

Shhhh... Listen! Do you hear that vacuum sucking people down?

A severely depressed 16-year-old youth broadcasts his suicide on a webcam via the internet in front of hundreds of horrified onlookers; a third grade elementary school child shoots a parent in cold blood; a public servant is arrested for lewd conduct and solicitation of a gay sexual encounter in a public restroom; a sports legend is found dead of an overdose; political and entertainment celebrities, as well as private citizens, are booking themselves into rehab centers in record numbers. Despite a collapsing economy, the neon signs of gambling casinos and parlors still glare brightly over the boulevards across our nation as people, desperate for a 'kiss from Lady Luck,' gamble away their paychecks. Each one is another life once full of promise, hopes, and dreams falling into another voracious and soul-devouring emotional black hole.

Emotional black holes like these impact the lives of at least five people you know. Individuals seek to fill their emotional emptiness with everything from drug abuse to an excess of even so called good things, like work, exercise, and yes, even religion. These temporary distractions do not avoid the devastation that awaits us while we continue to be drawn even faster into deeper emotional black holes.

There is hope. There is a way to heal the wounds. *Emotional Black Holes* is one author's very personal experience and invitation to step out, as he did, of the emotional blackness of deep and painful holes that snuff out life and move back towards the light and a life of fulfillment, love and joy that we were all meant to experience. Step through the doors of these pages, and you too will share in the author's journey as you also discover the *true* way to escape from your emotional black holes.

Emotional Black Holes

*An insightful look into the source of our emotional problems
and how to overcome them.*

If you feel:

No one loves me.
I'm all alone.
I hate myself.
I want to hide.
I'm trapped.
No one appreciates me.
I'm disgusting.
I need a drink NOW.
No one understands.
People are so stupid.
I'm stupid.
I don't trust anyone.
I don't trust myself.
I'm worthless.
I can't stand the pain.
I want to die.
I'm so exhausted.
I don't feel anything.
No one knows my pain.
I hate him.
I wouldn't even be missed.
I am so frustrated.
Somebody help me.
If people knew who I really was.
People are so incompetent.
I never do anything right.
I want to run away.
It's useless.
I could hit someone.
I just have to have it.
If they'd only notice me.
I just can't do it all.
I can do it all myself.
Don't bother me.
I'm ugly.
I deserve to be unhappy.
I'm ruined if they find out.
I just want to sleep forever.
I'm invisible.
I'll never measure up.

You need to read this book.

EMOTIONAL BLACK HOLES

Grant J. Hallstrom, Esq.



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I would also like to thank my secretary, Debi Pugliese, for her contribution in providing both material and editing for this book.



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Grant is married to his sweetheart, Jean, and they have six children and several grandchildren.

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PREFACE

After benefiting from a life-changing experience, I felt compelled to help others find Christ, the source who fills all of our emotional holes. Consequently, I wrote and published a short booklet titled *Emotional Black Holes*, and distributed it to individuals at my own expense. I decided to write this book to more fully expound the message contained in my earlier booklet after several persons expressed how much this booklet helped them, and encouraged me to write a book. I hope that you too will find peace, understanding, direction, enlightenment, hope and support in its pages, and feel motivated to share its message of love with others.

This book is intended to be non-denominational and a benefit to all, Christian and non-Christian alike. I firmly believe that all truth and all goodness come from Christ, and that as we seek truth and goodness we get closer to God. I feel that there is a lot of truth and goodness in all religions and that everyone should start where they are, and value the good in the religious training they have already received. I hope that everyone will show respect and courtesy to individuals from other faiths. I encourage everyone to keep all of the truth and goodness that they already have, but I invite each individual to be open to receiving additional light and truth, regardless of the source.

I am saddened by the number of persons living in spiritual darkness who are blinded by a flash of light, thinking that the few truths they have already learned are everything, and fail to enjoy the beautiful spiritual vistas available to those who keep their hearts open to all truth,

wherever it is found. I am confident that if individuals seek truth, goodness and love, they will find the source (Christ) better than if others try to push it on them. So, please do not make any disparaging remarks to individuals who you feel are lower on the path to God than you are. We all could use as much encouragement as possible from others. So, let's provide support to each other as we all strive to improve.

I am a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon). The ideas expressed in this book represent my sincerely held, but strictly personal, point of view. I have no authority to speak on behalf of my Church, and no one should assume that the thoughts expressed in this book represent beliefs or doctrines of my religion. Those interested in learning the official position of this religion should go to www.lds.org or www.mormon.org.

I primarily earn my living as the managing partner of the southern California law firm, Hallstrom Klein & Ward LLP, and do not intend to personally receive significant financial benefit from the sales of this book. Proceeds from sales are used to cover the costs of printing, marketing, and distributing the book. Proceeds are also used to create and maintain related websites and other charitable and humanitarian causes. I receive some residual benefit to partially off-set the loss of my income due to the extensive amount of time I dedicate to this cause. Your support by purchasing books and other items through our websites, EmotionalBlackHoles.com and ClearStonePublishing.com, is greatly appreciated.

**EMOTIONAL
BLACK HOLES**

EMOTIONAL BLACK HOLES

I have gone astray like a lost sheep.

Psalms 119: 176

We each have a spark of divinity within us that connects us all to each other. This is what makes us different from all other creatures. It is how we instinctively know right from wrong, regardless of our culture or upbringing.

God is love.¹ Because we all have a spark of His divinity in us, we all have an innate basic need to love and to be loved. However, because we are born into an imperfect world, all of us have been disappointed and let down by others we depended on. This creates an emotional vacuum that, on a very deep subconscious level, demands to be filled.

In some people, these emotional holes are extremely large due to abuse while in others they are less extreme, having resulted from neglect. In any case, all of us have some emotional deficiency resulting from being raised by imperfect parents in an imperfect world. These emotional deficiencies are like black holes that constantly pull us down despite our personal effort to resist.

These emotional deficiencies directly impact our lives and how we relate to others at a very deep level. Often they are the basis of marital discord and problems with interpersonal relationships. They may create a fear of rejection and abandonment, a fear of not being valued, or a fear of loss of control. Regardless, this subconscious quest to

fill our personal emotional deficiency has a greater impact on our lives than we probably realize.

We all are searching for ways to fill our emotional holes. Unfortunately, some people seek to fill their emotional emptiness with things that are destructive, such as drugs or alcohol. Many of us take good things, like work, sex, relaxation, excitement, and yes, even religion, to an extreme in an effort to fill our emotional needs. However, these things only temporarily distract us from feeling our emptiness.

Some people seek the rigidity of rules and strict discipline to give themselves a false sense of control, while others reject almost all restrictions in hope of escaping from the emptiness that haunts them. However, none of these things fill our true needs. Consequently, our emotional needs often grow because we are “looking for love in all the wrong places.”² Eventually, our life may even become completely out of control and unmanageable.

Regardless, while we are searching for ways to fill our own emotional emptiness, we leave potholes behind us in the lives of individuals who are close to us, especially our children who depend upon us for their understanding of love and how to relate to others. We may sense our inadequacy and indulge our children in an effort to mitigate our sense of guilt; but, material things will not fill the emotional black holes we create in our children. We may even become frustrated with our children as they act out or use inappropriate means to try to fill these emotional holes.

Because we are so focused, without even realizing it, on filling our own emotional needs, our perception of reality gets distorted. We may be hypersensitive to certain situations or personality types. For example, we may find it hard dealing with individuals who are authoritarian, or be

extra sensitive to criticism.

We often hide from our own emotional needs with pride. Generally, the greater our emotional deficiency, the more pride we have as we try to counterbalance the emptiness we feel with a deluded sense of significance. We convince ourselves that we are right while others are wrong. We may even attempt to do grandiose things without the resources to succeed. The more pride we have, the more we are annoyed by it in others. The pride we see in others is only a reflection of our own pride.

We demonstrate our pride when we compare ourselves with others. When we feel resentment because we think someone else feels they are better than us, or when we feel we are better than others and look down upon them, even if we think we are feeling sorry for them, we are almost always demonstrating our pride and are out of touch with reality to some degree. This pride is a distortion of truth or reality that often creates tension or difficulties in dealing with others and with the challenges of life, and blinds us to our own faults.

The only way to actually fill the holes that were created by a lack of love is to turn to the spark of divinity that is in each of us, and follow it. God, who is love, is the only source to completely fill our emotional black holes. We draw closer to God by following the spark of divinity in each of us that directs us to know what is right and true.

The more we seek light and truth, the closer we draw to God, and He fills our life with love. The more we follow the impressions we have of what is right, the better we recognize the guiding divine light within us. We become more secure because we know who we really are. But, in order to do this, we have to be honest with ourselves which

is probably one of the hardest things to do. The only way to truly be honest with one's self is by first seeking truth in all things and becoming accustomed to it by being honest with others.

The closer we draw to God the more free we are to be our true selves. We are liberated from reacting to other people, as opposed to just pretending to not care what others think. We become more whole and more connected with other individuals and with humanity. We become more at peace with ourselves and the universe, and our anxiety decreases.

This is why some followers of non-Christian religions may actually be closer to God and better "Christians" than some individuals who simply proclaim themselves to be Christians. Truth will guide people to Christ, and those who are familiar with truth will eventually accept Him and His teachings when the truth is presented to them in its pure form.

The more we follow that internal divine spark of the light of Christ within us, the more we submit to Him, until we fully open ourselves to Him. He then is able to completely fill our emotional holes with love and we become entirely free to be ourselves and enjoy life. We then feel a broader spectrum of emotions more intensely. Gratitude fills our life with joy and peace. It is as if we are born again into a more abundant, full life.

Once our own emotional holes are filled, we are freed to love others more deeply and broadly. We are more kind, less envious, not puffed up, less selfish, not easily provoked, we rejoice in truth and not evil, and we are able to endure and suffer things with patience.³ We become less concerned with ourselves and more interested in others. The depth

of our love increases. At the same time the breadth of our love, or the number of people we care for, increases. We become more like God because we feel more love for others. Eventually, we may even become like Him if we continue to follow the inspiration we receive from that spark of divinity within us.

THE LORD'S HEALING TOUCH

Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.

1 Timothy 1: 15

In the midst of a personal crisis, my wife mentioned that she felt the issue I was dealing with was part of a much bigger picture. She felt that in some unknown way it was related to a couple of business failures I experienced a number of years ago. This rang true. I knew she was right, even though there was no apparent connection.

I yearned to see this bigger picture. I turned to the Lord and was willing to do whatever He required. I placed everything on the altar and did not hold back any sacred cows. I was willing to sacrifice what I thought was a basic characteristic of my personality, being an entrepreneur. I told the Lord that if it was His will, I would become a teacher or pursue some other line of work that would facilitate me spending more time at home. I was willing to abandon my insatiable quest for financial security, which had dominated much of my life up to that point in time. I turned my whole heart over to the Lord and humbly asked for help.

I was then blessed with one of the greatest experiences of my life. It is best understood by visualizing the image impressed on my mind at the time. I saw a large, flat, dark body of water extending as far as I could see in every direction. This sea of darkness was not black, but

very dark and gloomy. The finger of the Lord came down and touched the water. Then, this sea of darkness opened up in all directions, just as a drop of oil on water spreads out quickly in all directions, and I saw a bright light shining up out of the opening. As the water opened up, the light became brighter and brighter, and I felt my sins being washed away at the same time the emptiness in my life was filled.

As the light grew brighter I could see the source of my problems and how I had hurt others close to me. I could see how I spent much of my life trying to fill emotional deficiencies created by growing up in a dysfunctional family that moved on the average of every nine months. I could see how I attempted to fill these emotional holes in inappropriate ways.

I could see that I, not my wife, was the cause of much of our marital difficulties. I was shocked! No, this couldn't be me, I told myself. But it was. I could hardly stand to look at myself. I was repulsed by my past behavior, just as two magnets with the same polarity are repulsed by each other when shoved together. The Lord propelled me in the opposite but correct direction by forcing me to see my faults. Yet, He empowered me with hope. I knew everything would be fine.

I no longer felt the emptiness that compelled so much of my past behavior. The Lord's love filled the hole. The light seemed synonymous with the emotion of hope and power that grew as the light became brighter. I could see more clearly, until everything was bright and I was completely filled with joy, hope and love. What glory! What light! What love! I can't describe it.

I felt as if I were born again. I was freed from all that held me bound. I was no longer held captive by the

emotional black holes that pulled me down. I no longer had any desire to sin. After feeling the Lord's love and acceptance, everything that bothered me no longer was important. I felt free to love others without fear of rejection. I no longer felt driven to prove myself. My anxiety dissipated and I felt at peace. I felt healed from all my sins. I was free.

I now realize that the sea of darkness represented my heart, and as I opened it up to God, he filled my soul with light and love. I know the Lord is there, waiting to fill your life with love if you will simply open up your heart to Him.

THE INFINITE ATONEMENT

*But he was wounded for our
transgressions... and with his stripes we
are healed.*

Isaiah 53: 5

After experiencing this “born again” event, I was surprised that the Lord could heal my soul and fill the emotional void in my life, as well as cleanse me from my sins. He lifted the burden (guilt) of my sins while at the same time healing me of the injury caused by others’ misconduct, or the effect of their sins on me.

I always believed that Christ paid the price for my sins, and thus could redeem my soul from hell; but I never understood that Christ’s atonement also applied to my internal turmoil. Previously, I believed His suffering was limited to feeling the pain of guilt for our sins. How wrong I was! He suffered so much more. He also bore all of the hurt and grief we incur from the mistreatment of others.

Besides feeling cleansed from my sins, I also felt the emotional deficiencies in my life filled. I wondered how this was possible. As I pondered this issue, the eyes of my understanding were opened.

I realized that before we were born, Christ made an agreement with every one of us, as pre-mortal spirits, to bear all of the emotional pain we each would suffer from the hurtful acts of others, if we would accept Him as our Savior.

Christ covenanted with each of us to bear the pain of all of our hurts and sorrows of this life: the pain caused by a parent's abuse or neglect; the hurt caused by a spouse's betrayal; the spiteful words of associates; the pain of illness; even death itself. Our Lord agreed to cover it all.

We, in turn, each agreed and accepted Christ as our Savior before we were born, just as He agreed to bear the sorrow caused by each of our wrongful acts. Consequently, when we sin we are actually offending Christ.

It now all made sense. Before I was born, I personally sold to Christ all of the suffering I would experience. He then kept His part of the bargain and bought my soul by suffering, in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the Cross, all of my pain. The pain He suffered was not just His own, but included the weight of all the suffering in the world from the creation of mankind to the end of time.

Everyone made this same agreement. That is one reason why the Lord's atonement is infinite. The sorrow I inflict on another is covered, as is the hurt I receive from someone else, until it all becomes one eternal round. If we fully accept Christ, He promises two things. First, He promises to heal our souls from the pain we feel that was caused by the sins of others. In essence, He eliminates the negative impact that other persons' misdeeds have in our lives. Second, He promises to forgive us for the pain we cause others by our own sins and lift the burden of sin, which is our sense of guilt.

The Lord's infinite atonement is one eternal round, bringing comfort to the victim of sin, while offering freedom from guilt to the sinner, and healing them both in the process.

No wonder we are required to forgive all men, while Christ will forgive whom He chooses.⁴ I have no right to

hold a grudge. It is not mine to keep. I already sold it to Christ. He bore all our grief and wants to take it from us.⁵ In fact, He demands that we relinquish what He has already purchased. Now, we need to let go and not hold on to a burden we do not own. We must uphold our end of the deal and truly accept Christ as our Savior. He will then heal us from all our emotional pain.

We should not take offense easily, and when offenses do come, we need to let go quickly and ask the Lord to help us forgive. His love will empower us to forgive as it replaces pain with peace and joy. As we forgive others, we are better able to accept our own humanity with its imperfections. This, in turn, enables us to be more tolerant of others.

We truly are saved by grace after all we can do.⁶ I can spend the rest of my life trying to undo and correct all of my mistakes and the harm I caused others, but no matter how hard I try, I can't do it. However, the Lord can. He can heal a broken heart and compensate for my neglect. He is there, ready, willing, and able to heal all those who come to Him. His remedy is free and available to all.

The knowledge that Christ can heal the pain I cause others is very comforting. This knowledge lifts the weight of my guilt and I feel redeemed from my sins. I now know there is a way to fix the mess I have made with all of my mistakes. I am motivated to direct all to Christ to be healed, especially those close to me. If Christ can heal me, He can heal others as well. He is the solution, and His grace is sufficient for all.

Lifting both the burden (guilt) and the effect (injury) of sin truly is a gift of God that is offered to us through His boundless grace (unmerited assistance). We do not earn this gift, but we can accept it by exercising our faith in God by

coming to Christ, turning our whole heart and soul over to Him, and demonstrating our commitment by following Him and keeping His commandments. We then have claim on this gift that He offers to everyone: peace in this life with freedom from the guilt and hurt caused from offenses, and the joy of eternal life at one with Him in the eternities after we leave this phase of our existence.⁷

MOTIVATED BY LOVE, CONFIRMED BY COVENANT

*Where wast thou when I laid the
foundations of the earth, ...and all the
sons of God shouted for joy?*

Job 38: 4-7

Once, while I was pondering Christ's atonement and the role our pre-mortal spiritual existence with God played in it, I felt an inkling of the emotions that were involved in that pre-mortal realm.

Before we were born, we each existed as individual spirit children of God.⁸ God, our Father in Heaven, had so much love for us that He presented a plan whereby we would come to earth to grow, and thus experience more eternal happiness. He explained that earth life would enable us to develop more of His attributes so that we could experience more love and joy. He explained that in order for this plan to work, we needed a savior to suffer all of the pain caused by our sins and misdeeds.

Christ was also there. Christ felt so much love and gratitude to God the Father for introducing this great plan of happiness that Christ wanted to help our Father in Heaven accomplish His plan. So, Christ volunteered to be our Savior and to suffer all of our pain and sorrow, knowing full well what it would entail.

Our Father in Heaven was very touched by Christ's willingness and devotion to do the Father's will. Christ's

great love for the Father generated a phenomenal reciprocal love from the Father for Christ. Our Father in Heaven was so moved by this mutual outpouring of love that He accepted Christ's offer to be our Savior.

They then entered into a covenant whereby Christ promised to be our Savior and take upon Him the sins of the world, and God the Father promised to accept Christ's sacrifice.

Christ then turned to us with great humility and sincerely desired to know if we trusted Him enough and had enough faith and confidence in Him for us to accept Him as our Savior. We were filled with awe at His humility and love. We felt so moved by His love for us, and His willingness to endure all our sorrow, that we were filled with tremendous love for Him. We felt great joy and responded that of course we would accept Him as our Savior.⁹

Christ, in turn, was touched by our love and confidence in Him. He was filled with immense compassion and love for us and felt a great desire to bear all of our burdens so that we would not suffer pain and sorrow. Christ then covenanted with us that He would bear all of our sins and be our Savior, and we covenanted with Christ to accept Him as our Savior and keep all of His commandments.

I do not want you to think that my experience was more than what it was. I simply felt a strong impression of the emotions involved, and that Christ entered into a covenant with both God the Father and also with all of us. Beyond this I do not personally know what took place.

However, this much I do know: being motivated by love to make a commitment and then confirming that commitment with a covenant is an eternal principle we should follow. For example, we are motivated by love to

become engaged, and then we later confirm that commitment by a covenant of marriage. Likewise, when we are motivated by love to accept God, we need to confirm that personal commitment with Him through the baptismal covenant that He established.

AN EARTHLY SYMBOL FOR A SPIRITUAL REALITY

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John 3: 16

Each one of us that is born on this earth already accepted Christ as his savior before we were born. We breach our agreement with Christ to the extent we do not continue to accept Him in this life. Christ was faithful and kept His part of the covenant. Now, it is up to us to keep our part of the deal and accept Him here in this life.

Accepting Christ is a very personal matter and consists of more than just confessing that He is God. We must follow Him. But, how is this done? By seeking light and truth and by keeping His commandments.

We accept Christ to the extent we seek and accept light and truth. Christ is the light of truth, and all things that motivate us to do good come from Him.¹⁰ By seeking truth and goodness, we are seeking Christ. Consequently, many good non-Christian individuals may actually be accepting Christ more than some persons do who simply proclaim that they are Christian, but do not follow the Savior. Accordingly, we accept Christ by seeking and holding on to truth and goodness. If we continue to seek and accept light and truth,

we will eventually be led to a full understanding of Christ and a complete knowledge of all things.

We seek truth by being honest and by living in reality. If we earnestly seek truth, Christ will guide us to it and confirm that it is true when we learn of it. Truth will taste good to our soul. But we must be willing to accept the truth.

Being completely honest with oneself is probably one of the most important, yet extremely difficult, tasks we must face if we are going to conquer our personal challenges. This is best achieved by being honest with others so that we will develop the ability to do the more difficult task of being honest with oneself.

Many studies show that most individuals think they are smarter, better judges, better drivers, better you-name-it, than most other people. Pride surely distorts reality and hinders our acceptance of Christ. It is impossible to look up to God while we are looking down on others.

A key way to seek light is to look for the goodness around us and in other people. We all have been moved by the beauty of a sunset, the elegance of a butterfly, or the majesty of mountains. We all have been inspired by the decency, kindness, integrity, or sacrifice of others. Who does not feel love while looking into a child's eyes, or feel uplifted when someone smiles and waves to you?

We all have a spark of divinity within us - a light of Christ - that connects all of us to each other. As we look for this light of Christ, or the goodness in others, we feel more love for others and feel more connected to them. This is the opposite of pride. We will glory in other people's achievements and be motivated by their goodness. As we seek the light of Christ in others, both of us will be edified and uplifted together as we both draw closer to God.

However, we all have emotional deficiencies created by being raised in an imperfect world where we were disappointed by those we depended on for love. These emotional black holes interfere with our ability to love and feel love from others. Hence, these holes hinder our ability to connect with others and with God, and we feel alone. This then creates the great challenge of life. How will we try to fill this emptiness?

The only way to actually fill the holes that were created by a lack of love is to turn to the spark of divinity that is in each of us and follow it. God, who is love, is the only source to completely fill our emotional emptiness. But we must open ourselves up to God and invite Him into our lives in order for Him to fill our emptiness. Consequently, humility is the key to our happiness and salvation.

God allows us to have weaknesses, many caused by our upbringing, in order to help us become humble so that He can bless us.¹¹ Consequently, what we feel is an obstacle may actually be our stepping stone to reach heaven's gate. We should not feel that life is unfair because of our upbringing or misfortune. Instead, we should look to God, and He will bless us. For example, many addicts turn their lives around after they are humbled when they "hit bottom." Once we are humble, God can bless us. That is why the 12 Step Programs work. Individuals turn to God.

