are legions of brothers and sisters in Christ who believe all manner of nonsense.

Without naming names, not that I object to naming names, we have a deplorable army of televangelists who are growing fat and sassy from the sacrificial giving of muddle-minded Christian believers. Do you think a televangelist needs his or her own private jet? A \$3,000 Armani suit? A mansion in a gated community? I met a man who was paid \$50 by one of these hucksters to jump out of a wheelchair during a so-called "old-fashioned Holy Ghost healing service." A not-so-bright crowd of Christians in attendance cheered as the former boxer sprang from the wheelchair and out of the arena. Later, he and his crisp \$50 bill made their way to a neighborhood tavern. I am not making this up.

Ignorance of the Bible gives birth to gullibility and, my young friend, ignorance is not bliss. Let us look at a story from the Book of Acts. In this account, the Apostle Paul and his

friend Silas shared the Gospel of Jesus Christ with the people of Berea, a small city in northern Greece. The crowd, likely a mixture of Jews and non-Jews, were eager to hear Paul and Silas' message, but they also referred back to the Scriptures to determine if these two itinerant evangelists were telling the truth.

Then the brethren immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea. When they arrived, they went into the synagogue of the Jews. These were more fair-minded than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness, and searched the Scriptures daily to find out whether these things were so. Therefore many of them believed, and also not a few of the Greeks, prominent women as well as men (Acts 17:10-12 NKJV).

Do not miss this point—the women and men of Berea were commended for their diligence. Rather than blindly follow Paul and Silas, they examined the Scriptures to determine whether or not they had been given the truth. Once they were assured that the Gospel message lined up with the Old Testament, they gladly accepted the good news about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus as absolute, unblemished truth.

Oh, that we had more Bereans in the church—women and men immune from the lies and twisted theologies of these rampant cults and isms that entice the biblically illiterate with a different gospel.

But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we said before, so say I now again, if any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed (Galatians 1:8, 9 KJV).

Though I do not know you, based upon your excellent question, I will assume you are a clear-thinking Christian like those to whom Paul and Silas ministered in Berea. If you want to immunize yourself from deception while giving the devil a headache, dedicate yourself to knowing God's word.

If you are on the side of truth, you need not fear the snares and traps of the world, the flesh, and the devil. May the Lord bless you and keep you, my young friend! And thank you for the question!

Question 143: Why is sin so much fun? Why is sin tempting and not easily resisted?

Answer: Do you know why male and female baboons are attracted to one another? A male baboon casts a lusty eye on a female baboon and a female baboon swoons over a big, hairy male baboon because they are baboons and baboons find other baboons most attractive.

Do you know why sin is so often tempting to us? We find many brands of sin deliciously appealing because we have an inborn sin nature and just as baboons like other baboons, sinners like sin. How did this sin nature originate? How did you and I come to be infected by this sin nature?

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned (Romans 5:12 ESV).

Through Adam, sin became a part of our spiritual DNA, so to speak, and sinners are enticed by sin.

Jesus, who was born of a virgin, stepped into this world without the infectious sin nature. He is the only human ever born of a woman who was not marred by this sin nature. Rather than living a life in which He pursued His own will, He submitted Himself completely to His Heavenly Father (John 6:38).

We sin when we do what we want to do rather than behaving as God would have us. Sin is born of self-will and rebellion toward God. As for the Lord Jesus, His life was one of

perfect obedience. The great theologian William Law said a created being's proper office was obedience to its Creator. How our woes and troubles begin when we turn a deaf ear to Him and go chasing after our own passions.

When we, as believers, shed these mortal bodies and enter into a glorified state, our sin nature will have been removed. You and I will no longer be tempted by sin. In other words, sin will be no more appealing than a platter of angry scorpions on a luncheon buffet. We will have no taste for sin.

I am grateful for your question—a question that made me stop and think about sin's appeal.

Question 144: My faith is weak, and I live in fear that under duress or persecution, I will deny Jesus Christ. How can I know that I am saved? What if I do something wrong that causes me to forfeit my salvation?

Answer: I have been a Christ follower for over thirty years and, in these three plus decades, I have learned that our salvation is more about Him and less about us. I hear people say, "I made a decision to follow Jesus," when, in truth, He elected to draw us to Him. Or how about "I am searching for God," when it is He who searches for us. One of my chief objections to much of the praise and worship music is in lyrics that tell what we are going to do for Jesus when, in truth, the real issue is what He does for us.

Even your faith is a gift from him. Let us see what our Lord's friend, the Apostle Peter, wrote:

Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle (special messenger, personally chosen representative) of Jesus Christ, to those who have received *and* possess [by God's will] a precious faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ (II Peter 1:1 Amplified Bible).

Do not miss this point: the precious faith spoken of by Peter came by the will of God. Faith, too, is a spiritual gift. The reason you believe is because God gave you the faith to believe.

The moment you believed in Jesus as Savior, you were born-again and became an adopted child in His Kingdom. As believers in Christ Jesus cannot lose their salvation (Philippians 1:6), nothing or no one has the power to snatch you from His grip. You belong to Him and that is that.

Not long ago, I spoke with a woman who astounded me by the depth of her faith. She had never attended seminary. No one called her “Reverend” or “Pastor” or “Doctor,” but in my long walk with Jesus, I have met few like her. How did this great faith come about? God gave her enough faith to trust Jesus as her Savior and the more she leaned on Him, the more faith He gave her.

I will let you in on a secret. From time to time, my faith is shaky. I often score poorly in the “fear not” department. You and I are not alone. I read that great saints such as C.S. Lewis and Mother Teresa also experienced bouts of wavering faith, but, in the end, we are His and, again, nothing or no one can steal us from our Good Shepherd. In two thousand years, the devil has never managed to snatch so much as a single lamb from our Lord’s great flock of sheep. By the authority of Scripture, be assured you will never end up as the main course on Satan’s banquet table.

For today, set aside the worry and anxiety. Be happy knowing that God chose you before He created the world (Ephesians 1:3, 4).

Question 145: Were any Gentiles saved during the Old Testament period?

Answer: We typically identify Jews as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. This does not take into account converts to Judaism or, in keeping with a stricter interpretation, those who consider the only true Jews as descendants from the line of Judah. But let us go back to the more traditional definition that recognizes Jews as the offspring of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All others, then, would be counted among the ranks of the Gentiles.

There were godly persons who walked with the Lord before Abraham was born. Enoch and Noah, as examples, immediately come to mind. Abel, the son of Adam and Eve who was slain by his brother Cain, found favor with God. Job, who may have lived about the time of Abraham, was a righteous man and he was likely a Gentile.

Of all the Gentiles appearing in the Old Testament, none is more admired, loved, and revered than Ruth the Moabitess. Moabites were pagan idolaters, but Ruth's name is found in the genealogy of our Savior, Jesus Christ. You will do well to read or reread her story; the Book of Ruth is thrilling, inspirational, fast-paced, and can be enjoyed in a single sitting. If you write me at dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com, I will send you a free downloadable commentary on the Book of Ruth.

As a Gentile, I have been "grafted" into God's Kingdom, so to speak. I, along with millions and millions of other Gentile believers, owe a great debt to the Jews (Romans 11:17-24). God loves the Jews, and He has never turned His back on them. In fact, I am convinced His greatest work among the Jews is yet to come (Romans 11:25-31). Christians should never, ever show contempt toward Jews or the nation of Israel. There is no place for antisemitism in the church and, believe me, God will deal harshly with those who malign God's chosen people.

Thank you for your excellent question!

Question 146: Do you think Jesus will come back in our lifetime?

Answer: I do not know when He will return, but we can be assured He is coming back to right the wrongs and to fix this broken planet. Have you seen the headlines? Our poor world is wobbling on its axis, and the days ahead appear grim—but all is not lost! As we can all use some good news about now, let us examine the words of the Prophet Isaiah who peered far into the future so that you and I might live in the bold confidence of our Savior's establishing of His Millennial Kingdom here on earth.

Behold, the Lord God will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him (Isaiah 40:10 NASB).

Why do you doubt? Why are you burdened by fear? Have you been abandoned by family? Have you been forgotten by friends? Do not despair, for the Lord is good. Though you feel alone and unloved, the God of Creation has sworn that He will never turn His back on you. His promises are good. Rejoice and be glad, for He is coming to your rescue!

He is coming again, and He will bring rich rewards to His faithful—good gifts in abundance to His highly beloved daughters and son. Why do you hang your head in despair? Why are your downward eyes teary and reddened from sorrow and grief? Do you not know that He will place a crown upon your head? The Lord is coming, and His children shall want for nothing.

He is coming again. As to when, we cannot say, but He will come when the time is right, and when the Lord Jesus comes, He will fix this broken world. Do not be deceived by the vain rhetoric of crafty politicians—do not place your hope in any mere mortal whose lips spew forth empty promises—no earthly ruler is capable of lifting this dying planet from the depths of its mounting woes, but the Lord Jesus, who is our great God and Savior, will

establish His throne in the holy city of Jerusalem, and what evil force or satanic being can stand against Him?

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry them in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing ewes (Isaiah 40:11 NASB).

The helpless lamb cannot stand against the ravenous wolf, and the frail ewe cannot escape the jaws of a salivating jackal, but the weak need not fear, for the Good Shepherd will gather His sheep to safety. His sheep will live without fear. No enemy can harm even the least among them. His sheep will find nourishment from the tender grass of His lush green pastures. His sheep will be refreshed by the gentle flow of cool crystal water. He is the Good Shepherd of whom King David praised, and His sheep will be in want of nothing. The Good Shepherd loves His sheep. No harm will come to His flock. Let us rejoice, for even the most cunning enemy cannot prevail against our vigilant Good Shepherd!

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales (Isaiah 40:12 NASB)?

Do you not know that the Lord created the heavens and the earth? The world's oceans would not fill the hollow of the Almighty One's hand. He is incomparable. No one is like Him. Even the great expanse of the universe cannot contain Him. He is majestic. His strength is immeasurable. His glory is blinding. He is our God, and He loves us. Why should we fear?

Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord,

Or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding?
And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge
And informed Him of the way of understanding?
Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust (Isaiah 40:13-15 NASB).

The Lord does not seek the wisdom of man. We can teach Him nothing. He has no need for the counsel of His creatures. The Almighty One is unimpressed by our degrees and honors. Who would bring accusations against the Lord? Who would dare rebuke Him? Let the wisest among us declare, "There is none but He whose being I do fear, and under Him, my genius is rebuked." Who is like the Lord of Heaven? There is none like Him.

His immeasurable wisdom is matched only by His incalculable strength. No evil will confound Him. No enemy can stand against Him. What is the fate of the proud? What shall become of the haughty boaster? Let the foolish who boast know that, in the end, every knee will bow, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord of heaven and earth.

We who have placed our faith in Him will not be overcome by those seek to make merchandise of us; we who rest in His safety will not be devoured by the evil one. Let us be glad and lift our voices in praise, for the Lord is good and He loves His own. He is coming again--do not ignore the signs! He is coming again for us!

All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless.
To whom then will you liken God?
Or what likeness will you compare with Him (Isaiah 40: 17, 18 NASB)?

At His appearing, the so-called wise, the mighty, the celebrated, and the powerful of this world will be put to utter shame. When He establishes His throne in Jerusalem, the

nation's rulers will tremble and fall. Who will oppose Him? Who can stand against Him? Who will prevent the fulfillment of the Lord's perfect will? Our God is matchless. His power is without equal. Indeed, it is written that our Creator will destroy massive armies as though they were ants. The day is coming in which the faithless—the doers of evil and the slaves of their own vile passions will cry to the mountains and to the rocks saying, "Fall on us and hide us from the presence of Him who sits on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb!"

As for the idol, a craftsman casts it,
A goldsmith plates it with gold,
And a silversmith fashions chains of silver (Isaiah 40:19 NASB).

The foolish trust in their idols, but an idol of silver and gold is still just an idol—worthless, powerless, and useless in times of peril and distress. Wealth is not a deliverer; wealth is a mocking deceiver. Those who trust in earthly treasure are mindless idolaters who will surely see their baubles and trinkets fading into the gloom of an eternal night.

It is He who sits above the circle of the earth,
And its inhabitants are like grasshoppers,
Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain
And spreads them out like a tent to dwell in.
He it is who reduces rulers to nothing,
Who makes the judges of the earth meaningless.
Scarcely have they been planted,
Scarcely have they been sown,
Scarcely has their stock taken root in the earth,
But He merely blows on them, and they wither,
And the storm carries them away like stubble (Isaiah 40:22-24 NASB).

Woe to leaders who deceive the people with lies! Woe to leaders who teach that evil is good and that good is evil! Woe to leaders whose tongues are tools of Satan! Their lips

are tinged with death and their hearts belong to hell—turn away from these liars, for they are enemies of God—but woe to the masses who fall prey to the cunning promises of such godless leaders—for they shall receive the same recompense as those who deceive!

Guard your hearts, for the Lord is coming. He is coming for His own. He brings rewards to those who trust Him and all who call upon His name will be delivered. The Lord is coming, and He is good.

Because He is righteous, He must judge the wicked. Those who do evil will be consumed by the white-hot fury of His indignation. He will judge the ruler who led the people astray. He will judge the profiteer who made merchandise of the innocent and the unborn. He will judge the purveyor of death whose stock in trade is heroin and cocaine. And He will judge the foolish who have bought into the vile deeds of these miserable deceivers. Guard your hearts, for the Lord is coming and He will judge the wicked. Woe to those whose hearts are sullied by deception, greed, and pride, for no evil doer can withstand the outpouring of God's fiery wrath!

"To whom then will you liken Me
That I would be his equal?" says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high
And see who has created these stars,
The One who leads forth their host by number,
He calls them all by name;
Because of the greatness of His might and the strength of His power,
Not one of them is missing (Isaiah 40: 25, 26 NASB).

Our God has no equal. He is supreme. He is matchless. He is incomparable. Who is like Him? No one is like our God.

And though His might is awesome and incalculable, He gently reaches down to us with the tenderness and love of a mother. Did you not know that our Heavenly Father places a prodigious value on each of His beloved sons and daughters? No one who trusts in Jesus as Savior should grovel about as a dirty-faced beggar. Rejoice, for we are loved and highly prized by the One whose love matters most!

Through the blood of Jesus, we are made clean. His death took away our sin. His bodily resurrection assures us of life eternal—for as He overcame death and the grave, it is written that we, too, shall overcome death and the grave! The Lord is coming. To those who scorn the Lord and despise His word, He will come as a dreaded, despotic conqueror at whose feet they shall surely fall, but for those who love Him, His coming will bring unspeakable joy, lasting peace, and eternal life. Is it not written that He shall wipe away the tears of His own? The Lord is coming, and He is good.

Do you not know? Have you not heard?

The Everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth

Does not become weary or tired.

His understanding is inscrutable.

He gives strength to the weary,

And to him who lacks might He increases power (Isaiah 40:29. 29 NASB).

No human mind can fathom the wisdom of God. Great mysteries enigmatic to man are fully known to Him. No human mind can understand His unmatched strength—a strength that never wearies or tires—a strength that is never exhausted. So why should we doubt Him? What is the basis of our unbelief? Where is the justification of our misgiving? Is not the Lord good? Yes, the Lord is good, and He bestows the bounty of His goodness upon all who trust in Him.

Do not permit your faith to be swayed, for the Lord is coming and He will transform this reeling, broken planet into a rapturous paradise. We must not allow doubt to creep into

our hearts, for God's promises cannot be broken. Rejoice and be glad, for the Lord is coming, and He is good!

Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
Yet those who wait for the Lord
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary (Isaiah 40:30, 31 NASB).

Let us not trust in ourselves or in others like us, but let us place our hope in the Lord. He will sustain us even when we walk through the cold, dank shadows of a lonely valley, for His tireless strength never fails.

It is not His will that we trudge about this dusty planet as forlorn and forgotten beggars; rather, He has destined us to soar high above the earth with wings like eagles. The Lord is coming, and He is good, and at His coming, He will lift and exalt those who have placed their trust in Him.

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last." Blessed are those who do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter through the gates into the city. But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practices a lie. "I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star." And the Spirit and the bride say, "Come!" And let him who hears say, "Come!" And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely (Revelation 22:12-17 NKJV).

I do not know the day and hour of His return, but He is coming, and this should give us hope. In the meantime, let us not stand idly by. We have work to do.

My trust in God flows out of the experience of his loving me, day in and day out, whether the day is stormy or fair, whether I'm sick or in good health, whether I'm in a state of grace or disgrace. He comes to me where I live and loves me as I am.

--Brennan Manning

Question 147: Does God judge sinners?

Answer: We hear people say, "God is love," and this is true, for His mercy, grace, and lovingkindness reveal a heart that beats to a rhythm of goodness, tenderness, and compassion. He loves us, yet there is nothing we can give Him or do for Him to justify His love. He loves us because He is good—not because we are good.

Does God judge sinners? Oh, yes. To emphasize the love of God while ignoring the wrath of God is mere theological dribble. Those who refuse God's love must accept God's judgment. There is no third option.

Those who open their hands to receive God's bountiful love will never face His wrath. Conversely, those who reject God's love will surely face the dreadful fury of His wrath. This is a frightening prospect, for God's consuming wrath burns with white-hot indignation. Who can withstand the anger of a vengeful God?

Who is this who comes from Edom,
With dyed garments from Bozrah,
This One who is glorious in His apparel,
Traveling in the greatness of His strength?—

"I who speak in righteousness, mighty to save."

Why is Your apparel red,
And Your garments like one who treads in the winepress?

"I have trodden the winepress alone,
And from the peoples no one was with Me.
For I have trodden them in My anger,
And trampled them in My fury;
Their blood is sprinkled upon My garments,
And I have stained all My robes.
For the day of vengeance is in My heart,
And the year of My redeemed has come.
I looked, but there was no one to help,
And I wondered
That there was no one to uphold;
Therefore My own arm brought salvation for Me;
And My own fury, it sustained Me.
I have trodden down the peoples in My anger,
Made them drunk in My fury,
And brought down their strength to the earth (Isaiah 63:1-6 NKJV)."

Talk of God's judgment upsets many people, for they prefer a grandfatherly sort of deity who smiles at our misdeeds and laughs at our follies, but this is not who God is. We must not attempt to create an ooey-gooey God in the likeness of a warm, fuzzy cosmic teddy bear, for such a God simply does not exist. God is good, but could a God who does not judge evil be righteous? The answer, of course, is no. Sin must be judged.

The gentle Jesus we so lightly invoke is the One who rained brimstone and fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19:24).

In His mercy, God gave us His Son, Jesus Christ (John 3:16). To be certain, no one who trusts in Christ Jesus as Savior will ever face the wrath of God (Ephesians 2:8, 9), but those who reject His Son will not escape His judgment (Hebrews 2:3, 4).

We call Jesus our Savior, but from whom or what are we saved? We are saved by God from God and His righteous, fiery indignation. This may sound paradoxical, but if God did not judge sin, there would have been no need for the shedding of the blood of Jesus Christ on that cruel Roman cross. Let us not make light of our Lord Jesus' sacrificial death. Had He not given His life for our sins, you and I could not stand in God's presence.

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23) and every lost sinner will be recompensed, but no one who has trusted in Jesus as Savior will suffer loss. Jesus is mighty to save.

I cannot be good enough to please God, but clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ, I have no reason to fear His wrath. His grace is truly amazing, but, again, for those who refuse God's grace, there will be hell to pay.

Question 148: Are Christians sexually repressed?

Answer: Repression or restraint? Critical thinkers will avoid playing games with words and the wise will not ignore the subtle nuances of language. If I show discipline at the table by resisting portions of food that would be detrimental to my weight and overall well-being, I am commended for having my appetite under control, but if I avoid sexual intimacy with a woman who is not my wife, critics hostile to the faith may accuse me of being a sexually repressed Christian. Do you see the folly found in this double-standard of reasoning? If I choose a six ounce serving of broiled salmon over a fourteen ounce ribeye, I am said to be exercising prudence and sound judgment. Conversely, if, because of my biblical convictions, I wake up alone after a dinner date, scoffers will say I am a wild-eyed, sexually repressed, Bible-thumping, born-again neurotic.

As logic has been demonized and truth labeled as the new hate speech, it is easy to see why reason has fallen to so-called political correctness. Besides the Bible, I wish every Christian would read George Orwell's *1984*.

Much of my ministry has been devoted to helping women and men, battered, bruised, beaten, bloodied, abandoned, and defeated, who followed the "if it feels good, do it" philosophy. In such cases, an ounce of obedience would have been better than a pound of cure.

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, slanderers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness although they have denied its power; avoid such people as these (II Timothy 3:1-5 NASB).

Faithful Christians are not sexually repressed. The word is obedient. Do not be misled by clever manipulators who speak with brimstone-scented tonsils.

Question 149: How can I stop condemning myself and others?

Answer: When we get right down to it, many people, if not most, are not very likeable. As we survey our friends and neighbors and, indeed, those with whom we share a church pew, what do we find? We find people who are frequently

- Self-centered
- Petty
- Stingy
- Ill-tempered
- Smug
- Self-righteous

And now, for a confession. If you were to know me, you would find I am often

- Petty
- Stingy
- Ill-tempered
- Smug
- Self-righteous

But wait! If I were to meet you, I might find you

- Petty
- Stingy
- Ill-tempered
- Smug
- Self-righteous

And, yet, in spite of our gross character defects, God loves us. He demonstrated this pure and holy love by sending His Son Jesus to die so that our sins could be forgiven (John 3:16). When we condemn ourselves and others, we are condemning the objects of God's tenderest affections.

Jesus said, "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12 NKJV)."

