

Living With an Eternal Perspective

Sue Bohlin considers several ways to develop a way of seeing our earthly life as part of the much bigger picture that extends into eternity.

What Does It Mean To Live With an Eternal Perspective?

Years ago, after spending his whole life on the mission field, a career missionary made his final trip home on a passenger ship. One of the other people on his sailing was a celebrity, and as the ship made its way into the harbor, all those on board beheld a huge throng of well wishers at the pier with signs and instruments to celebrate the famous person's return.

The missionary stood at the railing, watching wistfully, knowing that not a soul was there for him. He said, "Lord, I've served You my whole life. Look at all the recognition and revelry for that famous person, and there's nobody here for me. It hurts, Lord."



He heard the still, small voice say, "You're not home yet, son."

I love this story that helps me keep in mind the big picture that includes the eternal, unseen realm, and the long picture that extends into the forever that awaits on the other side of death.

The apostle Paul had a firm grasp on what it means to live with an eternal perspective. We can especially see this in 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

In these verses, Paul provides three aspects of an eternal perspective that kept him from losing heart, despite living with profound physical persecution and assault such as being hammered with stones, whipped by a cat-o'-nine-tails, beaten with rods, and shipwrecked. He knew what it was to go without sleep, food or drink, sometimes he was cold and naked. The man *knew* what it was to suffer! (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

But Paul had a sort of spiritual periscope that allowed him to “see above” into the spirit realm while continuing to “live below” in this physical world. He saw the contrast between our bodies and our souls, how earthly affliction prepares us for glory, and the need to focus on the unseen and eternal rather than the seen and temporary.

Paul's Eternal Perspective

The apostle Paul showed us in 2 Corinthians 4 that he understood what it was to live with an eternal perspective. He understood that our bodies can be growing older and weaker on the outside, while our spirits are growing stronger, brighter, and more mature on the inside. I get that; as a polio survivor who has also needed both my hips replaced, I am very aware that I keep getting weaker the longer I live in this compromised body. But I also know the beauty and glory of Jesus making me more and more like Himself, day by day, so by His grace I can keep growing in vitality and joy on the inside! I may have diminishing energy in my body, but my spiritual energy capacity keeps getting bigger!

Paul also understood that the hard parts of living in a fallen world, much less living with the pains and trials of persecution, are merely a “light and momentary affliction” compared to what’s waiting on the other side: an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison. Even horrible pain on earth is still “light and momentary” compared to the infinite length and glory of eternity with Christ. We can see how the Lord Jesus modeled this understanding as He faced the cross, and Hebrews tells us that He “despised its shame” because He was valuing the glory of the joy set before Him (12:2)

And Paul understood that we can shift our focus from the visible and temporary things of this world, to the unseen and eternal things of the spirit realm. We have to work at seeing the unseen and eternal. We do that with the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18). We do that by training ourselves to view everything through the lens of God’s word.

I’ve been working at developing an eternal perspective for years. For me, it’s about connecting the dots between earthly things and heavenly things.

I look at earthly things and wonder, “How does this connect to the spirit realm? How does this connect to what is unseen and eternal?” For examples, look at my blog posts, such as Glorious Morning Glories [probe.org/glorious-morning-glories/], Back Infections and Heart Infections [probe.org/back-infections-and-heart-infections/], Cruise Ships, Roller Coasters and Attitudes [probe.org/cruise-ships-roller-coasters-and-attitudes/], and Blowing Past Greatness [probe.org/blowing-past-greatness/].

Jesus’ parables are the world’s best examples of using the physical to provide understanding of the eternal. He was always connecting the dots between the things He was surrounded by—different types of soil, lost coins and sheep and sons, a wedding banquet—and explaining how these things related to the Kingdom of Heaven.

One of the most important prayers we can ask is, “Lord, help me see Your hand at work”—and then intentionally looking for it. For years I have kept a “God Sightings” Journal where I recorded evidence of God intervening in my life and the lives of others I have seen. I love to ask my friends and mentees, “Do you any God Sightings to share?” to help them identify the hand of God in their lives.

An Eternal Perspective on Suffering

As we talk about living with an eternal perspective, let’s remember that we live in a permanent battle zone of spiritual warfare. We have an enemy who hates us because He hates God. He and his fellow demons continually attack us with lies and deceptions. Some are personal, but many of them constitute the cultural water we swim in.

When we forget that we live in a culture of anti-God, anti-truth, it’s like going out in our underwear, needlessly exposing ourselves. Living with an eternal perspective means staying vigilant, donning our spiritual armor (Ephesians 6:10-18) and using it to fight back against the lies of the enemy.

Spiritual warfare is HARD. It means suffering. Sometimes physical, most often mental—because spiritual warfare is waged on the battlefield of the mind. But the suffering of spiritual warfare is temporary, because the vast majority of the believer’s life will be spent in heaven where warfare of all kinds will be a distant memory.

But for right now, suffering is still part of life, and developing and maintaining an eternal perspective really helps us remind ourselves of the larger truth. Romans 8:18 says that “our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.” Being faithful when we’re suffering means glory in the future.

My friend Holly has battled cancer three times on top of the horribleness of cystic fibrosis. She suffers literally every day of her life. Yet, with a beautiful, godly stubbornness, she reminds herself of what is true: “What if the worst thing happens? Oh wait, it can’t. The worst thing that can possibly happen to anyone is to die apart from Christ and spend eternity in torment. For me, to die means instant joy and relief in the arms of my Savior!”

Like [Joni Eareckson Tada](#), my friend Chris has lived with quadriplegia for almost fifty years. What comes to mind when I think of Chris is two words: “sweet joy.” Because of his eternal perspective, Chris knows his suffering is temporary, and he chooses not to give into self-pity. People are drawn to him like honey because of how he radiates Jesus.

And then there’s me. I’ve lived with a disability my whole life. As a polio survivor, I have walked every step with a [very noticeable limp](#). Living with an eternal perspective means that, by the grace of God, I know I will receive a beautiful, strong, perfectly healthy resurrection body in heaven. My polio days are limited, but my resurrection body days will be unlimited! Meanwhile, I get to see God use my disability for His glory and others’ good in ways I never would have imagined. It really is okay!

Remembering the Long View

Another aspect of living with an eternal perspective is focusing on the reality that our time on earth is short, especially compared to the never-ending life on the other side of death.

One of my favorite questions is to ask, “A hundred years from now, when you are face to face with Jesus in heaven, what do you want to be glad you chose today? Indulging your flesh and doing whatever you think will make you happy right now, or

making choices that honor God and bless other people?”

Probably my favorite question remains an essential part of my eternal perspective: passing everything through the grid of the great question, “In the scope of eternity, what does this matter?” [probe.org/in-the-scope-of-eternity/]The frustrations of traffic? Not getting our way? A loved one who does not know Christ? The answer determines what is worth getting upset about, what we should just let go, and where we should be investing time in prayer.

We can remember the long view by pre-deciding now that we will use our earthly days fully, engaged in ministry, as long as God gives us breath.

Years ago, my view of living with an eternal perspective was shaped by the story of a lady who decided to start college in her 70s. When they asked her why she would do such a thing when her life was basically over, she said, “Oh no! It’s not over! I’m preparing for the next part of my life in heaven! The more equipped I can get on earth, the more ready I’ll be for what the Lord has for me on the other side!”

Another lady was homebound because she was so disabled. She got the word out that every afternoon, her home was open for anyone who needed prayer. Some days it was like there was a revolving door, so many coming and going! She had a vibrant ministry in the waning days of her life because she was determined to use her remaining earthly days fully, to the glory of God.

One of my friends is a TSA [Transportation Security Administration, part of the U.S. Government] agent at a major airport. She diligently reminds herself daily that every traveler who comes through the security line is infinitely valuable because they are made in the image of God, and Jesus died for them. She showers kindness on them because they are so important. One of her co-workers, for whom work is just a

job where he punches a time clock, once told her, “In twelve months you’ll stop being nice to everyone.” We don’t think so. (Especially since she’s already had this job for several years.) She works at maintaining an eternal perspective, seeing the unseen.

In the time you have now, live well, to the glory of God. Keep reminding yourself that everything we do now has an eternal impact. Our choices, our behaviors, our words, ripple into eternity. Which is why we need to seek to do everything for the glory of God.

Eternal Perspective is What God Sees

As a mom of littles, Nicole Johnson was feeling sorry for herself when she met with a friend who had just returned from Europe. She writes,

“My friend turned to me with a beautifully wrapped package, and said, ‘I brought you this.’ It was a book on the great cathedrals of Europe. I wasn’t exactly sure why she’d given it to me until I read her inscription: ‘With admiration for the greatness of what you are building when no one sees.’”

“In the days ahead I would read—no, devour—the book. And I would discover what would become for me, four life-changing truths, after which I could pattern my work:

“1) No one can say who built the great cathedrals—we have no record of their names.

“2) These builders gave their whole lives for a work they would never see finished.

“3) They made great sacrifices and expected no credit.

“4) The passion of their building was fueled by their faith that the eyes of God saw everything.

“There’s a story in the book about a rich man who came to visit the cathedral while it was being built, and he saw a workman carving a tiny bird on the inside of a beam. He was puzzled and asked the man, ‘Why are you spending so much time carving that bird into a beam that will be covered by the roof? No one will ever see it.’

“And the workman replied, ‘Because God sees it.’^{1}

Living with an eternal perspective as we make choices and invest our time to glorify God is like building a cathedral that we won’t be able to see finished.

It means living with the long view in mind, aware that the things we can see, hear, and feel are temporary, but the spiritual realm is permanent.

An eternal perspective means that the things you do that no one sees but God—the unseen and eternal—*they matter!*

God tells us in Isaiah that our purpose in life is to glorify Him (43:7). Paul puts a point on this in 1 Corinthians 10:31: “Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.”

And that’s the key to living with an eternal perspective.

Notes

1. thejoysofboys.com/monday-motivation-the-invisible-mom/

©2021 Probe Ministries

A Christian Purpose for Life – Proclaiming the Glory of Christ

Steve Cable answers the question, Why does God leave Christians on earth after we are saved?

Misconceptions and Our Identity

Examining the beliefs and behavior of born-again emerging adults over the last few years, one common deficiency is a misunderstanding of their relationship to eternity. Many believers either have not thought about the question of “Why did God leave me here on earth once I was saved?” or they harbor misconceptions about the answer. Let’s begin by considering some common misconceptions.



The first misconception is being purposeless. These people believe that thinking about their eternal purpose is a waste of time. Just live for the moment. My eternal destiny is secure so why bother myself with asking, “Why am I still here? I’ll worry about the things of heaven after I die.” This viewpoint devalues the sacrifice of Christ. He did not give His life for us so that we can be unconcerned about what concerns Him. [\[1\]](#)

The second misconception is focusing on this life’s pleasures. Many young people say things like “I don’t want Jesus to return until after I have traveled, married, had children, gotten that promotion, etc.” They assume these things are of ultimate importance in their lives. Yet, the Bible teaches us that this attitude will choke out God’s fruit in our lives. As Jesus said, “[T]he worries of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things, enter in and

choke the word and it becomes unfruitful.”{2}

A third misconception is becoming prepared for heaven. Some think that God needs to get our character up to some entrance level requirement before we are ready to move on to heaven. Most people with this view are not really working hard to match their lifestyle to a biblical standard, but they figure at some point they will. However, since our righteousness is not our own, but rather that of Jesus’,{3} we don’t need to get more righteous to enter heaven. In fact, when we see Him then we will be like Him.{4} The fastest way to make us completely mature is to take us out of this world.

