

What's Next?

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to Rhetta and Grady. May I be a source of strength and guidance all the years of your life. As long as I live, when you look behind, I will be there to help you take the Next Steps.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Salvation: What Does It Mean?.....	5
The Bible: How Do I Understand?.....	17
Prayer: How Do I Do It?.....	23
Church: Is It Important?.....	31
Money: What Do I Do With It?.....	35

Chapter 1-Salvation: What Does it Mean?

Everywhere we look in this world is brokenness. Brokenness transcends cultures, social classes, races, nations, occupations, and genders. It reveals itself in unrealized dreams, depression, divorce, and addiction. Brokenness can be self-inflicted, the result of our own poor choices and decisions. Reaping of the things that we have sown. Other times, brokenness is brought on us by the actions and intentions of others. Certainly, we cannot control who our parents are and how they treated us. We cannot control how or where we grew up. We cannot always control what people say or do to us. Tragedies beyond our control have a way of showing up in our lives. Whatever the case, brokenness is real and present. Yet, there is something that transcends brokenness. It is wholeness. It is salvation. Salvation is rescuing from ruin and loss. It is the putting back together of that which is broken. It is the restoration of that which was lost. This has been God's desire from the beginning

Created for Relationship

From the beginning, a man was created to be in a relationship. Genesis 1:26-27 said, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

We were made in the image of God and to be in a relationship with God. Genesis tells us of the close relationship man had with God, as God walked with man in the cool of the day.

Yet, brokenness occurred in Genesis 3, when man ate of the fruit they were told not to.

Why the choice?

The logical question would be, “Why would God put something in front of us that would tempt us to break the relationship from Him?” The answer: free will. The ability to choose is one of the greatest gifts God has given us. He doesn’t make us enter into a relationship with Him. Yet, He wants us to. He allows us to decide to trust Him and to depend on Him. He allows us to decide whether to do it our way or His way. He doesn’t exert domination over our lives, but He gives opportunity to have a place in our life. It is His will for us to be near Him, to live an abundantly blessed life, and to leave a lasting legacy through our children and families. He doesn’t make anyone follow Him but invites us to.

But doesn’t He know everything?

Several words are used to describe God: omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful), and omnipresent (always present). So if God knew when He created the tree that Adam and Eve would eat the fruit, and if He is all-powerful and in control, did He MAKE that happen? The answer is no. Just because He knew didn’t mean He caused it. This is explained best by looking at our limited knowing.

Man is different from God. God is all-knowing and eternal. Our knowledge is limited to our past experiences and our present situation. We don’t know what is coming next. We can at best predict and forecast. To create our forecasted or predicted situation,

we must manipulate it to be so. We know we get paid next week. To make this come to pass, we must work and base our next receiving of a paycheck on the fact that it happened before. We see this in raising children. Why do we put covers over outlets? We know the nature of children is to put their fingers and other objects into outlets. We know based on past behaviors that there is a chance, a strong chance, that left to their own devices, our children will get hurt.

Needless to say, our knowledge is limited. God doesn't have to predict, manipulate, or act upon for something to take place. He gives us the ability to choose, and without having to force our hand one way or another, knows what we are going to do. How? He simply knows because He is all-knowing. He is God. He is above time and creation. This is important for us to discuss because the alternative line of thought takes on the following statement: God creates some people for heaven and others for hell. That violates the very nature of who God is and what the Bible says about Him. In John 3:16, He dies for the WHOLE world and its salvation, not a select few. In Matthew 25:41, we find that hell was created for the devil, not for man. He has created us all in His image and to be in a relationship with Him. If we don't do so, it is our choice, not His.

Why Do I Need Him?

Love

The basic needs of all man can be summed up in two words: love and purpose. The desire for love transcends all barriers and people. Everyone wants to be loved. Man will go to great lengths to feel accepted, appreciated, and loved. Some live life trying to prove themselves in their jobs. By working hard and

making a name for themselves, it will cause people to respect and want a relationship with them. Men and women enter into failed relationship after failed relationship in an attempt to find love, compromising their values, goals, ambitions, and dreams for someone in the hopes for love and acceptance. We try to be funny enough, to give enough, or do whatever it takes to fill that void. There will be moments when it feels like it has been accomplished. Then there are moments when intense loneliness comes in. Along with loneliness comes frustration because the one thing we think we find eludes us.

In salvation, we come face to face with love. A love that is given not because of who we know, what we know, how good or bad we are, or if we have it all figured out or not. It is a love that is given simply because you are you. When God created the world in Genesis, He stepped back and declared it good. In Jeremiah 1:5, God told Jeremiah that He knew him before he was even conceived. In Psalms 139:14, we are reminded that we are wonderfully made. You may feel like you are nothing, and everyone around you has convinced you of that by their words and actions to you. However, to Him you are EVERYTHING!

When man sinned in Genesis 3, God immediately set to work to bring man back to Him. It is the greatest love story ever told. By the end of Genesis 3, He already tells us Jesus is coming. Immediately after Adam and Eve sinned, God declared He had a plan. Throughout the Old Testament, He tells the story of the people He calls into a relationship: the Israelites. He establishes His promises to be with them and bless them through Abraham. Although they go into Egyptian captivity, God will supernaturally bring them out of bondage into a land prepared for them. As they wander in the wilderness, He supernaturally feeds them and clothes them. He delivers them from all their enemies. He does all this even though they fail Him constantly. His love never stops!!!!

Through the Israelites, God again gives man the opportunity to have an intimate relationship with Him. He tells them if they follow Him, He will bless them. If they go their way, they will reap what they sow. They go their own way, and God allows them to be punished by being taken captive. However, it doesn't stop there. He once again forgives them, delivers them, and preserves them.