As love is one of the Holy Spirit's manifestations in our lives (Galatians 5:22, 23), pray that God will allow His Spirit free reign in your life. It will do no good trying to muster feelings of love on your own, but by allowing God to work within you, real changes will come about. God can give you the love you need (Romans 5:5). He is the Author of Love.

Before I go, let us not confuse love with mushy, gooey, goggle-eyed feelings. We have been brainwashed by Hollywood and the recording industry into thinking love is all mad

passion and fireworks. Love is not simply an emotional joyride—love is demonstrating kindness, gentleness, patience, and helpfulness toward others in tangible ways.

Submit to God and He will show you the way.

Question 150: On behalf of restaurant servers everywhere, why are after church diners stingy and mean-spirited. Do you think I am kidding? Most servers would skip working Sundays if at all possible. Rather than receiving gratuities for my good service, some of these church-goers leave Bible tracts. I cannot buy groceries or pay my electric bill with tracts, and if they found Bible tracts in their pay envelopes, I doubt if they would be happy. Church goers are the worst complainers, too. If you doubt my word, talk to other servers.

Answer: As a matter of fact, I have spoken with other servers and you are right. The Sunday afternoon lunch crowd has a stinky reputation and all I can say is shame on them for their pettiness and rude behavior.

Let me begin by saying such detestable behavior demonstrated by some, but not all Christians, in no way reflects the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ who said, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 7:12 ESV).”

Because restaurants typically offer servers minuscule hourly wages far less than the mandated minimum wage, the women and men who attend to diners’ needs depend upon the generosity of the patrons who frequent these eateries. As the laborer is worthy of his or her wages (I Timothy 5:18), it is up to us to see that our servers are properly compensated. As to those who do not approve of tipping, let me suggest eating at home, for this is the system in place and until the system changes, we have an obligation to reward good service.

Now if your experience of Christ's encouragement and love means anything to you, if you have known something of the fellowship of his Spirit, and all that it means in kindness and deep sympathy, do make my best hope for you come true! Live together in harmony, live together in love, as though you had only one mind and one spirit between you. Never act from motives of rivalry or personal vanity, but in humility think more of each other than you do of yourselves. None of you should think only of his own affairs, but should learn to see things from other people's point of view (Philippians 2:1-4 Phillips emphasis mine).

To my Christian brothers and sisters who have treated servers shabbily, shame on you for behaving in the manner of sanctimonious prigs. Stop it. You are giving the cause of Christ a black eye.

Since you brought this regrettable matter to my attention, I have launched a social media page dedicated primarily to servers and baristas. Thus far, the response has been 99.9% positive. I also have plans to launch a letter writing campaign encouraging pastors to warn their congregants that such insufferable behavior is not how we are to represent our Lord Jesus Christ. Again, saints who cannot behave in public should stay home.

Thank you for bringing this situation to my attention.

Question 151: From my Bible studies, I know that Capernaum was Jesus' base of operations during His Galilean ministry, but why was it important for Him to have a base of operations?

Answer: Situated on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee in the land of Gennesaret, Capernaum means village of Nahum. We may assume Capernaum was more than a wide spot in the road, for the city had a synagogue and a customs station. Jesus taught in the Capernaum synagogue and He met a wealthy publican named Matthew at the Capernaum customs station. Of significance, too, is that Peter and his brother Andrew

were from Capernaum. Capernaum was also the site of many of our Lord's teachings and miracles, yet the people reacted with cold indifference:

Then (Jesus) began to denounce the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I tell you that it will be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you (Matthew 11:20-24 ESV)."

At some future time, the Lord Jesus will return to earth and establish His Millennial Kingdom. Though His will be a worldwide kingdom, He will base His operations in Jerusalem. From Jerusalem, our Lord will rule over the entire globe, and those foolish enough to oppose Him will be dashed to pieces like a potter's vessel (Revelation 2:27).

The day will come when Jerusalem will be the undisputed capitol of the world, but during His first earthly ministry, Jesus chose Capernaum as His base of operation. Why Capernaum? Perhaps Capernaum's strategic location made this city a suitable setting from which to operate His ministry. Why was a base of operations even necessary? Locations play significant roles in Bible history. From the beginning, God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. God delivered His chosen people from Egyptian bondage to the Promised Land. During the reign of King David and King Solomon, Jerusalem, the crossroads of the known world, was unrivaled in wealth, splendor, and importance. The prophet Daniel served from the royal palace in Babylon. The birth of Jesus took place in Bethlehem. Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead in Bethany. Paul encountered the resurrected Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road. John penned the Book of Revelation from Patmos, and, in the end, God will defeat His enemies at Armageddon. Between Creation and the unveiling of our eternal home, the New Jerusalem, specific geographic

locations have been synonymous with historic biblical events. Perhaps this explains why Jesus chose to have a base of operations.

Question 152: I devote myself to studying God's word. As I read and study the Bible, the intimacy between God and me grows and strengthens. It saddens me knowing most Christians do not read their Bibles. I have a question: Can I promise an atheist friend that if he reads the Bible with an open mind, he will have a meaningful encounter with God?

Answer: Let us imagine an atheist or an agnostic mariner alone on a desert island with nothing but a few basic provisions and a Bible. In the quiet solitude, would our castaway come to salvation by reading God's word? Perhaps.

How can a young man cleanse his way?
By taking heed according to Your word.
With my whole heart I have sought You;
Oh, let me not wander from Your commandments!
Your word I have hidden in my heart,
That I might not sin against You.
Blessed are You, O Lord!
Teach me Your statutes.
With my lips I have declared
All the judgments of Your mouth.
I have rejoiced in the way of Your testimonies,
As much as in all riches.
I will meditate on Your precepts,
And contemplate Your ways.
I will delight myself in Your statutes;
I will not forget Your word (Psalm 119:9-16 NKJV).

Are you familiar with C.S. Lewis? Considered by many as the greatest Christian writer in recent times, this former atheist who taught medieval literature at Cambridge converted to Christianity after studying God's word. And there is the famed archeologist, Sir William Ramsey, who abandoned atheism after devoting himself to an exhaustive study of Luke's gospel record. I could mention others such as Lew Wallace, Lee Strobel, and Josh McDowell, all great Christian leaders who walked away from atheism after a careful examination into God's word. The internationally acclaimed British actor, David Suchet, became a Christian after reading a Bible in his hotel room. (I strongly recommend you listen to David Suchet's recorded Bible readings.) But what do we do with Josef Stalin, the bloodthirsty communist leader responsible for millions of deaths, who had once studied at a seminary? This despot was well-familiar with the Bible, yet he had no use for God.

I will remind you, too, that one of the greatest Bible scholars of all times is none other than our deadly enemy, Satan. He quoted holy scripture to our Lord Jesus during our Savior's forty-day wilderness fast. No one could accuse Satan of being biblically-illiterate, yet he is devoted to usurping God's supreme authority.

All Scripture is inspired by God and beneficial for teaching, for rebuke, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man or woman of God may be fully capable, equipped for every good work (II Timothy 3:16, 17 NKJV).

The Holy Spirit is indeed the Author of the Bible, but the scriptures also reveal the Holy Spirit must enlighten lost sinners before the message of salvation can be received (John 16:7-11). Here we have the sovereignty of God at work. The Author of God's word must open the eyes of the readers of God's word if there is to be a genuine transformation. With this said, we cannot say with certainty that our nonbelieving desert island castaway will come to salvation by reading the Bible, but we can be assured our marooned mariner will remain in spiritual darkness if he uses his Bible to build a campfire.

Question 153: For a time, the Israelites were victorious in their conquests, but after the death of Joshua, God's people suffered defeat after defeat. What happened? Why did God turn His back on the Israelites?

Answer: After fleeing Egypt, the Israelites spent forty years wandering in the wilderness before entering the Promised Land. Why forty years? The journey could have been traveled in a matter of days, but because of unbelief and the hardness of their hearts, God kept His people in limbo, so to speak, until that rebellious generation died off. Joshua followed Moses as leader and, for a time, God's people were victorious in conquering the land, but they were never able to fully subdue their enemies. Indeed, as we look into the Book of Judges, we will learn how the Israelites suffered many crushing defeats at the hands of their enemies.

When Joshua dismissed the people, the people of Israel went each to his inheritance to take possession of the land. And the people served the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua, who had seen all the great work that the Lord had done for Israel. And Joshua the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord, died at the age of 110 years. And they buried him within the boundaries of his inheritance in Timnath-heres, in the hill country of Ephraim, north of the mountain of Gaash. And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel (Judges 2:6-10 ESV emphasis mine).

It appears as though the generation that followed did not know God. As I see the situation, a church should focus on its young people. As an older Christian, I have an obligation to pass on the Christian faith to the next generation.

And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals. And they abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt. They went after other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed down to them. And they provoked

the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord and served the Baals and the Ashtaroth. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers, who plundered them. And he sold them into the hand of their surrounding enemies, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. Whenever they marched out, the hand of the Lord was against them for harm, as the Lord had warned, and as the Lord had sworn to them. And they were in terrible distress (Judges 2:11-15 ESV).

The people of God were unable to subdue their enemies because they “did what was evil in the sight of the Lord.” Rather than worshipping the only true and living God, these foolish people bowed to the false pagan deities of their enemies. Here is a lesson for you and me: We will never fully enjoy all of God’s blessings if we give sinful behavior a stronghold in our lives.

Then the Lord raised up judges, who saved them out of the hand of those who plundered them. Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they whored after other gods and bowed down to them. They soon turned aside from the way in which their fathers had walked, who had obeyed the commandments of the Lord, and they did not do so. Whenever the Lord raised up judges for them, the Lord was with the judge, and he saved them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge. For the Lord was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who afflicted and oppressed them. But whenever the judge died, they turned back and were more corrupt than their fathers, going after other gods, serving them and bowing down to them. They did not drop any of their practices or their stubborn ways. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he said, “Because this people have transgressed my covenant that I commanded their fathers and have not obeyed my voice, I will no longer drive out before them any of the nations that Joshua left when he died, in order to test Israel by them, whether they will take care to walk in the way of the Lord as their fathers did, or not.” So the Lord left those nations, not driving them out quickly, and he did not give them into the hand of Joshua (Judges 2:16-23 ESV).

By the way, when the Lord Jesus returns, He will set up His Kingdom in Jerusalem and, at long last, the Jews will dwell safely in the land promised to them by God. Those who say God has turned His back on the Jews do not know the Bible. The Jews are His chosen people and I refuse to lend my ear to any form of anti-Semitic ranting. I trust you will do the same.

I fear American has entered into a deep, brooding spiritual darkness. Truth has been set aside for political correctness and our nation's soul has been shaped and molded by Hollywood. Pop singers and actors are the new influencers and education has given way to indoctrination. This is no longer a Christian nation and unless there is a revival in our land, I foresee a grim future. What can you and I do to see young people hear the Gospel? How can we uplift and bolster the next generation?

Question 154: Is trolling a sin?

Answer: Having grown up in an analog generation of vacuum tubes, transistors, and rotary dial telephones, I often find internet lingo confusing. As an example, I found the various explanations of "trolling" laden with ambiguity. One example of trolling amounted to nothing more than a vicious prank in which the intended victim's private cellphone number was publicly broadcasted. Along this line, I read of a far-left Pennsylvania state politician and supporter of Planned Parenthood who published the names and addresses of a group of teenage girls who were peacefully demonstrating at the entrance of an abortion clinic. This was done as a means of intimidating these teenagers who dared to stand up for the rights of the unborn. Shame on this vile politician who jeopardized the personal safety of these girls. Once again, we have another example of the so-called tolerant left's true colors.

On the other hand, trolling may simply be a means of making light of an opposing belief or opinion. Speaking as a writer, I believe satire can be an excellent literary tool. To remove the satire from C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* would be to drain the lifeblood from this spirited little volume.

Is trolling sinful?

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
Be acceptable in Your sight,
O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer (Psalm 19:4 NKJV).

Keep your comments acceptable in the sight of the Lord and you will be okay.

Since you cannot do good to all, you are to pay special attention to those who, by the accidents of time, or place, or circumstances, are brought into closer connection with you.

--St. Augustine

Question 155: I am aware the Bible condemns same-sex intercourse and marriage, but is it okay to have a distant “crush” on someone of the same sex?

Answer: While employed by a quasi-Christian nonprofit agency, I worked with students from three seminaries. Of the three seminaries, one of the schools was known for its extreme liberal theology. I had difficulties with their students, for, frankly, I considered them heretical. Their religion was political correctness, and their devotion was to progressive politics. This caused me a measure of grief, for my employer insisted that I work with these seminarians as volunteers or interns. In good conscious, I could not permit these students to lead chapel services or conduct Bible studies, for they refused to accept the Bible as the infallible, inerrant Word of God, and they taught all religions lead to God. I would have closed the doors to them, but as my employer was insistent that I serve as their field education supervisor, I found a way of escape. Rather than allowing them to conduct religious services, I assigned them to lead vocational training workshops. In other words, to prevent the brainwashing of the women and men in our care with their far-left ABC’s of theology (**Anything But Christianity**), these muddle-minded seminarians were asked to conduct innocuous presentations on resume writing and job

interviewing skills. In the end, my heretical students were happy, my pragmatic employer was happy, and only the Lord and I knew the truth.

From time to time, I was asked to attend meetings held at the seminary's campus. During one such meeting, I passed a classroom in which same sex wedding ceremonial procedures were being taught. The Apostle Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. (I Corinthians 6:9-11 ESV)." Sadly, as neither the students nor their teachers submitted to the authority of the Bible, same-sex marriage was readily embraced.

Herein is a problem for gay persons. Women and men attracted to those of the same sex are being told by many mainline pastors that homosexuality is entirely permissible. As most people, straight or gay, are biblically illiterate, they take the word of those with titles and clerical collars that God blesses same-sex marriages. As to the numerous biblical warnings against homosexuality, false teachers either ignore these condemning passages or make clever attempts at explaining them away.

Homosexuality is wrong, but those who misrepresent God's written word are the greater sinners (Proverbs 30:5, 6). I fear for those who lie in God's name, and to those pastors and teachers who think God is a sentimental old softie who winks at sin, read the story of a false prophet named Hananiah in Jeremiah 28.

Harboring desires for a person of the same sex is a dangerous game. James, the half-brother of Jesus wrote, "Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed. Then, when desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, brings forth death (James

1:12-15 NKJV)." Do not fuel ungodly passions with desirous thoughts. Run, rather than walk, from evil.

Question 156: Have you ever seen God work in an unexpected way?

Answer: A lawyer, late for a trial, circled the courthouse desperately in search of an available parking space. "God, if you lead me to an open parking space, I promise to attend church every Sunday for the next twelve months!" Just then, the lawyer spied a Buick vacating its parking spot. "Never mind! I found a place on my own!"

Since my conversion in May 1989, God has continually surprised me in unexpected ways. We marvel at Paul's dramatic Damascus Road experience and are thrilled by Jonah's high seas adventure to Nineveh, but in my own life, I have seen the providential hand of God at work in novel, unexpected ways. In truth, I believe every born-again believer has experienced unexpected, "out of the blue" blessings from God; however, like the lawyer in search of a parking space, many of us transform the miraculous into the mundane by attributing these providential blessings as end results of our own efforts.

Every believer in Christ Jesus is a walking, talking, living, breathing miracle in the flesh, for without the unseen, mysterious, supernatural hand of God at work, no one would be saved. Jeremiah the prophet wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it (Jeremiah 17:9 ESV)?" The Apostle Paul said, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned (II Corinthians 2:14 ESV)." And our Lord Jesus taught, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander (Matthew 15:19 ESV)." As it is obvious that we are, by nature, vile creatures steeped in evil, each salvation is a miracle that brings rejoicing in Heaven (Luke 15:7).

Every genuine conversion is a work of God. Let us examine these opening verses in the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church in Thessalonica.

We always give thanks to God for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly keeping in mind your work of faith and labor of love and perseverance of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters, beloved by God, His choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sakes. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word during great affliction with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. For the word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but in every place the news of your faith toward God has gone out, so that we have no need to say anything. For they themselves report about us as to the kind of reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is, Jesus who rescues us from the wrath to come (I Thessalonians 1:2-10 NASB emphasis mine).

God chose these idolaters, evil women and men who worshipped false gods, to become His beloved sons and daughters. By the power of the Holy Spirit, these vile persons were convicted of their sin, repented of their evil, and believed upon Jesus who rescued them from the wrath to come. There are no accidental conversions. No one blindly stumbles into the Kingdom of God. At the risk of redundancy, every born-again believer in Jesus Christ is living proof that God is actively orchestrating His ultimate plan of redemption.

How can we be so blind? So cavalier? So casual? How dare we consider salvation as an ordinary, mundane, as a matter of fact occurrence. I know quite well who I am and what I am and, friend, knowing that God has allowed me to serve others through Him is a most remarkable feat.

Throughout His earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus healed the sick and raised the dead, but equally remarkable was the conversion of a greedy little tax collector named Zacchaeus:

Then Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. Now behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector, and he was rich. And he sought to see who Jesus was, but could not because of the crowd, for he was of short stature. So he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was going to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and saw him, and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must stay at your house." So he made haste and came down, and received Him joyfully. But when they saw it, they all complained, saying, "He has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner." Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:1-10 NKJV)."

As I see it, the salvation of Zacchaeus is no less amazing than our Lord's summoning of Lazarus from his tomb. Both men were dead, one physically and the other spiritually, and both, by the power of God, were brought to life. Salvation is truly an amazing, unexpected experience.

Question 157: Should a Christian accept advice or receive counsel from worldly sources.

Answer: All truth belongs to God. God's word is truth, and all truth is of God. Hear the prayer Jesus offered on behalf of His disciples:

"I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to Me, and they have kept Your word. Now they have known that all things which You have given Me are from You. For I have

given to them the words which You have given Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came forth from You; and they have believed that You sent Me.

“I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours. And all Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine, and I am glorified in them. Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Your name. Those whom You gave Me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled. But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves. I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them by Your truth. Your word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth (John 17:6-19 NKJV emphasis mine).”

Again, all truth is of God. This is not to say all who speak truth are godly, for even a compulsive liar will, on occasion, say something trustworthy. Remember, Satan quoted Scripture to our Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul spoke of false teachers who, nonetheless, preached the message of Christ. The oiliest politician occasionally utters the truth just as a broken clock gives the correct time twice daily, yet we ought not rely upon fork-tongued politicians or broken wall clocks as reliable sources of information.

Today, I read of a patient who asked if her therapist should continue billing her as they are having an affair. What manner of advice can one expect from a licensed therapist who seduces his patients? For that matter, what about Christians who seek the advice of psychics? An ordained minister once asked me to recommend a psychic. No kidding.

When I told this muddle-minded clergyman that the Bible clearly condemns fortune-tellers and mediums, he then asked if I might search for a *Christian* psychic. Again, I am not making this up. One may as well ask about a Christian abortionist, a Christian cocaine smuggler, or a Christian embezzler.

On such matters as motor oil, dental implants, post-Impressionist paintings, bathroom remodeling, medieval architecture, tire rotating, French cooking, stamp collecting, and piano tuning, I yield to the experts regardless of their religious convictions, but in matters dealing with addiction, anxiety, dating, love, marriage, sexuality, child-rearing, forgiveness, giving, happiness, money management, morality, hope, faith, purpose, and eternity, I want the advice of godly men and women endowed with God's love and wisdom. May all who trust in Jesus as Savior safeguard their hearts and minds from the worthless counsel of godless deceivers.

Question 158: As Christians, how should we respond to acts of violence such as mass shootings?

Answer: Although I cannot say with certainty, I am probably older than you. This does not guarantee I am any smarter or wiser, but it means I have seen a previous world that many of you may know little about. So let me take you back in time to an event that could, in no way, happen today.

Each week, our sixth grade teacher set aside time for "Show and Tell." Students were encouraged to bring something unusual to school and explain its use or function to the class. One Friday, Jerry brought a 30 caliber machine gun to school. Jerry's father, a World War II veteran, had served in the Pacific theater. On the battlefield, he had captured a Japanese machine gun. I have no idea how he managed to leave the service with a Japanese machine gun tucked under his arm, but it happened. (One day, I will tell you about a distant relative who smuggled two hand grenades after receiving his discharge papers.) But let us get back to our 30 caliber Japanese machine gun.

I suppose Jerry and his father toted the gun to school in the family automobile. Jerry and the machine gun got out in the school parking lot and his dad then went off to work.

The Japanese machine gun was quite a hit with the boys and girls, and, at the end of the school day, it was time for Jerry and the machine gun to go home. Jerry's dad was still working. A 30 caliber machine gun weighs substantially more than a lone sixth grader would wish to carry. At the teacher's prompting, I volunteered to help Jerry carry the machine gun back to his house.

So, on a pleasant fall afternoon in 1964, two sixth grade boys are walking down Cheviot Drive with a 30 caliber machine gun. I held the stock and Jerry had the end of the gun's barrel in his grip. No one stopped us. No one asked what we were doing. The police did not close off the street or send in the SWAT Team. This was America in 1964.

Friend, there were plenty of guns in 1964. Also, there were very few gun laws on the books in 1964. For those who simply think guns are the problem, I am afraid they are not critical thinkers. Chicago, perhaps the nation's murder capital, has very tough gun laws. Tough gun laws will not solve society's problems. The problem is people.

We teach boys and girls they are the evolutionary byproducts of random chance. We amuse boys and girls with violent games and violent music and violent entertainment. We teach boys and girls that life is cheap. We teach boys and girls there is no God and there are no absolute truths.

