

# **Basics of the Christian Life Series**

## **The Beginning of the Christian Life**

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**By**  
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# The Beginning of the Christian Life

## I. Introduction

### A. Illustration: The Sin of Shirk<sup>1</sup>

1. Sometimes there are serious consequences riding on a decision to follow Jesus. This is especially true for Muslims. Nabeel Qureshi writes about this in his book *Seeking Allah Finding Jesus*, “The greatest concern for me, were I to accept Jesus as Lord, was that I might be wrong. What if Jesus is not God? I’d be worshipping a human. That would incur the wrath of Allah, and more than anything else, it would secure my abode in hell.”
2. Some former Muslims have been killed (called “honor killings”) for turning away from Islam, even in the United States. Turning from Islam to Christianity is as serious as it gets when it comes to religious consequences and sometimes even physical safety is in jeopardy. Nabeel explains the Muslim perspective, “In Islam, there is only one unforgiveable sin, **shirk**, the belief that someone other than Allah is God. Shirk is specifically discussed in the context of Jesus in 5:72 [Sura, chapter and verse of the Koran]. He who believes Jesus is God, ‘Allah has forbidden Heaven for him, and his abode will be the Hellfire.’”

B. Why would a Muslim take such a big risk? Why put your eternal damnation on the table? Is believing in Jesus worth all the hassle? Some people think religion is merely a way to cope with life. A person can easily move from one religion to another without any consequences. The content of what a person believes isn’t important, only the practical benefits of religion matter. This perspective promotes the idea that religions just need to “coexist”; perhaps you’ve seen the bumper sticker. If a religious system doesn’t “work” for you, that is if it doesn’t provide a personal benefit to your life, simply try another religion until you find one that works. People move from one church denomination to another all the time; not because they’ve had a change in doctrine (belief about God) but because they’ve been personally offended by someone in the church. I remember one woman who went from a Catholic church to a Lutheran church because the Catholic church would let her work as a custodian but not let her get married in the church. I wonder what the Reformers would think.

C. One of the biggest issues facing the church today is convincing people that religious beliefs and religion in general even matter in the first place. Apathy toward God and spiritual things is at an epidemic level in our country. As our culture becomes increasingly secular, the value of Christianity, and religion in general, decreases. Church can be skipped for months at a time and many think nothing valuable is lost. Why bother going to church at all? If Jesus doesn’t have any practical application for your life, why bother with Him? What good does He do? Unless a person sees religion as immediately beneficial, odds are, they won’t see any need for it. I think this is why we see many churches focusing on meeting practical needs and preaching life issues. These churches attempt to fix peoples’ lives and teach them how to live better; this approach is

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<sup>1</sup> Nabeel Qureshi *Seeking Allah Finding Jesus: A Devout Muslim Encounters Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 246.

very popular. As long as the Bible fixes some current felt need in a person's life they will value the Bible. If sermons aren't immediately practical and beneficial to some issue a person is currently dealing with, God is irrelevant and church becomes boring.

- D. An important concern for the church today is: Does Jesus make any meaningful difference in our lives? Perhaps you've been following Jesus and attending church for years and you've asked yourself the same question. Maybe you've heard thousands of sermons and you've ask yourself the question, "What good has all my time in church done for me? Does my life look any different?" These are important questions to ask. In Ephesians 4:17-24, we get a direct answer to these questions. If we are to think properly and Biblically about Jesus and religion in general, we need to understand the foundational change that Jesus makes in a person's life.

## II. What Happens When a Person Commits to Jesus?

- A. When someone hears the message of Jesus, understands it, and accepts it as truth as well as the word of God (1 Thess. 2:13), what happens? Does anything meaningful change or is Christianity just one religion out of many that a person can choose from as long as it helps them cope with life? The Bible says that those who put their trust in Jesus for forgiveness of their immoral acts, these individuals become a new type of person, "<sup>17</sup> Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come." (2 Cor. 5:17). This drastic life altering internal change is described by Jesus as being born again in John chapter three. Like any good weight loss program, there will be a dramatic and noticeable difference with the "before" and "after" pictures. However, in the spiritual life, the "pictures" that are taken focus on the inside of a person instead of the outside. So radical is the "before" and "after" when believing in Jesus that it can be described as the beginning of a new life.
- B. Perhaps you've had the opportunity to start a new life by taking a new job along with moving to a new city. When this transition happens, many elements of life are changed. New relationships must be developed, learning a new job is necessary, finding a different place to live is required, and even day to day activities need to be adjusted. I've had to change jobs when a move wasn't required. Although moving from one job to another is a big adjustment, many aspects of life remain the same because only one area of life is being changed. I still had all my friends, my day to day routine didn't change very much, and we were living in the same house. The changes I had to make to adjust to a new job were minimal. I had to go somewhere else to work, my income was different, I learned new job related tasks, and I increased my social structure by working with a different set of people while I left former coworkers behind. Everything else in my life remained stable.
- C. However, when our family had to move to a new place for a different job, the changes that had to be made affected almost every area of my life. For all practical purposes, almost every relationship I had was altered (my family was the only exception), I had to learn to live in a new community, we had to figure out where we were going to get groceries, what we could do for fun as a family on the weekend, and even where I would sit when I came home from work. Almost every aspect of my life changed. My family and I had to start over. No one knew us. Our reputations had to be rebuilt, accomplishments started from zero, and relationships were built from the ground up. A life starting over is the picture Jesus uses for the spiritual change which

