

INTRODUCTION

Growing to Maturity is a devotional resource for the study of the Book of James. Of all of the books of the Bible, James is valued for its practical insight in how to live the Christian life in today's world. Even though it was one of the first books written in the New Testament, it still speaks volumes in today's world.

The first volume covers the first 2 chapters of James. The rest of James' letter is covered in the 2nd volume. These devotions were originally written to complement a sermon series delivered to Camarillo Community Church in the spring and summer of 2003. As these writings were read, I kept getting complements on how much they helped in the lives of my brothers and sisters. It is only at their insistence and encouragement that I have even endeavored to publish them at all. The project has blessed me in 2 areas. The first blessing was in the actual writing. I would begin most days with absolutely no idea what to write for that day. Usually on my way to or from work, ideas would start to flow. That's the time that I spend the most time in prayer, while driving the California Highways. At the end of the day, as I put the final period to close that day's writing, I would give a prayer of thanks. So much of what is written here did not originate with me. I guess that is why it blessed so many people who read it.

In order to gain the most from this devotional material, my recommendation would be to read the scripture section in James provided each week and then read the day's devotional. That will keep the overall scripture topic in mind, as well as that day's application. Each day's reading was written to provide you with daily applications of the verses in James to your life today. Each day contains some action for you to take or some thought for you to chew on. My recommendation is that you do the suggested activities.

It has been my prayer that God would use this book to change hearts and minds. Our task, while we are on the Earth, is to become more like Jesus Christ. That is the whole point of God leaving us on Earth after we are saved by His Grace. As you read each day, prayerfully allow the Holy Spirit to minister to you. He may have some area in your life that needs changing. Your task is to be obedient to Him and allow Him to give you the power to make those changes.

Without God's Holy Spirit, this devotional is just meaningless words. It is only through Him that these words have the power to affect eternity. It is to the Holy Trinity that this devotional is dedicated.

Yours in Christ

Ray Tuttle
Camarillo Community Church, Camarillo, CA

INTRODUCTION.....	1
MATURITY IS MEASURED NOT IN KNOWLEDGE BUT IN CHARACTER.....	3
MATURITY IS CHRIST-LIKENESS.....	6
MATURITY IS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.....	8
MATURITY TAKES TIME.....	10
MATURITY IS BECOMING A FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWER OF CHRIST.....	12
MAKE US BITTER OR BETTER.....	15
GOD NEVER WASTES PAIN.....	18
EVERYONE HAS PROBLEMS.....	20
PROBLEMS DON'T LAST.....	22
PROBLEMS HAVE PURPOSE.....	24
KNOWLEDGE IS NOT WISDOM.....	28
WISDOM COMES FROM GOD.....	30
WISDOM IS PROMISED.....	32
WISDOM IS A RESULT OF FAITH.....	35
THERE IS WISDOM IN GODLY COUNSEL.....	37
TEMPTATION IS NOT ALWAYS A BAD THING.....	40
THE ENEMY IS ME.....	42
THE WORLD IS NOT MY OYSTER.....	45
THE FATHER OF LIES.....	48
WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL.....	51
THE BIBLE'S DIVINE ORIGIN.....	55
ITS HISTORICAL DEPENDABILITY.....	57
THE BIBLE'S SCIENTIFIC RELIABILITY.....	59
THE BIBLE'S PROPHETIC SIGNIFICANCE.....	62
THE BIBLE'S TRANSFORMING POWER.....	64
PEOPLE PROBLEMS.....	68
AVOIDING PREJUDICE.....	70
ASKING FORGIVENESS.....	72
GRANTING FORGIVENESS.....	74
GIVING HONOR WHERE HONOR IS DUE.....	77
FAITH IS MORE THAN WORDS.....	81
FAITH IS MORE THAN FEELINGS.....	83
FAITH IS MORE THAN BELIEF.....	86
FAITH IS MORE THAN YOU CAN SEE.....	89
FAITH THAT SAVES.....	92
CONCLUDING THOUGHTS.....	95

MATURITY IS MEASURED NOT IN KNOWLEDGE BUT IN CHARACTER

MARKS OF THE MATURE OVERVIEW DAY 1

Ephes. 2:10 (NLT) For we are God's masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so that we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.

Welcome to our study of the book of James called Growing to Maturity. Please allow me to be your tour guide as we meander through this most practical of books. Most Christians that I talk to enjoy the book of James because it has a vast storehouse of usable principles that they can apply to their lives right now. James just has a way of getting down to the place where you and I live. Because of that, this devotional is called Growing to Maturity. This week what you will be reading about what it means to be mature. We are not going to be talking about physical maturity, the event of growing from a child to an adult. No, the subject at hand is spiritual maturity, the kind of maturity that marks a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Before our first vacation to the lovely island of Maui, I poured over everything that I could find about the place. I wanted to know what was on the island to see, to do and to visit. After all, I didn't want to miss anything. After I finished all of the books, I went on the Internet to find more about the place. Well, beginning the study of a new book of the Bible is kind of the same thing. Usually before I begin a study of any book in the Bible, I will do a lot of research. I want to know who wrote the book, why it was written and to whom. All of this is important if I am to really understand what the author intended when he wrote.

This book is called James because that's who wrote it. Now before you snicker, that is not always true. Some books of the Bible are named after those they are written to. Now the problem is finding out which James wrote these words. There are 3 prominent men named James in the New Testament. There is the son of Zebedee, the brother of John, who was one of the inner 3 disciples. It could have been this James, except that he was killed relatively early in the church age (see Acts 12: 2). There was another disciple named James, who is always described as James, the son of Alphaeus. His authorship of this book is questionable as nothing much is known about him.

Then comes the man church tradition calls James, the Less. He is actually the half-brother of Jesus. That means that his mother was Mary and his father was Joseph. This James was one of the leaders of the church in Jerusalem (See Acts 15). Tradition holds that James used to be called "Camel Knees" because of the hours that he spent on his knees in prayer. Such was the man that wrote this book.

Old "Camel Knees" wrote this book to Jewish Christians living outside the city of Jerusalem. The issues that these Christians were facing are some of the same things that

the church faces today. We will be talking about all of them as we get there. You should take it upon yourself to read through the book all at once. It's only 5 chapters, a mere 4 pages in my Bible. That way you can get a flavor of the whole book. Notice the way James skips around from topic to topic. The book generally defies people who like to outline. The key to James can be found in 2: 26 where he says, **“For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.”**

What you and I will be talking about for the next 7 weeks in part 1 of this devotional, as well as the 8 weeks in part 2, is maturity. Did you ever know someone who was immature? You know the kind of person that never quite got the hang of growing up. These people tend to be more than a little self-serving. Responsibility is never quite something that they grasp for any great length of time. Consequently they tend to wander from relationship to relationship, unable to commit. When your whole life revolves around you, what other person can ever measure up?

For the Christian, spiritual immaturity looks pretty much the same. The church is seen as only a feeding machine. “As long as I am getting fed, I'll stick around, but once that stops, it's adios baby,” is their rallying cry. Such a person never sticks around any church too long because the other church always looks better. Not that I am saying that Christians should never change churches. Sometimes God will send us somewhere else. Wise is the believer who listens to the voice of God and goes where He tells him. No, I am talking about the church hopper.

So how can you become mature? This week, we will be talking about some of the ways. Today I want to discuss the fact that maturity is not measured in how much we know, or how big a Bible we carry around, but it is all about our character. Webster defines this type of character as the attributes and features that make up and distinguish a person. Mature people are like those of the Macedonian town of Berea, of whom Luke says, **“Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”** Do you see why Luke was so impressed with these people?

We don't see a lot of good character in our own society. It's just not something that is promoted. That's probably because it is hard to develop. You see it is much easier for me to take a drive down to the local drug store and buy products that will make me look younger and cuter. That is an easy way for me to make myself acceptable to society. You don't have to spend much more than 20 minutes watching TV to see that it is youth and beauty that are admired.

It is much more difficult to work on developing your character. You might just have to invest some time in reading some excellent books on the subject. Perhaps spend some additional time in prayer discussing it with your heavenly father. Maybe even doing some self-analysis that might hurt some. Of course the harder the course, the greater are the rewards. We're going to spend some time looking at character building in this study. Are you ready for it? Then let's go.

MATURITY IS CHRIST-LIKENESS

MARKS OF THE MATURE OVERVIEW DAY 2

2 Cor. 3:18 (Msg) All of us! Nothing between us and God, our faces shining with the brightness of his face. And so we are transfigured much like the Messiah, our lives gradually becoming brighter and more beautiful as God enters our lives and we become like him.

To become more like our master; that should be the rallying cry of every person who calls Jesus his Lord. For most Christians, they make many pronouncements about becoming like Christ, yet the reality is sometimes different. According to a Gallup survey, 94% of Americans believe in God, 74% claim that they have made a commitment to Jesus Christ and 34% confess to a “new birth” experience. Yet when you compare those statistics to the ones we see all the time about things like theft at work, family failures, mental disorders, financial misdealing and the like, you wonder if we are all speaking the same language.

John M’Clintock and James Strong write in “Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature” about a man they interviewed who told them, “In these last 4 decades my faith has truly taken a beating.” He tells that from the day of his early conversion he was taught that if he were a Christian then people would see a difference in his life. Now at 50, he sees so many mentors who have stumbled and fallen. He’s seen so many of his assumptions about faith and the gospel turn out to be just that, assumptions and not truth. He just doesn’t know what to believe anymore.

The church in America today vacillates from the extreme right, where the only thing that matters in life is that your sins are forgiven, to the extreme left where the only true Christian is the one who stands for love and justice in society. There are very few churches in America today that teach and preach about the transformed, abundant life. You’ve all seen the bumper sticker that says, “Christians aren’t perfect, just forgiven.” Does that saying sum up the ministry of Jesus Christ on this earth for you? Is that all there is to being a Christian, that we are forgiven? It is as if we in the church have forgotten that Jesus came that we might have life in all of its abundance.

Take a look at your life over the last 5 or 10 years. Is your life, your behavior or your attitude any different now than it was back then? Has your knowing Jesus Christ made any significant difference in your life? Do you feel like you are actively participating in the abundant life that Jesus promised, or are you just going through the motions? Look once again at the words of Jesus, **“I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of.”**(John 10:10b)

So how does one participate in this abundant life? Thankfully Jesus didn't keep it a secret. He talked about it all of the time. What I am talking about here is the idea of discipleship, to become Christ-like. It is what He wants all of us to become. Though I feel I must warn you, the pathway of discipleship is not a particularly easy one. It does have a cost associated with it, but the rewards are so far beyond the costs that it becomes well worth it. So how does one take a walk down this pathway?

The first step is that you need to get to know your master. It seems simple enough. If you are to become like Jesus Christ, you have to know what that is. A little over a year ago, I had the privilege of teaching a class studying the Sermon on the Mount. We took an in-depth look at the 5th through the 7th chapters of the Book of Matthew. In that time my class walked through the words of Jesus, soaking them up lesson after lesson. It is through such journeys that I truly began to understand what it means to be like my master. That would be my recommendation for you. You need to sit yourself down in a comfortable chair, pray until you feel your heart become one with God, and read the sermon in Matthew. Make sure that you pause in your reading to allow the Holy Spirit to minister to you. I will warn you that you will not get everything that you need all in 1 session. You will probably need to do this kind of study for the rest of your life.

I know what you are saying to yourself, "Who is this guy kidding? He doesn't know the kind of schedule I have to keep." You are absolutely right. I am talking only to the people who want to become more like Christ and are willing to go a little extra distance to get there. I am only talking to the ones who are looking at their life and thinking that there must be something better. If you are one of those people who are content striving after "things" that never quite satisfy, you probably won't be interested in investing this kind of time.

Secondly, you must surround yourself with excellent teaching. I am always amazed at the quality of teachers that God has brought to His Church. There is just something about sitting under a good teacher that brings you closer to our Lord. As a thirsty man seeks out cool water, you need to seek out such classes or such books in order to drink in what God has in store for you.

Lastly, you need to take the time in your busy schedule to listen to the voice of God. That will probably mean getting alone with God for a period of time each day. Remember communication is always a 2-way street, both speaking to God but also listening as well.

Listen to the words of Jesus, **"If any of you wants to be my follower, you must put aside your selfish ambition, shoulder your cross daily, and follow me. If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life. And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose or forfeit your own soul in the process? If a person is ashamed of me and my message, I, the Son of Man, will be ashamed of that person when I return in my glory and in the glory of the Father and the holy angels."** How are you going to answer the Lord Jesus?

MATURITY IS THE WORK OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

MARKS OF THE MATURE OVERVIEW DAY 3

Ephes. 3:16 I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit.

There is a lot of misinformation out there about the Holy Spirit. What I will attempt to do is to make sure that all who read this article would have a basic understand of who the Holy Spirit is and what He does. At that point, we can then talk about how the Holy Spirit works in our lives to bring about spiritual maturity.

First off, the Holy Spirit is always referred to with the pronoun “He.” What that means is that the Holy Spirit is a person, one of the 3 persons in the trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each of the 3 is God. One is not more God than the other 2; none are less.

The Holy Spirit is that part of God that is generally seen as closest to man. He is that part of God that interacts with man on a continual basis. That is true since Jesus’ resurrection. You see before that the Holy Spirit did not reside in man on a daily basis. Old Testament characters had temporary instances where the Holy Spirit rested upon them, allowing them to do some pretty amazing things. Look at Samson where it says, **“Then the Spirit of the Lord came upon him in power. He went down to Ashkelon, struck down thirty of their men, stripped them of their belongings and gave their clothes to those who had explained the riddle. Burning with anger, he went up to his father's house.”** After Delilah, the Holy Spirit left Samson and he became like anyone else (See Judges 16: 20.) In the Old Testament you see this happening over and over.

Jesus told his disciples that the Holy Spirit coming was one of the benefits of his going to be with His Father. He said, **“But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.”** The Counselor is another name for the Holy Spirit. Who can forget the dynamic way that Jesus’ words were fulfilled in Acts 2? Now the Holy Spirit resides in the hearts of men when they enter into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Look at what the Apostle John said in his first letter, **“Those who obey God's commandments live in fellowship with him, and he with them. And we know he lives in us because the Holy Spirit lives in us.”**

So what does this Holy Spirit do while He is living within us? Well first off, you wouldn’t be saved if it weren’t for the Holy Spirit (John 3: 5,6). It was the Holy Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead (Romans 1: 4). He also gives us insight into how God thinks (1 Cor. 2: 10-13), convicts us of sin (John 16: 8-11), helps us in our struggles against the flesh (Gal. 5: 16-18), helps us to remember the things of God (John 14: 26), is the source of all of our Christian fruit (Gal. 5: 22,23), delivers us through trials (Phil. 1:

19), gives us power to witness (Acts 1: 8), enables us to hold fast to what we believe (2 Tim.1: 13), and gives us Spiritual Gifts (1 Cor. 12: 4-11).

There is so much more that I could write down about all that the Holy Spirit does in and through us. Are you getting the picture yet? It is the Holy Spirit that maintains our daily walk with God. I've always believed that is why Israel had such a hard time maintaining their relationship with God. They didn't have the Holy Spirit living permanently inside of them. You and I are so privileged.

So let's look more closely at how the Holy Spirit helps to mature us. Look at the words of Paul as he prays for the Ephesian Church, **“When I think of the wisdom and scope of God's plan, I fall to my knees and pray to the Father, the Creator of everything in heaven and on earth. I pray that from his glorious, unlimited resources he will give you *mighty inner strength through his Holy Spirit*. And I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love. And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love really is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is so great you will never fully understand it. Then you will be filled with the fullness of life and power that comes from God.”** Did you see what Paul is requesting that the Holy Spirit do for you?

First off, Paul is asking that the Holy Spirit give you strength. The Greek word Paul uses means to be made strong, tough and enduring. It means to have energy or force; to act, endure, or resist. He is also requesting that the Holy Spirit give you power. That's the Greek word, *Dunamis*, from which we get the English word, dynamite. Notice also the Paul is telling you that you need that strength and power in your innermost being. That's the part of you that needs it the most. That's where the war is fought against your flesh. That is the only way you can gain victory over temptation and sin, grief and death, trouble and trials, disease and suffering and selfishness and worldliness.

Having that inner strength from the Holy Spirit is the only way you will ever be all that God wants you to be. It's only through this strength that we can break loose from the flesh and focus upon the eternal promises and call of God. So seek to stay filled with the Holy Spirit so that He may do the things that Paul asks of Him. Practice the spiritual breathing exercises of confession and asking to be filled with God's Holy Spirit.

MATURITY TAKES TIME

MARKS OF THE MATURE OVERVIEW DAY 4

Ephes. 4:15 (NIV) Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

In this fast paced event called our life, we become so used to having things happen right away. Think about it. Just 10 years ago, people thought that getting mail that was 2 days old was marvelous. If you wanted to talk to someone faster, you got on your trusty home telephone. Some 20 years ago having your dinner cook in 45 minutes was the norm for most families. It used to be that getting the morning paper kept a person well informed. Can you remember back that far?

Now we are in a constant state of doing it faster. The mail is just something that brings us our advertisements and bills. We now have e-mail, and if the 2 or 3 seconds it takes for us to get our e-mail is not fast enough, there is always broadband or DSL. Television advertisers are touting meals ready in “fewer than 15 minutes.” We have palm pilots to keep track of everything, Blackbirds and cell phones available to keep us constantly in touch. I’ve even seen a recent television ad that tells us that our old telephone is hopelessly out of date. For now we are in a cellular world where we can be in constant contact with those we love, even while we drive down the highway at 90 mph.

It is, then, only natural that people begin to look at the spiritual side of life with the same impatience that they view their physical life. If the average Christian were totally honest, he would really like to see God as accessible as their family. Wouldn’t it be great to snap your fingers and have things happen miraculously? We could get on our cell phones, dial up God’s 800 number, and make things happen. We would want the spiritual maturity of those Christians that we admire and we want it now!

Unfortunately, it just doesn’t happen that way. God is not at our beck and call to immediately give us our hearts desire, and we will not be spiritual giants in the next 10 minutes. We operate on God’s timetable and not our own. Nowhere is that more true than in the area of spiritual maturity. All this week we have been talking about what spiritual maturity is and what it looks like. Today, we will be looking at the process that is the road to spiritual maturity. The steps to take are not magical as they are not instant. It takes of lifetime of spiritual discipline in order to get there. The only question that you must answer is, are you ready for the journey?

If we are to become mature for God, we must do as Paul tells us where he says, **“You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new**

way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete.”

So, the first step on the road to spiritual maturity is to spend time each day in God’s Word. We’ve talked about this before. If you want to become more like Jesus Christ, you have to know what that is. There is no other way to do that than to spend time every day reading His words. Jesus said, **“You are truly my disciples if you keep obeying my teachings. And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”** Henry Blackaby in his book, “Experiencing God,” said that is the reason that he spends a portion of every day reading the 4 gospels. He does that, in addition to his other reading, so that he can constantly keep before him the knowledge of Christ, how Jesus acted and reacted, what He expects. I have found that idea to be really good advice.

The second step is to spend time each day in prayer. We have talked before about the fact that reading his word and prayer are the primary means by which God talks to us these days. Without this constant communication, there is no way that you can be all that God wants you to be. Look again at the words of Jesus when He said, **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”**

The third step is to develop a generous heart. That means development of the area of giving in every aspect of your life, not just money. If you are constantly taking in the good things of God and never giving out, you will become stagnant. This is not the way God wired his creation. He wants us to be givers of His gifts. He wants channels, not reservoirs. Jesus tells us, **“So no one can become my disciple without giving up everything for me.”**

The last step on the road to spiritual maturity is fellowship. That is the community that you hear so much of around today’s church. The writer of Hebrews tells us, **“And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage and warn each other, especially now that the day of his coming back again is drawing near.”** Notice what he says here. We are to be encouragers of each other. Jesus said, **“Let me give you a new command: Love one another. In the same way I loved you, you love one another. This is how everyone will recognize that you are my disciples, when they see the love you have for each other.”** That is the way that the world will know that you are different; by the love that you have for each other.

Well that’s the list. Now is the time that you get to do a little spiritual reflection. How are you doing in each of these 4 areas? None of us always practices each area to the fullest all of the time. You will have times where each of them rises to prominence. What I am talking about is over the long haul. How are you doing? Perhaps it is time that you do a little honest confession to your Heavenly Father? If there are changes that you have to make in your life, pray for His help to make them. Remember the Holy Spirit is with you every step of the way prompting you to live a life that God wants for you. Listen to Him.