One final misconception is providing for one’s family. Caring for our family is certainly part of God’s desire for our lives. However, if our sole purpose is to provide for our own family and our children have the same purpose and so on, the church will be limited to us and our progeny—and no one else.

These common misconceptions as to our purpose fall under the warning Paul gave us in Philippians,

For many walk, of whom I often told you, . . . that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, . . . whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things.{5}

Paul goes on to explain, “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ . . .”{6}

We are to live our lives constantly aware of our heavenly citizenship, eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord. In this article, we examine the book of 1 Peter to see what Peter has to say about our purpose in life and how we are to live it out.

Called to a Critical Mission

Peter begins the book of 1 Peter by reminding us what Christ has done for us. Let's read the first few verses of this amazing letter.

According to his great mercy, [God] has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

Through the resurrection of Jesus we are born again and are looking forward to an eternal inheritance kept in heaven for us to be revealed in the last time. What a wonderful truth helping us to realize that we are already living in eternity as we wait for our inheritance to be revealed. In the meantime, we are living on this earth in a temporary "earthsuit" called to fulfill God's purpose for our lives.

In the remainder of his letter to the churches, Peter addresses what we are to do while we are living on this earth. He first tells us that we are likely to encounter trials and suffering in this world. Then, beginning with verse 13 of chapter 1, Peter conveys to us the importance of our mission, giving us instructions we would expect a military commander to give before sending his team out on a dangerous and critical mission. He tells us to:

Prepare our minds for action – we are to be action oriented, not passively waiting for our life to pass by.

Be alert and focused on the mission – we are to keep our minds focused on God's purpose for our life on this earth.

Keep a long term perspective – don't be deceived into putting your thoughts and your hope on the temporary temptations of the world, and

Realize God has entrusted you with the priceless resource of time – Peter tells us that we are to conduct ourselves in the fear of the Lord while we are on this earth.

In the latter parts of chapter 1, Peter reminds us that we have been redeemed at a very high cost, the precious blood of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. We owe a tremendous debt which motivates us to desire to faithfully carry out our mission on this earth.

The calls to action listed above must be accompanied by two critical components to be effective in this life. Specifically, Peter calls on us to purify our hearts not conforming to our former lusts and to love other believers not only as a friend, but also with sacrificial love by which Jesus loves you. The actions listed above are not our purpose on this earth, but rather activities we need to address if we are fulfill our purpose.

Our Purpose: To Proclaim His Excellencies

Why does God leaves us on this earth after we are saved? In the second chapter of his letter, Peter begins by reminding us that we are living stones, part of the holy building God is building on the cornerstone Jesus Christ. This building made up of the lives of Christians is to be a beacon proclaiming the glory of God and the good news of redemption in Jesus.

In verses 9 and 10 of Chapter 2, Paul clearly states the purpose of our lives and of the church when he writes:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were not a people, but now you are the people of God; you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

We are a special people on this earth, God's own people. Peter

uses the terms used by Yahweh of the Israelites in the wilderness where God told them through Moses,

Now then, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be My own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.[{7}](#)

The Israelites discovered that they could not obey His voice or keep His covenant even when ruled by kings who desired to serve the Lord. Jesus Christ had to “become sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God through Him.”[{8}](#) In Jesus’ righteousness, we now become the special people of God given His purposes to accomplish on this earth.

We are left here so that we may proclaim His excellencies. We are to proclaim more than just the general attributes of our Creator. We are to let people know that our Creator is prepared to deliver them out of darkness and let them live in His marvelous light. God has entrusted us with His glory, His light. We have the privilege of proclaiming His glory and offering His grace. At a basic level, we proclaim His excellencies by obeying His commands to proclaim Christ, make disciples, and be available for God to use us on this earth.

If we are to proclaim the glories of Christ and the gospel of redemption to eternal life, how are we to accomplish this wonderful goal?

Fulfilling Our Purpose Through Excellent Behavior and Right Relationships

In this article we have been looking at the question, “What purpose does God have for my life as a Christian here on planet Earth?” We have seen that God leaves us here primarily for the purpose of bringing others into His kingdom. As Paul said, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain . . . if I am to remain on in the flesh if will mean fruitful labor for

me.”{9} In his letter to the Colossians, Paul stated, “We proclaim [Christ] by instructing and teaching all people with all wisdom so that we may present every person mature in Christ.”{10} The apostle Peter put it this way, “[You are] a people of his own, so that you may proclaim the virtues of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”{11}

If we are to proclaim Christ in this world, the next obvious question is, how are we to do this? Is the best approach to rent a large electronic bull horn and drive the streets preaching the good news? Or in today’s world perhaps we can start a Facebook page or send out a tweet with John 3:16? These techniques may be appropriate in some circumstances, but that is not where the apostle Peter says we should begin.

Peter follows his statement that we are called to proclaim Christ with this interesting instruction:

Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul. Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evildoers, they may because of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation.{12}

Instead of following this primary purpose with instructions on how to best verbalize our faith, he first focuses on how we live out our faith. He clearly points out that our behavior if kept excellent in purity and good deeds will attract the attention of non-Christians, of evil doers, causing them to consider the work of Christ in this world. We see that the reason God calls us to excellent behavior is not so that we will be good enough to get into His heaven, but rather to convict others of their need for a savior.

Peter continues to address ways in which we should proclaim Christ in the remainder of the second chapter. He points out

that having godly relationships is an important way of proclaiming Christ. What types of relationships does Peter address? He specifically calls out our relationships with unbelievers, government authorities, our bosses, our co-workers, husbands and wives, other believers and the elders He has placed over us.

Relationships are the biggest part of life. As people observe your relationships, they can see that they are different because you offer supernatural love, and your eternal perspective allows you to approach them with a servant's heart. As Christians, our relationships are not about getting what we deserve, but rather about giving to others the same way Jesus has given to us.

Fulfilling Your Purpose Through Your Testimony and Your Prayers

Above we have seen that our post-salvation purpose of life on earth is to proclaim the excellencies of Jesus Christ through the gospel. We also looked at the first two ways that we should use to proclaim Christ in this world. The first way is through excellent behavior lived out before an unbelieving world. The second is through living out right relationships with those with whom we deal in this world. As you can see, these first two ways that Peter addresses do not require us to explain our faith in Jesus Christ. Rather, they draw unbeliever's attention to our lives, building up questions in their minds.

For example, in 1 Peter 2:18-19, Peter tells us,

Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. For this finds favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.

Having a good attitude toward our boss even in those times when they are unreasonable finds favor with God and testifies to others of our different perspective.

After dealing with a comprehensive list of life relationships, from the government to our husbands and wives, Peter brings up our spoken testimony as well. In 3:15, he says:

Sanctify Christ as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; and keep a good conscience so that in the thing in which you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ will be put to shame.

Not only are we to live our lives in ways that proclaim the glories of our Savior, we are to be prepared to give an account for the hope that is in us. We know from the first chapter of 1 Peter that the hope that is in us is the hope that comes from being born again and knowing that we have obtained an eternal inheritance reserved for us in heaven. We need to be prepared to share with others that through faith in the resurrection of Jesus Christ they too can share in this same hope that drives our lives. The phrase in the verse, to make a defense, is a translation of the Greek word *apologia* from which we obtain our English word "apologetics."

It is important to note the context in which this call to apologetics is placed. First, it is to be done with gentleness and reverence, not with arrogance and self-righteousness. The object is not to demonstrate you are right, but rather to help the questioner come to grips with the truth of grace through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Second, Peter reiterates his instruction found in 2:12, reminding us that we are to focus on living sanctified lives so that even those who slander us know in their hearts of our good behavior in Christ.

Finally, in 1 Peter 4:7, we are called to be “of sound judgment and sober spirit for the purpose of prayer.” If we are to be effective in proclaiming Christ in this world we must be consistently praying about the people and the obstacles we face.

Peter makes it clear that our purpose as a church on this earth is to proclaim the goodness of Christ who delivered us out of the domain of darkness and into the eternal kingdom of God. Proclaiming Christ in this way involves our excellent behavior, our right relationships, our gentle defense of the gospel, and a commitment to prayer. Let us examine our lives to see how this call is being lived out in us.

Notes

1. 2 Corinthians 5:14 and 1 Peter 1:13-17
2. Mark 4:19
3. Philippians 3:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:21
4. 1 John 3:3
5. Philippians 3:18-19
6. Philippians 3:20-21
7. Exodus 19:5-6
8. 2 Corinthians 5:20
9. Philippians 1:21-23
10. Colossians 1:28 NET Bible
11. 1 Peter 2:9b NET Bible
12. 1 Peter 2:11-12

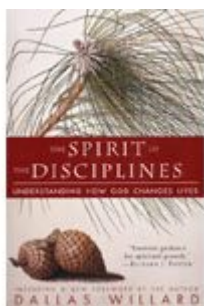
Spiritual Disciplines and the Modern World

The spiritual disciplines help us cooperate with God in our transformation into the likeness of Christ. Don Closson discusses disciplines of abstinence and of engagement.



This article is also available in [Spanish](#).

Spirituality and the Body



As a seminary student I was given the assignment to read a book on Christian spirituality called the *Spirit of the Disciplines* by Dallas Willard.^[1] I obediently read the book and either wrote a paper on it or took a test that covered the material (I can't recall which), but the book didn't have a major impact on my life at that time. Recently, over a decade later, I have gone back to the book and found it to be a jewel that I should have spent more time with. In the book, Willard speaks to one of the most important issues facing individual Christians and churches in our time: "How does one live the Spirit-filled life promised in the New Testament?" How does the believer experience the promise that Jesus made in Matthew 11:29-30: "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"?



Willard argues that modernity has given us a culture that offers a flood of self-fulfillment programs in the form of political, scientific, and even psychological revolutions. All promise to promote personal peace and affluence, and yet we suffer from an “epidemic of depression, suicide, personal emptiness, and escapism through drugs and alcohol, cultic obsession, consumerism, and sex and violence”^{2} Most Christians would agree that the Christian faith offers a model for human transformation that far exceeds the promises of modern scientific programs, but when it comes to delineating the methods of such a transformation there is often confusion or silence.

Christians frequently seek spiritual maturity in all the wrong places. Some submit themselves to abusive churches that equate busyness and unquestioning subservience with Christ-likeness. Others look for spirituality through syncretism, borrowing the spiritualism of Eastern religions or Gnosticism and covering it with a Christian veneer.

According to Willard, Christians often hope to find Christ’s power for living in ways that seem appropriate but miss the mark; for example, through a “sense of forgiveness and love for God” or through the acquisition of propositional truth. Some “seek it through special experiences or the infusion of the Spirit,” or by way of “the presence of Christ in the inner life.” Others argue that it is only through the “power of ritual and liturgy or the preaching of the Word,” or “through the communion of the saints.” All of these have value in the Christian life but do not “reliably produce large numbers of people who really are like Christ.”^{3}

We evangelicals have a natural tendency to avoid anything that hints of meritorious works, works that might somehow justify us before a holy God. As a result, we reduce faith to an entirely mental affair, cutting off the body from the process of living the Christian life.