takes place when someone believes in Him. The changes Jesus will make in their lives won't leave any area of life untouched. New things have come and the old is being replaced. A new person now exists.

- D. One of the biggest changes taking place in the life of a person who believes in Jesus is their access to the resources of God, <sup>2</sup> Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord; <sup>3</sup> seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence. <sup>4</sup> For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust." (2 Pet. 2:1-4). God's power is now made available to those who commit their lives to Jesus. They are granted access to everything they need for living life well and becoming a good person through their true knowledge of Jesus and the promises of God.
- E. Although this new life is something a person must grow into, immediate access to the necessary resources is a present reality. A person who becomes attached to Jesus, has everything they need to do what God asks them to do. However, they need to learn how to use these God given resources. A person who believes in Jesus can develop the wisdom of God but they must spend time being taught by the Holy Spirit through the Bible in order to gain this wisdom. They have the ability to overcome sinful habits but they must regularly participate in activities that foster the Holy Spirit's freedom while diminishing the influence of the old desires to make it happen. In short, while a new Christian has all the resources they need; they must learn how to use them.
- F. Illustration: Logos Bible Software
  1. When I was working outside of full time ministry, I was making the most money I ever have in my entire life. This opportunity provided me the ability to purchase the best Bible study software available: Logos from Faithlife. Purchasing this software put incredible Bible study tools at my fingertips.
  2. This software program gave me access to a full library of book which could be searched in an instance along with advanced and complex Bible searches (even in the original languages) in seconds. With this software, I could speed up my studies and go into much greater depth with much less effort. I jumped in with both feet.
  3. The problem, was that Logos is very sophisticated and its capabilities so exhaustive that, before I could use it well, I first had to learn how to use it. I watched many training videos and read a number of "how to" articles. I first had to learn what the software was capable of, the features it offered, and then I had to learn how to use them.
  4. Even now I sometimes forget how to do certain things and I have to go back to the training material to figure out how to make Logos do what I want it to do. I have been using this Bible software for years now and I'm still only using a fraction of its capabilities.

5. The more I learn about the software and the Biblical languages, the more I can do with Logos. The day I purchased the software, I had instant access to all the resources and features offered by Logos but it took time to figure out how to use it.
- G. God's resources are made available through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, <sup>16</sup> "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; <sup>17</sup> *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. <sup>18</sup> I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. <sup>19</sup> After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you *will* see Me; because I live, you will live also. <sup>20</sup> In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you. <sup>21</sup> He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." (Jn. 14:16-21). Jesus said He, through the Holy Spirit, will live inside each person who trusts Him (Jn. 14:23). The Holy Spirit teaches God's people about Jesus by using the Bible (Jn. 16:12-15, 1 Cor. 2:6-16, Jn. 17:14-17). When this happens, Jesus will make Himself known to those who have the Holy Spirit.
- H. Becoming convinced that a person who truly belongs to God has everything they need to live a life that is pleasing to God is very important; actually it's essential. Following Jesus is hard, even with the help of the Holy Spirit, it is a struggle to do the things God's wants us to do. We need to have a firm mentality that God will provide what we need in order to do what He desires us to do (Heb. 13:20-21). We can make changes to our lives, we can overcome the desires that we struggle with, we can stop sinful habits that we are used to participating in, and we can choose to obey God's Word. There will be times when we will doubt this is possible which is why it is absolutely essential to believe God when He tells us that He provides everything we need for life and godliness.

