

The *New* You



Straight Answers to Tough Questions

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Revised by: Eric Ens

Edited by: Trish Wilkinson and Stephanie Martens



New You!

Straight answers to tough questions!

One- How Can I Know I'm a Christian?

Two- Where Do I Go From Here?

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Introduction

Exciting times! You are on your journey to see what it means to say “yes” to Jesus. There are many questions you might have now. Harold Myra put together a great Q&A book called “The New You”. It was a great seller in the 1970s and 1980s, selling over 150,000 copies! I was able to use this book in my ministry for those who were searching or made a decision to follow Jesus. It's been a privilege to revise “The New You” so that many more can be helped as they explore their faith and newfound love of God.

You are on your start of a discovery. I realize we keep learning about Jesus everyday, through things we read, look up on the web, talk about with friends and discover for ourselves in the Bible. We hope this book with these questions, which have been based on actual questions from thousands of young people who are on the same path as you, will help you as you continue to build a relationship with God.

Thanks must first to go Harold Myra who allowed the revision to “The New You”. His heart to see people grow in their faith is never ending. Second, Trish Wilkinson and Stephanie Martens for all their time spent editing the changes to fit “modern times”. Also, thank you to Tanya Gericke for her outstanding work on the cover art.

Enjoy this book as you continue your faith journey in Jesus!

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One

How Can I Know I'm a Christian?

Question: When I said yes to "Jesus", when I finally said that after fighting him for a long time—I was really close to him. I could feel it. He was there! But now, I don't always feel that way anymore. Sometimes I do, but just as often, I can't tell that I'm any different or that He's in my life. Was it all a fluke? Have I lost His love?

Answer: Consider God's promise that He would never leave us nor forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). He doesn't say, "If you feel like I'm close, I won't forsake you." No, He states a fact. You were born into God's family. That's a fact, and it's not based on feelings any more than the law of gravity is. It's based on God's promise to you.

Most people go through a "down time" after accepting God's promise through Jesus. But if you genuinely received then this promise is true. Birth is forever. The relationship doesn't change— your Father (God) is still your Father, and He always will be.

That doesn't mean, of course, that communication can't break down. You can be on the "wrong side" of your earthly father, for instance, because you wreck his car. But he's still your dad. You just have to repair the broken communication—and perhaps, the car!

We must get three things in the right order: facts, faith, and feeling. Facts must be first. They're most important. They are based on God and his Word, the Bible. Then comes faith - our belief in those facts. Our feelings of joy and assurance come last.

These feelings are a great fringe benefit to the Christian life, but they are third in line. If we get the order mixed up, we will stumble. Good feelings are nice to have, but you don't stop being a Christian just because you feel "down".

We all feel rotten at one time or another. But to feel rotten and to act rotten are two different problems. Don't make them the same thing. There are some good examples in Hebrews 11 of biblical characters who operated on faith rather than feelings.

Question: I used to have God, but I can't seem to find him anymore. How come I feel so bad just when I need him most?

Answer: A lot of people ask this same question. Have you really lost God or do you just feel like you have?

Of course, if you've neglected Him for a long time, you may be out of communication in a serious way. But if you reestablish communication with Him, He is going to respond.

Think of it this way. Some day you may be standing saying your vows to the one you love and you soon will gently kiss the one you've just married. After the brief ceremony, the photographs, the cake cutting, and the reception, you'll drive off for your honeymoon. It will be an unreal, beautiful, unique experience. You'll finally be together alone—able finally to fully express your love for each other.

However, a few weeks later, after living together in the nitty-gritty of marriage, the relationship isn't quite the same anymore. It's still beautiful and, hopefully, still a love relationship, but it's more daily. When you wake up in the morning, you won't always breathe deeply and whisper, "Ah, my love, let me hold your hand and dream." More likely, you'll stagger drowsily to the bathroom to wash your face and fix your hair, as you do now.

Yet, you're still married. You still love. You're still together, even if the emotions aren't quite as powerful as the ones you had when you drove

away from the reception. Back then you may have thought all your problems were solved, but in actuality, your marriage may now enable you to face the problems as a couple and therefore help you a great deal. At the same time, however, marriage also gives you a whole new set of problems.

The more you share with each other, the more you feel joy together. It's the same with God. When you pray, when you read His Word, when you share with your friends, God will do beautiful things in your life. At times He will give you a wonderful sense of being in His presence—but not always, and not always with deep, honeymoon-type emotions.

If you still feel you can't find God, remember this. It is your will that He is interested in. You should say with conviction, "I will ask Jesus to take over my life. I will obey what He tells me. I will learn more in His book the Bible. I will start specific actions right now to be the kind of person I know He wants me to be. I will yield my body to Him."

If you truthfully say all that, then no matter how lost you may feel, He will be working in you, making you more mature. Development and growth will be there, whether or not you always feel close to Him.

Question: I've been trying hard to be a Christian every since I said yes to Jesus, but no matter how hard I try, I'm still not sure whether God accepts me. How can I be sure?

Answer: Many people are confused about the differences between trying to become a Christian, and growth after you've been accepted into God's family by saying yes to Jesus.

You don't have to work at becoming a Christian. That's a free gift, and if you've received Jesus, you are a Christian. God accepts you because of what Jesus did for you— not because you are a better person or for any other reason. So you can relax and quit trying to become a Christian, and get on with spiritual growth.

It's like the difference between discovering the internet, which was a one-time event and the online world then taking on a more recognizable form in 1990, when the computer scientist Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. No one had to go back and rediscover the internet every few months—that was already accomplished. But the exploration of the World Wide Web, mapping and development took a long, long time.

It should encourage you to know that your position in God's family is secure. But the prospect of life-long spiritual growth should also excite you and encourage you to get moving—and to keep growing!

Question: How do I know that Jesus really came into my life when I asked him? I mean, my world didn't change overnight or anything. How do I know I wasn't deluding myself—that I haven't missed the whole thing?

Answer: It is possible; of course, that you were only playing mind games and that you didn't really turn yourself over to Jesus.

But if you sincerely asked Him into your life and you're open to obeying Him, you can trust the promise God gives! First John 5:9 says, "We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God."

And what is it that God says?

"God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:11-13).

Are things happening in your life that didn't happen before? Are you sometimes bothered by the way you treat your family? Do you feel like defending God or standing up for His way more than you did?

You will find clues in your own experience—changes in your life that you can't explain.

One student found a solution by praying, "God, if there is a God, prove to me that you are real, and help me."

God answered that prayer, just as the student had asked.

Question: Sometimes I feel weird, sitting in my room talking to a wall or a window or shutting my eyes and talking to the dark. Is God really there? At times I feel like I'm having a conversation with empty space.

Answer: Yes, God is there, whether you feel Him or not.

Actually, your feelings are probably being affected by things that happened in your day—like getting an "A" on a paper, beating a stage on an online game, or getting something new from Amazon.

Some days—when you've found something exciting in the Scriptures—you may be very much aware of God's presence. Other

days, you might not have thought about Him once. All sorts of events affect your feelings.

God is most interested in your will, not your emotions. You should feel free to say, "God, to be truthful, I don't even feel like talking to You right now. I don't feel like You're in the room—I don't feel like You've been doing anything in my life today. But I need You. If You want to change me, here I am. Work on me any way You want. In fact, I pray that You will!"

God is delighted when you seek him because you feel "out of it" spiritually. It's easy to pray when you're spiritually high, but all Christians go through dry periods.

In Steve Jobs¹¹ last days (Founder of Apple), he stated:

"I have come to the pinnacle of success in business. In the eyes of others, my life has been the symbol of success. However, apart from work, I have little joy. Finally, my wealth is simply a fact to which I am accustomed. God has made us one way, we can feel the love in the heart of each of us, and not illusions built by fame or money, like I made in my life. I cannot take them with me. I can only take with me the memories that were strengthened by love."

Bible translator J. B. Phillips had a severe case of the "spiritual blahs" which lasted for years, but finally lifted.

You, too, will most likely have times when you don't know whether God is around or not. That's just the time to defeat Satan by saying, "God, I don't know what's happening, but here I am. I believe in You—please keep working in my life."

And He will. In His own way. In His own time.

Question: Do I have to accept everything in the Bible and all Christian doctrine to be a true Christian? I've opened my heart to Jesus, but there are a lot of things I have doubts about.

Answer: You can plan on having doubts for the rest of your life! Doubts will also be the natural result of looking at all sides of the arguments.

If you were to pretend that you don't doubt anything, you'd be naive. Your doubts are not sin if they are honest questionings.

¹¹ Snopes Steve Jobs Deathbed Speech Nov 8th 2015 updated June 20th 2017

In fact, you can treat them as opportunities. Bring them out into the open and ask your mentors the hard questions. Especially, you should confront God with them. He knows what the tough riddles of the universe are. He also understands the seeming contradictions and paradoxes in Scripture.

Then relax. Ask God to lead and enlighten your mind, and He will. People in the Bible like Job, David, Naomi, Ruth and Abraham, and even Moses questioned God and they eventually found the truth. That's the real stuff of life, and God expects you to search for answers as doubts arise.

Remember that you can't be expected to know it all. Only God Himself does. But He holds us accountable to act on whatever truth we do understand. That's the beauty of following Jesus and the Bible—you can study for a lifetime and still have plenty to learn!

Question: You tell me that the Bible is God's Word. That's quite a claim! I want to believe it, but I don't understand much of it. I've also heard that some scientists disagree with the Bible. Is the Bible really the Word of God?

Answer: C. S. Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*²², says:

"A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man, Jesus, was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool; you can spit at Him and kill him as a demon; or you can fall at his feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us."

That's quite a thought! And you must make almost the same statements about the Bible. To say it's merely great literature or that it contains some beautiful ideas to enrich life will not do.

The Bible claims to be far more than that. Either the people writing it were the greatest egomaniacs ever to sit down with quill and scroll, they

²² C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, New York: MacMillan Pub. Co., 1952.

were hopelessly deluded, or they were actually writing down words that were "God-breathed." Consider what the writers themselves say:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophets own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21).

Again and again the Bible claims to be speaking God's words (see Jeremiah 1:9; 1 Corinthians 14:37; 1 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Samuel 23:1-3, 2 Peter 3:2). And Jesus Himself referred to Scriptures as authoritative, on one occasion even supporting the story of Jonah and the great fish. You can read His words about Scripture in Matthew 5:18; 12:40; John 10:35, and other passages.

Billy Graham³³ summed it up in 2016

"How do you know the Bible is true? I'm grateful for every discovery scientists have made; many reading this column probably wouldn't be alive, nor would I, if it weren't for the remarkable advances made by medical science over the last few centuries.

But these discoveries have only strengthened my confidence in the Bible! For one thing, every scientific discovery confirms the Bible's statement that behind this incredibly complex creation is a Creator—God. Not every scientist believes in God, I know—but I've met many who do and, without exception, they have told me how their discoveries have strengthened their faith in God. The Bible says, 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of His hands' (Psalm 19:1).