In this article we will consider a New Testament theology of human transformation in order to better understand what it means to become a living sacrifice to God.

A Model for Transformation

Faith in Jesus Christ brings instant forgiveness along with the promise of eventual glorification and spending eternity with God. However, in between the believer experiences something called sanctification, the process of being set apart for good works. Something that is sanctified is holy, so it makes sense that the process of sanctification is to make us more like Christ.

Even though the Bible talks much of spiritual power and becoming like Christ, many believers find this process of sanctification to be a mystery. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a slow removal from our language of acceptable ways to talk about the spiritual realm. Being rooted in this age of science and materialism, the language of spiritual growth sounds alien and a bit threatening to our ears, but if we want to experience the life that Jesus promised, a life of spiritual strength, we need to understand how to appropriate God's Spirit into our lives.

According to Willard, "A 'spiritual life' consists in that range of activities in which people cooperatively interact with God—and with the spiritual order deriving from God's personality and action. And what is the result? A new overall quality of human existence with corresponding new powers."[\[4\]](#) To be spiritual is to be dominated by the Spirit of God. Willard adds that spirituality is another reality, not just a "commitment" or "life-style." It may result in personal and social change, but the ultimate goal is to become like Christ and to further His Kingdom, not just to be a better person or to make America a better place to live.

The Bible teaches that to become a spiritual person one must employ the *disciplines* of spirituality. "The disciplines are activities of mind and body purposefully undertaken to bring our personality and total being into effective cooperation with the divine order." [\[5\]](#) Paul wrote in Romans 6:13 that the goal of being spiritual is to offer our body to God as instruments of righteousness in order to be of use for His Kingdom. Moving towards this state of usefulness to God and His Kingdom depends on the actions of individual believers.

Many of us have been taught that this action consists primarily in attending church or giving towards its programs. As important as these are, they fail to address the need for a radical inner change that must take place in our hearts to be of significant use to God. The teaching of Scripture and specifically the life of Christ tells us that the deep changes that must occur in our lives will only be accomplished via the disciplines of abstinence such as fasting, solitude, silence, and chastity, and the disciplines of engagement such as study, worship, service, prayer, and confession. These disciplines, along with others, will result in being conformed to the person of Christ, the desire of everyone born of His Spirit.

Salvation and Life

When I first read in the Bible that Jesus offered a more abundant life to those who followed Him, I thought that He was primarily describing a life filled with more happiness and purpose. It does include these things, but I now believe that it includes much more. Salvation in Christ promises to radically change the nature of life itself. It is not just a promise that sometime in the far distant future we will experience a resurrected body and see a new heaven and new earth. Salvation in Christ promises a life characterized by the highest ideals of thought and actions as epitomized by the life of Christ Himself.

Although there is no program or classroom course that can guarantee to give us this new life in Christ, it can be argued that in order to live a life like Jesus we need to do the things that Jesus did. If Jesus had to “learn obedience through the things which he suffered” (Hebrew 5:8 KJV), are we to expect to act Christ-like without the benefit of engaging in the disciplines that Jesus did?

In *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, Willard argues that there is a direct connection between practicing the spiritual disciplines and experiencing the salvation that is promised in Christ. Jesus prayed, fasted, and practiced solitude “not because He was sinful and in need of redemption, as we are, but because he had a body just as we do.”^{6} The center of every human being’s existence is his or her body. We are neither to be neo-Platonic nor Gnostic in our approach to the spiritual life. Both of these traditions play down the importance of the physical universe, arguing that it is either evil or simply inferior to the spiritual domain. But as Willard argues, “to withhold our bodies from religion is to exclude religion from our lives.”

Although our spiritual dimension may be invisible, it is not separate from our bodily existence. *Spirituality*, according to Willard, is “a relationship of our embodied selves to God that has the natural and irrepressible effect of making us alive to the Kingdom of God—here and now in the material world.”^{7} By separating our Christian life from our bodies we create an unnecessary sacred/secular gulf for Christians that often alienates us from the world and people around us.

The Christian faith offers more than just the forgiveness of sins; it promises to transform individuals to live in such a way that responding to events as Jesus did becomes second nature. What are these spiritual disciplines, and how do they transform the very quality of life we experience as followers of Jesus Christ?

The Disciplines of Abstinence

Although many of us have heard horror stories of how spiritual disciplines have been abused and misused in the past, Willard believes that “A discipline for the spiritual life is, when the dust of history is blown away, nothing but an activity undertaken to bring us into more effective cooperation with Christ and his Kingdom.”^{8} He reminds us that we discipline ourselves throughout life in order to accomplish a wide variety of tasks or functions. We utilize discipline when we study an academic or professional field; athletes must be disciplined in order to run a marathon or bench press 300 lbs. Why, then, are we surprised to learn that we must discipline ourselves to be useful to God?

Willard divides the disciplines into two categories: disciplines of abstinence, and disciplines of engagement. Depending on our lifestyle and past personal experiences, we will each find different disciplines helpful in accomplishing the goal of living as a new creature in Christ. Solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice are disciplines of abstinence. Given our highly materialistic culture, these might be the most difficult and most beneficial to many of us. We are more familiar with the disciplines of engagement, including study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, and fellowship. However, two others mentioned by Willard might be less familiar: confession and submission.

Abstinence requires that we give up something that is perfectly normal—something that is not wrong in and of itself, such as food or sex—because it has gotten in the way of our walking with God, or because by leaving these things aside we might be able to focus more closely on God for a period of time. As one writer tells us, “Solitude is a terrible trial, for it serves to crack open and burst apart the shell of our superficial securities. It opens out to us the unknown abyss that we all carry within us . . .”^{9} Busyness and superficial

activities hide us from the fact that we have little or no inward experience with God. Solitude frees us from social conformity, from being conformed to the patterns of this world that Paul warns us about in Romans 12.

Solitude goes hand in hand with silence. The power of the tongue and the damage it can do is taken very seriously in the Bible. There is a quiet inner strength and confidence that exudes from people who are great listeners, who are able to be silent and to be slow to speak.

The Disciplines of Engagement

Thus, the disciplines of abstinence help us diminish improper entanglements with the world. What about the disciplines of engagement?

Although study is not often thought of as a spiritual discipline, it is the key to a balanced Christian walk. Calvin Miller writes, “Mystics without study are only spiritual romantics who want relationship without effort.”^{10} Study involves reading, memorizing, and meditation on God’s Word. It takes effort and time, and there are no shortcuts. It includes learning from great Christian minds that have gone before us and those who, by their walk and example, can teach much about the power available to believers who seek to experience the light burden that abiding in Jesus offers.

Few Christians deny the need for worship in their weekly routines, even though what constitutes worship has caused considerable controversy. Worship ascribes great worth to God. It is seeing God as He truly is. Willard argues that we should focus our worship through Jesus Christ to the Father. He writes, “When we worship, we fill our minds and hearts with wonder at him—the detailed actions and words of his earthly life, his trial and death on the cross, his resurrection reality, and his work as ascended intercessor.”^{11}

The discipline of celebration is unfamiliar to most of us, yet Willard argues that it is one of the most important forms of engagement with God. He writes that “We engage in celebration when we enjoy ourselves, our life, our world, in conjunction with our faith and confidence in God’s greatness, beauty, and goodness. We concentrate on our life and world as God’s work and as God’s gift to us.”^{12} Although much of the scriptural argument for holy celebration is found in the festivals of the Old Testament and the book of Ecclesiastes, Jesus was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard because he chose to dine and celebrate with sinners.

Christian fellowship and confession go hand in hand. It is within the context of fellowship that Christians build up and encourage one-another with the gifts that God has given to us. It is also in this context that we practice confession with trusted believers who know both our strengths and weaknesses. This level of transparency and openness is essential for the church to become the healing place of deep intimacy that people are so hungry for.

Walking with Jesus doesn’t mean just knowing things about Him; it means living as He lived. This includes practicing the spiritual disciplines that Jesus practiced. As we do, we will be changed through the Spirit to be more like Him and experience the rest that He has offered to us.

Notes

1. Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1991).
2. Ibid., viii.
3. Ibid., x.
4. Ibid., 67.
5. Ibid., 68.
6. Ibid., 29.
7. Ibid., 31.
8. Ibid., 156.

9. Ibid., 161.
10. Ibid., 176.
11. Ibid., 178.
12. Ibid., 179.

© 2004 Probe Ministries

Dealing with Doubt in Our Christian Faith

Dr. Michael Gleghorn points out that it is not having doubts about our Christian faith that is an issue, but rather how we respond to that doubt. Attacking this issue from a biblical worldview perspective, Michael helps us understand our doubts and respond to them as an informed Christian.

Help! My Doubts Scare Me!

Have you ever doubted your faith? We all have doubts from time to time. We may doubt that our boss *really* hit a hole-in-one at the golf course last weekend, or that our best friend *really* caught a fish as big as the one he claimed to catch, or that the strange looking guy on that late night TV show was *really* abducted by alien beings from a distant galaxy! Sometimes the things we doubt aren't really that important, but other times they are. And the more important something is to us, the more personally invested we are in it, the scarier it can be to start having doubts about it. So when Christians begin to have doubts about something as significant as the truth of their Christian faith, it's quite understandable that this might worry or even frighten them.



Reflecting on this issue in *The Case for Faith*, Lee Strobel wrote:

For many Christians, merely having doubts of any kind can be scary. They wonder whether their questions disqualify them being a follower of Christ. They feel insecure because they're not sure whether it's permissible to express uncertainty about God, Jesus, or the Bible. So they keep their questions to themselves—and inside, unanswered, they grow and fester . . . until they eventually succeed in choking out their faith.[{1}](#)

So what can we do if we find ourselves struggling with doubts about the truth of Christianity? Why do such doubts arise? And how can we rid ourselves of these taunting Goliaths?

First, we must always remember that sooner or later we'll probably *all* have to wrestle with doubts about our faith. As Christian philosopher William Lane Craig observes, "Any Christian who is intellectually engaged and reflecting about his faith will inevitably face the problem of doubt."[{2}](#) Doubts can arise for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they're largely intellectual. We might doubt that the Bible is *really* inspired by God or that Jesus was *really* born of a virgin. But doubts can take other forms as well. If a person has experienced great sorrow or disappointment, such as personal wounds from family or friends, the loss of a job, a painful divorce, the death of a loved one, or the loss of health, they may be seriously tempted to doubt the goodness, love, and care of their heavenly Father.[{3}](#)

Whenever they come and whatever form they take, we must each deal honestly with our doubts. To ignore them is to court spiritual disaster. But facing them can lead ultimately to a deeper faith. As Christian minister Lynn Anderson has said, "A faith that's challenged by adversity or tough questions . . . is often a stronger faith in the end."[{4}](#)

It's Not All in Your Head!