Once we feel God's love working within us, we must nurture it so that this new life within us does not die. Just as a babe in a mother's womb needs constant nourishment to grow and develop, our new life in Christ also needs to be nourished so that we can grow in Christ.

We grow in Christ by following His spark of divinity within us as it directs us to know what is right and true. If we

continue to follow the Lord's inspiration, we reach a point where we need to totally commit to Him in order to continue to grow, just as an infant must be born in order to continue to live and grow.

We must be born again spiritually.¹² Many people mistakenly believe that they have been born again when they first feel the spirit of Christ working within them. This is the start of the process, just as conception is for the birth of a child. But, it is not the complete process. We must allow the Spirit of God to grow within us until we are willing to completely submit to Him by abandoning our inappropriate pursuits to fill our personal emotional vacuum - then evidence that commitment with a covenant.

This is the same pattern that was established by God before we were born. Love motivates us to make a commitment that is then confirmed by a covenant. Accordingly, the Lord established baptism as a means to confirm by covenant our commitment to fully submit ourselves to Him.

Baptism is an earthly symbol of the spiritual reality of being born again. The basic elements - water, blood (of Christ), and spirit (Holy Ghost) - are present in being born again spiritually through baptism and are also associated with mortal birth.¹³ This ordinance points us to Christ. Just as Christ was crucified, lowered into the tomb, and then rose again as a resurrected being full of new life, even so we offer our old sinful self as a sacrifice to be killed and buried under the water so that we can arise out of the watery grave into a new life in Christ.¹⁴ Even being submerged in water helps us feel our sins being washed away. What a beautiful, perfect symbol to represent our conversion from an old way of life into a new life in God and to renew the covenant we each made with Christ, before we were born, to accept Him as our

Savior and to follow Him.

If we trust God and are willing to submit to His will, even in the face of our own emotional challenges, and are willing to confirm that commitment through the baptismal covenant, then Christ will fill our emptiness with love and make us whole. He will bless us with His Spirit to help us know His will and to bring peace to our souls. We will then be free from the emotional black holes that pull us down.

AT ONE WITH GOD

And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

Romans 8: 17

The whole purpose of our existence is to become at one with God. That was the essence of Christ's great intercessory prayer uttered in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his crucifixion.

As recorded in St. John, Chapter 17, Christ prayed "for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . . and the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one. . . I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. . . that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them."

This was Christ's prayer at the start of the process we appropriately refer to as the atonement, or in other words, at-one-ment with God. The atonement is the whole foundation of Christianity. It is the gospel or good news that Christians proclaim to the world.

C. S. Lewis, arguably the most influential Christian writer of the twentieth century and the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, put it well when he wrote: "Now, the

whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. . . . If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. . . . Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else. . . . He [God] said (in the Bible) [Psalms 82:6; John 10:34] that we are ‘gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.”¹⁵

God’s goal, then, is to convert us from our natural sinful state into an eternal loving state. He wants to turn us into a ‘god’ or ‘goddess.’ This is no small undertaking. Only God can create a child of God that He can convert into a ‘god’, and, as Paul says, a joint heir with Christ.¹⁶ In order for this to happen we need to go through a process of being born again into a new life in Christ. This requires us to change. Our very nature needs to be converted. But, we naturally resist this conversion. Consequently, we grasp for things that will placate our conscience while we maintain the status quo. This is our obstacle.

God wants all of us to become at one with Him. Likewise, our main goal should be to become like God. Accordingly, in order to reach our full potential of becoming like God, we need to know what He is like. The scriptures teach us that God is love, light and truth.¹⁷ Consequently,

if we are to become like Him, we must also incorporate all love, truth and goodness into our very being so that they become synonymous with our very identity.

How can this be achieved? Only God can do it. We cannot do it by ourselves. God is the only being that has the power to convert us. But, this can only happen if we truly want it to. It is not something that God can endow upon us without our choosing. He will not fill a closed heart. He can pour his love all over us, but it will just run off like water being poured on top of a closed jar until we open ourselves up to Him. As a hymn states, "God will force no man to heaven."¹⁸ Hence, God's love is something that we must seek with enough intensity that when we find it, it becomes part of our very nature.

This was not possible while we basked in God's love when we were in his presence before we were born. We could not seek light, truth, and goodness in our pre-existent state because we already enjoyed the benefit of God's love and goodness. Hence, the only way for us to grow and mature and truly become like God is for us to leave God's presence so that we would miss his love. We would then feel the need and drive to seek love, light and truth in order to make them a part of our personal being.

That is what this phase of existence is all about. The big test is to determine to what extent we will seek truth and goodness. That is how we will be judged, for we will judge ourselves. We will reap the reward of our life's labor to find God by receiving glory to the extent that we find Him, or in other words, find and accept light and truth. The more light and truth (intelligence) we obtain in this life, the more advantage we will have in the next phase of existence¹⁹ as we continue in our quest to become like God. If we seek light

and truth in this life, we will find it.²⁰

It will not be easy, for that which is easily obtained is easily discarded (easy come, easy go) while that for which we struggle sticks. Hence, the purpose of life is to suffer through difficulties in order to help us discover the true source of happiness, and to give us enough experience so that we have the opportunity to seek God. This quest must be so intense that we integrate His characteristics into our very souls so that we will become more like Him through this process.

Before we can look for something, it must be lost. Before we can seek God's love, we must lose it. That is why there is a veil placed between our mortal life and our pre-existence with God. We need to miss His love so that we will be motivated to seek it. Because we all have a spark of God's divinity in us, we all have a basic need to love and to be loved. We are all born into an imperfect world where we each are disappointed by those we depend on for love. This creates a void that must be filled. So, the quest begins.

The loss of love in this life creates three basic fears: 1) the fear of loss of love, or in other words, fear of abandonment and rejection, 2) the fear of not being valued, and 3) the fear of loss of control. A fear of rejection comes from not having the love and attention we need while young. A fear of not being valued often occurs in those who have been put down or pressured to excel. A fear of loss of control often occurs when one feels that the lack of love in their childhood resulted from some external cause. These fears influence all of our lives in varying degrees.

All of our unhealthy emotional conflicts are based on fear. However, love chases out fear.²¹ God is love. He is the only one who can completely fill our emotional deficiencies created from a lack of love. If we turn our whole heart over

to God and completely open ourselves up to Him, He then is able to fill us with His love. That then is the goal or great secret of life: to humbly seek to know and do the will of God so He will bless us with the gift of His love and heal our souls.

The antithesis of humility is pride. Consequently, whatever we do to fill our emotional holes which does not bring us closer to God is a form of pride and is sin. In actuality, all sin is an expression of pride.²² Whenever we seek to hide our mistakes, gratify our pride, or exercise unwarranted control over our own life and others,²³ we are responding to these three basic fears instead of to God. The goal, then, is to let go of our fears and seek goodness instead.

Humility is the key that unlocks the treasure of eternity. I discovered that if I ask myself why I did something, or better yet, why I am doing something, I can be more sensitive to His inspiration and draw closer to God. I simply ask myself, “am I saying or doing this because I am afraid of rejection, want to look better to others, or to control the situation?” Then, I stop and listen for the still small voice to direct a better way. Through patient application of this approach, I am learning to be more receptive to inspiration and to draw closer to God.

Whenever we let our emotional fears control our lives, even subconsciously, we are on the wrong path. Consequently, it is well worth the effort to frequently examine the motivation for our actions so that we can quickly identify these warning signs.

As we learn to lose our life to God, we actually find our true identity.²⁴ As we seek truth and goodness, we allow God to fill our soul with his love. Love chases out fear and fills the emotional voids in our lives. We are thereby

liberated from our fears that hold us down. True humility actually creates real confidence as one draws closer to God, while pride, on the other hand, is simply a deluded sense of significance to counterbalance the emptiness and fear one feels inside.

God works in mysterious ways - His wonders to perform. That which some people feel demonstrates that there is no God (problems in the world) actually helps prove that He is God. The only way to convert us into a being like God is to separate us from Him so that we will have so many problems that we will be motivated to seek Him with all our heart.

Challenges in life are blessings if they help us discover the path to goodness and truth. Most of us need weaknesses (emotional holes) so that we will have problems that will humble us and make us more receptive to God's will.

The key, then, is to turn to God while we are in the midst of our despair, and seek to truly do His will instead of allowing our emotional fears to control our lives. God, then, will set us free. If we let God have His way with us, He will raise us up to become at one with Him. May this be the individual destiny for each of us is my humble prayer.

MARITAL DISCORD

Nevertheless neither is the man without the woman, neither the woman without the man, in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 11: 11

We all have emotional holes caused by a lack of love while growing up. These emotional holes create a void in our life that needs to be filled, like a vacuum. Only love can fill the holes that were created by a lack of love.

This quest for love was created by design and not due to some mistake. It is how God motivates us to seek Him so that we will allow Him to convert us. It is also partially what motivates us to seek a spouse and create a family. Our spouse's love helps fill our emotional holes. This is healthy and how it is supposed to be. It is what helps keep families together.

We instinctively know that our emotional needs are satisfied with love. Consequently, it is only natural for us to look to our spouse to fill ALL of our emotional needs. However, I believe this is the greatest mistake couples commonly make and is the cause of most marital discord.

Our spouse cannot satisfy ALL of our emotional needs. Even if our husband or wife fawned over us all day, they could not completely fill the emotional holes created by our lack of love while growing up. They can't fix it. But,

God can. God is love, and He is the only source that can fill ALL of our emotional needs. We cannot realistically expect our spouse, who has their own emotional emptiness to deal with, to have such an abundance of love that it can over-flow and fill us up completely as well. However, that is what we often expect.

After a while, we each realize that we still have some emotional holes that our spouse has not completely filled. Marriage is not the panacea that resolves all of our emotional needs. We did not ride off into the sunset to live happily ever after. Marriage is not the eternal bliss we fantasized. So, we blame our partner. After all, if we expect our spouse to meet all of our needs, and we still have emotional needs that have not yet been satisfied, then it must be our partner's fault, right? It is easy to blame our spouse. We are all imperfect, so there is plenty an unhappy spouse can point to as the "cause" of their disappointment.

Of course, one spouse's disenchantment and anger usually feeds into the other partner's disappointment as well, creating a downward spiral of unhappiness. Consequently, because our spouse is not filling ALL of our emotional needs, we then all too often start to look elsewhere for other things to fill our emotional holes: work, sports, friends, children, thrills, pornography, and eventually even affairs. Instead of questioning and correcting our false assumption, we rationalize our misbehavior by thinking we married the wrong person and look for someone else to do the impossible task of making us happy.

Instead of focusing on our spouse's deficiencies, we need to look inside ourselves to figure out why some particular thing is so upsetting to us. After all, there are many things that are not right in the world, so why is this particular

thing so important?

Usually, we can identify something that upsets us as triggering one or a combination of the following three fears we each have in varying degrees that were created by a lack of love while young: 1) fear of abandonment and rejection, 2) fear of not measuring up or not being valued, and 3) fear of loss of control. Are you upset at what your spouse said because it reflected poorly on you in front of others? Why is it such a big deal that he forgot that special occasion? Do you feel you are not valued? Why are you upset when you don't know where your spouse is when you come home? Do you feel a lack of control of the situation, or do you feel abandoned?

Whenever we feel upset, we should stop and try to identify one or more of these three fears that is triggered by this upsetting circumstance. Being upset is like physical pain. Both serve as a red flag, warning us that something is not right with one's self.

By repeating this exercise, we soon learn to recognize our personal hot buttons, and we are better able to identify the true source of our pain. Usually, it is associated with disappointments while growing up. A fear of abandonment may come from a parent's death, divorce or neglect. A fear of not being valued may come from overly demanding or highly critical parents. A fear of loss of control may come from associating our pain with the helplessness of childhood.

Too often, one spouse subconsciously projects their anger and disappointment in their parents on to their partner. It is an interesting phenomena that individuals often marry someone similar to the parent with whom they have an unresolved emotional conflict. It is as if we are striving to resolve these early childhood issues vicariously through

our spouse. This, of course, does not lead to a harmonious marriage.

Regardless, until we resolve our emotional issues created by a lack of love in childhood, we will continue to repeat our dysfunctional behavior over and over again, just as in the movie *Groundhog Day*. Albert Einstein quipped that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Instead of going through life blaming our spouse for our unfulfilled emotional needs, we need to try a new approach. God is the solution. God is love, and only He can fill those emotional black holes from childhood with enough love to heal our soul. Love chases out fear and empowers us to forgive. We cannot do it alone. We all need God to be part of our life in order to forgive and live a full and happy life.

When we feel God's love and acceptance, we no longer stumble into our emotional holes because they are filled. We no longer overreact when someone pushes one of our hot buttons because the pain is gone or at least diminished. God then empowers us to be able to "be there" for our spouse, while our spouse deals with their own particular issues. Thus, God can use one spouse to strengthen the other spouse while they go through difficult times.

Before we seek to change our partner, we need to let God change or convert us. Our quest for love is a God-inspired quest for God. We need to seek Him, and He will heal our souls with His love. Many persons with huge emotional scars feel resentment, yet in reality they may have an advantage. The greater the emotional vacuum, the stronger the pull and motivation one has to find a source to fill it. God is this source. Many without crying emotional

needs go through life with little motivation to change and consequently miss out on discovering a more meaningful existence. Challenges often are blessings in disguise.

We come unto Christ by sacrificing our worst emotional fears on God's alter and by turning our whole heart and soul over to Him. We choose to follow Him and do the right thing in spite of the pain of our emotional fears. Once our heart is broken and open, He then is able to fill it with His love.

Feeling God's love and acceptance empowers us to endure trying situations and enables us to forgive others. Once God fills our emotional holes, we are freed to love others more deeply and broadly. The depth of our love increases and the number of people we care for also increases. By losing ourselves in Christ, we discover the love we so desperately sought in all the wrong places. Love is interesting. The more we love others, the more we are loved in return.

Now, just a few quick words for those who feel that marriage is not worth the effort and are tempted to throw in the towel and quit.

We deceive ourselves if we think we can become at one with God, who we do not see, when we do not make sufficient effort to become at one with our spouse who is with us right now. I personally believe that one reason God instituted marriage and commanded spouses to become one was to teach and train us to become at one with Him. Just as the Law of Moses was instituted as a schoolmaster to prepare the Israelites to accept Christ,²⁶ likewise, marriage helps us to learn how to become at one with God.

We may find that it is nearly impossible to reach our full potential and become at one with God unless we

obtain marital unity. God dictates that spouses are to become one because without a spouse it may be too hard to learn the lessons we need to learn and become refined enough to become at one with Him. The growth we achieve by making the sacrifices and investments needed for marital unity enables us to reach higher altitudes of spirituality than can be achieved in practically any other way.

When I was a young man in my early twenties, I stayed with my grandmother for about a week. She took this time alone with me to share some sage advice. She said that based on her decades of observation, all of the problems in the world can be traced to one or a combination of the following three issues: miscommunication, selfishness, or jealousy. I believe that even though she couched this advice in universal terms regarding problems with humanity in general, I feel she was tactfully trying to give me specific future marital advice.

As I have grown older, my observations have confirmed the truth expressed by my loving grandmother as she tried to pass on her wisdom to me so that I would avoid unnecessary discord and heartbreak in marriage. I have learned that turning to God helps me to see things more clearly so that I avoid miscommunication. I become more caring and less self-centered. He eliminates jealousy, making me a much better person to live with. I hope that the growth and changes I have experienced by making God a partner in our marriage encourages others to hang in there and to turn to God for help.

Granted, however, some marriages are so unhealthy and denigrating that it is appropriate for a spouse to leave. I am convinced, however, that these are rare exceptions and that most people would be better off, from an eternal

perspective, if they would care enough to make the extra effort to work through their marital problems.

We all have emotional issues we need to work through. This is by design so that we will be motivated enough to change, to seek God and to hold tight to our spouse and family. It is not fair to expect our spouse to solve all of our problems, especially when we are probably the source of a lot of our spouse's challenges. Instead, we should look to God to fill our soul with his love so that he will empower us to be there emotionally for our spouse when he or she needs us.

As we discover God's love, we will find increased love for our spouse that will be reciprocated.

POLISHED STONES

*And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of
hosts, in that day when I make up my
jewels*

Malachi 3: 17

One of my first memories is of staying at a neighbor's house for a few days when my younger brother was born. Some of the new and unusual things this family did created lasting memories in my impressionable four year-old mind.

I remember how strange it seemed that when they asked for a blessing on their food, they turned their chairs around at the kitchen table and knelt next to their chairs instead of just folding their arms and bowing their heads, as we did in our family.

Another thing that fascinated me was all of the interesting and unique rocks the older gentleman had collected. There were geodes, all sorts of crystals, and many polished stones. I wondered how any rock could become so smooth.

The neighbor must have sensed my bewilderment, so he showed me the tumbler that he used to polish the stones. As I remember, it was a metal cylinder about 18 inches long with lots of small holes around its circumference. The cylinder was placed horizontally to the ground and connected to a motor that rotated the cylinder like a clothes

dryer. The cylinder had a flap that opened so that one could place objects inside. This opening could be latched shut so the object placed inside the cylinder would not fall out while rotating.

This elderly neighbor explained to me that those pretty smooth stones were simply ordinary rocks that had been polished in his tumbler. I am sure he recognized my skepticism, so he suggested we go outside and find some rocks together and put them inside the tumbler to prove to me that it actually worked the way he had explained.

We went outside and selected several ordinary looking rocks of different shapes, colors, and sizes. We placed them inside the tumbler and he turned it on. It did not spin very fast - it simply rotated around at about the same speed that a clothes dryer rotates. Those rocks we placed inside just tumbled all around on top of each other. After a few minutes, the neighbor showed me a few small chips of stone that had fallen out of the holes in the cylinder into a catch basin underneath the cylinder.

He explained to me that as the rocks hit each other when they tumbled inside the cylinder, the rough edges of one stone would chip off due to the impact that stone would have with the rough edge of another stone. He explained that through this process, all of the stones would have all of their rough edges knocked off. They would eventually become smooth and polished like the stones I admired in his collection.

He went on to explain that this process did not happen overnight and would take time. Over the next week or so, he invited me back to show me the progress as those ordinary rocks I picked up in his yard became beautiful polished stones.

We each are like those rough and jagged rocks I picked up in my neighbor's yard as a young boy. God has placed us in this tumbler we call life, where we get knocked around by all of the other thick-headed numbskulls we come in contact with each day. We all are irritated by the stupid and hurtful acts of other people. Sometimes it seems that the greatest irritation comes from dealing with the imperfections of members of our own family. What's with this? Can't other people be less irritating?

Now, the big lesson of life: whenever someone else does something that annoys us, instead of focusing on how wrong the other person is, we should look inside ourselves to figure out why it bothers us so much. After all, there are many things that are not right in the world that do not disturb us. So why did this particular action, as wrong as it was, irritate us? That is the right question.

If we are honest with ourselves, usually we will recognize that the reason someone else's rough edge bothers us is because we have a rough edge of our own that conflicts with the other person's. We have little or no control over others, but we ultimately have control over ourselves.

Consequently, if we learn to identify why something bothers us, and then let it go, our rough edges will be chipped off. As life's hard knocks chip away our imperfections, we will find that not only are we less irritated by other people's imperfections, but we will be less irritating to others as well.

The key, then, is to be willing to let go of our imperfections instead of holding on to them. We go through life holding on to things. As a babe, we held on to our mother's blouse and our father's finger. As a child, we held on to our toys and school books. Today, we are still holding on - holding on to our wallet, our job, you name it. We

seem to be programmed to hold on to things, and the more personal, the tighter our grip.

Isaiah mentions that we carry our sins behind us with a cart rope.²⁷ This image has helped me to learn how to let go of my issues and move on. I believe that our sins generally result from us using inappropriate behavior to deal with some emotional issue or deficiency we have. Accordingly, I view our emotional issues as the cart that we carry our sins in, and we pull both of them behind us with that rope Isaiah refers to.

Sometimes the burden of those emotional issues and accompanying sins seems almost too heavy to bear in order to move forward. But, let go? No way! Why, those issues and sins are mine, and they are very personal to me. So I tighten my grip on that rope and trudge along in life ever so slowly, making very little progress.

The sad point is, however, that while my hands are clenched shut around that rope, I am not open to receive the gifts of love that God offers me. We all need to learn to open up and let go of our past so that we can receive the blessings from God that he offers us.

I have found that the following exercise actually helps me to let go and open up to receive God's healing love. You may want to try it as well.

Think of some situation that upset you, or think of the last time you did or said something you wish you had not done. Take a few moments to identify what the underlying issue is that made you upset. Was it that someone did not value you? Did you feel abandoned? Were you nervous because you were not in control of the situation? Try to identify the behavior that upset you, or that you are ashamed of, and try to tie it to some basic fear and its source from your

childhood.

Now, close your eyes and visualize that big cart loaded up with all of your inappropriate behavior and emotional hurts from your past. Visualize that you are pulling that heavy cart up a hill, and you can hardly take another step because it is so heavy. Hold your clenched fist out in front of you like you are pulling that rope with all your effort.

Now, slowly count: one – two – three, and open your hands. Visualize that rope slipping through your fingers. Turn and watch that cart and all your issues roll away. Now look forward, with your hands opened out in front of you, and visualize your Savior standing there with open arms to receive you.

Can you feel his love? Do you feel relieved of the burden you carried just a moment ago? If you felt your load lightened in any degree, you have found the source to heal you from all your pain. Christ is the source to turn to for peace. He wants us to let go of our emotional garbage so that we can grab hold of the treasures of eternity that he offers us.

It does not happen all at once. My wife says that it is like peeling onions. Once you finish one layer and you think you are done, there always seems to be another layer, and each layer seems to bring its own set of tears. But, in the process, we become more in touch with our emotions and experience greater joy and peace of mind. We are freed to love others more deeply and benefit from reciprocal loving relationships. We draw closer to God, and He is able to bless us with His healing Spirit.

I sincerely hope that we all will learn to let go and open up to God so that He can draw us near to Him in order for us to become polished gems in his hand.