These discoveries have strengthened my confidence in the Bible for another reason: They show that science alone can never answer life's most basic questions. Where did we come from? Why are we here? Where are we going when we die? How should we live? Only the Bible answers these questions, because it tells us about God and His plan for our lives.

³³ Billy Graham Evangelistic Association September 22, 2016 Topics: Bible, Science

The main reason I know the Bible is true, however, is because it points us to Jesus. He was God in human flesh, sent from Heaven to give us hope. This is why I invite you to make the greatest discovery you could ever make, by investigating with an open heart and mind what the Bible says about Jesus for yourself. Don't let doubt, or pride, or anything else keep you from putting your faith and trust in Him."

Question: Is there a way to know which thoughts are Satan's and which thoughts are God's? Does Satan really get involved in my everyday life?

Answer: Jesus referred to Satan quite frequently in the four Gospels in the Bible; Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. He called him the prince of the power of the air. Jesus didn't even contradict this evil prince when he claimed in Matthew 4, that he—Satan—could hand over earth's kingdoms to Jesus. Apparently the devil controls quite a lot on this planet!

However, Jesus also tells us in Luke 10:18-20 that he saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Satan's power was defeated through Jesus' death on the cross, and we now share that victory!

Unfortunately, however, many young people get into unhealthy situations and real spiritual danger by thinking about Satan all of the time or by getting too familiar with the dark side by searching explicit content online or the movies they watch. The best advice, which comes from James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8-9; and other Scriptures, is to stay as far away from Satan and his people as you possibly can.

Satan is real, and you should be aware of his plans for you.

You now have two major reasons for new conflict in your life:

1. Before you became a Christian, you had just one set of impulses, basically selfish. Your conscience was weak and watered-down. Now, with your new life in Jesus, you have God's new impulses in you, fighting against your old value system.
2. In addition, you've taken on a new enemy. Now that you belong to God, you're a threat to Satan in a way you never were before. He used to be relatively happy with you because you were going his way. You were part of his family. But now that you're part of God's family and have a new heavenly Father, you are Satan's enemy. He is unhappy to have lost you,

and he will work you over whenever possible. Here's his battle plan:

Doubt. Satan will try to immobilize you by making you question whether all this Bible and Jesus business might be just a hopeful theory. "You can't be sure about it," he will tell you, "so why be so serious about it?"

Discouragement. Satan tries to make you focus on your problems rather than on the Problem Solver. Matthew 14:22-23 tells about how Jesus invited Peter to walk on top of a lake, and as Peter looked at Jesus, he actually started doing it! But as soon as he started worrying about being out in the middle of the lake, and about how wet he'd be if this miracle suddenly stopped, he took his eyes off Jesus and "splash!"—down he went. And Jesus had to reach out and drag him back into the boat.

Diversion. Satan will use very attractive things to get your mind off God. Perhaps he will use something you want very much—like a boyfriend or girlfriend, all night gaming, or pornography. It will be something that's very attractive. But it will be a dead-end street, a counterfeit of the enriching things God wants you to have.

Defeat. Satan may also make you feel, "Well, I really blew it. I guess I'm just not cut out to be a Christian. All I do is fail—I might as well quit." Satan wants you to turn your one or two failures into a pattern. He focuses on past mistakes, whereas God puts the emphasis on the future and on what we can become. Satan reminds you of your worst failures. The apostle Paul was very realistic about this tactic. He says, in Philippians 3:13-14:

Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do; forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Delay. Why should Satan try to talk you out of something if he can just get you to postpone acting on it? It's like that diet you're going to start tomorrow or the homework that you're putting off. Always tomorrow, always tomorrow, if Satan can get you to put off doing what you know Jesus wants you to do, he'll have you sliding his way.

We're told in James 4:7 to "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you." We don't have to be afraid of his power. First John 4:4 assures us that "The one who is in you (the Holy Spirit) is greater than the one who is in the world (Satan)."

All of Satan's attacks will be based on lies. Jesus said, speaking about the devil in John 8:44, "He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies." That's strong language!

Be encouraged, for you have Truth on your side. No matter how great your temptation or how strong Satan's attack, Jesus has the power to overcome it. He tells us, in John 16:33, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

Question: I said yes to Jesus a few weeks ago but I'm confused about who I really am. Some of my friends and teachers think the whole idea of sin, rules, and a religion that says it knows the truth is ridiculous. They tell me that all these ideas developed centuries ago and have no value nowadays. How do I know?

Answer: It's true that many people look around, don't see God on a cloud or walking down the streets, and they figure that people are just one more uneasy rider on planet Earth. They assume we spin around and around just like the snails, the monkeys, or the birds. We may be a little smarter—but not really different.

This reasoning is common and it's easy to see where it comes from. You've probably taken a biology course in which you've studied the life cycle. A cute little rabbit is born; he grows up eating clover and lettuce, and after awhile, he dies and his body mixes with the earth. This helps new clover to grow so more bunnies can eat clover to then die and fertilize more clover to feed more bunnies. Round and round it goes—a cycle of life and death, life and death—going on year after year.

And that's all there is, they think!

But can you really believe that you're just fancy fertilizer? That you're worth no more than to be food for the roses? And that after death there's nothing—nothing at all?

Deep within, people have always known there is more. You've always known it yourself. The Bible says we know there is a God just from looking around at what He's made.

Jesus knows there is more, too. In the Gospels you will often find Him talking about judgment and the after life. The Bible clearly indicates that you will be alive a hundred years from now.

You probably won't be in a retirement home because a car accident, a heart attack, cancer, or some other disease or catastrophe will have

gotten you—or Jesus may have returned for you by then!—but you will be alive, thinking, doing, feeling, either with God, or separated from Him.

Since that is true, we can believe we are more than mere rabbits. We will live for thousands of years—even millions—and our lifestyle here should be worthy of God's presence because we will spend eternity with Him.

Of course, anyone can choose to disbelieve all this. But that doesn't make it untrue. This is the crucial choice each person must make. Either you believe what God is telling you by His creation and His Word or you don't. If you follow God, the payoff is eternity with Him. If you don't, it means separation from Him forever.

Isn't the risk of being wrong too great to take?

Question: Can you tell me what's going on? It looks like everything is falling apart! Every time I Google I read about somebody getting shot, raped or taken advantage of. Even when I can look out my window and see a beautiful day, I think about all the people who are suffering because of someone's greed, hatred, racial discrimination, or selfishness. You get to the point where you can't enjoy anything anymore.

Answer: Many people feel the same way you do—that things are terrible and getting worse.

To understand all this, we must see the world the way God sees it. How does He view murdered people lying in the streets? The victims of embezzlers? Those who commit violent sexual crimes? Remember some of the basics from His Word—the Bible.

The world is condemned.

Maybe you've seen an old house or building with a condemned sign on its front door. Windows may be broken, paint peeling, mortar joints eroded and bricks falling out, floors are broken, and there are holes in the walls. The house is not at all what it was originally meant to be. It's deteriorated, and now it's marked for destruction.

Perhaps you've seen photos of prisoners who are condemned. They're chained together, led off to be locked away from society, and eventually some of them will be put to death.

Most of us would rather not think about such scenes. But God says that's just the way the world is. Condemned. Like a prisoner on death row.

John 3:17 says, "God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him."

The world was already condemned. Jesus came because it was condemned and it still is. Have you noticed it's not getting any better? The world is made up of people and the ugly fact is that humans are condemned. We are a race of doomed creatures.

The Bible is very clear on this: "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). "For all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God" (Romans 3:23)

But the good news is that the Bible also gives the solution: "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 6:23)

God originally made man "in His own image." He made Him to do good and to love others. He also made Him to have the highest destiny of all God's created beings. Man was to be an honor and glory to his Maker. God also made people with a free will. Unlike the cows in the field, man has the ability to make moral choices. He can choose God's way, or the evil way.

Unfortunately, man has chosen wickedness. He chooses selfishness instead of God.

That's why people are such an incredible mixture. People are great—but they're contaminated. They are like the prized possessions of recent flood victims. Families watched sewer water contaminate their books, chairs, carpets, stereos, TVs, and other personal items. They eventually had to pitch these precious, excellent things into the street for garbage pickup. The merchandise was of high value, yet good for nothing. People looked at their goods in the streets and felt terrible about their loss. And that's exactly what God did. He looked at his contaminated creation—man, turned rebel—and He wept. Then He sent His Son, Jesus to reclaim His creation.

Men and women can write brilliant books, care for orphans, develop space flight vehicles, create music and art of high genius; but they can also cheat the poor, murder their fellowman, and destroy their own precious bodies with drugs, chemicals, and alcohol.

Men and Women are great. God made them that way. But they are also fallen, and many of their great achievements have turned sour because God has been—for the most part—ignored.

That's why Jesus came. To "save the world," one person at a time. He grafts in a whole new life with new goals, new direction, and a new allegiance.

A condemned building is good for nothing but destruction unless somebody renovates it. New beams, new floors, new glass in the windows, new roof, new doors, new wiring, new heating, new plumbing, new landscaping.

That's how complete a job Jesus wants to do in you. It begins when you accept him as Savior. You are made new right then. But Jesus still has a lot of carpentry to do as He brings you to maturity and teaches you what His perfection is all about. His ultimate goal is to make you just like Himself.

A condemned man is led away to death row unless the Parole Board of Canada offers him a pardon. If he does, the PBC is saying, "You are guilty. That has been proven in a court of law. But I forgive you. You are free."

This is exactly what Jesus says to us. We were condemned to death and we deserve it. We are guilty. But the Father has pardoned us—because Jesus took our place and carried our sins with Him to the town garbage dump where He was strung up on a cross and painfully murdered.

Back in 1830 in the United States, a prisoner named George Wilson was pardoned by the President. They brought Wilson the pardon papers, but he refused to accept them because that would mean admitting his guilt. So he walked to the hangman's noose with the pardon still in his pocket—unused.

That's what each human is like. We have pardons in our pockets. But most people ignore their guilt, ignore their pardons, and go on committing acts of hatred, pride, and sin. If only they understood that the pardon is there and free for the asking! That's partly our job—to tell them of Jesus so he can remake them and re-shape their minds and actions. That's the only way to reverse the trend—by introducing those who do not know Jesus, one person at a time.

Question: Why did Jesus have to die? I can understand our need to be forgiven, that's obvious. But why did He have to be tortured to death just so God could give us salvation? If God is almighty, why couldn't He simply declare us free and it would be so?

Answer: Your question is like asking, "why can't we fly with our arms?" or "why can't we feed all the hungry of the world by thinking about them?" Because that's not the way things are.

God is God. And he says in the Bible that God's plan demands that innocent blood be shed. In the Old Testament—Leviticus 17 is a good example—you'll read about lambs being killed to symbolically atone for Israel's sins and to foreshadow Jesus' atoning death.

Perhaps it would help to think of a kid who steals ten dollars from his dad's wallet, spends it, then confesses. His dad may forgive, but the ten dollars has to be paid back from some place. And the kid doesn't have the money, or the earning power, to pay back his debt.

That's the way we are. We have no assets sufficient to pay back the debt we owe to our heavenly Father. So He provided the payment and offers it to us freely.