Sometimes people have sincere doubts about the truth of Christianity, intellectual obstacles that hinder them from placing their trust in Christ. In such cases, Christians have an obligation to respond to the person's doubts and make a humble and thoughtful defense for the truth of Christianity. Nevertheless, as Craig observes, it's important to realize that "doubt is never a purely intellectual problem." Like it or not, there's always a "spiritual dimension to the problem that must be recognized."^{5} Because of this, sometimes a person's objections to Christianity are really just a smokescreen, an attempt to cover up the *real* reason for their rejection of Christ, which is often an underlying moral or spiritual issue.

I once heard a story about a Christian apologist who spoke at a university about the evidence for Christianity. Afterward, a student approached him and said, "I honestly didn't expect this to happen, but you satisfactorily answered all my objections to Christianity." The apologist was a bit startled by such a frank admission, but he quickly recovered himself and said, "Well that's great! Why not give your life to Christ right now, then?" But the student said, "No. I'm not willing to do that. I would have to change the way I'm living, and I'm just not ready to do that right now."

In this case all the student's reasons for doubting the Christian faith had, by his own admission, been satisfactorily answered. What was really holding him back were not his doubts about the truth of Christianity, but a desire to live life on his own terms. To put it bluntly, he didn't want God meddling in his affairs. He didn't want to be morally accountable to some ultimate authority. The truth is that a person's intellectual objections to Christianity are *rarely* the whole story. As Christian scholar Ravi Zacharias observed, "A man rejects God neither because of intellectual demands nor

because of the scarcity of evidence. A man rejects God because of a moral resistance that refuses to admit his need for God.”{6}

Unfortunately, Christians aren't immune to doubting their faith for similar reasons. I know of a young man who had converted to Christianity, but who's now raising various objections to it. But when one looks beneath the surface, one sees that he's currently involved in an immoral lifestyle. In order to continue living as he wants, without being unduly plagued by a guilty conscience, he must call into question the truth of Christianity. For the Bible tells him plainly that he's disobeying God. Of course, ultimately no one is immune to doubts about Christianity, so we'll now consider some ways to guard our hearts and minds.

I Believe, Help My Unbelief!

As He came down the mountain, Jesus was met by a large crowd of people. A father had brought his demon-possessed son to Jesus' disciples, but they were not able to cast the demon out. In desperation the father appealed to Jesus, "If You can do anything, take pity on us and help us!" Jesus answered, "If You can! All things are possible to him who believes." The father responded, "I do believe; help my unbelief."{7}

Can you identify with the father in this story? I know I can. Oftentimes as Christians we find that our faith is in precisely the same state as this father's. We genuinely believe, but we need help with our unbelief. It's always been an encouragement to me that after the father's admission of a faith mixed with doubt, Jesus nonetheless cast out the demon and healed the man's son.{8} But of course no Christian should be content to remain in this state. If we want to grow in our faith and rid ourselves of doubts, what are some positive steps we can take to accomplish this?

Well, in the first place, it's helpful to be familiar with the "principle of displacement." As Sue "Archimedes" Bohlin, one of my colleagues, has written:

The Bible teaches the principle of "displacement." That is, rather than trying to make thoughts shoo away, we are told to replace them with what is good, true, and perfect (Phil. 4:8). As the truth comes in the lies are displaced—much like when we fill a bathtub too full of water, and when we get in, our bodies displace the water, which flows out over the top of the tub.[{9}](#)

Once we grasp this principle, a number of steps for dealing with doubt quickly become evident. For one thing, we can memorize and meditate upon Scripture. We can also listen attentively to good Christian music. Paul speaks to the importance of both of these in Colossians 3:16: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God."

In addition, we can read good Christian books that provide intelligent answers to some of the questions we might be asking. Great Christian scholars have addressed almost every conceivable objection to the truth of Christianity. If you have nagging doubts about some aspect of your faith, there's almost certainly a work of Christian scholarship that speaks to it in detail. Finally, we must never forget that this is a spiritual battle. So let's remember to put on the full armor of God so we can stand firm in the midst of it![{10}](#)

Faith and Reason

How can we [know if Christianity is really true?](#) Is it by reason, or evidence, or mystical experience? Dr. Craig has an answer to this question that you might find a bit surprising.[{11}](#) He distinguishes between *knowing* Christianity

is true and *showing* that it's true. Ideally, one attempts to *show* that Christianity is true with good arguments and evidence. But Craig doesn't think that this is how we *know* our faith is true. Rather, he believes that we can *know* our faith is true because "God's Spirit makes it evident to us that our faith is true."[{12}](#)

Consider Paul's statement in Romans 8:16, "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." Since every believer is indwelt by God's Spirit, every believer also receives the Spirit's testimony that he is one of God's children. This is sometimes called the "assurance of salvation." Dr. Craig comments on the significance of this:

Salvation entails that God exists, that Christ atoned for our sins . . . and so forth, so that if you are assured of your salvation, then you must be assured of . . . these other truths as well. Hence, the witness of the Holy Spirit gives the believer an immediate assurance that his faith is true.[{13}](#)

Now this is remarkable. For it means we can *know* that Christianity is true, wholly apart from arguments, simply by attending to the witness of the Holy Spirit. And this is so not only for believers but for unbelievers, too. For the Spirit convicts the unbelieving world of sin, righteousness, and judgment, particularly the sin of unbelief.[{14}](#) So when we're confronted with objections to Christianity that we can't answer, we needn't worry. First, answers are usually available if one knows where to look. But second, the witness of the Spirit trumps any objections we might encounter.

Consider an illustration from the Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga. Suppose I'm accused of stealing a document out of a colleague's office. Suppose I have a motive, an opportunity, and a history of doing such things. Suppose further that someone thought they saw me lurking around my colleague's office just before the document went missing. There's much

evidence against me. But in fact, I didn't steal the document. I was on a walk at the time. Now should I doubt my innocence since the evidence is against me? Of course not! For I *know* I'm not guilty!{15}

Similarly, writes Dr. Craig, "I needn't be shaken when objections come along that I can't answer."{16} For my faith isn't ultimately based on arguments, but on the witness of God's Spirit.

Stepping into the Light

We've seen that both Christians and non-Christians can have doubts about the truth of Christianity. We've also seen that such doubts are never *just* an intellectual issue; there's *always* a spiritual dynamic that's involved as well. But since we'll probably never be able to fully resolve every single doubt we might experience, I would like to conclude by suggesting one final way to make our doubts flee before us, much as roaches flee to their hidden lairs when one turns on the light!

In John 7:17 Jesus says, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own." Here, Jesus frankly encourages us to put His teachings to the test and see for ourselves whether He really speaks for God or not. As biblical scholar Merrill Tenney comments, "Spiritual understanding is not produced solely by learning facts or procedures, but rather it depends on obedience to known truth. Obedience to God's known will develops discernment between falsehood and truth."{17} Are we *really* serious about dealing with our lingering doubts? If so, Jesus says that if we resolutely choose to do God's will, we can know if His teaching is really from God!

Sadly, however, many of us will *never* take Jesus up on His challenge. No matter how loudly we might *claim* to want to rid

ourselves of doubt, the truth is that many of us just aren't willing to do God's will. But if you are, then Jesus says that "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."[{18}](#) In other words, we can know by *experience* that Jesus is from God, that His teachings are true, and that He really is who He claimed to be!

As Christian philosopher Dallas Willard observes, the issue ultimately comes down to what we *really* want:

The Bible says that if you seek God with all your heart, then you will surely find him. Surely find him. It's the person who wants to know God that God reveals himself to. And if a person doesn't want to know God—well, God has created the world and the human mind in such a way that he doesn't have to.[{19}](#)

The psalmist encourages us to "taste and see that the Lord is good."[{20}](#) If we do, we can know not only that God is good, but also that He exists. And even if we still have some lingering doubts and unanswered questions in the back of our minds, as we surely will, they'll gradually fade into utter insignificance as we become more intimately acquainted with Him who loves us and who reconciled us to Himself through the death of His Son![{21}](#)

Notes

1. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 316.
2. William Lane Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2003), 31.
3. Lynn Anderson, interviewed in Lee Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 322.
4. *Ibid.*, 326.
5. Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 33.
6. Ravi Zacharias, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 343. See also John 3:19-21.
7. Mark 9:14-24.

8. See Mark 9:25-29.
9. Sue Bohlin, "I'm Having a Terrible Battle in My Mind," Probe Ministries, probe.org/im-having-a-terrible-battle-in-my-mind/.
10. See Ephesians 6:10-20.
11. This section is largely just a summary of the discussion of faith and reason in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 35-39.
12. Ibid., 35.
13. Ibid., 36.
14. See John 16:7-11.
15. Alvin Plantinga, "The Foundations of Theism: A Reply," *Faith and Philosophy* 3 (1986): 310; cited in Craig, *Hard Questions, Real Answers*, 38-39.
16. Ibid., 39.
17. Merrill C. Tenney, "The Gospel of John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 84.
18. John 8:32.
19. Dallas Willard, quoted in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 352.
20. Psalm 34:8.
21. See 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

© 2007 Probe Ministries

Why Bible Study Matters

Tom Davis builds a case for why we should study the Bible, drawing on both the Old Testament and New Testament scriptures.

Does it matter if we study the Bible?

I recently encountered an article claiming it doesn't. The author claimed that Christians are not feeding the poor, helping the downtrodden, seeking justice for the persecuted, or evangelizing people, because we are too busy studying our Bibles. (Interestingly, the article has since been removed, but the question remains.)

Is his concern valid? Approximately 16% of people in the United States read their Bible most days during the week.^{1} A 2014 article in *Christianity Today* states, "The average length of time spent studying the Bible was between 10 and 20 minutes per session."^{2} According to Probe's 2020 religion survey, "Only one out of five Born Again Christians ages 18 through 29 pray daily, attend church at least monthly, and read the Bible at least weekly."^{3} The statistics indicate that the average amount of time Christians spend reading their Bible cannot be what is keeping Christians from sharing their faith, helping those in need, or helping the homeless.

Another issue that the author raised is that the early church did not have an authoritative list of New Testament books for more than three hundred years after Jesus' resurrection. I am unsure how these historical facts show that anyone today is spending too much time reading their Bible. Are we better off when we have all the books of the Bible? Would these early Christians have preferred having all the books of the Bible? Would they want to stick with having parts of the Old Testament, a Gospel or two, and a few of the epistles? I think they would be confused why this pastor thinks that Christians are spending too much time studying their Bible.

What the Old Testament Says About Reading the Bible

One way we can figure out the role that studying the Bible should play in the life of the Christian is to look at what the Bible says about reading the Scriptures. We should start

with the Old Testament. The first passage to examine is:

These words I am commanding you today must be kept in mind, and you must teach them to your children and speak of them as you sit in your house, as you walk along the road, as you lie down, and as you get up. You should tie them as a reminder on your forearm and fasten them as symbols on your forehead. Inscribe them on the doorframes of your houses and gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9 NET)

God is preparing to lead the Hebrews into the promised land. He tells the people that they are to remember the covenant, teach the covenant to their children, and place inscriptions from the covenant in prominent places in their homes. Knowing and teaching the commands of God is so important that this charge is repeated in Deuteronomy 11:18-23.