Due to man's sinful nature, there was no way men could save themselves. They couldn't make themselves clean and pure, and they couldn't keep themselves clean and pure. So He sent a substitute. He sent His only begotten Son, Jesus. The Bible and history tell us that Jesus was a man who would live, perform great miracles and teach great messages, and would be crucified. However, He would be raised from the dead. As crazy as this sounds, the tomb is EMPTY!!!

Jesus was God made flesh. Jesus was before time. Jesus was at creation, and He had all power. Yet, there had to be a perfect sacrifice for sin. In the Old Testament and throughout many different religions, there has been an attempt for men to redeem themselves through sacrifices. In the Old Testament, there was a system that one followed to be forgiven. There were burnt offerings, sin and guilt offerings, and a variety of acceptable sacrifices that the people were to follow. However, these couldn't go all the way. These sacrifices couldn't change the heart of man. These sacrifices couldn't erase the sin and shame of past decisions. These sacrifices couldn't bring man near to God. There had to be a better way.

This could only be done by a perfect sacrifice. Jesus would be that sacrifice. He lived a perfect life and touched everyone He came in contact with. He would teach and amaze all who came to meet Him. For no reason other than jealousy, He would be crucified. But this crucifixion was all part of the plan. Whenever

He hung on the cross, He carried all our sins. The shame, the hurt, the addictions and bondage, the hopelessness, and the darkness in our lives He bore for us. He became it and took it so we could be free. It didn't stop there though. He would rise from the dead. You see He died for our sin and forgiveness. He rose for our eternity. As a result, all those who believe in Him never die. Death is behind us. Death becomes a door where we simply leave the temporary behind and put on the eternal. Why did He do all this? LOVE!!!!

All He asks is for us to trust Him and to surrender to Him. Total LOVE!!!!

Now you may be reading this and think this is some myth or far-flung story. Those who have any sense wouldn't believe this. It has to be impossible. It would be tempting to say this. However, there is something to it that just rings true. People choose whether or not to accept Christ, but they can never dismiss Him. Every world religion confesses to Jesus being something greater than an ordinary man. There is something extraordinary about Him. If He isn't who He says He is, why won't everyone dismiss Him? If He wasn't who He said He was, why would the disciples who saw these things take place die standing by their stories? Why would He have died in the first place? They got nothing out of it. They didn't get great wealth and fame for doing what they did. They spent their life on the run. Their lives didn't get easier while others tended to them. Following Christ would be the hardest thing they would ever do. It makes no logical sense for eleven men to die for the same story in different places at different times if it was a lie. What was to be gained?

Furthermore, how can you explain the change that occurs in people who turn to Christ? Addicts putting down their addictions. Those incapable of love, loving others. Relationships that had been

destroyed, put back together again. These things require reflection. The result will always be the same: there is a God who loves us whose Son died for us simply for the sake of love.

Purpose

The second thing all men desire to know is why they are here. We want to know our purpose. We can live our entire lives and never know this answer. When you stop and think about it, life itself doesn't make much sense, and much of what we do seems pointless. Take, for example, our daily lives. We get up every morning, rush to get ourselves and the kids ready and out the door. Once their at school, we work hard at a job we truly may not even like. We work for quitting time. We get the kids, eat dinner, go to sleep, and do it all over again. We spend the entire day waiting for the time to get off, we spend the entire week waiting for the weekend. Before you know it, 10 years have passed.

I have always thought about this when it comes to vacation time. My wife and I will set a vacation on the schedule. We count down to it. It seems like it takes an eternity for that day to come. We prepare, plan, pack, and begin it with such enthusiasm. As quickly as it begins, it's over, and it's back to the grind again. Certainly, there has to be something more to life than this.

In Christ, there is!

Every one of us has a different life story. The circumstances of our birth and the journeys that have led us to this very moment when you are reading this are vast. Perhaps you're reading this and were born into a family where your birth was planned and anticipated. You grew up in a loving home and have had a great life. Or perhaps you have experienced just the opposite. Maybe

you have been told you were a mistake or an accident. Maybe you don't know your parents. You feel like your life has been a constant place of turmoil, discouragement, and failure.

Let me tell you none of this matters when it comes to your true worth and purpose. If you are breathing breath, God has a purpose for you. What seems accidental is intentional. Yes, your parents feel they made a mistake in bringing you into this world, but God didn't when He created you. He has brought you into this world, and He loves you. Just as He oversaw your birth, He wants to oversee your life. In Him, we can find more than just existence until death. In Him, we can find more than fleeting happiness. In Him, we can find the fulness of joy. In Him, we can find abundant living that reaches much deeper than great incomes and many possessions. In Him, we can find a friendship that reaches beyond the accolades of men.

When we surrender our lives to Him, He will lead us into that thing He has for us. As we are obedient and do what it is that He has created us for, it brings true contentment. This contentment isn't based on what it gives us, but on what it does for us. Paul told the Philippians that he had found contentment whether he had a lot or a little. He said he found contentment even when he was hungry. How? Through the strength that Christ gave him. By being obedient to Him and trusting Him, contentment was given. Paul knew he was doing what he was created to do, and the fulfillment of that could not be taken away. Can you say you are truly doing what He has created you to do?

Let me ask it this way. If money, education, age, or whatever you feel is holding you back wasn't an object, what would you do? What is that one thing that you wish you could accomplish? I have found that thing is what God has created you to do. If you don't know the answers to those questions, but you know you are not truly fulfilled, in Him you will find them. The

interesting thing about this is that the seeds of it are already in you. This shouldn't come as no surprise since He created you for purpose and reason.