I grew up in a world in which guns were plentiful and gun laws were scarce. But I also grew up in a world that was far less hostile to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Even those who did not identify themselves with Christianity were civil and tolerant of Christ's followers.

I fully expect to see tougher gun laws passed in light of the recent back to back shootings. Will tougher gun laws solve the problem? I can only wish we, as a nation, were producing better people.

I pray for the safety and well-being of my family and friends. And though mass shootings, tragic as they are, dominate the headlines, I am reminded many urban areas such as Chicago see violence on a daily basis. There is hardly any outrage as to the violence in Chicago, Houston, San Francisco, and Baltimore. As for me, I steer clear of areas where thugs and gang-bangers rule the streets. I am aware of my surroundings. I am cautious. Caution is good, but fear is not good. You and I cannot live in fear. Satan would have us jumping at our shadows and this is not how a believer is to live.

Jesus is coming again, and He will fix this world. Until then, let us be salt and light that brings honor to our Savior.

Question 159: How can I break free from my chemical dependency?

Answer: Having spent years working with alcoholics and addicts at a large urban shelter, I can say with indisputable authority that alcohol, cocaine, heroin, and other addictive substances are cruel masters. They rob their victims of all they have—family, career, wealth, dignity, and health for a few moments of mindless stupor. I recall walking into a room in which a young woman, who had overdosed only minutes before, lay motionless near a closed Bible. Rather than opening the Bible, she chose to uncap a needle and pumped death into her veins.

It is not God's will that you be a slave to drugs.

The matter of recovery is much too involved for a typical response, but as Jesus said we are to ask, seek, and knock when addressing our needs, you are to

- go to God in prayer daily, even hourly if necessary, asking Him to lead you along the pathway to sobriety.
- next, seek answers through Bible study and Christian literature that deals with addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention. I do not recommend material from Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous, but Celebrate Recovery offers excellent “how to” study guides that have a proven track record. If you cannot afford or do not have access to Celebrate Recovery literature in your country, you may email me at dr.michaelblunk@gmail.com and I will send you my own 325 page Christ-centered program free of charge.
- then you are to knock on doors of opportunity by attending church and attending Christian support groups. Again, if Celebrate Recovery offers local chapters where you live, this would be my first choice, for their program is biblically-based, but you need to be in the company of mature Christian women and men who will love you, nurture you, and encourage you.

Perhaps this time next year, we will receive a letter from you detailing your new life—a life free from the tyranny of addiction.

Question 160: I struggle with anger. As I want to be more like Jesus, how can I learn to control my temper?

Answer: As an old Christian guy who has wrestled with anger and resentment much of my life, I have given a lot of thought to the matter of being kinder and more Christ-like. There is no denying I have offended others by my brusque nature, but that was then, and this is now. According to the Bible, all things are possible through Christ Jesus, and in keeping with the promises found in His written word, God has sanded down my rough edges and I am not the cranky, irritable old blighter of my former days. Okay, so I am not a cuddly old teddy bear filled with warm fuzzies, either, but I am a sight more agreeable these days.

If I properly understand your inquiry, you deal with anger, too, so let us take a look at what the Bible says.

“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath, nor give place to the devil (Ephesians 4:26, 27 NKJV emphasis mine).

According to the Apostle Paul’s words to the Christian believers living in Ephesus, it is possible to experience anger without incurring sin. This has been called *righteous anger*. As for me, my anger is all too often just another sinful outburst; there is seldom a scrap of righteousness when my temper ignites. Perhaps your own conduct parallels mine.

Let us note that the Apostle Paul also warned against clinging tenaciously to our anger. By allowing “the sun (to) go down” on our wrath, we permit this pent-up anger to fester and brew deep within ourselves. Pent-up anger demands our constant focus. The destructive habit of clinging to grudges robs us of God’s joy while blinding us to the divinely appointed duties and opportunities set before us. We become as bottles filled with deadly toxins. As believers in Christ Jesus, you and I are called to be ambassadors of God’s love and purveyors of the Gospel message--the salt and light of the world. I find no place in Scripture commanding us to be cauldrons of poison.

The Apostle Paul also warns that sinful anger gives Satan a foothold in our lives. This is not to say that anger necessarily opens the door to demonic possession, for believers in Christ Jesus have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and, as such, cannot be possessed, but unbridled anger quenches the ministry of God’s Holy Spirit and makes us much more vulnerable to the lies and deceptive schemes of our enemy. Unrepented sin muffles the voice of God while clouding our judgment. In such a muddle-minded state, we are far more likely to do the devil’s bidding, so to speak. For those of us who struggle with a volatile temper, we must confess our sin to God and allow Him to make us right through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

A few years ago, a college professor made threatening remarks to a student journalist during an outdoor campus protest. Grabbing the student's camera, the enraged professor shouted, "Hey, who wants to help me get this reporter out of here? I need some muscle over here." A short time later, she was dismissed by the university. During a follow-up interview, she expressed her regrets and explained that her deplorable actions did not truly represent who she was.

I disagree. In truth, these sudden outbursts represent *exactly* who we are and that which is brewing inside us.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis explained, "We begin to notice, besides our particular sinful acts, our sinfulness; begin to be alarmed not only about what we do, but about what we are. This may sound rather difficult, so I will try to make it clear from my own case. When I come to my evening prayers and try to reckon up the sins of the day, nine times out of ten the most obvious one is some sin against charity; I have sulked or snapped or sneered or snubbed or stormed. And the excuse that immediately springs to my mind is that the provocation was so sudden and unexpected; I was caught off my guard, I had not time to collect myself. Now that may be an extenuating circumstance as regards those particular acts: they would obviously be worse if they had been deliberate and premeditated. On the other hand, surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. In the same way the suddenness of the provocation does not make me an ill-tempered man; it only shows me what an ill-tempered man I am. The rats are always there in the cellar, but if you go in shouting and noisily they will have taken cover before you switch on the light."

There is one whose rash words are like sword thrusts, but the tongue of the wise brings healing (Proverbs 12:18 ESV).

Mind you, we are not speaking of ordinary, verminous pests; these angry, foul-mouthed rodents with their hair-trigger tempers are armed and dangerous and ready for a fight. Their cruel, hateful words are like sharpened javelins that pierce the hearts of their intended victims. We who struggle with anger often take aim at those near to us--close family members, spouses, and longtime friends. We harm those we love. To be sure, the wounds we inflict are slow to heal and typically result in sorrow and regret. I shudder in horror when reminded of some of the vicious words that have spewed from my mouth.

By contrast, a wise person speaks in ways that bring healing rather than hurt. Those who govern their tongues have fewer instances of regret; those who give their tempers a free reign rant in the shameless manner of fools.

Thankfully, God is ready to help us clean house and rid our cellars of rats.

But I (Jesus) say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matthew 5:44 ESV) ...

Love is much more than a feeling. Let there be no misunderstanding in the matter, for genuine love is not an attempt at conjuring warm, ooey-gooey emotions toward the brute who just shoved you to the ground after stealing your wallet or purse. Love is praying that such a person will repent and turn to Jesus for forgiveness and restoration. I am reminded that the Apostle Paul, prior to his conversion, was a wild-eyed, fanatical religious terrorist. The blood on innocent Christians stained his clenched fists. Had God struck this fiery Pharisee dead, the world would have been infested with one less zealot, but from his restoration, the church received her most prolific writer of New Testament scriptures. We can all thank God for the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul. Come to think of it, I have met a number of great pastors and Bible teachers who, prior to their conversions, were enemies of God's people. How do we love our enemies? We pray that our enemies will be transformed by Jesus. We pray that our enemies will become our friends. We pray that God will show our enemies the same lavish measure of grace and compassion He demonstrated to us.

When our prayers change from “Lord, please hurl a lightning bolt down on so-and-so’s ugly head,” to “Lord, may this person who has caused me grief come to know You and the joy of Your salvation,” our hearts are softened, and all deeply rooted bitterness begins to dissipate. We are most like Jesus Christ when we learn to love our enemies.

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

The carnal individual, who has little regard for God and gives even less thought to eternity, lives under the authority of his or her own desires. This is not to say that non-believers are axe murderers or find pleasure in setting fire to orphanages, but the works of the flesh stand in direct contrast with the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and other shameful acts are the thistles, thorns, and briars of the flesh. The Apostle Paul is abundantly clear in stating that those who continually practice such evil deeds will not do so with impunity; carnally minded persons who produce weeds rather than fruit face a perilous eternity of regret. Apart from Jesus Christ, there can be no eternal joy. Apart from Jesus, anger, bitterness, resentment, and envy find their unholy sanctuary.

John R. W. Scott wrote, “The Christian should resemble a fruit tree, not a Christmas tree! For the gaudy decorations of a Christmas tree are only tied on, whereas fruit grows on a fruit tree.” On the other hand, an angry person resembles a cross between poison ivy and hemlock.

Make me to know your ways, O Lord; teach me your paths. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day long (Psalm 25:4, 5 ESV).

The God of our salvation has a plan for your life and my life, and His plans do not include perpetual feelings of anger, hatred, and resentment that steal our joy, but how can we understand His will if we are far from Him? His plans are far better than any schemes or goals that we might conjure from our own imaginations, but too many of us are caught up in our own desires or are too preoccupied with what the world is saying to hear His gentle, loving voice. We will never know His ways until we shut out the world, put a lid on our own selfish ambitions, and wait upon Him for our marching orders. We speak loftily of following our dreams, but there is no greater satisfaction than living out God's divinely inspired purpose. Would not even the most rudimentary exercise in logic teach us that God's dreams are superior to our own dreams? What more could we desire? God's ambitions are attainable, too. When He bids us to fly, He gives us wings.

The great German reformer, Martin Luther, compared random evil thoughts with birds. "You cannot keep birds from flying over your head, but you can keep them from building a nest in your hair." Particularly among those of us who battle anger, resentment, and bitterness, many of these thoughts that seem to pop into our heads would be better described as vultures--grotesque winged scavengers that feed on rotting flesh. And we allow these horrid buzzards to build their nests inside our heads? Are we to give hellish ideas a foothold in our thinking? Laying out the welcome mat to evil thoughts is contrary to the Apostle Paul's instructions:

"Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things (Philippians 4:8 NASB)."

Here is a partial list of thoughts and beliefs that are unworthy of our consideration:

- "Why do others have more than me?"

- “Why bother trying? Nothing I do seems to work!”
- “No one could find me attractive. No one could love me.”
- “Everyone has a price.”
- “This may be considered unethical, but if I don’t do it, someone else will.”
- “I suppose I am the unluckiest person in the world.”
- “I am everyone’s punching bag.”
- “I know what the Bible says, but this is the real world.”
- “Okay, so I did it. Don’t act surprised. I never claimed to be perfect.”
- “No matter what I do, I never seem to get ahead.”
- “Trust no one. Believe no one. This is a dog eat dog world.”
- “No one is looking. Here’s my chance, and who will ever know?”
- “Don’t talk to me about right and wrong. Everyone does it.”
- “It would have been better had I never been born.”
- “One day, I will get even with him.”

Sound familiar? Each of these statements smells of smoke and brimstone and is unworthy of a born-again believer. Harboring such notions and beliefs distances us from the joy and restoration God offers. Additionally, these destructive thinking traps are laden with our favored brand of negativity that poisons the mind and drains the lifeblood from our souls. If we are to live better, feel better, and do better, such putrefying, cynical thoughts must be banished from our thinking.

To the Christians in Ephesus, the Apostle Paul commanded:

So this I say, and solemnly affirm together with the Lord [as in His presence], that you must no longer live as the [unbelieving] Gentiles live, in the futility of their minds [and in the foolishness and emptiness of their souls], for their [moral] understanding is darkened and their reasoning is clouded; [they are] alienated and self-banished from the life of God [with no share in it; this is] because of the [willful] ignorance and spiritual blindness that is [deep-seated] within them, because of the hardness and insensitivity of their heart. And they, [the ungodly in their spiritual apathy], having become callous

and unfeeling, have given themselves over [as prey] to unbridled sensuality, eagerly craving the practice of every kind of impurity [that their desires may demand]. But you did not learn Christ in this way! If in fact you have [really] heard Him and have been taught by Him, just as truth is in Jesus [revealed in His life and personified in Him], that, regarding your previous way of life, you put off your old self [completely discard your former nature], which is being corrupted through deceitful desires, and be continually renewed in the spirit of your mind [having a fresh, untarnished mental and spiritual attitude], and put on the new self [the regenerated and renewed nature], created in God's image, [godlike] in the righteousness and holiness of the truth [living in a way that expresses to God your gratitude for your salvation]. Therefore, rejecting all falsehood [whether lying, defrauding, telling half-truths, spreading rumors, any such as these], speak truth each one with his neighbor, for we are all parts of one another [and we are all parts of the body of Christ]. Be angry [at sin—at immorality, at injustice, at ungodly behavior], yet do not sin; do not let your anger [cause you shame, nor allow it to] last until the sun goes down. And do not give the devil an opportunity [to lead you into sin by holding a grudge, or nurturing anger, or harboring resentment, or cultivating bitterness]. The thief [who has become a believer] must no longer steal, but instead he must work hard [making an honest living], producing that which is good with his own hands, so that he will have something to share with those in need. Do not let unwholesome [foul, profane, worthless, vulgar] words ever come out of your mouth, but only such speech as is good for building up others, according to the need and the occasion, so that it will be a blessing to those who hear [you speak]. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God [but seek to please Him], by whom you were sealed and marked [branded as God's own] for the day of redemption [the final deliverance from the consequences of sin]. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor [perpetual animosity, resentment, strife, fault-finding] and slander be put away from you, along with every kind of malice [all spitefulness, verbal abuse, malevolence]. Be kind and helpful to one another, tender-hearted [compassionate, understanding], forgiving one another [readily and freely], just as God in Christ also forgave you (Ephesians 4:17-32 Amplified Bible).

We should not live in the manner of unbelievers who have no use for the goodness of God's ways. Theirs is a world of ignorance--a life of sensuality and impurity--a carnal existence hallmarked by the lusts of the flesh and void of any lasting purpose. A sum of years dedicated to mere superficialities cannot rightfully satisfy in this life or in the life that follows the grave.

The thinking of those who have no regard for Christ Jesus is futile and their shameful lack of godly understanding will leave them eternally empty. To be sure, these unrepentant souls marred by darkened intellects will howl from an unsatisfiable hunger throughout the ages to come. Imagine thinking so little of the glorious gift of life that one wastes this grand allotment of precious days on nothingness! What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Anger? Envy? Hatred? An unappeasable desire for revenge? Lustiness? Each of our deadly vices is as an itch that cannot be scratched. Is there no cure? A renewed mind is the only balm that can ease the agony of those chafing irritants that vex the troubled soul.

By the power of the Holy Spirit, a new attitude and, indeed, a new way of living can be ours. Through this divine renewal of mind, Satan's footholds are destroyed, and the clanking chains of the past are, at long last, broken. Those with the mind of Christ will no longer suffer from preoccupation with the sworn enemies of inner, lasting peace: anger, bitterness, perpetual victimhood, and a hateful desire for revenge. Who or what, then, can steal our joy? If we are to be made whole, we must abandon our former manner of corrupt thinking and focus on thoughts worthy of one whose identity and purpose are Christ-centered. Let us cast off Satan's blindfold and see people, events, and circumstances through God's eyes. This is God's will for our lives, for only then will we revel in the joy of a renewed mind.

We must allow God's Holy Spirit to work *freely* in our lives. Harboring ill thoughts and fostering a pessimistic attitude will hinder His efforts in making us whole. Rather than quenching the work of the Holy Spirit, let us shun evil thoughts of bitterness, rage, hatred, and the unholy desire of exacting revenge against those who have harmed us.

You have turned for me my mourning into dancing;

 you have loosed my sackcloth

 and clothed me with gladness,

that my glory may sing your praise and not be silent.

O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever (Psalm 30:11, 12 ESV)!

Ingratitude, the ugly cousin of faithlessness, also quenches the ministry of God's Holy Spirit. A grateful heart opens the doors to God's blessings. A. W. Tozier wrote, "Gratitude is an offering precious in the sight of God, and it is one that the poorest of us can make and be not poorer but richer for having made it." To truly enjoy God's blessings, one must realize that a benevolent, kind, and loving God is the source of all that is good. A thoughtful recognition of His generosity is our proper duty. To take Him for granted is to love Him less. To appreciate His lavish goodness is to love Him more. I am reminded that even a dog wags its tail before the supper dish. Shall we behave with less propriety than a cocker spaniel?

Weeping may tarry for the night,

 but joy comes with the morning (Psalm 30:5b ESV).

I find the final two chapters of Revelation most encouraging. Allow me to explain. We are scarcely into our reading of Genesis when Adam and Eve, beguiled by the Tempter, attempt to usurp God's authority and, in doing so, usher sin into the world. Paradise is lost, the glory departs from our race, and the curse of death spreads over creation. What follows is war, famine, cruelty, idolatry, perversion, disease, the bloody reign of Satan over a world he did not create, and a calloused majority of the earth's population that has little regard for the Son who was sent to save us from the ravages of our sin.

The final two chapters of Revelation tell a different story. In a nutshell, Satan is defeated, the glorified believers join King Jesus is the New Jerusalem, death is no more, all tears

are wiped away, and the earthly paradise is, at long last, restored. God triumphs and we, my brothers and sisters in Christ, are on the winning side.

This happy ending is not some fanciful myth written to distract us from our present suffering. God's ultimate and decisive victory is solemnly promised in the pages of the scriptures and God cannot break His promises. No matter what sorrows today may bring, the hope of tomorrow is most thoroughly assured.

Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him (James 1:12 NASB).

Let us not give up. May we not be discouraged. Those of us who trust in Jesus as Savior are to cast off the burdens of doubt and unbelief. No matter what cunning lies Satan whispers, we have a hope that will not disappoint.

In the wild, dogs are vicious predators. Domesticated, dogs are known as man's best friend (though I prefer cats to those yippy little dogs that incessantly bark), so how does a vicious predator become a trusty companion? A dog, living in close proximity to a human, tends to take on human traits. Likewise, when we dwell close to Jesus, we become more like Him. Those who enjoy intimacy with Jesus are transformed accordingly.

Do you wish to shed your anger? Pitch your tent near Him.

It is my prayer that God will make you more like His Son Jesus.

God buries His workmen but carries on His work.
--Charles Wesley

Question 161: What does the Bible say about doing things we do not want to do, such as chores, school, and homework?

Answer: I am an excellent argument against laziness, procrastination, a failure to plan, a lack of foresight, uninspired living, and a shortage of ambition. As a young man, God gave me no small measure of ability and opportunity; yet I frittered away my blessings on trivial pursuits. In high school, my grades were only so-so. I did not take my studies seriously. I dropped out of college at the end of my first semester. As I came to age back in the bell-bottom days, I let my hair grow long and bought a guitar, but I never heard from Warner Brothers. It was time to get a real job, but as I lacked specialized vocational training or a formal education, I was frequently unemployed, under-employed, or employed in positions that did not suit my interests. I had not planned to fail, but I had failed to plan.

At fifty, I enrolled in a small seminary. As I pursued my biblical studies while working fulltime, exciting new doors of opportunity began to open. At an age when many women and men begin giving thought to retirement, I was getting started in ministry. For the first time in my life, I found meaning and purpose in my calling. These days, I am steeped in ambition, but my best years are gone and so much of my life has counted for nothing. Because God is merciful, my work is making a difference in His kingdom, but I cannot go back in time and undo the sinful waste of the past—a past hallmarked by a lack of purpose and indifference.

There is a maxim that says, “Better late than never,” but to that, I say, “Better early than late.” Hear the confessions of a late bloomer. If you fritter away this one and only life

God has given you through laziness and indifference, you may find yourself up to your earlobes in regret. Believe me, I know all about living with regret.

Go to the ant, you sluggard!
Consider her ways and be wise,
Which, having no captain,
Overseer or ruler,
Provides her supplies in the summer,
And gathers her food in the harvest.
How long will you slumber, O sluggard?
When will you rise from your sleep?
A little sleep, a little slumber,
A little folding of the hands to sleep—
So shall your poverty come on you like a prowler,
And your need like an armed man (Proverbs 6:6-11 NKJV).

Nothing good comes from laziness. Nothing.

My young friend, God did not place us on this little blue planet to play games, watch movies, or listen to meaningless three chord progressions from not-so-bright performers long on predictability and short on creativity. First and foremost, we are to serve Him (I Samuel 15:22, 23).

Unlike all other religions that teach we must earn God's love by our own efforts, the Bible says we do not merit God's favor by our good works (Ephesians 2: 8, 9), but our good works reveal the measure of our faith (James 2:18). Our lives are to be lived according to His purpose and, speaking as an older saint, there is no greater pleasure than in serving Him. In Him, I have found meaning and purpose. In Him, I know who I am, what I am to do, where I am going, why I am here, and how I am to live each day. In Him, my life matters.

Not everyone is called to fulltime ministry, but we are all called to be fulltime Christians, and wherever God places you, you are to approach your duties with diligence. Let me close with this quote by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. "If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as a Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'"

Let me challenge you to go before the Lord and ask Him what it is you are to do with your life (Jeremiah 29:11). If you follow in whatever path He sets before you, you will find lasting joy and satisfaction. In the end, no one regrets doing what is right.

I have told you the truth.

Question 162: As a Christian teen, I am not sure how I am to approach secular entertainment. I want to please the Lord Jesus, so how can I balance my devotion to Him with my choices in reading, music, movies, and gaming?

Answer: Most likely, I am old enough to be your grandpa and, like you, I have often wondered, "Must I only read Christian books? Must I only view Christian movies? Are traditional hymns or the more contemporary praise and worship songs the only music suitable for me? Where is the balance?"