Peter Cousins states, "Not only is it to be upon the heart . . . it must take first place in training children, in conversation (at home and outside) from the beginning to the end of the day; it should govern the senses, control behavior, and direct life in the home and community."[{4}](#) The words of the covenant between God and the Hebrew people are so important that the words have to be known and understood. That requires study. Knowing the covenant is so important that the Hebrew people are commanded to decorate their walls, doorframes, and gates. The people are even commanded to have the words of the covenant on their clothes. All of this indicates that God intends for His people to know and follow His commands, and that this is done by studying them. Even the people who could not read would memorize the law. (Ancient cultures operated from an oral tradition; people were used to hearing, memorizing, and repeating stories and passages from verbal input alone.) To be fair, few Jews would have been able to recite the first five books of the Bible from memory, but they would have been able to recite long passages of Scripture.

The most common passage that was most often recited was the Shema, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You must love the LORD your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength" (Deuteronomy 6:4-5). Jesus said this is God's greatest commandment (Matthew 22:36-40). Jews would pray the Shema several times a day. This is the passage most often found on doorposts and in houses in archaeological digs.

As the people prepare to enter the land promised to them, God makes provisions for a future King. The responsibilities and conduct of the king are:

When he sits on his royal throne he must make a copy of this law on a scroll given to him by the Levitical priests. It must be with him constantly, and he must read it as long as he lives, so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and observe all the words of this law and these statutes and carry them out. (Deuteronomy 17:18-19 NET)

Here we can see that the king does not make the law. God gave the law to Moses. The Levitical priests were to copy the law and teach it to the people. The priests were also tasked with giving the king a copy of the law so that the king could carry out God's law. The King is under the authority of the priests and of God. The king is not allowed to make his own law, he must be obedient to God. [\[5\]](#)

As Joshua leads the people into the promised land God tells him, "This law scroll must not leave your lips. You must memorize it day and night so you can carefully obey all in it. Then you will prosper and be successful" (Joshua 1:8 NET). Even before a king was installed over the people, the leaders of Israel were to lead God's people according to the law so they could be successful in following God.

As Israel moved into the land God had promised them, they

became corrupt. The priests did not teach the kings or the people. God sent prophets to the people to call them back to living faithfully to the covenant. The people would not keep the covenant they made with God, and the priests would not teach the law to the people. God, in the book of Hosea, tells the priests:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I will reject you from serving as my priest.
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I will also forget your sons. (Hosea 4:6 CSB)

Despite all of these warnings, Israel was not faithful in following God. David Allan Hubbard summarizes the situation, “The collapse of the priests and prophet, key ministers of law and word, leads inevitably to the disastrous destruction.”^{6} The priests were not teaching the people or the kings. This led to God sending the people into exile and the destruction of the Temple in Israel. As a result of a lack of faithfulness and a lack of knowledge of God’s law, Israel was separated from God.

What the New Testament Says About Reading the Bible

The Gospels tell us that after his baptism Jesus has a 40-day fast followed by a confrontation with Satan. This involved Satan tempting Jesus by quoting scripture, and Jesus rebukes him by quoting Scripture (Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13). New Testament Scholar Craig Keener gives the following description: “This text also shows that Jesus does not just use Scripture to accommodate contemporary views of its authority; he uses it as his authority and the final word on ethics even when dealing with a supracultural adversary.”^{7} While the Bible was written by people living in cultures that existed in real places and real times in the past, the

morality taught within scripture is not restricted by those historical and cultural settings. As Jesus' followers, we need to understand what is expected of us morally. In order to know Christian morality, we must study the Bible.

The Gospels also show that Jesus had debates concerning what was taught in the Scriptures. These debates often included not just morality, but the identity of the Messiah, and the power of God. In one debate Jesus tells the Sadducees, "You are deceived because you don't know the scriptures or the power of God" (Matthew 22:29 NET). The Sadducees did not know the scriptures because they only studied the first five books of the Bible. They didn't know the power of God because they rejected the resurrection. Stanley Horton writes, "Those who do not really know what the scriptures teach, nor God's omnipotent power cannot avoid going astray."[\[8\]](#)

In another debate with the Pharisees Jesus said, "You study the scriptures thoroughly because you think in them you possess eternal life, and it is these same scriptures that testify about me, but you are not willing to come to me so that you may have life" (John 5:39, 40 NET). The Pharisees rejected Jesus because they saw him as a threat. Jesus had undermined their authority and threatened their position in the culture, so they were obstinate. Keener states, "They believed that one had eternal life through the scriptures; but Jesus says that the Scriptures witness to him, hence to reject him is to disobey the Scriptures."[\[9\]](#) By rejecting Jesus, the Pharisees unintentionally rejected the Scriptures. By rejecting Jesus, they could not possess eternal life.

In the book of Acts, we see Jesus' disciples proclaiming to everyone who will listen that Jesus is the Messiah and was raised from the dead. This led to debates and conflicts with the Jewish authorities. In Acts chapter seven Stephen accuses the Jewish council that they failed to follow the scriptures. In chapter eight Philip leads an Ethiopian eunuch to faith by starting with a passage in Isaiah and telling him about the

gospel of Jesus. Later in Acts Paul met repeatedly with a group of Jews. Acts describes the Bereans as “more open-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they eagerly received the message, examining the scriptures carefully every day to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11 NET). The reaction of the Bereans is not emotional. They investigated the scriptures intellectually to see what was true.[{10}](#)

In his letters Paul addresses why God gave us the scriptures. In Romans Paul writes, “For everything that was written in former times was written for our instruction, so that through endurance and through encouragement of the scriptures we may have hope” (Romans 15:4). John Murray comments, “In Paul’s esteem Scripture in all its parts is for our instruction, that the Old Testament was designed to furnish us in these last days with the instruction necessary for the fulfillment of our vocation to the end, and that it is as written it promotes this purpose.”[{11}](#) Part of being on fire for Christ is fulfilling our vocation. The primary way we know what our vocation is and how we can fulfill it is through studying our Bible.

In his second letter to Timothy, Paul doubles down on the benefits of studying scripture. Paul reminds Timothy that he was taught the scriptures while he was a child. Then Paul writes, “Every scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the person dedicated to God may be capable and equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). Paul is reminding Timothy that scripture has authority because it comes from God. Scripture is good for learning about God and ethics. The Jews have this benefit, but the Christians have a better understanding because Jesus taught the Apostles, which gave them a better understanding of the scriptures than that of the Jews.[{12}](#)

The last passage that I would like to examine is in

Revelation. "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy aloud, and blessed are those who hear and obey the things written in it, because the time is near!" (Revelation 1:3). While this verse is speaking specifically about people who read Revelation, by logical extension we are blessed any time we read any part of the scripture. All scripture is given by God, therefore when you read any part of scripture you will be blessed. What does it mean to be blessed by reading scripture? Earl F. Palmer answers, "It does not express superficial sentiment but instead the rugged and tested assurance that it is a good thing to be walking in the pathway of God's will." [\[13\]](#) Our obedience to scripture brings blessing. We cannot be obedient to scripture without studying the Bible.

Conclusion

In one sense the author of the article I mentioned was correct. If we spend so much time studying the Bible that Christians never feed the hungry, help the poor, make disciples for Christ, or work to bring justice to the downtrodden then we are neglecting part of what we were commanded to do. But how can we even know that Christ commands us to do those things if we do not study the Bible?

In the examination of what the Bible says about Bible study, we can see that Bible study is an indispensable part of the Christian life. We can see in Deuteronomy that God commanded the Hebrews to memorize and obey the Law. When they failed to do this, they were ultimately exiled by God. Jesus reprimanded the Sadducees and the Pharisees for not knowing and believing the scriptures. Paul and John taught that Christians would be blessed by studying the scriptures.

The reason we are blessed when we study the Bible is that when we study, we develop and form a Christian worldview. The story shapes our values, our morals, and the way we live. The way we think about the people and the world around us is changed by

studying scripture. One other aspect is that when we study the Bible, we enter into the glory of God. When we study the Bible, we are in God's presence in the same way as when we are praying. Studying the Bible is an act of worship.[{14}](#)

Finally, studying the Bible is how we obey the command in Ephesians 5:10 to "find out what pleases the Lord." Since the greatest commandment is to love God (Matthew 22:37) as noted above, how can we love Him without knowing what pleases Him? And since we find that God's love language is obedience (John 14:15), how can we discern what to obey without studying His word? How can we avoid sin if we have never studied the Bible to find out what sin is?

How can Christians implement Bible study into a busy 40-hour work week and taking care of kids and spending time with their spouse? You do not have to spend hours a day studying. Spend ten or fifteen minutes in the morning or at night to read the Bible. Take five minutes of your lunch break to read a chapter. If you are so busy that you cannot study during the work week, find fifteen minutes to study on your day off. Whatever amount of time you spend studying the Bible, God will honor and bless you for that time.

Notes

1. [State of the Bible 2021: Five Key Findings – Barna Group](#)
2. [Evangelicals admit struggling to find time for daily Bible reading and prayer \(christiantoday.com\)](#)
3. [Probe 2020 Survey Report 3: Religious Practices & Purpose for Living](#)
4. Cousins, Peter E. 1979. Deuteronomy. In *New International Bible Commentary*, Ed. F. F. Bruce, 264. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
5. Chianeque, Luciano C., Samuel Ngewa. 2006. Deuteronomy. In *Africa Bible Commentary*, Ed. Tokunboh Adeyemo, 234. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. Shultz, Samuel J. 1996. *The Complete*

- Biblical Library: The Old Testament Study Bible Vol. 4, Deuteronomy*, 185. Springfield, World Library Press Inc.
6. Hubbard, David Alan. 1989. *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Hosea*. 101. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
7. Keener, Craig, S. 2014. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament 2nd Edition*, 189. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press.
8. Horton, Stanley M. 1986. *The Complete Biblical Library: The New Testament Study Bible Vol. 2 Matthew*, 481. Springfield, World Library Press.
9. Keener, op cit, 265.
10. Marshall, I. Howard, 1980. *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: Acts*, 280. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing.
11. Murray, John, 1968. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Epistle to the Romans Vol 2*, 199. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing.
12. Guthrie, Donald, 1957. *Tyndale New Testament Commentary on the New Testament: The Pastoral Epistles*, 163-164, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans Publishing.
13. Palmer, Earl F. 1982. *The Communicator's Commentary: 1, 2, 3, John, Revelation*, 114, Word Inc.
14. Wright, N. T. 1992. *The New Testament and the People of God*, 235-237, Minneapolis, Fortress Press.

©2022 Probe Ministries

**Current Events and the
Currency of Truth: “Test**

Everything”

Byron Barlowe opens a series on biblical discernment for dark days, likening wise discernment of current events and abiding issues to examining bills and coins to verify their authenticity. Being able to tell the difference between good vs. bad, right vs. wrong, fruitful vs. unfruitful, and subtle lies that captivate believers is a long-term discipline that is a Christian’s duty and privilege to walk out as God provides Scripture, counsel, reflection, and field experience.

“In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” Colossians 2:3

As Christians, should we really concern ourselves with discerning real vs. fake, better vs. best, profitable vs. unprofitable, lies and half-truths vs. truth and wisdom? To help answer that question, and as an introduction to a coming series on discernment, let’s look at a historical example from over 70 years ago.