MATURITY IS BECOMING A FULLY DEVOTED FOLLOWER OF CHRIST

MARKS OF THE MATURE OVERVIEW DAY 5

Romans 8:29 (NLT) For God knew his people in advance, and he chose them to become like his Son, so that his Son would be the firstborn, with many brothers and sisters.

One of the things that I have always appreciated about being a Christian is that we have so many excellent examples of what it means to be a fully devoted follower of Christ. I'm not talking about the characters that we read about in the Bible exclusively. There have been outstanding Christians all down through history that made an impact upon the society that they lived in. What I want to know is what separates those great Christians from the kind that I run into on a daily basis. In other words, what does it mean to be a fully devoted follower of Jesus Christ and why would I want to be one?

Actually the name itself tells a lot about what it means. The first part is that we are looking at someone who is fully devoted. It doesn't leave much room for someone who is part time. To be devoted, according to Webster, is to be giving yourself up completely and purposefully. It's the idea of having a passion for Jesus. How many of us can actually say that is true of our lives?

The second part of the phrase implies that one is a follower of Jesus. That means a giving up of the leadership role in my life. When Jesus is in control, there is no more room at the steering wheel. It doesn't work for me to try to share the driving. You know, with one hand on the wheel and the other on the brake. No, either Jesus is driving, or you are. There just isn't any middle ground.

So with that in mind, I began to look at some of the great Christians. Did I see that total giving up of all control in their lives? The first one that I started with was Hudson Taylor. Before Hudson was born his parents prayed, "Dear God, if You should give us a son, grant that he may work for You in China." It was years later that Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission. In his early years Taylor tried hard to be fully devoted to God. His efforts only lead to frustration and failure. It wasn't until he received a letter from a friend by the name of John McCarthy that he found out the secret of being a fully devoted follower of Christ. Hudson Taylor writes, "As I read [McCarthy's letter] I saw it all! If we believe not, he abideth faithful. I looked to Jesus and saw that He had said, 'I will never leave you.' Ah, there is rest! I have striven in vain to rest in Him. I'll strive no more. For has He not promised to abide with me, never to leave me, never to fail me? And, dearie, He never will! The sweetest part is the rest which full identification with Christ brings. I am no longer anxious about anything, as I realize this: for He, I know, is able to carry out His will, and His will is mine. It makes no matter where He places me, or how. That is rather for Him to consider than for me;

for in the easiest positions He must give me His grace, and in the most difficult His grace is sufficient. So, if God places me in great perplexity, must He not give me much guidance; in positions of great difficulty, much grace; in circumstances of great pressure and trial, much strength? No fear that His resources will be unequal to the emergency! And His resources are mine, for He is mine, and is with me and dwells in me. All this springs from the believer's oneness with Christ."

Elizabeth Fry was born to a wealthy family. Early in her adolescence, she rejected God and everything He stood for. At the age of 17, she had her world turned upside down by a visiting pastor who convinced her of the reality of God. That experience changed her forever. Her sister writes, "There was a marked change in her. The Bible became her study, visiting the poor, her great object. To us, she was now always amiable and patient, forbearing and humble. She was really and truly awakening to a new life in Jesus Christ." While visiting the women's prison at Newgate, she felt her heart melt for these poor lost women. Her work for those women behind bars made her a national figure. Today a society dedicated to women prisoners around the world bears her name.

William Booth was born in Nottingham, England in 1829. One evening while walking home after a church service, he suddenly became aware that he needed to renounce his sin. Kneeling at a bare table in the Broad Street Chapel, he vowed, "God should have all there was of William Booth." He became one of England's greatest evangelists and founder of the Salvation Army. William Booth writes, "A young Christian once came to me, and told me that for some time she had been giving the Lord her profession and prayers and money, but now she wanted to give Him her life. She wanted to go right into the fight. In other words, she wanted to go to His assistance in the sea. As when a man from the shore, seeing another struggling in the water, takes off those outer garments that would hinder his efforts and leaps to the rescue, so will you who still linger on the bank, thinking and singing and praying about the poor perishing souls, lay aside your shame, your pride, your cares about other people's opinions, your love of ease and all the selfish loves that have kept you back for so long, and rush to the rescue of this multitude of dying men and women."

What do these men and women have in common? They wanted nothing more than to be a vessel, used by God for whatever purpose. God did use these to do a great purpose. What do you suppose that God wants to do through your life? What is getting in the way? Why not spend some time in quiet solitude today and ask God what He would have you do with all of this? His answer might surprise you.

James 1:1-6 (NIV)

James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ,

To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations:

Greetings.

[2] Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, [3] because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. [4] Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything. [5] If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. [6] But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.

MAKE US BITTER OR BETTER

PROFITING FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

JAMES 1: 1-6

DAY 1

1 Peter 1:7 (NLT) These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold, and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.

There is one thing that you share with the entire human race. It's that everyone faces problems and challenges. Life just doesn't always go exactly the way that we would like. Recently I was running late in leaving for work. Now I'm compulsive when it comes to being on time. I mean I am really compulsive about not being late. Well this day I was running a little late. I race down Santa Rosa Avenue towards Highway 101 (all right, not entirely within the speed limit), praying that I would hit all the lights. Now I have to tell you that my commute to Santa Barbara, CA starts at 6 am, not exactly the height of the morning rush hour. As I hit the 101, the traffic is backed up to a crawl. As I slowly head down the freeway, I can start to feel that anger and frustration start to build. As I slowly get to the next off ramp, I race off, only to be stopped at the light by Harbor Freight Tool Company. Finally the light turns and I make the left turn and race down Mission Oaks Boulevard. Crossing under the freeway, I look up and I notice traffic starting to flow.

Now I am really steaming! If only I had stayed on the freeway. As I go around to the frontage road, what is in front of me but a dump truck towing a backhoe. I now have the joy of meandering down the road behind this truck. I think, "I'll lose him. I'll turn left at the next street and be on my way," only to find the truck decided also to take the same left turn. I figure that he must be going to the construction site just up ahead, but he wasn't. In fact, I slowly followed him all the way to the next on ramp, and even joined him in making the left turn to get back on to a freely flowing Highway 101. Needless to say, there was not a whole lot of joy on that particular morning commute. The time that I normally spent in prayer and quiet meditation, while I drive to work, was not present on this particular occasion.

That is what we are going to be talking about today, what happens when problems and challenges come our way. You see, we have a choice at that particular moment. The attitudes and that state of our mind are entirely within our control. My commute that day didn't have to be stressful. It didn't have to be bitter. That is what I chose to do that morning. I chose bitterness. Skip Gray of the Navigator's ministry summed up my attitude towards the driver of that dump truck when he said, "Bitterness is the poison we swallow, while hoping the other person dies." That is exactly where I was.

Take another look at today's scripture in 1 Peter 1: 7. I love the way the NIV says it, **"These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed."** The "these" that Peter is referring to are the various trials we endure. It is the trials in life that increase our faith because it is where we get to see God at work. When the only place that we have to turn is to God and He works, which is what I call a faith building episode. Just like gold that is put through the refiner's fire to remove its impurities, so my faith must be put to the test to make it pure, to make it strong. The added advantage to this testing is that it results in the strengthening and purifying of my faith so that there comes a praise, glory and honor. I believe that praise, glory and honor in that instance are for both Jesus and me. As Paul said, **"Now if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."** It's that, "Well done my good and faithful servant," that you want to hear from Jesus. It is the rewards that are waiting for you that will last through all of eternity. It is the crown of life that you will proudly wear.

So how do you turn that bitterness into praise? First off you need to be aware of what is happening inside yourself. Bitterness is sneaky. It takes root sometimes even before you realize it. I didn't realize it that morning until I was almost at work. You need to be more aware!

The next thing that you need to do when bitterness takes hold is to confess it. That is what I had to do that morning, when I finally realized that I had allowed circumstances to dictate my attitude. Remember the words of the Apostle John, **"But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong."** He is faithful and just and will forgive us if we would only let Him.

Harry Emerson Fosdick said, "Bitterness imprisons life; love releases it. Bitterness paralyzes life; love empowers it. Bitterness sickens life; love heals it. Bitterness blinds life; love anoints its eyes." That leads us to the final step. After you confess and get rid of the bitterness, you need to replace it with something. That something is love. You need to surround yourself with the love that God has for you.

Ben Patterson, a campus pastor at Westmont College in Santa Barbara, was responding to a question as to why some people in ministry become worn down, resentful, jaded, and cynical, while others become more tender, shining, discerning, and useful to God. He said, "As I think about what has given vitality to my own spiritual life, it's always been, I hate to say, the really hard things: people or circumstances that made me face my limitations, my mortality, and my weakness. And if a few individuals are there, equally weak and broken, to walk with us, and if we can receive the grace to let that press us closer to God, to be more humble, God seems to delight in raising people like that up. Yes, there's still some bitterness in me, to be sure, but it's hard to be bitter when you've been humbled. And if we have the grace to let things drive us to our knees, bitterness just has to go." As I reflected about bitterness, that answer just said it all.

So what are you going to do with what you've just read? As I said in the beginning, you have a choice. The next time bitterness sneaks up on you, you can let that seed of bitterness take root in your soul and ruin your joy, or you can recognize, confess and get rid of it and live a life God intends for you. The choice is yours. As Joshua said, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

GOD NEVER WASTES PAIN

PROFITING FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

JAMES 1: 1-6

DAY 2

2 Cor. 1:8-9 (NLT) I think you ought to know, dear brothers and sisters, about the trouble we went through in the province of Asia. We were crushed and completely overwhelmed, and we thought we would never live through it. [9] In fact, we expected to die. But as a result, we learned not to rely on ourselves, but on God who can raise the dead.

The fact that God uses painful experiences to mold his people is well documented in the Scriptures. Today we are going to be looking at an example of how God uses pain to mold and shape his people into vessels that He can work with. No one thinks that pain is pleasant or enjoyable. That viewpoint changes, however, if we see the purpose of it all, the end product. The perfect example of this would be the kidney stone. Kidney stones going through the body produce pain beyond measure. Members of my family have had the task of going through a number of them. Now if you will contrast that with the pain of childbirth, there is a vastly different way of looking at it. The pain of childbirth is just as intense as a kidney stone and sometimes just as long, but you never see people refusing to have children because of the pain. Why not? It is because at the end of all that pain, when that tiny little baby is in your arms, you see the end product of all of that pain. It becomes worth it.

That's true of most kinds of pain. If you can see that the end product of that pain will be good, you endure it. Sometimes I wonder if that fact didn't help Jesus endure the cross. So the way that we can better endure pain is to understand that the purpose for that pain is a beneficial end product.

I want to spend our time looking into the life of Joseph. If you read about him in the book of Genesis, you will find out that he is the favorite son of Jacob. Joseph had the unenviable task of living with 10 older brothers who didn't like the fact that he was the favorite child. One day his brothers saw the opportunity to do away with this irritant, so they shoved him down a well and were going to kill him. That is until they saw a group of Ishmaelites coming their way. Seeing a chance for profit, they sold their brother to the Ishmaelites, who were on their way down to Egypt. It was there that Joseph was sold to an Egyptian official as a common house slave.

The Bible tells us that God looked with favor upon Joseph and blessed everything that he did. Put yourself in Joseph's place. Here you are minding your own business, seeing to your father's request of finding out if your brothers are all right. You get thrown into a deep pit, sold to some strangers and end up as a slave to some rich guy. This was certainly not the way that you had planned your day. Well the story gets interesting when God causes Joseph to be so successful as a slave that he is promoted. That's when he

catches the eye of his master's wife, who wants more from Joseph than having her house cleaned. When Joseph stands up for God and His righteousness, God causes everything to work out for the best, right? No, the Egyptian has Joseph thrown into prison for his righteous act.

Now if you are Joseph, you now have a right to throw yourself a "pity party" right? Yet when you read the account in Genesis, you don't see that happening. You see exactly the same behavior that was exhibited in the Egyptian's house. God blessing what Joseph was doing and the jailer promoting him.

While in jail, you discover that God has blessed Joseph with the ability to interpret dreams. You have to understand in that culture, dreams were a big deal, and interpreters of those dreams were in high demand. While Joseph is stuck in this dungeon, he comes upon a couple of Pharaoh's servants who had displeased their king. Now in those days you didn't get off with a written warning when you displeased Pharaoh. Joseph interprets a dream of one of those servants, Pharaoh's wine taster. The man was later restored to his job, just as Joseph had predicted, though he forgot all about Joseph and left him in jail.

I have read some scholars that have estimated the time that Joseph spent in slavery, both in the Egyptian's house and in Pharaoh's jail at over 15 years. If that is even close to the truth, that is far longer than I have ever had to endure trials. Yet at the end of the story, when God elevates Joseph to be second in command of all of Egypt, you just don't see even a hint of the bitterness that you would expect. Think of the last time you read about some criminal talking about his early years. Do you see the spirit of Joseph in him or a deep resentment and bitterness that has permeated every section of his life?

You see just how much Joseph is different when circumstances bring Joseph's older brothers into his presence because they need the food that only Joseph has. You don't see the attitude of revenge that you would expect. Look what Joseph says to his brothers, **"Come close to me. I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years, there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance."**

How could Joseph have such an attitude after all that he went through? I believe the answer lies in the fact that Joseph trusted God completely. He knew his God and so Joseph could rest in the fact that the end product would be worth the trip. What about the trials that you are currently going through? Are you willing to trust God for the outcome? Are you willing to live each day as it comes? Sometimes we are like a watermelon seed. What happens when you put your finger on a watermelon seed and push down real hard? It just squirts right out from under your finger. Is that how you are when life brings pressure? Do you want to squirt right out from under it? Why not try a little trust and try to look at today the way that God sees it?

EVERYONE HAS PROBLEMS

PROFITING FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

JAMES 1: 1-6

DAY 3

1 Peter 4:12-13 (NLT) Dear friends, don't be surprised at the fiery trials you are going through, as if something strange were happening to you. Instead, be very glad, because these trials will make you partners with Christ in his suffering, and afterward you will have the wonderful joy of sharing his glory when it is displayed to all the world.

There once was a man named Eldon P. Thornbush, and that was the least of his problems. It's not that he didn't like his name. His mother named him after his grandfather and Eldon like his grandfather a lot. It was just that Eldon worked as part of a crew of 8 cement finishers. It's real hard to be a part of a group of construction workers with a name like "Eldon," so he went by the name of "Chuck." That worked for a while until his foreman felt his work wasn't quite up to his lofty standards and said, "You finished that slab like a real Eldon, didn't you Eldon?" Once the cat was out of the bag, the rest of the guys were constantly ribbing him. Actually it wasn't that his name was all that bad, it mostly due to the fact that Eldon was a Christian.

While the rest of the guys headed for the bar after work to down a few, Eldon just went home. When the rest of the guys sat around at lunch telling dirty jokes, Eldon read his Bible. Eldon thought about quitting and finding some other line of work, but then he heard his Pastor preach one Sunday from the book of 1 Peter. As his pastor read, Eldon felt his heart melt. **"Be happy if you are insulted for being a Christian, for then the glorious Spirit of God will come upon you. If you suffer, however, it must not be for murder, stealing, making trouble, or prying into other people's affairs. But it is no shame to suffer for being a Christian. Praise God for the privilege of being called by his wonderful name! For the time has come for judgment, and it must begin first among God's own children. And if even we Christians must be judged, what terrible fate awaits those who have never believed God's Good News?"**

Eldon had never thought that what he was going through was the same thing that his Lord Jesus went through. He had always concentrated on the ordeal that his co-workers put him through on a daily basis. That's an easy thing to do because pain often does that. It focuses our attention, but sometimes on the wrong things. As Eldon prayed about the situation, God began to open his eyes to the reality of his work. He began to look at his foreman differently, not as a cruel perfectionist, but as someone who had lost his way. As Eldon's outlook changed, so did his focus. He began to look beyond the criticism and to focus on the guys as people who are just one decision away from being his brother for all of eternity. Over the next few weeks, his relationship with the other guys started to change. Eldon began to love these men the way that God loved them.

What happened next, Eldon still calls a miracle. It seems that within those few weeks, the guys started to seek Eldon out. Through their conversations, Eldon learned that his foreman's son had run away from home, Willy was working at failing marriage number 4, that Charley had a alcohol problem, and Pete was regularly experimenting with any mind altering drug he could get his hands on. Eldon learned these things, not because he eavesdropped on their personal conversations, but because the guys sought him out.

It turns out that, though they teased Eldon unmercifully, they admired him greatly. All Eldon did was talk about what things that God was doing in his life and what was happening at his church. He talked about how much he admired his wife and kids, and the joy that he felt doing the simple things in life. His excitement about life and living was contagious. The guys found themselves wishing their lives could be just like Eldon's.

Eldon's workday now takes on a new meaning. There is not as much teasing any more. That's probably because 4 of the guys are now Christians and the other 3 are giving it quite a bit of thought. It still amazes Eldon that God could use someone like him in such a glorious way. Then he thinks, "God is still in the business of saving and using His people."

How about you? Everyone has trouble, but not everyone deals with it in a way that glorifies God. How do you view painful experiences in your life? Do you think of them as something to be avoided or something to be used? Like Eldon, you can miss out on God doing something special in your life if you spend all of your time concentrating on the troubles and not on God.

I would urge you to make each day's opportunity as matter of prayer. Pray, "*God help me to be sensitive today to the needs of others. Help me to love those around me like you love them. Show me the lost and the hurting and give me the right words to say that will bind their wounds and heal their souls.*" Then stand back and watch what happens.

PROBLEMS DON'T LAST

PROFITING FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

JAMES 1: 1-6

DAY 4

1 Peter 1:6 (NIV) In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

I'm sure that there are quite a number of people that would like to debate the title of today's devotional. I know that some reading this have gone through quite lengthy trials and there is no end in sight. Even to those people I would like to say, "Your problems don't last." Now before you fold this devotional up and toss it in the trash, hear me out. What I am talking about is that when you look at things in the light of all eternity, your problems will appear as a distant memory. In the light of 10,000 years in eternity, the time you spent suffering will seem as just a whisper of time.

Gregory Jantz in his book, "Becoming Strong Again," writes, "In Carmel, California, a weathered, gnarled cypress tree grows out of solid rock on the rugged coast. The object of photographers worldwide, it is a symbol of tenacity and courage amid the ravages of nature. If that cypress could talk, it might complain about the coastal storms that have beat against its trunk and branches. But, wise tree that it is, the cypress would probably say, 'I would not have the elegance I manifest today were it not for the pressure of the wind, rain, and storms throughout the years; I have been shaped by their combined forces. Bruised? Yes. But I remain vibrant and strong because I made the decision to grow my roots deeper into the rock, and I weathered the storm.'" And so can you. The challenges of your life have shaped you. Some have been wrenching, terrible. Most of your early experiences were out of your control. All the greater reason to view them from a fresh perspective and see the past with adult eyes, taking note of your struggles in a light that will enhance your growth, give you hope for your better future, and bring inner healing."

So how can you make the trials that you go through even shorter? Let me give you a few easy steps that you can do in order to shorten your next period of trial. The first will be to keep a "Joy Journal." Go down to the drug store and buy yourself a small pocket sized notebook. Then make a list each day of everything that God does in your life. You will be surprised at what this exercise does to lift your spirits.

Secondly you need to actively practice 1 Thes. 5: 18 where Paul says, "**Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.**" There is just something about thanking God that causes troubles to disappear. In addition, the very act of thanking God forces you to constantly look at the positive side of things.

Thirdly, try doing a scripture search. List all of the verses you can find, both from the Old Testament and New Testament, on the subject of joy or rejoicing. Remind yourself

that it is God's will for your life that you be joyful always. As Paul said to the Thessalonian church, "**Be joyful always.**" It is not that we have to work at being joyful. God will give us joy, if we will only let Him. The best place to start is in His word. A careful search of the scripture will reveal true joy to your heart and in your life.

Finally when all else fails to bring you out of despair, just ask Him. God is longing to bring you close to Him and to give you the joy and the strength to get through you day. All you need to do is ask.

Sometimes we get so disturbed about our lives. We fret. We stew. We worry. One of my favorite verses is found in Phil. 4: 6, 7. Paul here says, "**Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**" Here the Christian is told to stop worrying about the trials and troubles of life. Notice that you are told to stop worrying and do something. The thing that you are to do is to ask God. It is interesting that Paul tells you not only to pray, but he uses another Greek word that the NIV translates petition. The King James translates the word as supplication, which is probably closer to what the Greek says. It is prayer that stresses the need. In other words, supplication is prayer, intensified. The 3rd thing that Paul stresses is that the prayer needs to be with thanksgiving. That means that we approach God with a sense of confidence; thanking Him even before the answer comes.