In Matthew 4:18-22, Jesus calls Peter, Andrew, James, and John to follow Him. When Jesus meets them, they are fishermen. Peter and Andrew were in the process of fishing, James and John were fixing nets. Their passion was catching fish. What made them be born with this desire? As Jesus passes by, He calls to them and tells them that He will make them "fishers of men." Jesus told the disciples I am going to take what you love to do, shift it, and give you fulfillment in life as you have never known. This is exactly what would happen in their lives. Their lives wouldn't always be easy. They would be persecuted, hated, and ultimately killed for following Jesus. However, none of it would rob them of their joy. They knew they were following Him and doing what they were made to do.

In talking about purpose, I am not saying that surrendering to God will cause you to have to change occupations. Although, you may find that He leads you in that direction. I am telling you that even in what you are doing, He can bring about the fulfillment that you so desire as His favor, His stamp of approval, and His leading is on your life. In Him, you find everything you ever longed for.

How Do I Experience Salvation?

After reading this you may be asking, "How can I be saved?" The answer is very simple. He did the hard part. He died for your sin. He is asking you to trust Him with your life. Trusting Him with your life is more than just a simple prayer. The simple prayer is where it starts, and then new life begins as you follow Him. Jesus calls to us as He did to all those who encountered Him.

He asks us to “follow Him.” He wants us to give Him our lives. To trust Him with our present and future. To allow Him to shape and mold us. In doing this, we embrace His Word as the guide for our life and the standard of truth for our values. When we pray the prayer of salvation, we confess our sin and need for Him, ask Him for forgiveness, and commit our lives to Him. If you are reading this and feel that you are at the place of salvation pray the following prayer:

“Lord, I thank you for dying on the Cross for my sin. I confess I am a sinner, lost without you. I ask you to come into my heart and forgive me of my sin. I commit my life to you from this day forward. Thank you for saving my soul. In Jesus' name, I pray, Amen.”

What Now

If you have said that prayer, you are now a follower of Christ. You have been justified. This means that all your wrong has been made right. You have been made right in the eyes of God. All your past decisions and failures are gone. They are not even there. You have been redeemed and purchased by the blood of Christ. You are truly His! You are regenerated. This is why abundant life is possible. Up to this moment, you were a dead man breathing air without a hope and a future. You are regenerated. This means that you who was dead has been given new life. Your new life has begun!

Now, more than ever, begin to study the Word, surround yourself with believers in the church, and commit yourself to draw near to Him every day. As you read, do it slowly. It's not about getting it done as fast as possible. It is about hearing Him speak to you. Begin with a chapter or two a day. Think about what you read

and allow His Spirit to form and shape you. As you do, your life will take on a whole new dimension.

What I have found over and over again is that those who have believed in Christ want to grow in their walk with God. The only issue is that they don't know how. Even in knowing "what" they need to do, we never learn the practices that accompany them. For example, we may know that we should read the Bible. However, we don't know where to start or even understand what it is that we are reading. We are told that we need to pray, but we never learn how to pray. In the following pages, I would like to help you with some practical tips to grow in your walk with Christ. Growing in our faith isn't unattainable or difficult. God is not far away wanting you to impress Him for Him to be present in your life. Paul told the people of Athens in the book of Acts that God was very near. Through the death of Christ, we can enter into His throne room and cry out to our Father and knows He hears us. We don't have to persuade God to bless us, He wants to bless His people.

Chapter 2- The Bible: How Do I Understand?

As we seek to draw near to Christ, the place to start is in His Word. Now, the Bible is different from any other book ever written. As an avid reader, I have found books that have given me tons of knowledge and information. However, the Bible is the only book that has ever transformed me. This is because the Bible isn't just words on a page. It is the living and breathing words of God. Yes, the Bible was written by men, but it was as they were moved on by the Holy Spirit. This is why the Bible never contradicts itself although it was written by multiple authors over hundreds of years. He moved on the writers then, and He moves through the words now. They shape, form, and mold me into who He would have me to be.

This is why we are never done reading the Bible, either. You can read the same story 10 different times, and God speaks to you through that story 10 different ways. Hebrews 4:12 explains why. He says, "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." The Bible can reveal our hearts, the motives behind our actions, and it can speak to us where we are at. I love the illustration of a two-edged sword. As we are submitted to the Word, it doesn't just reveal what is in us but cuts away what doesn't belong, and in its place puts what should be there.

It is through this book that we draw close to God. In John 17:17, Jesus prayed to the Father for the disciples and said, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." To be sanctified is to be consecrated and set apart. We are consecrated as we grow in the truth, and the truth is found in the Word. We will never be able to grow to the place God has for us without spending

time in the Bible. As we are set apart, His words become ours, His heart becomes ours, His perspective becomes ours. As a result, victory becomes ours. Within the Word are promises to every believer that we are to stand on. How can we stand on what we don't know? As we learn them and commit them to memory or "hide them in our heart" as King David said, we can overcome anything that comes our way.

Whenever we commit ourselves to read the Bible, there are several things to keep in mind and certain objectives that we should have.

Know What you are Reading

Between you and the Bible are approximately 1,000 years, several languages, and cultural differences. One of the greatest mistakes that we make in reading the Word is trying to make it say something it doesn't. Another mistake is trying to make the Bible say what we want it to say. We can do neither. The Bible says what it says and means what it means. We come to the Word to be changed by it, not to change it to what we want. To do this, we need to capture the original meaning the texts were written in, and then pull the principles and truths out to apply today. There are several examples of this. One is in John 4. In John 4, Jesus has a conversation with a Samaritan woman whose life will be saved and changed. In the conversation, the woman is completely taken aback by the fact that Jesus would talk to her. Why? Because Samaritans and Jews had nothing to do with each other. Jews felt they were pure and Samaritans were not. We may not be Jewish trying to decide whether or not to minister to Samaritans, but we all know people that many may pass by or not have any relationship with. It could be due to their lifestyle, their reputation,

or simply their failure. Through John 4, we see the need to go to them and give them hope just as Jesus did.