God can do anything He wants. He could declare us free from sin and make it so. But the plan that He devised is two-part. One half of it depended on God (offering pardon through His Son, Jesus) and the other part depends on us (accepting the free gift of salvation).

There is a price to pay. But God has paid it for us, if we are willing to accept the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Two

Where Do I Go From Here?

Question: Okay, so I have this big Book in my hand. You say it's only part of the Bible—the New Testament—but it still looks thicker than any other book I've read in my life! Where in the world do I start? Do I just start at the beginning, like it's a novel? Or is there a better way?

Answer: You could read it straight through, but here's another suggestion:

Start with the letter called 1 John. It was written by Jesus' best friend, and the theme is love—both toward God and those around us. You'll find it practical and down-to-earth.

Over a period of days, read 1 John through several times. Then, turn back a little further to the letter written by James, who was Jesus' brother. It, too, is down-to-earth and gets you thinking about practical ways to demonstrate your Christianity.

Next, read the Gospel of Mark, the second book in the New Testament. This is a young man's account of Jesus' life—what He did and what He said. Take your time—don't feel as though you need to plow straight through it. Then, after Mark, read these letters: (1) Ephesians, (2) Romans, (3) Colossians, and (4) Philippians. You can search online for other books of the Bible that interest you or ask a leader in your church that you trust for his or her favourite books.

Question: I'm not quite sure I understand what the Bible is supposed to do for me. Why should I read it so much?

Answer: You'll soon find that the Bible is God's major way of speaking to you. It's His Book—His Word to all mankind.

Your new love relationship with God makes you want to know what He has to say. If you were going out with someone who moved away—let's say to Europe—and you were really in love, you can be sure that the arrival of a letter from Europe or a text would be a very special event each time and when you communicate with each other it is exciting. Then you would read the letter or text a couple more times to be sure you knew exactly what it said and what was behind the comments.

It's the same with God's letters to us. No, it's not in personal letter form. But when you keep asking "How does this apply to me?" you'll find it coming alive. Sections of Scripture that relate include 2 Timothy 3:14-17 and the story of the farmer in Matthew 13:18-23.

In a way, you're like a sports car made to run on high-octane fuel. Yes, you can pour cheap gas into the tank. You can even put in crankcase oil, and perhaps it will cough along. But for it to run with full power—to roar around the track as it was meant to—it needs the high-octane stuff.

You were made for the fuel God provides in His Word. It's not the only way He empowers you and speaks to you but it's the gas pump nearest you, and it's always available. Ignore it, and you will cough along through life, or perhaps will conk out as a Christian. You probably already know of some people who are "hung up along the shoulder of the road" in their Christian lives.

Spiritual food—reading the Bible, talking with other Christians, prayer—is not just a nice idea, it's a necessity. We've all seen the pitiful

photos of emaciated people dying of starvation. That's what a Christian is like without spiritual food—especially when one is beginning the Christian life and doesn't have a lot of reserves to fall back on.

How often do you need this spiritual food? There's no cut-and-dry answer, but compare it to actual vitamins, proteins, and carbohydrates. Think about the last summer camp, weekend retreat, or sports camp you attended. How regularly did you and the other kids eat? You probably pigged out until you were stuffed! Yet the very next morning—there you were, back in the breakfast line ready to eat again.

Food is a constant necessity. It's the same with your spiritual needs, except for one thing. You aren't driven by hunger pangs to get what you need. It's more like fuel for your gas tank—you don't always put it in because it's so much fun hearing it gurgle down the pipe. You put it in when the gauge says empty and because you know the consequences of running out of fuel. It's not always convenient to stop at a gas station, but you do it anyway, even if it makes you a little bit late to wherever you're going. Not refuelling isn't worth the risk!

That's why you should try to set up time to read the Bible and talk (pray) with God at a certain time each day—like brushing your teeth or washing your face. Once you build a habit, it takes over for you and becomes part of your daily routine. The toughest part is getting the habit set up in the first place.

Getting into this habit can change your life. Not that you'll never miss a day and not that it should become a ritual. You're not really out to prove anything. It's simply like scheduling a breakfast or dinner during your busy day.

Question: What does my new Christian life have to do with the church? You say I'm into a "relationship, not merely a religion." But where do the two meet? My church turns me off. How do I know its teachings are right? And why do so many churches have internal problems if Jesus is really the leader of all the churches?

Answer: First, let's talk again about your being a new member of God's family. You now have a large number of new brothers and sisters who love Jesus. You have a new heritage. Ephesians 2:20-22 puts it this way:

You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God

is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what He is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now He's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it. A temple in which God is quite at home.

A family is made up of a variety of people. There are babies, grandparents, teenagers, grade-school children, and middle-agers. Each learns from the other. Each helps and supports the other. A grandfather can do something for a teenager that no one else can do. And a baby can bring excitement into his mother's life as no one else can.

It's the same with the "family of Christ." His church is an organism—living, breathing people who are the "called out ones", called out to Jesus. You're incomplete without all the other members of this new family. You grow properly only as you interact with other family members and as you love your brothers and sisters (especially the nagging, unlovable ones who probably need love the most). Remember—God loves you when you are unlovable, too!

To grow, you need to see where you're going in life. What will it be like to be a parent? An educator? How does it feel to sit by your lover's bedside as cancer destroys your dreams? Or to see the joy of a son or daughter getting married? Or to watch your parents playing with your newborn baby sister? Growth requires both breadth and depth. You are complete only with other Christians in whom God is working. If someone lets you down or seems to fail, read what Galatians 6:1-4 advises:

Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him or her, saving your critical comments for yourself. *You* might be needing forgiveness before the day's out. Stoop down and reach out to those who are oppressed. Share their burdens, and so complete Christ's law. If you think you are too good for that, you are badly deceived.

So the church is not made up of perfect individuals. They are people who need help and they know it.

But what about the building on the corner—that place where you worship each week? Let's look at it from two viewpoints. First, your own responsibility.

Let's say you're out in a beautiful wheat field, running hand-in-hand with your current boyfriend or girlfriend. A photographer is clicking away with his camera. He has this idea that he can take fabulous photos of you as a couple, looking blissful and sun-drenched, for a contemporary

love poster. You've seen them in the drugstore—wind-blown, boy-girl posters, and you're putting on the same expressions as you run dreamily through the waist-high grain.

But let's say you're really not getting along all that well together. Your relationship is full of put-downs, hard feelings, and distrust. Well, you can look blissful for the camera, but inside you know better. Inside it's phony. Your true attitude is not gentle bliss but, rather, slicing jabs and hurtful barbs.

It can be the same with your attitude toward the local church (but let's hope that it's not). A lot of young people walk into church ready to judge and put down everything and everyone they see, instead of reverently asking God what He might have for them to learn that day.

If your relationship to Jesus is cold and mechanical, then your relationship to church will be cold, as well. If your relationship with Jesus is breathing and alive, then perhaps you'll find the church is also coming alive.

Set out to deliberately create an atmosphere in which you can learn something, can enjoy some Christian fellowship, and can find some opportunities to show Christ's love.

Now, the other angle.

It is true that many churches have lost something. Some have junked the very basics of believing in Jesus and the Bible. Some don't know Jesus at all. Others have turned mechanical and dull. Still others have gone to another extreme. They push the right doctrines, but they do it in a harsh and judgmental way—without love.

All of us find it easy to point out the problems and the problem people in the church. But what attitude would God like for us to have?

Look at any weaknesses you find in the church as your opportunity. Pray for the people in the church you attend. Pray for your pastor, youth leader, and those who serve faithfully in ministries such as music, teaching children, community outreach or counselling.

You don't necessarily have to leave your church. You may also find it helpful to supplement your church program with other situations in which you can get together with other believers who are excited about God and who can share their excitement with you.

Whatever you do, be sure to get with "alive" Christians regularly. It's a must for spiritual growth. It will inspire you to keep at it.

Question: Why is it so important to dedicate everything to Jesus? Some people say you get neurotic worrying about every little detail.

How much do I have to give to God? How hard do I have to try before it's enough?

Answer: You are called to be a complete person. You grow into that completeness through yielding your life to Jesus Christ.

It's like going out for football and being twenty pounds overweight. You might wish the coach would lay off, but he intends to have you fit by the time the season begins.

"C'mon, Coach. Lay off. Let me be," you plead. But his job is to get you ready to play. You have to do everything he says, or you're fooling yourself and failing him and the team.

You sacrifice everything and, therefore, gain everything. Halfway commitment doesn't make it. God intends to do the complete job in you.

The Bible refers to Christ as Lord. That means he's in charge—of everything. Totally. Speaking in Luke 6:46-49, Jesus commands us to come to Him, to hear His words, and to put them into practice. He implores us to build our lives on a firm foundation—Him, our rock!

How do you get a handle on that?

Admittedly, it's hard to discuss "yielding your life." What does that mean, and how do you go about it?

Concentrate on one thing at a time.

For instance, you may not know exactly what God wants for your future—college, marriage, career, and other decisions—but you do know how He wants you to act with your date this Friday night.

Jesus came into your life by invitation. Now, invite Him into specific areas, one at a time. If He's invited into your grades, then He controls everything you do related to your studies. And that becomes a point of accomplishment in your life.

What is the biggest barrier between you and God right now? Concentrate on that one thing. Is it your temper? Attitude towards your home life? Cutting your friends down online? The stuff you're looking up, or the videos you're watching in your spare time? Maybe it's your language—or some habit you need to break?

Identify one thing, bring it to the Lord, and say, "Here it is. You come in and take over. You're in charge, Lord."

If you've seen the movie "Hacksaw Ridge"⁴⁴, while serving overseas in World War II, Solider Desmond Doss hears the cries of the dying

⁴⁴ Hacksaw Ridge: Summit Entertainment September 2016

soldiers and decides to run back into the carnage. He starts carrying wounded soldiers to the cliff's edge one by one and rappelling them down by rope, each time praying and asking God to guide him to save one more. The arrival of dozens of wounded soldiers—once presumed dead—comes as a shock to the rest of the unit below. When day breaks, Doss rescues Sergeant Howell and the two make a daring escape under enemy fire. Doss kept going on and saving one more even though he didn't know what would happen. Then another. And another. That's what spiritual growth is all about.

So find something specific—something with a name, a time, and a place. Say to God, "Here's my problem. I'm inviting you into that area to lead the battle."

Jesus said, in Matthew 6, that we're to live one day at a time and not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will have its own problems. So today pray, be Desmond Doss for me, Jesus, and take my problem. Tomorrow give Him another, always moving on as He leads you to full maturity and godliness.

As humans, we are never capable of giving one hundred percent in anything. So give one area after another to God. The basic law of growth is this: when you stop giving, you stop growing. When you keep on giving, you keep on growing. Give all you can—that's what God expects of you.

There's always new ground to be broken. There's always something new to yield. The more He controls, the more real He is to you, and the more rich and dynamic life becomes.

Question: This may sound like a stupid question, but you keep referring to things like "John 1:12" and "Ephesians 2:8-9." What does that mean? Are they like chapters in a book? Or is this some kind of code to help you find things in one long document?