Adolph Burger, a Jewish printer sentenced to a Nazi concentration camp in 1942, was shocked to find himself released and forced to use his printing skill for Germany’s war effort. In a perversion of the tabernacle artisans whom God gifted during Israel’s exodus from Egypt, [\[1\]](#) Burger was forced to facilitate a brilliant secret plan to ruin Britain.

His and fellow Jewish craftsmen’s work would be dropped by German bombers over English cities and towns. But these were no explosive devices. They potentially held much more devastating power than any number of bombs. They were even made of paper!

Fifty-five years later, investigative TV show *60 Minutes II* hired a deep-sea recovery team to search the 350-foot depths of Lake Toplitz in Austria. Why? In the final days of WWII, when the Russians and Allied troops were pinching Hitler’s

regime from opposite sides for an inevitable victory, some Nazi holdouts hoped the diabolical plan could yet be implemented. So, they sunk the work of the Jewish artisans in remote Lake Toplitz.

The plan, dubbed *Operation Bernard*, would seize upon human greed and sheer numbers to ruin the British economy. It would go like this:

- Drop exquisitely forged English pound notes from Luftwaffe planes causing widespread distribution, then refuse to honor the phony money by banks and businesses, and resultant economic panic among citizens, thus
- Radically undermining the value of the British pound, hence
- Destroying the economy, hopefully driving England to its knees and ensuring victory.
- Key to the plan: human nature. Money falling from the sky is just too tempting! It would definitely lead to hoarding and general circulation, they thought.

Most forgers do as little as they can to mimic genuine currency—only enough to get a pass on a cursory look. “But by using the world’s finest craftsmen and supplying . . . the most modern tools and machinery, the Germans solved this problem Once the bills were in circulation, it would be difficult for even experts to know genuine from counterfeit; amateurs would have no hope.” [\[2\]](#)

Judging counterfeit claims and deceit, like the bogus bills the Nazis created, is a complex project, requiring great skill and training. Much of godly discernment emerges from self-discipline, a facet of the fruit of the Spirit. According to Tim Challies, author of *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, every disciple of Jesus is morally obligated to discern between truth and lies and to pass on the former while resisting the latter.

Whatever the person's level of maturity in Christ, wisdom and its application of discernment to specific issues is available for every Christian. "His divine power has given us everything required for life and godliness through the *knowledge* of him who called us . . ." (1 Peter 1:3-4, emphasis mine). "Yet when I am among mature believers, I do speak with words of wisdom, but not the kind of wisdom that belongs to this world or to the rulers of this world, who are soon forgotten" (1 Corinthians 2:6 NLT). All born-again believers possess potential discernment. Mature ones seek and develop it.

The biblical command to "test everything" (1 Thessalonians 5:21) means carefully weighing inputs from culture, family, and even personal thoughts. It monitors—somewhat like antivirus software on a computer—our beliefs and decision-making in light of Scriptural truth, Spirit-illuminated meditation and thoughtfulness, godly counsel, and experience in situational discernment.

Gaining wisdom, the entire point of the book of Proverbs, is life-giving and sweet! "Know also that wisdom is like honey for you: If you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off" (Proverbs 24:14).

Often this lifelong process seems burdensome, but spiritual warfare is indeed warfighting, which is often excruciating. The Body of Christ has always been in a *war of ideas*, battling for truth. However daunting, constant discipline and practice takes over and knowledge grows into wisdom which, by God's grace, produces discernment. Discernment becomes a progression not unlike basic education from kindergarten to secondary graduation. The seasoned soldier of Truth can see potential danger approaching and react with muscle memory, but not prematurely or with overkill. Better weapons in trained hands win. [\[3\]](#)

Lies, subtle and blatant, emerge daily on every front like perhaps never in our history. Brazenly hostile and self-

contradicting misinformation and propaganda avalanches too quickly to keep up with.

Renowned Christian philosopher Dr. J.P. Moreland insists that “the fundamental fight today is not primarily about truth claims” themselves but rather how we can know truth at all. The prevailing assumptions question the very “nature of knowledge itself.”[{4}](#) People say, “How can you know that?” or simply dismiss Christian faith statements and reasoned, Scriptural argumentation as groundless, mostly due to their faith in scientific naturalism as the only source of actual truth.[{5}](#) Postmodernism creates a widespread belief that truth can only be tribal, eschewing appeals to absolute or universal truth claims—chiefly, the metanarrative of the Biblical record.[{6}](#)

This moment in American history is witnessing pervasive efforts to deceive and shut down alternative views. Pressure groups, several with Marxist underpinnings, actively initiate strategies designed to dismantle and remake American culture, its history and education system, the nuclear family, negotiated policy creation, America’s founding principles, the role of the press, and to suppress individuals and groups who do not hew to certain views. Some big businesses, “woke” and supportive of such moves, provide financial, advertising, and distribution aid as de facto gatekeepers and worse.

Thanks to federal law granting them special protections, social media platforms and search engines (Big Tech) are uniquely free, compared to broadcast radio and TV, to blacklist and block anyone with whom they disagree. It’s a matter of public record that Google, Facebook, Twitter, and others exercise these tactics of massive influence more each week. Industry leaders who skew Leftward politically have bound together to influence the outcome of the 2020 Presidential election.[{7}](#) Calls from members of Congress unconstitutionally imply, even threaten, to “research” individuals who were associated at all with the former

president or the movement he represented. Understanding the roots of radical notions like these helps recognize and rebut them.

This seems to be our generation's time of testing. But, as Jesus taught, believers don't target even our human enemies.[{8}](#) Rather, "we destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ" (2 Corinthians 10:5). We fight for their sake and ours against destructive lies. During dark days, such a keen battle-ready mindset and *heartset* seems all the more urgent.

What's Our Part in Deciphering Truth in All This Chaos?

Did you know that you can refuse a suspicious piece of currency? But if you accept it, you're legally responsible. If it's funny money, you're left holding the bag.

The Bank of Canada's solution to a rampant counterfeiting problem was a campaign drumming into the public the watchwords: "touch, tilt, look at, look through." That publicity campaign taught citizens how to test official currency compared to forgeries. Likewise, Christ followers must hold up any claim or trend to the light to see if it's genuine truth or a fake. On religious claims and trends, examine carefully any doctrine or teaching or you could be led astray.[{9}](#)

Therefore, if legal tender requires examination and the recipient is legally responsible for analyzing all received cash payment, then certainly Paul's admonition to "examine everything"[{10}](#) applies even more to citizens of God's kingdom. We will answer for our spiritual savvy, our *saltmanship*, and our lighting of the world, as well as how wisely we led our families, fellows and flocks.

Everyday life examples of the need for vigilant discernment are replete. Recently I was digitally fed news from an online newspaper I found valuable. After a quick search I discovered that this newspaper is owned by a mystical religious cult founded in China. I found out through reporting sources I didn't fully trust, though, so I provisionally entered that new fact into my matrix of personal filters. Only recently was that claim confirmed when I saw the name of the religious group spelled out on the publication's web site.

The point of the story: few things are jet black and snow white, so layers of discernment are required. When things get gray, more work is needed with the help of others. Wise discernment discovers distinctions within the knowledge we gain, it assesses known patterns, and advises the heart and mind on levels of trust to agree to or the need to reject.

In the case mentioned, I determined that the enemy of my enemy (the Chinese Communist Party) is my friend, in a way. However, I have an eye out on journalistic balance and am especially on guard reading their newspaper's spirituality section (if I ever read it). All of this took a grand total of less than fifteen minutes, then an abiding mindfulness as I hunted for other things. Awareness and practice are key. Biblical and cultural perception paves the way. Make your own wise assessments.

You, as a growing or seasoned Christian, can use wise discernment to serve as an "elder in the gate" for others. Or, as a seeker you can begin to plumb the depths of God's twin revelations in Creation and the Bible. The book of Proverbs emphasizes a desperate and greatly rewarding pursuit of wisdom and its seasoning with age. We are here to help equip you and answer your questions.[{11}](#)

The best antidote to spiritual and worldly confusion is simply Holy Spirit-led discernment. (And that's not just for those gifted with special discernment.)

In future posts I will address several angles on discernment in the world and Church. Following is a list of upcoming topics as I envision them today.

Upcoming in This Discernment Series

The How of Discernment—I'll dive deeper into biblically defining discernment and address how worldview as a concept helps reveal and classify untrue and dangerous assumptions among philosophies that affect one's view of the universe and the Creator, human value and business, and more. Also, to be discussed: How can we distinguish true from untrue (or the insidious half-true), good, better and best, and right from wrong or disputable matters of conscience? What is the relationship of knowledge, wisdom, and discernment as the Bible frames it?

Spiritual & Mental Triage—How can I handle sustained, varying and rapid information, claims and counterclaims, and policies that force me to either endure, protest, or free myself from them? (I may write some about conscientious objection vs. following authorities.) How can one fend off attack, especially the arrows aimed at religious freedom, biblical values and God's revealed will? What if repression or persecution happens anyway?

Distinguishing Between God's Ways and God's Enemy's Ways—It bears emphasizing that, though the cosmos (world) and human sin nature (flesh) are capable of ruin on a global scale, there's a cosmic battle pre-dating man and Creation—and, yes, politics. The traits and track records, if you will, of both God Almighty and the original Rebel help to immediately test a message's likely origin and flag the source.

Discerning and Dealing with False Dichotomies—With so many events and "empty philosophies of men,"[{12}](#) the unified biblical narrative of how life works and biblical guidance gets distorted by oversimplified false choices—a favorite

trick of the Liar and his worldly, often unwitting, disciples. It's either "material things are all that matters" or "spiritual and mystical things are the only really real things," etc. Competing goods are confusing for good-willed people, too. How do I better notice these and find either a middle way or a third way? What false *splits* have I bought into that keep both unbelievers and believers from discerning biblically: facts vs. feelings, truth vs. emotions, oppressors vs. the oppressed only, and so on?

Giving Essentials Their Proper Due—How do I and those I spiritually lead avoid unconsciously discounting a high view of Scripture, theology, and God? We not only need to elevate our game but lift our eyes to the heavens.

Realize and Embrace the Need for Testing—Even the scariest of crises, such as an epidemic or a cultural revolution, may constitute a test God uses for us. Such events provide a perfect laboratory for gaining discernment from general knowledge and a growing understanding gained by "rightly handling the word of truth."^{13} The disciplines you hone through a sincerely perseverant search for a divine source of wisdom gains immediate insight for daily situations, news, and cultural developments that touch your life.

Discernment and the Human Heart, Mind and Will—What did Solomon receive after asking for discernment to govern God's people, and how does that apply to me? Did that guarantee wise living? What's the difference between the heart and head in biblical and scientific terms? What does Scripture say about the heart and how elevated is its role?

Are You and Your Sources Asking the Hard Questions?—Yesterday's conspiracy theory increasingly becomes today's headline and tomorrow's policy. Did you detect a curious new spirit of control, perhaps a taste by governments for unreasonable and unrelenting regulations in the initial stages of the Covid-19 response? [I did in March 2020.](#) Skilled

observers like Dennis Prager asked early on about the balance of our national response. Discerning people were justified in their caution and predictions about the tradeoffs between several goods: fighting a novel virus for everyone weighed against economic, medical, and psychological damage, not to mention governments' tendency to retain emergency measures beyond need. Asking the hard questions can enable us to see and respond to the shifts and movements around us from whichever side. Asking early enough can avoid hazards.