Another example can be found in both letters to the Corinthians. Like a good Jerry Springer episode, there is some drama taking place in the Corinth church. There is a man who is sleeping with his stepmom. In 1 Corinthians, Paul tells them to put the man out of the church. By leaving him in there, they are endorsing this type of behavior, thereby encouraging others to do the same. They listen to Paul and put the man out. By 2 Corinthians, the man has repented of what he did. Paul finds out and tells the church to restore the man because if they didn't Satan might destroy him through guilt and shame. We may not be dealing with this exact situation, however, we can take away truths from this situation. The first is a sin shouldn't be justified and left alone. It should be confronted lest it destroys our lives. The second is that once people repent of sin, we shouldn't continue to ostracize and put them out. The end goal of all church discipline should be restoration.

In other words, when you read the Bible focus on context. CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT. A common practice in Bible reading is pulling Scriptures out of context. For example, we have all probably heard someone say, "It's going to work out anyway. God's in control." Or maybe you have heard "He will give you peace." Both of these statements are inaccurate. According to the Bible, things work for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose. In other words, people who are walking with and trusting God can be assured that it will all work out. Peace isn't just given, either. The Bible says that whenever we pray and bring all our needs to Him, His peace which passes understanding will keep us. Peace is dependent on trusting God to meet all our needs.

Scriptures out of context are one of the most dangerous things people do. Never trust a solo verse. Read the verse before it and after it to ensure correct meaning.

Take Your Time Reading

Whenever you read the Bible, you aren't reading to finish it. You are reading to be transformed by it. Whenever I first came to Christ, one of the things I did was consume the Bible as fast as possible. It was a great journey, no doubt. However, there was so much that I missed. Reading the Bible isn't a race to see who can get done the quickest. It isn't even about trying to fit it all in a yearly plan. If you want to do that, it's all well and good. In my life, I have found that slower is better. Read one to two chapters a day. As you read, read it slowly. If you are someone who likes to journal or take notes, do that. As you do this, you will hear Him speak to you.

Minimize Distractions

As you read the Bible, do it in a time and place where you can give it your undivided attention. Comprehension is hard when done with a lot of noise around you, or while you are trying to do multiple things at a time. If you try to read late at night, you will probably be too tired to pay attention. I would recommend getting up a little earlier to study before getting started. If you aren't a morning person, then use your break time or other times when you may be alone. The time doesn't matter as long as you can devote the time and pay attention. In that quiet place, He will talk to you!

Memorize through Repetition

When we study the Bible, we don't read the Bible through and then call it quits. When we get through, we read it again. Each time you read, you will learn something new. Each time you read the same story, God can speak to you differently. As you read, you are committing the Word to memory. This will serve you well. As you go through trying times or situations where you don't know what to do, the Spirit has a way of bringing those things that you have read back to your mind. In that time, you find direction, hope, and peace. You find the strength that you didn't know you possess. You learn the promises of God so you can stand on the promises of God.

Where Do I Begin?

Now that you know you should read the Bible and how, the next question is typically about where to start. There are several ways to begin. Some begin in Genesis and read straight to Revelation. This is what I do. However, it can be tough. You are going to hit areas in the Bible that are slow and not very interesting. Even the most faithful believers don't enjoy all the genealogies in the Bible. Some may begin by reading the New Testament and then the Old Testament. Some read a chapter out of Proverbs a day (since there are 31 or 1 for each day of the month), and then read other chapters, as well. I recommend reading the book of Romans. There, we learn of the grace of God. Then read the book of James. This is where we learn how to treat others. Then, go back and read the whole New Testament followed by the Old Testament.

In truth, there is no wrong way to read the Bible. The only wrong is to not read it at all. My prayer is that as you study, His truths are illuminated in your heart and His Will for you becomes ever clear.

Chapter 3- Prayer: How Do I Do It?

Another aspect of the faith that we should nurture is our prayer life. Prayer is a very important thing because it is our communication with God. Prayer shapes us, brings clarity to His Word and Will, and draws us near to God. I would say that in most believer's lives, including mine, that prayer is one area of the faith that is neglected. Prayer is a conversation with God. Now prayer can take place at any time much like the way we talk to one another. Sierra and I talk all the time. Any married couple should. I will call her when I am driving or when I have some free time. We talk while we are doing things. I pray that way, too. Throughout the day I have a conversation with Him, at times just thanking Him for what He has done for me or quickly asking for wisdom in a situation I am in. I think on the Lord and His Word and it informs my actions. Like me, you may do the same thing. So to say that you never pray wouldn't be accurate.

What I am talking about is a little different from that. Sierra and I talk all the time with distractions all around us. We are talking around the kids, while we are watching TV, etc. It is healthy communication. However, when we go out on a date, that communication is different. Sierra has my undivided attention. It is just me and her. I hear what she is saying, and she hears what I am saying. The same should be with God. Call it a date with God. A time where we give Him our undivided attention. We talk to Him and we listen to Him. As these moments strengthen our marriages, it strengthens our relationship with God. No wonder Christ compares our relationship with Him to marriage, He is the groom, and we are His bride.

What Does Prayer Do?

Prayer changes us. We don't come to God to try to change Him. He is the perfect One. It is us who need the tune-up. It is us who need the cleansing. It is us who need forgiveness. The beauty in this is that when we pray we know that we are praying to a perfect God who has great things in store for us as we trust Him and walk with Him. As we pray, He will reveal those things in our life that are wrong. Our motives, our actions, and will lead us into the right way to do things.

It is so surreal how this happens. When you say amen and conclude the prayer, you may feel no different. However, as you navigate life, you will interpret and react to situations differently. This is the sanctifying or consecrating aspect of the Word and prayer taking place in your life. He is shaping you and forming you even when you don't know it.