### III. The Old Self

- A. Paul talks about the beginning of the process of living for Jesus in Ephesians 4:17-20, <sup>17</sup> "So this I say, and affirm together with the Lord, that you walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their mind, <sup>18</sup> being darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart; <sup>19</sup> and they, having become callous, have given themselves over to sensuality for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness. <sup>20</sup> But you did not learn Christ in this way," (Eph. 4:17-20).<sup>2</sup> Here Paul explains the starting point of everyone who commits their life to Jesus. Every disciple begins the Christian life with the "old self" (v. 22) and a "former manner of life" (v. 22) summed up under the heading of being "Gentiles". The old self is our human nature that is opposed to God and unresponsive to that which is pleasing to Him. It isn't a pretty picture.
- B. The spiritual condition which every person is in prior to hearing about Jesus is called being "spiritually dead" (Eph. 2:1). This doesn't mean people aren't "spiritual" but they are unresponsive to both God and the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 2:14, Jn. 14:17). They are largely uninterested in things that relate to God and there is an unwillingness to submit to Him so that

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<sup>2</sup> A parallel passage is found in Colossians 3:5-10

they can do what they want to do. They don't accept the things coming from God or the Word of God. Even individuals who throw themselves into spiritual activities and think that they are worshipping God can be unresponsive to God's actions and work. The Pharisees are an example of this (Jn. 5:39-42). This means everyone is unresponsive to God before they encounter Jesus and live a self-focused life as a result. The most important priorities of their life center around satisfying the desires that are inside them and the pursuit of what they think is most important which is in harmony with the general course of the world (they easily go along with the thinking and values of the culture) and this course creates hostility toward God; but then God steps in and changes things (Eph. 2:1-7).

- C. The "old self" has three main characteristics. It starts with a mind that does not understand what true values and standards are.<sup>3</sup> For Paul, the mind is THE central influence in a person's life. It is at the center of a person's spiritual deadness and it is also at the center of a person's spiritual transformation. The spiritually dead mind is a mind that has been darkened and corrupted by the self-imposed ignorance because of their hardness toward God. The corrupted thinking leads to a lifestyle of doing things that should not be done from God's perspective and in constantly doing them, the individual loses their sense of feeling (1 Tim. 4:2). They become petrified, not fearful, but hardened to a greater extent than they previously were due to their rebellion against God. Jesus talked about this frequently and He even had a saying connected to this reality, "He who has ears let him hear, he who has eyes let him see." Those who are hardened may be exposed to spiritual realities but they are unresponsive and uncomprehending. Spiritual ignorance and corrupted thinking is revealed by the way people live their lives. These individuals are hardened toward God in the pursuit of their own interests with little regard for others.
- D. The second characteristic of life separated from Jesus is a lack of concern with the moral implications of their behavior because of a longing to satisfy their desires. It is a lifestyle focused on personal pleasure, a life lived in the pursuit of personal happiness. The highest priority is the satisfaction of their personal desires to the point that they aren't concerned whether their behavior is right or wrong or the consequences of their behavior on others. The primary concern is having their desires satisfied, "have given themselves over to sensuality" (Eph. 4:19). Corrupted thinking results in a lack of understanding and ignorance which leads to a lifestyle of indulging in pleasure unrestrained by morality. This lifestyle seeks after activities that make them feel good without concern of whether these pursuits are right or wrong. They live for themselves by seeking after activities and behaviors that bring them comfort and pleasure. They "give themselves" to these things, that is, their lives are motivated by their self-focus.
- E. The third characteristic of the previous lifestyle for those who turn to Jesus is a never ending search for satisfaction, "for the practice of every kind of impurity with greediness" (v. 19). Activities and habits are developed in a person's life that are immoral and they have a corrupting influence on the person. The motivation behind this lifestyle is personal satisfaction

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<sup>3</sup> Richard J. Erickson, "[Ephesians](#)," in *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*, vol. 3, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1995), 1028.

of their desires. However, satisfaction remains elusive which leads to further decent into these activities in the hope of finding satisfaction. If one activity doesn't bring satisfaction, either more of the same activity is pursued or a different activity is sought out for satisfaction.