Okay, let us talk about this. When we ask, "Where is the balance?", are we implying that we should devote two hours a week to church services, four hours a week to Bible study, two hours a week to prayer and two hours of good deeds and then counterbalance these edifying spiritual activities with six hours of secular TV, four hours of worldly music, three hours of video gaming and one hour of gossiping? Sounds kind of silly, doesn't it?

I will let you in on a secret. I am a musician and composer and I do not like most of the contemporary praise and worship music popular today. To my ears, most contemporary Christian music sounds rather light-weight and fluffy—cutesy and predictable. I like raw, gutsy music—music that sweats! Of course, I grew up with Pink Floyd and, even today, David Gilmore's British blues guitar riffs and Richard Wright's grinding organ and synth work make my heart pound. Furthermore, I am not going to feel guilty because I like *Adam Heart Mother Suite* more than I like *Getting Back to the Heart of Worship*. Anyway, my newest project is writing Christian music that is reminiscent of early Pink Floyd.

But I have yet to address your question.

I do not think "striking a balance" is the issue. Who has your heart? If Jesus has your heart and the entertainment you choose is not, shall we say, vile and godless, what is the problem?

You are saved by having placed your faith in Christ Jesus as Savior. You will not be saved based on your favorite song, your favorite movie, or your favorite game.

Now let me add an important point--a mature Christian should not want to hear the profanities and violent tirades of Snoop Dogg, Jay Z, or other millionaire vulgarian. Music that glorifies rape and killing cops is wholly and completely inexcusable and, as King David wrote, "I will set nothing evil before my eyes (Psalm 101:3)." If Jesus has your heart, you will be repulsed by this kind of so-called entertainment. If anyone claims to love Jesus and feels comfortable being entertained by music that glamorizes rape and other forms of violence, I urge such an individual to search his or her heart and question why one born of God would find pleasure in such filth-ridden garbage. By the way, Mom and Dad, do you know who is molding your child's thinking?

Who has your heart? If Jesus has your heart, then I am certain you will choose the right forms of entertainment. Agree?

Okay, did I answer your question? I hope so!

Question 163: Please discuss a Christian's proper attitude when attending a funeral.

Answer: In 1985, my paternal grandmother died after a stroke. Her passing occurred almost forty years ago, and to this very day, I miss that dear, sweet, funny lady. My father, who is well into his nineties, is experiencing a protracted bout of poor health. My mother, an amazing woman to whom I owe so much, also struggles with multiple health issues, and I must remind myself that I may not have my beloved mom and dad much longer. This grieves me as I am very close to both my parents.

Thankfully, my mother, father, and grandmother all professed faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers (and sisters), about those who are asleep (dead), that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him (upon His return) those who have fallen asleep (died) (I Thessalonians 4:13, 14 ESV parenthetical statements mine).

When my grandmother died, I grieved, but I did not grieve in the manner of one who has no hope. And if something should happen to Mom or Dad, I will miss them sorely, but I will not be without hope, for I know I will see them again.

The day is coming when God will do away with death. Death is under a "death sentence," so to speak, and we have God's solemn promise that the curse of death will never again break our hearts or separate us from one another:

Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New

Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people. God Himself will be with them and be their God. And 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, for the former things have passed away (Revelation 21:1-4 NKJV).”

The death of a believer is only a temporary separation. Yes, the loss hurts, but the loss does not leave us void of hope. In the end, God will wipe away every bitter tear from the believer’s reddened eyes. This is His promise to you and me. Pity the grieving atheist, for when he or she loses a loved one, there is no expectation of a happy reunion.

(God) heals the brokenhearted
And binds up their wounds (Psalm 147:3 NKJV).

I dread attending funerals, yet the older I grow, the more often I am required to attend these melancholy gatherings. Even so, when the loved one dies in Jesus Christ, the sting of death is greatly lessened.

Because Jesus overcame death and the grave, we who have placed our faith in Him as Savior shall live forever with Him. What does the atheist have to offer? Emptiness? Despair? Countless unanswered questions? Atheism has nothing to offer. Nothing.

Question 164: When I sing praises to God, do the people in Heaven also hear me sing?

Answer: I have no idea what the saints who are with the Lord Jesus hear, but the Lord hears our praises, and this is all that matters. In truth, God does not benefit from our praise. He knows who He is and is no more enhanced by our adoration than if our lack of reverence could somehow diminish His glory.

Our praise to Him is really for our benefit, for when we praise Him, His mind-boggling, glorious, eternal, divine attributes are brought to mind. The more we know Him and the closer we grow to Him, the more we gain. We are the beneficiaries of God's goodness.

Make a joyful shout to the Lord, all you lands!
Serve the Lord with gladness;
Come before His presence with singing.
Know that the Lord, He is God;
It is He who has made us, and not we ourselves;
We are His people and the sheep of His pasture.
Enter into His gates with thanksgiving,
And into His courts with praise.
Be thankful to Him, and bless His name.
For the Lord is good;
His mercy is everlasting,
And His truth endures to all generations (Psalm 100 NKJV).

I am somewhat disturbed by a regrettable genre of Christian music that seems to focus on us, not God, and all that we are going to do for Him. As an example, one popular song says, "Every blessing you turn out, I'll turn back to praise." Is that so? Well, friend, I know of no one whose gratitude is on par with God's blessings. I heard another praise and worship song with the lyrics along the line of, "Lord, I have loved You with all of my heart and I have served You with all of my strength." Oh, yeah? Maybe Mother Teresa served the Lord Jesus with all her heart and strength, but anyone else who makes such an outlandish claim should blush with embarrassment. What nonsense! The Christians I know, and this includes me, are tainted with varying measures of selfishness and narcissism. Let us not spoil our praise by making empty, grandiose claims to an all-knowing God who sees through such facades of boasting, self-righteousness, vain promises, and petty altruisms.

Praise should be sincere. And praise should focus on Him. Not us. Let us sing of what He has done for us.

Say, do you have a good voice? Maybe you do, but even if you do not, give God praise. He is worthy.

Thank you for your question.

Question 165: There is no God. Your Bible is a collection of myths and Christianity is a farce. Why, then, do you give people false hope?

Answer: As a critical thinker, Christianity makes perfect sense; hence, to deny the existence of God, the reliability of the Bible, and the doctrines of the Christian faith is irrational, illogical, and unreasonable.

Critical thinking is an unfortunate label. We have all met disagreeable individuals who are particularly critical in their response to a meal set before them, the firmness of the hotel's bedding, a baseball umpire's call, the dryness of a cappuccino, or the perceived dryness of a lecturer's delivery. Chronic complainers are not to be confused with critical thinkers. On the contrary, critical thinking is a self-guided discipline in which the individual considers the quality of his or her thinking. Critical thinkers place their thinking under a microscope of scrutiny, so to speak, in an effort to enhance their thinking. Better thinking leads to better decision-making. Better decisions lead to better outcomes. Better outcomes lead to a better, happier, fuller, more productive life.

After hearing a number of engaging speakers at a university conference, I began teaching weekly critical thinking classes at a large men's prison. Over the years, I have written a goodly number of critical thinking studies for the benefit of women and men behind bars. Among these topics are

- the elements of thought

- maintaining intellectual standards
- logical fallacies
- thinking traps
- enhanced decision-making skills
- actions and consequences
- the proper role of emotions
- short term and long term goal setting
- addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention
- life skills
- vocational training
- the proper role of guilt
- negotiation/mediation/conflict resolution techniques
- stress management
- enhanced writing and speaking skills
- preparing an effective parole release plan

Who I am is not particularly important, but for the sake of this response, it is worth mentioning that I am, first and foremost, a Christian and a member of the clergy. My faith defines who I am. My worldview has been shaped by the teachings of Christ and a literal interpretation of the Bible. My theology is evangelical, and, as previously mentioned, I hold to the historic doctrines of the Christian faith.

In a recent visit to a major critical thinking website, I was left with an uneasy sense that women and men of faith are unwelcome among the ranks of this group of critical thinkers. Their barbed hostility toward religion was subtle but sure. This raises a good question: Can a thinking person be a person of faith? Rather than offering a broad, definitive answer to this thorny problem, I will simply attempt to justify my own reasons for adhering to the Christian faith.

During His earthly ministry, Jesus gave His audiences a number of astounding, startling, never-before-heard teachings--novel teachings, gracious teachings, radical teachings,

voice-of-God teachings—teachings unlike those ever offered by Israel’s most celebrated rabbis (John 7:46). He spoke like no ordinary man, for He was no ordinary man. To the hardened religious establishment, His teachings were subversive and condemning, but to those who hungered for God, His words brought comfort and joy. Two thousand years later, hardened souls still find His teachings subversive while humbled souls look to Him for love, forgiveness, salvation, and hope for now and throughout the endless ages to come.

I marvel at the words of Jesus. His teachings are singular. His teachings are incomparable. His teachings are authoritative. Never has there been anyone like Jesus.

But there is more to His teachings. During His earthly ministry, Jesus made a number of startling personal declarations. He boldly and unapologetically claimed to be the Son of God, One with God, and God Himself. As C.S. Lewis reminded us, a good man does not go about claiming to be God unless, of course, He is God. And if He is not God, then Jesus is a liar or a lunatic. There is no middle ground. You cannot hail Him as a good man, a great moral teacher, or a prophet of God while denying His claim to deity. Jesus is God or He is a fake, a fraud, and a phony. Take your pick, but know there is no third option.

As for me, I believe Him. I believe that Jesus is God who clothed Himself in human flesh and pitched His tent among us (John 1). One reason, but not the only reason, that I believe in the deity of Jesus is that I cannot attribute His voice-of-God teachings to that of a pathological liar or a wild-eyed madman. His words are steeped in truth and righteousness. The more I study His teachings, the more I believe the real mad men are those who staunchly oppose Him.

By the by, those closest to Jesus—those who lived with Him, ate with Him, traveled with Him—those who knew Him personally and intimately came to recognize His deity. Based upon the words of Thomas, often dubbed Doubting Thomas, there was not a trace of doubt in his mind as to the deity of Jesus. Upon seeing the resurrected Jesus, Thomas

cried out, "You are the Lord of me, and You are the God of me (John 20:28)." To deny the deity of Jesus is to deny the teachings of His Apostles. It is worth remembering that, with the exception of John, who was exiled on a lonely desert island, the Apostles of Jesus died martyrs' deaths. The best of men will die for the truth. The best of men will not willingly or knowingly die for a fabricated myth.

All of this brings us to the one central and inescapable question that Jesus first posed to Peter: "Who do men say that I am?" Logic and reason demand that I attribute the teachings and reputation of Jesus to none other than the one and only God/man.

If God is not subject to the limitations of time, then all future events are known to Him. You and I experience time linearly--moment by moment, minute by minute, hour by hour, day by day, and year by year, but all times are present before God. We find convincing evidence of this in the Bible. Notable events in the life of Jesus, such as His birthplace, His betrayal at the hands of Judas, and the manner of His cruel death on a cross, were foretold with pinpoint accuracy hundreds of years before the actual events occurred. The prophet Isaiah described the crucifixion some eight hundred years before a band of jeering Roman soldiers drove spikes into the hands and feet of Jesus. Here are just a few examples of the hundreds of prophetic writings found in Scripture. Such an amazing number of accurately fulfilled prophecies cannot be attributed to mere chance, accident, or luck. Any attempt at explaining away these flawless prophetic writings is mere muddle-minded foolishness or, even worse, wishful thinking conceived in a cynical, hardened heart. Only an all-knowing God can foresee the future. After years of study, I have concluded that the Bible is God's uniquely inspired word. To ignore such towering evidence defies sound logic and reason. I believe. In truth, I cannot help but believe.

My next line of reasoning may sound somewhat subjective, but when I consider the countless changed lives of women and men who wholeheartedly accepted the Gospel of Jesus Christ, my faith is bolstered and emboldened. I have known people steeped in bitterness, despair, addiction, and anger whose lives were radically transformed by God. In my own life, the sense of dread brought about by what I had perceived as the

meaninglessness of life vanished when I finally surrendered my stubborn will to Him. No longer do I wake up wondering about my purpose in life. At last, I know beyond doubt who I am, why I am here, what I am to do, how I will do it, and where I am going. My entire worldview changed once I began seeing people, events, and circumstances through eyes that had been transformed by God.

It is true that much evil has been rendered by women and men who professed faith in God. This is hardly surprising as Jesus warned against false prophets who would invoke His holy name, but more evil has been brought about by bloodthirsty tyrants whose cruel reigns were hallmarked by misery, torture, and murder. If you remind me of the Spanish Inquisition, I will remind you that Josef Stalin, a staunch atheist, murdered five million of his own countrymen. Hitler, who condemned the Bible as “the Jews’ book of lies,” filled even more graves than Stalin. Behind the barbed wire and guard towers of Auschwitz, more innocent women, men, and children died in a single hour than during the entirety of the Spanish Inquisition.

I am reminded, too, that great leaders, thinkers, educators, healers, and social advocates found their motivation in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Without diminishing the importance of his work in civil rights, Dr. Martin Luther King considered himself, first and foremost, a purveyor of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us not forget that Dr. King was an ordained clergyman and, indeed, a Christian martyr who died for his faith. Francis Bacon, the author of the scientific method, and Galileo Galilei, who played a pivotal role in the scientific revolution that occurred in the Renaissance, were men of great faith. Today, there are scores of notable scientists, researchers, astronomers, physicists, mathematicians, and botanists, who unapologetically adhere to the teachings of the Bible. George Washington and Abraham Lincoln, this nation’s two greatest leaders, were devout Christians. Florence Nightingale, who answered God’s call to care for the sick and dying, was an ardent follower of Jesus Christ. In more recent times, Mother Teresa’s mission in Calcutta was established for the sake of bringing the hope and comfort of Jesus to the forgotten souls perishing from hunger, disease, poverty, and squalor.

In contrast to Florence Nightingale and Mother Teresa, we have Margaret Sanger, founder of Planned Parenthood and an enemy of the Gospel, who referred to blacks, Jews, Arabs, and American Indians as “human weeds.” In my estimation, atheism has attracted history’s most unsavory characters. Caesar Nero, who ordered the death of the Apostle Paul, took great pleasure in the cruel torture of Christians. Two thousand years later, the North Korean regime considers the distribution of Bibles as a crime worthy of death. As for Stalin, he had 100,000 priests, monks, and nuns executed in a single year. I am not comfortable in the company of Pontius Pilate, Caesar Nero, Napoleon, Adolf Hitler, Josef Stalin, Pol Pot, Mao Tse Tung, and Margaret Sanger. Atheism should watch its membership more carefully. Granted, much evil can be laid at the feet of greedy, phony, and twisted zealots who claim an allegiance to Jesus, but our worst hypocrite cannot compare to a Stalin or a Hitler. Show me an Armani-clad televangelist who bilks unsuspecting widows of their savings, and I will show you a godless tyrant who subdues opposition with chemical weapons and secret police.

Until you can prove that Jesus was a pathological liar, and that the Bible is riddled with historical, doctrinal, and prophetic error, please do not tell me that I cannot be a true critical thinker and a follower of Jesus Christ. The two are not mutually exclusive, but if you insist that they are, then I have good reason to question *your* critical thinking abilities.

I am no physicist and, as such, I must not pretend to speak authoritatively of matters beyond my comprehension, but, as mere mortals, you and I live in a four-dimensional space/time world, yet physicists tell us there are at least eleven and, perhaps, twenty-six dimensions. In other words, there are realities you and I cannot perceive through our natural senses. As God is not subject to time and space, He would have authority over all dimensions and possess unlimited power. If He chose to conceal Himself from us, He could do so and we would never know of Him, but as He elected to reveal Himself in His written word, through the Incarnation of His Son, and by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, we can know God.

Owing to the narrowness of your thinking and the limitations of a mortal mind, you cannot perceive realities outside of time and space, yet you boldly declare there is no God. Have you explored other dimensions? Are you knowledgeable of worlds that cannot be seen, heard, touched, or experienced by primitive mortal senses? You are as a blind man who stands beneath the night sky and says, “There is no moon. There are no stars. There is only nothingness.”

Your inability to see does not alter the truth.

Forgiveness is an act of the will, and the will can function regardless of the temperature of the heart.

--Corrie Ten Boom

Question 166: What does the Bible say about government-sponsored “harm reduction” methods such as “safe rooms” for addicts and needle exchange programs?

Answer: Having spent years teaching addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention at a men’s prison and an urban homeless shelter, I have given considerable thought to “harm reduction” methods such as needle exchange programs. Beyond the inherent dangers of narcotics, dirty needles pose additional health risks, but providing addicts with taxpayer-funded needles might be seen as a governmental nod of approval. I once walked into a room in which a dead woman lay with a needle still plunged into her arm. The cleanliness of the needle was a moot point—the heroin killed her. I cannot say clean needles necessarily encourage drug use, but needle exchange programs do not *discourage* substance abuse.

Pragmatists believe questionable methods are justified by favorable end results. As a Christian, I do not believe the ends justify the means. For this reason, I am inclined to disfavor state-sponsored “safe rooms” and needle exchange programs.

Many years ago, I met with a mom and her teenage daughter who were active in the prolife movement. As abortion is a barbaric affront against the sanctity of human life, I was anxious to learn how this mother/daughter duo was standing up to the local Planned Parenthood abortion clinic. Fifteen minutes into the meeting, I learned the mother had been providing free condoms to minors. I could hardly believe my ears. "Am I understanding you correctly?" I asked. "Are you giving condoms to teenage boys and girls who are not your own?"

She justified her loathsome behavior by saying the condoms were preventing unplanned pregnancies, hence, she was doing her part to end abortion. Frankly, if I learned someone was supplying my teenager with birth control, I would have the meddling dimwit arrested. We do not use sin to stop sin. I left the meeting believing these two prolife activists were as morally corrupt as their pro-abortion adversaries.

Until someone can show me the Bible justifies pragmatism, I will oppose needle exchange programs.

Question 167: I am a Christian who has been struggling with severe mental health issues my entire life. In search of relief, I have tried meditative scripture reading, formal Bible study, prayer, medication, psychiatrists, multiple counseling methods, various diets, and exercise. About all that can be said is that I have not yet attempted suicide. What is wrong? Am I at fault? Why am I not enjoying the abundant life Jesus promises to those who give their lives to Him?

Answer: How I wish the two of us could discuss your situation over coffee, but as this is not possible, I will keep my response conversational. I do love stimulating conversation over good coffee. Do you? Let me first take you to a passage penned by the Apostle Paul. After briefly describing a supernatural experience, Paul penned these words...

Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities. For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me to be or hears from me. And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure. Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me. And He said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong (II Corinthians 12:5-10 NKJV).

Of our Lord's servants, I suppose none worked harder or suffered more than the Apostle Paul. As to intellect, even Peter acknowledged the depth and weightiness of Paul's writings (II Peter 3:16). This is purely subjective, of course, but I believe outside of our Lord Jesus, Paul is the greatest intellect who has ever lived, yet Paul was stricken by an infirmity, a "thorn in the flesh" so to speak, that troubled him until his death at the hands of Caesar Nero.

What was this infirmity? Many think the Apostle Paul suffered from poor vision. I am inclined to agree, but when he petitioned God for healing, the Lord replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness."

Rather than healing you, God may be saying, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." This is conjecture on my part; in no way do I have any divinely bestowed insight into your circumstances, but perhaps God wants you perpetually leaning upon Him. It is a thought.

Many years ago, a young man invited me to visit his home church. As it happened, he belonged to a congregation that followed the teachings of Kenneth Copeland, Kenneth Hagin, Benny Hinn, Oral Roberts, and other proponents of the positive confession

movement. In a nutshell, the positive confession movement teaches unlimited health and financial prosperity to those who have sufficient faith. Dubbed “the name it and claim it movement,” these Scripture-twisting proponents of unbridled greed and materialism look down upon the poor and chronically ill as lacking in faith. During the sermon, the pastor pointed to a paraplegic teenage girl in the crowd and said, “When you are ready to receive God’s truths, you will climb out of that wheelchair.” In other words, he was saying this child was bound to that wheelchair because of her lack of faith. I could scarcely believe my ears. In doing so, he heaped condemnation on this dear child. As to that preacher, I pray the Lord soundly rebuked him for his sulfur-scented verbal nonsense.

I have met healthy and wealthy pagans and I have known sincere women and men of faith plagued by very real problems. Do not allow anyone to condemn you for your struggles.

Again, it may be that you and the sweet little paraplegic teenage girl are among the special league of suffering saints to whom our Lord God says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Despite your struggles and calamities, you cling to Him. It is easy to praise God when all is well, but only mature saints lift up His name in the midst of their sorrows. Perhaps you are one of these saints.

The Apostle Paul’s life was a life of pain, hunger, loneliness, hardship, suffering, incarceration, danger, and the ever-present threat of death, yet he continued laboring for the Lord Jesus. If you are not actively engaged in ministry, please go to the Lord and ask Him what He would have you do. If you are not involved in ministry, I will suggest that you should be, for you have something to offer. The Lord can make use of your talents, skills, and abilities. In serving Him, the quality of your life will be enhanced.

Perhaps this time next year, I will hear how the Lord is using you despite the hardships you face.

Question 168: Did God send the lazy servant in Matthew 25 to hell?

Answer: Before we discuss your question, let us carefully examine the text.

(Jesus said,) “For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’ His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’

“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’

“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed. So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received

back my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.

'For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 25:14-30 NKJV)."