This happened with Moses. Moses is leading God's people to the Promised Land and they constantly caused problems. They didn't trust God, they whined, they bickered, and were just aggravating. So God tested Moses. He told Moses in Exodus that He will wipe the nation out and start over with Moses and his family. Moses had been shaped and changed and didn't even know it. How do we know this? Because Moses intercedes for the nation of Israel and asks God not to destroy them. In Exodus 32:14, the Bible said the Lord "repented." Now that doesn't mean God changed. This means He stopped it. He didn't pour out the judgment that Israel deserved, but that was nothing new. God never gives us what we deserve. That is mercy. He gives what we don't deserve. That is grace. That is His goodness.

Therefore, the whole conversation with Moses was for Moses' sake. He had found the same compassion that God always had, and was able to see them the way God saw them. Although

they were wayward and difficult, they were still God's. The same is true for us and ours!

How Do I Pray?

Now that we have established that prayer is important, let's talk about how to pray. Jesus taught the disciples how to pray after they asked the same question. Matthew 6:9-13 said, "After this manner, therefore, pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen."

In this prayer is so much we can learn.

Length

Notice the brevity and how concise Jesus' prayer was. Sometimes we can get convinced that we have to pray a long time and end up accomplishing nothing. Even the Bible addresses not getting caught up in vain repetitions and babbling on and on. This doesn't mean all prayers have to be short, either. There are times when one may spend moments with God and other times when we may spend hours with God. The most important thing is to pray until we are through. Then, Jesus gives us a footprint of how to pray.

Praise

When Christ opened the prayer, He began with praise. He prayed that “hallowed” be His Father’s name. For it to be revered, His power observed. It is best whenever we come to the Lord in prayer for us to begin by giving praise and thanks to the Lord. Sometimes we can get so busy asking for things that we never stop and take stock in what God has already done for us. We miss what He is doing in us. In our praise, we find His power. We are reminded of all He has brought us through and all that He has done. In our praise, we recognize that unchanging God who came through then will come through again. What has God done for you? Did He save you? Do you have a job? Children? Spouse? Family? As we look around, we can all find something to be thankful for. So begin prayer with thanksgiving.

Submission to His Will

Next, Christ prayed for His Kingdom to come and for His Will to be done. There is a recognition of who is in control. It is at this point where we surrender to Him. Much of the issues that we deal with in our life are because we assume control in areas where God would have us trust Him. The best thing we can do at times like this is to relinquish control and give it to the Lord. He will work it out. What He has for us is greater than the plans we have for ourselves. True blessing is at the place of surrender.

Praying for our Needs

Following submission, Christ then prayed for daily bread. Christ is the source of all that we receive. The Bible says we have not because we don’t ask. Jesus said that when we ask we receive.

The truth is that God provides for our needs. Therefore, we should take our needs to Him.

How often do we turn to others for advice and help? Take your needs to Him first. When we pray over our needs, we can trust and know that He will do what needs to be done. Even when the answer is “no” we can be assured that it is working for our good. If we love Him and are doing what He has asked us to do, all things will work for good.

Praying for Forgiveness

We all need forgiveness. Jesus prayed, “And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” Our sins, failures, and shortcomings demand more than we can give. We can’t do enough to earn forgiveness. Our bad thoughts and deeds will always outweigh the good. We all fail more than succeed morally. We all need a Savior. That is who Christ is. By bearing our sins and failures, He allows for us to be forgiven. Whatever you are carrying, you can lay down at the cross. There is no need for you to live with shame and regret. With forgiveness comes cleansing. What was is no longer. You are cleansed.

The other side of that is that we must forgive those who have wronged us. Regardless of what they have said or done, we must purpose in our hearts to forgive them. Even those who we feel don’t deserve it. We don’t deserve forgiveness, yet God gives it anyway. As Christians, we must choose this also.

Praying for Leading

Lastly, Jesus prayed for us to not be lead into temptation. At every turn in life, we should pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit. When we are dependent upon Him, we can rest assured that He will always lead us into the right paths. He ended by recognizing whose Kingdom we are a part of. We are part of a Kingdom that has no end, a Kingdom that is ruled by God Himself!

Meditation

As we live in a fast-paced world where our schedules are held hostage many times by life, the discipline of meditation is often difficult. Yet, meditation is so important. When I say meditation I am not speaking talking about wearing your robe, sitting Indian style, and humming.

This meditation revolves around Scripture and prayer. So often when we pray, we do all the talking. Trying to fit devotional time into life, we are doing well to get to read. So we read quickly and then move on to the next thing. Christian meditation is simply turning off the TV/radio and other distractions and focus on what the Lord is trying to say to you. It is thinking about the things of God. Things you have read, where you are in your life, where you feel the Lord is leading you, and what you need to do.

To do this isn't difficult. I do this typically riding down the road. I love to listen to music, podcast, and talk on the phone. However, there are certain times I turn it all off and just ride. I think over the things in my life and try to view them from Christ's perspective. What is He telling me in His Word about it? How

should I be reacting and behaving? What should I say in those situations? I would encourage you to start this. You may think I am crazy, but it is amazing how you can hear Him speak to you!

Chapter 4- Church: Is It Important?

This is probably the most debated thing in the church world. Is going to church necessary? You hear those who don't go say, "I don't go to church, but I believe in God and am a good person." There are several problems with this statement.

Believing in God isn't enough. The Bible says that devils believe in God. Guess what? They are still devils and in hell. It isn't about believing in God, it is about following God.