Answer: If you're not familiar with the different books of the Bible, look at the beginning, where you'll find an index.

About seven hundred years ago, each "book" was divided into chapters and verses for easy reference. The colon (:) is the divider that splits chapter numbers from verse numbers. Try looking up a few references, such as John 3:16, with the aid of your index. Go to the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16. You'll find it relatively easy.

There are two major divisions to the sixty-six books of the Bible—the Old Testament (thirty-nine books) and the New Testament (twenty-

seven books). There are many different kinds of books in the Bible. They include accounts of history, collections of songs, biographies, letters, and other literary forms. As you get to know the Bible more deeply, you will find it has inexhaustible material to help you understand God better and better.

Question: I don't feel like I'm talking to the Lord in the right way. I also know I'm doing some things that are wrong, but I keep on doing them. I want to be constructively enthusiastic about living the Christian life, but how can I control my attitudes and desires? What's the key to self-discipline?

Answer: Take some time to sit down and read what Jesus says in John 15. There, He uses an excellent picture of vines and branches (us) being connected to the main vine (God). This is exciting! We are actually part of God. We are branches which reach out from Him, the Main Vine. So our life comes from Him, and so do our controlling impulses. Daily life and what it takes to keep going come from Him—just like liquids and nutrients flow from the main trunk of a tree out to the branches and limbs. It's similar to a lamp. You have to plug it in to have it work. Unplugged, it may have a brand-new bulb, a beautiful shade, and be very impressive-looking. But it's dead. There's no power, no life. And a lamp can't plug itself in!

Ask Jesus to "keep you plugged in" continually. Then, the power will be coming from the Source; from Him. Your role is not to generate power or light, but to let it flow through you.

One student commented, "I find that when I'm plugged into God and talking to Him, my problems result in growth. But when I let the plug get gently pulled away or yanked out, my problems increase and get more frustrating. I get nowhere until I come back to talking to God."

Question: I keep feeling like I'm going to fail—really badly—so that everybody will know it and I'll look like an idiot. Will God let me fail?

Answer: Maybe. The Bible says that before you knew Jesus, you were a slave to sin. You were God's enemy. But now that you're His child, the Bible says you are specially loved. Ephesians 2 has an excellent description of how you are now alive and free in Christ, and one of the things you're free to do is to fail.

God is not nearly so interested in how you look to your friends (although He's not out to embarrass you) as He is in helping you grow into spiritual maturity. And sometimes failure here and there is part of that growth process. A father expects that his kids will have some knocks, bruises, and some failures in the process of growing up. But that's all normal development. It's the same in reaching spiritual maturity. What's important is that you move on from the failures—keep reaching, keep stretching, keep growing.

Question: I went out with this girl. She heard that I was a Christian and now she's really cold to me. At work some of the guys think I'm on an ego trip because I seem to be happy more consistently. My parents get irritated as they say I'm more critical of them, but I feel like I've been changing for the better.

It's hard to be good. My parents keep putting me down; they think I'm just going through a phase. So then I'm afraid to talk about it because when I cross them, like when I don't want to clean my room or something—they throw it back saying, "Fine Christian you are!" How do I handle all this?

Answer: You've hit some tough reactions. Maybe a good response to your parents' criticism would be: "Please be patient. God isn't finished with me yet." As a newborn Christian, you're not saying you're the new golden good child, you're just saying you're someone who wants to improve and who has opened themselves up to God in trying to find a better way to live.

Love your parents as they are. That's part of your challenge, and it's a direct command of Scripture to honor and obey them. Love them with the idea that God—not you—can change them. Accept the fact that they won't understand your new faith, and neither will a large part of the rest of the world.

But as you live out your faith day by day, admitting you're not perfect, you are showing the right attitude for growth.

One young person who was finding that he just couldn't communicate with his family adapted the famous prayer of St. Francis of Assisi in this way: "Lord, grant me the grace and love to be still (but pray) before my parents when I'm right, and grant me the humility to admit to them my sins when I'm wrong."

Living with people is the challenge God has given to us. It is a bigger challenge than completing a hard level in a game or winning

the NBA Championship. Only God can help you take on the challenge and win some victories.

Question: I watch other people who seem to be forever quoting verses from the Bible that “leaped out and helped them” or something. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to relate to the Bible like that. Can I be spiritual but just not get that much out of it right now?

Answer: Do you have a modern edition? Maybe it's the "thee's and thou's, and the would'st's and should'st's" that are hanging you up. All the Scripture in this book, for instance, is from the New International Version—one of the easier-to-understand translations available. A very easy-reading paraphrase of Scripture is The Living Bible or the Message. The original language of the New Testament—Greek—was street language and not at all refined. So reading Scripture in a common, everyday language you can understand is a logical first step.

Of course, some people do have a special knack for seeing things in Scripture which they can apply to themselves. And they want to share these insights. Not everyone sees and applies these viewpoints equally. Each of us has specific talents.

You can train your mind and stretch it. Here are some tips:

Your frame of mind is vital. Remember, this is God speaking to you. Ask Him to show you what it means for your life. Then, be ready to obey. If you're open to His leadership, He's more apt to give it.

Make prayer and Bible reading become a living interaction. You may be in the middle of a Psalm and feel like you want to talk to God about what it's saying. Good! Go ahead! That's what it's all about.

Don't just chew—swallow! It would be crazy for you to sit down to the dinner table and carefully chew your meat forty times per bite, but never swallow it. Yet that's how a lot of people approach the Bible. Knowing the facts and what they say is helpful—but it's *important to apply that knowledge* as well. That's what we mean by swallowing, internalizing scripture. How do you do that? Well, suppose you want God to affect your relationship with your mother. But she obviously isn't specifically mentioned in Scripture. What do you do?

As an example, take the following statements from James 1:24. Read them slowly and thoughtfully:

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its

work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Okay—how do you "swallow" that?

Let's go back to your mother, with whom we'll assume you've been having some sharp disagreements. Put her name into the verse.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kinds **with your mother**, because you know that the testing of your faith develops patience **with your mother**. Perseverance [patience] **with your mother** must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking in anything.

The key concept here is to personalize Scripture. If the Bible is talking about sin, ask yourself, "Which sin?" If it talks about loving a brother or sister, ask yourself, "Which one?" Put your own name in often. Constantly apply to yourself everything you read, whether it's advice or a story about someone. Ask yourself, "What hatreds or lusts or stupid actions do I see in this character which I can avoid?" Or "What love did this other person show that I can copy?"

Scripture will come alive and you, too, will have exciting insights to share from the Bible when you make it personal and real to your everyday life.

Question: I have trouble understanding why there's so much violence in the Old Testament. I read about God sending the Israelites into cities to kill men, women, and children, and I wonder how a God of love could command such things. Also, haven't a lot of people misused Scripture to "prove" their personal viewpoints?

Answer: The Old Testament must be viewed—like all Scripture—from God's point of view. Man rebelled. There are many examples in the Bible of whole cities and cultures living as rebels whose lifestyles, in God's own words, "stunk in God's nostrils."

But it was one group of these rebels that God chose as His special people. They were Israelites—Jews—and God's plan was to use them to bring about a whole new lifestyle. He moved into their wicked ways and gave a set of laws that would provide for widows and orphans, would free slaves, and that would protect neighbors and strangers. Most of all, His way commanded them to "Love the Lord your God with all their hearts, souls, minds, and strength."

When these chosen Israelites lived side-by-side with people who were still enemies of God, He knew they would contaminate His chosen people. The rebels weren't about to move on, so God gave the command in Deuteronomy 9:4-6 to drive them out.

This points to the deadly seriousness of life and death, our rebelliousness, and God's claims on us. The scenes are not easily glossed over, and the questions they raise have no simple answers. We're not in a little playground here on earth. We are significant human beings with important choices to make. And the consequences are enormous.

Author David Winter, in his book *Now What?*, comments that the main criticism we have of this bloodshed is based on the belief that death is the worst thing that can happen to a person. But perhaps allowing evil to continue is even worse. Certainly, to be an enemy of God is worse than death. We see in the Old Testament, not only God's love and concern, but also his judgment, his blazing holiness and the terrible reality of our fall from God's favor.

None of this contradicts Jesus. True, He loves us. He died for us. But Jesus spoke about hell as well as heaven.

It's dangerous to bring our ideas to the Bible and try to mold it, instead of letting it mold us. Some people have used the Bible to "prove" some people are better than others, although the apostle Paul makes it clear in Colossians 3:11 that God considers all of us equal. You can "prove" almost anything from the Bible if you take verses from here and there, patch them together, and build a framework to support any wild theory you have.

That's why so many false cults can say they are based on the Bible. They actually misuse it, instead of letting the Bible form them.

One humorous example involves the fellow whose Bible fell open to "Judas went and hanged himself." When He flipped to another section of the Bible, His eye fell on "Go thou and do likewise."

Obviously, when you look at one part of the Bible you must also consider the rest of it to make sure that what you see is consistent with other parts of Scripture. Let the Bible mold your thinking—not vice versa. Compare all of Scripture and see how it blends together. And get good teaching from a pastor, youth leader, or other knowledgeable person who knows, believes, and can teach the whole truth of God.

The Bible is an incredibly realistic assortment of different types of literature, all with a common theme. You will find mysteries and mindbenders—things that will keep you going deeper and deeper until you're old and gray. That's one way that you can tell it is God's Word. No

shallow answers can sum it up. There are puzzles to probe and tough teachings to figure out.

In this, as in all questions, confront God directly. Ask Him to show you right from His Word just why He acts the way He does. Ask Him what He means by each statement. Go right to the Source for your answers!

Question: Is all this talk about my being so sinful healthy? Okay, maybe I'm a terrible person but I have enough problems now believing in myself. How can it be helpful for me to keep putting myself down all the time? I might as well give up hope if I'm always going to say that Jesus is wonderful, but I'm no good.

Answer: Self-honesty is the best road to health. The fact that you see yourself as infected with a fatal moral disease—that you are a selfish creature—is really a healthy thing. It is the beginning of healing and wholeness.

Look around you and you see the selfishness of people. Look inside yourself and you see something terribly wrong there, too. To ignore it is like ignoring cancer.

But by looking within you also see the *incredibly high potential* you have. You catch a glimpse of the person you could be the person God wants you to be. Your own "goodness" is now irrelevant. You have a new life in Jesus and it is his goodness which lives in you.

You are unique. A person, in the deepest sense. A marvellous creation of God. He has given you new life, and a new self.

Under no conditions should you hate yourself. That's the wrong idea altogether. Jesus said, in Matthew 22, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Included in this statement is the assumption that you do love yourself. You accept a growing appreciation for yourself, as you are connected with God. You are becoming what God originally intended for you to be.

But you can't do this on your own. Warfare rages inside. Your old self clashes with the new. Expect conflict. Expect the battles to result in His victory in you. God's plan in this world is to draw out of it a community of people who will love Him forever. And because you've personally received Him, you're one of them!

Three

Why Do I Still Mess Up?