So what happens when you pray like this? Well Paul states that a peace that can only come from God and which man cannot possibly understand, will put a guard around your heart. That is precisely what this verse tells you. God's peace actually puts a guard around your heart. The Greek word Paul uses here is the same word that was used when Rome deposited a squad of soldiers to protect the peace in its territories. The idea is that the peace that God puts in your heart is protected both from within and without. From within, in that it holds that peace in and doesn't let it out. From without means that the guard that God sends to you prevents things on the outside from getting in to damage our peace.

If God goes to that great a length in order to see that we have peace in our hearts, it must be really important to Him. For your practical application for today, I want you to take a few moments and list out the things in your life that usually rob you of your joy. Write them down. Use multiple pieces of paper if you need to. Next commit these things to the Lord, confessing if you need to, and rejoice that you have a heavenly Father that knows and cares for you.

When you get done with your listing and prayer, get to those 4 steps that I gave you in order to shorten those times of trials that come your way. After all, doesn't our own attitude towards trial actually work to lessen or intensify the effect that trial has on us?

PROBLEMS HAVE PURPOSE

PROFITING FROM YOUR PROBLEMS

JAMES 1: 1-6

DAY 5

Romans 5:3 (NLT) We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they are good for us—they help us learn to endure.

We have talked a lot this week about the benefits of problems and trials. I know that when you are in the middle of a time of trial, you are not really thinking about how good this is for you. It's kind of like that medicine that your Mom gave you. It seems like the worse it tasted, the more your Mom thought it was good for you. If you are like me, it got to the point where if Mom said something was good for me, my hand automatically clamped over my mouth.

It seems to be universal that when someone is in the middle of a time of testing, the one question that they ask is why. We want to know the point to all of this pain. We want answers, or do we? Sometimes I wonder if God really answered us if we would be real excited about the answer. Nevertheless, I am convinced that you never really find out the "why" of the trial until well after the trial is finished. It is only in the crystal clearness of looking back that everything comes into a right perspective, and the answer to that "why" question becomes clearer.

There was a time in my life when I went through what was probably my deepest valley. You see I am in love with Christ's church. I believe with all of my heart that the church is where man can truly have an impact upon his fellow man. As most Christians, I had always wanted to be a part of a moving dynamic body of believers. We had just moved to the Central Valley of California, mostly in search of cheaper housing. My family found that, but we also found one of those moving churches. As is usually the case, when we move, we didn't have to do any church shopping. The place we started out was the place we stayed. It happened to be the same denomination that we came from, so it was like we stayed at home.

A few years after we arrived, the church started going through some struggles. Attendance on the weekends plateaued, but we knew that it was only a temporary lull. After all, the city was booming with more people moving to the area searching for the cheap housing that we had found. To accommodate the growth that the leadership knew was coming; the church even purchased 20 acres of land on which to build a larger church.

Then the trouble came like a torrent. Our staff began to experience some turn over, seeing 3 music/worship pastors in 3 years. It all culminated one night when our youth pastor stood in the pulpit and confessed that he had been having extra-marital affairs and submitted his resignation. We had our Senior Pastor and his wife over for dinner soon

after that. The conversation soon turned to the state that our beloved church was in. I can still remember the Pastor saying that he really didn't know how to rebuild a church. He had always been part of a growing church, and had built this one up from a handful of people to a where we were at about 600 people on Sundays. Now that holes were appearing in the walls, he wasn't sure how to repair the damage.

Shortly after that, he announced his resignation. It wasn't entirely his idea, the board had actually asked for his resignation. I guess they felt the need for new leadership. This man had faithfully served this congregation for 17 years and he was asked to leave. You can imagine the kind of turmoil that was brewing within the congregation. I heard many a person says that as soon as Pastor was gone, they were out of there.

Pastor called me one evening to ask me if I would be a part of the pulpit search committee that was forming. I had never before been a part of any board nor did I have any experience in finding a Senior Pastor, but I had felt the tugging of God to do it, so I accepted. The church hired a retired Pastor as an Interim Pastor to work part time until the committee could find someone. While the Interim Pastor was a good administrator, he was not really exciting to listen to on a Sunday morning. Consequently attendance continued to seriously decline. At the low point, there were less than 200 people in an auditorium that seated 450, and that was spread over 2 services.

For someone who is in love with the church, that was really a hard time to go through. I can remember asking God why He was putting his people through such a time as this. That time on the Pulpit Search Committee, I still rate as one of my spiritual markers. As the weeks turned into months, we came together as one, as we waited and prayed each week.

The end of the story is that the church found a man out of Dallas that was exactly what the committee had been praying for. When Dennis came, things began to happen quickly. Within 2 years, Sunday morning attendance was well over 900 and we were in 3 services. At the beginning of the year, Dennis set a goal of having 100 people receive Jesus and baptizing the same number. I can still remember laughing a little bit over that lofty goal. I stopped laughing in September when both goals had been met.

We stayed in touch with our old Pastor because he was like another grandfather to both of our kids. He and his wife moved to the California Coast and were working for a larger church. They were happier than I had seen them in years. It was at that point that I finally understood why God had taken his people through that trial. People who stayed at the church grew in their trust and love of God. I don't think the kind of growth we experienced could have taken place in the old church. The time of testing had resulted in a rebirth.

How about you? I would like you to think back to a time when you went through a really difficult time in your life. Do you now have a better understanding of how God worked through it; what He did? Take the time to prayerfully analyze it. My God is faithful and

He will give you understanding so that you will be able to see Him as He worked in and through your life right on through that difficult time.

James 1:5-11 (NIV)

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. [6] But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. [7] That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; [8] he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.

[9] The brother in humble circumstances ought to take pride in his high position. [10] But the one who is rich should take pride in his low position, because he will pass away like a wild flower. [11] For the sun rises with scorching heat and withers the plant; its blossom falls and its beauty is destroyed. In the same way, the rich man will fade away even while he goes about his business.

KNOWLEDGE IS NOT WISDOM

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

James 1: 5-11

Day 1

1 Cor. 8:2-3 (NLT) Anyone who claims to know all the answers doesn't really know very much. But the person who loves God is the one God knows and cares for.

There once was a guy named Willie who wanted wisdom. He wasn't sure what it was even, but read about it in a book and thought that it would be a nice thing to have. He was wondering how he could obtain some wisdom until he thought of the local college. "Surely there must be a lot of wisdom there," he thought. So Willie wandered down to the college and asked the first person he saw if they knew the meaning of life, thinking that anyone who knew the meaning of life must surely be a wise person. He was immediately directed to the Philosophy Building. Going into the building, Willie asked the first person he saw his question. That person scratched his head and directed Willie to the head professor. He asked the Head Professor his question. The professor paused, stroked his beard, and gave Willie more words than Willie had heard in a long time. Since none of the words made any sense at all, Willie thought that he might be in the wrong place to find wisdom.

Suddenly, Willie had another brilliant idea and headed off to the local seminary. There he sought out another professor and asked his question. The professor started talking in some strange language. He wasn't sure if it was Latin or Greek. In any event, Willie didn't understand anything that the man was saying. Thinking hard, Willie tried to figure out how he could get an answer to his question and gain some wisdom. On his way from the Seminary, he happened upon a young girl. She noticed the rather puzzled look on his face so she asked him what was wrong. Willie said, "I was looking for wisdom so I went to the college and to the seminary, but there doesn't seem to be a lot of wisdom there." The girl replied, "I know all about wisdom. Wisdom is Jesus."

There are a lot of people that confuse wisdom with knowledge. It is not the same thing. To know something, at least according to Webster, is to perceive directly or to have a definite cognition of a thing. In other words, it is to have a brain full of facts, and to be able to understand how these facts relate to one another. What is wisdom? To some people it is the ability to choose the best possible end and the best possible means to that end. To others it is the ability to make the right decisions when judging between 2 different courses of action. Wisdom always has a moral element to it. Wisdom is thought of as being that which is pure, loving and good. When one rules by wisdom, his decisions are fair, just and right. It is more than just intelligence or knowledge. Wisdom is the ability to take knowledge and use it for the right thing.

Let me give you an example of how both wisdom and knowledge relate to one another. Mankind is close to having the knowledge to clone a human being. He has done this with

animals and is busy perfecting the methods needed in order to make an exact replica of you. Wisdom says that because man has the ability to do a thing doesn't mean that he should do that thing. Do you see the difference?

Let's look at what the Apostle Paul said about the wisdom of this world. In the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthian church he said, **“Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.”**

Notice that last sentence. It says a lot about the relationship between the wisdom that man has and the wisdom of God. Think about it. Mankind has tremendous faith in his own ability to solve the world's problems and bring about a better life for all men. To the politician the answer lies in full employment and fair taxes. To the doctor, it is the elimination of disease. To the engineer, a better life lies in bigger and better cities. To the teacher, education is the key to a better life. While all of these things are noble and admirable, none of them will lead to a better life in the real sense. The truth is that I can be employed, healthy, smart and live in the greatest city on the planet and still be miserable. The problem is that man wants a life that is full and free, but he wants it on his own terms. God, on the other hand, understands that for mankind a better life can only be found at the foot of the cross.

It has never been a great leap for me to understand that God made me and that He knows what is best for me. The cross exposes man for what he is, constantly in rebellion against his creator. That is what the Bible calls sin. The cross is God's son, a man without sin, being put to death by mankind. Why would men do such a thing? What did Jesus do to deserve such a fate? The reality is that mankind enjoys his rebellion and he would have to give up control in order to follow Jesus.

The cross shows us the emptiness of man's search for love, joy, peace, and all the other qualities of the good life. Man wants his own freedom, and he wishes the same for other men, at least to some degree, but in all his searching man discovers something. Science, technology, and good works can never bring him the love, joy, and peace for which he longs. Those pursuits can never give man the richness of really knowing God. Those pursuits can never give man the assurance that he is going to live with God eternally.

This week we are going to be talking a lot about wisdom. You are going to be discovering how valuable this gift from God can be. We will be looking at a God who wants us to obtain His wisdom and we will be finding out how to gain it. I don't know about you, but I am looking forward to this week.

WISDOM COMES FROM GOD

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

James 1: 5-11

Day 2

Eccles. 2:26 (NLT) God gives wisdom, knowledge, and joy to those who please him. But if a sinner becomes wealthy, God takes the wealth away and gives it to those who please him. Even this, however, is meaningless, like chasing the wind.

Many times throughout the Bible we see God giving wisdom to those whom He chooses. Today we are going to be looking at 2 of them. Yesterday we took a look at the difference between the wisdom that comes from men and the wisdom that God alone has. Do you believe that the wisdom that comes from God would be superior to that of man? So if God, then, gave you wisdom, it would be superior to anything that you could get from man. If that is a fact, then let's look at some characters from the Bible.

The first character under the microscope will be Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel. With Abraham, what did God have to work with? Well for one thing he was a man a bit too concerned with his own safety. After all Abraham was caught twice for lying about Sarah, saying, "She's my sister." It seems that when Abraham was confronted by a threatening situation, he would lie to protect himself rather than trust in his God. Abraham was also a man who bent a little too easily under pressure. At least that is the reason we will assume that Ishmael was born. In Abraham, we also see a man who thought that it was a good idea to bargain with God. Remember that time just before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah?

Despite his flaws, God worked with Abraham and caused him to be a faithful and wise man. The Abraham that we see at the end of his life is a much wiser man than at the beginning. Ultimately God considered him worthy enough to entrust him with his sacred promises and we find out later that God considered him a righteous man. It was a much wiser man that was able to take his only son Isaac to the mountain in obedience to his God.

Next under the microscope will be Jacob. In Jacob we have an extremely interesting man. In looking at what God had to work with here we see that Jacob was a self-willed mama's boy. He was opportunistic, morally ruthless, a deceiver and a liar, and these were his good traits. Jacob in his early years was totally ungodly. He was far more likely to trust in his own cleverness than his father's God. It seems that Jacob alienated almost everyone that came into contact with him, like his own father, his father-in-law, his brother and even his wife, Leah.

In the end, Jacob was in a position where he had to trust God. He was headed back home with his flocks and his family when he heard that his brother Esau was coming with a hundred or so henchmen. Look at the words of Jacob as recorded in Genesis, "**O God of**

my grandfather Abraham and my father, Isaac—O Lord, you told me to return to my land and to my relatives, and you promised to treat me kindly. I am not worthy of all the faithfulness and unfailing love you have shown to me, your servant. When I left home, I owned nothing except a walking stick, and now my household fills two camps! O Lord, please rescue me from my brother, Esau. I am afraid that he is coming to kill me, along with my wives and children. But you promised to treat me kindly and to multiply my descendants until they become as numerous as the sands along the seashore, too many to count."

Now I know that deadly peril can be a tremendous motivation for prayer, but even in his despair we see a trust in the promises of God, and that is the beginning of wisdom. Later Jacob even wrestled with God. It seems that Jacob did a lot of that, wrestling with God, or at least God's plan for his life. Yet Jacob found God's favor in that he overcame the hard times. Notice what God says about him, **"Your name will no longer be Jacob," the man told him. "It is now Israel, because you have struggled with both God and men and have won."** From that point on Jacob followed God and became truly wise.

From these 2 men, we can see the 3 steps that you need to take in order to gain God's wisdom. First you need to begin by reverencing and obeying God. The Psalmist said it best when he said, **"Reverence for the Lord is the foundation of true wisdom. The rewards of wisdom come to all who obey him. Praise his name forever!"** There is no way for men to be wise until they learn to reverence God, since that is where true wisdom resides. Go back to the original definition of wisdom; the power to see that which is good, moral and pure. Who does that best besides God? If we want to gain God's wisdom then we need to fear Him. We need to become humble and teachable. We need to stand in awe of His holiness and sovereignty. We need to distrust our own thoughts and understanding in order to allow our thought patterns to be turned around.

The second source for God's wisdom will be found in His word. Look at what Paul said to the Colossian church, **"Let the words of Christ, in all their richness, live in your hearts and make you wise. Use his words to teach and counsel each other. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts."** The key here is to let God's word dwell in you richly. The Greek word that Paul uses for richly means abundantly or copiously. The idea here is that you let God's word affect you deeply. You can't do that by merely reading the Bible. You need to soak it in and become steeped in His word. The alternative is that you will never learn wisdom. You need to spend more time reading God's word than you spend reading the newspaper.

The last source of God's wisdom will be found in His people. Later in Paul's letter to the Colossians he says, **"My purpose is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."** Do you see the access road to true wisdom? Paul's prayer here is that God's people be encouraged in their hearts and united behind the love of God. It is those people who know and understand the wisdom of God. Are

you currently on that path? If you stay united, encouraging one another, you will gain access to a treasure trove of wisdom.

WISDOM IS PROMISED

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

James 1: 5-11

Day 3

Luke 21:14-15 (Msg) Make up your mind right now not to worry about it. I'll give you the words and wisdom that will reduce all your accusers to stammers and stutters.

Within each one of us there is some doubt as to how we will perform for Jesus when we are put to the test. Times like the one that Cassie Bernall faced on April 20, 1999, when an armed Dylan Kliebold walked up to her and said, "Do you believe in God?" Witnesses say that Cassie told him that not only did she believe in God but that she loved Jesus. Those were her last words as Dylan shot her to death in the Columbine High School Library that day.

Like most of us, I often wonder what I would do or say when my faith was on the line. What each of us needs to cling to are the promises of our Lord that in those times. We need to cling to the fact that at those times, the Holy Spirit is actively ministering to us. It is in those times that we receive all of the grace that we need. I have talked to people who have lost loved ones, whose children were born with massive birth defects and have heard the same thing. God was there when they needed him the most.

So why is it that we doubt that God will give us wisdom when we need it? James says, **"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."** I'm not sure that it can get any clearer than that. James tells you how and where to obtain it.

From our talk a couple of days ago, you now understand that wisdom is different from knowledge. You understand that wisdom is taking that knowledge and using it for a good, just or pure purpose. It is knowledge that is applied for God's glory. Let's go back to that verse in James and look at some truths that are there. The first is that it is God that gives wisdom. Yesterday, we talked about that fact that the source of true wisdom is God and that the wisdom of God is far greater than that of the world. I don't know about you, but I get excited at the fact that God's wisdom is something that He wants to give me. Second notice that God does not promise to give anyone a tiny portion of wisdom. The promise from God is to give it in abundance.

The last thing that I see in this verse is that God will never scold you or rebuke you when you ask Him for wisdom. As a loving Father, He stands ready to grant this request. He

stands willing to give you more than you need of wisdom. There is nothing in this verse that says that God will have to think about it, or hesitate for even a moment. There are not any conditions to this promise except that you believe (We'll talk more about that aspect tomorrow.) The only thing left is that you walk confidently in the knowledge that you have the wisdom that you asked for.

So what does this promise do for you today? In those times in life when you are required to make a defense for what you believe, Jesus promises wisdom, **“But make up your mind not to worry beforehand how you will defend yourselves. For I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict.”** Give a quick prayer for wisdom and then go ahead and start defending. You can be confident that the words you use will be supported by God to do the work that He wants done.

In those times when you have to do something difficult, ask for wisdom. I have served for the last 8 years on the Board of Elders at our church. Before every meeting, I pray that God will give this group wisdom. As I look back over the years that I have served, I have seen examples of His wisdom time after time as we grapple with some really difficult decisions. There never was a bigger decision than the one we made 2 years ago to commit to building phase 1 of our present facility. Phase 1 was to consist of digging out the basement, the underground portion of the building and to dig out the basement. To an outside observer, this decision wouldn't be seen as wise. We had about \$600K in the bank and we had just committed to spending \$700K without any financing in place for the rest of the building. As one of my brother Elders put it, “We may get stuck with one expensive swimming pool.” However, to every one of us, the issue was crystal clear. To a man every one of us believed that God told us to build the facility. Every one of us knew God was faithful. We prayed for wisdom. It was time to walk the walk. The board voted to start the building and we never looked back.

That's the way that you should do it. When you have a difficult decision, you pray about the decision until you feel that you have God's sense of which way you should go, all the while praying for wisdom. At that point, it's action time. Do it and don't look back.

Now you might say, that's an easy thing to say, but not so easy to do. I would agree with you. That is why I would advise you to start on something a little smaller than committing to a multi-million dollar building project. It is a lot like faith. Faith is something that is built over time as you see God's faithfulness time after time. Why not start on something like where you will spend your next vacation as a family. Commit the time to God and pray as a family. After you have prayed for a week, meet together as a family to see if God has answered your request. Now parents, be spiritually sensitive enough to realize that God may be speak through your children and not you. Sometimes God will speak through them more readily than he does you. It probably has something to do with the fact that children often have less interference in their prayer channels. Once you know what God is saying, do it.

After you see God is faithful in the little things, be sure to move on to the more complex issues. Soon you will be allowing God to direct in ways that you never thought possible, and in the process serving Him in new and exciting ways.

WISDOM IS A RESULT OF FAITH

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

James 1: 5-11

Day 4

Ephes. 1:15-17 (NIV) For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better.

Today's topic took quite a bit of meditation on my part in order to gain understanding about the relationship between faith and wisdom. I would like to thank Diane Horne, the wife of the Executive Pastor of our church. Diane labored with me on today's article and was instrumental in molding my thinking on this subject. Diane and I had the wonderful privilege of spending the day in the jury assembly room in Ventura, CA.

As you have been reading, we have been talking about wisdom all week. Wisdom is that quality in God and His people that seeks out the good and pure. The question is how that relates to faith. Faith, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, is **“the confident assurance that what we hope for is going to happen. It is the evidence of things we cannot yet see.”** In other words faith is listening to God and believing what He tells us.

James tells us, **“If any of you needs wisdom to know what you should do, you should ask God, and he will give it to you. God is generous to everyone and doesn't find fault with them. When you ask for something, don't have any doubts. A person who has doubts is like a wave that is blown by the wind and tossed by the sea. A person who has doubts shouldn't expect to receive anything from the Lord.”**

Essentially that verse tells you that if you want wisdom you should ask for it and expect that God is going to give it to you in abundance. James cautions you to believe in this promise of wisdom, or don't ask for it.