The second issue is that no one is good. We may do good deeds, people like us and label us good; but we all know our motives aren't what they always should be. We say wrong things, we treat people at times in ways that aren't good. There are times we wrestle with strong grips of depression, anxiety, and worry. We are all broken and flawed. This is true from the best of us to the worse of us. If we could be good on our own, why would Jesus need to die? He died because we couldn't be good on our own.

We may ask, "How can the church be the solution? The church is full of hypocrites and they are just as bad as people who don't go." This statement isn't true but isn't wrong either.

What is a Hypocrite?

A hypocrite, by definition, is someone who holds others to a standard they have no intention of keeping. The church and world are full of people like this. They are at the ball games, stores, doctor's office, and our workplace. However, it never keeps us from going there. There are no doubt "fake" people in the church.

On the other hand, there are very real people in the church. Going through real situations like you and me, and dependent upon the same Savior that we are. Those who fall into this category aren't hypocrites, they are growing believers. Being a believer in

the church doesn't mean that we have all the answers and are living the perfect life. It means that we are striving to be like Christ and to become more like Him every day. We are imperfect, not hypocritical if we are striving to do right and fall short. A hypocrite is a hypocrite of the heart. Their motives are wrong.

Christianity is Communal

When you examine the New Testament, you will find that the majority of it was written to groups, not individuals. The letters were typically written to churches and the pastoral letters (Timothy and Titus) to pastors leading churches. What if you never gathered with other believers on that day? How would you hear what God was doing? God is calling all of us to gather together. We need the community and we need the connection for several reasons.

Relationships

The beauty in being connected in the church is the relationships that it provides. Every one of us is going through things. We need encouragement, guidance, a listening ear, and strength. Being involved in the local church provides all of these things. Some of my closest friends are in my life through the church. I can go to them about anything. They will pray for me, talk to me, and encourage me.

These relationships won't exist if we just watch church online or do it all on our own. We are all limited in our strength and understanding. This is another avenue to find peace and help in life. It may be that someone in the church has gone through a similar situation and can speak and help you. Remember, we are all growing together.

You may be thinking that you are good and don't need that in your life. Maybe that is true. This is the other aspect of the church. It isn't all about you and what you can get, but also what you can give. You have stories of tough times and valleys you have walked through. You know how God brought you through, and the things you had to do to get through them. You have a responsibility to help others around you going through similar situations as they strive to live for Christ.

Word

In addition to building relationships, there is the preaching of the Word. There is so much misunderstood about this. To the cynic, it appears one man is standing up there trying to tell everyone else how they should live. All they want is our time and money.

There is no doubt that there are crooked people out there, but that is not always the case. The pastor is a student of the Word. He should spend his days growing in the knowledge of the Word and seeking the Lord. When he preaches, it isn't about his shot at fame, but speaking an encouraging and edifying Word into your life. Sunday is a place of encouragement, refueling, and refocusing to go back out into the world. It is a time to bring perspective. If you aren't getting that from the preached Word, find another church! However, don't abandon the church. You and I both need it!

Worship

Lastly, it is an opportunity to worship Christ. Now worship should be present in the life of the believer every day. Christ doesn't just deserve praise on Sunday or a Bible study. The Bible

teaches to always give Him thanks. The Bible also tells of the power of gathered believers. When two or more are gathered together, the Bible says God is in the midst. As we worship together, the presence of the Lord is there to strengthen, correct, and help every one of us. There is nothing greater than pausing to give Him praise for all that He has done. In doing so, we gain perspective on our current problems. The God who did it for us before will do it again!

Chapter 5- Money: What Do I Do With It?

What does the Bible say about money? Now, this can be a touchy subject. From the outside looking in, many times tithe and offering time looks like the preacher just trying to get someone's money. I wish I had a dollar for every time I have heard this in my life. In reality, the Bible has a lot to say about money.

The way we manage and spend our money says a lot about who we are. Indeed, bank statements alone can tell you a lot about a person. The way money is spent reveals our values, our impulses, and our priorities. Matthew 6:21 said it like this, "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Notice the word order. It doesn't say where your heart is your treasure is. It says where your treasure is. Our emotions and commitments follow our treasures. What do our spending and managing habits say about us?

End Goal

When it comes to money, what is your end goal? What are you trying to achieve? The thing that matters the most to God is our motives, or as the Bible calls it the "thoughts and intents of the heart." For example, saving and investing are important. Proverbs 13:22 said, "A good man leaveth an inheritance to his children's children: and the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just." This verse says that a good man lays up an inheritance for his grandchildren, but there is also a hidden principle in there. This stretches to more than money. If the man isn't just, he will lose it all. God blesses wise investment coupled with submission to Him. In this case, accumulation is important because it goes to something greater than one's self.

To accumulate for the sake of accumulation, on the other hand, is wrong. Luke 12:15-21 said:

“And he said unto them, Take heed, and beware of covetousness: for a man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth. And he spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided? So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The man in this parable never had enough. He was so focused on wealth that he missed what was important. No matter how much we get, we can't take it with us when we go. Our wealth ends at our death. If we have spent more time investing in what we have rather than in who we are, we will be truly poor and miss out on what God has for us. Therefore, the end goal of our lives and money must serve a greater purpose. Money must be a means to an end, not the end itself.

Providing for Family

The primary purpose of money is to provide for our families. Money and investments cannot be neglected. The wise individual pays attention and manages well the resources that he is given. It is through this that we have our homes, clothing, food, and the ability to live and do life.

Two perceptions need to be addressed. One is the idea that being wealthy is bad, and the other is the idea that being poor is laziness. Now, the truth is some wealthy people are greedy, arrogant, and self-absorbed. However, money doesn't cause them to be this way. Sin does. The truth is some are in poverty and have the same mentality. Some wealthy people are lazy and have inherited wealth and status by no merit or labor of their own. On the other hand, some make very little who work very hard. Lack of education or opportunity cannot be confused with laziness.