Question: I accepted Jesus three weeks ago, but already I feel like I'm not a very good Christian. Others seem like so much better Christians than I am—it leaves me kind of depressed. What's up with this feeling?

Answer: Actually, your attitude is a terrific step in the right direction. Instead of feeling "secure" or "with-it" spiritually, you realize you have a long way to go.

It may help to know that other young people really struggle also. Many of them are fighting deep problems—abusive backgrounds, dependencies, broken homes, low self-esteem—and they may be unwilling or unable to let others know their struggles. Still other young people look like super-Christians, but are really superficial underneath.

Two teenagers were at a youth retreat, crammed into a motel lobby with about two hundred other young people. The guy, a senior, had been deeply touched by God and was really determined to live for Jesus. His emotions were touched and tears were running down his face.

A girl he knew was counselling a group of other students. "Wow," he thought. "She must really be spiritually mature. Compared to her, I'm not much of a Christian all!" Yet it was the guy who went on to a deeper faith full-time ministry for God. The girl eventually deserted the Christian Lifestyle altogether.

The point is not the girl's problem, whatever it was, but the guy's attitude, which led to wholesome maturity. His saying, "God be merciful to me, a sinner", genuine tears of repentance and commitment enabled him to grow.

That's what it's all about—starting a lifetime of growth where you are now is not nearly so important as the direction you're going and how spiritually hungry you are. Are you willing to let God open up a growth program in you that will continue on?

Your growth is based on your relationship with Jesus. The Bible says, in John 1:12 in the New Testament, "To all who received Him [Jesus], to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God." That's what you are—a newly born member of God's family. You have a new heavenly Father—a Father who is perfect and who has your best interests at heart.

Birth is only the beginning. Consider this idea of being newly born. A baby comes noisily into the world and can cause lots of aggravation. But, babies are very limited in what they can do and understand. They don't hop off the delivery table, slip on some designer jeans, and trot off downstairs to meet some friends.

In the same way, spiritual birth is just a beginning. There are potentially many years of growth ahead.

It's absurd to think of a baby hopping off a delivery table. It's equally absurd to envision him staying a day-old baby for months. Eventually, lying there in the post delivery room, he'd begin thinking, "I don't enjoy being a human at all. I got slapped around a couple of times by this guy wearing a gown and a mask. I can't breathe too well, and they've got me in a hot little box. Here I am, farsighted, red-faced, and helpless."

Obviously, that's impossible. But you can remain in the baby-stage spiritually—you can stay immature and miss out on growing as a Christian and seeing all of the great things God wants to do in you.

Another New Testament verse, 2 Peter 3:18, tells us to "Grow in grace and understanding of our Master, Jesus Christ." Colossians 2:6-7 sums it up this way: " My counsel for you is simple and straightforward: Just go ahead with what you've been given. You received Christ Jesus, the Master; now *live* Him. You're deeply rooted in Him.

You're well constructed upon Him. You know your way around the faith. Now do what you've been taught. School's out; quit studying the subject and start *living* it! And let your living spill over into thanksgiving." All this takes time. If you've ever taken care of a baby, you know it takes a while for him to catch onto things. The first few months, babies just lie there like blobs, except when they're crying for food or a dry diaper. You can make faces, wrinkle your nose and eyebrows, and gurgle—but there's no response. For the first few months, the baby can't even burp by himself.

But then he starts discovering his fingers. He begins to look at faces. He rolls over, then crawls, and finally he says "Gagagale-bagaga," which his father insists is "Da-da."

Now, can you imagine the baby's father, at this stage, slapping him and saying, "You dumb kid. Say it right! Don't say anything until you can say it right!"?

Or when the baby starts to crawl and awkwardly drops down on its stomach, imagine the father saying, "I don't want to see you try that again! Do it right the first time, or don't do it at all!"

Of course not! That's ridiculous. Fathers are delighted with any progress. Growth is slow, but it comes. It is a process.

In the same way, your new heavenly Father is interested in your growth, even though you may occasionally stumble and mess up. God is there to help, not to put you down.

A baby also learns there are "no-no's" in life. Some things are right, and some things are wrong. A bottle on the table will break if tipped over—don't touch! A child finds that if he's going to get along in life, it's best to get along with his father. And that involves seeing things his father's way.

Our heavenly Father, unlike human fathers, is always right. When we do wrong things, the way to restore our relationship with Him is to see things His way. We apologize, and then obey the next time. He promises in 1 John 1:9 always to forgive. On the other hand, if we admit our sins He won't let us down; He'll be true to Himself. He'll forgive our sins and purge us of all wrongdoing. When you were born into God's family, He accepted you with love as if you were perfect. Hebrews 10:14 points out that "By one sacrifice He has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

That's you! Perfect. And loved. Notice the growth factor—"being made holy." And God promises that the growth process will go on and on:

"He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

Don't worry about others being better Christians than you are. Just look forward to the exciting things your Father wants to do in you!

Question: How can I be sure I'm placing my trust in a true thing? I'm getting my information second-hand, not from a voice out of a smoking mountain or a burning bush or something.

Answer: Almost everything you believe or do is based on trusting some authority. For instance, you believe there is a place called Moscow—not necessarily because you've been there, but because reliable people have told you it's there. You have faith.

You get into a car and drive along a mountain road. Do you slow down every time you approach the top of a hill because you're afraid there's no road on the other side? No, you trust your life to the road builders. You believe in an authority.

There's a story in the New Testament about a doubter named Thomas—that's where we get the term "Doubting Thomas." You can read about him, and how Jesus dealt with his doubts in John 20:19-31.

The best authority is Jesus Christ and His Word, the Bible. You can believe what He says.

When scientists built the particle accelerator, or "atom smasher" as it is popularly called, they were working by faith to find incredibly small, short-lived energy particles which, by their calculations, should have existed. They had no proof. No one had ever seen one, or even a trail which one had left behind. But mathematics indicated they should exist.

They did. The particle accelerator and the scientists' investigation proved their faith in a universe that runs by laws and has order.

The nature of things indicates that God exists. His Word—which has the ring of truth—says that Jesus Christ can be depended upon and can be followed with complete trust.

Question: It seems things have just gotten worse for me since I've accepted Christ. I'm giving up most of my bad habits—cheating, gossiping, pornography, etc. But it's tough, fighting against what you want to do all the time—and against what all your friends are doing. I like what I've got in God, but why hasn't life gotten any easier?

Answer: Struggle is always a sign of life. Usually, it's also a sign of growth. The person who is content to sit still can often slide along without the hassles—or the rewards. When you coast, you can only go one direction—downhill!

It's like sports or exercise. You can sit around and do nothing, getting flabby, or you can move into action. Like a weightlifter, you grow stronger by stress, by pushing against the resistance until you hurt. You expect a little pain and unpleasantness when you're getting your body into shape. The Bible talks, in 2 Timothy 2:2-7, about some occupations where this is especially true: being a soldier, an athlete or a farmer.

The Holy Spirit has breathed new life into your conscience. You are a brand-new person so move into the challenge. Walk right up to some boulders that need to be moved and start your way up some tall mountains that need climbing!

Sure, a lot of young people prefer the easy way of stolen tests, easy booze at parties, or having sex in cars. But they are like people who live to eat instead of those who eat to live. The food they wolf down gives them pleasure for a little while, but then it turns to ugly fat. The person who learns to deny himself—to discipline himself—gets far more out of life and relationships.

Of course, some people are quick to tell you that being a "super-Christian" is boring. They tell you it's dull compared to attending wild parties. But true joy comes out of some pain, commitment, and direction in life. Ask the coach of any athletic team. Ask yourself what you really want out of life.

Jesus gave you a mixed bag when you accepted Him: denial of your selfishness, commitment to living for others instead of yourself, His control of your body and emotions.

All that may seem confining, but Jesus also said that the reason He came was to bring you joy. With Jesus, you have the fruit of the Spirit, which includes, according to Galatians 5:22-23, "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

These are the right kinds of building blocks to build a life on. They will help you move confidently through the temptations and frustrations you will face.

Question: How does God view the relationship between attitudes and behavior? How does He really work?

Answer: Most often, you will see God affecting events and situations through his changing of attitudes.

Researchers have learned that if you change attitudes, you change behavior. They had guessed that was so, but now their tests show it's certain. For instance, if your attitude about a car, a brand name, or a minority group can change, your behavior toward that person or thing will likely change as well. God does intervene to change events, but more often those changes come from within because of a change of attitude.

God moves in to help us change attitudes. Jesus said, in Matthew 22:37, that the greatest commandment is "***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.***" And the second commandment, He said, is "***Love your neighbor as yourself.***" With that attitude, ***you could change the world!***

Try it for yourself. Ask God's help in changing your attitude toward some problem situation or person—and then look for the ways He will work both in the situation and in you!

Question: I have a terrible time getting along at school. Also, I blow up at my brother a lot. I guess I'm really pretty insecure. I know I'm selfish and impatient and lazy about my schoolwork. I want to care more about others and less about myself, as Jesus commands, but I'm not able to pull it off. It's discouraging. What can I do?

Answer: You sound pretty down on yourself right now. First, remember who you are. You're a member of God's family. Important enough to Him that He sent His Son to die for you, extended to you the offer of eternal life and then gave you that eternal life when you asked for it. That makes you pretty special!

Next, work on separating out the things you can change from the things you can't. Bone structure, height, race, certain genetic qualities—these you can't change. God created you this way, and He called it good.

But, with God's help, you can change problems like lack of diligence in school, a short temper, being self-centered and not respecting authority.

Not every person can be the outstanding athlete at school, a valedictorian or a university scholar! But everyone can work to develop Christ-likeness in attitudes and actions.

It's the Holy Spirit's job to help us change, so pray about it. Pick one problem—say, your selfishness—and really work on it until you see some progress. Then work on another. Then another. One thing at a time, with God's help.

See yourself as God sees you—a wonderful person—"in process!"

Question: None of my friends accept what I say about Jesus. They leave me out, then brag about all the fun they have at their wild parties. They put me down because I don't drink, do drugs, gossip or watch pornography. I want to be popular and feel secure, but I feel hurt because I'm left out. What should I do?

Answer: Maybe it's time to find a new set of friends. In a talk He gave to his followers, Jesus told them what to do when people persecuted them for being righteous and when people said all kinds of bad things about them. Consider the advice in Matthew 5:11-12, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." The truth is, not everyone will love you or your faith.

Question: How can I change my reputation? I had gotten involved with a partner sexually and now all the others hate me as I see what they post online. I want to share my faith with them, but they'll hardly even talk to me.

Answer: You probably won't be able to make much impact on them until they see the genuine difference in your life. You might as well try to accept that and let God decide the timing of when you share your new life with them.

It's a little bit like someone with bad cavities and crooked teeth wanting to do a Colgate toothpaste commercial. It would be a lot more believable after a trip to the dentist and a couple of years with braces.

If Jesus is in control of your life, people will see that bright new look and they will eventually start to show some interest in finding out more about it. But it's also important that you get with other Christians so they can help you grow.