Are you beginning to see the relationship between wisdom and faith? Faith is the opposite of doubting. Look at the scriptures, especially the gospels. When the disciples doubted, they found themselves powerless. For those of you Bible students, look at Mark 4: 40 where Jesus rebuked the disciples for doubting during the storm. You can also look up Matthew 14: 31 to see Peter doubting when he went for a stroll on the Sea of Galilee. There is also the disciple's failure to heal the demon-possessed boy because of their lack of faith (Mt. 17: 17). In fact on that occasion, Jesus said clearly, **“Because you have so little faith. I can guarantee this truth: If your faith is the size of a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you.”**

So let's go back to James and I will give you the steps and then use an illustration from my own life to show you how this process works. The first step is that you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. That requires an initial step of faith; to believe that there is a God, that He took care of your sin and wants to have a personal relationship with you. None of this process can happen until you take care of that step. The next step arrives when there is a situation that enters your life that you feel a real need for wisdom in order to make the right choice. This situation can be anything. According to what James writes, you ask God for that wisdom. You then proceed with the assurance that you now have wisdom from God. It is at this point that you look at the plusses and minuses and seek Godly counsel. You then make your decision with confidence that you are moving where God wants you to go. Some time after that decision is made, you take a look back to see how God used that decision to mold you to be more like Jesus. It is that process that builds your faith in order to more easily trust God the next time a situation arises.

There was a time in my life where I was unemployed for almost 5 months. I talked about that time in one of the devotionals that I wrote called Making Good Financial Scents. During those 5 months, there were no interviews and no job offers. Then suddenly, I had 2 offers of employment in the same week. The decision has to be made as to which job to take. Believe me, I prayed hard to make the right decision. I wanted to go to work where God wanted me. One of the jobs can only be described as my ultimate dream job, the job that you always wanted. The other job, I knew the man that I would be working for and I really like him and the company. After praying about it, looking at the plusses and minuses and getting counsel, I took the dream job.

Now I have to tell you that there were times over the next year that I believed that I had made the wrong choice. Sometimes when you get your dream job, the dream turns out to be a nightmare. Today, as I look back at that time, the dream job was exactly where God wanted me to be. There has never been a job where I have had been stretched more; where I was more dependent on God than that one. Put that together with the people that God touched through me and brought closer to Himself, it was definitely the right choice from God's perspective. You see God is not as interested in my career goals or my comfort and happiness as He is about growing me into a disciple.

The secret to wisdom is that you continually view life from God's perspective. When a situation arises that needs wisdom, you ask God for it. When you ask Him, you believe that He has given wisdom to you and you proceed accordingly. You make that decision with confidence that you are proceeding in God's will. Then allow some time to go by, then you look back to see how God used that decision to mold you or to move His kingdom along in some way. That very task of reviewing will build your faith to higher levels, so that the next time this process is a whole lot easier.

THERE IS WISDOM IN GODLY COUNSEL

MAKING UP YOUR MIND

James 1: 5-11

Day 5

Proverbs 15:22 (NLT) Plans go wrong for lack of advice; many counselors bring success.

One summer when I was 16 years old, I was able to spend a few weeks as a camp counselor at a Boy Scout Camp. I can still remember that it was the first time that I really felt grown up. One feels especially grown up when he is being viewed as a role model by the scouts that were attending the camp for those weeks. Of course there was a lot of work involved, but that didn't seem to matter. Those weeks are still a special memory of my past.

The same can be said for the people that I have talked to who have spent a week leading a High School summer retreat or the adult counselors at an AWANA Scholarship Camp. I have often wondered who has the better time, the students or the counselors. It probably depends upon whom you ask. There is just something special about being in a position of counselor. The weight of responsibility that falls upon a counselor can be really heavy. Still, God is faithful and just seems to give you the right words to say at just the right time.

What we are talking about today is that one of the ways that God uses to impart His wisdom to you is through counselors. Rick Warren, in his book "The Purpose Driven Life," talked about the fact that we all are relational beings. That means that the value, meaning and purpose that we derive from life comes from our relationships. Think about it, when we are all done and about ready to end this life, our memories will be about relationships, not about our careers or the stuff we accumulated. Real life is all about relationships.

You need to let another truth sink into your heart. The writer of Hebrews says, "**Since the One who saves and those who are saved have a common origin, Jesus doesn't hesitate to treat them as family.**" If you have a relationship with Jesus Christ, you are part of one, very large family. You have one father, and millions of brothers and sisters. Now I know for some of you having a large family doesn't bring about a special or tender memory for you. It's not that uncommon for family relationships to be the most painful, but that is not how the family of God is supposed to work. It is in God's family that real love and caring is takes place.

Now the book of Proverbs is full of advice about the wisdom of seeking counselors. I talked about this subject quite a bit in "Making Good Financial \$cents." In that devotional, I advised you to seek counsel whenever you have a financial question. The same advice is worth hearing as it concerns every aspect of your life. Seeking counsel is

never a bad idea. Look at what Solomon has to say, **“For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure. The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice. Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.”** Do you see a pattern here?

To those who seek counsel, I would offer this advice. First you need to seek God. Before you take a problem to a counselor, seek God. Obviously you do this through deep prayer. Get alone with God with your Bible to pray, read and listen. You may wish to consider a time of fasting as this helps clear your mind for the things of God. The next thing I would suggest is that you choose your counselors very carefully. You need a Godly person who exhibits wisdom and who has no vested interest in your decision. Remember, you are seeking someone who loves you and only wants your best.

To those who are being asked to counsel, I would say your job is to communicate the truth, as you know it. It is not your job to demand that the counselee take your advice. That is God’s job, not yours. Also, you need to observe strict confidentiality. The fact that you even met together must never be revealed to anyone else. Next, if you are called upon to counsel someone and you really have no idea where the answer to his or her dilemma lies, say so. Don’t attempt to make something up. Remember what you say has a great impact upon someone else’s life. Finally don’t forget to pray. You want to be sure that God is directing your words.

The relationship between the counselor and counselee is a rich one. I believe that both are blessed and used by God. I know that it takes more time to seek advice from someone, but the rewards are great. Times when I have sought out wise counsel, I have been kept from some really bad decisions. Why not try it next time?

James 1:12-18 (NIV)

Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him.

[13] When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; [14] but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. [15] Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

[16] Don't be deceived, my dear brothers. [17] Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. [18] He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of all he created.

TEMPTATION IS NOT ALWAYS A BAD THING

WINNING OVER TEMPTATION

JAMES 1: 12-18

DAY 1

1 Cor. 10:13 (NASB) No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.

Why do people always assume that temptation is a bad thing? Whenever someone mentions the subject it is always in the negative. For the Christian, temptation is nothing but a choice. You can choose to do good as well as choose to do bad. That's the nature of a choice. Each time you choose to do good, you grow a little closer to God, a little more like Jesus. When you blow it, well even that is not the end of the world, as you will discover in the last reading for this week. Your reading schedule for this week will include talking about temptation in a general sense. The topic for tomorrow through Thursday will be the 3 different sources for temptation and how to combat them. Then on Friday, we will talk about what to do when you've chosen the wrong path. Now to the average Christian, temptation is the exclusive role of Satan. To be sure as a tempter, there is none better, but if you concentrate on only the Devil, you will probably be struck down by the other sources of temptation that can and will affect you. The Bible tells us that temptation can also come to us through our own flesh and it can also come to us through the world.

If you think about it, it is temptation that makes you good. To illustrate this point, go back in time, before there was such a thing as temptation, all the way to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Before their encounter with the serpent, they were neither good, nor evil. They were innocent. The idea of choosing between good and evil was foreign concept to them. In fact the very tree from which they ate the fruit was called the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (See Genesis 2: 17). The Bible said that after they had eaten of that fruit, their eyes were opened and they had their first understanding of the concept of evil. Ever since that day, they and all of their offspring, including you, have been making choices between good and evil. So from a certain perspective, it is the presence of evil that makes good possible.

So how does temptation work? Look at what James says, "**Temptation comes from the lure of our own evil desires. These evil desires lead to evil actions, and evil actions lead to death.**" It all starts in your mind, some desire that invades your brain. At this point, there has been no sin. It is not a sin for you to think. God gave you a brain. Let me give you an example that will hit home for half of you. A guy is walking down the street and sees a pretty girl. He is automatically attracted. At that point, he has not done anything other than react in the way the God wired him. What he does next is to make his choice between good or evil. If he checks the thought by thinking of something else,

he has chosen to do good, to become more like Christ. If he dwells on the girl, imagining all sorts of things in his mind, then he has started down the path that James is describing. As Martin Luther said, "You can't stop birds from flying overhead, but you can stop them from making a nest in your hair."

So let me give you some suggestions on how to deal with temptations in order to give you a better chance of choosing right. First it is important for you to know that you have a choice. You are not powerless in the face of temptation. Look at today's verse. **"No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; he'll never let you be pushed past your limit; he'll always be there to help you come through it."**

Paul here tells you that every temptation that you will ever face has been faced before. There is no such thing as a super-human temptation, nothing that is beyond the possibility of humans to endure. People have faced them before and have been victorious over them. It is possible. Second, Paul is teaching you that God is there even when you are right in the middle of the temptation. He didn't suddenly leave. You need to send prayers heavenward in those times. Ask Him for help. You know those little "SOS" prayers. As the verse is reminding you, He will never let you down.

Next you will notice that the temptation is never too strong for you, and that there is always a way of escape. God knows you much better than you know yourself. In His sovereignty, he has chosen to limit the temptations that you face in order that you can have success, to choose Him. No one will come before God with the excuse that he could not possibly have withstood the amount of temptations that came his way. Finally, God always give us an escape hatch to slip through that allows us to withstand the tempting.

Let's get real practical. I found a wonderful step-by-step method to fight temptation in the notes for the Life Application Bible that I thought might help. The 5 steps you need to take to overcome temptation are: "(1) recognize those people and situations that give you trouble, (2) run from anything you know is wrong, (3) choose to do only what is right, (4) pray for God's help, and (5) seek friends who love God and can offer help when you are tempted. Read over these 5 steps again. Meditate over them throughout today. They are the key.

If you want victory over temptation, you have to win the battle over your mind. That is why Paul tells you to, **"Fix your thoughts on what is true and honorable and right. Think about things that are pure and lovely and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise."** That is because you do the things that you do because you think the way you think. In other words you will not act differently than you think deeply. Know the situations where you are most likely to fall into temptation and avoid them like a bad cold. I have always found that the more that I fix my mind and my heart on Jesus, and the closer I get in Christian Fellowship, the less likely I am to fall.

THE ENEMY IS ME

WINNING OVER TEMPTATION

JAMES 1: 12-18

DAY 2

Galatians 5:19-21 (NIV) The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

In the world of temptation, we are going to be talking about the first of the deadly trio, your own flesh. Now I know that it is always easier and more comforting to blame your temptation on the Devil, but there are times when you are your own worst enemy. To begin with let's define the term flesh. Obviously we are not talking about our own skin or outer layer. When the Bible talks about flesh in this context, it is talking about the sinful element of human nature, that which is unregenerate in mankind. When the Bible talks about living according to the flesh, it means to live and act sinfully. It is what the human has become as a result of Adam's sin.

Go over Paul's list in today's scripture verses one more time. Do you notice how complete the list is? They are truly not the kind of actions that you would want at the next church social. If you were to take everything that the church of Jesus Christ is supposed to be and wander to the exact opposite, this verse is talking about that kind of behavior. Paul says in this verse that such people who live like this will not get into the kingdom of God. Since God is righteous, it should be obvious that His children should also make every attempt to live righteously.

The problem is that most people think that God is going to somehow accept them for who they are. This belief comes from a false idea of who God is. There is nowhere in the Bible where God is described as an indulgent father who will allow man an indiscretion or so along life's path. The idea that God will accept people, just as they are, is not found anywhere in the scriptures. That is why Jesus had to die on a cross.

So what does the Bible say about the relationship that you need to have with the flesh? Look what Paul told the Roman church, **"Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation, but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live."** Notice, as we talked about yesterday, you have a choice. Who you live for is entirely up to you. Of course you will have to live with the consequences of your choice, but the freedom to choose is something that God has given to you.

The Apostle Peter also had some words to say on this subject when he said, **"Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude,**

because he who has suffered in his body is done with sin. As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God. For you have spent enough time in the past doing what pagans choose to do, living in debauchery, lust, drunkenness, orgies, carousing and detestable idolatry. They think it strange that you do not plunge with them into the same flood of dissipation, and they heap abuse on you.” Do you relate to what Peter is saying here?

Notice that Peter is giving you some advice as to how to fight this source of temptation. His advice is that you need to arm yourself with the same attitude that Jesus had. What does this mean? First you must die to self, just like Jesus did. In the flesh, Jesus didn't want to suffer. Remember Jesus' words in the garden? Yet in the end, it was all about what His Father wanted. Jesus served no matter what the cost. Now you are encouraged to do the same thing by Peter. For you are in open warfare with these kind of desires and they will destroy you unless you conquer them. Peter is asking you to seek after God and don't let these desires even get a toehold in your life.

Second, Peter says that you must arm yourself with the mind of Christ in that you concentrate on doing God's will for the rest of your life. Notice that the evil desires that Peter talks about are in the plural. As Paul did for Galatia, Peter here gives us a list of areas where our flesh attacks us. Instead let your focus be on fulfilling the Great Commission, let your focus be on doing God's will and these things will not get you.

Third, arm yourself by being truly fed up with sin. Look at sin with all of its ugliness. View the natural outcome of its lifestyle. Take in the way the flesh will totally waste a life, take your life so far from what God had in mind when He created you. Your life has been divided into 2 parts, that which was before you met Jesus Christ, and that which your life has become since meeting Jesus Christ. Keep the 2 separate.

Fourth, Peter tells us to arm yourselves with the mind of Christ in dealing with the strange looks that others will give you because you do not follow them in their activities. I can remember when I first accepted Christ's offer and started my new life in Him. I was a member of a band at the time. As my behavior changed, I started to be derided by the guys. Oh, it was all in fun, but I always wondered how much of it was good-natured teasing and how much was the fact that they lost me. It wasn't that I stopped being there for them. I just stopped the drinking and the language that was my life before. After a short time, the band broke up. You see up to that point, one of my primary functions in the group was as a peacemaker. After Jesus came into my life, I didn't need the band so much, and I stopped playing diplomat.

The flesh is a powerful lure for the believer. There is no doubt that in your own strength, you will have a really tough time fighting this area of temptation. If you read on in the scripture at the top of today's reading, you will see that Paul also has an answer to the flesh, and that is the Holy Spirit. Look at what he says, **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit,**

let us keep in step with the Spirit.” When we allow God’s Holy Spirit to control our lives, these fruit will be in evidence. The power is there. All we need to do is appropriate it.

THE WORLD IS NOT MY OYSTER

WINNING OVER TEMPTATION

JAMES 1: 12-18

DAY 3

1 John 2:15-17 (NASB) 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.

We talked yesterday about the temptations that come from within us. How are you doing in dealing with this source of temptation? Are you becoming more used to the idea that you need to die to yourself and live for Jesus? That is great! Unfortunately your victory over your flesh, though it is a major victory, is only part of the picture of temptation. Today we will be talking about another, totally different source of temptation standing ready to trip you up. This one is called the world.

When the Bible talks about the world, it is not always talking about planet Earth. For example in John 3:16, it says that Jesus died for the world. That means that His atoning death was meant for all of mankind. There are also times when the Bible uses the word world to refer to the sociological part of mankind that denies God's existence and does all it can to reject God. The other way to say it would be to refer to the world system, or the world's way of viewing God. It is that world system that today's verse is talking about. Do you see in the second sentence of the verse that the world is on the opposite side from God? So what does the Bible have to say about the world?

Jesus said that the world would choke out all desires for God and His truth in the Parable of the Sower (See Mt. 13: 22). He also said that the world would give you a false sense of security (Mt. 24: 38, 39), and would compete with your ministry (1 Cor. 7: 32). In Ephesians 2: 2 Paul says, "**You used to live just like the rest of the world, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God.**" Do you see how the world will mold your very thoughts and attitudes? James tells us, "**You have spent your years on earth in luxury, satisfying your every whim. Now your hearts are nice and fat, ready for the slaughter.**" Pretty graphic don't you think? It is the world that gives Christians tribulation. As Jesus said, "**These things I have spoken to you, so that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.**" Finally it is the world system that gives us our greatest opposition. Jesus said, "**If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.**"

We have talked a lot about the object of your love. What you love says a lot about you. In today's verse, John is talking about that very thing. He says it in the negative; do not love the world or anything in it. Why would John say such a thing? Well for the very reasons that we have just been talking about. The world is going in the complete opposite direction from you. That is why it is so hard for the Christian to fight. It's like we are constantly trying to swim upstream. So what is so bad about the world? Well you have to remember that John is talking to believers here. This letter is written to you. Why would a believer in the Lord, Jesus Christ leave all that God has promised and love the world. Actually, it never starts out that way. It happens a little at a time, and usually with things that seem good. Unfortunately, before too long, those things begin to dominate your life.

Let me give you a few examples of what I am talking about. Some Christians will begin to enjoy nature and the beauty of the earth. While there is nothing wrong with enjoying God's creation, it can take you away from God when it supplants worshipping with other believers. At that point nature has caused you to be ineffective for the Lord. There are Christians who believe that they need to be involved in government and the moral issues of our day. Again there is nothing wrong in that. The only problem is when they become more faithful to the cause than God or their church, it hurts both the Christian and Christ's church. What about the person who hungers after the pleasures and possessions of this life? I think you can complete that journey on your own.

So, according to John, what 3 parts of the world are we supposed to avoid? The first is what John refers to as the lust of the flesh. This is anything that would involve the 5 senses, feeling, tasting, smelling, hearing and seeing. Once again none of these things are evil by themselves. God created each of them. What John is saying is that these things should not control you. That's what he means by lust. Lust is a wanting that is out of control.

The same can be said for the 2nd part of the world that he tells us to avoid, the lust of the eyes. The eyes have to do with seeing and wanting to possess what you see. Once again seeing is not wrong. It is only wrong when either we see and want what God directly forbids, or we see and desire only to indulge ourselves. It is once again an issue of control. It is one thing to see a shiny black BMW convertible. It is quite another to want that car so badly that you will do anything in order to possess it.

The last thing John warns about is the boastful pride of life. I believe that there are at least 2 aspects to this warning. The first is a warning against focusing too much on you. If your desire, above all else, is for people to notice you, you may have a problem in this area. The second aspect would be the feeling of self-sufficiency. This would be a person who focuses on himself and his capacity to handle anything in life. This person feels that he can handle anything that life throws at him. It kind of takes God and your dependence on Him out of the equation.

So how do you fight this temptation? I believe Paul gives the answer in Romans 12: 2 where he says, "**And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the**

renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” The secret is that you are to be transformed by the renewing of your mind. That means you need to undergo a metamorphosis. That is the Greek word that Paul uses here for transformed. Your mind and the way it operates must be changed, inside to outside, just like the caterpillar. That journey starts when you receive Jesus and it will continue throughout your Christian life as your journey with Him. As Paul said, **“What this means is that those who become Christians become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!”** Keep yourself on the journey; read the Word, pray continually and fellowship with the saints. That’s how you will continually renew your mind.

THE FATHER OF LIES

WINNING OVER TEMPTATION

JAMES 1: 12-18

DAY 4

John 8:44 (NLT) For you are the children of your father the Devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning and has always hated the truth. There is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.

Today we're going to deal with temptation that comes from the Father of Lies, the great tempter himself. Unfortunately, there is not enough room in the average daily devotional to do a complete review of Satan. Where I want to concentrate today will be in his role of tempter. I want to look at his modis operandi as it were. What does it look like or sound like when Satan tempts. Then I will look at how you can do battle against that temptation.

When Satan tempts you it is usually consistent with his personality. When he was thrown out of the heavenly realms, it was because he wanted to be god (See Ez. 28: 2 and Is. 14: 13). If you are going to understand about Satan's temptation, the first thing that you have to know is that he wants to be above God. It was true in the Garden of Eden and it is still true today. Anytime you read about a religion that teaches that man can become a god, you know where that religion is coming from. Look what Paul says about him in 2 Thes. 2: 4, **"He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he sets himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God."**

Notice how Satan tempts Jesus in Luke 4. **Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. And He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended, He became hungry. And the devil said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread." And Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'Man shall not live on bread alone.' "And he led Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the devil said to Him, "I will give You all this domain and its glory; for it has been handed over to me, and I give it to whomever I wish. "Therefore if You worship before me, it shall all be Yours." Jesus answered him, "It is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve Him only.' "** And he led Him to Jerusalem and had Him stand on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, "If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down from here; for it is written, 'He will command His angels concerning You to guard You,' and, 'On their hands they will bear You up, so that You will not strike Your foot against a stone.' " And Jesus answered and said to him, "It is said, 'You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.' " When the devil had finished every temptation, he left Him until an opportune time.