MAKING JELLO

*But if from thence thou shalt seek the
Lord thy God, thou shalt find him, if
thou seek him with all thy heart and with
all thy soul.*

Deuteronomy 4: 29

I loved Jello as a young child. We didn't have much money, so treats were a rarity. Consequently, Jello became an affordable luxury we looked forward to. I liked cherry flavor the best, but lime and raspberry were close seconds. I didn't much care for lemon, but strawberry was okay.

Once, my mother taught me how to make Jello. She showed me how to measure two cups of water from the faucet and pour it into a pot that we put on the stove. We turned the burner on under the pot and waited for the water to boil. In order for the Jello mix to dissolve, the water couldn't just be hot - it actually had to boil.

It always seemed to take forever for the water to boil. That is when my mother taught me the old saying, "a watched pot never boils." It really seemed true to me. Sometimes I would stand on a chair and watch the water in the pot as little tiny bubbles would form on the edges of the pot. Nothing seemed to happen and then out of nowhere, usually when I stopped watching for just a moment, it started to boil.

We then poured the boiling water into a pan of

whatever shape we wanted, where we would stir in the Jello mix and a couple of cups of cold water. We then put it into the refrigerator to cool where its very nature was changed from a runny liquid without form into a glistening, malleable yet resilient shape of the mold we had chosen. Sometimes we would even mix in some fruit, but regardless of the variations, the transformation was always fascinating. I looked forward to helping my mom make Jello almost as much as eating it.

Sometimes, as I watch others start to turn to Christ to solve their problems, I am reminded of these childhood experiences in my mother's kitchen making Jello. All too often, I see persons give up before their conversion occurs. On other occasions, I watch and wonder when this individual will finally get a clue. Just when I think it may never happen, he is completely transformed, like a struggling caterpillar converts into a beautiful butterfly.

I empathize with those who are frustrated because they feel that when they turn to God nothing seems to happen. I can read the struggle in their faces. They seem to be saying, "God promises that if we seek, we will find Him - yet nothing seems to change. It seems to work for others, then why not for me? Maybe I'm just worthless and not one who He has chosen to save? Why should I even try? Nothing ever works out anyway." These are damnable thoughts.

Contrary to what some religions teach, God wants to save all of us. We are all His children. He loves each of us.²⁸ Our loving Heavenly Father wants to convert all of us into beings that can experience ultimate joy. Don't give up and throw the hot water out of the pot just before it boils. It does work. But it may require more than you currently realize. It is well worth it though. God will not let any of your anguish go to waste. Instead, he will raise you up and

make something strong, yet beautiful, out of every tear you shed. So hang in there.

God wants to make Jello - not lukewarm water, which the Lord spews out of his mouth.²⁹ Too often we give up when we start to feel the heat. It is human nature to delay our conversion by avoiding the uncomfortable heat of facing our sins, character flaws and the emotional injuries from our childhood that often form the foundation of our wrongdoing. So, instead, many of us just dabble with religion. We want the promised blessings but do not want to make a complete commitment. It is as if we put our pot on low heat.

Consequently, we suffer through life, dealing with its ups and downs without God's full help and without truly being converted. We still react to the same old buttons that people push; when in actuality, nothing really changes that much. Maybe over time, there will be enough accumulated effect of the simmering heat that the water may eventually boil. But, usually not, and even if it does, we miss out on a lot in the meantime.

I have found that if we want water to boil, it is much better to turn the heat on the stove all the way up to its highest setting. The key to conversion is opening up and completely submitting to God. How much we suffer, how hard we work, or how long we struggle does not make a big difference. The power of conversion lies with God, not ourselves.

However, we hold the key to unlock God's power. He will immerse us in his love and power only to the extent we are willing to accept it. He will force no man to heaven. God describes His power as a refining fire that burns away all of our impurities.³⁰ We must be willing to submit and bear enough heat so that we can be converted. We need to

seek Him with enough intensity and purpose that the help he gives us to change will actually stick, and not just be a passing phase. God realizes that for many of us, it is easy come, easy go.

Once the conditions are right, and we are really willing to let God have his way with us, He will then change our nature, just as liquid water converts to steam and hot Jello solution solidifies into the shape of the mold we select.

Because the key to conversion is our willingness to submit to God, not how long we suffer, it makes more sense to let go and submit to God's will immediately instead of prolonging the process.

I do feel it is important to point out, however, that even though our nature may not change all at once, if we look for it, we can see God's influence in our lives, giving us hope and encouragement to hang on. I can personally testify to the veracity of the Savior's promise, "Seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you; for everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened."³¹

Faith is the key. Even if we only have enough faith to desire to believe, that is enough to start. The Lord will do the rest if we let Him. If we open up and give even just a speck of space in our heart to God, even if it is as small as a mustard seed, God will begin to expand our soul and fill us with his love.³² But, we must be willing to make room for him in our heart as he fills us with his love. This requires us to let go of other things in our heart that compete with Him. In order for us to be completely converted and saved, we must develop enough faith so that eventually we are willing to sacrifice everything. God is patient and will help us develop this faith over time if we let Him.

God is a jealous god³³ not because he wants our praise, but because He knows that if we love anything more than Him, He cannot fully convert us into a being capable of receiving all that He has. Consequently, we must face our core emotional issues in order to give them over to God. This usually is terrifying. In fact, facing our core emotional fears and turning them over to God is the boiling or conversion point we need to reach. We resist doing this because of the pain these memories invoke. We doubt that God will actually heal our soul and remove the pain. We let fear control us because we do not know the outcome or what we will turn into afterwards.

However, when truly dealing in faith, we don't have a preconceived outcome in mind. Instead, we simply decide to trust in God and do what we know is right, regardless of the outcome. Like the watched pot that never boils, sometimes we must learn to wait in faith for the promise of the Father. As we make room for Him in our heart, He fills us with His love that heals our soul and chases out our fears. This is the way God heals us of our emotional black holes that pull us down.

In ancient times, God required his people to offer their choicest animal to Him as a sacrifice. The sacrifice consisted of killing and then burning on an altar this animal that was dear to them.³⁴

Today, God asks us to offer to Him a broken heart and a contrite spirit.³⁵ To accomplish this, we need to sacrifice on God's alter our emotional issues that are as dear to us as the choice animals were to God's ancient people. We need to identify each emotional issue that we cater to more than to the will of God, then kill it and ask the Lord to completely obliterate it and convert its very nature, just as

fire destroys and converts the nature of what is burned into ash and smoke.

If we are really willing to give up and completely destroy those things that hold us back from God, He then will convert our very nature. We will then discover our true self liberated from all that holds us down.

Abraham is a great example. Even though Abraham had seen and spoken with God on more than one occasion, he still had issues that he needed to deal with in order to be fully converted into the being God wanted him to become.

When Abraham was younger, his father tried to sacrifice Abraham to a pagan god, but he escaped through the grace of God.³⁶ When Abraham was over 100 years old, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, to God.³⁷ For decades, God worked with and prepared Abraham for this great test, which God knew he would pass. I believe Abraham needed to deal with the emotional scars from his youth, so this great test was very personal to Abraham. When Abraham was ready, God asked him to face those issues. Through faith and in obedience to God, Abraham attempted to sacrifice his own son, at which point an angel stopped him.

Abraham learned something about Abraham that day. I believe Abraham learned to forgive his own father for his evil attempt to sacrifice Abraham years before. Through this process, God was able to heal Abraham of his lingering emotional pains that he still had not yet fully resolved. Abraham learned that he really loved and trusted God with all his heart. Abraham was then better able to understand and internalize God's sacrifice of His own son, Jesus Christ, because of His great love for each of us.

In order for us to truly repent and be converted, we

must learn how to forgive those who have offended us. We need to internalize the reality of the infinite scope of the atonement.

If we fail to forgive others, it is as if we deny God's atonement. It reflects our own faulty opinion that Christ's atonement was not infinite, but limited. If it is limited, then our own salvation is at risk. Hence, we still need to develop more faith so that God can convert and save us. As we accept Christ, the love he gives us empowers us to forgive. Consequently, love and faith are intertwined and build each other.

Once we totally submit to God, we reach our boiling point and our nature begins to change. God then gives us His Spirit, and, just like Jello mix, it makes us sweeter and adds more flavor to our life. He takes us out of the heat and gives us time for our conversion to set.

The knowledge that God accepts us gives us the faith to endure trials and brings peace to our souls. Our very natures change. We are no longer like a liquid with no substance, flowing from one thing to the next. God can then form us into whatever shape or thing he wants us to be.

What a wonderful blessing it is to know that God promises to convert us into His child to be a joint heir with Christ. For our citizenship is in heaven, and we eagerly w-a-i-t for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will *transform* our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.³⁸ I can hardly wait.

SUFFERING

Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: ...be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.

Revelation 2: 10

In any hour of suffering, besides just trying to endure the situation, we should examine why we are suffering so that something positive can come out of that harrowing experience. We may suffer because of our position or our disposition, and our disposition often influences where we are at in life.

Our first inclination is usually to blame some outside influence for our difficulties. At first glance, it appears that all of our suffering is due to our position in life, and that if we were not in this pickle of a spot we would escape harm from these external forces. If I were not sick . . . if my husband wasn't such a jerk . . . if my wife wasn't so critical . . . if I didn't have such a horrible boss . . . if that car didn't hit me . . . if I weren't so old . . . if I had better parents . . . if my son wasn't addicted to drugs . . . if I had a better job . . . if I weren't sitting in jail . . . the list is as diverse as it is endless.

Yes, often our challenges involve our surroundings and are due to external forces influencing our lives. Some we have control over and others we don't. Sometimes we put ourselves in the spot we are in, whereas other times it is

truly due to circumstances beyond our control. Regardless of the cause, we can all benefit by remembering the Serenity Prayer in our times of trial:

God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change;
courage to change the things I can;
and wisdom to know the difference.

-Reinhold Niebuhr

It is only natural to blame others for our suffering. To look inward and assume at least part of the responsibility for our condition requires us to stare at our faults in the mirror, and we don't like seeing that ugly picture. However, we often deserve what we get, if not directly for the particular point at issue, then for something else indirectly related. For example, how many times do you speed compared to the number of tickets you receive, even if on that particular occasion it was not entirely warranted? Realizing this truth helps me put things into perspective so that I can move on.

However, much of our suffering is actually caused by our disposition, not by our position in life. Even when suffering is caused by outside forces, our disposition determines how we deal with it. If we find a recurring theme in the challenges we deal with through life, it is very likely that these difficulties result from our disposition and not simply due to a number of disparate factors. Our disposition comes from inside of us, and is not the result of some outside force. We cannot escape from problems caused by our disposition simply by changing our circumstances, because we carry our disposition with us.

We ultimately have the power to control our disposition if we tap into that God-given power within us

that connects us with God. Consequently, our disposition is a much more important issue than the particular spot we are in at the moment. If we are to avoid much of the suffering in life, and deal with the rest in a positive way, we need to allow God to change our nature.

Regardless of the cause, as we come to know God, we realize He uses all suffering for our good. We learn that suffering is a two-sided coin. On one side it may be viewed as coming from God to help bring out the best in us. Thus, through our faith, instead of a leap into darkness, it becomes a leap towards the light. On the other side of the coin, Satan attempts to use temptation and suffering to bring out the worse in us. The choice is ours.

We can react to suffering by despising it and becoming bitter. We can also treat it lightly as Esau did his birthright,³⁹ or faint under its pressure by treating it too seriously. Hebrews 12:5 says, “My son, do not despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives.” We can take courage by taking this divine instruction to heart. This is the reaction desired by God.

I have a friend who was furious with God after the death of her husband. She said, “I was so angry at God. We were not on speaking terms for nearly three years.” Reviling the experience of such unbearable suffering and loss, she plunged deeper and deeper into an ever blackening hole of emotional despair. Loss compounded loss. She lost her job. She lost her home. She lost life-long friends. She fell, exactly as one might imagine, straight into the greedy clutches of Satan. Her life was a shocking tale of suffering brought on by loss. In reviling God over her loss, she found comfort in

sin and unspeakable darkness. Does this sound familiar?

One desperate night, when she reached the point where life intersects with mortality, she finally surrendered to God. Broken, more dead than alive, she committed all her suffering to Him. If you commit your suffering to God, he will use it for your good and His glory. The book of James tells us to count it all joy when we experience dark hours.⁴⁰ I have repeatedly experienced how God uses our faith in Him during darkness to promote patience, to produce awesome fruits, to give me knowledge and maturity, and to silence the devil.

You should see this friend today! She lives a life filled with blessings and flooded by the light of God, by whose hands and incredible mercy “took captivity captive” and restored her to a life of abundant joy. She will be the first to tell you that she is THANKFUL for the experience because through it she found God. She proclaims, “It was well worth the oceans of tears that I shed.” Never revile God for your suffering. Instead, commit your pain and suffering to Him in faith and just watch what he does!

I was amazed at how well another individual, who had turned his heart over to God, handled adversity. He was a key witness in a lawsuit. Unfortunately, the ‘bad guy’ tried to discredit him and send a message to other adverse witnesses to not testify by filing false criminal charges against this innocent witness, and even had him arrested. I know the charges were false because at the time he was supposed to have committed this alleged crime, he was sitting in my office. Despite a horrific stay in jail for most of the day while we arranged bail, he remained calm and strong. Interestingly, the only written thing he saw in jail was one sheet of newspaper that was left at a spot where he was

told to sit. The newspaper had a huge headline declaring, “FAITH IN GOD.” God does support those who love Him in their time of need. I was amazed that when I picked up this innocent person from jail, he was not vengeful or angry but was quite calm and serene considering the circumstances.

We have all had our own share of adversity. Through it all, I have learned one great lesson: to TRUST GOD. I have come closer to Him through my trials and adversity than in any other way. I am certainly a much better person for it. I am confident that an eternity from now, looking back at my life, I will value the trials that have shaped my life probably more than almost anything else. Even though at the time they almost seem overwhelming, in reality they are but a small moment in time. Just as sure as the sun rises each morning, God will shortly bring us warmth and comfort after the dark nights in our lives.

As we learn to trust God and seek to know and do His will, He empowers us with His strength so that we are able to endure the challenges we face. Paul taught that we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. We certainly do not hope to suffer, but we hope to reach the point where we would BE ABLE to endure anything. This is because it is evidence that we are at one with God. By ourselves, we will not be able to endure all things, but with God’s help, we can. To the extent we seek and incorporate God’s characteristics of light and truth in us, we will be empowered to be able to endure our trials.

As we submit to God’s will and trust Him, He blesses us with the assurance that He accepts us and loves us. The knowledge that we are doing the Lord’s will gives us additional faith that empowers us to endure.⁴¹ Thus, even much of our faith is a gift from God that He grants to us as

we exercise a particle of faith and desire to follow the Lord's will. God then blesses us with His peace that changes our disposition. This peace and assurance grows as we continue to demonstrate our willingness to accept God's will and His gifts of love and faith.

We hope to eventually reach the state where we are as converted as the martyrs of early Christendom who willingly laid down their lives for truth and righteousness. They did not reach this state all at once, but learned how to trust God through the things that they suffered in everyday life. Eventually, they reached the point where their calling and election as a joint heir with Christ was made sure.⁴² As we learn to trust God and keep our eye focused on doing His will, God will then bless us with a more sure word of prophecy and we will know that God lives and loves us, which assurance will empower us to endure all things.

I sincerely hope that we each will learn to trust God so that he can heal our souls and empower us to endure the trials that we suffer.

TEMPTED BEYOND WHAT YE CAN BEAR

For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit.

1 Peter 3: 18

Teachers and speakers have repeatedly told me that I could not be tempted beyond that which I could bear. Consequently, I believed that the power was personally within me to resist any temptation I faced.

When I failed and succumbed to temptation, I thought that I personally was a failure and felt depressed. This, in turn, often made me even more susceptible to temptation. I would then try extra hard to obey every commandment and be perfect. But my fanaticism pushed people away, and I felt alone in dealing with life's challenges. Left to my own devices, I would fail again regardless of how hard I personally tried to be perfect. I judged myself by the same standard that people around me used. If someone sinned, he was weak. People would look down on others who sinned because "no one is tempted beyond what he is able to bear." I would then try even harder to personally be strong. And so the cycle continued, year after year.

Unfortunately, I did not really understand the scripture people cited to support the proposition that the power is within us to personally resist temptation. The scripture states:

“There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is *faithful*, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a *way* to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”⁴³ I overlooked two key phrases: “God is faithful” and He will “make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.”

In what is God faithful? And why is this phrase a key component of the scripture? Christ made a covenant with each one of us before we were born to bear our burdens. He was *faithful* and kept His part of the covenant. He suffered, bled, and died for all of us. His suffering was personal to each one of us. He has already felt our personal emotional pains. Consequently, we hold on to our emotional turmoil needlessly.

This internal turmoil makes us susceptible to temptations we cannot resist unless we resolve this conflict. The only way to *escape* this turmoil, and the temptations that follow, is through Christ. He has bourn our grief and can heal our souls. We cannot heal ourselves, no matter how hard we try. When we rely on the arm of flesh, even our own, we will eventually be left wanting. Christ was *faithful* and *He is the way* to escape temptation.

But, how do we find Christ and the way to escape temptation if not by our own determination to be perfect? An ancient minister named Alma once said:

“And now, my brethren, I wish from the inmost part of my heart, yea, with great anxiety even unto pain, that ye would hearken unto my words, and cast off your sins, and not procrastinate the day of your repentance;

But that ye would humble yourselves before the Lord, and call on his holy name, and watch and pray continually, that ye may not be tempted above that which ye can bear,

and thus be led by the Holy Spirit, becoming humble, meek, submissive, patient, full of love and all long-suffering;

Having faith in the Lord; having a hope that ye shall receive eternal life; having the love of God always in your hearts, that ye may be lifted up at the last day and enter into his rest.⁷⁴⁴

Alma taught that we need to *humble* ourselves before the Lord and *pray* so that we will not be tempted above that which we can bear. Otherwise, we might. Simply stated, we need to have enough faith in the Lord to be willing to surrender our whole heart to Him and seek His guidance. The Lord will then empower us with hope and fill our souls with His love, so that we will have no desire to sin.

Sin often results from us using inappropriate means to deal with unresolved emotional issues. Until we resolve these internal conflicts, we will be unduly subject to emotional black holes that pull us down. The root of many of our emotional needs is a lack of love while we were young. This lack of love creates a fear of abandonment, which is a fear of a loss of love, often accompanied by a fear of not being valued and a fear of not being in control, because we feel that the lack of love resulted from the helplessness of childhood.

All of our unhealthy emotional conflicts are based on fear. However, love chases out fear. God is love. He is the only one who can completely fill our emotional deficiencies created from a lack of love. If we turn our whole heart over to God and completely open ourselves up to Him, He then is able to fill us with his love and eliminate the appeal of sin in the process. Christ was faithful and His love truly is the way to escape from temptation.

When we try to earn our own salvation, or prove our

value, the focus is on ourselves and not on the Lord. This often leads to pride, which is the opposite course we need to follow to escape from temptation. While we are obsessed with accomplishing a myriad of tasks, the list keeps growing. This is because we can never do enough to work our way to heaven. Instead, we should focus on the Lord and simply seek to know His will.

Until we open up to Him, He will not fill us with His love, which would resolve our emotional conflicts and in turn eliminate the allure of sin. But, when we truly seek to know His will and are willing to let go of everything, He will bless us with His spirit so that we will know what to do and what not to worry about. Good works will naturally follow as gifts of the spirit.

No wonder the Lord said that He requires us to offer as a sacrifice (to give up, let go, not hold back) a broken heart and contrite spirit, and then promises to bless us with His spirit. Alma's counsel is the key. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and call on his holy name." Then we have claim on the Lord's promise, "wherefore he that prayeth, whose spirit is contrite, the same is accepted of me if he obey mine ordinances."⁴⁵ Once we feel the Lord's acceptance, we lose our desire to sin.

Let us all be contrite and pray continually so that we will not be tempted beyond that which we can bear.

PRAYER IS THE KEY

Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you.

Matthew 7: 7

Even though we moved on average every nine months while I was growing up and I was quite used to change, the first day of high school was scary. Everything seemed new and ominous.

During P.E. the coach assigned all of us combination locks for our gym lockers. Unfortunately, the coach ran out of class time to issue all of the locks, and I was one of the last persons to receive a lock and combination. Consequently, I was running late to get to my next class, so I quickly looked at the combination on the little slip of paper and stuck it in my pocket as I ran to my next class.

However, when I sat down in the next class and looked for the combination in my pocket so that I could write it down in my binder and try to memorize it, the combination was nowhere to be found. Fear hit me like a sledgehammer. There was no way that I could remember the combination, as I had only briefly scanned it as I put it in my pocket. I retraced my steps and looked everywhere, but I could not find the combination anywhere.

Well, time is a good ally, so I decided to see if it would

solve the dilemma. At first it was not a problem. We were not required to dress down for P.E. for a few days, so not being able to open my locker was not a big deal. Regardless, the inevitable doom weighed heavily on my mind. I decided to try to remember the combination, so during lunch and after school I would go by the gym and try different combinations in an attempt to open the lock, all to no avail.

The fateful day arrived and we were required to dress down for P.E. class. I was somewhat shy and fearful of authority figures, but seeing that there was now no alternative, I mustered up the nerve to go see the coach and confess that I had lost my locker combination and I could not remember it.

Of course, the coach made it seem like it was not the huge problem I had feared. But, when he looked in his master list, he told me the bad news: the lock I was issued was not a school lock and they did not have its combination. Apparently, some student had lost his lock the prior year and substituted a store-bought lock in its place. The coach said that if I could not remember the combination, he would have to cut off the lock and I would have to buy a new one to replace it.

It was a slow walk home from school that day. We were poor, so I did not know if we had enough money to buy a lock. My mother confirmed my worst suspicion when I asked her if I could buy a lock at the store for \$3.50. Now I had a real problem. I could not remember my combination, we did not have money to replace the lock, and if I did not dress down during P.E. it would affect my grade.

As the week progressed, each day the coach would dock my grade until it reached the point that if I did not dress down one more time I would receive a failing grade for P.E.

Bear in mind that P.E. was a required course for all semesters to graduate from high school. I was in a panic. I had only been in high school for two weeks and I was never going to graduate. My whole life would be a failure.

Needless to say, I was in the gym every chance I got trying every combination that would pop into my brain. I tried systematic approaches. I tried familiar sounding combinations. You name it - I tried it - all without any success.

Finally, the last day before I would fail P.E. and not be able to graduate from high school, I was in the gym after school continuing to try different combinations. I realized that it was impossible for me to remember the combination. The only solution was to turn to the Lord and ask for help.