Okay, let us say the servants represent three kinds of people we might find in a typical church. The first two are genuine believers who love the Lord Jesus and serve Him with joy and gladness. One leads a small group Bible study and the other cares for the wee ones in the church nursery. Both are faithful believers who make good use of the opportunities God has placed before them. Their Bibles are well worn from study. They never grumble or complain when the collection plate is passed about, for they consider giving a blessing. No one doubts their sincerity, for both reflect the goodness of their Savior.

But, say, who is this third person sitting drowsily on the back pew? His thirteen year old Bible looks brand new. Other congregants often forget his name, for his church attendance is rather sketchy. Though he earns a good living, his total giving in the last six months would equal the cost of a fourteen inch thin crust pizza and a two liter bottle of soda. He does not know enough to teach, and he does not care enough to serve in a more menial capacity.

Do you think this lazy pew-sitter loves Jesus? Do you think the well-being of the saints concerns him? Do you think he gives much thought to eternity?

Let me pose another question: If this man goes out of his way to avoid service to Jesus while ignoring the needs of others, why would he want to go to Heaven? As I see it, he would be much happier spending eternity with his own kind rather than dwelling endlessly

with the Lord Jesus and His saints. If he does not love Jesus down here, why would we think he would love Jesus up there?

All who enter hell are there by their own choosing. Logic says no damned soul would be happy in the never-ending company of Jesus and His people.

Let me leave you with these words from C.S. Lewis: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it...In the long run the answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell, is itself a question: What are you asking God to do? To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does."

Have I answered your question? I hope that I have.

Question 169: Have you heard about the Well to Hell hoax? How do silly myths like this get started? Why are some Christians so gullible? How do we minister to skeptics and non-believers who have been exposed to lying preachers who pervert God's truths?

Answer: Let me begin by saying I am delighted by the opportunity of addressing your most insightful inquiry. With God's guidance, I will give you a sound, biblically-based answer.

During my teaching ministry, I have made an ongoing effort to demonstrate basic and practical critical thinking skills to my students. Critical thinkers are those who think about the quality of their thinking for the purpose of improving their thinking. Better thinking leads to better decision-making. Better decision-making leads to better outcomes. Just as we

can enhance our overall physical health and well-being with exercise and diet, we can improve our minds by employing logic and reason. As most of my students have been prison inmates and/or substance abusers, I have seen firsthand the woefully disastrous results born of bad decision-making. Logical people do not pump heroin in their veins or hold up liquor stores with handguns.

Many years ago, a not-so-terribly-bright relative phoned me about the so-called *Well to Hell* story in which a microphone lowered into a deep hole supposedly captured the tormented wails of the damned. This hoax was first reported in the United States by the Trinity Broadcasting Network. Of course, gullibility among Christian believers is nothing new; otherwise, these pension grabbing televangelists with their private jets and Armani suits would be out of business. Besides the *Well to Hell* myth, we have a dozen or so ordained hucksters with best-selling books about their supernatural visits to Heaven. To those who are willing to check their brains in at the Gate of Nonsense, let us remember that the Apostle Paul, who was temporarily caught up to Heaven, was not allowed to write about his startling, out-of-this-world experience (II Corinthians 12:1-6). With this in mind, thinking people must wonder why God muzzled the Apostle Paul, the New Testament's most prolific writer, while allowing some toothy TV preacher with a \$250 haircut to chronical a sojourn into the land of golden streets and pearly gates. In case the body of Jesus Christ is not paying attention, a mocking world laughs at such fanciful, fanatical follies. Many non-believers sincerely think Christianity is a religion for gullible, slack-jawed nincompoops and, frankly, who can fault them?

Of course, non-believers are just as gullible. Consider the legions of women and men who esteem political correctness over truth and feeling over fact. George Orwell rightfully warned the day would come when truth would become the new hate speech. As two ready examples of worldly muddle-mindedness, Darwinian evolution and climate change, though sorely lacking in verifiable evidence, prove beyond doubt stupidity abounds in the secular camp, too.

I can give you three reasons why so many Christians are ready to believe *Well to Hell* nonsense:

1. Biblical illiteracy
2. Biblical illiteracy
3. Biblical illiteracy

Christians who know the Bible know better than to believe these phony hucksters who pollute the Christian media. Contrariwise, Christians ignorant of God's word are fair game among the false prophets who financially profit from the clueless.

But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away! For of this sort are those who creep into households and make captives of gullible women loaded down with sins, led away by various lusts, always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth. Now as Jannes and Jambres resisted Moses, so do these also resist the truth: men of corrupt minds, disapproved concerning the faith; but they will progress no further, for their folly will be manifest to all, as theirs also was (II Timothy 3:1-9 NKJV).

How do we minister to unbelievers who are convinced the "name it and claim it" crowd represents the true essence of Christianity? The Apostle Paul said, "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth (II Timothy 2:15 NKJV)." We combat lies with truth. We expose folly with logic. We tear down nonsense with reason. Even so, I am learning many people prefer living in their world of make-believe and cower in the face of truth. Perhaps there is a measure of bliss in ignorance, for many find temporary comfort in their lack of spiritual discernment. Of course, all this wholesale ignorance comes at a great price, for lying lips are an abomination to the Lord (Proverbs 12:22). I do not see the gates of Heaven swinging wide for those who deceive.

Remember, too, that the Lord's genuine followers hear His voice. Jesus said, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me (John 10:27 NKJV)." Those who have little regard for the truth must belong to someone other than Jesus.

Question 170: I am struggling with an addictive sin. Should I attempt giving up my addictive sinful behavior cold turkey (which seems impossible), or might I break free of this sinful habit gradually?

Answer: A thief stood before a church congregation and boasted, "For years, I have earned my living snatching purses at the railway station. On a typical day, I stole ten to twelve purses, but now that I belong to Jesus Christ and am indwelled by the Holy Spirit, I never snatch more than five or six purses a day!"

Please do not think I am unsympathetic. I, too, have wrestled with addictive sin and this can be an ongoing battle, but if the Bible teaches a gradual turning away from sin, relevant passages supporting such a notion are unknown to me.

Recently, a friend announced she was giving up cigarettes by a gradual reduction in the number of cigarettes she smoked. As an ex-smoker, I knew her plan was doomed to fail, and, as I expected, she was back to her usual consumption of tobacco within forty-eight hours.

All addictions must be approached differently. For years, I worked with alcoholics and substance abusers and believe me, I never knew anyone who overcame alcohol, heroin, cocaine, or crack by some sort of gradual, tapering-off method. As to tobacco, most smoking cessation experts agree that using a nicotine substitute, such as gum or lozenges, is preferable to quitting cold turkey or the doomed tapering-off method. Likewise, an overeater does not give up food entirely. A young woman I know, who recently lost seventy pounds, accomplished her remarkable weight loss goal by adopting

healthier eating habits. Obviously, addressing destructive eating habits is not entirely like dealing with a raging cocaine addiction.

As your letter is intentionally vague, I cannot give you a definitive answer, but I hope you are not thinking like our muddle-minded thief who suggested the Lord was honored by the reduction in the number of purses he snatched in the course of a day.

If you are inclined to write back with more clarity as to the nature of this secret sin, I might be able to offer better counsel. Regardless, confess your sin openly to God and ask Him to guide you to freedom. Let me suggest, too, that you begin a verse by verse study in the Apostle Paul's two letters to the church in Corinth. In doing so, you will soon discover carnality among Christian believers is a two thousand year old problem.

Question 171: I have a friend who says, "I don't need a boyfriend, because I have the love of God," and "Why should I worry about finding a husband, because I have a relationship with God?" What is the difference between divine love and mortal love?

Answer: I heard a story of a little boy who feared going to bed because of a raging thunderstorm. The clap of thunder and the flashes of lightning outside his bedroom window frightened the young lad. His mother tried reassuring him by saying, "You have no reason to fear. God will be with you."

"Yes," the child agreed, "but what I need right now is someone with a face!"

As believers, our relationship with our Creator is different than our relationship with others. Experientially speaking, I can talk to God about matters that I could never share with my parents, siblings, daughter, co-workers, or friends. God knows me better than anyone else and He will never steer me in the wrong direction. Even so, there are times when I need another face--a human voice--someone like me who wants to share a pizza, enjoy conversation over coffee, or someone with whom I can relive past events.

Our relationship with God is a unique relationship.

Not all human relationships are the same. My relationship with my daughter (a bright, beautiful, witty young woman) is different from my relationship with my mother and father. And my relationship with a close friend is different from my relationship with either my sister or brother, but in all these relationships, there is the bond of love that ties us together. As Christian believers, we should be known by our love for others (John 13:35).

During His earthly ministry, our Lord Jesus had many friends. Yes, He had the love of His Father, but He enjoyed the love and comradery of His family and friends.

Human relationships can fail. There can be misunderstandings. Hearts may grow cold. And there is death. Death separates wives from their husbands, children from their parents, and lifelong friends from one another, but the love of God will never fail us.

God created us for community. God ordained marriage and family and friendships. He intended us to have loving relationships with others. We are to have a healthy, vibrant relationship with God, and we are to have healthy, vibrant relationships with others. This is not an either/or situation. God would have us enjoying many healthy, loving relationships.

When you and I die and enter Heaven, we will come to know legions of angels created at the dawn of time as well as women and men from every land and every historical period. We will meet humble coachmen and housemaids from Victorian England, weather-beaten shepherds who tended their flocks in ancient Israel, slaves buried in forgotten graves whose lives were spent in toil under the blistering Alabama sun, early Christian converts who lived in bustling northern Africa during the time of Augustine, faithful monks who meticulously copied the Bible by hand prior to the invention of Gutenberg's printing press, and selfless Christian martyrs who gave their lives bringing

the Gospel of Jesus Christ to hostile lands. Despite our geographical, racial, cultural, and generational differences, we will be cherished brothers and sisters in the family of God.

Will I meet my grandchild who unexpectedly died in the womb? Most certainly! And what about ancestors who came before us? I have an uncle who was killed in combat during World War II. He died on French soil shortly after the Normandy Invasion. From all I have heard, he was a remarkable young man and, friend, I will know him in the endless ages to come. I strongly suspect we will never meet a stranger in Heaven.

Our futures will be hallmarked by everlasting love and relationships that will never grow cold or die. Say, God is really good to us, isn't He?

Question 172: I love my five-year-old nephew very much. I want him to know Jesus, but what if God does not choose him to be saved?

Answer: My anxious friend, who or what has caused you to doubt the goodness of God? Are you to think our loving, merciful, compassionate Heavenly Father would turn a young child away? Heaven forbid! To end this confusion, let us begin with a passage that is familiar to most Christians:

Then they brought little children to Him, that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. But when Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God. Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it." And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them (Mark 10:13-16 NKJV).

Those who sought to hinder the wee ones from coming to our Lord Jesus were His disciples—and He gave His followers a sound rebuke for their misguided actions. The Lord Jesus does not make a habit of giving little boys and girls the old heave-ho.

Everyone who calls on the Name of the Lord will be saved (Romans 10:13). Everyone is everyone, right? I see no disclaimers here—no ifs, ands, buts, or howsoever. Again, the Bible says *everyone* who calls on His Name will be saved. Do not bother looking for fine print or sneaky little exclusionary clauses. No one who comes to the Lord Jesus for salvation is sent away empty-handed.

Do not be misled. Those who focus on predestination while ignoring man's free will and those who focus on man's free will while ignoring God's sovereignty both err. God's sovereignty and man's free will are not at odds. There is no contradiction. God is sovereign. Man is a free moral agent. Both statements are true. This is not an either/or situation.

Share the Gospel with your nephew. Introduce him to Jesus now, and, in doing so, never doubt the goodness of God.

Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.
--Martin Luther

Question 173: Why did God create mosquitoes?

Answer: Here are some interesting facts about mosquitoes.

- As “vectors” for such dangerous diseases as Malaria, Zika and Dengue, mosquitoes may be responsible for more than one million deaths annually.
- Only female mosquitoes draw blood.
- A mosquito can consume three times its body weight in blood.
- Mosquitoes are rather slow—they fly at speeds under 2 mph.

Why did God create mosquitoes? Let me take you to the Book of Genesis for an answer:

Then to Adam He (God) said, “Because you have listened to the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree about which I commanded you, saying, ‘You shall not eat from it’;

Cursed is the ground because of you;
With hard labor you shall eat from it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall grow for you;
Yet you shall eat the plants of the field;
By the sweat of your face
You shall eat bread,
Until you return to the ground,
Because from it you were taken;
For you are dust,
And to dust you shall return (Genesis 3:17-19 NASB).”

Prior to man’s attempt at usurping God’s authority, earth was a paradise free of disease and vermin—and no mosquitoes. This is speculation on my part, but I believe, after the curse was placed on creation, some formerly useful insect was transformed into the dangerous flying blood-sucker responsible for more deaths than any other insect or animal.

Now for some good news: Jesus is coming back. He is coming back to fix this broken world. His will be a world without poverty, disease, crime, hunger, war, death, and, of course, mosquitoes. We have made a mess of this planet, but our Lord Jesus will restore the earth to its former paradisal state.

Question 174: Through the power of Jesus, I walked away from sinful, addictive behavior, but since breaking free, I have been experiencing bad dreams that cause me

to relive my formerly sinful ways. Can demons control our dreams? How can I rid myself of these unwelcome dreams?

Answer: Do not fear. If you belong to Jesus Christ, the devil can never reclaim you. Consider this passage from the Book of Romans:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or trouble, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? Just as it is written:

"For Your sake we are killed all day long;
We were regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."

But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:35-39 NASB).

With this said, the devil is not prone to giving up without a fight; he cannot steal you from the love of God, but he can rob you of your joy, tempt you into giving in to your deepest cravings, and move to spoil the legitimacy of your Christian testimony. You cannot forfeit your salvation, but if you are careless, you will accomplish very little for the Kingdom of God. Our works cannot save us, but our works prove the depth of our faith. Unless you are watchful, the devil will strip you naked and your life will have counted for little.

C.S. Lewis said the Bible knows nothing of a solitary religion. We are made for community. Surround yourself with mature Christian believers who will love you, nurture you, pray for you, stand with you, teach you, and uplift you. Let me illustrate this point with a story taken from the Old Testament Book of Exodus:

Now Amalek (an enemy of God's people) came and fought with Israel in Rephidim. And Moses said to Joshua, "Choose us some men and go out, fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the rod of God in my hand." So

Joshua did as Moses said to him, and fought with Amalek. And Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. And so it was, when Moses held up his hand, that Israel prevailed; and when he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands became heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. And Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side, and the other on the other side; and his hands were steady until the going down of the sun. So Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Exodus 17:8-13 NKJV).

You are facing a battle, and, like Moses, you need others to sustain you. How can a Christian forsake the comradery of like-minded believers and avoid becoming devil fodder (Hebrews 10:25)? You and I were created for community.

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which

indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Colossians 3:1-17 ESV).

What can we garner from this passage?

- Let us set our thoughts on that which is godly and edifying—not on that which is earthly and carnal.
- We must put to death earthly passions that ought not have footholds in our lives. You and I are to renounce thoughts of evil as soon as they come to mind. Dwelling on our former sinful pleasures is a quick way of falling back into old habits.
- We are to shed our former selves for the “new you” and the “new me” in Christ Jesus. May we be who He intends us to be.
- Let us demonstrate kindness, compassion, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, and a willingness to help others. May we manifest our love in tangible, recognizable ways.
- We must allow the peace of God to hallmark our lives.
- We are to live in the community of other believers.
- Let us be thankful.
- May we not be biblically illiterate, rather, we are to internalize the Holy Scriptures for our growth and edification.
- Let us praise God. He is surely worthy.
- In all that you and I do that is good, we are to do this in the Name of the Lord Jesus.

Finally, before retiring for the evening, ask God to place His hedge of protection around you. Ask Him.

Live free. Be free. Remember, demons are mere creatures whose power cannot compare to the unlimited, irresistible, almighty power of our great God and Savior.

Question 175: How do you know when you are putting someone before God? My boyfriend and I got together recently and there are times when I know I love God more, but other times I wonder if Satan making me think I love my boyfriend more than I love God. We read the Bible and stuff together, so is Satan just trying to split us up?

Answer: You have posed an interesting question. No doubt, many other young couples have shared your concern. For an answer, let me take you to a familiar passage.

Then the Pharisees went and plotted how they might entangle Him in His talk. And they sent to Him their disciples with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that You are true, and teach the way of God in truth; nor do You care about anyone, for You do not regard the person of men. Tell us, therefore, what do You think? Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”

But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, “Why do you test Me, you hypocrites? Show Me the tax money.”

So they brought Him a denarius (a coin). And He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?”

They said to Him, “Caesar’s.”

And He said to them, “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they had heard these words, they marveled, and left Him and went their way (Matthew 22:15-22 NKJV).

What can we learn from this? Give God the time and attention He deserves, and give your boyfriend the time and attention he deserves. Do not rob God of the duty and devotion rightfully due Him, but this is not to say you must ignore your boyfriend. Remember, the more you love God, the more you can love others.

If you and your boyfriend get married one day, you can show your gratitude for this godly wisdom by naming your first child after me. By the by, the name is Michael—that is M-I-C-H-A-E-L. Only kidding! Only kidding! I wish you and your boyfriend well, my young friend.

Question 176: A Christian friend, who was due to be released from prison, was just informed his parole has been revoked. This revocation was not due to misconduct. He had a job waiting at a nonprofit agency and, quite obviously, was eager to begin his new life. I met my friend while teaching at the men's prison. He is a sincere Christian believer who is capable of so much. Why, then, did God allow this to happen?

Answer: I, too, am shocked by this turn of events. It appeared as if you were all set to return and take your new position at the agency and then, at the last minute, all this changed.

You and I and even the parole board realize you are not a threat to anyone. On the contrary, you could be quite useful on the outside. The agency has a place for you (and God knows the agency could stand the influence of a genuine Christian), so why this?

Has God turned His back on you? Though you may feel this way, we both know God does not walk away from His sons and daughters. So why? Why this?

In the Book of Job, Job's friends attempt explaining the calamities that befell him. Job lost his property, his children, and his health. His wife told Job to curse God and die. His friends insisted there was secret sin in his life, but Job was guilty of no wrong doings. Indeed, it really looked as though God had turned His back on Job.

In a way, your situation compares with Job's troubles.

At the end of the book, God restores Job's fortunes and Job's friends, who insisted he must be guilty of some horrible deed, are silenced. And Job finally understands why he was called by God to suffer.

There is a reason for this. Not wishing to be like Job's insufferable friends, I am not going to give you any theories or conjectures. All I can say is God has a reason for all this.

Let me remind you, too, that Paul's ministry was effective even during those times when he was locked away in prison. One of my favorite books, II Timothy, was penned while Paul suffered in the infamous Mamertine Prison in Rome.

You have not been abandoned. You have not been forsaken. God is not angry with you. You are not a second class Christian. The devil will artfully make use of these circumstances to heap condemnation and doubt upon you, but his lies smell of sulfur and brimstone. Do not believe him. Jesus called him the "Father of Lies." You will learn nothing from him.

Like Job, the day will come when you understand why all this happened, and I strongly suspect that, like Job, you will then embrace that which is now so disappointing.

Today, we walk by faith rather than by sight. Tomorrow, we will walk by sight.

The Apostle Paul tells us not to grow weary in doing what is right, for in due season, we will reap a harvest if we do not throw in the towel. Harvest time is coming, my friend. You will reap abundantly, and the rewards will be exceedingly great.

Question 177: Many Christians say that lust is equivalent to adultery, but few would say that anger is equivalent to murder. I know that the Bible says that when we look at someone lustfully, we commit adultery in our hearts, but I cannot see how this would be as serious a sin as committing physical adultery. Someone who looks at another lustfully

has committed adultery, but yet the same does not apply to being angry and being a murderer. So just how can it be that lust is adultery, but anger is not murder?

Answer: You have asked a thought-provoking question. Let us begin our search for a reasonable, biblically-based answer by examining our Lord Jesus' words on this matter.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire. Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift. Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right 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 for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell (Matthew 5:21-30 NKJV emphasis mine).

During the four years I taught at a large men's prison, forty percent of those incarcerated were serving time for murder. I met many men who, in anger, while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, or during the commission of another crime, had taken the life of another, but I never met an inmate who had been convicted of nothing more than anger;

indeed, if anger were a felony, you and I and everyone I know and everyone you know would be behind bars.

The religious leaders of that time believed they were justified before God by adhering to their understanding of the Law and in the keeping of manmade traditions. I call this the Three Rs of Religion: rites, rules, and rituals. Do you recall the haughty Pharisee who boasted of his virtue while condemning the publican? Let us revisit this passage.

Now He (Jesus) also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and began praying this in regard to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, crooked, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to raise his eyes toward heaven, but was beating his chest, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other one; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted (Luke 18:9-14 NASB)."

We are not saved by being good. We are not justified based on our own deeds of righteousness (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Being good is never good enough. Imagine, then, someone boasting, "I am a decent sort of person. I have never harmed another, I have been faithful to my wife of thirty-seven years, I pay my taxes, and my credit rating is 769. When I die, why would God turn me away? Like I said, I am a decent, law-abiding person and not like those whoremongers who hang out in strip joints, or those bloody murderers locked away in prison."

Lust will send a person to hell as efficiently as adultery. Anger will condemn a person's soul as quickly and thoroughly as murder. Do not miss this point: We have all sinned, to one degree or another, and, as such, we all fall woefully short of God's standard of righteousness (Romans 3:23).

The disgruntled diner who erupts with anger because the restaurant server brought the wrong dish and the serial killer on death row both need Jesus if they are to escape the wrath to come (Hebrews 2:3, 4).

Say, have you placed your faith in Christ Jesus as Savior? In our Lord's own words, He invites you into His family saying, "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me. To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne (Revelation 3:19-21 NKJV)."