If there is one thing that Satan knows, it is men. It's not that he can read your thoughts. The Bible does not teach that he has that power. He does, however, know men. He knew Jesus. It is implied in his very first word. The Greek word he used can also be translated since. Satan knew that after 40 days without food, Jesus might be susceptible to a little temptation. I don't think that food would have been the only thing on Jesus' mind at that point. There was also the looming thought of his upcoming ministry and his death. Jesus knew Israel, their views and feelings. He knew the kind of Messiah that they were looking for. In his weakened condition, one wonders if the hopelessness of the task ahead would have pressed in on Him. Satan knew it too, for the point of 2 of the 3 temptations that he slings at Jesus is to cut short the contest in one decisive stroke.

Satan offered Jesus rule over all of the kingdoms of the Earth; past, present and future. Do you notice that Jesus didn't dispute Satan's ownership of these kingdoms? For now these kingdoms are still Satan's to give. "You don't have to die, Jesus, you can rule right now. All you have to do is worship me," was Satan's meaning here. Imagine what would have happened if Jesus were to take Satan up on his proposition to throw himself off the pinnacle of the temple? To be sure, angels would have come to his rescue, as God had already promised. So as Jesus floated to the ground in front of all of Israel, He would have been immediately accepted as their Messiah. That is exactly the kind of entrance Israel was looking for in a Messiah. Jesus would have it all. The only problem was that men would still die in their sin.

Just as Satan knew Jesus, he also knows you. He will do whatever he can to keep you from serving God. He hates your prayers. He despises your worship. He can't stand it when you testify about your relationship with the God of the Universe. You need strategies to thwart his plan. Let me give you a few.

How did Jesus combat Satan? He did it by accurately quoting the Word of God. Did you notice that I said accurately? Even Satan can misquote scripture; make it say what he wants it to say. Never underestimate the power that is held in God's Word. The writer of Hebrews said, "**For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.**" The first principle in the fight against Satan is that you need obtain the power of God's word by memorizing it.

The second principle lies in the power of prayer. After Jesus came down from the Mount of Transfiguration, he came upon some of his disciples who were unable to cast out a demon. After Jesus got rid of the demon, the disciples wanted to know why they couldn't do the job. Jesus told them, "**This kind can come out only by prayer.** (Mark 9: 29)"

The third principle of fighting the temptations of Satan can be found in the power of Jesus' name. After Jesus left, the disciples came to realize the power that was present in His name. The mere utterance of the name of Jesus and people were healed, saved and set free. Jesus came to destroy Satan's works. Look what the Apostle John wrote in his first epistle, "**The person who lives a sinful life belongs to the devil, because the devil**

has been committing sin since the beginning. The reason that the Son of God appeared was to destroy what the devil does.” John also writes, **“You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world.”**

The last principle is that there is safety in numbers. That is why Christians need to stick together. Look how Peter describes the Devil, **“Be careful! Watch out for attacks from the Devil, your great enemy. He prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for some victim to devour.”** There is nothing that a lion enjoys more than a young one that has been separated from the group. It represents an easy meal. Satan is the same way. Alone you are vulnerable. When we are united together doing the work of God, we are a formidable force.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU FAIL

WINNING OVER TEMPTATION

JAMES 1: 12-18

DAY 5

1 John 1:9 (NLT) But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong.

The title for today's reading was chosen with much thought. I had originally typed in what happens if you fail, but changed it. The reality is that everyone fails in the area of temptation at one time or another. There was only 1 person that always chose the right path when he encountered temptation, and that was Jesus Christ. The Bible tells us that, **"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are, yet was without sin."** From the context, we understand that the writer of Hebrews was talking about Jesus.

First let's review a little bit what we have been discussing for the last few days. There are 3 different and unique sources of temptation that try to trip you up. The first is your own flesh. Temptations that come from the flesh must be fought internally, for that is where the temptation comes from. The Christian needs to make up his mind that he is going to please God and not his own flesh. The second source of temptation is from the world. The way you combat the world is to move yourself closer to Jesus. The more you have contact with Godly things, the less the influence the world will have over you. The final source of temptation is from Satan, himself. The only way to defeat Satan is through the power of God, as experienced through His name, prayer, His Word and fellowship with His saints.

As I said in the 1st paragraph, despite all of these strategies, you will fail at times. It is important that you understand the provisions that God has given us to restore the fellowship that we have with Him. The problem with sin is that it does damage. One of the physiological changes that happen to everyone when they take of the guitar is that they will develop calluses on the end of their fingers. The body does that in order to avoid the damage that continual pressing down on those narrow strings causes. I can always tell when I have been away from playing too long. It hurts a lot when I start again. That is because the calluses have gone away and now have to reform. The same is true about sin. It develops calluses over your conscience. The next time that you participate in that sin, it will hurt a little less. That will continue until you can sin and not feel anything at all. For a Christian, who supposedly serves God, that is not a good thing. In fact the writer of Hebrews warns, **"You must warn each other every day, as long as it is called "today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God."** The point is that you need to strive to be sensitive to God when it comes to the area of sin. That is the first thing that you need to know when you make the wrong choice in a temptation.

If you remain sensitive to God, then the Holy Spirit will let you know when you've blown it. Look at what Jesus said in the Gospel of John, **"But it is actually best for you that I go away, because if I don't, the Counselor won't come. If I do go away, he will come because I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convince the world of its sin, and of God's righteousness, and of the coming judgment."** The counselor is another of the Holy Spirit's names. Perhaps you have heard the small voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to your heart after you've made a bad choice. That is the voice of God working in your life. Listen to it as you would a trusted friend.

Now our Lord, Jesus Christ is not idle during this process of restoration. In his first letter, John tells us, **"My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if you do sin, there is someone to plead for you before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who pleases God completely."** What is usually taught about this verse is that Jesus is acting as our counsel of defense in front of God. While there are similarities to the role Jesus plays and a defense attorney, there are also great differences.

A criminal defense attorney does his job by showing that his client is not guilty of the charge either by showing that he didn't do the act or that he had every right to do the act (self defense.) His job is to plead his client's case in court. Now if his client is convicted, the attorney's role changes. He now works to ensure that his client's sentence meets the legal requirements and is as light a sentence as possible. Jesus' role is completely different, though his role of promoting the good of the client is similar to the defense attorney. First off, Jesus admits the guilt of his child up front. I mean think about it, do you think you can hide your sin from God? So for Jesus to argue that you are "not guilty" is ridiculous. He does not hide any facts or give any justification for them, and contrary to our own legal system, there are no "insanity" pleas in this court. What Jesus does is to provide the security or collateral for the offense. In other words, He takes the punishment for the sin upon himself. Notice we are not pardoned; there is no escape of the punishment for the sin. The punishment is just marked "Paid in Full."

So then does God, the Father, have a role in the forgiveness process? Let's turn to today's scripture that you read at the top of this reading. Only we will look at the verse in its context. **"This is the message he has given us to announce to you: God is light and there is no darkness in him at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness. We are not living in the truth. But if we are living in the light of God's presence, just as Christ is, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we say we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and refusing to accept the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts."** When you make the wrong choice when you are confronted by temptation, you break the fellowship that exists between you and God, the Father. That is because God is light, which means that He is completely without sin or blemish. Rather than denying the sin in our lives, God's desire is that we confess it and agree with Him about the matter. John tells us about the faithfulness of

God and the completeness of Jesus' blood. Both are needed for forgiveness to happen. Thankfully, both always present and available when a sinner bows his knees and admits his sin. How about you? Is there something in your life that needs Jesus' blood? I would encourage you to bow your head, right now, and talk to God about it. Then listen for the Holy Spirit to speak His answer to you. Do it right now. It's too important to put it off for one more moment.

James 1:19-27 (NIV)

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, [20] for man's anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires. [21] Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you.

[22] Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. [23] Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror [24] and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. [25] But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it--he will be blessed in what he does.

[26] If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight rein on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless. [27] Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

THE BIBLE'S DIVINE ORIGIN

BEING BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

JAMES 1: 19-27

DAY 1

2 Peter 1:20-21 (NASB) But know this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

This week I have the awesome privilege of talking about the greatest book ever written. As I think back over 30 years of my life, I have owned quite a number of copies of the Bible in various translations. Even now, with a simple mouse-click I can switch over to my Bible Software and access 11 different translations of the same book. I don't say that to impress anyone, but to point out that the Bible is unique. What other work can you name that has been translated into so many versions and languages as the Bible?

This book was written over a 1600-year span, with over 40 authors from every walk of life. Parts of it were written from a wilderness and some of it was written from a jail cell. The original was written in 3 different languages, Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Yet from Genesis to Revelation, the Bible tells but one story, that of God reaching out to man. It tells of God reaching out to Adam, his first creation, to God coming back to Earth and reaching out to his last creations as depicted in John's Revelation.

Originally written on perishable materials, our Bible was copied by hand for hundreds of years before the invention of the printing press. Yet it did not diminish even a little bit in its style, correctness or its existence. When the printing press was finally invented, the very first thing that was printed was the Bible. There is more manuscript evidence to support the Bible's accuracy than any 10 pieces of ancient literature combined.

What I want to talk about today is the origin of the Bible. Did it come from God or man? The answer that you give to that question determines much of how you live your life. Each of us must grab onto some anchor to which everything in life is attached. In other words what are the basic beliefs by which you live your life? If men wrote the Bible, then it becomes opinion, fallible or a nice tale that makes for entertaining reading, but nothing that anyone would die for. If this book was actually written by the God who created the universe, then its words become a whole lot more important. For if the creator of all mankind wrote the words contained in the Bible, then those words should become a guidebook for your life.

So how do we know that God wrote the Bible? The answer is really simple, because the Bible says that it is. Look once again at today's verse. There are a lot of words, but they say that men wrote the words in this book as they heard them from God. Now that's a pretty bold claim. The topic that Peter addresses is called inspiration. The Greek word that is translated inspiration literally means, "God breathed." The idea here is that God

created the scriptures much like he created plant Earth. As the Psalmist said, **“By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33:6).**

The excellent preacher Oliver Greene says, “God Almighty is sovereign; and if we are saved through the power of the Gospel; if the Gospel makes us wise unto salvation; if it is not God’s will that any man perish but that all come to repentance, we can rest assured that He has preserved and protected His holy Scriptures down through the centuries! Anything we need to know about our relationship to God and His relationship to us is found in the Bible. We need no added books, and we cannot afford to take any away. If we add to or take from His Word, God will take away our part out of the book of life. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God. ‘Given by inspiration of God,’ according to the Greek dictionary, is one Greek word. This word can also be translated “God-breathed.”

There has been a lot of discussion over the centuries as to exactly what it means to be “God Breathed.” Some have thought, for example, that God appeared to Paul and said, “Take a letter.” That view is largely rejected because the personalities of the authors come through in their writing. Others believe that these men went into a holy trance and wrote or dictated God’s thoughts. The reality is that no one really knows. That’s probably because there hasn’t been anything written like it in almost 2000 years. Most biblical scholars aren’t old enough to have walked with Paul, even though some of them may look like it.

The accuracy and dependability of the Bible is clearly seen when you read what it says about itself. First, the writers of the Old Testament claim that their writings are the Word of God. Look at the words of the prophet Jeremiah, **“Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, ‘Now, I have put my words in your mouth’.**” The words, “So says the Lord,” appear in the Old Testament over 2000 times. The writers of the New Testament, when referring to the Old Testament, give it authority. It is clear from their writing that they expected their readers to obey its message, as if from God Himself. Jesus, referring to the Old Testament, said, **“And he said to them: “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!” (Mark 7: 9)**

So every man and woman throughout time has had a decision to make about the Bible. If the Bible is what it claims, then its words reveal the secrets to an eternal relationship with the Triune God. If it is God’s Word, then it must possess Godly qualities. It must be without error, for its author is without error. It must be all-powerful as its author is all-powerful. It must be eternal, for God is eternal. The events that it witnesses must have really happened and its miracles must have occurred. You see there really is no half way when it comes to the Bible. You can’t claim that part of it is good, but not all. It’s kind of like saying this meat is only part rotten. It still tastes awful. So, what do you say?

ITS HISTORICAL DEPENDABILITY

BEING BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

JAMES 1: 19-27

DAY 2

John 17:17 (NLT) Make them pure and holy by teaching them your words of truth.

When we talk about the Bible's historical dependability, we look at how the Bible stacks up against the science of Archaeology. It is an important area of study because should the Bible have errors in its historical accounts, then the spiritual subjects would also be suspect. We talked yesterday about the subject of inerrancy; the fact that the Bible contains no errors. Well no errors also means no historical errors.

In order to look at archaeology and how it related to the Bible, it is important that you understand a little about archaeology. For if you don't understand the limits of archaeology, you might be tempted to make the science do a lot more than it's capable of. For example, you cannot use archaeology to prove that the Bible is the Word of God. Spiritual truth can never be proved by archaeology. Christians, however, are thankful that archaeology has confirmed many of the Bible's historical accounts.

So, what is archaeology? The word itself means literally the study of ancient things. It attempts to reconstruct for mankind the past of an ancient people. First it seeks to understand their environment, the geographical, geological and climatic factors that affected their life. Second its goal is to find about the people themselves. Archaeology looks at the type of houses they built, the forms of government they instituted, the tools used, the religions practiced and the art forms they used. Archaeology is a science in that the method and procedures used are basically scientific. The first step is the observation and study of a particular piece of ground. The observations are then combined into an organized body of information. Finally hypotheses are developed based upon these assembled facts. Archaeology is different from traditional science in that tests are almost always done in the field, rather than in a controlled laboratory. In fact the archaeologist uses other scientists to aid his work. He will, for example, call in a chemist to analyze ashes or clothing material. He will call in an anthropologist to analyze human bones.

A man named John Garstang accomplished the greatest confirmation that archaeology has done of a Bible Story in the 1930's. Dr. Garstang's team uncovered the ruins of the ancient city of Jericho. What his team found there was of great interest to Biblical scholars. Dr. Garstang writes, "The walls fell outward so completely that the attackers would be able to clamber up and over the ruins into the city." To have walls fall outward like that is unusual. Most times walls, when attacked from without, tend to fall inward. Of course, from the Bible story of Joshua 6, we know that the city walls didn't fall down as a result of the army of Israel on the outside.

In the past, historians loved to attack the gospel of Luke. That is because Luke contains a lot of historical references. One such problem passage can be found in Luke 2: 1-3 where he states, **“At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own towns to register for this census.”** Historians used to take great delight in pointing out the complete lack of any outside source for either the census or anyone named Quirinius being the governor of anything. That was until some archaeologists uncovered ancient Roman records indicating that Rome had a regular enrollment of its peoples every 14 years for the purpose of taxation. Historians working from ancient Roman records were able to establish that there was a Quirinius who was legate (governor) in Syria from A.D. 6-9, but this date is far too late for Jesus’ birth, which occurred prior to the death of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C. Luke’s historical reference seems in direct conflict with non-biblical sources establishing that either Saturninus (9-7 B.C.) or Varus (6-4 B.C.) was legate of Syria during Christ’s birth. The discovery of an ancient inscription has shown that a legate fitting the description of Quirinius served two different times in Syria. Apparently the nativity occurred during Quirinius’ first tenure in Syria as legate with primary responsibilities for military affairs, while Varus was the legate handling civil matters. Quirinius served a second term in A.D. 6-9. Thus archaeology has proven Luke right on both counts.

For centuries, historians took issue with John’s account of the healing at the pool of Bethesda in the 5th chapter of his gospel. John tells us, **“Inside the city, near the Sheep Gate, was the pool of Bethesda, with five covered porches. Crowds of sick people, blind, lame, or paralyzed, lay on the porches. One of the men lying there had been sick for thirty-eight years.”** The problem was that there was no record of such a pool. That was until the pool was dug up in 1888 in the excavation of the Church of St. Anne. Visitors to the City of Jerusalem can now visit this site.

While archaeologists are digging up ancient articles all of the time. There has been no find that has disproved a single historical fact found in the Bible. Dr. William F. Albright, a noted archaeologist, wrote, “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of the Old Testament tradition.” Millar Burrows of Yale University said, “Archaeology has in many cases refuted the views of modern critics. It has shown, in a number of instances, that these views rest on false assumptions and unreal, artificial schemes of historical development.”

So what does all of this do for the average Christian? The findings of modern archaeology will not silence the critics of the Bible. To be sure, they must accept the historical accuracy of the book, but that is a long way from accepting its message in their hearts. No, the benefits of archaeology are twofold. The first is that it helps you to stand firm in your faith, knowing that the Bible is true. The second is that it helps you to understand the culture that surrounded the Biblical writers. None of them wrote in a vacuum. To properly understand what they were saying, it is vital that you understand the culture of the day. Archaeology gives us the tools to do that.

THE BIBLE'S SCIENTIFIC RELIABILITY

BEING BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

JAMES 1: 19-27

DAY 3

John 17:17 (Msg) Make them holy, consecrated, with the truth; Your word is consecrating truth.

Today's topic is interesting in that a century ago; there was not any debate or disagreement between science and the Bible. That is because early in the era of modern science, most of the scientists were either Christians or approached their science from a Biblical perspective. So you have to ask yourself, what happened? To make the argument that scientific discoveries proved that the Bible is wrong is not where the answer lies. Could it be that the controversy erupted because a majority of scientists moved away from a belief in God and sought to explain the universe in terms other than God?

Frances Schaeffer writes in his book, *Escape from Reason*, "What we have to realize is that early modern science was started by those who lived in the consensus and setting of Christianity. Christianity was necessary for the beginning of modern science for the simple reason that Christianity created a climate of thought which put men in a position to investigate the form of the universe." In other words, the beginning of science came from the belief that there was a God, that He acted in the world, and that there were relationships in nature that always took place. For example, when you approach geology or astronomy from a creation view, you can expect positive results from your work because God created a world with law and order. The sun always rises in the East and sets in the West. It never changes. Imagine the difficulty science would have if we lived in a world of absolute randomness.

Actually the fault for the controversy between science and the scriptures lies equally with both sides. It is my belief that there are well-meaning Christians out there who try to make the Bible say what it doesn't say. Let me give you an example of what I am talking about. There was a man by the name of Bishop Ussher who lived from 1581 to 1646. Now Mr. Ussher worked out a series of dates from the Biblical genealogies so that he was able to conclude that God created the Earth in 4004 BC. The problem is that Biblical genealogies were never intended to measure elapsed time. They chronicle important members of one's family, or a line of descent. In other words, they just hit the highlights of a family line. If you want an example of this, look at Matthew 1: 8 and compare it with 1 Chronicles 3: 11, 12. You will see that Matthew left out 3 generations in Uzziah's line.

In the area of creation, I have seen 6 different theories that Christian scholars have come up with to explain how God created the world. The reality is that the Bible doesn't concern itself with how the world was created; it is only concerned with Who created it.

Scientists also are somewhat to blame for the controversy when they give their philosophical interpretations the weight of fact. If you go back to fundamental science, the mantra of the scientist is to question everything. In other words everything is open to question, discussion and experimentation. Theories are only valid until more evidence comes to light. What I could never understand is why that kind of curiosity doesn't seem to apply to the theory of evolution? Most scientists that I have heard are like Dr. R. S. Lull, professor of Paleontology at Yale, who said, "Since Darwin's day, evolution has been more and more generally accepted, until now, in the minds of informed thinking men, there is no doubt that it is the only logical way whereby creation can be interpreted and understood. We are not as sure as to the modus operandi, but we may rest assured that the process has been in accordance with great natural laws, some of which are yet unknown and are perhaps unknowable." In other words, even though we don't and perhaps can't understand how evolution occurred, still every person with half a brain must accept it as fact. Do you see any logic in that?

The real argument between scripture and science occurs when scientists wander outside their realm and try to explain things that science was never designed to explain. The scientific method applies the 5 senses in a controlled observation of whatever phenomenon the scientist is studying. He brings it into his laboratory and under a controlled environment he looks at it from all sides and tries to develop a hypothesis to explain what he keeps seeing. Only after repeated tests seeing the same result does that hypothesis get elevated to theory. Theories, when tested by various scientists over an extended period of time, only become laws when no variation in the results has been observed.