Don't take too lightly the fact that your old friends can pull you down. Jesus talked, in Matthew 5:14, about us being "the light of the world." Starting out, it's like carrying a little candle through the dark night. If you are always sloshing around in a swamp, your candle is likely to get doused. Get around other people who are also carrying candles, and you'll have more light to find your way. You need people around you who are excited about Jesus and who can share your excitement.

If you've been sexually involved, you may want to stop dating altogether for a while. Temptations will still be very strong whenever you're out with someone—particularly the wrong kind of person. Spend a few months concentrating on letting God take charge of every aspect of the new you. Then ask Him to help you get involved in a whole new set of activities and, perhaps, a new set of friends, which will be hard but worth it in the long run.

Question: I really confuse myself with some of the dumb things I do. I often don't intend to do them, and I really don't have a good reason or any explanations for my behavior! How do I understand this part of myself?

Answer: Part of the great new adventure with God is learning more about the intricate, fascinating, marvellous you.

God is in the business of changing us from ugly larvae to butterflies—beautiful winged creatures who can soar and flutter in the breeze. And He's starting with the unique raw material He created—you!

In one sense, we're still in the caterpillar stage because God has only just begun His work in us humans. But the Bible assures us that we "are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Learning that you are a worthwhile, significant new person in God's sight is exciting. Exploring what that means is one of the great adventures in any Christian's life.

Question: How is God going to love me after what I've done this week? And I know I'll probably do it again! It doesn't make sense that He'll just forgive me over and over again. I feel terribly guilty and just can't forgive myself for blowing it so bad—again!

Answer: You're right. God's forgiveness doesn't make sense. But it's true, and it's available. Over and over again.

When someone blows it, societies reaction is to judge him. God's reaction is to love him. Fortunately, God doesn't act like humans do!

Don't misunderstand. God hates evil. He's not a soft touch grandpa who will overlook or pay no attention to real wrongdoing. He's not weak. He's the virile God who made tornadoes as well as the tulips. He can't stand sin, and He must judge it. Yet He loves you in spite of your failures. As He looks at you, He sees His Son, Jesus. It is because of Jesus' righteousness that God grants us forgiveness and a second chance—and a third, and a fourth. If we confess our sins the Bible says in 1 John 1, God

is faithful and just, and He will forgive us those sins. And there appears to be no limit—He just keeps on forgiving as we keep on repenting.

You should, of course, be concerned about your actions. Your motivation in life is to please Jesus—to keep the relationship close. First John 2:1-2 explains it this way:

I write this, dear children, to guide you out of sin. But if anyone does sin, we have a Priest-Friend in the presence of the Father: Jesus Christ, righteous Jesus. When He served as a sacrifice for our sins, He solved the sin problem for good—not only ours, but the whole world's.

You may think you have some obligation, because of your new commitment to God, to be a super-Saint—always happy, kind, generous, loving, and patient. But you're human. As much as you might try, you will slip, get irritable, and do things you shouldn't. And it's for those occasions that God makes His forgiveness freely available.

Learn to forgive yourself when God does. Stop kicking yourself—He doesn't! God knows more about you and the situation than you do. He loves and forgives. You should do the same.

Question: I'm tempted to do all sorts of wrong things. I often give in, and I know God hates that. I'm getting tired of fighting it. Am I so terribly sinful that I have to be tempted like this all the time?

Answer: Welcome to the family! You're normal! You can probably sympathize with the World War II sailor who originated the word "snafu." He was so frustrated one day that he signalled, "Situation Normal: All Fouled Up." so "snafu" quickly entered America's vocabulary.

Situation Normal: All Fouled Up. That's why Jesus came in the first place. And even after you've received Him into your life, you may often be tempted to go back to your old ways. First Corinthians 10:13 says this:

No test or temptation that comes your way is beyond the course of what others have had to face. All you need to remember is that God will never let you down; He'll never let you be pushed past your limit; He'll always be there to help you come through it.

So your situation is normal—all fouled up. But Jesus changes that. James 1:12-15 declares:

Anyone who meets a testing challenge head-on and manages to stick it out is mighty fortunate. For such persons loyally in love with God, the reward is life and more life.

Don't let anyone under pressure give in to evil say, "God is trying to trip me up." God is impervious to evil, and puts evil in no one's way. The temptation to give in to evil comes from us and only us. We have no one to blame but the leering, seducing flare-up of our own lust. Lust gets pregnant, and has a baby: sin! Sin grows up to adulthood, and becomes a real killer.

So we can't simply relax and float downstream. We must not give in, for when we see the seriousness of sin, we see how important it is to yield to Christ.

Peter, perhaps more than anyone else, saw in a terrible graphic scene just what his sin cost God. Peter denied Jesus three times. Then he saw soldiers lead Jesus away to a whipping which ripped open his body, then to a cruel execution on a cross with spikes through his hands and feet. And Peter wept when he saw how he had failed

Years later, Peter said, in 1 Peter 1:13-16:

So roll up your sleeves, put your mind in gear, be totally ready to receive the gift that's coming when Jesus arrives. Don't lazily slip back into those old grooves of evil, doing just what you feel like doing. You didn't know any better then; you do now. As obedient children, let yourselves be pulled into a way of life shaped by God's life, a life energetic and blazing with holiness. God said, "I am holy; you be holy."

Our natural inclination is to drift away from God. We want to give in. But God waits patiently for us to invite Him to take over for us, to fight the battles that are bigger than we are.

Question: Let me tell you about the real me. I tell lies about other people. I lust after people of the opposite sex. I'm self-centered and I put other people down. In fact, I enjoy putting people down. What can I do to change this?

Answer: Your comments are very similar to others we hear. For example:

"I'm jealous, and I can't help myself."

"I resent people who hurt me. I hate them."

"All I want to do is escape and do what feels good all the time."

"I can't stand my sister, and sometimes I think I'm going to kill her."

It should be no surprise that the old self in you produces some alarmingly evil things. The surprise is that God has a remedy. We confess

our sins, reject them from our lives, and God forgives us and moves in to control.

Here are some tips:

1. Remember that you're a son or daughter of God, even when you're struggling.
2. Stay away from things that create a problem for you. If lust is a problem, searching for pornography online is not going to help. If certain friends drag you down, search for some who will lift you up.
3. It's not bad to cry "help" if you need it. Maybe from other friends who believe like you, or youth leader, from a pastor, or from a counsellor or health-care professional. Look for people who can talk with you, pray with you, and encourage you.
4. Accept God's forgiveness as the first step to victory. Psalm 37:23-24 says, "The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in Him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with His hand."

Question: Sex is really a problem for me. When I'm in a relationship, I have real trouble controlling my selfish desires. What can I do?

Answer: There is such a thing as lust, and you may be going too far with your partner. Don't try to make yourself sexless. You were made to have sexual thoughts—you're a sexual being.

God made something very beautiful when He made sex. He knows all about how you feel and think sexually, because He created sex—for you. And His aim is for you to have the most pleasure and true joy possible, with commitments which protect and enrich the whole person.

That's why He invented marriage. Only in the marriage relationship will you find the commitment needed to make sex all that God intended it to be. "Experimenting with sex before marriage can seriously damage your chance of finding sexual fulfillment once you are married."

But that's not to say you won't ever have sexual feelings before marriage. A touch, a kiss, a hug—all expressions and thoughts about sex depend on your level of commitment to the other person and to God.

Bring your sexual thoughts to the Lord, and ask Him for guidance and understanding. In our sex-saturated society, we have to fight its

becoming an obsession. First Corinthians 6:18-20 gives some very specific advice on what to do about sexual thoughts:

There's more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. As written in Scripture, "The two become one." Since we want to become spiritually one with the Master, we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never "become one." There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for "becoming one" with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through your body.

Accept your sexuality and give Jesus control over it. Go to Him when you are tempted and ask Him to show you what is right.

Question: Sometimes I still have the urge to smoke Marijuana or get drunk. I know it's not really good for me but does the Bible really say there is anything wrong with it?

Answer: Nowadays, there are many people who are trying to figure out where they stand on this subject. You can find things online that support these habits but there are also consequences to substance use that have negative effects on the body.

In Daniel chapter 1 in the bible there is a story about looking after your body:

The head of the palace staff wanted all staff to eat rich food and drink wine, the royal food, as part of their diet. Daniel and his three buds realized that this was not good for them so they decided to eat healthy instead of the indulgent food and drink they were being offered. They asked the head of the palace if they could do this simple and healthy diet for 10 days and then compare themselves with those who ate the royal foods.

At the end of the time set by the king for their training, the head of the royal staff brought them in to king Nebuchadnezzar. When the king interviewed them, he found them far superior to all the other young men. None were a match for Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. So after that, the attendant fed them only vegetables instead of the food and wine provided for the others.

Keeping healthy and not over indulging will be beneficial in the long run to all of us just like it was for Daniel and his friends.

As you have now decided to follow Jesus, and He wants the best for you, it is time to work on what he has planned for you. Romans 13:13-14 states it well:

Because we belong to the day, we must live decent lives for all to see. Don't participate in the darkness of wild parties and drunkenness, or in sexual promiscuity and immoral living, or in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. And don't let yourself think about ways to indulge your evil desires.

1 Corinthians 6:20 also remind us:

Don't you see that you can't live however you please, squandering what God paid such a high price for? The physical part of you is not some piece of property belonging to the spiritual part of you. God owns the whole works. So let people see God in and through **your body**.

Ultimately God still allows us to make our own choices but provides us with a guide, the Bible, to help us navigate this new life. We should choose to let our choices reflect His teachings.

Four

Can I Really Talk to God?

Question: Frankly, I don't know how to pray. I say "Hello, God." Then there's this long silence. What should I do?

Answer: There's no mysterious formula for praying. In fact, you might start at the most natural point—what you're already thinking about. Is there a test tomorrow? A teacher who put you down? Is your best friend having trouble and taking it out on you? A trip you're going on? A date or a game you're excited about? God wants to be in on all aspects of your life—the laughter and good times as well as the fears and frustrating times. Bring up whatever's most important to you right then. Like, "Lord, I think I'm getting too involved with Lindsay. It scares me. What should I do?" Or, "Father, you know I just can't stand Derek. Sometimes I scream inside. How should I handle myself?" Invite God into the real stuff of your life.

You'll find He'll answer your prayers in many ways: through circumstances, through other Christians, through His Word. Let the Bible blend into your prayers. For instance, say you're really afraid to get up in class to give a speech. You'll find the promise "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline" (2 Timothy 1:7) might help you right then. One student always repeats that promise when he has to talk in front of a group, praying that God will give him confidence. "The promise comes true," he says. "I'm much more self-confident as I include God when I'm scared. It gets my mind off of me and making a good impression. He keeps me from being so self-centered, and He really does help me to think clearly."

God cares about the things you care about. Talk to Him about anything and everything. He's the God who created Earth, Mars, and the Solar System, but He also made tiny microbes. Jesus said He even cares about the hairs on your head.

God lived here on earth himself, and He knows what life here is like. Jesus came, not to swagger around and play some superstar, but to help people with their illnesses, their hurts, and their problems.