I waited until all of the football players were dressed and had left the locker room. I knelt down and humbly, desperately pled with the Lord to help me in my predicament. I then got up from my knees, took the lock in my hand and turned the combination to 17 – 10 – 24. Pop. It opened right up! I was so shocked that I almost didn't remember the combination.

I learned a great lesson that day: earnest prayer is the combination that unlocks the treasure chest of heaven. Perfunctory prayer does not cut it. But, when we pray with the same desperation as Moses did when trapped next to the Red Sea by Pharaoh's army,⁴⁶ we are open to receive revelation. I find it interesting that in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ promises to fill us with the Holy Ghost if we hunger and thirst after righteousness as one starving yearns for food and water.⁴⁷

God respects us and our free will. Consequently, he waits for us to invite Him into our lives. Therefore, let's remember to pray earnestly every day and invite God to fill

us with His spirit, so we will be open to receive Him and the blessings He wants to give us.

LUST

Ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust.

2 Peter 1: 4

You are several thousand years old, yet very new to this physical world. No wonder it is a challenge to learn how to deal with all of the unfamiliar stimuli we encounter during this phase of our existence. But, as we learn to bring our spirit and physical body into harmony, we draw closer to God and become more at one with Him and enjoy a fuller and richer life.

We are dual-natured beings. Our spirits, which some people refer to as our souls, existed as children of God for eons before we were born here on Earth, where we received our physical bodies.⁴⁸ Just as placing our hand inside of a glove animates the glove, likewise our spirit brings life to our physical body. Take out our spirit and our body becomes a lifeless form, just as the glove without the hand is an inanimate object.

We were created to glorify God. This occurs as we become more at one with Him. Developing more unity and harmony between our spirit and body enables us to become more in tune with nature, the universe, and with God himself. As we draw closer to God through this process, we bring

Him more glory and in turn receive more fulfillment.

However, if the balance and harmony between our spiritual and physical natures is distorted, then our whole life gets thrown out of kilter. Because this is a physical world which is completely new to us, we all have issues with learning how to achieve this unity and harmony.

Naturally, our physical appetites have great power over our whole dual-natured being. But, if we let our physical cravings control our behavior, we devolve into beasts. Left unchecked, our appetites will dominate our spirit and stunt our growth and development. As our physical appetites occupy more of our thoughts and actions, they displace other aspects of a whole person and distract us from realizing our full potential.

Many years ago I worked in the insurance industry. One phrase that caught my interest was the term “friendly fire” which is used to distinguish between fires that are covered by insurance and those that are not. Fires that remain contained within the boundaries we intend, such as fireplaces, stoves, and barbecues, provide comfort and benefit to man. In fact, controlling fire is regarded as the most important and useful advancement in human history. Hence, these fires are referred to as “friendly fires.”⁴⁹

However, fires that exceed the borders set for them become destructive and cause devastation and misery. Consequently, these are “hostile” or “unfriendly fires.” The damage may be minor, such as to wallpaper in a kitchen. However, any unfriendly fire left unrestrained will cause more extensive damage, not only to the property where the fire originated, but often will threaten adjoining properties as well.

Last summer, Southern California was devastated by

wildfires. My sister and her family evacuated their home, along with almost one million other residents, to avoid the threat of personal harm posed by the fires that were out of control. Even though her home was fortunately spared, their lives were still thrown into upheaval due to this tragedy.

Likewise, passions and emotions are integral to and enhance a healthy, well balanced life. However, lust for power, sex, fame or fortune harms the individual and may destroy his life. Unrestrained passion invariably impacts the lives of those closest to us, with more far-reaching effect than we realize and for generations to come.

Lust for power invariably is associated with a hot temper. Unkind words spoken in anger have probably caused more heartache and sorrow than all of the wars the world has ever known. Lust for power and control is actually evidence of that individual's lack of self-control and of unresolved personal emotional issues.

God wants us to be independent and have power to act and make our own decisions.⁵⁰ The closer we get to God, the more self-control we obtain with its corresponding independence. Consequently, a desire for independence is God inspired; yet, if not contained, it becomes counterproductive and can lead to a loss of self-control and destroy personal relationships.

Anger in all its forms, including passive-aggressive behavior, is a sure sign that our God-inspired quest for power over our life has exceeded the healthy limits God has set and has become an 'unfriendly fire.'

There is probably nothing more physically and emotionally fulfilling than intimate sexual relations with one's spouse. The harmony between our physical and spiritual natures that is realized in the mutual giving and receiving

of marital relations is beautiful, inspiring and simulates the ecstasy we will receive when we achieve complete harmony between our spirit and body and unity with God.

Yet, there is nothing with greater potential to cause explosive lasting harm than sexual passions expressed outside the bonds of matrimony. Because sex is so powerful, its destructive effect is enormous when we engage in behavior beyond the bounds set by God. Unfortunately, casual sex is flaunted throughout society today, but its effect will be no less damaging for generations to come than the wildfires of Southern California. We should flee from this real danger as quickly as families evacuate their homes when threatened by wildfires.

Greed and affluence are curses of modern society. I am convinced that material things are the idols and false gods of our day. Society seems to worship at the altar of materialism. We even offer sacrifice of unborn children to the god of convenience, and call it abortion on demand. We want to gratify our immediate desires without having any consequences for our actions.

Yet, we all need sufficient material resources to satisfy our physical needs. Our choices are limited if our income is too restricted. God wants us to be free to act so that we can learn and grow, and through this process become more at one with Him. Instead, many of us do not live within our means and we become slaves to debt while limiting our growth and ability to become closer to God. No wonder God instituted tithing⁵¹ as a means to help us realize how much we worship the god of wealth, and provide the means to purge us of this destructive practice.

Obesity and eating disorders are becoming a major problem in our culture as well. Again, when we take

something good to excess, even something as necessary as eating food, we invariably have problems. Consequently, in our 'anything goes' society, individuals' health is destroyed and lives are shortened because people gratify their physical appetites without restraint and in complete disregard for the consequences of their actions.

It is interesting to me that so many ancient religions embrace fasting as a means to get closer to God.⁵² It makes sense to me that if we learn how to control our craving for food, then we are better able to keep all of our physical appetites within healthy limits and in balance with our spiritual nature. If an individual has addiction problems, I recommend that they include fasting as a regular component of their recovery.

I am amazed by the number of individuals, especially young people, who are engulfed in an insatiable quest for fame. God wants us to have self respect and a healthy sense of self-confidence. However, once again, when our passions exceed the healthy limits God has established, we suffer.

How many youth get caught up in drugs and other destructive behaviors because they want to be part of the crowd? How many people fail to excel because they are seeking validation from others to overcome their insecurities? Unfortunately, none of these things will satisfy our need to feel valued.

The only source to overcome our inadequacies is inside of us. We need to tap into that spark of divinity within us and respond to it, feed it and help it develop. No outside source or recognition can fully satisfy the emptiness we feel inside that drives us to seek fame and fortune. Fame and accolades are very fleeting. As the Preacher says in Ecclesiastes, "vanity, vanity, all is vanity."⁵³

Some individuals and religions teach that our spirits are prisoners trapped inside our physical bodies, and that we will never achieve unity with God until our spirit completely dominates our physical being and eliminates all natural desires. This is a false doctrine.

God intends for us to enjoy life and our physical bodies. In fact, we show our gratitude to God for the gift of life by living it to the fullest. However, this is not possible unless we achieve harmony and balance between our spiritual and physical natures. We realize greater fulfillment in life, discover our true and complete nature, and become more whole as our spiritual and physical natures learn to dance in unison.

As we learn to bring our body in unity with our spirit, we experience enhanced and heightened sensations of physical and emotional joy. However, if we allow the lusts of the flesh to dominate our spirit, then our sensations begin to shut down. We feel less and less, and need more and more physical stimuli in order to reach the same level of artificial high that was reached previously.

It is interesting to me how drugs, alcohol, smoking, illicit sex, and overeating actually reduce our ability to enjoy our physical sensations. How numb and empty do men feel when addicted to pornography? Yet, how many smokers discover an enhanced taste of food after they quit smoking? The high that is felt whenever we allow our physical cravings to dominate our spiritual nature is only a short-lived counterfeit of the real high we realize when our dual natures are in harmony.

Two keys in learning how to achieve this unity between body and soul are: first, follow God's commands; and second, listen to and follow the inner voice that tells us

what is right and true. As we learn to recognize and follow God's direction, we will learn to live a more harmonious and full life.

WE ARE WHAT WE THINK

No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon.

Matthew 6: 24

Proverbs 23:7 teaches us that, “as [a man] thinketh in his heart, so is he.” Science is now beginning to understand this great truth taught by God’s servant thousands of years ago.

As we think and act, our brain builds little connections between the brain cells affected by those thoughts and actions. These connections are like little bridges that enable electrical impulses or information to flow from one brain cell to the next. The more often we think or do the same thing, the more and larger these bridges and expressways between the affected brain cells become, so that the flow of information is expedited.⁵⁴ That is why it becomes easy to ride a bike or throw a ball after we have done it several times. This is also how habits are formed and why they are so hard to break. We are literally wiring and programming our brain as we go through life. Consequently, the things we think and do are very important because that is who and what we are actually becoming.

The other night I listened to a debate between

presidential candidates. I am sure they each were sincere in some of the beliefs they expressed, but these beliefs were often diametrically opposed to each other. We all have had a conversation with someone whom we felt was completely deluded. Yet, that individual sincerely believed his position.

Understanding how the brain works helps explain why different individuals can hold such divergent, sincerely held views of the truth. The more they think a certain way, the more entrenched that idea becomes. That is the basis of 'group thought,' where individuals reinforce their beliefs by limiting their association to mainly be with those individuals holding similar ideas, as academia is currently accused of doing.

Yet, truth is not relative. Truth is how things actually were in the past, currently are, and will become. God is truth. The closer we get to God, the clearer are our views until we reach the point, like the prophets of old, where all things past, present, and future are revealed to us. Now, this will not fully happen until we become at one with God in the hereafter, but we can get a glimpse of it now as we learn to place our thoughts in tune with God and reality.

Thoughts also are precursors to our actions, good and bad. No wonder we are taught to control our thoughts. Rarely, if ever, does an individual indulge in immoral action without first fantasizing about such behavior. Likewise, individuals need to first aspire, plan and then diligently execute their plan to accomplish great achievements. Athletes are trained to repeatedly visualize themselves successfully performing their event to increase the likelihood of winning.

Again, the brain creates and expands connections between the affected brain cells as we engage in thought. The more we think or do the same thing, the more connections

are created and the larger they become. The more and larger these information bridges become, the easier and more readily our thoughts will flow through and follow the course these bridges provide, thus reinforcing the likelihood of even further similar thoughts and behavior. Consequently, if we learn to control our thoughts, we not only increase the likelihood of accomplishing our goals but also make it easier to do.

Conversely, it is important to avoid evil thoughts and bad behavior because it makes it more likely to continue. When we went sledding as children, we learned that the first person to go down a hill of fresh snow would not go very far. However, once the path was created, the next person would go down the hill much faster and further. Our thoughts and actions are very similar to this. That is why once we do something wrong, the next time it is much easier to do, until we eventually lose all sense of restraint and remorse. This is also why, once we start down a familiar path of bad behavior, we may find it nearly impossible to resist the ultimate outcome. Learning to identify and avoid these trigger points is vitally important.

The more we are aware of what we are thinking, the more power we have to control and direct our thoughts. We are not helpless creatures, doomed by our upbringing and past behavior. We were created to think and to act. We have free will because God has given each of us a portion of His Spirit, which is independent and intelligent. Hence, the power is within us to accomplish things of our own free will and choice.

However, if we fail to properly exercise this power, we become subject more and more to our current and past thoughts and behavior. The scriptures talk about Satan

beginning to lead his subjects with a thread, then a rope and eventually the chains of hell.⁵⁵ However, with the Lord's help, we have the power to break these bonds. Just as these connections between our brain cells grow the more frequently they are used, likewise, over time they decrease when they are not used. Just as a muscle atrophies due to lack of use, these information bridges in the brain fall into disrepair unless they are maintained by repeated use.

I also strongly believe that when we have a born-again experience, the Lord has the power to burn the bridges that lead us down. However, unless we build new bridges in our mind to direct our thoughts in a new positive direction, our brain will have a natural tendency to rebuild the old negative bridges. Once we remove something negative from our lives, we need to fill the void with something positive or the vacuum will be filled again by what used to occupy that space.

It is a great blessing that the more we are aware of what we are thinking, the more power we have to control and direct our thoughts. When we find ourselves thinking something that pulls us down, we have the power to replace it with positive uplifting thoughts. We may even want to keep a ready inventory of positive thoughts (such as our spouse, child, parent, friend, music, art, nature or a peaceful location) handy so we can immediately choose to replace negative thoughts or temptations with thoughts that uplift. The key to controlling our thoughts is to consciously seek good things so consistently that this approach eventually becomes second nature to us.

Paul's last advice to the Philippians tells us how this is done. He admonished: "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things

are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”⁵⁶

I find it interesting that Paul admonishes us to start with being honest. Being honest and seeking truth is the foundation on which everything else is built. We need to be honest with others so that we will have the power to be honest with ourselves, which is one of the hardest things to do.

If we are honest with ourselves we will know, as the Savior said: “I can of mine own self do nothing.”⁵⁷ Once we understand our own nothingness, yet God’s great love and mercy which He extends to us, we are then ready to approach the source of all truth and goodness so that He can bless us. We must open ourselves up to Him and be willing to allow Him to burn and destroy all those chains that pull us down.

Paul then admonishes us to seek after things that are pure, lovely, of good report, virtuous, or praiseworthy. We must *seek* after good things. If we really seek goodness, then we have claim on the promise that we shall find it.

The other day I was driving while deep in thought on a personal matter, and I drove right past the off-ramp I needed to take. I had been driving for almost half an hour and I was oblivious to the world around me. Has that ever happened to you? Life can be just like driving that car, missing out on all of the goodness around us that God has placed here to edify us and help us come closer to Him. If we do not look for it, we will miss it.

We need to look for the goodness of God in nature and in the people we meet. The world and each one of us have the light of Christ within us, and as we look for it we

will find it and be edified in the process. Seeking or looking for good is how we always remember Him so we can have claim on the promise to always have His Spirit with us. This is how we become at one with God, the Spirit of Truth and Love.

DEPRESSION

Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

John 14: 27

Depression is a very sensitive subject that I feel requires special treatment. It is probably Satan's greatest tool to damn our soul by sapping our will to move forward, and it probably afflicts more individuals than we realize.

I do not profess to have all of the answers, or even a few, to help with this huge problem; but, I sincerely desire to attempt to assist those who struggle with this issue and hope that what I write may help in some small way.

Because of the extra-sensitive nature of this issue, I have decided to take a different approach in writing about it than I have with the other essays in this book. I chose to approach this subject in the format of a letter from a father to his child and hope that those who suffer from depression may feel the yearnings of a parent for them individually - even if their parent is not yet in a position to express these thoughts. Please be assured that at least your Heavenly Father has tender feelings for you and would express thoughts even more caring than these if you could hear Him.

Dear Child:

Thank you so much for letting us know that you are feeling down. I am so glad you did. It is important for you to have an outlet for your feelings so that you don't keep them all bottled up inside, and that is what parents are for. I want to reach through the pages of this letter and give you a big hug, but all I can do is hope that you can feel my love through the things I write. We love you so much and want you to feel it.

I feel bad that we were not there for you more while you were growing up. I wish we gave you much more attention and positive reinforcement. You are so good, and you deserve to know that we appreciate all of your efforts. I believe that because we were so busy and involved in dealing with life's challenges, you were neglected more than I like to admit and more than you realize.

I fear that this neglect has created your own emotional black holes which pull you down, regardless of how hard you try to resist. It makes it more difficult for you to relate and connect with other people and makes you extra sensitive to feeling alone. And when you face challenges, all of these old suppressed hurt feelings come rushing back, and you feel abandoned and alone.

Please know that you are not alone. We are there with you in spirit and think about you continually, pray for you, and love you. You will always belong to our family and I hope you feel our loving support.

Additionally, even though it may sound trite, it is true that the Lord is there to support you as well, and I hope this letter will help give you tools to be able to tap into more of the support the Lord wants to give you.

I wish I could go back in time and fix everything, but I can't. All I can do now is try my best to be honest with you, admit my faults so that it can help you see where some of your challenges come from so that you will have more power to deal with them, try to show my love for you and help you feel it, and trust in the Lord to fill in the holes of the past. I know He can and will do it as we turn to Him.

Unfortunately, that is often the stickler. How do we do this? You try so hard to do what is right, but you feel like you repeatedly mess things up and nothing works out, so why keep trying? I know. I tried focusing on accomplishing things for decades without really understanding the big picture, so eventually I gave up and did some really stupid things too.

Now I understand life much better, and want you to avoid the frustration I felt for years trying so hard and still not having things work out. I see you falling into the same trap I did of feeling worthless. What I was really doing was avoiding dealing with the emotional holes from my upbringing, which in reality kept me from progressing. I was stuck in a loop that repeated itself like the movie *Groundhog Day*.

The key is connecting with God. This is achieved by seeking light and truth. Christ is the light of the world and all good things come from Him. As we seek light and truth, we are able to see His influence all around us, and He fills our souls with love and hope.

There are two tools or ideas that help me to stay in tune with the Lord's Spirit. First, look for and try to experience all of the good things in nature and the world around us; and second, look for the good in the faces and actions of the people we run into and see throughout the day.

The scriptures teach us that Christ not only created the

world, but His Spirit (the light of Christ) is in and throughout all things and brings life to all living things. If His Spirit or influence is in His creations, then we can find it there if we seek and look for it.

Try an experiment this next week and tell me how it turns out. Each day, try to identify your various sensations, sight, smell, touch, hearing, and taste throughout the day. Try to concentrate on feeling. What does the cool breeze feel like? What colors are in the sunset? What does the food in each meal taste like? While you are at it, tell us about everything else as well. It does not have to all be positive. Remember, it is light and TRUTH you are seeking, so in order to connect with God it is important to identify all of your feelings. Is that smell gross? That noise sure is annoying, etc. It is okay to experience all feelings, but try to focus on the positive.

Sometimes when we get in touch with our feelings, we feel the hurt from the past and try to shut down all of our feelings. But, we connect with God mainly through our feelings. So experience the full spectrum, but concentrate on looking for the good or the influence of God all around us. I have found that as we do this, we don't hide from our pain, but bring it out in the open so that the Lord can take it away. We will not feel as alone. The sound of a bird or the beauty of a flower will lift our spirit and we will feel closer to God and more connected with the whole world and humanity.

However, if we do not look for it, life will be like riding in a car oblivious to the world passing by, and you will miss it. Again, try to get in touch with your feelings by experiencing all of the sensations of life while you look for the influence of God in all of His creations. If you have seen the earth, sun, moon and stars, you have seen the Lord. The

Lord promises us that if we will seek Him we shall find Him. Now you know a place or a way to seek Him. Try it. You might like it.

The second approach is to look for the good, or in other words the light of Christ, in the people we meet. We know that everyone has the light of Christ within them. So we can seek God and connect with Him by looking for the influence of the light of Christ in the people we interact with every day.

Look for situations where people are kind to others. Was the bus driver friendly? Was a little girl helpful to her younger brother? All this goodness comes from Christ, and as we look for it and recognize it, we will feel closer to Him. Also, look for the goodness that shines through individual faces. Some of the faces may have been hardened by life's challenges, but I have found that if I look for it, I can feel the influence that God has in their lives and see it in their eyes and faces.

Everyone has different strengths, so His influence is felt and reflected in different ways in different people, but it is still there. Granted, it is easier to see it in some people than in others, because some people have accepted and are following the light of Christ within them more than others. But regardless, you can be uplifted and feel the Lord's love for you by identifying His influence in the lives of the people around you.

I have found that as I do this, I not only feel more connected to God, but I also feel more connected to other people, and they feel more connected to me. We are edified together. I strongly believe that if you try this approach, you will feel less alone. It has helped me a great deal.

I hope these two ideas help you, but these are just a

couple of ideas. There are many other ways to get close to God. Music is another example. Try different things and find what works for you. Remember, prayer is always a great way to connect with God. You may also try reading the scriptures and find things in there that will help you as well. Please remember, WE LOVE YOU!

It is also important to exercise whatever particle of faith you have and reach out to serve others. If we focus on ourselves and our problems, we draw in and away from God, but if we reach out and serve others, we draw closer to God and the peace and freedom he offers us. It is impossible to know a master whom we do not serve, and it is God's work and glory to bless and lift mankind. So, as we serve others we are actually serving God, our King.

Look for ways to serve by simply going the extra mile at work, volunteering to help at a local school or hospital, or joining a choir at your church. There are many ways to serve. Even if your service is something very small, it is important to reach out and start to do something that benefits others. As we follow the Savior's example and serve others, we not only draw closer to Him, we also start to connect more with other people and receive strength and encouragement from them as well.

Again, it is good for you to open up and express some of your feelings to family and friends. Please keep doing this. It is healthy. As the scriptures state, it is not good for man (or woman) to be alone, so reach out to other people. I really believe it will help you a lot if you relax and try to enjoy life. The other stuff will come if you take care of yourself.

This coming week, try writing in a journal and make note of details about your life and what you like and what

you don't. What is the food like? What is the weather like? Is it cold? Is it windy? Or is it hot and dry? What does your neighborhood look like? Are there many trees or other landscaping, and what do they look like? What color is the sunset? What is the music you like to listen to? What clothes do you wear? How do you spend your day? I think you get the idea.

Also, you may want to make a point of trying something new each day. Taking a different route to work or buying a different treat to eat can give you some variety to stimulate your senses. Then write about those feelings. As you learn to express your feelings, it will help you identify them and in the process get closer to God.

We all can benefit from applying a neat saying I heard the other day. It was: "Look up, not down. Look forward, not backwards. Look out, not in."

Well, as usual, I went on and on too much, but I really want you to know I love you and want to bless you in any way I can. We love you always.

Love,
Dad

YOUR FLIGHT IS CANCELLED

*Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust
also in him; and he shall bring it to pass.*

Psalms 37: 5

Several years ago I worked for a company that conducted a lot of business in Mexico. I speak fluent Spanish, so I often would travel to Mexico on business.

One day I was scheduled to take an early morning flight from Aguascalientes, situated in north central Mexico, to Mexico City, located in the southern central part of the country. Unfortunately, the plane we were scheduled to take was not available due to some mechanical difficulty. So, the airline diverted a flight from Leon, a city close by, to pick us up. This flight was originally scheduled to go directly from Leon to Mexico City.