The problem is that anything that cannot be measured in this manner is not solvable by the scientific method. That would include the origin of the universe, history and things in the emotional or psychological arena. Even if a scientist could reproduce even one step of the evolutionary process in his laboratory, it would not mean that the event happened that way during the creation time period. It would only prove that it could have occurred that way. The reality is that neither the scientist, nor the Christian can go back in time to the beginning to observe the phenomenon of creation.

The other problem that causes the division between science and Christianity is that there needs to be a better defining of terms. The debate between evolution and creationism is a perfect example. I once saw a television show where a scientist was explaining the law of evolution using the example of the horse. He showed how the horse had changed over time. There was almost a sneer in his voice as he talked about those who couldn't accept evolution as people out of touch with the facts. I have always thought of Dr. Ledyard Stebbins, noted plant evolutionist, as one who tried to buck this trend. Dr. Stebbins believes that evolution proceeded on 3 different planes. The first is individual variation, as shown by the fact that I look different than you look. Science also refers to this plane as genetics. The second plane is called microevolution, where it is noted that there are variations within populations of a species. In other words, there are different races in humans and breeds in other animals. The final plane is called macroevolution where a variation occurs in a species that results in an entirely new species forming.

Do you see the problem? The scientist calls all of these planes evolution and believes that the creationist rejects all 3. That is why the scientist thinks the creationist isn't playing with a full deck in rejecting evolution. The reality is that most creationists don't have a problem with genetics or microevolution. Both would be hard to deny. It's the macroevolution that the creationist has a problem with. To the creationist, the evolutionist fails to deal with the fact that there appears to be a natural barrier between species and that macroevolution has never been demonstrated successfully in the laboratory to make a reproducible new species.

So how can science and the Christian co-exist? The problem is that we insist on a perfect fit. We try to reconcile the stable Bible with constantly changing science. You need to realize that all you have to do is to wait. Science will probably change its mind in a few years anyway.

THE BIBLE'S PROPHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

BEING BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

JAMES 1: 19-27

DAY 4

Hebrews 1:1-2 (NLT) Long ago God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it.

A few weeks ago in a small group that I was leading, my worst nightmare occurred. The lesson material ran out with over 30 minutes left in the time we normally spend in God's Word. With a brave heart and some fear and trepidation, I opened up a forum where I volunteered to answer any question that the group had. Since the discussion that evening had been in Matthew 25, which is an end-times scripture, the question that was posed by the group concerned what would happen when Jesus returns to the earth.

So I took the group to Revelation 19: 11 and started reading, sprinkling in a little of my own commentary as we went along. We read the description that John saw of Jesus returning to Earth and what would happen when he arrived. In chapter 20, we saw the New Jerusalem coming down from heaven as a bride beautifully dressed for her groom. We read about gates of pearl and streets of gold. It was an extremely rich time that our small group was able to have together. As one of our members said later, reading this section of scripture makes the problems that we face every day seem insignificant. I have to agree.

So what makes this exciting prophesy about events still in the future, more than just a fairy tale? Some of you will say that is where faith comes in. You just have to believe it. I tend to disagree with that idea. For me, the confidence that I have that future events will come out the way the Bible describes them is that all of the past prophesies that God has given have all been fulfilled exactly the way God said they would be.

To begin with, let's define our terms. What does the word prophecy mean? According to W. E. Vine the word means the speaking forth of the mind and counsel of God. Though much of the Old Testament prophecy is about events in the future, the prophet doesn't necessarily predict the future. His job is to tell his listeners exactly what God told him. Many of you are familiar with the job of the prophet or seer in today's world. The tabloids are full of them each New Year. How would the Jean Dixon's of this world stack up against God's test of the prophet? Look what Moses said to Israel, "**But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death. You may say to yourselves, 'How can we know when a message has not been spoken by the Lord?' If what a prophet proclaims in the name of the Lord does not take place or come true, that is a message the Lord has not spoken. That prophet has spoken**

presumptuously. Do not be afraid of him.” So God says that if any prophesy that they spoke didn’t come to pass, the false prophet was to be put to death. So you can imagine that would result in a lot of careful prophets.

So what about the past performance of God as a seer? Well let’s take the messianic prophesies as a whole. Those Old Testament prophets saw the Messiah and predicted many of the events that would occur when Israel’s Messiah did finally come. The Old Testament was written over a 1500 year time period and contains over 300 predictions about the Messiah. All of them were fulfilled in Jesus, and all of them were written more than 400 years before He was born. What are the odds against one man fulfilling all of them in his lifetime? Well let’s just say your chance of hitting the next 3 lotteries in a row is better.

The Bible contains other prophecies, not related to the Messiah. For example, the destruction of Tyre by Nebuchadnezzar in Ezekiel 26 later came true exactly as God had said it would. The predicted rise to power of Alexander the Great, his early death, and the splitting of his kingdom into 4 parts was predicted by Daniel hundreds of years before it happened (Dan. 8: 8).

The most startling prophesy in the New Testament is the one that Jesus gives in Matthew 11: 20 – 24 concerning Chorazin, Bethsaida and Capernaum. All 3 cities were later destroyed and have never been rebuilt. Contrast those cities with the Galilean city of Tiberius. Tiberius has been partially destroyed at various times, but has always been rebuilt.

Is it any surprise to you that when God predicts the future it comes about? When you have a true view of the God of the Bible, fulfilled prophesy doesn’t really surprise you, for our God is described in the Bible as being omniscient. That means that God knows everything. He can see the past with the same glance that He can see the end of time. That is because the whole idea of before and after, that which we call time, was created by God. No created thing controls God. It is the other way around. Since God can see the future, it should not surprise you that when He describes it, that’s what happens. Another thing about God is that He is absolutely sovereign. That means that He is in ultimate control of all things. As the Psalmist said, **“I know that the Lord is great, that our Lord is greater than all gods. The Lord does whatever pleases him, in the heavens and on the earth, in the seas and all their depths.”** In the Acts of the Apostles, Luke tells us, **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”**

So if God has the ability to see everything, past, present and future and the power to make anything happen that He wants, it should not surprise you when His prophesy is fulfilled exactly like He said it would be. Would you expect anything less of God?

THE BIBLE'S TRANSFORMING POWER

BEING BLESSED BY THE BIBLE

JAMES 1: 19-27

DAY 5

Hebrews 4:12 (NIV) For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

As I write these words, it has been over 31 years ago when I began this relationship with Jesus Christ. For 30 of those years, I have been a teacher of the Word of God. That means that I probably started a lot earlier than I should have. I suppose that it is probably much better if you have something to teach before you start teaching. My early introduction to teaching was probably as a result of nobody wanting to teach the high school group, combined with the fact that I didn't know any better.

It's not that teaching high school students is particularly difficult, nor is it particularly stressful. It's probably that most adults remember what they were like at that age, and the thought of having to teach those kids something is a scary thing. The reality is that if you teach and want to make an impact in the world, there is no better place to do that than in any youth department. Anyway, this article is really not about the pluses and minuses of teaching youth. The point I was trying to make is that there was identified within me, from an early age, the spiritual gift of teaching. I just happened to start exercising my gift with high school kids.

There is nothing that I would rather do than teach. I love the entire process, from the preparation to the actual class time. It doesn't matter the venue, Sunday school, small groups, evening service or writing these daily devotionals, this ministry just gets my juices going. It is that moment when you have just presented some spiritual truth and you see lights come on as people feel the impact that the Word of God is having on them. It's having people tell you how something you said changed their life.

The Word of God is like that. As I exercise my gift of teaching, I am able to bring together a bunch of related materials and mold it into a cohesive whole, but that will never change a life. It has always been easy for me to mold Bible verses and illustrations so that it makes sense to the listener, but so what? Change occurs because the Bible is a powerful tool. When the Holy Spirit speaks through its pages, your life is never quite the same. Look what the prophet Isaiah said about God and His Word, **“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”** Did you understand what Isaiah is saying? Matthew Henry writes in his commentary for this passage, “The power of his word in the kingdoms of providence and grace, is as certain

as in that of nature. Sacred truth produces a spiritual change in the mind of men, which neither rain nor snow can make on the earth. It shall not return to the Lord without producing important effects.”

Today’s passage is another witness to the power that is inherent in the Word of the Living God. The writer of Hebrews is teaching you that, **“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”**

Notice the 5 things that this passage teaches you about the Bible.

Your first lesson is that the Word of God is living and active. The idea of the Greek word is that the Bible strikes you deep within your heart. It is never dead or meaningless. Its message reaches right into your heart to minister the truth that God has for you today. That’s why you can read the same passage years later and come away with a completely different application to your life.

The second lesson is that His Word is powerful. It is from this Greek word that we get our English word energy. It has the power to reveal your innermost feelings and motives. It has the power to convict men of their sin. It has the power to reach out to the worst in us and bring us to the foot of the cross.

The third lesson this verse give us is the God’s Word is sharper than any two edged sword. The literal translation of the Greek here is actually a two-mouthed sword. Albert Barnes says the word mouth was given to the sword because it seemed to devour all before it. If you’ve ever felt pierced by a Biblical passage, you know what I am talking about.

Fourth, the Word of God is piercing. It divides man’s earthly nature and separates it from his spiritual possibilities. For example, it separates your proud soul to reveal your humble spirit. It separates your rebellious soul to bring out an obedient spirit. It lays waste your unbelieving soul so that your believing spirit can shine forth.

Last, the Word of God will discern the intentions of your heart. The idea here is to judge, to sift or to analyze our very thoughts and intentions. Kenneth Wuest writes, “The Word of God is able to penetrate into the furthestmost recesses of a person’s spiritual being, sifting out and analyzing the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Not only can God know your thoughts before you even have a chance to think them, He also gives the Bible that power. Have you ever been reading a passage in the Bible and feel that the words were speaking right to you as if the writer had you in mind? That is the idea here.

This powerful book has changed millions of lives over the course of its existence. It has changed my life in ways that I could never have imagined 31 years ago. Take a moment to think back to the times when you have been studying a particular passage and were never the same after that. That is the Bible. Isn’t it strange that there is something that powerful and yet so little used? Why not use it a bit today?

[25] In the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did when she gave lodging to the spies and sent them off in a different direction? [26] As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead.

James 2:1-13 (NIV)

My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. [2] Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. [3] If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the floor by my feet," [4] have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

[5] Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? [6] But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? [7] Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong?

[8] If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. [9] But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. [10] For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it. [11] For he who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." If you do not commit adultery but do commit murder, you have become a lawbreaker.

[12] Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, [13] because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!

PEOPLE PROBLEMS

TREATING OTHERS RIGHT

JAMES 2: 1-13

DAY 1

Galatians 6:2-3 (Msg) Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. [3] If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.

When I was looking at this topic and trying to figure out what I was going to write, an old saying came to mind. I love mankind; it's people that I can't stand. You've probably heard it before. We smile when we read it because it really does represent what we all feel at one time or another. Anyone who drives the highways or spends time in a crowded mall understands the thinking behind this saying.

I suppose the main problem with our difficulty in getting along with people is in our expectations. You expect people to behave in certain ways. When they don't perform to our expectations, you get upset and irritated. It's like the woman who was looking to marry the man of her dreams. As Gary Smalley writes, "She believes this man will fulfill her deepest longing for intimacy. She pictures him sitting next to her on an overstuffed love seat in front of a warm fire, his arm around her, talking for hours. She sees them discussing their plans for the future, their next vacation, and how they'll redecorate the living room. She knows he will diligently fix things around the house, keep her car running smoothly, and be there to support and encourage her when she is discouraged. She often thinks of her husband-to-be as a waterfall cascading into her life, a never-ending source of fulfillment that will make her life overflow with meaning." Now the men who read this are probably falling over on the floor laughing, but deep down inside this is not that uncommon a view in today's world, even for the men.

I suppose it starts with our nightly view of the ideal life. At least that's what our TV tends to give us. You know what I am talking about. It is evidenced in the fact that your TV always shows good winning out over evil. Problems occur when you carry those expectations into the real world. So is it wrong to expect people to act a certain way? Personally I think you have to avoid putting your standards on anyone else. Isn't that really what we are talking about? This is especially true of the Christian. The problem with the woman's view above of her ideal man is that he will not be found on this side of heaven. For her to believe that there exists this "guy" out there somewhere just sets her up for major disappointments. As she puts the measuring stick up against every man she meets, she soon becomes disillusioned and cynical.

The same is true of the Christian. We tend to develop this spiritual ruler that we place beside everyone that we meet in order to view their level of "spiritual maturity." You see, we all understand the way the Christians are supposed to behave. When they fail to meet that standard, we may let others know that we will pray for them, but deep in our

hearts, they stand rejected. What I am talking about is real subtle, but it is pervasive. It extends to you, to your spouse and even your kids.

So what's wrong with this kind of attitude? Just like the woman dreaming of her ideal man, it's not realistic. People are still full of sin, even Christians. They are sometimes inconsiderate, thoughtless and self-centered; and that's on their good days. So how do you fight against this terrible temptation to judge? Let's get acquainted with the concept of grace, especially as it was exhibited for us in the life of Jesus.

For when John described Jesus in the 1st chapter of this gospel, he said that Jesus was full of grace and truth. Grace is the undeserved acceptance and love that is received from another. Now we talk about the grace of God, we sing about it, we praise Him for it and we glory in it. Imagine, salvation given freely to us. It's a wonderful thought, isn't it? The problem is that we ignore the fact that grace is also how we are to treat each other. As Paul writes, **"Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Col 4:6)."** Paul here is teaching that the purpose of speech is to build people up, to encourage them and to be ministering grace to them. Yet how we tend to tear one another down.

I have always been amazed at Jesus' words in Luke 22: 31-34. **"Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers. But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the rooster crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'"** There are a lot of things that I probably would have said to Peter if I, like Jesus, knew what Peter's failures would be that night. Praying for his faith would not be among them. Yet even when Peter was at his worst, Jesus was at his best, full of grace.

That is the way that God expects all of us to be. When we are tempted to put someone down, He wants us to build them up. When we are tempted to ridicule, He wants us to praise. When we are tempted to put that spiritual ruler up against someone else's life, He wants us to break the ruler into tiny pieces and throw it away. He expects all of us to treat our brothers and sisters with the same love and respect that we give to God. As the Apostle John said, **"If someone says, 'I love God,' but hates a Christian brother or sister, that person is a liar; for if we don't love people we can see, how can we love God, whom we have not seen?"**

This week we will be talking a lot about how we deal with one another. It is my prayer that you will read these words in a spirit of prayer. Ask God what He thinks about how you view others. Ask Him where you need to do better.

AVOIDING PREJUDICE

TREATING OTHERS RIGHT

JAMES 2: 1-13

DAY 2

Galatians 3:28 (NIV) There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

When I originally thought about this subject, the first thing that came to mind was an old TV show. Star Trek was one of those TV series that always had its finger on the pulse of where society was at the time. Yes, I am talking about Star Trek. For those of you who are not “Trek” fans or for those too young to have watched, this particular episode featured comedian Frank Gorshim playing 2 aliens. For almost half the episode the boys from the Starship Enterprise were kept busy keeping these 2 aliens from killing each other, but they couldn’t figure out why. Both of the Aliens were played by Frank, so they looked pretty much the same. I mean they looked weird, but then most of the aliens on the show usually looked weird. These aliens had white skin on one side of their body and black skin on the other. Finally the venerable Captain Kirk asks one of the aliens why he hated the other one. The alien said that this creature was of an inferior race on their planet. Now Captain Kirk couldn’t figure out the difference since both guys looked the same. With hatred in his eyes, the alien said, “Don’t you see it? He is black on the right side and white on the left, while I am white on the right side and black on the left.” That was Star Trek’s way of showing how ridiculous racial hatred really was.

When you think about prejudice, you have to include more than race, however. Webster defines the word as an irrational attitude of hostility directed against an individual, group, race or their supposed characteristics. So using that definition anytime there is hostility against someone, either in a group or individual that is irrational in nature it represents prejudice. I say that in order to broaden your definition, so that you understand how pervasive prejudice is in this world. It is so much more than racial in nature.

James talked about the prejudices that we all have when it comes to wealth; how we treat the rich differently than we treat the poor. Look at what James says, **“My dear brothers and sisters, how can you claim that you have faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ if you favor some people more than others? For instance, suppose someone comes into your meeting dressed in fancy clothes and expensive jewelry, and another comes in who is poor and dressed in shabby clothes. If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, ‘You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor.’ Well, doesn't this discrimination show that you are guided by wrong motives? Listen to me, dear brothers and sisters. Hasn't God chosen the poor in this world to be rich in faith? Aren't they the ones who will inherit the kingdom God promised to those who love him? And yet, you insult the poor man! Isn't it the rich who oppress you and drag you into court? Aren't they the ones who slander Jesus Christ, whose noble name you bear?”**

Sometimes I think that Christians are the most prejudiced people in the world. We just call it denominationalism. I can remember going to my second Promise Keepers event at the LA Coliseum. Maybe some of you reading this will remember that we had to pass through a picket line of our brothers and sisters in the Lord. They were protesting the fact that the Promise Keepers encouraged the use of more modern translations of the Bible. I guess they felt that if King James English was good enough for God, it should be for everyone else. As one of my favorite authors, Max Lucado, said, “Oh how we love to cluster.”

As I read and study the Word of God, I become more and more convinced that there is no place for prejudice of any kind in the church. Look at today’s verse. It comes from Paul’s letter to the Galatians. That’s very significant because of the reason that Paul wrote the letter in the first place. The big debate in the early church was what to do with all of the gentiles coming into the kingdom. Since the early church started out Jewish, it was a natural leap for the members to assume that one had to become a Jew first and then enter the kingdom. Opposition to that opinion quickly developed from the most unlikely of sources, the Apostle Paul. You know, the guy that described himself as a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee who learned his Torah at the feet of Raban Gamaliel. Paul was the Apostle to the gentiles. His whole ministry was affected by this issue. Now one would have thought that the entire issue was decided at the Jerusalem council that is recorded in Acts 15. The Apostle Peter knew that the gentiles received the Holy Spirit when they believed, not when they converted. That day, the leader of the Jerusalem church, the Apostle James, agreed. The issue was decided, case closed. Unfortunately it was not. For a group of these Judaizers came out of Jerusalem and infected the Galatian church with their own particular brand of Christianity.

Paul here seems to set the issue at rest. He said, “I don’t care if you are black, white, green or purple. You are all one when it comes to Jesus Christ.” Isn’t that the way that it is supposed to be? Charles P. Curtis said in *A Commonplace Book*: “There are only two ways to be unprejudiced and impartial. One is to be completely ignorant. The other is to be completely indifferent. Bias and prejudice are attitudes to be kept in hand, not attitudes to be avoided.”

Jesus Christ is the answer to all of our prejudices, bitterness and hatred on this earth. He is the answer because with Jesus, everyone stands on equal footing. We stand by faith and nothing else. You are not accepted for any other reason. Everyone falls short by every other measurement you can name. Jesus embraces all, even though everyone is different from Him. When you look at your brother and sister in Christ, you must see him through Christ’s eyes. There will be no color, nationality, social standing or denominations in heaven. There shouldn’t be any of that here either. You need to be able to view each other with the same love and acceptance that Jesus has for you. Remember what the Apostle John said, “**Dear friends, since God loved us that much, we surely ought to love each other. No one has ever seen God. But if we love each other, God lives in us, and his love has been brought to full expression through us.**” Let us take these words to heart and live them out in our lives.

ASKING FORGIVENESS

TREATING OTHERS RIGHT

JAMES 2: 1-13

DAY 3

Luke 11:4 (NLT) And forgive us our sins, just as we forgive those who have sinned against us.

There once was a homeless guy by the name of Waylon. It wasn't that he started out to be homeless. Like most people, Waylon had dreams and ambitions. None of which included the life of a wanderer. Day after day, Waylon carried everything that he owned everywhere he went. "You just can't be too careful. People will steal you blind," Waylon thought. Some of the bags Waylon had carried around with him for years. The largest bag that he carried around was called pride. It's hard to imagine a homeless guy with a large bag of pride, but Waylon's was real big. It had been with him since his earliest childhood. His mother had called the bag stubbornness, but the reality was that Waylon's bag was filled with himself. One of his other bags was from his Dad. That bag went by the name of "looking out for number 1." Some might call that bag selfishness, but Waylon thought his name sounded a whole lot better. Waylon also carried a backpack called "rationalization" everywhere he went. He felt that this was a real important bag, so he rarely took it off. As long as he had his backpack, things were never his fault.