Question 178: What is the meaning of "thou anointest my head with oil" in Psalm 23?

Answer: I suppose Psalm 23 ranks among the most beloved passages in the scriptures. Let us revisit this beautiful song of praise:

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

Oil is often symbolic of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, of course, is God, the third Person of the Trinity, co-equal and co-existing with God the Father and God the Son. The pouring of a special anointing oil over one's head was a sign that this person had been called, or

set aside, according to God's will and purpose. One of the Holy Spirit's roles is equipping God's people to do His work.

King David had his enemies. There were those who hated and despised him. As you may recall, King Saul sought David's life. King Saul treated David as though he was a common outlaw--a criminal, no less! David had other enemies who sought his destruction. When David wrote of the Lord anointing his head with oil, David was declaring he was a man of God, called by God, and the anointing was proof that God had indeed chosen David as one of His holy saints.

Let me give you an example from Revelation 3. In this passage, the Lord Jesus is speaking comfort to the persecuted church in Philadelphia. The church in Philadelphia had been savagely tormented by ruthless enemies inspired by Satan--but Jesus promised those who persecuted the saints would one day bow in submission as proof that the Christian women and men in Philadelphia were the objects of God's love and affection. In other words, a day of judgment is coming when God will humiliate those who plotted evil against the saints as He elevates those who proved their love and faithfulness to our Lord Jesus Christ.

And this gets me back to Psalm 23. The anointing of David was proof positive that he was the object of God's deep and lasting affection. Come what may, God would never abandon David.

Have I answered your question? I hope I have!

Question 179: How do I break the cigarette habit?

Answer: I have been tobacco-free for more than twenty years and I will be the first to say quitting is never easy, but quitting is undoubtedly worth the effort. According to two smoking cessation experts whose workshop I attended, a nicotine substitute, such as a

nicotine infused chewing gum or a patch, enhances one's ability to break the habit. I am to understand nicotine, though addictive, is not particularly harmful. It is the tars and carbon monoxide in cigarette smoke that does so much harm to the body. As for my brother, sister, and me, all former cigarette smokers, we used Nicorette, a nicotine-laced gum, and we have all been tobacco-free for many years. Though vaping is frowned upon, I know people who successfully broke the cigarette habit by vaping with a nicotine-infused liquid.

I spent eight years working with alcoholics and drug addicts at an urban homeless shelter; nine out of ten of our resident clients were cigarette smokers. I am convinced tobacco, not marijuana, is the true "gateway drug."

The Apostle Paul wrote, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (Philippians 4:13 NKJV)." All things include breaking the tobacco habit. Go to God in prayer; tell Him you want to stop smoking. Ask for the strength to resist your body's cravings. Avail yourself of a nicotine substitute, for these products reduce the physical cravings.

At my age, had I continued smoking, I would likely suffer from emphysema or heart disease. By God's grace, I am active for my age, and I am not tethered to an oxygen tank. Believe me, friend, breaking the cigarette habit has its rewards.

Question 180: While dating my ex-girlfriend, we were having some trouble and our relationship was in turmoil. Once I was driving in my car and thinking about our troubled relationship, and there was a strong inner voice speaking to me, telling me to "make it work." I failed to heed to the inner voice's instructions, and we broke up. Now I look back and I see how my life is in a big mess as a result of not obeying that inner voice. I live in a dysfunctional home, and I need that girl to help me grow into the mature person I want to be. Apart from her, I cannot live independently. Now I am a prisoner in this

dysfunctional family, and I am stuck in sin as a result. Was this inner voice a command or a sign from God?

Answer: Based on a one hundred-forty word inquiry lacking in critical information, I do not believe I am qualified to act as your life coach, but allow me to make two or three key points based on the data I have.

Firstly, I am not impressed by inner voices. Our emotions and desires are often the sources of these inner voices, so let us be careful in attributing to God what may have been conjured by our own fertile imaginations.

Secondly, you need Bible study, prayer, corporate worship, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to grow as a person. Your ex-girlfriend may be an amazing young woman, but God gave us His Spirit, not girlfriends, so that we can become more Christ-like. Others can be a positive influence in our lives, but do not expect a girlfriend to make you strong and mature.

If you were the father of this young woman, would you want her yoked to a young man who, by his own admission, is “stuck in sin,” unable to live independently, and whose “life is in a big mess?” Do not take offense. I am not berating you—on the contrary, I am hoping you will come to understand that to be the kind of man God wants you to be, you will need to rely upon Him and not on a particular young lady.

Thirdly, if your dysfunctional family is holding you back, maybe it is time to break free. Bring this matter before God. He will guide you in the right direction (Proverbs 3:5, 6). Maybe it is His will that you further your education. Perhaps He would have you move to another city in order to distance yourself from your dysfunctional family. I am not God, and I am no one’s life coach, but I do know that God can help you reinvent your life.

The problem today is we have too many young men lacking in wisdom, maturity, determination, backbone, and fortitude. Just yesterday, I met a young woman whose

husband abandoned her and their young children. After the third child was born, he decided he no longer wanted to be a father. She is working, attending classes, and raising these wee ones on her own. What is he doing? He is not raising his children, that is he is doing. These boys in men's bodies spend too much time playing video games and gratifying their own desires at everyone else's expense.

God has given you this one and only life, so make the most of the opportunities He has given you. You will never find satisfaction and contentment until you are walking according to God's will.

Follow up to Question 180: The Bible claims that God created Eve as a helper for Adam. Isn't that equivalent to my need for a woman, which legitimizes that need?

Answer: Let us continue our conversation by first examining the relevant passage in Genesis.

Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him." Now out of the ground the Lord God had formed every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call them. And whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field. But for Adam there was not found a helper fit for him. So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

"This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
she shall be called Woman,
because she was taken out of Man."

Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed (Genesis 2:18-25 ESV).

When I was a young boy, my mom kept me clean, prepared my meals, taught me right from wrong, took me to church, kept me in school, loved me, invested her time and energy in me, and demonstrated true godliness by living an exemplary life. By God's grace, my mother is living and remains one of my few, real-world heroes. How well did she do her job? I tell people I may not be much, but I would be an even bigger blighter than I am were it not for God's grace and my saintly mother's dutiful upbringing.

Let's get back to Genesis. God did not create Eve to be Adam's nursemaid or his mother. The term helper implies someone who would be *in agreement* with Adam.

Please do not think I am belittling you, but I think you are looking for a girlfriend who will train you up to be a man and, friend, that is not a girlfriend's role.

Despite the politically correct attacks against the nuclear family, God created man to be the protector and provider. Unless I have misunderstood your words, I perceive you are looking for a woman to protect and to provide for you. Until you are strong enough to fulfill the role of a godly man, you are not ready to be a husband.

I am a devoted father; my wonderful daughter is the apple of my eye and I only want what is best for her. If you had a daughter, would you want her yoked to someone like you? Friend, most of my ministry has been devoted to serving women, and an overwhelming majority of the women under my care were or had been yoked to men who

- refused to work
- did not want to be involved in the care of their children
- preferred weed, booze, and partying to responsibility

Once, while addressing a group of male addicts, I angered my audience by saying, “The difference between many of you and a large pepperoni pizza is a pizza will feed a family of four, and you will not.”

Absentee fathers, abusive husbands, thugs, deadbeats, party animals, players, and spineless boys in men’s bodies have brought more women and children to ruin than all the ghastly diseases listed in a physician’s desk manual.

Ask God to make you the kind of man who is worthy of a good woman. God will honor that prayer, and when He does, you will make a special lady an amazing husband.

P.S. Are you attending a Bible-believing church? If not, you ought to be. Let me challenge you to have a frank and honest discussion with a mature, biblically literate pastor. Young men do well to learn from wise, seasoned Christian male mentors. Many of today's young men are being raised by rappers, actors, influencers, high-dollar athletes, and other such fools. Is it any wonder homes and families are falling apart?

Question 181: I desire to obey God and do his will, but my flesh wages war against me by enticing me to do things that I know are sinful. I say no to the flesh and don't do the things that I know are sinful, but I still feel tempted to do them. I have even tried praying to God to help me not to desire to do these things, but I still have this desire in me. What can I do to get rid of these desires?

Answer: Based on the biographical information you supplied, I might be fifty years older than you; my young friend, I, too, struggle with temptation on a daily basis. The flesh knows how to wage a fierce, protracted campaign. Do not be discouraged, for the Apostle Paul wrote,

After all, the Law itself is really concerned with the spiritual—it is I who am carnal, and have sold my soul to sin. In practice, what happens? My own behaviour baffles me. For I find myself not doing what I really want to do but doing what I really loathe. Yet surely if I do things that I really don't want to do, I am admitting that I really agree with the Law. But it cannot be said that "I" am doing them at all—it must be sin that has made its home in my nature. (And indeed, I know from experience that the carnal side of my being can scarcely be called the home of good!) I often find that I have the will to do good, but not the power. That is, I don't accomplish the good I set out to do, and the evil I don't really want to do I find I am always doing. Yet if I do things that I don't really want to do then it is not, I repeat, "I" who do them, but the sin which has made its home within me. When I come up against the Law I want to do good, but in practice I do evil. My conscious mind whole-heartedly endorses the Law, yet I observe an entirely different principle at work in my nature. This is in continual conflict with my conscious attitude, and makes me an unwilling prisoner to the law of sin and death. In my mind I am God's willing servant, but in my own nature I am bound fast, as I say, to the law of sin and death. It is an agonising situation, and who on earth can set me free from the clutches of my sinful nature? I thank God there is a way out through Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:14-25 Phillips).

Sound familiar? Even though we desire to do good, that stubborn, restless, unyielding, steel reinforced sin nature that has been with us since conception is not easily tamed.

Thankfully, Paul goes on to say there is no condemnation for those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus as Savior (Romans 8:1). This is welcome news, for if we had to be good enough to merit eternal life, we would never pass through the gates of the New Jerusalem; on the contrary, were it not for grace, you and I and everyone else would be eternally lost.

What can I tell you? We must continually lean upon our Lord Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit who indwells all believers, we can have some victories over the flesh, and

through prayer and Bible study, we will experience spiritual growth, but we will never achieve absolute sinless perfection on this side of eternity.

In our future glorified states, we will not have the burden of an inborn sin nature troubling us, so a better day is coming. Until then, let us cling tenaciously to Jesus who is mighty to save.

Do little things as if they were great, because of the majesty of the Lord Jesus Christ who dwells in thee.

- - Blaise Pascal

Question 182: What does one say to a friend suffering from substance abuse?

Answer: Addiction is a cruel master. Addiction robs its victims of their physical health, mental well-being, family, personal wealth and possessions, relationships, careers, and opportunities. Additionally, no one can serve the Lord Jesus while fettered and chained to narcotics and alcohol. Having worked with addicts and alcoholics for many years, I can tell you that substance abusers will stop at nothing, and I mean nothing, to satisfy their cravings. In the end, runaway addiction will lead its victims to a hospital bed, a prison cell, or a cold, dank grave.

What does one say to a friend in the grip of addiction? Nagging and berating an addict to come clean does not work. I know of no one who was nagged into sobriety, but you can take the addict to a place where healing is possible.

On one of those days, as he (Jesus) was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law were sitting there, who had come from every village of Galilee and Judea and from Jerusalem. And the power of the Lord was with him to heal. And behold, some men were bringing on a bed a man who was paralyzed, and they were seeking to bring him in and lay him before Jesus, but finding no way to bring him in, because of the crowd,

they went up on the roof and let him down with his bed through the tiles into the midst before Jesus. And when he saw their faith, he said, "Man, your sins are forgiven you." And the scribes and the Pharisees began to question, saying, "Who is this who speaks blasphemies? Who can forgive sins but God alone?" When Jesus perceived their thoughts, he answered them, "Why do you question in your hearts? Which is easier, to say, 'Your sins are forgiven you,' or to say, 'Rise and walk'? But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins"—he said to the man who was paralyzed—"I say to you, rise, pick up your bed and go home." And immediately he rose up before them and picked up what he had been lying on and went home, glorifying God. And amazement seized them all, and they glorified God and were filled with awe, saying, "We have seen extraordinary things today (Luke 5:17-26)."

Celebrate Recovery is a Christ-centered addiction, recovery, and relapse prevention program. It is here that your friend will meet Jesus and learn to live without alcohol, cocaine, crack, heroin, and other dangerous drugs. Be like the friends of the paraplegic and take this person to where he or she can find salvation and freedom.

Question 183: What does it mean to walk according to God's will?

Answer: This is the first Bible verse my daughter memorized.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV).

God has a plan for your life. Indeed, God has a plan for everyone's life; unfortunately, most people never bother stopping by to get their heavenly marching orders. People tend to drift along taking life as it comes, never stopping to think God has a plan that offers fulfillment and purpose in addition to salvation and eternal life. What is God's plan for

your life? I certainly do not know, for this is a matter between Him and you, but I do know God's plan does not include

- ongoing confusion
- timidity
- fear
- anxiety
- uncertainty
- failure heaped upon failure
- meaninglessness
- despair
- isolation

I have told you what I know; now it is time for you to hear what He has to say to you.

Question 184: Once I understand how the Lord wants to use my life, how do I go about making this happen?

Answer: You have posed an excellent question.

Commit your works to the Lord,
And your plans will be established (Proverbs 16:3 NASB).

A few years ago, I took a group of clients in my care to the university I attended decades earlier. Fresh out of high school, I was a lazy, short-sighted, wholly uninspired college student. I majored in under-performance and mediocrity. I say this to my shame and regret. On this particular day, one of the university's librarians had arranged computer training classes for a group of women in our substance abuse program. After seeing that our clients had settled into the classroom for their assigned training, I decided to take a walk about campus and revisit my old school.

As I strolled about enjoying the sunshine and scenery, my imagination went wild. "If I were nineteen again," I imagined, "I would join a number of academic clubs. And if I were nineteen again, I would be active in campus organizations. If I were nineteen again, I would camp out in the library and make straight A's." As my thoughts soared to lofty heights, a pretty young girl crossed my path. "If I were nineteen, I would date a pretty little girl just like her." Okay, I have a good imagination.

"But I am not nineteen, and I will never again be nineteen," I reasoned, "so why waste these precious brain cells on that which will never be. Rather than thinking what I would do if I were nineteen, let me focus on what I can do today that will glorify Jesus Christ, help others, and provide real fulfillment." And so, I did. Instead of futilely dreaming of impossibilities, I returned to my office and penned an article that was later used to teach women and men how to live free of alcohol and narcotics.

Long term goals are most often achieved through a series of short term accomplishments. Let me explain. During my time working for an urban rescue mission, I served as a field education supervisor; in other words, I worked with student volunteers from several area colleges and universities. Often, my students showed their appreciation by asking me to attend their graduation ceremonies. In order to graduate, these students had successfully completed a series of rigorous academic studies. Over the course of several years, my interns had attended countless lectures, poured over volumes of notes, read shelves of books, wrote endless papers, and passed grueling tests. Tough? You bet, but almost any worthwhile goal demands sacrifice. To see their faces as they received their diplomas proved beyond doubt their hard work was already paying impressive dividends.

Once you know what God would have you do with your one and only life, you must work your way from start to finish. I knew a flighty teenage girl from our church who said she wanted to be schoolteacher, but she refused to study, frequently skipped classes, and eventually dropped out of school. Today, she serves waffles and greasy sausages at a twenty-four hour diner. She dreamed of being a teacher, but she refused to work toward that goal.

People do not plan to fail, but they fail to plan.

As for me, I keep an ongoing log of the day's accomplishments. I cannot regain the precious years that I lost as a slothful young man, but I can make proper use of whatever remaining time God grants me.

Keep a log. Write down your God-given goals. Stay focused. Do not become overly frustrated by setbacks. Stay on track. Do not permit videogames and television to gobble up your valuable time. Keep marching forward. If anyone retreats, see that the fleeing party is Satan.

By the way, as you pursue the dreams God has for you, spend time reading from the Book of Proverbs. A daily dose of wisdom will keep you energized and on track.

Live so that when you are my age, your regrets are few. I have told you the truth, but what good is truth if you fail to act on it? My challenge is simple: Do what is right and be the person God intends you to be.

Question 185: What practical lessons can we learn from the story of Achan's sin?

Answer: In a moment, we will read the entire text of Joshua 7; it is here we find the story of Achan, the stolen plunder, God's anger, and Achan's destruction. It is worth noting that in the previous chapter, Joshua 6, we find the account of Jericho's miraculous defeat. To the victor belongs the spoils of war, but in this instance, God clearly instructed the conquering Israelites to bring the precious metals taken from the people of Jericho to the Israelites' treasury; in other words, individuals were not to gather the booty for themselves.

But the children of Israel committed a trespass regarding the accursed things, for Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, took of the accursed things; so the anger of the Lord burned against the children of Israel.

Now Joshua sent men from Jericho to Ai, which is beside Beth Aven, on the east side of Bethel, and spoke to them, saying, "Go up and spy out the country." So the men went up and spied out Ai. And they returned to Joshua and said to him, "Do not let all the people go up, but let about two or three thousand men go up and attack Ai. Do not weary all the people there, for the people of Ai are few." So about three thousand men went up there from the people, but they fled before the men of Ai. And the men of Ai struck down about thirty-six men, for they chased them from before the gate as far as Shebarim, and struck them down on the descent; therefore the hearts of the people melted and became like water.

Then Joshua tore his clothes, and fell to the earth on his face before the ark of the Lord until evening, he and the elders of Israel; and they put dust on their heads. And Joshua said, "Alas, Lord God, why have You brought this people over the Jordan at all—to deliver us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us? Oh, that we had been content, and dwelt on the other side of the Jordan! O Lord, what shall I say when Israel turns its back before its enemies? For the Canaanites and all the inhabitants of the land will hear it, and surround us, and cut off our name from the earth. Then what will You do for Your great name?"

So the Lord said to Joshua: "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you. Get up, sanctify the

people, and say, 'Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, because thus says the Lord God of Israel: "There is an accursed thing in your midst, O Israel; you cannot stand before your enemies until you take away the accursed thing from among you." In the morning therefore you shall be brought according to your tribes. And it shall be that the tribe which the Lord takes shall come according to families; and the family which the Lord takes shall come by households; and the household which the Lord takes shall come man by man. Then it shall be that he who is taken with the accursed thing shall be burned with fire, he and all that he has, because he has transgressed the covenant of the Lord, and because he has done a disgraceful thing in Israel.' "

So Joshua rose early in the morning and brought Israel by their tribes, and the tribe of Judah was taken. He brought the clan of Judah, and he took the family of the Zarhites; and he brought the family of the Zarhites man by man, and Zabdi was taken. Then he brought his household man by man, and Achan the son of Carmi, the son of Zabdi, the son of Zerah, of the tribe of Judah, was taken.

Now Joshua said to Achan, "My son, I beg you, give glory to the Lord God of Israel, and make confession to Him, and tell me now what you have done; do not hide it from me."

And Achan answered Joshua and said, "Indeed I have sinned against the Lord God of Israel, and this is what I have done: When I saw among the spoils a beautiful Babylonian garment, two hundred shekels of silver, and a wedge of gold weighing fifty shekels, I coveted them and took them. And there they are, hidden in the earth in the midst of my tent, with the silver under it."

So Joshua sent messengers, and they ran to the tent; and there it was, hidden in his tent, with the silver under it. And they took them from the midst of the tent, brought them to Joshua and to all the children of Israel, and laid them out before the Lord. Then Joshua, and all Israel with him, took Achan the son of Zerah, the silver, the garment, the wedge of gold, his sons, his daughters, his oxen, his donkeys, his sheep, his tent, and all that he had, and they brought them to the Valley of Achor. And Joshua

said, "Why have you troubled us? The Lord will trouble you this day." So all Israel stoned him with stones; and they burned them with fire after they had stoned them with stones.

Then they raised over him a great heap of stones, still there to this day. So the Lord turned from the fierceness of His anger. Therefore the name of that place has been called the Valley of Achor to this day (Joshua 7 NKJV).

What lessons can we learn from this account?

Firstly, God takes a dim view of sin. As we mortals were born with a sin nature, we take a more casual view of sin. Sin is, after all, a part of our identity. Of course, we are shocked by some sin such as murder or child abuse, but we often wink at sin we consider to be of a less serious nature. Contrariwise, God, whose divine nature is untainted by sin, is repulsed by all that is evil. In His eyes, no sin is trivial. We are comfortable and at ease with many forms of sin, but this is not so with our Creator. He sees all sin as abhorrent.

God gave the Israelites clear, precise instructions as to the disposition of the captured wealth. The booty was to be taken to the treasury. No single Israelite was to claim any of the treasure for himself or herself. Moved by greed, Achan chose to take that which did not belong to him, and, in the end, he paid the ultimate price for his disobedience.

Secondly, our sin often involves others. As God destroyed Achan and his family, we may reasonably assume Achan's family knew of and approved of his taking of the forbidden treasure. They, too, may have been culpable. Many years ago, a teenage wife and mother asked me to have a word with her young husband. As it happened, her seventeen year old husband had skipped work to congregate with his buddies. He and his pals had spent the day fishing and drinking beer when he should have been supporting his wife and baby. The young man told me he had been raised by an alcoholic father. In fact, his dad had died from alcoholism at the age of thirty-six. The young man before me was

imitating the behavior he had learned from his father. When we ignore God's commands and live in disobedience, what do our children think? How are those around us affected by our conduct? Most sin is not committed in a vacuum.

During my time working with substance abusers, many of those I knew were children of alcoholics and drug addicts. When I hear others excusing their conduct by saying, "I hurt no one but myself," I know the truth is not in them.