To have either of these stereotypes towards a group of people is to be either jealous or arrogant. If we look to those who have more and try to justify their success by insinuating they are doing something wrong, we are simply jealous. We don't want to admit it, but it is true. It is the idea if they have it and we don't, then they must be doing something wrong because everything we do is right. It is a terrible attitude to have! Learn to celebrate others' successes even when they are greater than your own.

To label all those who live on less or in poverty than you as lazy is arrogant. You are setting yourself as the standard as to how people should work and live. You are essentially saying, "If you will work like me, you could live like me." What you may not know is that some are working as hard if not harder, but they cannot catch a break. Why?

Starting Points

Everyone starts at a different point in life. Everyone's situation is different. What happens to us as a child shapes the way we view and see everything. There are only two things that will ever change this: exposure and Christ. Some people are stuck in a way of living because they don't know another one is available. For example, from the time I entered school, my parents pushed

me to study and learn. I was encouraged to further my education and they footed the bill. I lived in their house, and while I worked to pay for my gas and other little things, they took care of all the big bills. I wouldn't be where I am without my parents.

Perhaps you had parents like that. They were very present in your childhood. They pushed you in whatever it is you wanted to be. They encouraged you to further your education or to pursue that sport or job skill that you were great at. They taught you that you could be and do anything that you put your mind to. If that is the case, you should be thankful because that isn't the common situation.

Many children grow up without one of the parents in the home, some without both. A win for them is to get a (not three) meal that day. Instability is their life, and they know nothing else.

Parable About Money

In the Bible, Christ tells a parable about money known as the parable of the talents. In it, the master is getting ready to leave town and entrust three of his servants with a certain amount of money or talents. To one he gives 5 talents, to the second 2 talents, and then to another 1 talent. While he is away, the men with 5 talents and 2 talents invest their money yielding high returns. On the other hand, the man with only 1 talent takes his talent and buries it in the sand. When the master returns, he asks the servants what they did with what they were given. The man with 5 had doubled his money to 10, the man with 2 had doubled his money to 4, and the man with 1 had done nothing. As a result, the master blesses the two that invested and took away the one from the man who did nothing. The master then casts this man out into what the Bible causes darkness because he was an unprofitable servant.

There is much that we can take away from this story. The first is that God rewards excellence. If we do the best with what we are given, God will take care of us. It makes Him proud to see we take what He has given and do the best we can with it. The second is if we sit back and make excuses, constantly complain about where we are at in our lives financially, and do nothing, then judgment awaits us. The truth is that all three of these men were blessed. In the story, none of the men had earned the talents, to begin with. The master gave them their talents.

It doesn't matter how much or little you think you have. All your goodness and blessing come from God. I have heard people talk about how they didn't feel God do anything, that they had everything because of their work, their plans, their abilities. My thoughts would be this: who gave you the breath to wake up and the physical and mental strength to accomplish these things? Who allowed certain relationships to be formed in the life that would propel you forward? The truth is that there are certain intangibles that you have no control over. God just did it for you because He is good and wants to bless you! When we start seeing that, praise to God for what He has done for us and humility will be our lot.

In the parable, to me, the most impressive man is the one with 2 talents. The man with 1 talent made excuses why he couldn't do anything. He saw that the other two men had extra so they could afford to invest. The man with 1 talent knew better than to let the master down because the master was a hard man that takes what isn't his.

We will address that in a minute.....

Back to the man with two talents. The man with 2 talents didn't have as much as the man with 5 talents. Yet, the man with more didn't affect the actions of the man with 2. While the man

with 2 talents had more than the man with 1 talent, we see no evidence of the man with 2 looking down on the man with 1 or act prideful because he had more than him. The man with 2 talents simply took what he had been given and did the best with what he had. He did it without pride or envy towards the other. It was the lot the master had given him, and he simply wanted to be faithful with it. What would happen in our lives if we wouldn't play the comparison game? Instead of looking at others who have more and becoming depressed because we don't, we become thankful for what we have and make the most of it? Instead of looking down on others with less arrogance, do what we can to love them and help them if necessary. We are no better than them, our starting points were just in different locations.

One more thing about the man with 1 talent....

The man with 1 talent had one major flaw, and it wasn't the amount of income or talent he had. It was his perception of the master. He assumed that the master was hard and simply wanted to take. The truth was just the opposite. Nowhere in the story do we see the master take anything. All he did was give and ask the men to handle and wisely manage the money. Whenever we talk about money, there are so many wrong ideas that have developed around this. God doesn't just want to take your money. God isn't a taker, He is a giver. He gave you what you have, and says if you give Him a portion back, He will bless you even greater. The recurrent theme in Scripture is that God is a giver. He gave His Son that we could be forgiven and free, He gives us His Spirit so we may be comforted and led, He gives freedom to the captives, and He gives hope to the hopeless. He is a giver!

The first step to a more rewarding, deeper relationship with God is coming to the understanding that God is for you. He doesn't

desire to take but to bless. He asks of us to be faithful, submitted, and thankful. Let us put away envy and arrogance when it comes to money. We are no worse than another because we may have less, nor are we any better because we have more. Rather than winning the net worth game, let us be faithful!

Giving

The first step to freedom and faithfulness is surrender. In surrendering our lives it seems that the surrender of finances is the most difficult. No wonder Christ talked about money so often. Understand, God isn't trying to take anything from you, He is trying to give. He doesn't want what is yours, but what is His. Look at it like this: He gives you the breath to breathe, the strength to work, the favor to find employment, the means to take care of you and your family. All He is asks is for little in return. With that little, He promises to do much.