There were other bags in Waylon's load. Some were newer than others. Some had been around for years. Waylon rarely noticed the tremendous weight that he carried around day after day. He had carried them so long that he was used to them. Though he didn't pay much attention to them, each of them had a hand to play in why he spent his days wandering. For each time that trouble ran his way, he would just reach into his bags, pull a little pride, combine it with some rationalization and selfishness and then blame the situation on someone else. The solution was always nice, painless and most importantly, never his fault.

It was because of the bags that his marriage had failed. Oh, it was great for a while, the wedding, the presents, the newness of it all, but then Waylon saw that his new bride begin to make demands upon him. After a few months, she still felt that he owed her some of his attention. She yelled at him when he spent all their money for his toys. His bag of pride and selfishness kept him taking things out of the relationship. It never allowed him to give anything back. When the fun was gone, so was Waylon.

The same was true at his job. Waylon had landed a really good job. The pay was great and the hours allowed him his playtime. As time passed, Waylon found that his boss had become really stupid. He hadn't noticed at first, but after a while, some of the guy's decisions defied all logic and reason. Waylon figured that with half his brain, he could manage circles around his boss. It wasn't long after that Waylon joined the office social

club. It's that gathering of coworkers that is characterized by the drinking of coffee and the criticism of management. The more he met with those people the angrier he became about his situation at work. Waylon's bag of pride kept telling him that the company was going in exactly the wrong direction and that he knew best. Unfortunately the office social club began to affect the performance of the group. It wasn't long until Waylon found himself in the boss's office getting himself fired. His rationalization bag came in real handy this time. With it, he was able to chalk it all up to management ineptitude.

After that, Waylon found himself being comforted with his bags more and more. He pulled an "I deserve it" or 2 out of his bag and increased his drinking. As he drank up what little he had left in his bank account, he found himself out on the streets. So each day finds Waylon wandering round town begging for spare change and scrounging up whatever work he can find. It was on one of those rainy afternoons that he ran into a stranger on the streets. Waylon, soaked to the bone and cold, was feeling fairly miserable. The bags were weighing on him a lot more than usual. In fact, Waylon was considering for the first time in his life letting them drop to the ground. This stranger was inviting him to a place where he could dry off and get warm. Waylon had heard of the local rescue mission, but had never set foot in the place. To Waylon's thinking, the place was for losers. He certainly wasn't one of those, but warm and dry was sounding real good. With steps of uncertainty, he followed the stranger to the mission.

After the first time, it got easier and easier to go to that mission. They had a guy there, dressed in black, who would talk to the men and women each afternoon. This man in black wasn't like one of those preachers that Waylon had seen on television. His words kept focusing on the bags that still hung from Waylon's body. Every now and again, the man in black would bring out another bag. This one looked like it was woven with golden thread. Waylon had never seen a bag as nice as this one. It kind of made his old tattered bags look real shabby. Just when Waylon was focusing on the bag, the speaker hid it away, only to bring it out a little later for another glimpse. Waylon found himself longing for the shiny bag. He wanted it so badly that he hardly noticed that his other bags had dropped to the floor, long since forgotten.

Suddenly the man in black opened the bag and Waylon was able to finally see what was inside. Waylon saw that there were words embroidered on the inside in thick scarlet thread. Straining to see what these words could possibly say, Waylon read, "**If we admit our sins, make a clean breast of them, he won't let us down; he'll be true to himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing.**" On the outside of the bag, Waylon read the name of this bag. It was called, "Forgiveness."

How about you? Are you wandering through life with the heavy bags of your past weighing you down? There is an answer. You can continue to strain under the weight day after day, or you can take Jesus Christ at His word. "**Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.**" What choice will you make?

GRANTING FORGIVENESS

TREATING OTHERS RIGHT

JAMES 2: 1-13

DAY 4

Mark 11:25 (NIV) And when you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins.

You've all heard the sayings that have been bandied about in our society. "I forgave, but I'll never forget it." "I don't get mad, I just get even." "Do unto others before they have a chance to do unto you." To hear people talk, the idea of forgiveness seems as foreign in this society as intelligence in government. Even in the church, forgiveness seems to be a precious commodity. I am sure that you have heard it said that the church is the only army in the world that shoots its wounded. Why is that? If we say that we want to be more like Jesus, why can't we forgive each other? Today, I will be talking about the consequences of non-forgiveness and then give you 6 things you can do to forgive people from an article that I recently read in Leadership Magazine.

First off, what happens if I don't forgive my brother? I think Jesus laid it out for us in the 18th chapter of Matthew. Jesus said, **"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his wife and his children and all that he had be sold to repay the debt. The servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go. But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him a hundred denarii. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.' But he refused. Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. When the other servants saw what had happened, they were greatly distressed and went and told their master everything that had happened. Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' In anger his master turned him over to the jailers to be tortured, until he should pay back all he owed. This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother from your heart."**

This passage is a parable that Jesus told to Peter in response to his question about how many times should he forgive his fellow disciples. The story uses the verbal technique of contrast. The contrast is between how much the servant was forgiven and how little he was required to forgive. You tend to lose the impact if you don't understand the units of measurement used here. To give you an idea of how much 10,000 talents is worth, you need to understand that when Caesar Augustus gave Herod the Great control over Israel,

the historian Josephus tells us that he was given an annual income by Rome of 800 talents to run the country. That means the 10,000 talents is about 11 times the national budget of Israel. In contrast, a denarius was worth about a days wage for the average common laborer. If you still miss Jesus' point, look at the last sentence that Jesus speaks. Your forgiveness is dependant upon your forgiving others.

Look at the alternative. Lewis Smedes writes, "Vengeance is a passion to get even. It is a hot desire to give back as much pain as someone gave you. The problem with revenge is that it never gets what it wants; it never evens the score. Fairness never comes. The chain reaction set off by every act of vengeance always takes its unhindered course. It ties both the injured and the injurer to an escalator of pain. Both are stuck on the escalator as long as parity is demanded, and the escalator never stops, never lets anyone off." To give illustration to Mr. Smedes' point, look at the conflict in Northern Ireland. There the Protestants and Catholics are still battling over atrocities that were committed by Oliver Cromwell in 1641. Look at the current violence in Israel. Leveling houses and killing Palestinians will never stop suicide bombers. As Phillip Yancey writes, "How different would modern history be if Anwar Sadat ruled Iraq instead of Saddam Hussein, or if a modern day Lincoln had emerged from the ruins of Yugoslavia?"

Gary Preston, pastor of Bethany Church in Boulder Colorado, wrote one of the best articles that I ever read about forgiveness. Mr. Preston gives tremendous insight in how to deal with difficult people with grace. His first step is to recognize your own weak spots. The issue that you most struggle with is the one that will irritate you the most, the one you will find harder to forgive. It's the old "log in your own eye" issue that Jesus talked about.

Second, you must resist your first impulse. That's the one that is going to tell you to lash out, kill and destroy. Well maybe you're not seeking to kill and destroy, but I bet you spend time thinking about the ways you can get a little "sweet revenge." James Broderick made this observation about Pope Paul IV, "He never forgot such offenses, which was one of his fundamental weaknesses. He might bury the hatchet for a time, but he gave the impression of always carefully marking the spot."

The third step would be to admit your guilt. In Deuteronomy 32: 35, God says, "**I will take vengeance; I will repay those who deserve it. In due time their feet will slip. Their day of disaster will arrive, and their destiny will overtake them.**" Avenging is God's job, not yours. If you are really honest with yourself, you might just find a little bit of blame lying on your side. Since that is the case, you can't have a part in repaying the wrong.

The fourth step is to forgive each person for each act. Sometimes it would be easier to just forgive a bunch of offenses in a lump sum. It just doesn't work like that. Each person must be forgiven individually. There are no shortcuts in this process. You will find that the length of time forgiveness takes is usually proportionate to the severity of the pain caused.

Fifth, make sure that you speak about the person to others in a positive light. It's a strange phenomenon that positive words coming out of your mouth tend to grow positive feelings in your heart. How easily those words come out of your mouth is a very accurate gauge of how good a job you are doing in forgiving from your heart.

Finally you need to take the person to the Lord in prayer. Write out your thoughts and read them to God as a prayer. As you are praying, read the scripture in Matthew 18 to remind yourself how important it is to God that you forgive others.

Well that's the list. It's really not a magic formula for forgiveness, but I believe that it will help you the next time someone does you wrong.

GIVING HONOR WHERE HONOR IS DUE

TREATING OTHERS RIGHT

JAMES 2: 1-13

DAY 5

Romans 13:7 (GW) Pay everyone whatever you owe them. If you owe taxes, pay them. If you owe tolls, pay them. If you owe someone respect, respect that person. If you owe someone honor, honor that person.

I found today's subject interesting probably because I had never spent much time thinking about it. What does it mean to honor and why would someone do it? Honor simply means that you recognize the value of someone or thing and act accordingly. So what we are talking about is to place value on something or some person and change your behavior as a result of that value. That is a good thought and it does require that I stop this roller coaster called life once in a while. The question that I had to answer for myself was how important it was to God that I honor others. I mean there is no question that I should honor God that goes without saying. What does the Bible say about this thing called honor?

Let's start with today's verse. If you have been spending any time reading these devotionals, you will know that I am a strong believer of taking verses in their context. The Apostle Paul sets forth the main point of his teaching in verse 1 of this chapter where he says that Christians are to obey their government. He makes the argument that if a Christian is acting in complete righteousness, he should have no problem with his government. All right, so then our government gives some of their workers authority over us. If my government gives authority to someone, then it is my obligation to honor them. While I have no problem with this concept when it comes to our police or fire personnel, I do at times have a problem with some of the low level clerks that you will find in some government offices. I had a case recently where I had to file a small claims action for a client in a county in our central valley. The clerk, who processed my request, sent it back to me, spending \$.55 of county money, because I had forgotten to include a stamped, self addressed envelope, so they could send the form back to me. The Bible says that I am to honor that person for God requires me to be a good citizen of my country.

The Apostle Peter says, **"In the same way, you husbands must give honor to your wives. Treat her with understanding as you live together. She may be weaker than you are, but she is your equal partner in God's gift of new life. If you don't treat her as you should, your prayers will not be heard."** A husband is to count his wife as a precious gem, as a prize of extreme value. He is to highly esteem her, set her up on a pedestal before his very eyes.

Paul says that I am to honor my employer, **"Christians who are slaves should give their masters full respect so that the name of God and his teaching will not be shamed."**

This one I have no problem with. There is something about spending some time unemployed that causes one to really appreciate being gainfully employed.

Paul also tells me to honor the staff at our church when he says, **“Elders who do their work well should be paid well, especially those who work hard at both preaching and teaching.”** Of course this verse really comes into play at my church’s annual budget time of year. At that time, all of the non-staff members of our Board meet to discuss such mundane things as salary increases for the coming year. I have always believed that every one of the staff at our church work very hard at their ministries. They do it because they love God. That being said, it is still my responsibility to give them honor.

Of course the most famous verse about honor is found in that part of the Bible that is commonly referred to as the 10 Commandments. **“Honor your father and mother. Then you will live a long, full life in the land the Lord your God will give you.”** That honor does not stop when you move out. I can’t really find where it says that I am to honor my parents only if they deserve it. I understand that for some of you this concept is really hard. There are some things in this life that can only be done through God’s strength and grace.

While this list of honor is not intended to be complete, I must submit that we are to honor God, first and foremost. **“Glory and honor to God forever and ever. He is the eternal King, the unseen one who never dies; he alone is God. Amen”** (1 Tim. 1:17.) If there was ever someone deserving of our honor and praise, it is God. For He created us, He sustains and He saved us when we least deserved it.

So why should I do all of this? Probably the best reason that I can think of is that honor is a 2-way street. If you honor people, they will honor you. I have always found it amazing what can be obtained by a smile and a kind word of praise. It’s not that I try to manipulate people, but I have always felt that people need to be treated with respect and honor. As part of my job, I have to do one of the hardest things in the world to do, collect money. As a supervisor, I counsel those who work for me to treat people with kindness and respect. It is amazing how much can be gained. In addition to that, you get to come home with a smile on your face, not ready to beat your dog. Life becomes a whole lot more enjoyable.

When I honor God, He will also honor me. The Psalmist says, **“What are mortals that you should think of us, mere humans that you should care for us? For you made us only a little lower than God, and you crowned us with glory and honor. You put us in charge of everything you made, giving us authority over all things”** (Ps 8: 4-7.) When you walk obediently with God, you are seeking the honor that only God can give. **“He will give eternal life to those who persist in doing what is good, seeking after the glory and honor and immortality that God offers** (Romans 2:7.)

There are a lot of people out there who think nothing of going through life, running over anyone that gets in their way. I see that everyday trying to get to work on our freeway. If

you want to live a life that seeks to honor God, then you have no alternative but to live another way. God wants you to give people honor and He will honor you in return.

James 2:14-26 (NIV)

What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? [15] Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. [16] If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? [17] In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

[18] But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds."

Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. [19] You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that--and shudder.

[20] You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? [21] Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? [22] You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did. [23] And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend. [24] You see that a person is justified by what he does and not by faith alone.

FAITH IS MORE THAN WORDS

HAVING REAL FAITH

JAMES 2: 14-26

DAY 1

James 2:20 (GW) You fool! Do you have to be shown that faith, which does nothing, is useless?

This week we are going to be talking a lot about faith. It is my prayer that you will come out of all of this with a much clearer understanding of what it means to have Biblical Faith. There is a lot of misconception about what faith is even in a church like ours. That is especially true in the world. George Barna particularly brought point home that fact to me when I read his article called, "The Seven Paradoxes Regarding America's Faith." Now for those who are not familiar with Mr. Barna, he heads up a worldwide ministry in Ventura called the Barna Research Group. He regularly polls people to find out what they believe about various topics. His research over the years has opened up a lot of eyes, especially within the church. This article is no exception.

Mr. Barna did a poll in 2002 which found that a vast majority of Americans claimed that their religious faith was important to them and described themselves as "deeply spiritual." Yet less than half of them say they are absolutely committed to the Christian faith, and less than 10% of them are regular attenders of a church. A majority of adolescents attend a Christian church today, but only 1/3 of them say they are likely to do so once they reach adulthood. The persecution delivered by terrorists has produced no increase in spiritual practices, such as attending church, reading the Bible, praying or serving the needy, yet a majority polled claimed that their faith has been an important factor in helping them process the effects of terrorist attacks.

I tend to agree with Mr. Barna when he says, "Many Americans may have fallen in love with faith rather than the object of their faith. It is much less demanding to be devoted to the idea of faith than to invest oneself in a true relationship with the living God." How about you? Do you consider yourself as deeply spiritual? Where does your "faith level" sit? I would urge you to spend some time this week, both in reading this devotional book and reading God's Word to see what He says about this whole idea of faith.

First let's demystify this word, faith. Quite simply, faith is trust. Trust is something that everyone does almost without thought. We sit in a chair several times a day and trust that it will hold our weight. Some of us will climb aboard an airplane, weighing several tons, and trust that it will not only fly, but also land safely. Some of us are going to travel the freeways of America today and actually trust that we will get to our destination. Humans are, by nature, very trusting creatures. The reason that we trust easily is that the things that we place our trust have proven reliable over the years. When is the last time you sat in a chair and it actually broke? We know that airplanes crash, but the odds of yours going down is actually quite small. As far as the freeway, well who can explain that?

So you see that faith is dependent upon the object of that faith. If the object of faith proves to be trustworthy, then it is usually a lot less difficult to trust that object in the future. For example if the chair that I am now sitting in has held my weight for the last 100 times that I sat in it, I find it easy to trust that it will hold me on the 101st time. For the Christian, his faith needs to be in God alone. The trust that you and I possess at this point in our lives must not be in the god of our beliefs, the god of our childhood or the god of our parents. Trust must be placed in the God of the Bible for it to be valid, Biblical faith. Anything less, you are just fooling yourself.

Look at some of the characters of the Bible, who were commended for their faith. You can see a list of them in the 11th chapter of the book of Hebrews. Take Abraham, for example. In the Bible, Paul says of Abraham, **“Well, what about Abraham? We have been saying he was declared righteous by God because of his faith.”** If you read the 4th Chapter of Romans, Paul says there, “So that's why faith is the key! God's promise is given to us as a free gift. And we are certain to receive it, whether or not we follow Jewish customs, if we have faith like Abraham's. Abraham is the father of all who believe. That is what the Scriptures mean when God told him, "I have made you the father of many nations." This happened because Abraham believed in the God who brings the dead back to life and who brings into existence that which didn't exist before.” Do you see the pattern in Abraham's life? God gave Abraham direction; Abraham believed God and changed the course of his life. The same is true today; God still speaks to His people. When we hear the voice of God, faith occurs when you believe God and change the course of our life to reflect what we sense God has told us. Anything less is not faith.

Let's now travel to our scripture for the week in James 2: 14-17. **“Dear brothers and sisters, what's the use of saying you have faith if you don't prove it by your actions? That kind of faith can't save anyone. Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, ‘Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well’, but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, it isn't enough just to have faith. Faith that doesn't show itself by good deeds is no faith at all, it is dead and useless.”** James is saying the same thing. If your faith doesn't result in a change in behavior then it is absolutely pointless.

The God that I read about in the Bible is looking for people through whom He can do mighty things. Are you that person? Perhaps you are one of those Americans that George Barna polled, the ones who think that faith is some nebulous thing that helps me get through the really tough times. While that might seem good enough for you, I will tell you that you are really missing out. I have seen a lot of real people of faith in my lifetime and I will tell you that it is amazing the things that they accomplished in their life. It wasn't that they were especially gifted or talented. They made a true impact in the world because they heard God speak; they believed Him and changed their actions to conform to where God wanted them. How about you?

FAITH IS MORE THAN FEELINGS

HAVING REAL FAITH

JAMES 2: 14-26

DAY 2

John 8:32 (NLT) And you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.

Early in my Christian life, I was mentored by a real Biblical scholar. He was the Senior Pastor of the church I was attending, and was the pastor that performed our marriage ceremony. While we attended his church, Glen actually earned his doctorate in Biblical Studies. It was under his tutelage that I learned how to correctly study God's Word. I will always be grateful to Glen for instilling in me a love for the study of God's Word.

The problem was that Glen also taught me to suspect my feelings when it came to my Christian Faith. He always taught that feelings change, but the Word doesn't; for God never changes. To Glen nothing mattered except correct doctrine and proper hermeneutics. The problem was that I came out of that era of my life a very cold Christian. Everything in life had to be based upon solidly exegeted scripture.

It is interesting that God had us move away and begin attending a church where the Senior Pastor, Floyd Overstreet, was very much a man of emotion. Pastor Floyd opened my heart. It was at that church that I learned that it was a wise God that made me with these emotions and that they were all right to have. It was at that church that I learned to balance fact with emotions. When it comes to faith, that is exactly what you need to do as a Christian, balance the facts behind your faith with the way you feel about them.

Let me explain what I mean. In the article that I talked about yesterday by George Barna, his research shows that 90% of Americans own at least 1 Bible. The majority of adults in America also claim to read that Bible during the year and claim that they know all of the basic teachings of the Bible. Yet one wonders how over half of them can say that Satan doesn't really exist, that the Holy Spirit is merely a symbol and that eternal peace with God can be earned through their good works. How can the majority of these Americans also contend that Jesus committed sins and that the Bible, Koran and Book of Mormon all teach the same truths? For a majority of Americans their faith isn't based upon the facts that are taught in the Bible. They are far more likely to develop their belief system based upon things that they have heard from others that sounded good, rather than a more time consuming study of God's Word.

Your faith must be based upon truth for it to be valid. Faith is only as valid as the source of that faith. So the question must be asked, how can we know the truth? As Henry Blackaby said in "Experiencing God," truth is not some abstract concept. Truth is a person. As Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me."** That is what lies behind today's main scripture. By substituting the word Jesus in John 8: 32 for the word truth, Jesus is saying, "You shall

know Me, and I will set you free.” As Mr. Blackaby said, “You don’t know the truth about anything until you have heard it from Jesus.”

You hear a lot in this world about how faith in God and the Bible flies against all reason and logic. In fact it was Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish Philosopher that said that you couldn’t believe in Christianity by virtue of reason. He said that if one chooses faith then he has to suspend his reason in order to believe in something higher than reason. In fact, Kierkegaard contends, one must believe by the virtue of the absurd. To Mr. Kierkegaard and his followers, I have just one thing to say, “Baloney.”