To the legions of absentee fathers, I ask, "What are your kids learning from you? That a man's role is merely that of a sperm donor?" To be sure, our sin does great harm to others.

Thirdly, the story of Achan is a reminder that those in leadership must constantly approach God on behalf of the people they lead. We do not find Joshua consulting the Lord prior to planning his attack against Ai. It is reasonable to assume that God would have revealed Achan's treasonous behavior had Joshua sought the Lord's wisdom before waging war against Ai. When the Israelite army moved toward Ai, God was not with them. If God is not for us, anyone can stand against us. Launching a campaign tainted by sin is a formula for defeat.

Fourthly, let us consider the high cost of greed. In the United States, a burglary occurs every twenty-six seconds. Last year, some 700,000 motor vehicles were stolen. Each year, there are about a quarter million bank robberies. During the last twelve months, shoplifting costs retailers over \$30 billion; these losses are ultimately passed on to consumers. Like Achan, many desire that which is not rightfully theirs and, like Achan, this greed will lead to their ruin.

Let me conclude by saying our sin will find us out. No one sins with impunity. To be sure, God will expose our vile behavior, so let us hasten to repent of sin hidden from others. As for me, I prefer mercy to chastisement.

Question 186: After fifteen years of living the life of a heroin addict, I am free. Thank God! As a new believer, I am wondering if drugs are idols. During my addiction, was I an idolator?

Answer: First, allow me to commend you for vowing to live a sober, drug-free life. By God's merciful grace, you will never again be a slave to the deadly poisons found in needles, pipes, pills, and bottles. Addiction is a cruel thief, for habitual substance abuse robs one of his or her physical health, mental well-being, family, career, personal wealth, dreams, aspirations, friends, and one's God-given purpose in life. Addiction means severed relationships, broken homes, lost opportunities, shame, suffering, and degradation. Left to run its course, addiction leads to a hospital bed, a prison cell, or a cemetery plot.

Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (I Corinthians 6:9-11 ESV).

As a believer in Christ Jesus our Savior, you are no longer to be a slave to narcotics. Rather than being chained and fettered to heroin, you are joined to Jesus Christ. You are to dwell in Him just as the Holy Spirit of God dwells within you. You are His adopted daughter, and the daughter of King Jesus is a princess. Yes, you are a princess—a real princess, but who ever heard of a princess groveling about in some seedy back alley looking for her next high? No, those dreary days are behind you, for Jesus satisfies in ways that drugs cannot.

At the risk of stating the obvious, you will honor God and grow spiritually through

- frequent prayer

- daily Bible study
- routine church attendance

Through prayer, you open your heart to God; through systematic Bible study, God speaks to you, and through corporate worship, you are strengthened and nurtured by the teachings and comradery of a mature pastor and like-minded believers. Do not fool yourself by thinking any or all of these proper Christian duties are optional. If you want God's best, and I am certain that you do, devote yourself to prayer, Bible study, and weekly corporate worship at a Bible-believing church.

You asked if drugs are idols. Perhaps. Anything we place ahead of God might be an idol. There can be no doubt that drugs are demanding tyrants who make slaves of their victims. Why live as a slave when God offers freedom, right?

You will do well joining a Christ-centered Celebrate Recovery program. Speaking as one who spent years working with recovering addicts at a nonprofit agency and a men's prison, Celebrate Recovery will give you additional tools that will ensure ongoing freedom from addiction.

Never lower your guard, so to speak. A day may come when you are feeling down, tired, or frustrated; this is when temptation sets in. No one plans to relapse, but I have known many women and men who, after a brief sojourn in the Promised Land, died with needles in their arms. Do not allow the devil to overtake you with temptation. Getting back to what I mentioned earlier, those who have strong prayer lives, are regular church attenders, and who diligently study the Bible are far less likely to suffer loss from relapse. Your life is much too precious for this to happen.

I am so happy you and I could have this talk. Believe me, I will be lifting you up in prayer. With this said, go out and live your life in the manner of a royal child beloved by her Father, the king. Be the princess God intends you to be.

Question 187: I am still in love with the mother of my daughter, but she broke up with me because of my problems with drugs. How could I win my family back?

Answer: Your inquiry is scant on information. First, I need to know if you are clean and sober. Can you honestly assure your family that you are no longer drinking and drugging? Next, assuming you are clean, how long has it been since your last high? Also, what are you doing to remain clean and sober? Ongoing sobriety takes effort. What are you doing toward relapse prevention? Finally, are you currently assisting your family financially? I hope and pray you are not another deadbeat dad who will not financially support his family. To such men who shirk their responsibilities, the Apostle Paul wrote, “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (I Timothy 5:8 NKJV).” According to Paul, an AWOL dad is worse than an atheist.

If you are not clean and not supporting your family, I would be inclined to think you are selfish and that your wife and child are better off without you. Sound harsh? Take this as a wake-up call to seek the Lord Jesus’ forgiveness and repent of your narcissism. If you say you love them but do not support them, where is the evidence of your love? In such a case, I would say grow up and be a man. Contrariwise, if you are clean and helping with rent and groceries, I would be delighted carrying on this conversation.

As I grow older, I am increasingly concerned about the multi-faceted problems caused by absentee fathers—men who prefer weed and vodka to changing diapers and paying the bills. I currently teach young moms living with their kids in a Christian maternity home. In the eleven years this home has been open, only two fathers have cared enough to visit their children. Two dads in eleven years. Shame on deadbeat dads.

If this is you, repent and turn to the Lord Jesus. Do so today. He can teach you how to be a real man rather than a sniveling, selfish little boy.

Author's note: As this young man failed to address my questions and concerns, I concluded he was looking for an easy way of getting back into his family's good graces without a need for correcting his self-centered, abominable behavior. May the Holy Spirit convict his hardened heart.

Question 188: My older brother, who is a recovering meth addict, is in prison. He has been in prison for about a year, and will not be released until sometime next year. During his time in prison, he has come to faith in Christ and spends his time reading and studying the Bible. I want to send him a letter, however i want to include Bible passages that will help him overcome his addiction and further temptations after his release. Can you help me find some passages that are unique to this situation?

Answer: Your older brother is blessed to have your love and support. He needs you. It is good that you stand with him.

As I have recently moved, I have been looking for a church closer to home. For the past several weeks, I have been visiting what would be considered an evangelical church; the pastor believes in the inerrancy of the Bible while holding to the historic essential doctrines of the Christian faith. I would not have it any other way; yet, after hearing several sermons, I have determined that his teachings amount to little more than pep talks sprinkled with a few Bible verses. Take out the occasional scriptural reference and these messages could be used to rally a sales force or to motivate a company's management team. After today's little "you can do it" message, I will not be back.

During lunch, I mentioned these concerns to my sister and brother-in-law and they, too, have noticed this disturbing trend. Have our churches abandoned the idea of teaching God's word in its entirety? Are pastors now doing the work of motivational speakers?

What does all this have to do with your inquiry?

I spent eight years ministering to addicts while in the employ of a largely secular nonprofit agency and another four years working with substance abusers at a men's prison. It is time we stop looking at isolated Bible verses as magic pills for all that ails us and began devoting ourselves to the whole word of God.

This is not to say "I can do all things through Christ Jesus who strengthens me" lacks impact and meaning, but we have become one verse wonders when we should be digging deeper into God's written word.

For an addict behind bars, the story of Joseph as recorded in Genesis teaches the value of perseverance and the faithfulness of God in the face of betrayal, loneliness, and hardship. The entire Book of Ruth, not simply an isolated verse, illustrates the sovereignty of God and the value of character while foreshadowing God's redemptive plan through Jesus Christ. When I am feeling down (and I can be a melancholy fellow at times), the final two chapters in Revelation give me renewed hope. No single verse in the Bible can do for me what the last two chapters in Revelation can do.

We treat the Bible as we would a box of chocolates. We choose a tasty verse that pleases us, but, in the end, we remain largely biblically illiterate. Prisoners do not need pep talks or motivational speeches. And neither do the rest of us.

If you google "fifty motivating Bible verses," you will find just what you are looking for, but let me suggest an approach that is far more substantive. Let your letters and discussions reflect Bible stories and teachings in their entirety. Prisons are dark, lonely places. Let your conversations be filled with light. A random verse here and there will do little in dispelling the darkness shrouding your brother's day to day existence.

You have asked me for a box of candles. I am suggesting floodlights.

It is my prayer that God will use you as a blazing beacon of light that reflects the goodness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Question 189: I have recently stopped caring about what I say as in using profanities to express myself. Although my relationship with God is not the healthiest right now, avoiding hell is the only reason I would stop cursing. What is wrong with me? I grew up under legalism, and I am not motivated by God's love—only fear of hell. I have been hurt by many people who wear nice clothes, drive nice cars, and correct my language. Someone has advised me that I may have some form of Asperger's syndrome, so connecting with people is already difficult. Added to this is a history of past drug use and living like an animal. Why bother trying? Whenever I attempt to contain myself and my actions, I become hyper-sensitive, and it drives me toward thoughts of suicide. I am very depressed and disappointed in the modern day church, and present day Christianity just doesn't make sense to me when reading Acts then observing what is happening in today's churches.

Answer: I am an amateur musician. I play two instruments reasonably well or well enough to suit my needs. A classically trained musician would spot me as a hack right away, but as I do not keep company with classical musicians, my secret is safe. Besides the keyboard, I play the electric bass guitar. My Fender Precision Bass has four rather hefty metal-wound strings that have caused callouses to form on my fingertips. Experienced bassists and guitarists tend to have fingers that are tipped by thick, hardened skin. The callouses are useful, for they serve as pads or cushions; otherwise, the continued manipulating of the metal strings will irritate the player's fingertips.

Callouses on fingertips can be beneficial, but hearts that have been calloused by rejection, disappointment, mistreatment, unhappiness, substance abuse, personal loss, loneliness, abandonment, and despair can steal our joy, cloud our judgment, and drive us further into isolation. If I may take liberties with a Pink Floyd song title, calloused hearts leave us feeling *uncomfortably* numb.

Let us not spend our brief time together talking about profanities. One might argue Peter had a dirty mouth, too (Matthew 26:74). You have been robbed of your joy and that, my friend, may be the bigger issue.

As a boy, I had a friend who was raised by two harsh, demanding, unappeasable parents steeped in legalism. Rather than enjoying a relationship with Jesus Christ, they viewed the faith as a stifling, suffocating moral code. In the end, their son rejected Christianity and devoted himself to a godless lifestyle. In their misguided zeal, the boy's mother and father drove him away from Jesus. One could almost believe such parents are on Satan's payroll. As your letter hinted of a legalistic upbringing, perhaps you can relate to this.

There is joy in knowing one is loved by the Lord Jesus, for He loves selflessly, wholly, and purely. And when we surrender our stubborn wills to Him, He infuses our drab little lives with meaning and purpose. I am not saying we wake up each morning hearing an angelic choir singing outside our windows, but speaking personally, I find joy knowing who I am, where I am going, what I am to do, how I am to do it, and knowing when the dust finally settles from the catastrophes that will surely come, I will still be standing. It is hard to be perpetually gloomy when we know we will ultimately cross the finish line (Philippians 1:6).

(Jesus said,) "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. If a son asks for bread from any father among you, will he give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent instead of a fish? Or if he asks for an egg, will he offer him a scorpion? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him (Luke 11:9-13 NKJV)!"

If you have placed your trust in Jesus as Savior, you can ask Him for joy, and He will not give you a scorpion or a stone or a serpent. Do not think I am promising some pie-in-the-

sky-by-and-by rhetoric, for I am an older saint who has worked with addicts, prison inmates, and down and outers whose despair gave way to godly joy. I speak on the authority of God's word and personal experience. My favorite writer, C.S. Lewis, said all who desire joy will find it. You are a seeker, otherwise, you would not have penned such a letter. God is a seeker, too, and He has found you. Hold out your hand and ask for a life hallmarked by joy, gratitude, and purpose. Ask in faith and receive.

Perhaps you are not yet a believer; maybe you have been taught that you must earn God's favor by being good or by following a list of dos and don'ts. Friend, if you have been taught this slab of tripe by misguided parents or an ignorant pastor, you have been taught wrong, for salvation is a gift that cannot be earned (Ephesians 2:8, 9).

If you have in the past or are now willing to place your faith in Jesus as Savior, salvation is a matter of trust. The Apostle Paul wrote, "... that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, 'Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame.' For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek, for the same Lord over all is rich to all who call upon Him. For 'whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:9-13 NKJV).'"

Will God do what He says that He will? Yes. Once again, the Apostle Paul wrote, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. Now those who belong to Christ Jesus crucified the flesh with its passions and desires (Galatians 5:22-24 NASB)." There is nothing wrong with either you or me that the Holy Spirit cannot correct. Do not miss this point.

I perceive you are a pretty intelligent person. Your letter indicates one who is a thinker. Now is the time to let God renew your mind, for He can dispel the doubts and anxiety that rob us of the joy He intends us to have.

I will agree that, by and large, our modern day churches are lacking on a number of fronts. In one corner, we have churches that have exchanged God's truths for political correctness. In the other corner are evangelical churches that profess sound doctrine, but whose worship is steeped in lightweight, "feel good" music and motivational talks instead of sound Bible teachings. Good churches are becoming increasingly scarce, but we have not entered into total apostacy quite yet.

I rather suspect God has big things in store for you.

Question 190: I am twenty-five years old, so I no longer live with my parents. It bothers me that I grew up in a home never knowing or hearing about God. My parents continue to practice paganism and believe in multiple gods and/or believe everything comes from the universe. Their beliefs trouble me because they seem so selfish and fake. They made it clear to me that they won't change, so should I move on, or should I continue to try to save them?

Answer: I was well-acquainted with a stubborn know-it-all who would not attend church and if he owned a Bible, it must have been relegated to a lonely, forgotten shelf or drawer, yet he loved to discuss, or shall I say, argue about the Christian faith. Stubborn and painfully verbose, he had nothing worthwhile to say, but that never stopped him from babbling about the Bible. No doubt, you have run across those who are ready to spout off about this or that. They are long on ungrounded opinion, but short on sound logic and reason.

Thankfully, his son, a sound, solid, knowledgeable Christian, eventually led his father to the Lord Jesus before his death. In the end, the score was Jesus 1, Satan 0.

My own father, who is nearing the end of his life, was, at one time, a nearly fanatical disciple of the popular motivational speakers and writers who dabble in the metaphysics.

According to these metaphysical cultists, God was a force one could tap into so as to achieve personal ambitions and financial success. In truth, it was a gospel of greed and, frankly, his favored motivational gurus sounded like these seedy televangelists who tool around in private jets. How much I had to do with his conversion, I cannot say, but a few years ago, he admitted to having renounced these purveyors of a false gospel. My dad is now a Christian. According to his physician, my father's remaining days are likely measured in weeks or months, not years, but when he breathes his last on earth, I have every confidence that his next breath will be in the presence of our Lord Jesus. Once again, the score is Jesus 1, Satan 0.

You must be a wonderful daughter. I should know, for I have a wonderful daughter, too. Thank God for wonderful daughters.

Families are often divided by conflicting spiritual beliefs. Many would be surprised to know that Jesus' own family, at one time, doubted His claims and, for that matter, His sanity (Mark 3:21 and John 7:5). If our Savior had difficulties with His earthly family, we should not be surprised when parents, grandparents, children, brothers, sisters, or cousins find our beliefs peculiar.

Thankfully, God has not called you to beg, plead, argue, or debate your parents' pagan beliefs; rather, God wants you to win them with love and by setting a good example (I Peter 3). When questioned about your faith, be prepared to give solid, biblical answers (II Timothy 4:2); however, it is the Holy Spirit of God who convicts sinners, so never feel that your parents' conversion is your job. We can be instruments of salvation, but salvation is truly God's work.

Love them. Pray for them. Show them your faith through word and deed. Never give up. Remember, God loves your mom and dad, too.

Let me leave you with a final word of encouragement. I am almost forty years older than my daughter, but I listen to her. I listen to her because she is smart, and she always has

something worthwhile to say. Season your words with love, grace, and wisdom. Do this and I strongly suspect your parents will listen to you, too.

Whether they know it or not, your mom and dad are blessed to have you. I will join you in praying the final score will be Jesus 2, Satan 0.

Question 191: I am a guy and I collect bras and panties. I do not wear them, but I love the way they look. Is this okay?

Answer: My oldest friend collects Indian artifacts; he likes the looks of flint.

As I strive to avoid legalism, I shy away from giving biblical advice that cannot be backed by chapter and verse. Thus far, I have not found any verse that specifically states, "Thou shalt not gather bras and panties into thy storehouse," but King David vowed, "I will set nothing wicked before my eyes (Psalm 101:3a NKJV)."

My friend can admire his collection of Indian artifacts without the stirring of illicit passions and feelings of carnal lust.

Bras and panties are poor substitutes for genuine love and marriage. Imagine a restaurant patron drooling over a menu, but never bothering to order any of the dishes. A menu may tantalize the senses, but the menu will never satisfy one's hunger.

As for me, I would rather find a godly woman who wants love and is ready to offer love in return. Are you, my young friend, willing to settle for mere baubles and trinkets? If so, you will never be fully satisfied.

There are many of us that are willing to do great things for the Lord, but few of us are willing to do little things.

--Dwight L. Moody

Question 192: Why did the blind man named Bartimaeus throw aside his cloak when Jesus approached?

Answer: You have asked a good question! Let us first examine the passage:

Then they (Jesus and His disciples) came to Jericho. And later, as He was leaving Jericho with His disciples and a large crowd, a beggar who was blind named Bartimaeus, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the road. And when he heard that it was Jesus the Nazarene, he began to cry out and say, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Many were sternly telling him to be quiet, but he kept crying out all the more, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" And Jesus stopped and said, "Call him here." So they called the man who was blind, saying to him, "Take courage, stand up! He is calling for you." And throwing off his cloak, he jumped up and came to Jesus. And replying to him, Jesus said, "What do you want Me to do for you?" And the man who was blind said to Him, "Rabboni, I want to regain my sight!" And Jesus said to him, "Go; your faith has made you well." And immediately he regained his sight and began following Him on the road (Mark 10:46-52 NASB).

Why did Bartimaeus throw aside his cloak? I cannot give you a definitive answer, but I can give you a couple of reasonable conjectures.

As beggars were often considered "unclean" and prohibited from physical contact with others, some beggars may have spread their outer cloak upon the ground to collect whatever coins might be tossed their way. Believing Jesus could restore his sight, Bartimaeus' action can be interpreted as a sign of his great faith. Perhaps he thought,

“Jesus can heal me! With my vision restored, no longer will I beg for my living. I can earn my keep by my own strength.”

It may be, too, that his outer cloak, which would have covered the tunic that was worn beneath, impeded his movement. Perhaps his movements would have been hampered by a bulky outer garment. He wanted an audience with Jesus, and nothing or no one was going to stand in his way.

I am reminded that we must often toss aside possessions, friendships, habits, beliefs, hobbies, opinions, and even our identity when we follow the Lord Jesus. And, indeed, what can we claim that is better than a relationship with Jesus our Savior? Our friend Zaccheus, the chief publican of Jericho who perched himself in a sycamore tree, gave away his fortune to become a Christ follower, and was the richer for doing so.

This we may know for certain; Bartimaeus was no longer a beggar. He became a son of the King. The son of a king is a prince, and a prince should never grovel about as a beggar.

Question 193: Please explain Psalm 118:17.

Answer: Let us begin by reading Psalm 118 in its entirety. I am using the New King James Version.

Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever.

²Let Israel now say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

³Let the house of Aaron now say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

⁴ Let those who fear the LORD now say,

“His mercy endures forever.”

⁵ I called on the LORD in distress;

The LORD answered me and set me in a broad place.

⁶ The LORD is on my side;

I will not fear.

What can man do to me?

⁷ The LORD is for me among those who help me;

Therefore I shall see my desire on those who hate me.

⁸ It is better to trust in the LORD

Than to put confidence in man.

⁹ It is better to trust in the LORD

Than to put confidence in princes.

¹⁰ All nations surrounded me,

But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

¹¹ They surrounded me,

Yes, they surrounded me;

But in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

¹² They surrounded me like bees;

They were quenched like a fire of thorns;

For in the name of the LORD I will destroy them.

¹³ You pushed me violently, that I might fall,

But the LORD helped me.

¹⁴ The LORD is my strength and song,

And He has become my salvation.

¹⁵ The voice of rejoicing and salvation

Is in the tents of the righteous;

The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

¹⁶ The right hand of the LORD is exalted;

The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

¹⁷ I shall not die, but live,

And declare the works of the LORD.

¹⁸ The LORD has chastened me severely,

But He has not given me over to death.

¹⁹ Open to me the gates of righteousness;

I will go through them,

And I will praise the LORD.

²⁰ This is the gate of the LORD,

Through which the righteous shall enter.

²¹ I will praise You,

For You have answered me,

And have become my salvation.

²² The stone which the builders rejected

Has become the chief cornerstone.

²³ This was the LORD's doing;

It is marvelous in our eyes.

²⁴ This is the day the LORD has made;

We will rejoice and be glad in it.

²⁵ Save now, I pray, O LORD;

O LORD, I pray, send now prosperity.

²⁶ Blessed is he who comes in the name of the LORD!

We have blessed you from the house of the LORD.

²⁷ God is the LORD,

And He has given us light;

Bind the sacrifice with cords to the horns of the altar.

²⁸ You are my God, and I will praise You;

You are my God, I will exalt You.

²⁹ Oh, give thanks to the LORD, for He is good!

For His mercy endures forever (Psalm 118 NKJV).

I am to understand this song of thanksgiving and praise was sung by ancient Israel's temple singers, the ruling king, and the congregation to celebrate victory over an enemy.