When we boarded this plane in Aguascalientes, the people already on the plane were quite unhappy. They were supposed to be on a direct flight to Mexico City, and now they had an unscheduled stop that would make them arrive later than they had originally planned. Additionally, the plane was now crowded so the flight would not be as comfortable. I heard several individuals grumbling about the inconvenience this change imposed on them.

We all got situated in our seats and we were ready to go. Then, all at once, everything died. The lights went out,

the roar of the engine ceased, the air conditioning stopped blowing. There was an eerie silence for a moment. Then the silence was broken with individuals complaining and verbally wondering what next would go wrong.

The intercom was not working, so the flight attendants went down the aisle explaining that the captain did not know what was wrong. They assured us that the captain was diligently trying to identify and solve the problem and requested our patience. Now the passengers from Leon began to become even more irritated.

After quite a while, maybe a half hour or so, the flight attendants notified all of the passengers that they still were not able to isolate the problem, so the flight was cancelled. They informed us that the airline would send another plane later that afternoon, around 4:30 P.M., to pick us up and take us to Mexico City.

Now the people from Leon were extremely upset. They were not even supposed to be there, and now they were stranded for the whole day in a city with nowhere to go. Many people had important plans for the day that they would miss. People were grumbling and swearing as they bumped into each other while they retrieved their bags from the overhead compartments as they prepared to deplane.

The flight attendants mentioned that we could stay on the plane if we wanted, but practically everyone decided to deplane. However, I had sat on those hard stone benches in that airport plenty of times before and knew how uncomfortable they were, so I elected to stay on the plane, even though it would get hot without any air-conditioning.

I moved up to one of the front seats and spent several hours reading and visiting with the co-pilot and flight attendants. Then, a very interesting thing happened. An

engineer who was working on the plane came up to the co-pilot and stated:

“The people on this flight do not know how lucky they are. This plane would have never made it to Mexico City. It would have crashed mid-flight. A master electrical wire was so thin that the surge of electricity from starting the engines caused it to break. If the plane had taken off, sometime during the long flight to Mexico City, the vibrations of the plane would have broken this wire, and the plane would have crashed. Everyone was so fortunate that this wire broke while they were on the ground.”

I learned a great lesson that day. When things go wrong in our lives, we may not see the whole picture, and it might actually be a blessing in disguise. To this day, the people from Leon believe that this was a horrible experience, yet in reality the problem they lament actually saved their lives.

As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God’s ways higher than our ways.⁵⁸ He sees and knows all things, and is loving and merciful. When bad things happen, let us try to realize that we do not see the whole picture. We need to trust in God and His love. In fact, I am convinced that one of the reasons bad things happen is to help us learn to trust God more than we would otherwise, so that He can bless us more deeply and bring us closer to Him.

God can fix the problems in our lives, but it may not happen the way we think. Learning to trust God and His love and wisdom is one of the greatest lessons we can learn in life. So, when bad things happen in your life, just remember you may be glad your flight was cancelled if you knew the whole story.

CONTROL FREAK

*And be ye kind one to another,
tenderhearted, forgiving one another,
even as God for Christ's sake hath
forgiven you.*

Ephesians 4: 32

Invariably, individuals with unresolved emotional issues have problems with control, whether exercising it improperly or in dealing with others asserting it over them.

Control issues are based on insecurity. One does not grab the steering wheel while someone else is driving the car unless he feels the car is out of control and is going to crash. On the other hand, some individuals who are unsure of themselves will abdicate to others in an effort to pass the buck and avoid responsibility for their actions. They then resent the fact that they gave up their independence and become angry, usually with the very person they freely gave their freedom away to.

Insecurity is generally caused by life experiences where we have been disappointed or injured by other people's actions, often our parents. We accordingly lose trust in others.

Consequently, many individuals feel they can only rely on themselves. However, control is an illusion. We are all imperfect, so those who try to control their world

will repeatedly be disappointed. Their view of the world is distorted and not completely based in reality. A warped mind does not think straight. So, they often blame others for their continual disappointment, thus perpetuating the insatiable drive to gain even more control, resulting in the same disappointing effect. In fact, because their life is based on abnormal behavior, they will often turn people off and few will want to deal with them, thus making life even more difficult and disappointing.

The lives of persons with control issues are out of harmony with God and the universe, otherwise they would feel no need to control their environment. Naturally, if one is out of harmony with God and the universe then one would feel insecure.

The converse is also true. The closer one is to God, the more assured he becomes, because his life is built on a sure foundation. Jesus used the example of a foolish man building a house on sand so when the storms of life came his house was washed away. However, a wise man built his house on a rock, so he survived troubled times.⁵⁹ Christ is the rock of our salvation, and if we build our lives on Him and strive to become like Him, we too will survive the vicissitudes of life that are sure to come.

Everyone will let us down at some point. God is the only one we can completely count on. You can rely on Him completely. As we exercise faith in Him, our knowledge of this assurance grows, bringing stability and security into our life. This assurance creates confidence and peace. Because we are secure, we are able to remain calm in the midst of turmoil.

As we discover and then develop our divine nature and get closer to God, we become more in tune with truth

and reality and are more sure of ourselves, thus gaining more actual power and control over our lives. Consequently, as we align ourselves with God and become more like Him, we gain more true self-confidence.

God wants us to be free to act so that we can grow and develop to become more like Him. It is the only way. Our desire for independence is God-inspired. We naturally resist and resent others who try to impose their will on us and deprive us of this God-given right. However, many individuals freely surrender this gift from God and become slaves due to excess debt, addiction, negative attitudes, or simply to avoid responsibility.

Anger is a natural reaction when individuals with control issues feel that they lack control of their surroundings. However, if viewed properly, anger is a warning sign that alerts us to the fact that we are out of harmony with God. If we do not heed this warning, our life will continue to become more and more out of control, until we become a control freak with destroyed personal relationships. However, if we recognize that anger is a warning sign and heed it, then God can turn a negative attribute into a positive one, if we will simply let Him.

Picture your brain as a hook that grabs on to thoughts and feelings as they pass by. However, we have the power to determine whether those thoughts stay or not. Envision a switch that controls this hook in your brain. When you turn off this switch, the hook relaxes and releases these thoughts and feelings, and when you switch the hook on it grabs and holds on to the thought or feeling passing by. You decide whether this hook will hold on to negative or positive thoughts and feelings. If we hold on to negative thoughts, they will fester and grow, and we will develop an angry temperament.

However, we have the power to let them go, but we must grab on to positive uplifting thoughts and feelings to fill the void from the negative thoughts we have released, or they will return. Consequently, we should implement the strategy of having a ready inventory of positive thoughts to focus on when we want to escape from the disturbing thoughts and feelings that pull us down.

All good things come from God. So, as we look for the good around us, we will not only find it but also find God in the process. We find what we look for, whether it is good or evil, so let's look for eternal treasures instead of garbage. If we are to maintain peace and security in the midst of this tumultuous world, we need to let go of our fears and trust God. That is one of the great lessons of life.

In my opinion, the need to trust God is the theme of the entire Old Testament. As we learn to trust God and let go of our desire to control things, we have claim on His promise to help us. "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."⁶⁰

SACRIFICE THE NEED FOR VALIDATION

If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

1 John 4: 12

Responding to a need for validation is evidence we are on the wrong path, leading us away from God and His happiness.

The purpose of life is to become like God. We are all children of God. As such, He desires to give us all that He has. This is possible only to the extent we become like Him. We lived and worshipped God, the Eternal Father, as pre-mortal beings before we were born here on earth. Our current phase of existence is part of His plan to convert us to become like Him.

This metamorphosis occurs to the extent we allow God to have His way with us. Our life here on earth is designed to motivate us to seek Him with such intensity that this conversion can take place to a greater degree than would be possible in any other way. A key to achieving this purpose of life is learning to seek God's will, and recognize it, so that we will allow Him to raise us up to become at one with Him.

When we were born here on earth, we were separated from God and the direct influence of His love. Some individuals refer to this as a veil or curtain of forgetfulness

that keeps us from remembering our pre-earth life with God. This separation from God and His love creates a void inside of us that acts like a vacuum, drawing us in and making us self-centered.

This natural void, caused by our separation from God, is amplified by being born into an imperfect world with imperfect parents. The neglect of parents, and the effect of other individuals' misdeeds in our lives, creates emotional issues we need to overcome.

These emotional issues are evidenced by our need for validation, our hypersensitivity to other individuals' imperfections, our obsessive out-of-balance behavior, and our desire to control our circumstances and others. All of these issues come from our self-centered approach to life, which is caused by the void inside of us due to our separation from God.

Self-centeredness is the father of all sin. Sin is nothing more than any action contrary to the will of God. It is God's will that we become like Him, so any un-godlike activity is sin. Consequently, all sin, in essence, is an expression of pride (our will verses God's will). Pride actually is the only real sin. All sins are nothing more than pride expressing itself in various forms.

The veracity of this truth is demonstrated when we look at the root of all negative activity. Just take a moment to think about your own life. When was the last time you were angry and said something hurtful to your spouse, co-worker, or close friend? What triggered that reaction? Did you feel you were disrespected, not valued, ignored, or imposed upon? Why did that even matter unless you were sensitive to some personal emotional deficiency?

This is true for all sins. Dishonesty is usually motivated

by a desire for approval or by selfishness. Decadent behavior results from a self-indulgent attitude. Violence often is an overreaction to something one is hypersensitive to, or comes from a disregard for others. Vanity and the desire to be popular result from the craving to fill a void in our life.

Interestingly, depression is a sister of pride because it often involves being too self-absorbed. Consequently, depression is the opposite side of the same coin as pride. Even trying to prove our self-worth through ‘good works’ is a form of pride that actually is counter-productive. In analyzing all improper behavior, one can usually trace it back to a desire to gratify some selfish impulse or to avoid some personal emotional issue.

I have learned from sad experience that responding to a need for validation is evidence I am on the wrong path, leading away from God and His happiness. Interestingly, catering to any selfish interest only exacerbates the need for more self gratification. It does not solve the underlying cause, but makes it worse.

Only God can fill the emotional hole inside of us. As we engage in un-Godlike behavior, we move away from God, making the void in our life even greater. As we continue down this cycle of a self-centered approach to life, we become more miserable and unhappy until the quality of our life implodes, and we are left alone with nothing but ruined relationships.

However, there is balance in the universe. So, along with this enticement to do evil, there is a comparable quest to find God. Without this quest, we would not allow God to convert us to become at one with Him. God gives us weaknesses and our “issues” so we will be humble and allow God to convert us.⁶¹ We need to be separated from God in

order to exist in an environment where we are motivated to seek Him with sufficient intensity that we will be converted and become like Him.

So, the very void that creates the environment for temptation and sin also acts as the impetus for positive change. This life is intended to be a metamorphosis where we change and mature into the creature God desires us to become, if we will simply let Him have His way with us.

However, change is often painful, so we resist it. Hence, we need an environment where we are enticed by both good and evil. We choose what to follow. Hopefully, we learn from experience to choose the better part. Otherwise, we will relive our negative experiences over and over again, like in the movie *Groundhog Day*, and never resolve our issues so that we will be able to move forward.

The key to personal progress is seeking light and truth. The very emptiness inside of us that draws us in to become self-centered acts as the catalyst to motivate us to turn to God. If we truly seek God, we will find Him, and He will convert us to become more like Him.

In this process of learning by the things we suffer, the Savior eliminates and off-sets the consequences of our wrong choices. He lifts the burden (guilt) of our sins and also heals the effect (injury) sin has on us and on others. That is the miracle of the atonement. As we come unto Christ, he heals our souls by filling the void inside of us with His love. However, we must turn from a self-centered life to look out and up to God.

Consequently, whenever we respond to the void inside (a need for validation and control) instead of following light and truth, we pull in and away from God and His happiness. Are our actions being motivated by a fear of

not being good enough, not being valued, or of not being in control? If so, we need to let go and turn our heart over to God so He can fill it. It is the only way to heal our souls. Otherwise, we will continue to live with our same old issues being expressed in a variety of ways. We progress toward God by facing our fears and by not responding to them. Instead, we need to choose goodness (light & truth) and let go of our fears.

We need to respond to the inner-voice that tells us to do what is right. As we follow that inner-voice, we will learn to better recognize its promptings over time. However, we must first obey His commandments, which are comparable to a parent screaming to his child to get out of the street because a car is coming. How do we expect to recognize the whisperings of His Spirit if we ignore the warnings that He shouts to us.

God wants us to draw closer to Him. So, once He has our attention, He will often whisper His will to us so that we will need to listen more intently and draw even closer to God in order to understand the things He whispers to us. As we draw closer and closer to God, we are thus able to understand His will more and more, and in the process we become more like Him.

As we come unto the Savior and follow Him, we have more peace and happiness in this life; and, after we leave this phase of existence, we will become joint-heirs with Christ of all that our Heavenly Father has.⁶² Let us all be willing to allow God to convert us into the king or queen he wants to make us by not seeking validation in our own way.

EINSTEIN AND SOYBEANS

Judge not, that ye be not judged. For with what judgment ye judge, ye shall be judged.

Matthew 7: 1-2

When I was a teenager, my parents told me a story about Albert Einstein which made a strong impression on me. While my parents were dating, they attended a devotional talk given by world renowned chemist, Doctor Henry Eyring, who also just happened to be the author of my high school chemistry textbook. Doctor Eyring became a good friend of Albert Einstein while they both taught at Princeton University. Often they would go for early morning walks before classes would start.

One morning as they were walking, Einstein noticed a poor African-American farmer out hoeing in the field. Einstein did not recognize the type of plants growing in the field, so he stopped and asked this laborer what type of plants they were. Now realize, this was in the late 1940's when there was much more racial prejudice in America than there is today. The poor farmer replied that they were soybeans.

Einstein had not heard of soybeans before, so he asked the farmer what they were used for. After the man explained how useful soybeans were, Einstein continued to ask this poor itinerate black farmer more questions, while the

farmer continued to teach Einstein all about soybeans.

It was quite a sight, the ‘smartest’ person in the world standing there being taught by someone who most people considered so ignorant that they would not even give him the time of day. After 15 minutes or so, Einstein thanked the poor farmer for being so generous with his time and for all of the information he shared with them about soybeans. Then Dr. Eyring and Einstein continued their morning stroll.

This story helps explain the greatness of Einstein. He sought knowledge and truth from whatever source he could find. But, not only does this story demonstrate the greatness of Einstein, it teaches us all a couple of great truths: 1) No one is so great and knowledgeable that he cannot learn something from every individual he meets; and 2) None of us is so low or insignificant that we cannot contribute something to every individual we encounter every day.

Unfortunately, most of us are so focused on filling our own emotional needs that our perception of reality gets distorted, and we do not realize the value of the individuals we meet each day and our own intrinsic worth. Instead, we generally try to counterbalance the emptiness we feel inside with a deluded sense of significance. Pride is a tool we all use to hide from our personal emotional issues. Generally, the greater our emotional deficiency, the more pride we have, and the more we are annoyed by it in others. The pride we see in others is only a reflection of our own pride. A critical and judgmental attitude is simply a byproduct of our pride and the emptiness we feel inside.

We demonstrate our pride when we compare ourselves with others. When we feel resentful because we think someone else thinks they are better than us, or when we feel we are better than others and look down on them,

even if we think we are feeling sorry for them, we are almost always demonstrating our pride and are out of touch with reality to some degree. This pride is a distortion of truth or reality that often creates tension or difficulties in dealing with other people and with the challenges of life. It blinds us to our own faults and obstructs our growth and development.

I have found that a good way to overcome our pride is to actively look for the goodness around us and in other people. We all have been inspired by the decency, kindness, integrity, or sacrifice of others. Who does not feel love while looking into a child's eyes, or feel uplifted when someone smiles and waves to you? We all have a spark of divinity within us – a light of Christ – that connects all of us to each other.

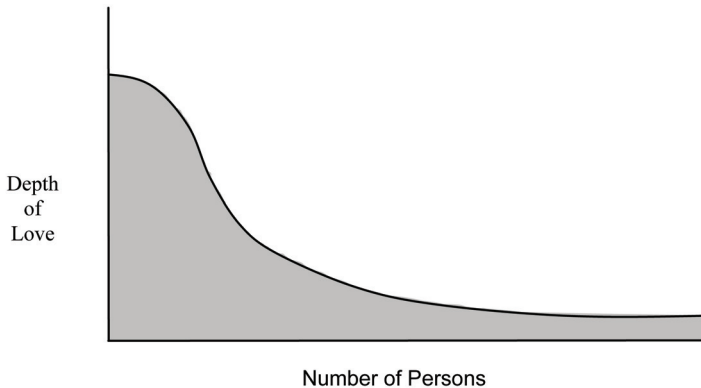
As we look for this light of Christ, or goodness in others, we feel more love for others and feel more connected to them. This is the opposite of pride. We will glory in other individuals' achievements and be motivated by their goodness. As we seek the light of Christ in others, both of us will be edified and uplifted together as we both draw closer to God.

As we actively seek to find the goodness around us and in other people, we are actually seeking God. He then is able to fill our emotional holes and free us to love others more deeply and broadly. Love is a gift of God that he gives to those who diligently seek Him. He enables us to become less concerned with ourselves and more interested in others. The depth of our love increases. At the same time, the breadth of our love, or the number of people we care for, increases. We become more like God because we feel more love for others.

We can almost graph our progress in becoming at

one with God by analyzing the depth and breadth of the love we have for others. In the graph below, notice that the vertical axis denotes how much love we have for someone else, and the horizontal axis shows the number of individuals we care about.

Perhaps you are like me. I feel a lot of love for my family, somewhat less for my friends, even less for my acquaintances, and then some residual altruism for mankind in general. The amount of my love quotient is demonstrated by the filled in area on the graph below.



However, God is love, and has infinite love for everyone. So, His graph would be completely filled in. Granted, it is impossible for us to reach a unity with God and feel infinite love for everyone in this life; but, I do know that when I feel closer to God, I feel more love for others.

I am convinced that the challenge of life is to seek God by looking for goodness around us and in other people. Thus, we can experience more love while we live and also potentially become like God. That is our destiny if we will simply seek God and trust Him enough to let Him direct our lives.

BALANCE IN LIFE

They shall run to and fro to seek the word of the Lord, and shall not find it.

Amos 8: 12

“**W**hat? Me, obsessive? No way! I’m just busy.” However, the mere fact that so many of us feel that we are too busy is evidence that both our society and our individual lives are out of balance.

It seems we are all rushing about frantically trying to find something that is missing from our lives. We feel obliged to rush to work, rush to an appointment, rush home, rush to take the kids to school, to the dentist, to soccer practice. We even rush to the movies or other entertainment. The fact that we feel stressed due to all of the demands on our time indicates that our life is out of balance.

If our life is not in balance, we are putting too much emphasis on some aspect of it. In essence, to the degree our life is out of balance, we are obsessive and compulsive in some areas of our life.

If our lives were really in balance, then why are we rushing about so much as if compelled by some invisible force to jump from task to task like puppets? Are we really directing a well managed and balanced life, or are we actually controlled by a subconscious quest to find the acceptance and love we are missing? Do you feel calm and at peace,

or anxious and agitated? Do you ever find yourself doing something that you promised yourself to never do again? Do you get upset with your children, and then promise yourself to never do it again, only to find yourself raising your voice once more? How many other things in your life are out of control?

The degree to which our lives are out of control and out of balance is evidence of the extent to which we are allowing unfulfilled emotional needs to control our lives, instead of our own self will. To that extent, we are compulsive or obsessive probably without even realizing it. This truth applies to all of us in varying degrees.

All of us have some emotional deficiency resulting from being raised in an imperfect world. This subconscious quest to fill our personal emotional deficiency has a greater impact on our lives than we probably realize. Yet, denial seems universal and is the first major hurdle we need to overcome in order to achieve a peaceful, fulfilling, balanced life.

I learned a great lesson from my son a while ago. My wife and I use an unusual disciplinary tool in our family. We assign our children essays when they do something wrong and they are grounded until the essay is complete. The essays start out at two pages; but, if they need discipline for the same thing again, then the next essay is doubled in length to four pages, then eight pages and so forth. Also, they need to include at least two scriptures per page.

Well, a little while ago, I assigned our youngest son, then 17 years old, an essay on the subject of challenges. He had a hard time finding scriptures dealing with the word 'challenge,' so he looked up scriptures about trials. He found a scripture in the New Testament that says all trials

can be blessings in our lives.⁶³ After quoting this scripture in his essay, he wrote that there are two possible outcomes for every trial: pass or fail. If we pass, then he mentioned all of the typical things we frequently hear about becoming stronger by overcoming challenges, etc.

Then he asked, "What about when we fail?" He reminded me that the scripture said *all* trials are blessings. If that is true, then how can failing a trial be a blessing in your life? He then taught me a very important truth. We fail trials because we have a weakness; and, failing helps us identify the weakness, which is the first step in overcoming that weakness. So, even when we fail our trials in life, it will be a blessing to us if we are willing to identify our weakness, and then care enough to make the effort to work on overcoming that weakness.

Unfortunately, most of us go through life looking for external causes for our problems in order to avoid facing the frightening reality that we individually need to change. We all have emotional holes and are searching for ways to fill them. Unfortunately, some people seek to fill their emotional emptiness with things that are very destructive, such as drugs or alcohol. Many of us take good things, such as work, sex, relaxation, excitement, and yes, even religion, to an extreme in an effort to fill this void. Today, it seems that the world is infected with an epidemic of people seeking escape through pleasure and thrills. However, all these things only temporarily distract us from feeling our emptiness.

Some people seek the rigidity of rules and strict discipline to give themselves a false sense of control, while others reject almost all restrictions in hopes of escaping from the emptiness that haunts them. Neither approach actually fills our needs, so our emotional holes often grow because

we are “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

The only way to escape the gravity of our emotional black holes is to seek the love of God. We find His love by listening to and following that voice inside of us that tells us what is right and true and by looking for His influence in the world and people around us. As we follow that voice, and get closer to God, we feel more of the love and acceptance that He freely offers to everyone. His love fills our emotional vacuum to the degree we are willing to accept it by making room for it in our hearts.