Avoiding Logical Pitfalls and Inappropriate Judgment—Thinking can be flawed or downright incorrect, so how can I avoid that? What are some common logical fallacies and how can I spot them? Are sound arguments always true?

Judging: Is it a Forbidden Act or a Necessary Tool?—One of the most famous but misused quotes of Jesus is, “Judge not, lest you be judged” (Matthew 7:1). Was He teaching never to make assessments of anyone or anything, or did His and other New Testament teachings offer a nuanced approach?

Discernment must stem foundationally from an outside Observer or its interpretations will be captive to its own small circle of knowledge, assumptions, and influencers. Think of it! God intervened in human form and keeps speaking into it by his illuminating Spirit. “But the one who is spiritual discerns all things” (1 Corinthians 2:15).

As ministers of reconciliation and ambassadors, we speak his truth as if from a foreign country.^{14} How do we gain a hearing? Partly from making sense of things from an objective, authoritative, out-of-this-world point of view, relying on knowledge and wisdom that the unredeemed can only dream exist.

Notes

1. Exodus 36:1.
2. Tim Challies, *The Discipline of Spiritual Discernment*, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway Books 2007), 14. I owe this well-

researched story and many concepts to Challies.

3. 2 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Timothy 4:8; Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12

4. Dr. J.P. Moreland, on a Zoom conference call sponsored by Baylor University apologetics club Oso Logos (tied to Ratio Christi), streamed live on March 2, 2021. I attended that online meeting.

5. See probe.org/atheist-myths-and-scientism/. Note: this belief sneaks into the minds and convictions of Christians, too, who don't see its influence.

6. See probe.org/worldviews-part-2/ and probe.org/truth-what-it-is-and-why-we-can-know-it/.

7. See a mainstream media article detailing a "conspiracy" to "save the [2021 Presidential] election" through a "shadow campaign" led by a "cabal" of Big Tech leaders at time.com/5936036/secret-2020-election-campaign/. See also an expose (speech transcript) detailing very recent and alarming systematic message controlling methods by giant social media platforms: imprimis.hillsdale.edu/control-need-rein-big-tech/.

8. "Love your enemies . . .", Leviticus 19:18; Matthew 12:31.

9. Acts 17:11. More to come on general as well as spiritual discernment to via [Probe.org](https://probe.org), Probe radio and our [Head & Heart podcast](#).

10. 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

11. Visit our answers to visitor queries at [Probe.org/answers/](https://probe.org/answers/) and [Ask Probe](#).

12. Galatians 2:8.

13. 2 Timothy 2:15.

14. Hebrews 11:16.

©2021 Probe Ministries

Glorious Morning Glories

This is what love looks like.

My husband planted morning glories for me on our back fence because they are my favorite.



I love that a whole new batch of brand new blooms pops out each morning, day after day of fresh beauty that reminds me of Lamentations 3:23, that God's mercies are "new every morning—great is Your faithfulness!"

This year, we had to wait long into the fall for the flowers. The green foliage was crazy lush and full for months, but there were no gorgeous "blue happies," as I think of them, until late October.

Finally they started exploding daily with beauty and color. Not long afterwards, an unseasonable cold snap hit us, and the green foliage started to wither and dry up.

But the "blue happies" kept popping out!



I had to smile at what was happening on our fence, because it was a powerful illustration of what it's like for me to grow older. The green leaves were getting old and spent and dry and yucky, at the same time that every morning, there were still fresh and new morning glory blooms sprouting out. What a picture of what has become my new life verse, 2 Corinthians 4:16-18—

Therefore we do not lose heart, but ***though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.*** For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

My body is growing older and weaker, especially ravaged by the lingering effects of polio. Not long ago, I spent almost two years [unable to walk](#) at all because of severe arthritis in both hips. (The Lord has restored so very much to me on the other side of two [hip replacements](#)!) I'm able to walk and stand without pain these days, for which I give thanks every single day, but the march of time continues and, like everyone else, I'm going downhill physically.

But—the glorious but!—on the inside I get to be fresh and new every day! Just like the “blue happies”! As I walk in faithfulness with the Lord, seeking to abide in Him and allow the beauty and character of Christlikeness to flow into and through me, He keeps bringing renewed energy and joy to my soul. Every day! I love it!

The hope for us as believers, especially older believers, is that we get to be renewed daily with the radiance and vibrancy and joy of Jesus within that keeps getting better and better the older we get!

In fact, the Bible even speaks about our transformation as a special kind of glory: 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 says,

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

I LOVE being transformed, a little bit every day, into the image of Jesus, with ever-increasing glory! I get to be a spiritual morning glory!

This blog post originally appeared at
blogs.bible.org/glorious-morning-glories/ on December 15,
2020.

Addressing Anxiety in

Tumultuous Times

Byron Barlowe connects the dots between the universal problem of anxiety, what brain science is teaching us about our minds, and how Scripture and spiritual disciplines can help. In a world consumed by violent riots and trauma surrounding the Covid virus, this is a timely topic that God and science speak to well.

Millions of people worldwide are battling anxiety in a tumultuous time. The Coronavirus pandemic response has created a new abnormal: heightened fear of sickness and death, economic damage, and social isolation. Loneliness is the number one health crisis in America according to many epidemiologists, psychiatrists, and social scientists.[{1}](#) While we're all still reeling from this, racial strife has erupted into looting, killings, and anarchy in American streets.

Mental health is an increasing concern too. One study found that during the spring 2020 mass quarantine, prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spiked.[{2}](#) A San Francisco area hospital has seen more deaths by suicide than by Covid-19, prompting a call for an end to mass shutdowns.[{3}](#) *It's been a perfect storm of stress.*



Are there real solutions *right now*? Yes, brain science is confirming the truths and promises proclaimed in Scripture in exciting ways! We have wonderfully adaptive minds—especially when they are focused on God. These built-in mind-morphing capabilities show the genius of our design as Image-bearers of God. Audiologist, cognitive researcher and outspoken Christian Dr. Caroline Leaf writes, “As an individual, you are capable of making mental and emotional change in your life. Through your thinking, you can actively recreate thoughts and, therefore, knowledge in your mind.”[{4}](#)

And this has profound implications for true hope. Leaf continues: “Thoughts are real, *physical* things that occupy mental real estate. Moment by moment, every day, you are changing the structure of your brain through your thinking [it’s happening right now as you read]. *When we hope, it is an activity of the mind that changes the structure of our brain in a positive and normal direction.*”^{5} The biblical book of Hebrews defines faith as “the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). The thankful, attentive, willfully hopeful mind creates positive emotions, thoughts, and acts of the will. In other words, we *significantly control whether we have a healthy soul.*

Dallas Willard writes, “The transformation of the self away from a life of fear and insufficiency takes place as we fix our mind upon God as he truly is.” As Scripture teaches, “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” In this article we’ll explore this transformation.

Morphing Your Mind—It’s Mostly Up to You!

Everyday stress is hard enough—but what about work-related anxiety? Money? Riots, memories of abuse, bullying, and abandonment? We have little control over family, culture or epidemics. But we can make amazing internal changes through our responses. Science and Scripture *agree* on this.

The transforming mind-renewal encouraged by Scripture is possible for us all, especially for people who have invited God to lead their lives. We can intentionally train our minds to reshape our brains—we are *not* perpetual victims of our past or circumstances. Nor are humans mere products of matter in motion. Dr. Caroline Leaf, author of *Switch on Your Brain*, claims that “Choice is real, and free will exists. You are able to stand outside yourself, observe your own thinking, consult with God, and [work with him to] change the negative, toxic thought or grow a healthy, positive thought. When you do this, your brain responds with a positive neurochemical rush

and structural changes that improve your intellect, health, and peace.”{6}

Even traumatic memories can be starved, defanged, broken down, and replaced. Brought into conscious awareness, they can become plastic enough to be recreated. Leaf explains that “Neurons that don’t get enough signal (that is, rehearsing of the negative event) will start firing apart, wiring apart, pulling out, and destroying the emotion attached to the trauma.” Also, desirable brain chemicals that bond and remold chemical connections, increase focus and attention, and increase feelings of peace and happiness begin to weaken traumatic memories even more. So bad memories, hatred, hurt, and other negative thoughts and emotions that form toxic beliefs: “If they stop firing together, they will no longer wire together. This leads to . . . rebuilding new ones.”{7}

Ideas have consequences and our beliefs guide our behavior. In the words of King Solomon, “As a man thinks in his heart, so he is.”{8} That is, we construct frameworks of beliefs and *then* speak and act from them.

Science seems to confirm this biblical view of self-control. Measuring magnetic fields, electrical impulses, chemical effects, photons, vibrations, and quantum energy paints a picture of intricately [networking] neurotransmitters, proteins, and energy—that is, signals—that change the brain’s landscape.{9} This “neuroplasticity [seems to be] God’s design for renewing the mind.”{10}

And there’s nothing magic about it: overcoming anxiety can be helped a lot through habits of the mind, heart, and soul.

Mindfulness & Meditation—Self-Control and Seeking God in Silent Solitude

It’s no wonder that the concept of “mindfulness” has become a “thing” these days. Meditation and concentration are new-old

survival skills. How do they work?

Dr. J.P. Moreland, noted philosopher and author of *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and The Practices That Brought Peace*, candidly shares his struggles with anxiety and the need he had for medications. He also discovered the power of seeking God in self-directed solitude. He emphasizes sustained habits of the praising, thankful, and self-controlled soul.

Mindful meditation is not like taking a drug, is not a quick fix, or denying the senses to rid oneself of desire.^{11} “By charting new pathways in the brain, mindfulness can change the banter inside our heads from chaotic to calm.”^{12} New habits are formed over time. When it comes to our minds, “practice doesn’t make perfect; it makes permanent.”^{13}

Remaining at rest via the practice of spiritual disciplines takes advantage of our mind’s ability to “move into a highly intelligent, self-reflective, directed state.” And the more often we go there, the more “we get in touch with the deep, spiritual part of who we are.” This exercise switches brain modes in a way that can create wisdom and potential connection with God.^{14} As Jesus taught his disciples, “Keep awake (give strict attention, be cautious and active) and watch and pray, that you may not come into temptation.”^{15} We can mentor our own minds, settle our souls, habituate our hearts, and free our spirits to respond to God. Brain science is catching up on this reality.

So, what’s going on physically when we stop to meditate in focused solitude and silence? A post at *Mindful.org* claims, “The impact that mindfulness exerts on our brain is borne from routine: a slow, steady, and consistent reckoning of our realities, and the ability to take a step back, become more aware, more accepting, less judgmental, and less reactive. . . . Mindfulness over time can make the brain, and thus [ourselves], more efficient regulators, with a penchant for

pausing to respond to our world instead of mindlessly reacting.”{16} How different would social media conversations be—especially on politics and race—if more people practiced patient contemplation!

Various regions of our brains change while meditating. The “fight or flight” area actually shrinks in size.{17} It’s a real chill pill!