He shared the temptations, despair, and pleasures you now have. He knows what you're going through, and He will move in beside you. Even when you don't feel like talking to Him, tell Him about that, too. He already knows you, thought for thought.

You'll find that as you bring Him your biggest problems they will become—believe it or not—the best things in your life. They are doors which you shove open in desperation and then invite Him to enter your innermost self and to work miracles at the core of the real you. Philippians 4:4-6 says:

Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, revel in Him! Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them. Help them see the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute! Don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray.

Pray for others, too. When you truly love someone, you want God's best for them. One way to see that happen is to ask God to work in their life.

You'll also want to praise God and to thank Him for the things He's already done in your life. Gratitude, according to a recent hospital study, is the healthiest emotion known. You'll find that the moments when you show your gratitude to God are the moments when you find your greatest joys.

One student commented, "Whenever I face difficult problems or big decisions, I ask God to help me. I'm so glad to have Jesus there! He's like an older brother or a person you can tell your secrets to and not worry about being judged or their getting spread around."

Question: I want to spend time talking to God everyday but I put it off. Before I know it, I've fallen asleep and I haven't prayed or read the Bible. And when I do pray, my mind often wanders. I've even fallen asleep while I'm praying! What can I do about this?

Answer: Try walking while you pray. One young man we know always does his talking with God while taking a twenty-minute walk each evening. And, if your mind wanders—let it! Simply invite Jesus to go along for the ride. A good starting place is the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6:9-13:

This, then, is how you should pray:
 Our Father in heaven,
 Hallowed be your name,
 Your Kingdom come,
 Your will be done,
 On earth as it is in heaven.
 Give us today our daily bread.
 And forgive us our debts,
 As we also have forgiven our debtors.
 And lead us not into temptation,
 But deliver us from the evil one.
 For thine is the Kingdom,
 The power and the glory, forever.
 Amen.

Let's face it, God knows what your mind is doing all the time. He's not surprised to see your mind wandering during your quiet time. Ask Him to take charge of your time with Him and to control your thoughts. You might want to use your note pad in your phone to jot down things when you pray, like "Remember to talk to Bob tomorrow." Then you can forget it and get back to the business at hand.

The whole question of having a set time to meet God is a little tougher. Many Christians would tell you that after years of struggle and feeling guilty, they still haven't found a magic answer. But here are some thoughts which should be helpful:

1. God wants to relate to you all day. Make little sentence prayers and thoughts run through your activities. Like "Uh oh, here comes Michelle and I don't know what to say to her. Help me, Lord!" or "Boy, I'm really enjoying this ball game, Lord. Thank you for my health and for the athletic ability you've given me." In other words, don't limit your prayers just to your formal quiet time.

2. On the other hand, setting aside time each day can change your life. Remember Daniel in the Old Testament—the one thrown into a den of lions who came out alive? He ran kingdoms and was quite a hero for God. It says in Daniel 6 that he prayed three times a day. In fact, that's what got him thrown to the lions! It was a habit which kept him so close to God that the Lord called Daniel especially beloved. Most Jesus-followers find it helpful to set a time and place to be alone with God. It might be walking a mile or so. Or sitting quietly in your room with the door closed. Or choosing a quiet corner of the library, or staying in your car. Get a Bible app on your phone. Mix talking with God with His talking to you through His Word. When you miss a day or two, don't get upset. Just start again and ask for God's help. Ask Him, "How can I build a habit of talking with you daily? How can you help me, Lord?" You're not chained to endless self-effort nor should you feel bound to a legalistic system. Ask God what will work for you. The important thing is to be in regular communication with him.

3. Remember, you are meeting a Person—someone who really cares about you and wants to talk with you. Jesus loves you and wants to share His exciting plans for your growth. When you spend time with Him, you're always richer for it. In a way, the Christian who does not talk to God is like Stephen Curry without a basketball shooting 3's. What a waste! Your communication with God gives you the strength, energy, and insights to live in the middle of a mixed-up and messy world.

As one student said, "Last night, I had doubts about my needing Jesus. He'd been sort of a 'good luck charm' to get into heaven with. But all of a sudden, after I'd prayed seriously, I burst out crying, realizing that I needed him every day!"

Question: Just how much power is there in prayer? Could I pray for someone to be healed of cancer and see it happen? Somehow, that seems

way out of reach. In fact, getting specific answers to prayers at all seems beyond me.

Answer: There is power in prayer. Jesus said, in John 15:7, "If you remain in Me and My Words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given to you."

Jesus' followers experienced power in a graphic way. Acts 4:31 says, "After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken."

God promised the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 33:3, "Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know."

God is prepared to answer your requests. But He doesn't just put on a magic show. Also, He is not obligated to let you manipulate Him into doing things. You may ask, for example, that He heal someone of cancer. But you must be willing to fit into His will, instead of expecting Him always to meet your desires. He may answer your prayer miraculously, or He may answer no in order for you to see that He has a different plan.

God is at work in you to shape you and bring you to full maturity. Prayer is the nerve center for that process. Prayer is far more than your drawing up a list of requests and His answering them. Prayer is getting to know His will for you—what He really wants—and then being willing to accept it.

You don't feel you believe God enough for "big things"? You don't believe, for instance, that if you pray for your friend to say "yes" to Jesus it will happen?

Then perhaps you should go back and start with what you *do* believe He would do. If you asked Him to help you say one thing to your friend about Jesus this week, do you believe He could do that?

And after He's answered that prayer, could you believe that God would help you give that friend a New Testament or some Christian literature or invite them to a church event in a way that seemed very natural? Do you think eventually, that you could believe God to open up just the right situation for you to share with that friend what Jesus means in your life?

Or, let's say you're having a problem with your temper. You know God isn't going to totally remove it. But could you believe He will keep you from firing back sharp remarks—to help you keep your mouth shut—the next time you get angry or upset?

The idea is to make faith-sized requests—what you believe God can and will do if you ask—and then watch Him work. You have some faith and it's enough. Ask for more and God will give it.

Make your prayer requests very specific. You might want to keep them on a note pad on your phone as well. Write down your requests in one column and, as they are answered, check them off with a brief summary of the results and the date. Consider the first two verses of Psalm 116, "I love God because He listened to me, listened as I begged for mercy. He listened so intently as I laid out my case before Him."

Archbishop Temple, when told that all of his answers to prayers were probably coincidences, made this interesting comment: "Maybe so. But when I quit praying the coincidences stop happening!"

Question: I have a question that's really bothering me, even though it may seem silly to you. Why pray at all? If God already knows what we need, and what He's going to do about it, why should we ask Him for anything? Can't He just give it to us without our having to run to Him about every little thing?

Answer: Yes, He could. But that's his whole idea—having us run to Him with every little thing. If the God of the universe is interested enough to care, who are we to ignore Him? "Every little thing" is just what God wants to be part of, for your every breath comes from Him.

As you allow God into your life, you're saying about your desire to run your own show, "Lord, I know I'm self centered. Take your knife and cut. Slice out the selfishness I know is in me. Replace it with healthy life. Let your love touch everything I do!"

To go any other route as a Christian is to say, "Why do anything? Why have hospitals? Why give bread to the hungry? Why exert myself at all?"

But the Lord doesn't work that way. He chose to make us significant—not some kind of robots. We are His muscles, His eyes, His voice. He works through us and through our prayers. Certainly He isn't limited to working that way. But He chooses us as participants—and that's exciting! God works through us in various ways, and our prayer releases his power. He talked about this in His Sermon on the Mount, as found in Matthew 6:5-15.

Question: Frankly, God hasn't exactly come through for me on anything lately. I've asked Him for some pretty special things that were

important to me, and God dropped the ball. I don't mean to be disrespectful, but why doesn't He doesn't always come through?

Answer: Watch out that you don't make the mistake of considering God to be your heavenly errand boy. Remember that getting involved with God means radical surgery in your life. A large part of prayer is tuning yourself to His will so you'll be asking for what He wants.

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart." Notice the beautiful cycle here. You delight yourself in God—excited about Him. Okay, that means you're naturally delighted with the same things that make him happy. In a relationship like that, the psalmist says God will give you your desires.

You are a rebel who has laid down his rifle and bayonet. God is now your Leader—that's why you call Him "Lord." You may, perhaps, occasionally resent that, but accepting His authority over you is the only way to genuine freedom and to seeing God work miracles in your life.

After all, He made you. He breathed life into you.

Here are some reasons for unanswered prayers:

1. Obstructions between you and God. Sin blocks your communication. For instance, if you're unwilling to forgive someone who's hurt you, why should God forgive you? Why should He do what you ask when Jesus said you should forgive others? If you can't forgive someone, ask God to move in and change you. Only He can do that. Confess your sins, and ask for His help. Then, stop condemning yourself. If Jesus has forgiven you (and He has promised in 1 John 1:9 to do that every time you ask), then surely you can forgive yourself. Jesus said He came so that you might have life. Forgive yourself when God forgives you, and experience some of that joy!

2. God's view is different from yours. Have you ever had to take care of a baby, or have you babysat the neighbor's children? You watch the kid trying to get into everything. She tries to stick her wet fingers into the electrical outlet. "NO!" you scream. She looks up at you like you're some kind of killjoy. Then she starts wailing. Later, she may want all sorts of things, but you'll give her only what you know is best for her. You give her one of three answers to each request—"yes," "no," or "wait." And, if at all possible, you'll say "yes."

Our Father wants to "give us the desires of our heart." But He knows what is best for us—to mature us, to fit us into his mosaic. Only He knows when a prayer is like putting wet fingers into electricity—when we are asking for something that really isn't the best for us, after all. Only He knows the right time to say "no" or "wait" or "yes."

Of course, as you keep praying, you may find you'll change some of your requests. Or circumstances may change, and you'll wonder what made you ask for that in the first place! The point is, keep on asking. Prayer is changing you as well as the people around you.

Jesus asked once, "Why do you call me Lord, yet don't do the things I say?" Are you obeying Jesus so He can work through you? Or do you maybe have doubts that he'll do anything at all? If so, tell Him exactly that, and then ask for more faith.

Remember that Jesus himself, in Gethsemane, prayed three times that His bitter cup of troubles would pass from Him. But the Father told Him to drink it, and Jesus obeyed. The Father answered Jesus' prayer, but not according to His original request. God really does know best. Not only for His Son, but for us, as well.

Question: I'm getting a lot out of talking to God by myself. But I'm afraid to do it with somebody else around, like in a group. Is it really necessary to pray with other Christians?

Answer: You'll be missing out if you don't. It's interesting that the Lord's Prayer, which Jesus gave his followers as an example, says, "give us our daily bread and forgive us" Jesus also said, in Matthew 18:20, that "Where two or three come together in my name, there am I, with them,"

You need your personal prayers which you pray when you're alone. But sharing with others strengthens you in a unique way. Enjoying God, agreeing to do what He wants, asking Him to change things—these are community experiences. You may not be able to see God, but you can see your Christian brother or sister. Here is flesh and blood contact with another believer—which encourages you.

If you feel awkward praying out loud in a group, pray silently. Or perhaps you will want to meet regularly with just one friend you feel comfortable to pray with. That friend can help you keep up the discipline of prayer. You can share your deepest concerns with each other. Look for someone who needs your prayer support as much as you need his or hers!