As we feel His love, we are filled with peace. Feeling and knowing that we are accepted and loved by God endows us with His peace, which empowers us to be able to endure all things. Nothing else really matters that much after one feels God’s love in his heart. We realize that He is in charge, knows our situation, and will look after our eternal well being. I even speculate that the peace we will feel when we enter into the Lord’s rest after we die will be a result of our expanded vision and understanding that Christ really has it all handled, and it is not all up to us individually. We just need to trust God, let Him do what he wants to do with us, and we will be just fine.

I believe that the Lord wants us to focus on truth and light. To the extent we incorporate God’s characteristics of light and truth into our being, we will be able to endure trials. The knowledge that we are doing the Lord’s will gives us the faith necessary to endure all things. Thus, much of our faith is actually a gift from God which we receive after we exercise a particle of faith and demonstrate our desire to follow the Lord. The Lord then blesses us with His peace as we turn to Him and rely upon Him. Our peace and assurance continue to grow while we demonstrate our willingness to

accept God's gift of love and faith. This is the comfort that He promises to give to all of the true followers of Christ.

However, most of us live our lives out of balance. We take our strengths and carry them to an excess so that our strengths actually become our stumbling blocks. This unrecognized extremism often plays out in our relationships. I have a strong work ethic and organizational skills, so I became a workaholic. Consequently, my wife tried to balance our family life by pulling in the opposite direction, which in turn motivated me to become even more extreme. Needless to say, this put a strain on our relationship. I was shocked when the Lord revealed to me that I was leading this dysfunctional dance. We usually pursue our strengths, whatever they are, in an effort to fill our subconscious emotional needs because it is the easiest path to follow.

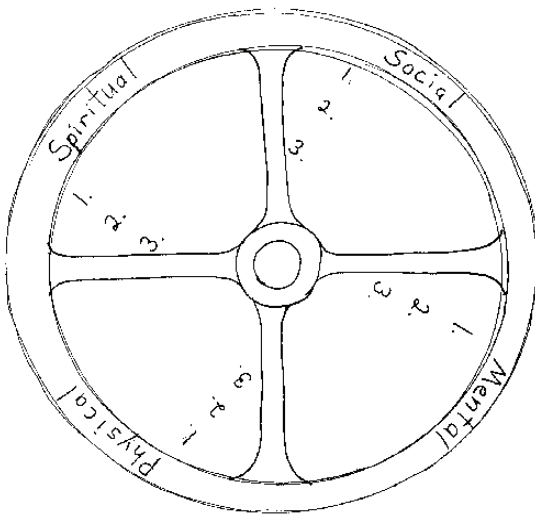
Conversely, God does not want us to live a 'flat line' existence either. He wants us to live a full and abundant life. I am confident that it pleases God when we relish life - when we work hard and play hard. I once learned a great lesson at the funeral of a good friend and client of mine who was Jewish. The rabbi taught a great truth that we show our gratitude to God for the great gift of life by living life to the fullest. I believe that.

However, everything we pursue to an excess, whether it is work or play, excitement or relaxation, will knock our life out of balance. Just as our car shakes when its wheels are out of balance, likewise we will live a bumpy existence when our life is not in balance. Consequently, the source of many of our problems may be that our life is lopsided. It certainly is worth taking a serious look at this possibility when life seems to throw us curve balls.

The best way to put our lives back into alignment is

by getting in tune with God. God maintains equilibrium in the universe, and the closer we become to Him, the more balance we will have in our lives. Therefore, consciously attempting to follow the Master's example is a great way to start. If we keep at it, we will eventually get to where we are headed.

The following is a hand-drawn diagram of a wheel that we hand out to our children at the start of each new year. It is based on the only scripture that describes Christ's growth and development as a young man. It is found in Luke, chapter 2, verse 52, and says, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and Man." We accordingly divided life into four areas: mental, physical, spiritual, and social. We then would each make three goals in each area, while keeping in mind the objective of having our life wheel in balance so we can avoid a bumpy ride through life. Granted, this approach is an oversimplification, but it might be a good place to start.



As we strive to follow the Savior's example, we should try to maintain balance between faith and works. Certainly, if we have real faith then works will follow. Faith actually empowers us to be able to act and do things we would not otherwise accomplish. However, it is also true that if you do not feel like praying, then you should pray until you feel like it. So, doing works also helps us increase our faith. That is because when we take action in an effort to do what is right, we are exercising our faith, even if it is just a particle of faith or a desire to believe. But if we exercise any degree of faith and take action and continue, then the Lord will bless us with more faith to empower us to proceed. Even the phrase, "exercise faith," denotes physical effort. However, we should not underestimate the enabling power of God's grace.

Many people struggle with the apparent tension between faith and works, but they are reciprocal. I have heard several good examples to describe this interrelationship, such as: faith and works are like a pair of scissors, or a bow and arrow. The example I personally like regarding maintaining balance between faith and works is that they are like two oars of a boat. If one relies too heavily on believing without taking comparable action, then he will go around in circles. However, if one relies too much on his own efforts and not the Lord, then he will go around in circles in the opposite direction. In order to move forward and arrive at your desired destination, one needs to row in concert. Likewise, we need to trust God and then exercise our faith by taking action. But, in all our doing, we need to remember that our own efforts really will not amount to much without the Lord's participation.

As we navigate down the path of life, letting the Lord's Spirit be our guide, we will find that life seems to

slow down. We enjoy relationships with other people more and accomplish more with a lot less effort. It is as if the Lord directs us to avoid wasting our time, energy and money pursuing shallow things, or expending a lot of unnecessary effort doing many things that turn out to be rather meaningless. Instead, as we learn to recognize his voice, he will direct us to do the few things that really matter.

HAPPINESS COMES FROM WITHIN

For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Luke 12: 34

We moved quite often while I was growing up. In fact, we lived in over 30 different houses before I left home on my twentieth birthday. That averages out to a move every nine months.

We lived in a variety of places. Sometimes we lived in very nice homes, while other times we lived in very humble surroundings. Once, when I was in the sixth grade, I stayed home sick from school for the day, so my Dad took me with him to help fix up a house in the country that we were going to move to a few days later. I suppose some things had to be fixed because there was a notice posted on the front door stating that the house was condemned by the health department. Regardless, we lived there for almost two years, and it was one of our favorite places to live.

One of the biggest contrasts in our housing occurred during my freshman and sophomore years of high school. When I was about 14 years old, we lived in a mansion that had previously belonged to the owner of the largest local newspaper, the Sacramento Bee. Governors of the State of California often held large parties and receptions at this estate before we lived there. It was a home that most people can

only dream about.

This estate consisted of about five acres nestled in a nice part of town. The residential section of the estate was situated on about one acre of land in the middle of the property, concealing the house from the busy outside world. Out front we had stables for our horse and a pasture surrounded by trees on about two acres of land. A long driveway ran up one side of the pasture and then turned into a large circular driveway in front of the mansion.

We had a three car garage – unheard of in those days – with a wood shop connected on the end farthest away from the house. We had the largest swimming pool I had ever seen at a personal residence. The back two acres consisted of a rural setting with a year-round stream running between the oak trees. There were about a half dozen large brick barbecue pits interspersed throughout this natural setting. Surely, most people would think that they had finally arrived and would be happy owning such a nice property.

A year later, we were living in a dilapidated house in the middle of a run-down rural trailer-park outside of Redding, California. The house was not much more than a shack. It consisted of three rooms and had a corrugated tin roof that leaked like a sieve and made the house sound like the inside of a drum when it rained. We hardly had any furniture. We used a Styrofoam cooler to keep our food cold because we did not have a refrigerator. We did not have a television, so our neighbor invited us to his trailer to watch the first man to step foot on the moon. My brothers and I slept on the floor next to the little table where we ate. We certainly were poor by anyone's standards.

Interestingly, I was happier living in this dilapidated house in the middle of a run-down trailer park than I was

a few months earlier living in a mansion on an estate. Our family was closer. We spent more time doing things together and talking with each other. I began to develop a more personal relationship with God and would read the scriptures each morning before the rest of the family arose.

Even though we were in the midst of upheaval, I felt more settled, secure and peaceful than I had for years. The contrast was so dramatic that, even as a teenager, I consciously registered a great life lesson: happiness comes from within and not from an outside source.

This truth was reaffirmed later when I served as a missionary among the Quechua speaking Indians of Ecuador. Most were poor and many destitute, yet many still seemed to enjoy life.

I will never forget visiting Brother Ruiz in his house with walls made out of dried mud, dirt floors and a thatched roof. His wife had died several months earlier leaving him to provide and take care of their three young boys, including a baby less than a year old. The six year-old would care for his younger siblings while his father worked in construction during the day, earning a mere pittance. When Brother Ruiz would arrive home at night, he would prepare their dinner and food for the next day, then gather his family around him to eat and play together. He and his children always seemed so full of life and love, even while struggling through this difficult time.

One particular evening when I dropped by to pay them a visit, I discovered that Brother Ruiz had invited a homeless man, even more destitute than himself, to come over for dinner and to stay with his family for a few days while this stranger looked for work. I was amazed. Here was someone who had practically nothing, sharing his meager

portion with someone even less fortunate than himself.

His great example helped me realize that the source of his family's happiness was based on gratitude and a willingness to share. This attitude of gratitude is certainly a key to happiness. It is impossible to be happy without feeling gratitude. Sharing not only evidences our gratitude, it also helps us develop more gratitude.

If we believe material things are the source of all happiness, we will be sorely disappointed. The pursuit of happiness through materialism is insatiable. We can never acquire enough stuff to fill the emotional black holes that drive us to 'succeed.' There will always be something else we want, or something else that is a little bigger or better. We will never be fully satisfied in life until we find the source of truth and love, God.

I find it very instructive that Christ referred to His message as a "well of living water" to a Samaritan woman at a well. Every day for decades, this woman had probably come to this well to draw water in a futile effort to satisfy the demands of a parched earth and human thirst. She could never draw enough water to fully satisfy all of the demands for this life-sustaining substance in this dry and barren place. She had to repeatedly return, day after day. No wonder her interest was peaked when Christ told her:

"Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life."⁶⁴

He then instructed her that the only way to really worship God is in truth and through the spirit. As many Christians can testify, once we invite God's spirit into our souls, it becomes a well of living water, quenching our emotional and spiritual thirst, and satisfying our quest for

love, meaning, and well-being.

Cars break down, clothes go out of fashion, properties require maintenance, and stocks rise and fall. Satisfaction achieved through material wealth is fleeting, at best. If fame and fortune were really the ticket to happiness, rock and movie stars would not be seeking to escape their empty and shallow lives through drugs and alcohol.

Granted, this is a material world that we live in, so acquiring the necessities of life is essential to a well-balanced existence. But, many individuals fall into the common trap of taking a good or necessary thing too far to where it obstructs their ability to acquire the peace and happiness they seek.

I strongly believe that materialism is one of the biggest problems of modern society. As the Bible states, “the love of money is the root of all evil.”⁶⁵ Because material things temporarily satisfy our physical needs, as the water from the Samaritan well, many are lured into the false belief that temporal things will completely satisfy our quest for well-being. But, it never lasts. Just as the Samaritan woman had to return to the well every day, material things will never fully satisfy our thirst.

Let us not waste our life endlessly pursuing things that cannot satisfy and will leave us wanting more. Instead, let us turn to God who will become a well of living water inside our being that will fill our souls with love, perspective, understanding, peace, and satisfaction.

OUR MISGUIDED QUEST FOR EDEN

*But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and
his righteousness; and all these things
shall be added unto you.*

Matthew 6: 33

When I was a young man, an elderly gentleman told me a story of a Persian prince who wanted to be known as the wisest and most knowledgeable ruler of all time. So, he commissioned a huge agency of all of the intellectuals in his kingdom and charged them to gather all of the knowledge in the world. Several decades later, the head of the commission informed the prince, who now had become the king, that they had completed his charge and had built a great library containing all of the information that was known in the world.

Excited, the king followed the wise man to the large edifice so that he could learn all that there was to know. However, the king quickly became discouraged when he saw how much material there was to learn. There was no way that he could learn all of this information in his lifetime, even if he dedicated all of his time to study. Yet, he did not want to abandon his quest to be regarded as the wisest ruler in history. So, he charged the agency of wise men to condense all of this data down to include only material facts and formulas.

A number of years later, the senior advisor again approached the king and informed him that the commission had completed the task and had condensed all of this knowledge so that it was now contained in just one large room. Again, the king was discouraged because he realized that it would require a great deal of time and effort to learn all of this material. So, the king again instructed the commission of wise men to condense all of this information down to just the most material and relevant facts and wisdom of the ages. Again, the wise men labored for years to abridge and consolidate this data down so that it could fit within one large book.

The chief wise man again informed the king of their great accomplishment of consolidating all of this knowledge and wisdom down so that it could be contained in such a concise document. However, shortly after the king began to study this encyclopedia, he realized that it still would require a great effort on his part to assimilate all of this information. So, he again instructed his wise men to condense all of this truth and knowledge. This time the king told them to distill all of this material down to just the essence of all wisdom.

After consulting with his colleagues for several days, the wise man returned and informed the king that they had completed their assignment. The essence of all wisdom was contained in the simple phrase: "There is no such thing as a free lunch."

Despite the intended humor in this story, I have learned over the years that there is great wisdom in internalizing the simple truth that we can't get something for nothing. It may appear that some people do, but there are always hidden costs and unintended consequences associated with trying to obtain something without a fair exchange of value.

Regardless, it appears to me that the foolish desire to obtain something for nothing dominates the lives of many people. It is as if they are striving to find a shortcut to a life of luxury and ease without any consequences or costs. However, that quest is as futile as finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

When God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, He told Adam (and all of his posterity) that he would eat bread by the sweat of his face all the days of his life.⁶⁶ I believe that most people view this as a great curse, but I think God was simply telling us the rules of the game of life. I do not view this so much as a punishment, but rather as an instruction on how to live and get ahead in life. We need to exchange something of value (work) in order to receive something else of value that we want in return. These are the playground rules and there are always adverse consequences whenever we ignore them.

However, the underlying motivation for so many of our actions seems to be a misguided quest to return to the Garden of Eden. We want to live life without any cares. When we want something, we want to receive it immediately without any effort. If we are hungry, we simply want to reach up and pluck some tasty fruit off a tree and enjoy it.

We are constantly looking for ways to receive something for nothing. This is why so many individuals are seduced into becoming involved with gambling, get-rich-quick schemes, multi-level marketing programs, and a welfare lifestyle. Invariably, the result is disappointment and often financial ruin. I have learned from sad experience that regardless of the venture, investment, or opportunity, whenever the real underlying motivation to participate is to obtain a financial reward that is not commensurate with the

value provided, I will be disappointed. However, when I focus on creating value, things work out and I have sufficient for my needs and eventually even enough for some of the luxuries of life.

It is fine to want nice things in life. But, we run into difficulties when we try to obtain them without earning them. We create these problems because our efforts are not based on true principles. If we are not living in reality, we will experience hardship when we bump up against it. The school of hard knocks is a tough but effective teacher. Conversely, as we live according to true principles, we become free.

I strongly believe that one of the main purposes of life in this physical world is to help us more fully learn the law of the harvest. There are consequences for our actions, and we reap what we sow. The cause and effect relationship of this physical world enforces this principle very effectively and dramatically. Break the laws of physics and there are immediate consequences to pay. For example, last weekend I was not very careful while standing on a ladder to get something out of our attic. As a result, I fell and hit my hip and head. So, for the past week, every time I take a step I am reminded of the consequence of my foolish action.

I believe that there is an irrevocable law decreed in heaven that whenever we receive a blessing from God it is by obedience to the law upon which that blessing is predicated.⁶⁷ The principle of cause and effect applies as much in the spiritual realm as it does in this physical world. Consequently, God uses physical laws to help us learn this principle so we can apply it in our spiritual arena.

Therefore, we are attempting to avoid one of the main purposes of our existence here on Earth whenever we try to find a shortcut and circumvent the eternal principle

that one needs to give value in order to receive value. Our quest for Eden is misguided, and we will eventually be disappointed if we continue down that path. Unfortunately, the consequence of this course of action is not always readily apparent to those traveling along the path of life. Regardless, the eventual outcome is still sure, whether it be the loss of time, energy and money pursuing a fantasy or the disruption of normal family life for the few who actually win the lottery. Disappointment invariably follows.

The grass often seems greener on the other side of the fence. Consequently, so much of our time, energy, and money are spent pursuing the dream of a life of luxury and ease and efforts to get there overnight. Many individuals strive to retire as early as possible, only to discover that the grass really isn't greener after they have gone out to pasture. They soon become disenchanted with the empty and shallow life they are living. They realize that God's decree that we will eat bread by the sweat of our face all the days of our life still applies because man has an innate need to create value and contribute in order to maintain a sense of self-worth.

As a child of God, we all have a spark of divinity inside of us that struggles to expand and express itself. The desire to create comes from our divine nature. Consequently, when we squelch that instinct or fail to make the effort to develop it, we are suppressing the divine part of our character. There is great satisfaction in completing a task and knowing you did a good job. Even God himself looked at all the Earth and what He created and said, "It is good."⁶⁸

I am convinced that 'work' is an eternal principle which actually helps us experience joy and fulfillment. I believe the common concept of heaven being a boring place where we all sit around on clouds doing nothing but play

harps all day is a delusion and results from our misguided quest for Eden. I personally believe that in heaven we will actually experience an enhanced ability to express our divine nature through unlimited opportunities to create. In the meantime, while we are here on Earth, we can learn to connect with God through our efforts to create value for the benefit of mankind. Once we recognize that work is an expression of our divine nature, we can learn to realize serenity in performing even mundane tasks.

Our misguided quest to find Eden distracts us from our eternal mission to become like God. However, if we seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, we shall discover Him inside us, inspiring us to excel and bless mankind. We will experience peace and tranquility that dispels anxiety and creates the quiet confidence associated with satisfaction. Then, if we seek riches, we may obtain them, but affluence will not be the end goal. Instead, we will realize that wealth is simply a tool that God can use to accomplish His purposes of blessing the lives of those less fortunate than ourselves.

Let's not waste our time and resources searching for a life that will not satisfy our divine yearnings. Instead, look for the divinity that is expressed in our daily efforts to create value and bless the lives of others.

OUR CHOICES IN LIFE'S GARDEN

I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.

John 15: 5

The other day I was talking with one of the secretaries at work about a personal issue she was dealing with. She is a very sincere person and was struggling to know what God wanted her to do in her situation. I relate to the yearning and frustration in her question, “I want to do the right thing. So, why doesn’t God just tell me what I should do?”

On another occasion, I talked with a woman at church who was very discouraged because it was impossible for her to do everything she felt she was supposed to do, and she was exhausted from trying. I think many women feel that way at times.

I believe that the frustration expressed in both of these situations results from a fundamental misunderstanding about the purpose of life. The root of this misunderstanding is a false, yet often sincerely held, belief that life is like a recipe for cooking a cake: follow a list of rules and ingredients, cook it in the oven of life’s adversity, and presto, you will become like God; just tell me everything I need to do. Unfortunately, this recipe cannot create a being like God.

A more clear formula is found in the example of

our first parents with the choice that God required them to make in the Garden of Eden. God gave them what appeared to be two conflicting commandments: Multiply and fill the earth with children, but don't eat the fruit that would enable them to have children. And then, when they ate the fruit, they were punished and banished from a life of luxury and ease.⁶⁹ How fair was that?

Well, that is not what actually happened. God knew that in order for us to grow and develop to become like Him, we needed to learn to discern good from evil and become sensitive to His Spirit. That development can only come from making hard choices and learning to feel His Spirit through our experiences. The only commandment God actually gave Adam and Eve was to multiply and replenish the earth. However, he warned them of the consequence of partaking of the fruit that would enable them to proceed. It was a tough choice. Just think of the many people who are still confused about it today.

We are not exempt from this same process if we are to reach our full potential of becoming like God. We must learn to make tough choices. Just think of all of the hot political issues of the day. Each side claims the moral high ground, yet only one is correct. Which is more important: the right to privacy or the value of unborn life? Does executing a murderer just create more violence? Does gay marriage undermine the family unit and society or does it extend a fundamental right to a minority group? The list is voluminous, and when one applies the principle on a personal level, the list is endless.

The key is learning to be sensitive to the Spirit so that we can not only discern right from wrong on the big issues of the day but also know the Lord's will on a personal

level. If we simply focus on rigidly observing a bunch of rules, God's goal for us would be frustrated. This also leads to extremes and fanaticism, which muffles the voice of the Spirit. It also is discouraging because we each fall short and cannot personally earn eternal life. That is the real problem with dwelling solely on obedience to rules. The focus is on ourselves and our own efforts instead of on Christ. The fact is that living a Christ-centered life is the only way to become at one with God. We need to learn to live a faith-based life and not a rule-based life. Pure doctrine has a greater effect in changing lives than insisting on obedience to a bunch of rules.

There are several reasons why people naturally get confused on this point and believe that God wants us to live a rule-based life instead of a faith-based life. One very innocent reason is that the Spirit of God fosters an obedient attitude. So, it is natural for one with the Spirit to seek rules to comply with. But, there is a risk that this individual will become distracted and think that safety is in the rules instead of in relying on the Spirit. Their focus changes from a faith-based life to a rule-based life, and in the process they shift their eyes from God to themselves and miss the target. Consequently, this strength, carried too far, becomes detrimental.

A second reason is that the Lord does set forth some very firm commandments so that we all have clear direction and a warning when we are going down the wrong path. Thou shalt not kill. Thou shalt not steal. Thou shalt not commit adultery.⁷⁰ These are clear black and white commandments. But, the Lord does not want to command us in all things. He much prefers to teach us correct principles and let us govern ourselves because that is how we develop and grow closer

to Him.⁷¹

Unfortunately, because the Lord needs to lay down clear, black and white directives in major areas, some individuals try to apply this approach universally and make everything black and white, both in how they live their lives and how they impose their views on others. However, real growth occurs in the grey areas where we learn to be sensitive to the whisperings of the Spirit by putting our lives in tune with God.

Once God has our attention and knows that we are trying to listen to Him, God whispers to our spirits instead of yelling at us so that we will need to strain to hear Him and be motivated to move closer to Him in order to better hear and understand the direction He whispers to our souls. God's commandments are warning signs to help keep us on the correct path of life. However, they are not the actual path itself that leads to Him. The path to God is light and truth. As we seek and follow light and truth, we will connect with God.

Another reason why some individuals live a rule-based life instead of a faith-based life – which applies more often than people want to admit – is that focusing on rules actually provides a scapegoat that enables people to placate their conscience while avoiding real change and true conversion.