#### IV. The New Self

- a. Although at the beginning the Christian life the "old self", as previously described, is most prominent; there is also a "new self" that has been created by God, "<sup>24</sup> and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." (Eph. 4:24). There is a competing internal influence to the "old self". God puts a new nature in each person who belongs to Him. This new nature is responsive to God and desires to submit to the things that are pleasing to Him. This "old" and "new" dynamic creates internal turmoil which is described in Romans 7. Those who follow Jesus will continually experience an internal battle between the self and the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-26). Disciples gradually learn how to live in the midst of this struggle with the victory the Holy Spirit provides.
- b. Notice how Paul describes the "new self" which is contrasted from the "old self", "which is in *the likeness of God*" (v. 24).<sup>4</sup> The new person that God creates through Jesus Christ moves a person from selfishness to Christlikeness. Although each person has a naturally built in image of God (Gen. 1:26) that natural image has been corrupted. God restores this image so it can have a greater influence on the person who turns their life over to Jesus. The "new self" will make a person like God, "<sup>15</sup> but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all *your* behavior" (1 Pet. 1:15). In short, this "new self" will make us look like Jesus, "<sup>15</sup> but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ," (Eph. 4:15). As a person matures spiritually, as they grow in the "new self" they will look like Jesus in every aspect of their lives. This is the direction of the "new self".
- c. The "new self" in its Christlikeness is "created in righteousness" (v. 24) which is a lifestyle that conforms to the moral standards of God. The "new self" is created to do what is good and just. Instead of living with a self-focus, the "new self" begins to live for God. While there will still be tendencies to do what feels good, this will be set aside in order to do what is good. Self-pleasure will be sacrificed for what is moral. This doesn't mean that following Jesus isn't pleasurable, only that inappropriate self-indulgence is stopped. Life with Jesus actually brings about deeper levels of morally upright pleasure. Remember, God is the source of joy and pleasure (Ps. 16:11)! Those who genuinely follow Jesus are given the "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt. 5:6).
- d. The "new self" is also created to be saturated in "holiness" (v. 24). Holiness is the quality of being personally dedicated to God in moral purity. "Sensuality" and "impurity" is replaced with holiness; immorality with morality. Instead of following desires that corrupt, desires are given that purify. Disciples will start the process of intentionally purifying themselves, "<sup>3</sup> And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure." (1 Jn. 3:3). Once again, there is a desire to be like Jesus. The "new self" pursues new things. Instead of chasing

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<sup>4</sup> Colossians 3:10

after activities that will satisfy immoral desires, the “new self” promotes the pursuit of activities that will clean up a person’s heart; this pursuit will satisfy new healthy desires.

#### V. The Three Basic Methods of Spiritual Change

- A. Paul now tells us how those who have started following Jesus can make spiritual changes in their lives. He describes how people are transformed from the old person we once were to the new person God has created us to be. It is the old way of life that must be abandoned by the person who is following Jesus, “that you no longer walk just as the Gentiles also walk,” (v. 17) and “in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self” (v. 22). There is a natural lifestyle that is followed by those who don’t live for Jesus, Gentiles are people who are not Jewish and this reference speaks of those who aren’t part of the people of God. Gentiles are those disconnected from God. The one who believes in Jesus is to change their lifestyle. Paul uses very firm language to make a point that can’t be missed: those who follow Jesus can’t continue to live in the same manner as when they did when they didn’t follow Jesus. There is a sharp and clear distinction between those who have chosen to follow Jesus and those who are not.
- B. Jesus put it this way, “<sup>34</sup> And He summoned the crowd with His disciples, and said to them, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. <sup>35</sup> For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. <sup>36</sup> For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul? <sup>37</sup> For what will a man give in exchange for his soul? <sup>38</sup> For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will also be ashamed of him when He comes in the glory of His Father with the holy angels.’” (Mk. 8:34-38). Those who decide to live for Jesus must move their self and their desires to the side so Jesus can be front and center. The natural question arises: how do we change from the old self to the new self?
- C. The dramatic and far reaching change that occurs in a person’s thoughts, motives, desires, decisions, and actions is explained in detail in Ephesians 4:21-24, “<sup>21</sup> if indeed you have heard Him and have been taught in Him, just as truth is in Jesus, <sup>22</sup> that, in reference to your former manner of life, you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit, <sup>23</sup> and that you be renewed in the spirit of your mind, <sup>24</sup> and put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.” Here we see the three methods of internal change caused by Jesus. These three methods are conditional; they will only be true of those who genuinely turn their lives over to Jesus. These methods will only be active in those who belong to God.
- D. The first method of spiritual change is to cut out the aspects of the “old self” that are no longer appropriate for someone who is following Jesus, “you lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit” (v. 22). Any part of life that is unresponsive to God and resistant to His Word must be ceased immediately. Saying “no” to old desires is necessary. Drastic measures may need to be taken (Mt. 5:27-30). This method of change involves stopping the things that we are actively doing that are resistant and hostile to God.
- E. The more a person learns about the type of person they should be, through the teachings of Jesus and their growing knowledge of Him, the more they will realize what needs to be cut out



of their life. Paul uses terminology related to changing your clothes. An old set of clothes is removed, never to be put on again. A new set of clothes is going to be put on to replace the old worn out clothes that are no longer appropriate. Picture someone getting out of prison never to return again. They get rid of the prison jumpsuit and changing into civilian clothes when they are released from prison. The internal change that takes place inside a person when they choose to follow Jesus leads to an intentional resistance not to God but to old habits and desires which are known to be displeasing to God. The direction of resistant is now pointed in the other way.