I just finished reading Lee Strobel’s book, “The Case for Christ.” Now Lee entered into the writing of this book as an Atheist. That is one who believes that there is no God. He possesses a Master’s degree in Law from Yale University and is the former legal editor for the Chicago Tribune. The interesting thing about this book is that he approached the case for Jesus Christ in much the same way that he would approach any other news story that he would have pursued in his career. He spent almost 2 years gathering the facts and crisscrossing the country several times interviewing several scholars, all with very impressive credentials. What was the end result of all of this effort, besides a really good book? Lee writes, “The atheism I had embraced for so long buckled under the weight of historical truth. It was a stunning and radical outcome, certainly not what I had anticipated when I embarked on this investigative process. But it was, in my opinion, a decision compelled by the facts.”

In looking back to the contradictions in the thinking of a majority of Americans that were revealed by George Barna’s research, the Bible clearly teaches that Satan exists. All you need to do is to read Genesis 3: 1-19 or Matthew 4: 1-11 to see that. That the Holy Spirit is clearly part of a triune Godhead is also clearly taught in the Bible (see Romans 8: 9, 1 Corinthians 12: 12). To believe that He is merely symbolic is to misunderstand what the Bible teaches. How can someone read Paul’s words to the Ephesian church, “**God saved you by his special favor when you believed. And you can’t take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it,**” and still believe the one has to work for their salvation? The person that contends that Jesus sinned clearly has never read 2 Corinthians 5: 21 where Paul states, “**For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ.**” Those words state the truth fairly clearly to my way of thinking.

As to the Bible being equal to the Koran and Book of Mormon, it is not a comparison based upon the facts, just the errors associated with political correctness and tolerance. Let’s compare the Koran to the Bible. Muhammad claims that he went into a cave alone and had a religious experience in which Allah revealed the Koran to him. There are no other people to authenticate it. Mohammad never offered any miraculous signs in order to demonstrate that Allah was confirming the authenticity of what he was saying. Over 40 different authors, on the other hand, wrote the Bible. Jesus clearly claimed to be God and backed it up with independently verified miracles. Those miracles are not only testified to in the Bible, but also by independent historians such as Josephus.

Joseph Smith, who claimed that he had a visit from the angel Moroni, wrote the Book of Mormon. It was during this visit that he was given a golden scroll, written in ancient hieroglyphics. Mr. Smith claims that the angel gave him special glasses that allowed him to read what was written on the scroll. Out of those golden scrolls came the Book of Mormon. The problem is that there is a lack of veracity in the whole process. The scroll is gone and no one except Joseph Smith saw it. The Book of Mormon also contains references to ancient civilizations that lived in the Americas. There has never been a single archaeological discovery to substantiate the existence of any of these ancient civilizations. To claim that the Book of Mormon stands equal to the Bible, which has been archaeologically confirmed time after time, takes a whole lot more wishful thinking that I care to have.

The point of this piece is not to put down people or other religions. The point is to stress that your faith must be based upon more than your feelings or what others tell you. It must be based upon a set of individually verified facts. It has always seemed obvious to me that if there is a God, and if He has final say about who gets into His heaven, and if He wrote a book telling me how to get into that heaven, then I might just want to read that book very carefully and take what it says to heart.

FAITH IS MORE THAN BELIEF

HAVING REAL FAITH

JAMES 2: 14-26

DAY 3

James 2:19 (NLT) Do you still think it's enough just to believe that there is one God? Well, even the demons believe this, and they tremble in terror!

For the past 2 days, I have been quoting an article by George Barna called, “The Seven Paradoxes Regarding American Faith.” As a result of his polling the American population, the truth of today’s title has become readily apparent. In a recent study, Mr. Barna found that only 7% of Americans believe that spiritual wholeness and development are the keys to a successful life. The vast majority of Americans still believe that the main factors that determine the success of life are such things as personal accomplishments, family solidarity and emotional fulfillment. George Barna asks, “The Christian faith commends sacrifice, servanthood and sharing as the means to significance. How is it possible to have more than 120 million adults attending Christian churches on a regular basis, but only 15 million who grasp the message that success is not about personal accomplishments or material possessions?”

Faith is much more than just belief. Read today’s passage again. James is teaching you a fundamental truth about both faith and the demonic world. To Satan, there is no doubt that there is a God. Read the book of Job, there you will see Satan walking right into the throne room of heaven and talking to God. Satan knows with absolute certainty that Jesus was God in human form. There is no doubt, whatsoever, in Satan’s mind about the power and work of the Holy Spirit. He knows that God is real. Satan feels the result of God’s power every single day. Yet with all of that knowledge about God, Satan is not going to be your brother in heaven for all eternity.

You might say, “Of course not” to that last statement. Yet Jesus said, “**And whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?**” Wasn’t it Paul that said to the Philippian jailer, “**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household??**” So how does one reconcile both statements? If you are to believe in Jesus in order to be saved and Satan believes in Jesus, then why doesn’t that belief save him?

The answer to that question lies in what we mean by the word belief. It also lies at the very heart of what we have been talking about all week, this idea of faith. Now the New Testament was originally written in the Greek language. Though Greece wasn’t a world power at the time Jesus lived, its language and culture were practiced throughout the Roman world. Greek was the language of Aristotle, Homer and Plato. It is a more highly inflected language than English. These inflections identify the uses and functions of the words in a sentence. The stems of Greek words are modified by the addition of prefixes, by the changing of the endings of words, and by the insertion of a letter or letters in the

midst of words. In the hands of a skilled writer, the Greek language is able to communicate the nuances of philosophy and the deep emotional feelings of a Sophoclean tragedy. That is why translating it into the English language becomes such a challenge.

For example, the Greek word for believe, *pisteuo*, means much more than to make a mental assent to truth. It means to trust in or to rely upon something. Let me give you an example. Let's say that you asked the average American, "Do you believe that Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson actually existed?" It wouldn't be hard to imagine that a majority of the people you asked would answer that they believed that these men existed. I believe that this same group would also say that they believe in God and Jesus. In fact Barna regularly reports that over 90% of Americans would answer that question in the positive. The problem lies in that the belief they have in Abraham Lincoln is the same kind of belief that they have in God. To some, this kind of belief is called "mental assent." It's the kind of belief that happens in your head, but never makes it into your heart or your life.

It's easy for me to say that I believe in Abraham Lincoln because it doesn't cost me anything. I can be the same person today as I was yesterday when I didn't say that I believed in Abraham Lincoln. For the majority of Americans the same thing is true about their belief about God. They feel that their belief in God has no bearing on how they live their life. It doesn't change their behavior.

Unfortunately, as we have been discovering, faith requires much more than mental assent. It requires action on my part. It requires some outward evidence for it to be real. Remember the definition of faith that we were working on a couple of days ago, "When we hear the voice of God, faith occurs when we believe God and change the course of our life to reflect what we sense God has told us." That kind of faith requires much more of us than a mere mental assent.

Let's apply our definitions to a rather misunderstood passage and see if this all makes sense. Jesus said, "**Have faith in God. I tell you the truth, if anyone says to this mountain, 'Go, throw yourself into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours.**" Now some teachers think that Jesus is teaching us a new way to do earth moving. It would be much cheaper for you to pray to move that mountain instead of hiring an excavating contractor. I tend to look at the lesson Jesus was trying to teach rather than get bogged down in the illustration of that lesson. The lesson Jesus is trying to teach is about the relationship between faith, belief and answered prayer.

During the early part of this century, a midwestern town was experiencing a severe drought. Since farming was their life, this lack of rain was a serious thing. Now the local Baptist church had just hired a new preacher. On his first Sunday, he was persuaded by some of his members that it would be a really good idea to pray for rain. That Sunday morning the pews were jammed with excited people hoping that their new pastor had some kind of special pull with God. After all they were good people and they needed

rain. The pastor stood in the pulpit, after all of the singing and praising was done, and looked out over the congregation. At that point, he pronounced the benediction and dismissed the crowd. After the service, the deacons had one of those impromptu board meetings. They demanded of the new pastor the reason that he had failed to pray for rain. The pastor said, "Well, the God of the Bible only answers prayers of faithful people." The chairman of the Board of Deacons almost yelled when he said, "What makes you think that we are not faithful people." To which the pastor replied, "I knew that there wasn't a single person in service today that believed that God could bring rain because no one came to the service with an umbrella."

How about you? Do you believe in the God of the Bible so much that it changes the way you think, act and feel about every situation in your life, or is God just another thing to do once a week? Do you read the Bible and wish that you could do the kind of things that those great heroes did, or do you see God working in your life in much the same way as he did back then? The kind of faith that has in impact on the world is yours for the asking. Oh, it takes a lifetime of trusting to really become a person of faith, but He is there, only a prayer away. Why not ask Him, right now, to become more real to you. Tell Him that you love Him and that you really want Him to live through you. That's one prayer that I know that God will answer.

FAITH IS MORE THAN YOU CAN SEE

HAVING REAL FAITH

JAMES 2: 14-26

DAY 4

2 Cor. 5:7 (NIV) We live by faith, not by sight.

There has always been a great gulf between a life of faith and one based upon our 5 senses. For most human beings, reality is defined by those 5. Think about it, most things that you do during the day involve at least 1 of the senses. It is by this standard that we define reality. Yet when it comes to God, there are times when you are asked to suspend your view of reality. There are times when God will ask you to suspend your experience, your plans and mostly your priorities for an entirely new set of operating instructions. I am convinced that it is the people who are able to do that, who are able to follow God no matter what their senses are telling them, that will see God do great things. One such man is a personal hero of mine by the name of Elijah. You can find out all about what I am going to talk about today in 1 Kings 17.

To set the stage, the northern kingdom of Israel had just gone through over 50 years of idolatry. Starting from Jeroboam, their first king, all the way to their present monarch, Ahab, there was nothing but idol worship in the nation. Now if you know anything about the God of the Bible, you will know that idol worship is something that He hates. So He sends a rather unimpressive man by the name of Elijah to Ahab to make a rather startling statement, **“As the Lord, the God of Israel, lives, whom I serve, there will be neither dew nor rain in the next few years except at my word.”** Now I am sure that Ahab thought that this little man should be committed. You have to admit this is a rather bold statement. After all Ahab’s main god, Baal, had delivered rain for these past decades. Ahab wasn’t laughing after the first rainy season came and went and not even a drop of rain fell. I mean you can exist in drought conditions for a while, but the Bible tells us that there was not even dew on the ground for 3 ½ years (James 5: 17).

After a while, the drought became severe, and Ahab began to look all over for this guy. I am sure Ahab felt that with a little painful persuasion, Elijah could be made to see things his way. After all, Elijah did say that it would be at his word that rain would come. Well, the God of Israel had Elijah squirreled away in a tiny ravine, east of the Jordan, called Kerith. There, Elijah was brought food every day by ravens and he drank from a brook that ran down the ravine. It is not too hard to imagine, in that out of the way place, Elijah had quite a number of talks with God. It was in that ravine that God began the process of forging out a great man of God.

In my younger days, I really liked to go backpacking. I found that getting away from life for a few days, in the peace and quiet of the outdoors, to be an awesome way to relax. Of course, the scenery that I viewed during these trips always spoke mightily to the unique creation talents of God. After about 3 days, I was always ready to come home. When all

you have to sit on is rock, and hard ground to sleep on, the comforts of home always seemed to call me back. I found that the most that I could take of backpacking was 3 days. Elijah did it for months, with no one to talk to but God. He had to trust in God like he had never done before.

What comes next is a change in the situation, as the Bible tells us the brook dried up. That's not hard to believe, given that there was no rain in the land. One can almost imagine what Elijah was thinking as each morning he would look at the brook, running a little less than the day before. It's not hard to view Elijah looking up to heaven and whispering, "Uh, Lord, the brook's drying up."

Chuck Swindoll in his book on Elijah gives us 6 lessons that you can draw from this experience. The first is that God, who gives us water, can take it back. It's His sovereign right. People tend to think that if God gives us the spouse of our dreams, God has no right to take them back. If God gives me a child, He has no right to take it back. If God has given me a business, He has no right to cause it to fail. If God gives me a growing ministry, it should always stay growing. None of those things are true. That's the point when we say that He is Lord. However, in those times, you need to remember that God has never left you. He has never left your presence. In fact, He is closer to you than when times are good.

Second, sometimes the brook drying up is as a direct result of our own prayers. We pray, "God make me a Godly person, but don't make it hurt." Have you ever prayed for patience, what usually happens? Did you forget the patience is poured from the blast furnace of trials? In these times do you surrender to God or try to bargain with Him? It is in those times that you have to wait upon God and be confident that He will look out for you.

Third, you must be willing to be hidden as well as out in front. This lesson is particularly hard if you are used to being at the center of things. I can remember when I first moved to where I am living now. I was so involved in my last church. It was really hard to sit on the sidelines. Sometimes you long to be out front, to be the center of attention, but it is not always about what you want.

Fourth, God's direction always includes provision. When He tells you to go and do something, He provides what you need. You need to trust Him. Vance Havener in his book called, "It's Toward Evening," describes the cotton farmers of the Deep South. They had invested all of their money in their yearly crop of cotton only to find it wiped out when along came an insect called the boll weevil. You see this year the crop was supposed to bail them out after years of declining cotton yields. Now instead of living on "Easy Street," they were going to have to take up residence in the poorhouse. Out of desperation, the farmers planted peanuts in their fields. The peanuts that they harvested that year brought them more money than their cotton ever did. Do you know what those farmers did? They built a statue as a monument to the boll weevil. They realized that the very thing they thought would destroy them actually made them. You never know how God is going to work in a situation. Don't second-guess Him.

Fifth, you are to trust God one day at time. When you read about Elijah, you will see that God never gave him instructions ahead of time. Now I know that you don't like living like that. You want the whole plan, right up front. Unfortunately God doesn't work like that. Sometimes, He is more interested in growing you than completing a plan.

Finally, you need to understand that the brook drying up is often a sign of God's pleasure not his punishment. Sometimes when life goes the wrong way, we start looking at our own life and where we might have sinned. That may not be the case. It wasn't in Elijah's life. God had another job for him to do in far off Zarephath. The next time God causes your brook to dry up, don't start accusing or blaming God. Start listening for God to speak. He might just surprise you with another assignment that He would like you to do for Him.

Well hopefully some of this will help you in your daily walk with Him. I have always felt that following God is the greatest adventure around. How about you?

FAITH THAT SAVES

HAVING REAL FAITH

JAMES 2: 14-26

DAY 5

John 1:12 (NASB) But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name,

When I read the verse above, I am always struck by how simple it is to enter into a relationship with Jesus Christ. All a person need do is to believe in Jesus. Now as we talked a few days ago, the idea of belief is more than making a mental assent to the fact that Jesus existed as a person in history. It implies an acceptance of his words and his actions with respect to paying the price for your sins. Other than the step of believing, there doesn't seem to be anything else that needs to be done. If there were, this would have been the perfect place for John to give us the list. From John 20: 30, 31, we understand that John's whole point in writing was that his readers would believe and have life in His name. So it seems to me that if there were a list of things that needed to be done to gain that life, he would provide it. Read the book of John and you will not see any "to do" list to gain eternal life.

So, if gaining eternal life is so easy, why aren't more people saved? I believe the real answer lies in the title of today's reading. It is your faith that saves you. Let's go back to our definition of faith that we have been using all week. Faith is when we hear the voice of God, believe God and change the course of our life to reflect what we sense God has told us. Faith involves a choice. Faith in God will cause you to put what God wants of you ahead of what you want. The fact is that most people on this planet do not want anyone or anything else in charge of their lives.

Go back to the times in which Jesus lived. Why didn't the religious leaders of Jesus' day accept Him? Why did they do everything within their power to destroy Jesus and His message? I am sure that if you traveled back in time and asked them, they would give you an altruistic religious argument that this Jesus couldn't be the Messiah because He didn't do the things that Messiah was supposed to do. The counter argument to that reasoning is always His miracles, His words and the many prophecies that were fulfilled in His life. I believe that the real reason that the religious leaders of Jesus' day didn't believe is that they had too much to lose. All of their wealth, power and prestige lay in retaining the status quo. Look at the life of Nicodemus. When he met Jesus in the upper room, the Apostle John tells us that he was a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court of Israel. It is interesting that historical tradition holds that Nicodemus was one of the 3 wealthiest people in all of Jerusalem. If you look at that same historical tradition, you will find that sometime after Jesus' death, Nicodemus's family was seen begging in the streets of Jerusalem. If that was the case, believing in Jesus cost Nicodemus all of his power, wealth and prestige.

Think about Stan, the skeptic. He's the guy that always has 100 reasons not to believe in this "religious stuff." It doesn't matter how many facts you present or how clever your arguments, he still won't believe it. Are his doubts the real reason behind his skepticism? I think if you really went to the heart of the matter, it is really just a matter of the will. He won't believe probably because he has too much to lose.

Think about Marion, the material girl. The main point of her life is to spend, spend, and spend. She is always about the newest and the latest. When someone shares the gospel, she listens politely and then goes about her way. You see if she were to believe then she couldn't live her life the way she wants to, and she just won't accept that. Once again, it is a matter of the will.

Think about the people around you, your neighbors, your co-workers and your friends that don't believe in Jesus the same way that you do. What do they tell you about the way that they feel about this faith of yours that makes such a difference in your life? What do you think is the real reason that they reject every invitation that you make to them? The problem is that you know what a relationship with Jesus will do for their lives. You want, so much, for them to come to know the Jesus that you know, that sometimes you sound more like a salesman for Jesus.

Look at what Jesus says in John 6. **"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the Prophets: 'They will all be taught by God.' Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me."** Do you see what Jesus is teaching you in this passage? No one comes to God, or a relationship with Jesus, unless or until God draws Him to Himself. When you are praying that someone will find God, your prayer should be that God begins to draw that person to Himself. The most important decision any person makes is whether to believe or not to believe in their creator. It is their choice, given to them by God. He will never force them to accept Him and you shouldn't either.

What about you? Perhaps you have just started attending church. You are not even sure why you came. That is God drawing you. You say, "I am really attracted to God, as He is taught here, but I really have my doubts." I would say to you; that is perfectly fine. Everyone around you has his doubts from time to time. As the writer of Hebrews defines faith, **"Faith assures us of things we expect and convinces us of the existence of things we cannot see."** Let's say I was holding something in my hand and told you that it was a penny. If you really knew me well, you might say that you really believe that I am holding a penny. That's faith. Do you know with absolute certainty that I have a penny? No you don't. You are basing your belief on my integrity and my relationship with you.

It's the same thing with God. He has shown us Himself. You see it every time you go outside and view his creation. You see it every time you see the good that exists in His world. You have the witness of His Word, the people around you at church and even deep down inside yourself you sense His presence. It is based upon that evidence that you believe. You may have doubts, but the doubts should always take you back to

reexamine the evidence again. The evidence tells you that God exists and that He has a plan for your life. The only question that remains is what choice are you going to make? Are you going to believe and follow that plan, or are you going your own way? You can choose to live the life that has a purpose and a meaning, or to lead a life that leads to emptiness and despair. God gave you that choice and He will never take that gift away. As Joshua said, **“Choose today whom you will serve.”**

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Well you have been studying the book of James for 7 weeks now and you're only half way through. I'm sure that you will agree. There is a lot that James has to teach us.

It has always amazed me that writings that were done almost 2 thousand years ago can be just as applicable today as they were on the day that James wrote them. I guess human nature doesn't change all that much over time. Yes, we have a lot more stuff that comes our way than his audience ever experienced, but the way we react to such things as wealth, wisdom and temptation are very much the same.

It is my prayer that you are a bit different after reading these daily devotions. I have prayed that the God that inspired James to write his letter has also caused the truths contained therein to change the way you look at things. I have always believed that the only way permanent change can happen in the life of the Christian is when the Holy Spirit is the source of that change. I pray that you have been open to that Holy Spirit and that you are walking a little bit closer to God for having taken the time to read this book.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for the privilege of being able to interact with you over last 7 weeks. It has been a joy. I pray that you have thought that it was worth your while enough that you will continue into Growing To Maturity, Part 2. That devotion covers the rest of James' letter and takes another 8 weeks to complete.

So we'll see you in heaven...

Ray Tuttle
Elder
Camarillo Community Church
Camarillo, CA