It is easier to obey a bunch of rules than change our nature. So, individuals often pick a number of rules that they obey and then set those rules up as the standard to judge other people by. When others fall short, this person feels justified and comfortable in remaining in his current position and fails to grow. Hence, he is damned because his progress is stopped. It is also a means of passing the buck and avoiding responsibility. “Hey, I just did what I was

told.” But, that attitude belongs to a servant, and not a king or queen and joint heir with Christ.

The real purpose of life is to learn wisdom from our choices and to become more like God in the process. God does not want us to turn into robots that simply obey a myriad of instructions. Instead, He wants us to develop our spiritual sensitivity and learn how to know what we should obey. He wants us to become like Him, which will only happen as we become familiar with Him. We need to learn to recognize the voice of the Spirit of Truth in order to become at one with it.

This comes from experience. If we are striving to do God's will, then after we have pondered and prayed about an issue, we need to exercise our faith and move forward the best we can, trusting that the Lord will reveal His will to us before we go too far astray. We will make mistakes, but that is how we will learn to recognize God's voice. God can fix our mistakes, and our knowledge that God can make everything right gives us faith to be able to move forward. If we have made the wrong choice and are going down the wrong path, God will let us know of our mistake before too long so that we can correct it.

Through this process of trusting in God and taking action, God is able to train our spirits to become more in tune with His. Paul teaches us that even Christ learned obedience through the things which he suffered until he became perfect.⁷² Consequently, we do not need to be told everything that we should do, nor should we try to do everything that we are told to do.

Of course, if we intentionally ignore the commandments that we unmistakably know are God's will, we are foolish to think that we will be able to recognize His voice in the more subtle issues. Consequently, we must first

be willing to change anything in our life that we know is not right with God. A key to obtaining the power to change comes from turning our heart over to God by seeking and being willing to do His will. We must seek to learn God's will in order to understand it and become at one with it. God promises us that if we seek, we shall find.⁷³ But we must seek with real intent. If we do this, then God will reveal His will to us as we follow the light and truth that we are aware of.

By no means do I want to encourage a rebellious attitude. The Lord's Spirit actually fosters an obedient attitude. If we resent direction from our religious leaders, we are often on the wrong track. More people are lost from not following religious direction than have their spiritual growth stunted due to an overdependence on religious leaders; so, it is certainly appropriate to emphasize the need to be obedient. But, we also need to be careful that we do not rely on our own efforts instead of on the Lord. The scriptures direct us to rely wholly and solely on the merits of Him who is mighty to save.⁷⁴ As we learn to rely on God, He empowers us to move forward and develop more faith.

Through this process we learn wisdom and become more sensitive to the Spirit. Our choices are not always simply between bad and good, even though we need to start there. Our real growth and development comes from learning to be able to discern between good, better, and best.

I am convinced that God structures life so that we have many limitations, including time, energy, money, and health, so that we are forced to make tough choices. A lot of our problems and stress in life are caused by fighting or ignoring the limitations life naturally imposes on us. Instead, we should learn to recognize limitations and realize that they

are simply part of life so that we will live in reality as we deal with them. Life will then train us to set priorities as well as enhance our sensitivity to that inner voice, directing us to make the best choice placed before us. In essence, we need to go with the flow while we learn to navigate within it.

As we live a faith-based life, we will learn to recognize the Lord's Spirit through our experience in making choices. We will learn that following the Spirit is the best thing to do and is a whole lot better than doing a bunch of other good things.

As we follow the inspiration of God's Spirit, we will be blessed with peace. We need to rely on the Lord and not our own efforts. As we do this we will not feel anxious, overburdened, or discouraged. The Lord wants to bless us with His Spirit, which we will receive as we learn to recognize His voice by responding to it. We then will receive the fruits of the Spirit, which are love, joy, peace, and goodness. If we truly seek to learn and do His will, and not to just do a lot of 'good' things so that we will look good or to placate our conscience, then God will direct our paths and lead us to a life full of peace and tranquility.

USING RELIGION TO PLACATE OUR CONSCIENCE

For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.

Romans 10: 3

After we welcome God into our lives, we run the risk of falling into the trap of using religion to placate our conscience in order to avoid the painful process of further conversion.

This danger is not isolated to one or two religions, but cuts across the landscape of all religions. It is part of our human nature to resist personal internal change and to grasp at anything convenient to help us extinguish the gnawing realization that we need to change and become better individuals. Consequently, what better tool to use to placate our conscience than religion itself?

Accordingly, individuals in all religions use the tenets of their faith to actually dam their spiritual progress. How this is done varies from religion to religion. Nevertheless, it happens in all religions, and we need to be on guard to not fall into that trap ourselves without realizing it. It is easy to look at others and see how they use religion to placate their conscience, but that does us very little good unless we are willing to look inside ourselves to see if we are doing the

very same thing.

History is replete with examples of people soothing their conscience in order to avoid true personal growth. We all look back with incredulity at the widespread practice of idolatry during Old Testament times. Many scribes and Pharisees at the time of Christ justified their rejection of the Savior by their strict obedience to voluminous rules and customs. People bought indulgences during the middle ages to avoid the effort to truly repent. Some “Christians” today believe that all they have to do is profess their acceptance of Christ and they can continue living their lives without any changes. Others try to prove their worthiness through their works in an effort to feel good about themselves.

Often the most devout followers of the various religions actually are the most resistant to change and true conversion. Muslim extremists, who believe that they will go to heaven by killing innocent people, are an obvious example of this point.

It is hard for us to understand the widespread practice of idolatry during Old Testament times. How could anyone actually worship something they made with their own hands? Yet the practice was widespread. I believe people naturally pursued this abominable practice because it enabled them to feel good about themselves while they did whatever they felt like doing. Often, idolatry and adultery were closely related. The Sodomites intermingled idolatry with homosexual activity and were a significant problem in Old Testament times.⁷⁵ Many scholars even identify the god Baal, who is frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, with Zeus of Greece,⁷⁶ and all of the dysfunctional activity of the Greek gods. If the gods were involved in bizarre behavior, why should I aspire to be any better? Consequently, people used idolatry to placate

their conscience and avoid spiritual growth.

On the other hand, many devout Jews refused to accept Christ when He, their God, lived in their midst because they were bound by the traditions of their fathers. These individuals failed to recognize that the Law of Moses actually points people to Christ.⁷⁷ Many individuals were not receptive to His message because they felt God had already accepted them due to their obedience to a myriad of rules. They focused their attention on following procedures instead of allowing the process to turn their hearts to God. It was easier to use their observance of various regulations as a means to justify their current status than to attempt the more difficult task of allowing their obedience to change their hearts. They were not seeking light and truth, so they did not see it when the source of all truth and goodness was living in their midst. It was easier to obey a bunch of rules than to open up their hearts to God and follow Christ.

Even to this day, many orthodox Jews strain at a gnat while swallowing a camel. I have a number of Jewish clients in the garment industry who complain to me about the unethical business practices of various members of some orthodox Jewish sects. Some of these particular orthodox practitioners act very piously while cheating their neighbor. They apparently justify their behavior because they have found ways to get around both religious and temporal laws.

For example, some members of these strict sects will not pay for goods they order because the agreement was not in writing, while at the same time they hire a goy (a gentile) to 'purchase' their business and run it on the Sabbath, then 'buy' the business back the next day, so they can technically comply with the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. Surely, focusing on the letter of the law brings

spiritual death, while striving to understand and obey the spirit of the law facilitates a rebirth into a more abundant spiritual life.

Likewise, the selling of indulgences during the middle-ages had the same effect. Back then, the Catholic Church issued certificates granting remission from the punishment of sins in exchange for a donation to the Church. Part of the faulty logic used to justify the trafficking of indulgences went like this: Charity is the ultimate virtue, and we demonstrate our charity by giving alms, so who better to give alms to than to God's church; therefore, we are saved by giving alms to the Church.

By focusing on the results, and not on the underlying motivation of actions, an insidious practice became widespread, lulling many good persons into a false sense of security. This deceptive practice invariably became part of the rationalization some people used to justify actions that were offensive to God.

Purchasing indulgences offered an easy way for individuals to comfortably remain the same, unconverted. Some individuals even purchased indulgences before they committed a sin in case they died before they could buy an indulgence afterwards. Initially, indulgences were issued by the Church as remission from the punishment of the sins that one had already fully repented of.⁷⁸ However, due to our aversion to making deep personal changes, individuals purchased indulgences as a means to avoid true repentance, which denotes a real change of behavior. It was easier to part with some money than to change one's heart. The Church said they were forgiven, so no further change, and hence growth and development in Christ, was required. Consequently, some individuals' personal progress stagnated

and the quality of their lives decayed, just as fresh water becomes rancid as the flow of a stream stops when dammed.

Is the reason that the practice of selling indulgences was so readily accepted unique to the dark ages? I am afraid not. It is part of human nature and hinders people's acceptance of God's plan for them today as well as throughout history.

As an attorney, individuals frequently come to me for help in solving problems caused by the wrongful acts of others. Unfortunately, the story is often the same: "I trusted him. He was so religious. He claimed to be a Christian. How could someone who goes to church all the time do such a thing?" I do not doubt that the perpetrator had a moving spiritual experience at some point in his life. Unfortunately, he, along with many well-intended Christians, do not really understand true Christian doctrine. Some mistakenly believe that they simply need to proclaim that Jesus is the Christ without truly turning their whole life over to Him. Consequently, Christ is unable to fully convert them.

These pseudo-Christians believe that all they have to do is "accept Christ" in word only and they can continue living their life without any changes. To truly accept Christ, one must take up his cross and follow Him and not hold on to any ungodliness. Our old sinful life needs to die so that we can be born again in Christ. However, it is easier to profess religion than to actually be converted.

On the other hand, people may fall into the same pit from the opposite side of the chasm. We are correctly taught that works are fruits of the Spirit. Unfortunately, too often some look beyond the mark and concentrate on the result (works) and not on the cause (faith). Again, just as many Jews sought comfort in observing numerous rules and some Catholics thought rituals would save them, others avoid true

conversion by concentrating on a checklist of things to do.

This obsession with obedience to rules may actually be a means of avoiding obedience to God's greater command, to come unto Him and be converted. It is much easier to follow a few rules than to be honest with ones' self and let God change our nature. Again, it is easier to do a lot of things on a checklist than to actually be converted.

The key to conversion is truly submitting ourselves to God, trusting in His love, and seeking to know and do His will. God is always there, waiting for us to invite Him into our lives. If we invite God into our lives by being willing to do His will for His sake and not to demonstrate how good we are or for any other self-centered purpose, God will heal our souls, make us whole, and convert us into children of God to become joint heirs with Jesus Christ of all that the Father has.

We all need to be converted (changed), and concentrating on a list of rules and actions can actually promote the status quo. It all depends on how each individual approaches it. Because of our pride, we look for ways to justify our current position, the status quo, while helping us feel good about ourselves in the meantime in order to avoid changing or improving.

Many individuals try to placate their conscience by looking for a religion that does not require anything from them. Other persons look for ways to judge others so that they can feel vindicated when these individuals do not measure up to the position they imagine themselves at. This method allows us to feel that we do not need to change. This is one reason why we seek petty rules to obey while avoiding the weightier matter of true conversion. God gave the Law of Moses to help point the people of Israel to Christ.⁷⁹ However, many looked beyond the mark through

strict observance and missed the whole purpose for which the law was given. Likewise, God's current instructions can also be misapplied, just as the Law of Moses was.

The goal of our existence is to become at one with God by incorporating all of His characteristics into ourselves to the point where they become our characteristics. That is the whole point of the atonement, or in other words, the "at-one-ment." In order for this to happen, we need to go through a process of being born again into a new life in Christ. This requires us to change. Our very nature needs to be converted from our current sinful state into a caring and loving state. But, we naturally resist this conversion. Consequently, we grasp for things that will placate our conscience while we maintain the status quo.

The best way to achieve this objective is to follow the Savior's example. He showed us the way when He said, "I can of mine own self do nothing: . . . my judgment is just because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me."⁸⁰ The key then is to be humble and seek to do the Father's will and not gratify our pride, our vain ambitions, and appetites.

It is the power of God that converts or changes us, not our own efforts. Just as heat is often needed for a chemical reaction to occur; likewise, we need to be born again by the fire of the Lord's Spirit in order for our nature to be converted. God is ready, willing, and able to do this if we really want Him to. We need to invite Him into our heart and turn our whole soul over to Him so that he can purge out all of the impurities that are inside of us. Being completely submerged under the water in the baptismal ordinance symbolizes our willingness and necessity to completely turn our life over to God.

“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”⁸¹ The greatest commandment, of course, is to love God with all our heart, or in other words, all our feelings; with all of our mind, or our thoughts; and with all our strength, or our physical being.⁸² We need to do this in order to learn and do God’s will for His sake, so that we may become at one with Him and not do so in order to prove how great we are.

As we demonstrate our love for God by seeking truth and goodness, He will bless us with His spirit which will fill our soul with love so that we will care for other individuals more deeply. Through this means, Christ can be in us as God the Father is in Christ, until we all become one as God the Father and Christ are one.

HOPE: THE ENABLING POWER OF GRACE

Which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast.

Hebrews 6: 19

Grace is simply assistance we receive that we do not deserve. We are all mixed bags and fall short in some respect. So, we all are dependent on the goodwill and grace of God and others. Without grace, we have no hope - and without hope, there is no joy. Conversely, when we understand and feel the universality and depth of God's grace, our soul is filled with hope, encouragement, peace, confidence, love, and joy that empowers us to change and move forward.

Let's talk a little bit about grace. What exactly is grace? When we surrender to God, we receive the benefits of the grace which He freely extends to all of us. Does this mean that God says, "Because you've come to me, I'll cut you some slack and give you the benefit of the doubt?" Isn't that frequently how we equate grace in our relationships? How often have you done this? Maybe you've encountered troubling behavior in another, or maybe you had to decide how to deal with unproven but questionable conduct in another, or even the merest suspicion of bad conduct. How often do we, in such circumstance, imagine ourselves the benefactors of grace by saying, "I'll give them the benefit of the doubt." And we think we are magnanimous.

The benefit of the doubt? But, is that grace? Broken down and deconstructed, it suggests, as a threshold matter, that I have cause to have some serious doubts about you. Yet, out of the kind generosity of my heart, I choose to give you the benefit of the doubt until it is proven otherwise. This leaves the beneficiary on tenterhooks, does it not? That certainly does not produce the fruits of peace, comfort, assurance and hope that grace does. Instead, God's grace says, "I know you sinned. I know you've behaved imperfectly – even offensively. Yet, in SPITE OF all the irrefutable evidence of your wrong, you are forgiven." This is God's grace which He freely offers to everyone, if they will simply accept it.

Others unfortunately believe that grace must be earned. One author uses a story about a young girl who tries to save enough money to purchase a bicycle, an impossible task. After she has exhausted her efforts, her father then pays the difference needed to buy the bike. The author analogizes that story with Christ's atonement,⁸³ stating that we are saved by grace after we do all that we can do first.

In my opinion, this author almost got it right, but still misses the boat. A better example would be: the father purchases a bicycle for his daughter as a free birthday-present because he loves her. However, the child still needs to accept the free gift and exercise enough faith to learn how to ride the bike in order to enjoy the full benefits of the free gift. If the daughter never accepts the gift and does not actively use it in her life, it would be as if her father never even gave her the gift at all.

The fact that Christ's gift of grace is free to all mankind actually creates the hope that heals our souls and empowers us to change our lives. We do not earn it. We do not

deserve it. Yet, it is still offered to us, freely. That is grace, by definition. If we must earn God's grace, our hope would not be sure. We are all starkly aware of our own inadequacies. If grace depended upon us, we would have no hope indeed. The assurance that God loves us and extends His grace to us, regardless of our worthiness, gives us hope and provides us with the sure foundation on which to build a new life. He is the only one on whom we can rely.

Some Mormons misapply one of their scriptures that states, "it is by grace we are saved, after all we can do,"⁸⁴ thinking that we have to do everything possible ourselves as a precondition before Christ's grace will save us. These individuals feel that they must earn the right to receive Christ's grace through their exhausting efforts. This is wrong. If they read this verse in the context it is actually used, its message would be more like Paul's instruction to the Ephesians to "remember, that after all we do, it is by grace that we are saved, and not by works, lest any man should boast."⁸⁵

The key to receiving Christ's grace is not the extent to which we work to earn it but instead the degree to which we are willing to accept it. This acceptance is demonstrated by our willingness to submit to God's will and to change, so that His grace will become effective in our lives. There is no time limit on it. It is not preconditioned on one obtaining a certain status or position. It is offered to everyone, wherever they are in life. The vilest sinner in the depths of despair has as much right to grace as the holiest saint, and they each desperately need it or they will be damned. God offers His grace to you and to me because He loves us, not because of our worthiness.

All we have to do to receive the benefit of God's grace is to truly be willing to accept God's will. However, He

knows our thoughts and the intents of our hearts. We cannot lie to God. He knows our level of commitment and if we are really willing to submit to Him.

Once we reach the point where we surrender to God and truly desire to know and do His will, God will break the shackles which hold us down and set us free. He will unlock the shutters in our minds and open our view to the wonders of eternity. He will heal our souls of all the emotional black holes which pull us down. He will endow us with hope which will empower us to change. He will convert us and fill our life with love. These are the fruits of the free gift of grace and love which He offers to all of us.

We demonstrate our willingness to follow God's will by changing anything that is not right in our lives that we can change. He will do the rest, if we let Him. But, we must be willing to let Him convert us from the person we have become into a royal child of God. We must have a desire and willingness to follow Christ. Why would one think that we can come to Christ to receive His free gift if we are running away from Him?

"Wait a minute," you may say. "I thought you said God's grace was a free gift? This doesn't sound free to me at all. In fact, it sounds like it will cost me everything that I have and all that I am." Yes, you must be willing to sacrifice everything to God: all your possessions, ambitions, prestige, thoughts, time, energy, talents, heart, even your whole soul. No half measure will do. But in comparison, it costs you nothing more than trading a heavy, smelly, putrid, oozing bag of trash for a crown of jewels.

"Well, is it really worth it?", one may wonder. "If God is always there, willing to accept the sinner whenever he turns to Him, then I think I might just enjoy life some

more and repent later.” This is the same flawed logic that many ‘good’ people use when they begrudge the forgiveness a sinner receives. Just like the prodigal son’s brother, they feel, “It’s not fair. I have labored hard my whole life to be good, so why should someone who has sinned and enjoyed life receive the same blessing that I am promised?”⁸⁶

In both situations, the ‘sinner’ and the ‘saint’ miss the point. Wickedness never brings happiness. Just think about it. A rock star’s hard life of drugs, alcohol, and sex take a heavy toll. I knew a beautiful young model in her thirties who got involved with drugs. A few years later she was homeless and literally looked like she was seventy years old. I was sad to hear that she died a couple of years later. If a sinful life is so great, then why do celebrities continually try to escape from it through drugs and alcohol? Is your life really all that great? Are you truly happy and fulfilled? Is something missing in your life? Don’t you really want more out of life?

God is the answer. He is your true destiny, if you choose to accept Him. You can be a slave to sin, but it is a cruel master. When it pays you off, its wages are misery and death – separation from God forever. God does not pay wages. He offers a free gift – joy and eternal life. There is nothing you can do to earn this gift. If you could, it would be wages. There is no comparison between the two. Life or death, joy or misery, the choice is yours. You simply need to be willing to eject the poison of hate and sin from your heart so that there will be room to receive the healing balm of God’s love. Few individuals would feel it a great sacrifice to clean out the junk and clutter in their garage to make room for the gift of a brand new luxury car. Let’s not delay in cleaning the trash out of our lives.

Some people think that Christian hope is a fantasy based on a “Pollyanna” outlook on life. The opposite is actually true. God’s hope is always based in truth and reality. There is no sugarcoating here. In order to have the peace and confidence that God offers His followers, each must realize his own nothingness and lost state. Otherwise, their hope is not sure and is vulnerable to the discovery of new evidence of additional failings and imperfections. Instead, God reveals our faults and weaknesses to us so that we stand fully exposed and naked before Him. Then, when He covers us with the blanket of His love, we know that it is secure and will not evaporate with the revelation of our unworthiness.

Once we have been born again in Christ, we realize that just as an infant has not yet developed to the full stature of a mature man but still is endowed with basic human rights, likewise, we have claim on redemption through Christ’s atonement, even though we are still far from being perfect. But, just as an individual can lose his rights by being convicted of a serious crime, we can fall from grace if we subsequently reject Christ.⁸⁷ However, while we strive to follow Him, we have the assurance that He will always be there to support and sustain us in our time of need. Granted, the Lord often tests our faith, such as with Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac, but this is more for our growth and benefit than to prove we are worthy of God’s blessings.

Even though grace is a free gift from God, we often acquire a more submissive attitude by striving to do good works and exercising our faith by taking action. This, in turn, strengthens our faith and helps us to be more willing to submit to God and accept His grace. But, it is still by grace that we are saved and not by our own puny efforts. In reality, our good works are gifts of the Spirit that God

bestows upon us after we accept Him.

As God converts us to become more like Him, he endows us with His love, which enables us to extend to others the same grace that He offers to us. If we are unwilling to forgive others their trespasses, then we are denying the grace which God offers us. If God's grace does not extend to others, then our own saved status is in jeopardy. We do not deserve grace any more than those who offend us. Yet, God has forgiven us because of His great goodness, mercy and love, and not because of our worthiness. If our will is ever to become in unity with God's will, we must be willing to forgive others as Christ does.

The great test of our acceptance of Christ is our willingness to allow God to empower us to forgive others. Without His love in our soul, we will fail. Yet, as we invite Him into our heart, He fills our soul with His love which enables us to extend to others the same grace that He offers to us. There is no other way for us to grow and develop to become more like Him. This is partially why God placed us here in this imperfect world. We need to experience His grace so that we will be motivated to seek His love, thereby enabling us to more fully love and forgive others. Through this process, we become more like God and glorify Him.

This is the hope and assurance of every Christian.

THE BLOOD ATONEMENT

Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.

Romans 6: 4

The Bible is a book of redemption. It is that or nothing at all. It is not merely a book of history or anthropology. It is God's written words of salvation and deliverance for lost mankind. From the Old Testament to the New, the whole of the Bible looks to the redemptive atonement of Christ. His blood sacrifice was the ransom paid for our deliverance.⁸⁸ He took our sinful nature upon Himself to satisfy the demands of the law.