The Biblical concept of giving is called "tithing." The word tithe means 10%. In other words, we are asked by God to give 10% of our earnings back to Him. This 10% is used to further take care of His house and to be a beacon to the world with the hope that only the Gospel gives. The earliest evidence of tithing goes back to Abraham in Genesis 14:20. Here, Abraham has defeated an enemy and goes to the priest of God, Melchizedek. There, he offers a tithe of all that he had. This is an important point of reference because Abraham wasn't told to do this, he did this willingly. Giving from compulsion will do nothing but bring pain and frustration into your life. It is about the heart or motive of giving that determines the results.

Once the law is established, the people of Israel are instructed to tithe to the Lord and the temple. Deuteronomy 14:22-29 serves as an example of this principle. Then, in the New

Testament, Christ encourages the practice with a little twist. In Matthew 23:23, Christ said, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone.”

In these verses, Jesus is confronting the religious leaders whose character is lacking. They think they are saved or safe because of who they are and all that they do. They are doing the acts, but with the wrong motives. Once again, it isn’t all about what we do, but how we do it. Yet, while chastising them, Christ tells them they should be tithing. This is very important. As Christ comes to fulfill the law, removing the need for further sacrifices, He instructs for tithing to continue.

So, tithing is a heart thing. It is done with our money, but it is transacted in our hearts. If we give for show or begrudgingly, we undo the act itself. However, when we are surrendered to God and obedient, some very powerful things will take place.

The Tithe and Offering Blessing

In Malachi God tells of the blessing that comes when His people tithe. Before we look at these verses, I must explain why it works. The blessing of tithing isn’t achieved by just giving money. I have already spoken about the need to give from a grateful heart. A grateful heart realizes where the blessings of life come from. When we give in that way, it becomes an act of faith. It is an act of faith because one realizes that they aren’t the source of their provision, God is, and by entrusting Him with what He asks, He will richly bless. The results can only be explained by faith. It doesn’t make logical sense to have more when you have given something away. When you give away 10%, logic says you are left

with 90%. However, faith in the Word lets us know we are left with much more than that.

Malachi 3:10-12 says, “Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the LORD of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the LORD of hosts.

Test Me

Out of the gate, God says that whenever we tithe, He will provide for our temporal needs. He said in verse 10 that there would be meat in your house. However, it is the next statement that is awesome. This is the only passage of Scripture where God tells us to “test Him” or “prove Him.” In other words, we can hold Him to what He says. He promises to provide for us.

Then He goes even further, promising to open up the windows of heaven and giving a blessing that there isn’t room enough to contain! Isn’t that amazing! He promises to bless us to overflow. This kind of reminds me of what David said in Psalms 23:1 where He said that because the Lord was his Shepherd that he wouldn’t want or lack.

Not only will He provide for your temporal needs, but this blessing goes much further than money. By living a life of faith, evidenced further by our commitment to tithe, it ensures blessing all around. Money can’t buy permanent joy, peace, contentment, health, or bring keep your family together. However, a life of

surrender can. There is peace and joy in knowing that God will always take care of you. That He is always for you. If the God who could speak the world into existence is for you, how can you fear anything?

How many people are stuck in jobs, some even very lucrative, but miserable? Money can't buy contentment or purpose. However, God will lead us into what He has for us, and in that is fullness of joy. Money can't keep you healthy. On the other hand, God gives us the strength to live and do what He has for us. When it comes time to die, we know on the other side is everlasting life. Death isn't the end, it is just a door!

Rebuke the Devourer

Next, God says that He will "rebuke the devourer for your sakes." What does that mean? In a society made up of farming, homes were taken care of by the growing and selling of crops. Famines or plagues that would come and destroy crops would ruin lives. There is nothing like putting all your efforts into something and it fails. Maybe you can relate. You put your all into a job that you end up losing. A business venture that ends up failing. Or sometimes everything seems to tear up at the same time, emptying your savings. We have all experienced one of these!

Yet, God says that He will keep the enemy at bay. There is a hedge of protection placed around us. Now, that doesn't mean that we won't walk through seasons of difficulty. We can be assured that will happen. We serve a just God but live in an unjust world. Sometimes, we confuse the two. Some things happen to us that people do, but God didn't cause it. We all make a choice, and sinful people will do sinful things to you. The hope in this is that God will work all things for our good. He will carry you through. The devourer will not win! When you get on the other side of the

trial, like the Psalmist, you will declare, “Had it not been for the Lord who was on my side!”

A Good Name

The Bible says a good name is to be desired above riches. In verse 12, God promised to do just that. He said that “all nations shall call you blessed.” Why? He says that you will be a “delightsome land.” There is nothing like God’s people. People who choose to walk by faith. People who choose to trust Him. Notice I didn’t say people who attend church. Attending church is just an element of surrendering to Christ. It is necessary but it isn’t everything. Christ-followers who are fully committed to Christ are a delightsome people. They are joyful because they know who has saved them. They are at peace because they know who is taking care of them. They are investors and givers into other people and the Kingdom because they know God gave to them and will give more.

Perhaps you know some people like I just describe. They are probably known for their character. Why? They are delightsome because they choose to trust Christ with everything. As a result, others call them blessed. Even people around them see the difference between them and others.

Take the Step

I hope that after reading this, if you have not already, that you would take the step to surrender your finances to Christ. I can promise you, it will bring great dividends. I hope that you have seen that giving to the church isn’t just so the church can take away from you. Nor is it just to pay the preacher. First, it is an act of surrender and worship to God. Secondly, it is about the

Kingdom, and so that others can come to know the life-saving power that you have known.

It is choosing to trust God with all that you have. At first, it may seem to be a hard step. One that you don't understand. I get that. That is where faith comes in. I want to challenge you to commit the next 3 months to trust God with your finances. I say this because, after that time, you will always do it. He can do more for you and me than we can do for ourselves. I am praying for you!