God keeps “him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on You, because he trusts in You.”{18}

Thankfulness and Happiness—Healthy Habits of the Mind & Heart

In trying times, we all want to return to happiness. It’s a God-given right to pursue it, according to America’s founders. The biblical worldview recognizes the inherent brokenness of both creation and human beings, so it is no surprise that confusion, discord, and tragedy—along with evil spiritual powers—“steal, kill, and destroy”{19} our joy. What can be done?

Christian philosopher J.P. Moreland writes, “You have it in your power to begin a regimen of choices, assuming you would choose the right things, and form a habit of this that can *substantially improve your happiness and decrease or get rid of anxiety*. There really is hope.”{20} Our non-conscious mind turns thoughts over and over. Through spiritual disciplines, we bring these into our conscious awareness, which manipulates actual proteins, creating overhauled memories. Intentionally bringing God to mind—His attributes, the wonder of creation and His blessings, promises, answered prayers—such a focus leads to a cycle of good thinking, feeling, and *knowing* that turns into believing real truth. Faith is a gift so we’re not alone in doing this. But it is up to us to put to use the gifts described here to “work out [our] salvation with [reverence and proper humility].”{21}

Remember, we have a strong influence in reshaping our own brains—especially with God’s help. Secular scientists are discovering the wonderful power of thankfulness. Scientific studies prove seven benefits according to *PsychologyToday.com*. Gratitude improves relationships, physical and mental health, sleep, self-esteem, and mental resilience. It even reduces aggression, the urge for revenge. Scripture aligns with physical reality again when it tells us: “Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.”[{22}](#)

Moreland jokes, “If we’re not careful, we may even come to think we were designed to flourish best when we are thankful and grateful! Yet as exciting as these psychological studies are, we didn’t need them to know the importance and value of expressing gratitude and thanksgiving to God. The Bible insists on this . . . [it’s] filled to overflowing with exhortations to be grateful to God and express thanksgiving to him.”[{23}](#) As King David famously prayed in Psalm 23, “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life”—he trusted a good God to lead, protect, and bless him. That’s joy far beyond happiness!

Takeaways & Practical Applications

Brain networks form an inner life of the mind. We can switch between various networks constantly. Like a mom monitoring kids running around inside several contained rooms, this enables us to control the controllable—our reactions to events and circumstances. Brain scans confirm how we capture and police rogue thoughts in ways prescribed in Scripture: “We . . . take every thought captive to obey Christ.”[{24}](#)

UCLA researchers address how our habitual non-conscious thoughts can drive anxiety—negative self-talk like:

- “I’ll be in real trouble if...”
- “What if so and so happens next week?”
- “I’ll probably fail that exam!”

“It’s what we say to ourselves in response to any particular situation that mainly determines our mood and feelings.”[{25}](#)

“Forming a new habit requires doing things you may not want to do in the early stages of formation,” as any coach or teacher will tell you.

For retraining our brains, experts have devised methods like **The Four Step Solution**:

It goes as follows:[{26}](#)

Step 1: Relabeling: call out thoughts as having no necessary connection with reality: tell yourself “That is a destructive lie.” Call on Proverbs 4:23, “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life.”[{27}](#)

Step 2: Reframing: take the power out of the bad thoughts. Reset your perception of the deceptive message by being mindful that it exists, its content, and how you are now feeling by correctly categorizing the distorted message. Bad self-talk includes:

- all or nothing thinking (for example: “it was a *total* failure”)
- overgeneralizing
- singling out one thing to focus on
- catastrophizing (or making too big a deal out of things) and
- discounting the positive

Reframing them creates stable memories formed by repeated updating.

Step 3: Refocusing: Set your mind on anything else—distract yourself from the negative thoughts. Stop obsessing! Get into “the flow” of something. Focus elsewhere. And don’t ruminate about the message—analyzing it will deepen the grooves in your brain.

Step 4: Revaluating: After a while, reflect on how you did Steps 1-3. Recommit to repeat these steps throughout the day.

Over 21 days, a “newly formed neural network” will decay in less than a month: thoughts are like muscles that atrophy and die or get stronger with use.^{28} Starve the bad, feed the good.

As Paul instructed the Philippian church, dwell on what is good and pure, true and worthy of praise.^{29}

Notes

1. Senator Ben Sasse, *Them: Why We Hate Each Other and How to Heal*, quoted by Richard Doster in Christian Healthcare Newsletter, June 2020, “Can the Church solve the country’s worst health problems?”

2. Nick Givas, Fox News, “Prescriptions for anti-anxiety meds spike amid coronavirus outbreak, new report finds,” posted April 18, 2020. www.foxnews.com/health/prescriptions-anti-anxiety-meds-spike-amid-coronavirus.

3. Amy Hollyfield, “Suicides on the rise amid stay-at-home order, Bay Area medical professionals say,” posted May 21, 2020, abc7news.com/suicide-covid-19-coronavirus-rates-during-pandemic-death-by/6201962.

4. Dr. Caroline Leaf, *Switch on Your Brain: The Key to Peak Happiness, Thinking and Health*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2013, p. 19 (emphasis mine).

5. Ibid.

6. Leaf, 39.
7. Leaf, 64.
8. Proverbs 23:7.
9. Leaf, 47.
10. Leaf, 65.
11. As with Buddhist meditation practices seeking utter emptiness.
12. Jennifer Wolkin, Mindful.org, "How the Brain Changes When You Meditate," posted September 20, 2015, www.mindful.org/how-the-brain-changes-when-you-meditate.
13. J.P. Moreland, *Finding Quiet: My Story of Overcoming Anxiety and the Practices that Brought Peace*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2019), 67.
14. Leaf, 82.
15. Matthew 26:41.
16. Ibid. Wolkin
17. Various Authors, *Psychiatry Research: Neuroimaging*, Volume 191, Issue 1, 30 January 2011, Pages 36-43. Posted Nov. 10, 2010:
www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S092549271000288X.
18. Isaiah 26:3.
19. John 10:10.
20. *Finding Quiet*, 54-55 (emphasis mine).
21. Ephesians 2:12, Amplified Bible.
22. Philippians 4: 6-7, New Living Translation.
23. *Finding Quiet*, 113.
24. 2 Corinthians 10:5.
25. Psychologists Edmund Bourne and Lorna Garano, cited by Moreland.
26. Entire section, *Finding Quiet*, p. ?
27. Proverbs 4:23, CSB.
28. Leaf, 151.
29. Philippians 4:8.

How Can I Make God Answer My Prayers My Way?

How can I get God to give me what I want? That's often at the root of our interest in prayer. If we're honest, that's the question we want answered when we read books on prayer, listen to a message or podcast on prayer, or talk to people known as prayer warriors.

Instead of New Year's Resolutions

Fill in the blank: New Year's _____.

You probably either supplied "Eve" or "Resolutions," right?

Resolutions are intentions that may last days or weeks, but so often they peter out before we even get used to using the new year in our dates. May I suggest that instead of forming resolutions, we spend time asking some powerfully insightful questions that will help us evaluate ourselves truthfully and helpfully?

Here are three questions that many community/accountability groups ask each other regularly (as in, weekly):

What am I doing to feed myself (spiritually)? *How am I spending time in God's word and other sources of spiritual truth and wisdom such as books?*

What am I doing to feed my flesh? *How am I indulging my appetites and desires in ways that glorify myself instead of God?*

What am I doing to feed others? *How am I pointing others to Christ and helping them grow spiritually?*

My pastor at Watermark Community Church-Plano, Kyle Kaigler, is especially good at pointed questions. Every morning, as he thinks back on the previous day, he examines himself in four areas:

Where was I hooked? (caught in a bad habit that controls me)

Where was I cold? (being so self-focused that I failed to be loving and kind to those around me)

Where was I scared? (allowing my fear of man to keep me from saying and doing the things I should be)

Where was I proud? (taking credit for what God did)

(Pastor Tim Keller asks these same questions: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/erik-raymond/help-with-prayer-simple-clear-gospel-devotion-from-tim-keller/>)

Kyle also offers these questions:

John Piper says that “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in Him.” So, looking back over the last 12 months:

What are the most God-glorifying occasions over this past year that came from finding satisfaction in Him? *When was I moved to erupt in gratitude and praise for what God did in my life? Were there sweet moments of deep connection with others, or a “lightbulb moment” when He revealed truth to me in a way that zapped lies and wrong beliefs? Were there moments of realizing I was just immersed in His goodness?*

What was a distraction to the glory of God? *In what areas of my life is my stubborn affinity for my flesh, getting my way, insisting on staying in my comfort zone, serving like mud that covers up “Christ in me, the hope of glory”? Where did my entrenched habits (such as continually checking my phone) function like a stop sign, keeping God at a distance? How have I tuned Him out so that I miss the ways He wants to nudge me, direct me, lead me through the day?*

Here are some helpful spiritual assessment questions:

What has God been teaching me in His word? We should be recording the things the Holy Spirit is showing us in our time in His word so we can remind ourselves of His lessons and insights. Otherwise we are the guy from James 1 who looks in a mirror and then turns away, thoughtlessly unaware of what he looks like.

How's my time with the Lord?

- a. Consistent and meaningful (It's ok to choose this option)
- b. Consistent but not so meaningful (I am faithful to go before the Lord but I leave the time unfulfilled)
- c. Inconsistent but meaningful (I don't do it very often but when I do, He is faithful to meet me there)
- d. Inconsistent and not meaningful (it's just not happening)

(If a or c) **How is God transforming my life?** What is God revealing about Himself and His desire for my life? How is my heart being changed to more faithfully follow where He is leading? What have I surrendered (or still working on surrendering) to Jesus' control? How is my life changing so He is increasing, and I am decreasing?

(If b or d) **What are the barriers to consistent and meaningful time with God?** (Busyness, worldliness, selfishness, sin—lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, sinful pride of life)

Am I sharing my story of how Jesus Christ changed my life?

Am I being a good steward of the body God gave me?

Am I being a good steward of the resources He has given me?

And finally, again thanks to Kyle, here are some interesting survey questions for family members:

Spouse survey

1. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *couple*?
2. What were the best memories that we made together this year as a *family*?
3. What would you consider the key challenges we faced as a family this past year? What about in our marriage?
4. If someone were to ask you, "Describe your current marriage relationship." What would you say and why?
5. If you could change anything about last year, what would it be and why?
6. Based on the experiences that we have had as a couple and as a family, what have you learned about God and His work in our lives?
7. What are 3 trips or activities that you would enjoy doing together this next year?
8. What do I do that really ministers to you and you would love it if I did it more?
9. What are your top fears/concerns for each of our children?

Kid Survey

1. What have been some of the best times you have had with me this past year?
2. If you had to give me some advice on being a better parent, what would it be and why?
3. What are some things that you would like to talk with me about and why?
4. What are some of your fears that you would like me to

pray for you about?

5. What is something that you would like to do with me?
6. How can I help you grow as a Christian?
7. As you consider conversations and time together as a family over the past year, what new things have you learned or understood more about God?

I think these powerful questions, answered thoughtfully and truthfully, will serve us better than any New Years Resolution we've ever made.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/instead-of-new-years-resolutions/ on December 31, 2019.