On one hand, God is perfectly just. On the other hand, God is perfectly merciful. Through Christ, justice and mercy become unified like the interlaced fingers of two hands folded in prayer. Christ's sacrifice was accepted by God for the debt owed by the sinner. Through Christ's redemption, we receive forgiveness at the price of his death, establishing in us a justification for our restored position of favor before God. We are then promised final deliverance from the power of sin.

The scarlet thread of redemption began with the fall of Adam and Eve. Genesis tells us that after Adam and Eve

ate of the fruit of the “Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil” the Lord came to visit them in the cool of the day, and they hid themselves.⁸⁹ They were afraid, naked, and ashamed, so they sewed fig leaves together to make aprons to cover themselves. But when God looked at their feeble attempt to cover their wickedness, he found it inadequate. Covering for sin (atonement) could not be woven by human hands. The Lord instead took an innocent animal and before the eyes of Adam and Eve slew that innocent creature as the ground drank up its blood. God then took its skin and covered the shame and nakedness of Adam and Eve and provided them protection from the elements of our cold, cruel world, just as Christ’s spilt blood creates a redemptive garment that covers all our sins and protects us from the forces of evil.⁹⁰ When Adam and his wife saw this spent life of an innocent creature, it was their first experience of knowing what it meant to die because of sin.

This was the beginning of the scarlet thread of redemption. This same story continues to unfold as one studies the Word of God, from the redemptive grace bestowed upon a faithful man from the line of Seth, Noah and his family, to Abraham, then to Moses, on to the founding of the kingdom of David and the subsequent prophets of God. Throughout the history of the Old Testament, out of agony, suffering, tears and captivity came great blessings as the people learned to trust God, until the time was fulfilled for the greatest blessing of all! From the seed of Adam and Eve, God’s promise at last came to pass with the birth of Christ, who came to redeem a fallen human race.

In his earthly ministry, the Bible reveals that Jesus taught his disciples of his death and what it would accomplish. At the last supper he uttered those now unforgettable words,

“This is My body, eat in remembrance of Me... This is My blood, drink in remembrance of Me.”⁹¹ And before he went to his tortuous death, he gave Himself in the Garden of Gethsemane with travail of soul for our redemption where great drops of blood were pressed out of His every pore by the great weight of the world’s sins.⁹² Then, just before he died on the cross, he bowed his head and said, “It is finished.”⁹³

When we talk about Gethsemane and the cross, when we think about the blood He spilt, and when we preach of His sacrificial death, we are proclaiming the meaning of His coming into the world. His dying consummated the greatest redemptive plan ever conceived in the universe – the purpose of God on earth. This plan, this promise of the restoration of the estate of YOUR life is written about throughout the pages of the entire Holy Writ of Scripture. This is the scarlet thread of redemption. And in accepting this great gift of God, we will ultimately see the great throngs of the saints who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. God Himself will banish death, sorrow, pain and suffering. There will be no graves on His heavenly hillsides, no funeral wreaths. We will be whole new creations with Him in a glorious new heaven and earth.

So, how does this conversion happen? Exactly what does happen when one opens his heart and surrenders to God? Do we hear church bells? Does the sky open up and a golden harp play melodies of joy on high? Maybe it has happened that way for some, but I dare say, for most of us it doesn’t happen that way. But certainly, *something – on this most auspicious of occasions - does happen!*

Is it similar to joining a club? If you apply for life-time membership to a social club or a gym, you generally

submit an application and sometimes pay fees or dues of admission, right? And then to validate your membership, a few weeks later, a little laminated card arrives that you can proudly carry in your wallet, showing the world that you belong. So does it perhaps begin with you on your knees in prayer and supplication, asking for “admission” to God’s forgiveness and grace? And God, sitting somewhere in his heavenly corporate office, reviewing applications all day, now reviews yours, and says, “Hmm, name, okay; date of birth, okay; circumstances to consider, okay”; looking it over and once satisfied everything on the application is in order, issues a little laminated card of His approval? Of course not.

Here is what happens. The moment a repenting sinner turns to Christ, and through faith opens his heart and completely surrenders to Him, the Holy Spirit immediately confirms the veracity of God’s love and mercy and God’s acceptance of the repentant soul, thus regenerating the new believer into a new life full of hope and love. The sinner feels as if he is born again, with a second chance at life. However, this complete conversion may not happen all at once at the start of the process.

Once we feel God’s love beginning to work within us, we must nurture it so that this new life within us does not die. Just as a babe in a mother’s womb needs constant nourishment to grow and develop, our new life in Christ also needs to be nourished so that we can grow in Christ.

We grow in Christ by following His spark of divinity within us as it directs us to know what is right and true. If we continue to follow the Lord’s inspiration, we reach a point where we need to totally commit to Him in order to continue to grow, just as an infant must be born in order to continue to live and grow.

We must be born again spiritually.⁹⁴ Many people mistakenly believe that they have been born again when they first feel the spirit of Christ working within them. This is the start of the process, just as conception is for the birth of a child; but, it is not the complete process. We must allow the spirit of God to grow within us until we are willing to completely submit to Him - abandon the inappropriate things we pursue to fill our own personal emotional vacuum - and then evidence that commitment with a covenant. Accordingly, the Lord established baptism – a symbol of Christ’s blood atonement of death, burial, and resurrection - as the means to confirm by covenant our commitment to fully submit ourselves to Him.

Once we make this commitment, God confirms through His Holy Spirit that all of our sins are forgiven. The weight of guilt is lifted from our shoulders, at the same time He fills our emotional black holes, thus setting us free to reach our full potential to become at one with God. Thus begins the transformation and conversion from our sinful natural state into a royal celestial being.

I know the Lord is there, waiting to fill our lives with love, if we will simply open up our hearts to Him.

THE LIGHT OF CHRIST

I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

John 8: 12

It is apparent that many of the false beliefs and practices of various societies and religions throughout the world's history evolved from some true principle or teaching, but were distorted as the people fell away from the truth.

For example, it is easy to see that human sacrifice, which was prevalent in many ancient cultures, evolved from the Lord's instruction to Adam to sacrifice the firstlings of his flock in similitude of the Savior sacrificing his life for all of mankind.⁹⁵ The more we search, the more we can identify the particles of truth that were twisted to form many other false doctrines and erroneous practices.

If there is some truth at the root of so many minor erroneous beliefs, what truth, if any, is there to the widely held belief of nirvana (a religious state where the soul becomes at one with the universe and the Creator and individual existence is extinguished)?

I suggest that there is more truth to this concept than Christendom generally acknowledges. However, where this doctrine errs greatly is in teaching that an individual loses his personal identity when he reaches the state of unity with the

universe and his creator. Conversely, I believe the essence of the glory of God is based on His and our individuality, as well as His and our unity with truth and goodness.

I believe that the essence of God's spirit is light, truth, love and goodness.⁹⁶ This essence is what is in all things, quickens all things, governs all things, is the power by which all things were created, gives life to all living things, and is the light or intelligence of man.⁹⁷ This is the force that governs the elements and is integral to their existence. It is the unifying principle that physicists are trying to identify.

Everything that is or was created is allocated its respective portion of this essence or intelligence. God sets the laws or limits that govern all of His creations, and these controls vary from element to element and creation to creation. Some things have more independence than others, yet all have a level of intelligence or ability to adhere to the laws or limits that apply to them. Some things were created primarily to act (humans), while others were created primarily to be acted upon (the earth).⁹⁸

I refer to this essence, or intelligence, as the light of Christ because He has become at one with the infinite and has made all truth and goodness His.⁹⁹ He created the heavens and the earth, and all things therein, so all of this essence or intelligence throughout the Universe was organized by Him. Additionally, because He created us, we are subject to Him, and all additional light and truth we receive, we obtain through Him. Hence, Christ is the source of all light and truth.¹⁰⁰

This intelligence, or the essence of our and God's spirit, is light and truth, and the more we seek light and truth, the more we receive and the closer we come to God, until we become at one with Him, as Christ is at one with his Father.¹⁰¹

What we refer to as inspiration in reality is often us becoming more in tune with this light of Christ, or intelligence.

When God breathed into Adam his spirit, man became a living soul, created not only in God's image, but also with God's potential.¹⁰² We all have a spark of His divinity in us.¹⁰³ This portion of God's essence that is allocated to man incorporates an ability to make choices. It is intelligent. We were created to act, and not just to be acted upon.¹⁰⁴

Hence, this is the purpose of man's existence: to decide, to act, and develop that portion of God's spirit that He has given to man so that we can bring more glory to God.¹⁰⁵ This is also the condemnation of man, if he chooses to reject this light of Christ, or truth and goodness.¹⁰⁶ However, as we cleave unto light, we receive more light; as we accept truth, we receive more intelligence; as we share love, God endows us with more of His love.¹⁰⁷

This is how God is glorified.¹⁰⁸ As we accept God and His goodness, more light and love is created in the Universe, which is the essence of God. He thereby receives more glory through our development in becoming more at one with Him. Interestingly, the more unified we become with God the more we also are edified by the goodness of others. Therefore, jealousy and envy are incompatible with the Spirit of God.

There are three analogies that I like to use to demonstrate this concept. Each is far from perfect and has its own limitations, but I believe they are still helpful in understanding this principle.

The first I call Wave Theory. When two waves meet, they combine and become one bigger wave. However, each wave has its own frequency, or rate at which it moves, which also relates to the horizontal distance between the top and

bottom of the wave. The goal, then, is to become in tune with God's frequency so that we are on the same wave length with Him. In this process, He not only lifts us, but to some small degree, we also help glorify God.

The next example I like to use is light itself. I do not believe it is by happenstance that God frequently refers to Himself as the light of the world.¹⁰⁹ Light is the source of life. It enables us to see and understand truth. Interestingly, we are taught that time stops at the speed of light. So if God exists in a dimension operating at the speed of light, then theoretically, all things are present before Him, past, present, and future. That also is a great way to define truth, which is another way to refer to God.¹¹⁰

Similar to the Wave Theory example above, more light enhances the light that already exists. Turning more lights on in a room does not detract from the first light, but simply adds to it. Using a match to light candles on a birthday cake only perpetuates and augments the flame from the match, and brings more smiles to the faces of those present. Likewise, as we accept the light God shares with us, more light, truth, goodness and love exist in the universe and God is glorified.

The example I personally like is an orchestra. A few years ago a manufacturer of color printers ran an advertisement using a tune played by one instrument, and then a few more, until a full orchestra was playing a symphony. The first tune was nice, but it kept getting better. Likewise, as we become at one with God, we do not lose our own identity, but our individuality enhances the glory of God. Just as a violin is complemented by an oboe or drums, each playing something a little different, yet all following the director to make beautiful music, likewise, if we follow the Eternal Director, our existence will enhance the quality

of existence for others following God, to our mutual benefit and the glory of God. Additionally, even though the director is at one with the music he is creating, he does not lose his identity.

Just because the essence of God's spirit exists throughout eternity in all things, He does not lose His own personal identity. He is an entity as individual as you or I. Of this I personally testify. Similarly, we will not lose our identity as we become at one with Him.

As we seek light and truth, we need to learn that there is one great truth, one great reality that transcends all other truths and incorporates them all into one great whole. That truth is the atonement of Christ. Christ's atonement is infinite and more encompassing than we realize. He created all things that exist by distributing and organizing that essence I call intelligence or the light of Christ into various creations. This spirit essence is intricately connected with light, truth, and goodness. It is why the elements and all creation obey the laws of physics. All these creations have an ability to ignore these physical laws, yet because their nature comes from God, they consistently obey. Now, how does this apply to the atonement?

Christ descended below all things to make all things subject to Him.¹¹¹ While Christ was in the Garden of Gethsemane, He bore the weight of all of the hurt and wrong throughout the history of the world. Christ was partly human, and the pain and anguish He felt was as real as the miniscule pain, in comparison, which we suffer when we are injured. His pain was so excruciating that He bled from every pore of his human body. No mortal could endure such agony. Christ was only able to live through this experience because He had power over death which He inherited from God, His

physical father. Even then, He pled to have the bitter cup removed from Him, if possible. Nevertheless, He submitted to His Father's will and drank it up.¹¹²

Christ had a choice to make. He could escape the excruciating pain from all the hurt caused by sin throughout the world's existence and the agonizing death by crucifixion, but instead He chose to submit to God's will and bear it. Christ used His free will and chose to become unified with love, compassion and goodness while He was in the midst of suffering incomprehensible anguish caused by all of us, the very individuals on whom He had compassion while suffering through this ordeal. What goodness! What love! How marvelous! How incomprehensible! No words can describe the wonder of it all.

Christ remained true to the essence of the Spirit of God, which is love, light, truth, and goodness, while He carried the weight of the whole universe on His shoulders. He swallowed up all pain, suffering, evil, error, sickness, and even death itself, through the power of His infinite love and goodness. In this process, all things became subject to Him. He can heal a broken heart, fix a ruined life, and raise us from the dead. Because He is so good, He is all powerful. His unity with the essence of God (love, truth and goodness) makes all things subject to Him because all things have a portion of this essence or intelligence, the light of Christ, in them.

The whole purpose of our existence is to become at one with God. That is what Christ prayed for in the Garden of Gethsemane shortly before his crucifixion. Christ prayed that we "may be one; as thou, Father art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us. . . . and the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as

we are one. . . I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one. . . that the love wherewith thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them.”¹¹³ This prayer was at the start of the process we appropriately refer to as the atonement, or in other words, “at-one-ment” with God. The atonement is the whole foundation of Christianity. This is the gospel or good news that Christians proclaim to the world.

C. S. Lewis, arguably the most influential Christian writer of the twentieth century and the author of *The Chronicles of Narnia*, put it well when he wrote: “Now, the whole offer which Christianity makes is this: that we can, if we let God have His way, come to share in the life of Christ. . . . If we share in this kind of life we also shall be sons of God. . . . Every Christian is to become a little Christ. The whole purpose of becoming a Christian is simply nothing else. . . . He [God] said (in the Bible) [Psalms 82:6; John 10:34] that we are ‘gods’ and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him – for we can prevent Him, if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less. He meant what He said.”¹¹⁴

God’s goal then is to convert us from our natural sinful state into an eternal loving state of unity with Him. However, we do not lose our individual identity in the process, just as Christ and God, His Father, are separate distinct eternal beings.

The scriptures teach us that God is love, light and

truth. Consequently, if we are to become like God, we must also incorporate all love, truth and goodness into our very being so that these characteristics become synonymous with our very identity. We cannot do this alone. Only God can accomplish it. But, it can only happen if we truly want it to. It is not something God can endow upon us without our choosing. God will not fill a closed heart. God's love is something that we must seek diligently so that it can become a part of our very nature. We will not be judged by how many rules we keep or break, but we will establish our own degree of glory based on the level of love and goodness that we incorporate into our very being.¹¹⁵ We will receive glory to the extent we become at one with God.

We need not become discouraged, thinking this is impossible, because it is not all up to us. In fact, it is a free gift from God if we are willing to receive it and let God have His way with us. Now, that is the difficult part, but God will empower us to succeed as we strive to follow Him. He promises that if we seek Him, we will find Him, and that He will bless us with His love to heal our souls as we follow Him.¹¹⁶ Once we feel God's love and acceptance, he fills us with hope, which empowers us to move forward and endure difficulties.

However, just like Christ, we have a choice to make. Will we listen to that voice inside of us, the light of Christ that tells us what is right and true, or will we ignore it and pursue other paths that are shallow and empty? The choice is ours. As we choose goodness, light, truth, and love, we draw closer to God and it becomes easier to follow him. Just as a magnet has more effect on a piece of metal as it gets closer; likewise, God has more influence in our life as we choose to draw closer to Him.

Some of the choices we must make may be very difficult. Will we follow the Savior and choose love and forgiveness while we are in the midst of being betrayed or falsely accused? Will we trust God enough to let go of a legitimate complaint and let Him fight our battles? The issues are numerous, yet very personal to each individual, and must be faced as part of the refining process whereby God purifies our souls and brings us more in unity with Him. That is why we are told to rejoice in tribulation. As we deal with challenges, we learn to rely more on the Lord and to trust Him, so that He can convert us to become more like Him.

Through this process, we allow God to draw us closer to Him. The choice is ours, but as we choose life, light, love and goodness, God will heal our soul of the emotional black holes that pull us down. He will fill us with His love and glory. I testify that it is well worth the effort. God is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving. Of this I personally testify. He can heal our souls from the emotional black holes that will destroy us unless we trust in God. If we seek God with all of our heart, mind, and might, we will find Him and He will convert us to become at one with Him.

YOU ARE INVITED

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Matthew 11: 28

Jesus told a parable of a king who prepared a great wedding feast for his son. However, at the appointed hour all of the invited guests made excuses and did not attend. So, the king sent his servants into the streets and alleys to quickly bring in the poor, the disabled, and the blind so that there would be people present to enjoy the feast.¹¹⁷

It is generally agreed that the wedding feast refers to the second coming of Christ when He will come in His glory as the groom to accept His bride, which is His Church. These are the last days before He comes again, so this parable has particular application to you and me.

All those individuals with wealth, power, and standing in society that naturally would be invited to this prestigious wedding cannot be bothered, so the Lord's servants are anxiously gathering in all of the outcasts of society to enjoy the festivities. I am convinced that Jesus was not just referring to the temporally poor and physically disabled, but was referring to the poor in heart and those that struggle with spiritual and emotional issues that handicap them as they struggle through life. These are the individuals that are responding to God's invitation to come unto him and enjoy a

feast beyond comprehension.

God has prepared a feast for each one of us that is more fulfilling and enjoyable than we can imagine. As we seek God by feasting on the Word of God and following the impressions He gives us to do what is right and look for the good around us, He will fill us with His love, peace, joy, and a great sense of belonging and well-being. Our understanding will increase and we will gain greater perspective. He will bless us with the companionship of His Spirit and we will not feel alone. We will be filled with love and joy beyond measure.

However, the choice is yours. His invitation has gone out to the whole world, including you. God is quickly gathering in all the poor and outcasts to enjoy the feast that the nobles and persons of high position have rejected. Time is of the essence. The Lord's second coming is getting closer; and, as it approaches, the turmoil and destruction of society increases. Now is the day for you to choose, or it may grow too late.

The Scriptures admonish us to prepare, for the day of the Lord is at hand.¹¹⁸ How do we prepare? Do we store food and supplies and purchase insurance to mitigate the calamity of natural disasters? I suppose that is partially how we can prepare. However, I feel the key to understanding this warning is found in two truths: 1) those who are prepared will not fear;¹¹⁹ and 2) love chases out fear.¹²⁰ In order to be prepared to meet God, we need to come to Him so that He can fill us with His love to chase away the fears that covertly control our lives, so that God can heal our souls.

His love will drive away the fear of rejection, because we know that He will always be there for us. We will not worry about being valued, because we feel His love and

acceptance in spite of all our weaknesses. The fear of not being in control will evaporate as we realize God is all powerful, all loving, and all knowing, and He is in control. As God drives away our fears, He fills our emotional black holes with His infinite love, which heals our soul.

On behalf of the Lord, I invite you to come unto Christ and be made whole. Let Him fill you with His love so that you can enjoy an abundant life full of love, peace, joy, and belonging. Let Christ fill your emotional black holes so that you will be free to reach your full potential, become more in touch with your feelings and experience more intense emotions. Let God convert you into His son or daughter so that you can become at one with Him and inherit all that God has.

God is real, and He is inviting you, personally, to come and enjoy a life full of love, peace, and happiness with Him and fellowship with a community of believers. Come join the feast. You are invited just as you are. He knows all of your imperfections, and He still wants you to come and enjoy the feast. He will heal your soul and cleanse your life if you will simply let Him. Turn to God and come unto Christ and He will bless you with love and joy beyond measure.

I personally testify to the truth of all these things, in the sacred name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

NOTES

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- 1 1 John 4:8 *see* 1 John 4:7-12, 16, 20-21
 - 2 Johnny Lee, "Lookin' For Love"
 - 3 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
 - 4 *Doctrine & Covenants* ("D&C") 64:10; Romans 12:19; Matthew 18:21-35
 - 5 Isaiah 53:4
 - 6 2 Nephi 25:23 - Book of Mormon ("B of M"); Ephesians 2:8
 - 7 D&C 59:23
 - 8 Abraham 3:22-23; Moses 6:36
 - 9 Job 38:7
 - 10 Ether 4:12 (B of M); Moroni 7:12-19 (B of M); D&C 93:9, 28-29, 36-37; D&C 88:6-7; D&C 84:45
 - 11 Ether 12:27 (B of M)
 - 12 John 3:3,7; Alma 7:14 (B of M); Mosiah 27:25 (B of M)
 - 13 Moses 6:59
 - 14 Romans 6:4-6
 - 15 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pgs 177, 205
 - 16 Galatians 4:7
 - 17 1 John 4:8; John 9:5; John 14:6
 - 18 *Hymns of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Hymn #24, "Know This, That Every Soul Is Free"
 - 19 D&C 130:19
 - 20 Luke 11:9
 - 21 I John 4:18
 - 22 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pg 121
 - 23 D&C 121:37
 - 24 Matthew 10:39; 16:25
 - 25 Ether 12:27 (B of M)
 - 26 Galatians 3:24
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 - 28 John 3:16-17

- 29 Revelations 3:16
 30 Malachi 3:2-3
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 32 Matthew 13:31; Luke 13:19; Alma 32:28 & 33:23
 (B of M)
 33 Exodus 20:5
 34 Moses 5:5; Leviticus 1& 7; Numbers 7 & 28
 35 3 Nephi 9:20 (B of M)
 36 Abraham 1:7
 37 Genesis 22:1-2
 38 Philippians 3:20-21
 39 Genesis 25:29-34
 40 James 1:2
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 59 Matthew 7:24-27
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- 61 Ether 12:27 (B of M)
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 65 1 Timothy 6:10
 66 Genesis 3:17-19
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 68 Genesis 1:31
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 72 Hebrews 5:8-9
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 88 1 Timothy 2:6
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 93 John 19:30
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- 95 Moses 5:5-7
- 96 1 John 4:8; John 8:12; John 14:6; Ether 4:12
(B of M); Moroni 7:13 (B of M)
- 97 D&C 88:11, 13, 17; D&C 93:29, 36; D&C 84: 45-46
- 98 2 Nephi 2:13-26 (B of M); D&C 93:30
- 99 D&C 84:45; D&C 88:4-14
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- 101 D&C 50:24; D&C 93:20-36
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8:17
- 103 D&C 88:50
- 104 2 Nephi 2:27 (B of M)
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- 109 John 8:12
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