Verses 1-4 offer praise to God. Verses 5-7 recount the king's fervent prayer in his time of desperation. The next two verses offer more praise to God. Verses 10-14 recount the dire situation brought about by Israel's enemies. The following two verses boast of God's uncompromised strength. Verse 17, the verse you asked about, along with the next two verses, express the king's unwavering confidence in the Lord's faithfulness and in His ability to overcome Israel's enemies.

Next, the temple gate is opened and the king praises God, for only the righteous are permitted to enter and, thankfully, it is God who declares those who trust in Him as righteous. As believers in Christ Jesus, we are made righteous through our faith in Him (Ephesians 2:8, 9). We cannot earn salvation through our own merit, but as Jesus paid the penalty for our sin debt, you and I stand faultless before God. Like the ancient king preparing to enter the holy temple, we can pass through the gates of Heaven, for we are clothed in Christ's righteousness. Salvation is a gift from God and not a paycheck for a life well lived.

By the way, Psalm 118 is quoted by our Savior in the New Testament; you may recall Jesus referred to Himself as the chief cornerstone rejected by the builders. Paul and Peter also refer to our Lord as the cornerstone of our great faith.

What can we learn from Psalm 118?

- God is worthy of our praise.
- God is worthy of our gratitude.
- God can be trusted in times of distress.
- God is mightier than our enemies.
- Only God can make us righteous.

Because of your question, both of us have a better understanding of Psalm 118. Keep asking questions.

Question 194: I am an imaginative young person. How can I use my God-given imagination to bring glory to Him?

Answer: Borrowing a whimsical quote from Dr. Seuss, "Think left and think right and think low and think high. Oh, the thinks you can think up if only you try!" God bless our imaginations!

So, God has given you an active imagination? Wonderful! Imagination is revealed in many ways. How do you express yourself? Are you a writer? An artist? A musician? Can you tell great stories? Are you an actor? A vocalist? A cartoonist? A chef? What about an inventor? Do you make people laugh with funny jokes?

I thank God for imaginative people. My favorite writer, C.S. Lewis, penned over a dozen masterfully written Christian books that have proven invaluable in my own ministry as a teacher, writer, and clergyman. God blessed "Jack" Lewis with a quick mind and an ability to write; in return, Lewis used this ability to bless generations of Christians. And though he died in 1963, his books continue to ride the wave of popularity and should keep inspiring believers for years to come.

God is the God of imagination. Relying on His infinite imagination, He spoke the expanse of the universe into existence. From blazing stars in faraway galaxies to brightly colored tropical birds perched in jungle treetops, all that we see is God's handiwork.

Years ago, I spent a lot of time on a potter's wheel. With lumps of gooey clay, I made pitchers and vases. With a lump of clay, God made Adam. He is the Master Artist.

There are godly people who used their talents--their *God-given talents*--to bring honor to Jesus and inspiration to other believers. Of course, there are others who are immensely talented, yet they misuse their God-given talents simply to make obscene amounts of money and to promote beliefs and causes that are shameful.

Let's get back to you. God can use artists and writers and musicians and actors and ventriloquists and jugglers and chefs and poets and inventors and fashion designers and makeup artists and architects and woodcarvers and animators and game designers and whatever brand of creativity someone happens to possess. All of these can be used to His glory.

Work hard at your craft. Are you a writer? Then write. Are you a musician? Practice and keep on practicing. Are you a cartoonist? Draw. Are you a public speaker? Wow your audience. Are you a juggler? I do not suggest juggling with live hand grenades and chain saws, but dazzle your audience by being the best juggler you can be. Do whatever you do for the glory of God (I Corinthians 10:31).

Finally, the God who has given you this special talent will open doors of opportunity for you. Read Jeremiah 29:11. Listen to Him. Do not compromise your faith in order to please people.

Now go out there and show the world what God can do through you.

Question 195: Is it wrong to look upon something that is sinful? Some Christians argue this based on Psalm 101:3. If this is the case, wouldn't this mean that even things like going to the beach would be a sin since you can be sure that you'll see immodestly dressed people? I have always thought that looking at a sin is not wrong as long as you yourself aren't committing it.

Answer: If, as you argue, there is no wrong in watching a detestable act as long as the onlooker is not directly participating in the abhorrent behavior, what are we to make of a rather grisly incident that took place in Chicago a few years ago? Six young men sexually assaulted a teenage girl as some forty curious onlookers witnessed the attack. As the crime was in progress, no one among the forty witnesses bothered notifying the police. They simply watched with passive interest as a frightened teenage girl was brutally

manhandled by a gang of brutes. You may choose to give your blessings to the forty onlookers, but I find them nearly as reproachful as the attackers.

According to your brand of logic, the making of pornographic films is sinful, but viewing the finished productions is perfectly okay. Do you really think so? If people refused to watch this vile filth, the salivating, lowlife purveyors of pornographic smut would go out of business. King David said, "I will set nothing wicked before my eyes (Psalm 101:3a NKJV)." When King David failed to heed his own advice, he committed sin with Bathsheba.

As to your notion that onlookers of evil are given a free pass, I do not buy this illogical nonsense and I strongly suspect you know better, too.

Follow up to previous question: Okay, I will admit that watching porn is wrong, but what about going to the beach where nearly naked people parade about?

Answer: The last time I was at the beach, which was Coney Island, I saw a lot of scantily-clad people and noted some of the heavier variety of sunbathers looked like beached whales with tattoos.

You and I have no control over how others dress. What we can control is our thoughts about what we see and how long we stare.

I am an old guy, even so, I still find women exciting and attractive, but whether one is seventeen or sixty-seven, lust is wrong. I think it is possible to see a beautiful woman, appreciate the fact that she is a beautiful woman, and yet not lust after her. I have reached the time of life in which most of the really beautiful women are the age of my daughter. Would I want some old fossil salivating over my daughter? Absolutely not! So, I have better control my thoughts, too, for these young women are human beings—not mere objects or playthings.

Do some of these young women dress too provocatively? Yes. Does this brand of immodesty cause problems for many men? I think so, but as I said, you and I cannot control how others dress, but we can control what goes on in the vast region that spans between the right ear and the left ear.

Cheer up. One day, you will be old like me and those pretty girls who once turned your head will be frumpy old grandmas preoccupied by grandkids and their annoying, yippy little dogs. Welcome to my world, young friend.

Now behave yourself and do not fill your mind with lustful thoughts.

Question 196: My girlfriend and I have been seeing each other six years. Two years ago, we enrolled in the same college and decided to share an apartment. As unwed couples are to abstain from sexual intercourse, we, as believers in Jesus Christ, faithfully follow God's command and maintain our sexual purity. I know this sounds off the grid, but do you find fault in our living arrangements? Most people assume we are having sex, but let me assure you we are not. What do you think?

Answer: This may surprise you, but I find no fault in your actions and believe me, I am hardcore conservative through and through.

Unwed couples should not engage in sexual intercourse, but as you and your girlfriend are honoring God's command by remaining celibate, far be it from me to find fault in your living arrangements. Frankly, I doubt if most couples would show such restraint, but as you and your girlfriend have a history of ongoing and vigilant chaste behavior, I think any condemnation from me would be tantamount to mere legalism.

Some might object to your living arrangements by saying, "What will others think?" Let me address this concern. During my time working for a supposedly Christian nonprofit agency, the president of the board of directors called me aside and asked, "Between you

and me, don't you think Jesus had a little something going on with Mary Magdalene? After all, he was a man, and she was a woman..." How a so-called Christian organization could place such an old heretic as the head of their board amazed me; nonetheless, I bring this up because people are going to think what they want to think.

To those who might object by saying, "Do not give the appearance of evil," I would contend the local grocery outlet sells alcohol, tobacco, and condoms, but I do not assume everyone pushing a bascart down aisle 3 is stocking up on beer and tobacco for a night of "safe sex."

Am I finished? Not quite. I want us to examine a passage penned by the Apostle Paul to the church in Rome.

Therefore let us not pass judgment on one another any longer, but rather decide never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of a brother. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself, but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. Whoever thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. So then let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding.

Do not, for the sake of food, destroy the work of God. Everything is indeed clean, but it is wrong for anyone to make another stumble by what he eats. It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble. The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God. Blessed is the one who has no reason to pass judgment on himself for what he approves. But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Romans 14"13-23 ESV).

The Apostle Paul warns against our liberties causing others to stumble. If you and your girlfriend were attending a Christian college, I might be inclined to think your cohabitation could be a stumbling block, but as I assume you and she are enrolled in a secular institution, I do not believe the Apostle Paul's admonition applies.

Others may disagree with my conclusion, but as you and your girlfriend are celibate, I will not object to your living arrangements on purely legalistic grounds.

One final word of advice: When you and she decide to get married, consider naming your first child after me. Michael if a boy and Michelle if a girl. Only kidding! Only kidding!

Question 197: What does it mean that God will not hear me if I regard the iniquity in my heart? The fear I have is if I am not perfect in one area of my life, God will not help me in any other area.

Answer: With the Lord's guidance, I believe I can satisfactorily answer your question and, perhaps, set your mind at ease. As good Bible students, rather than yanking a single verse out of its proper context, we are going to look at the whole of Psalm 66. Our text comes from the English Standard Version.

Shout for joy to God, all the earth;

² sing the glory of his name;

give to him glorious praise!

³ Say to God, "How awesome are your deeds!

So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.

⁴ All the earth worships you

and sings praises to you;

they sing praises to your name." *Selah*

This is a psalm of thanksgiving and praise. At this time, the whole world does not worship our Lord Jesus and a majority of earthly inhabitants do not sing praises to His name, but I think the writer of this psalm was looking ahead to the Millennial Reign of Jesus that will be established in Jerusalem after God pours out His wrath upon a rebellious and unbelieving world. During King Jesus' one thousand year reign over the planet, our Savior will rule in truth and righteousness. If we look at the current state of Washington, D.C., we see very little truth and righteousness, and I fear matters will only worsen.

⁵ Come and see what God has done:

 he is awesome in his deeds toward the children of man.

⁶ He turned the sea into dry land;

 they passed through the river on foot.

There did we rejoice in him,

⁷ who rules by his might forever,

whose eyes keep watch on the nations—

 let not the rebellious exalt themselves. *Selah*

⁸ Bless our God, O peoples;

 let the sound of his praise be heard,

⁹ who has kept our soul among the living

 and has not let our feet slip.

¹⁰ For you, O God, have tested us;

 you have tried us as silver is tried.

¹¹ You brought us into the net;

 you laid a crushing burden on our backs;

¹² you let men ride over our heads;

 we went through fire and through water;

yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.

The psalmist continues his praise by recalling how God our Savior delivered His people, the Jews, from the cruelties of enemy bondage. Through the death, burial, and

resurrection of our Lord Jesus, God has delivered us from the bondage of sin. While we still have a sin nature, we are no longer slaves to sin.

By the way, God has not turned His back on the Jews, and the day is coming when He will bring His chosen people back to the land promised to Abraham and they shall live in safety and abundance. God is grieved by those who attempt to rob Israel of her blessings. No Christian should be guilty of antisemitism. Hatred of the Jews should never be tolerated among those who have placed their faith in Christ Jesus as Savior. Persecution of the Jews is the devil's work, and we ought to oppose him. Far too many who claim Christ as Savior appear to be in league with Satan.

¹³ I will come into your house with burnt offerings;

 I will perform my vows to you,

¹⁴ that which my lips uttered

 and my mouth promised when I was in trouble.

¹⁵ I will offer to you burnt offerings of fattened animals,

 with the smoke of the sacrifice of rams;

I will make an offering of bulls and goats. *Selah*

¹⁶ Come and hear, all you who fear God,

 and I will tell what he has done for my soul.

¹⁷ I cried to him with my mouth,

 and high praise was on my tongue.

¹⁸ If I had cherished iniquity in my heart,

 the Lord would not have listened.

¹⁹ But truly God has listened;

 he has attended to the voice of my prayer.

²⁰ Blessed be God,

 because he has not rejected my prayer

 or removed his steadfast love from me!

Based on your letter, I perceive it is verse 18 that confuses you. I think the solution is simple. Those who confess their sin and cry out to Jesus for salvation are never turned away (Romans 10:13). We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus. We do not earn everlasting life by committing ourselves to good works, for salvation is a gift and a gift cannot be earned or deserved (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Salvation is not a paycheck for a life well lived; rather, salvation is God's gift to you paid for by the blood of Christ Jesus.

Though we are born-again believers whose sins have been forgiven, we still have this nasty sin nature that will be with us as long as we occupy these earthly bodies. Some forms of sin repulse me but, admittedly, there are some brands of sin that continue tempting me. Frankly, there are a few sins that I wish were not sinful, and maybe you have these struggles, too, but God will see that we cross the finish line despite our weaknesses. When God begins a good work in the life of a believer, He sees that work through its completion (Philippians 1:6).

Do you trust in Jesus, rather than in yourself, for salvation? Does your eternal hope rest in His death, burial, and resurrection? If you answered yes, you belong to Him and nothing or no one will steal you from His grip. When the Good Shepherd begins the day with one hundred sheep, He ends the day with the same one hundred sheep. No ungodly power will turn you into a broiled lambchop on Satan's banquet table.

Question 198: How can God help someone come out of a rough season? It's hard being positive and reassured when things seem hopeless.

Answer: How I wish I could say I am a brave person who faces trials and adversities with patience, resolve, and head-on determination. I know what I want—I want heaven on earth and when something breaks or I feel poorly or no one is around when loneliness sets in or my favored candidate fails to win an election or some trinket or bauble I cannot afford causes me to wistfully consider the state of my financial affairs, I can be a gloomy old blighter. There is no heaven on earth. A perfunctory glance at the headlines quickly

establishes this truth. More importantly, the Bible supports this truth, too. Job, who lost his children, his wealth, his reputation, his health, and his wife's support wrote, "Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward (Job 5:7 KJV).

When sin entered the world, paradise was lost, and our planet fell under a curse. The world groans under the burden of sin (Romans 8:22). As the world is under a curse, we can expect hard times, and these hard times will continue until Jesus returns to establish His Kingdom on the earth. For now, we can be assured that trials will come, and tears will fall. From your letter, you are experiencing difficult days. I have been praying for you. Maybe, God will use me to bring you some measure of comfort.

The world can be a wearisome place, and no one can run from sadness, but we have not been abandoned. We are not alone. Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as our Comforter:

But the Helper (Comforter, Advocate, Intercessor—Counselor, Strengthener, Standby), the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name [in My place, to represent Me and act on My behalf], He will teach you all things. And He will help you remember everything that I have told you (John 14:26 AMP).

This world is not our home and, as such, we ought not devote all of our affections to this life. C.S. Lewis wrote of a man who, upon achieving success, rested in the belief that, at last, he had found his place in the world when, in truth, the world had found its place in him.

In my own life, many of the problems I faced were the results of bad decisions I had made. Some good came from this, for frustration stemming from my lack of accomplishments drove me to return to school and complete my education. More recently, a minor health concern has caused me to rethink my eating habits. Can some troubles lead us to make positive changes? In my case, yes. Additionally, God granted me the opportunity to teach in a large men's prison. During that time, I met many wonderful men who had come

to know Jesus after losing their liberties. Some of the best men I have known had numbers behind their names.

Trials and troubles should keep us from clinging too tightly to the pleasures of this world, and difficulties have a way of driving us closer to God. When all is going well, we tend to rely less upon Him, but when our world is crumbling about us, He may be all that we have.

Some of the seedier televangelists would have you believe God wants everyone healthy and wealthy and driving luxury automobiles, but even the Apostle Paul was plagued by some malady, a thorn in the flesh as he put it, that God refused to remove (II Corinthians 12:7-9). This trouble, whatever it was, caused Paul to rely all the more upon God.

Our Lord Jesus was no stranger to sorrow (Isaiah 53:3). Whatever forms of sadness you and I have known, He, too, experienced similar trials and heartaches, and though He possessed miraculous powers, He did not perform miracles to make His life more comfortable.

I am not going to give you a pep talk or a motivational speech. I fear many of our pastors are abandoning solid Bible teachings for Sunday morning pep rallies. What I will say is this: Go to God. Tell Him you hurt. Ask Him for divine comfort. Draw close to Him. He loves you. He really and truly loves you.

One day, when you stand before our Lord Jesus, you can show Him your wounds and He will show you His wounds, and then He will wipe away all tears and there will be joy forever more.

By these things examine thyself: By whose rules am I acting? In whose name? In whose strength? For whose glory? What faith, humility, self-denial and love of God and to people have there been in my actions?

--Anonymous

Question 199: Are people both physically and spiritually tormented in Hell?

Answer: Over the years, I have given the matter of Hell much thought. From what we know about Hell, it is a woefully dreadful place to be avoided at all costs; yet I can understand how Hell serves a useful function. For a moment, imagine a largely successful individual, educated, attractive, a person not without influence, who has enough money, prestige, and connections to feel quite at home in this world. In this person's mind, he or she considers himself or herself to be self-sufficient. If you asked this individual about God, he or she might respond, "Who needs God? All that I have, I have acquired by my own wit and determination. God is merely a crutch for the weak and the superstitious. The Bible is a collection of myths and Christianity is a suppressive, patriarchal, out-of-date moral code that has no place in these enlightened times. Eternity? I live in the here and now. I am not moved by some 'pie in the sky by and by' promise of a better life after death—once we break the shackles of ignorance and toss off the bonds of religion, we can create a heaven on earth. I have no use for your God. I have no use for your Bible. And I have no use for a Savior. Who needs saving? I am no sinner. I work hard, pay my bills, treat others well, and volunteer at the local Planned Parenthood clinic. I am a moral person, so do not trouble me with your talk of this Jesus. In time, all of the world's problems will be solved by science. Science is the thinking person's religion."

As such a person will spend the bulk of his or her life avoiding any form of contact or association with God, I cannot see this worldly individual enjoying eternity with God in Heaven.

You might say Heaven is an acquired taste. For those who want nothing to do with God, living eternally with God would not be heaven. Where, then, is God to house such persons after death?

Hell was created for the devil and his fallen angels (Matthew 25:41). Hell was not created for man; however, hell has been asked to accommodate those who reject heaven.

As to Hell, the Bible speaks of fire, darkness, banishment, and destruction. All of these must be true. The great Christian writer C.S. Lewis suggested those who enter hell may have lost their humanity, hence, the damned will spend eternity as something less than human. Just as a log becomes ash and smoke when tossed in the flames, perhaps the damned individual is transformed into some ghastly, loathsome, wretched subhuman entity wallowing in its self-inflicted miseries for the endless ages to come. Like C.S. Lewis, I believe all who enter into Hell do so by their own volition.

Hell is a choice.

Many years ago, I was deeply offended from a decision made by a leader in the church I attended. Rather than discussing my grievances with this elder, I stormed out filled with bitterness and resentment. For weeks, I wallowed in my anger. Miserable? You bet I was, yet I nurtured my anger and continued heaping coals upon the fire that burned within me. I did not want to let go of my anger. I am ashamed to say I rather enjoyed, in some perverse way, the raging resentment inside me. When I think back upon my ridiculous behavior, I realize I had chosen misery over joy and fury over brotherhood. I am not proud of this, but during this shameful episode, I found a measure of satisfaction in my role as a human cauldron of poison. And what a wretched example I set for my family as well as my Christian brothers and sisters.

Here is my point in telling you all this. I created a miniature hell built on anger and resentment. I then willfully entered into this state of misery. No one shoved me in. No one forced me inside.

As I said, Hell is a choice. By contrast, God is the Author of Joy. Let us close by reading Psalm 16 from the New King James Version.

Preserve me, O God, for in You I put my trust.

O my soul, you have said to the Lord,

“You are my Lord,

My goodness is nothing apart from You.”

As for the saints who are on the earth,

“They are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight.”

Their sorrows shall be multiplied who hasten after another god;

Their drink offerings of blood I will not offer,

Nor take up their names on my lips.

O Lord, You are the portion of my inheritance and my cup;

You maintain my lot.

The lines have fallen to me in pleasant places;

Yes, I have a good inheritance.

I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel;

My heart also instructs me in the night seasons.

I have set the Lord always before me;

Because He is at my right hand I shall not be moved.

Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoices;

My flesh also will rest in hope.

For You will not leave my soul in Sheol,

Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption.

You will show me the path of life;

In Your presence is fullness of joy;

At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

May we always reject the miseries that lead to destruction by embracing the joy of the Lord and His salvation.

Question 200: I am a teenager with an unusual question. Is the image of a girl with wet stains on the clothing around her breasts considered vulgar or overly sexual? There have been a lot of in-game characters designed to look like this, and nowadays, people consider this normal.

Answer: Sexuality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Let me be perfectly candid: I am an older man and I have zero interest in gaming, or in the characters portrayed in these games, so what do I know? I will assume a leaky breast could have sexual overtones, but I know of men who are aroused by four hundred pound women. Much of what is considered in poor taste is cultural. As an example, one hundred years ago, a teenage girl wearing shorts and a tank top might have been arrested for indecent exposure.

I am not as concerned by an animated character with leaky breasts as I am with legions of young people wasting endless hours playing mindless, meaningless games. I am not saying recreational gaming is sinful, but when gaming encourages godless behavior or consumes large blocks of precious time that could be devoted to worthwhile pursuits, I say it is time to abandon childish pursuits and grow up. The Apostle Paul wrote, When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways (I Corinthians 13:11)."

Spoken like a grumpy old man, right? Maybe, but as I approach the final stretch of my life, I bemoan the time I wasted during my youth. To think what I might have accomplished saddens me. Make your youth count for the Lord Jesus, my young friend.

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