- F. Paul wants to make this point crystal clear: bad behavior is inconsistent with the Christian life, the lifestyle that Jesus promotes. It should be the goal of everyone who is following Jesus to live their life in such a way that Jesus is honored (2 Cor. 5:9-10, Phil. 1:27); this is the focal point of the Christian life. We no longer use our bodies for activities that displease God (Rm. 6:1-18, 12:1). Immoral desires and habits do not have control in the new life as they did in the old life. It is no longer a valid option to continuing living in the same way as before. Someone who is following Jesus will not excuse sin by simply saying, "Jesus will forgive me." Sinful habits and behaviors is incompatible with who they are in Christ. A person can't live however they want and follow Jesus. The claim to believe in Jesus carries responsibilities with it.
- G. The second method of creating spiritual change is starting to do the things that Jesus tells us to do, "put on the new self, which in *the likeness of God* has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." (Eph. 4:24). Followers of Christ need to "put on" the new self that God has created; they need to learn what it means to live for Jesus. A person who is following Jesus needs to actively put time and energy into becoming the new person God desires them to become. This means they will need to add new activities to their life that they weren't doing previously. It is probably more accurate to say that we should be consumed and obsessed with the "new self" instead of simply saying that we should put effort into its development (1 Tim. 4:15). A follower of Christ should work to the point of exhaustion while developing the new person God is creating them to be. The "new self" should be the main focus of their life while secondary pursuits are left behind.
- H. The third method of spiritual change is to change the way they think, "be renewed in the spirit of your mind" (Eph. 4:23). One of the key pieces of spiritual transformation, and also one of the most neglected, is the life of the mind. For Paul, the mind is the key to unlocking spiritual change (Rm. 12:2). Changing the way a person thinks is part of the process of changing the way a person lives; this is why regular Bible study is so important. Day by day, as a person is exposed to the thoughts of God, their perspective is changed. Our minds are renewed through a developing knowledge of the Bible and its application to life. Forming our thought patterns, and what we accept as truth, to match those of God is the means by which our lives change. If a person doesn't change the way they think they will not change the way they live. Changing a person's thought process is the pickaxe that chips away the hardness of a person's heart in order for changes to be made.
- I. If the Christian life is to be lived out appropriately it is absolutely essential to take note of the difference between the natural course of rejecting God and the path of learning about Jesus

and His desired lifestyle, “but you did not learn Christ in this way.” (Eph. 4:20). As long as a person has genuinely responded to the message of Jesus (Eph. 4:21), they will be able to put the words of Jesus into practice (Mt. 7:24-27) and will learn as a result (Jn. 7:17, 2 Cor. 3:14-18). As a person learns more about Jesus, they are transformed to be like Him. As a person who continues to be willing to live out what they know about Jesus, Jesus will continue to teach them more about Himself (Jn. 8:31-36). Learning Christ is active instead of passive. The lifestyle that opposes God happens on its own without effort, the life of God happens only as effort is put into following Jesus; it isn’t automatic. Spiritual growth requires consistent attention and effort (Phil. 2:12). Growth and maturity will not just happen, they require nourishment. This spiritual growth process will not be completed in this lifetime (Phil. 1:6).

## VI. Conclusion

- A. Jesus makes a big practical difference in the lives of those who truly believe in Him. The difference is so dramatic that it is described as beginning a new life. The core identity of the person is changed. God creates a new nature inside those who commit their lives to following Jesus and this new nature comes with a new lifestyle.
- B. There are three building blocks of the Christian life, three general methods of spiritual change that will be ongoing throughout the maturing process. First, a person will stop doing what is displeasing God. They will change old habits. Second, a person will start doing that which is pleasing to God. They will move from a self-oriented life to a God oriented life. Third, the key ingredient to spiritual change is a continual renewal of the mind through regular Bible study and application. As a person develops the mind of Christ, they will start to live like Jesus.

## VII. Questions For Further Thought

- A. Describe what happens inside a person when Jesus heals their moral wounds in your own words.
- B. Can you think of any other differences between the “old self” and the “new self” not listed by Paul in this passage? If so, what are they?
- C. What specific behaviors are attached to the “old self” in Ephesians 4:25-32?
- D. Do any of these behaviors play a prominent role in your life?
- E. What contrasting behaviors of the “new self” are found in Ephesians 4:25-32?
- F. Do any of these qualities play a prominent role in your life?
- G. What changes have you seen in your life between your “old self” and the “new self” God is creating in you?