Question: To be honest, I don't pray very much. For instance, I know I should pray that my friends will accept Jesus. But while I'm being honest, I might as well admit that I don't really care that much about some of them after all! The things I'm supposed to be praying about bore me. So I don't pray. How can I change this?

Answer: You've taken the first step, being honest. Now, tell that to God. He knows what you're interested in and also what bores you. Forget about the things you're "supposed" to be praying about and talk to Him about your sex life, your last conflict with your parents, your grades at school, or whatever is on your mind. And don't worry about the language. Everyday speech will do. You'll find that as you include Him in your interests—in the real you—He will begin to develop your concern for others, as well.

Actually, you can't make yourself care about friends. Only God can do that. And He'll get around to that if you talk to Him about your deepest concerns and ask Him to fill you with His Spirit.

Maybe the real reason you don't pray is that you're afraid He'll start changing you around. Perhaps you don't want God "nosing around" in certain areas of your life. We all feel that way at times, but it's no good to pretend you can hide anything from God. He knows all about you—both your failures and your strengths.

Invite Him into every corner of your life. Then you won't miss the growing, joyful life He's promised you.

Question: Someone told me I should pray for people I don't like or can't stand. I guess it sounds like a good idea, but to tell the truth, I really don't want to. How can I change this attitude?

Answer: Of course you don't want to pray for people you can't stand—none of us do. We'd rather pray for people we like. Yet Jesus commanded us, in Matthew 5:43-48, to love our enemies and to pray for them.

Author Rosalind Rinker comments, "I will love God only as much as I love the person I dislike the most." You may think that's too strong, but we are all in the same boat—we're sinners. Any nastiness you see in someone else is no worse than the badness you're capable of yourself. We are all fallen creatures.

At the same time, we are made in God's image. C. S. Lewis wrote,

"I once talked to a pastor who had seen Hitler and had, by all human standards, good cause to hate him. 'What did he look like?' I asked. 'Like all men,' he replied. 'That is, like Jesus.'"

Most of us think of Hitler as an arch-fiend, and perhaps he was. But do we think of him as worse than ourselves? Do we think of him as someone whom Jesus couldn't have transformed? When we consider ourselves more deserving of Jesus' favor than others, we are on dangerous ground. British preacher John Bradford saw a drunken bum on the street and commented, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

We are often hurt by people. We are infuriated. We sulk. We plot revenge. We gossip about them. But this is precisely where God wants to intervene and change us. Praying for our "enemies" enables God to transform us dramatically.

Jacob DeShazer, who was in a Japanese prison during World War II, got a Bible and accepted Jesus through reading it. Later he read Jesus' command, "Love your enemies."

DeShazer's enemy was the cruel guard who had just slammed a heavy, iron-barred door on his bare ankle. But, Jesus said to love him—regardless of the pain.

Next morning, DeShazer talked pleasantly to the guard, asking about his family. Through small, loving acts, the prisoner and the guard built up a friendship which became a beautiful work of God instead of a festering resentment.

Why not try it? List three people you dislike the most or can't get along with. Maybe it's even someone in your own family.

Jot these three names down and pray for them—for God to work in their lives. Then see what God will do to change your own attitudes toward them.

Question: I don't quite get this business of Jesus doing everything and me just sitting around watching Him or something. Don't I have to do anything?

Answer: There's a creative tension between what God does for you and what you do for yourself. You'll find plenty of verses in your Bible talking about what you should do and there are also plenty which speak about what God will do for you. 2 Peter 1:3-4 says:

Everything that goes into a life of pleasing God has been miraculously given to us by getting to know, personally and intimately, the One who invited us to God. The best invitation

we ever received! We were also given absolutely terrific promises to pass on to you—your tickets to participation in the life of God after you turned your back on a world corrupted by lust.

Philippians 2:12-13 says:

What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God. That energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the more pleasure.

These two passages speak of both what God does for us and what we must do along with Him as He works in our lives.

Let God's Word, as you study it, give you a deeper understanding of the balance between the two. Your relationship with Jesus is a Love relationship. It's not a fifty-fifty thing, but one in which Christ and you give all of yourselves to each other.

Five

How Do I Share With Others?

Question: How do I start helping other people experience the new life in Jesus which I've found? I really want to share it, because they don't realize what they don't have! But I'm afraid I won't have the right words or the understanding to get it across. How can I gain more self-confidence?

Answer: Begin by just naturally sharing what God has done for you. Jesus once healed a blind man. The Pharisees—who didn't like Jesus—questioned the blind man, saying that Jesus, who had healed him, was an evil person.

The once-blind man didn't have a lot of intellectual answers. He simply said “I know nothing about that one way or the other. But I know one thing for sure: I was blind . . . I now see.” (John 9:25)

The man with the new sight just told what God had done for him, even when he was being cut down by religious people who insisted they had all the answers. You don't have to know it all to share what God has done for you.

However, here are a few basic pieces of knowledge about new life through Jesus. This process might help you get started sharing:

1. Man is a sinner. He's a sinner because he's fighting God. Even now he grieves God with his hatred, prejudice, injustice, and war. And anybody who thinks he's not part of it should look inside himself.

2. But God was patient, and instead of destroying man, He sent His Son Jesus to bring truth and to die by man's evil hand. In spite of the way we've mistreated Him, God is still reaching out His loving hand to us.

3. Jesus was sentenced to death because of our sins. He took the rap for us.

4. To have peace with God, we have to invite Jesus into our lives. We have to hate our evil actions and attitudes and ask Him to help clean us up.

Tell your friends that you don't necessarily think you're better now than they are. You're just a rebel who has made peace with God. You're a "sinner saved by grace". As D.T. Niles of Ceylon put it, "Evangelism is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food." We're no better than terrorists or bigots or drug pushers. We're all sinners. But we have found some answers in Jesus and have made a voluntary commitment to follow Him and His way.

Share what you understand, admitting that you're just getting started in the Christian life. And don't worry about the response—that's God's business. He will work in the lives of people in His own good timing and in His own good way. An excellent description of your new role in this process is found in 2 Corinthians 5: 16-21. Remember, you're praying for your friends and showing your care for them often trigger's God's action in their hearts.

You're right to want to share your faith. Even Denzel Washington⁵⁵ questions his faith and God "There's never been a time where God didn't direct, protect, and correct me," Washington passionately attested. "There may have been times where I was less than faithful to Him, but He had faith in me."

You're witnessing—that is, you're sharing what Christ has done for you—should be a by-product of living for him. It just comes naturally, as your relationship with him deepens and develops.

⁵⁵ Denzel Washington: Christian Post Nov 12 2015

Question: My girlfriend is falling away from God. How can I reach her without making her reject me?

Answer: It's possible you can't. This is a common question. Unfortunately, often a guy and a girl may be going opposite directions, one with God and the other away from Him. And that hurts when you really care for each other.

In today's world, the music you listen to and the movies and books you experience constantly tell you that love is the one thing that makes life worth living.

"Can't do without you," comes pounding through the headphones. "Without you I'd be lost," rocks through social media. So, many kids figure that the most important thing in the world is keeping the relationship they've got—or going out to start one.

Love between a girl and a boy is a beautiful thing. God meant it to be, and He's all for it, but allowing God to take charge of your life is even more important. When you find you have to change too much to keep someone—when you have to shove God into a corner—it's time to make the relationship take second place. 2 Corinthians 6:14 says: Don't become partners with those who reject God. How can you make a partnership out of right and wrong? Yes, it would be nice if you could reach your girlfriend without her rejecting you. Let's hope you can. Pray for her. Pray that God will give you the right words that will show her God's love and the courage to say them. Live a life that shows the love of Jesus around her, showing the fruit of the Spirit as listed in Galatians 5:22-23.

But don't fool yourself. It may be that God will ask you to make a choice perhaps one of the hardest ones yet.

Question: Maybe God put my parents in charge of me, but he sure picked a couple of losers. I fight with my mother all the time, and I'm barely on speaking terms with my dad. They don't understand anything about where I'm coming from with my new Christian life. How can we get along?

Answer: Perhaps your parents really are at fault most of the time. But perhaps it's also true that you don't understand where they're coming from, either. But let's say that God has put you into a battleground. Your parents are tyrants and grouches. You're a victim. Your parents are nasty—they're the enemy. But Jesus said we have to love our enemies. So the question is,

how in the world do you get the strength to love them? You can't. That's the whole point. All you can do is open yourself up to Jesus. Ask Him to pour in His love and change your attitudes, even if you are right and your parents are totally wrong.

No, it's not easy. In fact, it's impossible, from a human standpoint! Only Jesus Christ can do the impossible in you. We're not, of course, only talking about the warm emotions of love. No, Jesus calls for your specific acts. "A gentle answer turns away wrath," He says in Proverbs 15:1, "but a harsh word stirs up anger." And in Matthew 5:39 we are told to turn the other cheek, if someone strikes us. Scriptures like that give you principles to live by. But then you need to apply those principles to specific situations and to list specific actions you plan to take. For some down-to-earth, practical suggestions on living a better witness before your parents, read the book of James, the Gospel of John (especially chapters 14-17), and the Book of Proverbs. Don't be surprised if a little change in *your attitude* makes a change *in theirs*, as well!

Question: I still have trouble believing in a final judgment and hell. It doesn't make sense that so many people are going to be forever lost. Most of them have never heard about Jesus. How can this be?

Answer: One thing we know about God—He is fair. We don't know precisely how everything will turn out beyond this life, but we do know that a holy and just God is in charge.

We also know that the human race is condemned because of its sin. This is disturbing, but it's true. We have to face that fact.

It's strange that so many people find it easy to accept the idea of heaven—meadows, streets of gold, lions coexisting with lambs, and everyone delighted forever. But some of those same people reject the idea of hell for those who do not receive Jesus. The teachings about both places comes from the same Bible. Remember—just because people ignore something doesn't mean it isn't there!

People don't want to talk much about judgment and hell in our "enlightened" society. Although we do not know many of the details of what hell is like, we do know from 2 Thessalonians 1:5-10 and other passages that God judges men and that hell exists. The Bible says that man's punishment is to be separated from God forever.

How can this be?

In one sense, God is not going to judge us at all—we judge ourselves. Read the first few chapters of Romans. Every person—

American, Asian, South African, or whatever—knows there is a basic right and wrong. Every person has a standard of his own. It may be twisted a bit from God's perfect standard, but it's a moral code. And the judgment is this: no man anywhere has completely lived up to his own moral code. We keep violating our own standards. And in the day of judgment, the question will be, "Did you live up to the light God gave you?"

Many would criticize this kind of reasoning. "It's unhealthy," they would say—medieval myth, fear-mongering. But the facts are still the facts.

Our problems are so bad that Jesus—the only truly good Man who ever lived—had to be executed for them

And he now offers new life—a new destiny—to anyone who will reject sin, believe in him, and invite him to make radical changes in the new believer's life. That's the good news.

Believe it.

Live it.

Share it with others!