



# The Greatest Miracle

# THE GREATEST MIRACLE

BY JOSEPH SZABO

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*Do you believe God still performs miracles today?  
Evidence exists that says He does!*

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# INTRODUCTION

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We live at a time when more and more people are casting away long-cherished beliefs in God and Christianity. Talk of miracles is considered childish or unsophisticated in the light of scientific discovery and technological advances. People who claim to really know God are dismissed as religious fanatics and perhaps a bit crazy. Beautiful Catholic Cathedrals in Europe and other places are practically empty except for older people, clergy, and wide-eyed tourists. In some places, church properties are sold off and converted for purposes other than worship. Many young people find religion irrelevant and boring and doubt that life has any ultimate meaning.

We should ask why. What is missing?

This book is for Catholics who want to know God for real and dare to believe that miracles can still happen today. Frankly, there is nothing mystical about experiencing God. You do not have to be a saint, a priest, or a nun to have a divine encounter. I am convinced that you are special and loved deeply by God. You are a candidate just as you are. I trust you enjoy the book not just because it contains interesting stories, but because it will help you find what all of us need—a fulfilling relationship with God!

*“Our hearts were made for You, O Lord, and they are restless until they rest in you.”*

St. Augustine of Hippo



# 1 DO MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN TODAY?

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## **IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:**

- What are miracles?
  - What is the purpose of miracles?
  - Who is eligible to receive a miracle?
  - What is the greatest of all miracles that can happen?
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## **SOMETHING TO CONSIDER**

Having lived seven years in the Canary Islands (seven small but lovely volcanic islands off the northwest coast of Africa), I have flown in and out of the Los Rodeos airport on the island of Tenerife many times. As the plane approaches the airport from the west, the shimmering Atlantic Ocean stretches underneath. Boats of all kinds—ferries, container ships, and sailboats—dot the blue surface. Tenerife’s twelve-thousand-foot-high volcano called Teide looms ahead. Soon the coastal region of the island is in full view, and the plane flies by pine-covered mountain ridges, over the capital city of Santa Cruz, and finally lands on a high plateau. The view is breathtakingly beautiful. However, on cloudy days the approach can be somewhat tense. At times low clouds completely engulf the airport, reducing visibility to nearly zero. It has made me wonder how planes could land or take off in such conditions.

On my flights to and from the airport, I could not help but be reminded that it was the site of the deadliest aircraft collision in history. At about 5:00 p.m. local time on March 27, 1977, two Boeing 747 airliners loaded with tourists collided on the runway of Los Rodeos Airport. One of the planes was already traveling 180 mph, nearly ready to take off. Only 68

people survived out of 651 who were on board the two jumbo jets. One of the fortunate passengers was Norman Williams.

I heard Norman talk about his amazing escape from the flames and carnage. He said that after the collision, everyone in his area was either dead or dying except for one or two people. Even the man who had been sitting next to him was gone. There were explosions, flames, and hurling debris all around him. He saw one white-hot object headed directly toward him and instinctively threw up his arms to protect himself. Amazingly, almost as though he were Superman, he deflected it. Then he spotted a jagged hole in the ceiling of the plane. Even though he was a six-foot, non-athletic, 250 lb. middle-aged man, he found himself able to leap high enough to grab the edges of the opening and pull himself through with no help. He then slid down onto the wing of the plane and jumped to the ground. His only injuries were cuts and burns to his hands. Norman Williams attributes his survival to a miracle. In fact, he remembers feeling utter peace during the whole ordeal.<sup>1</sup>

## DO YOU NEED A MIRACLE?

If you are like most people, you probably would welcome a miracle or two in your own life. Who wouldn't? Maybe you or someone you know is suffering with illness. Perhaps you have severe financial needs or are unemployed. It is possible that you face real dangers and need divine protection. In this chapter we will consider four questions: (1) What are miracles? (2) What is the purpose of miracles? (3) Who can receive a miracle? (4) What is the greatest miracle that could happen to you?

## WHAT ARE MIRACLES?

Maybe you consider finding a good parking place for your car a miracle. I have been tempted to think that in certain congested cities I have visited. In Spanish-speaking countries, many women are named *Milagros*, which means "miracles." Perhaps you think of the long-awaited birth of a baby as a miraculous occurrence. For some, paying all their monthly bills on time seems like a miracle. Some described the first manned spaceflight to the moon as nothing short of miraculous. No doubt each of these examples represents a wonderful event, but are they miracles?

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<sup>1</sup> George Otis and Norman Williams, *Terror at Tenerife* (Van Nuys, CA: Bible Voice, Inc., 1977), 1–10.



## Real Miracles

Generally, we think of miracles as wonders or supernatural signs that can be attributed only to God. They are demonstrations of divine power, mercy, and compassion. Did you know that the Bible talks about miracles from cover to cover? Some miracles affected nature, like the parting of the Red Sea for the ancient Israelites and Jesus' calming of the storm on the Sea of Galilee. There are also miracles of divine enablement, such as when God helped a shepherd boy called David, armed with only a sling and some stones, to defeat a huge battle-hardened Philistine warrior. Other miracles directly affected the lives of individuals in need, such as when Jesus gave sight to the blind, healed lepers, and restored mobility to those who were paralyzed or crippled.

***Miracles are wonders or supernatural signs that can be attributed only to God. They are demonstrations of divine power, mercy, and compassion.***

## False Miracles

Throughout history and right up to the present time, people have claimed to have experienced miracles. Unfortunately, some miraculous claims are merely products of a huge imagination. Misguided people have attempted to prove God's existence because His name "miraculously appeared" in the markings on an eggshell or in a cloud formation or because the shape of a tree resembled that of a man praying. Other miraculous claims are actually hoaxes that eventually prove false. However, some miraculous claims are much harder to dismiss—like the story at the beginning of this chapter.

In many cases, people have been spared from serious injury or death through very unusual circumstances or should have died long ago from a terminal illness but did not. Cases of angelic intervention and help abound. An objective person who is convinced that a loving, all-powerful, and all-knowing God exists cannot ignore the possibility that He is still doing miracles in the world today.

## WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF MIRACLES?

Even though God is not obligated to do miracles, the Bible and personal experience support the idea that God cares about people and intervenes in their lives. He listens to their prayers. He sees their needs.

After all, God is the Creator. Making humankind was God's idea in the first place. We did not simply evolve from lower life-forms such as amoebas, reptiles, or monkeys. It is only logical that this same Creator God would demonstrate His interest in the lives of the people He made. When Jesus, God's eternal Son, visited the earth two thousand years ago, He performed incredible miracles. St. John wrote, "There was much else that Jesus did; if it were written down in detail, I do not suppose the world itself would hold all the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

While we may not experience a miracle every day, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that the God who made you and loves you deeply would do something incredible in your life.

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***Even though God is not obligated to do miracles, the Bible and personal experience support the idea that God cares about people and intervenes in their lives.***

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## WHO CAN RECEIVE A MIRACLE?

Do only very good or religious people experience miracles in their lives? No. If that were so, few people, if anyone, would be eligible. You could search the whole world to try to find a perfect man or woman, but you would fail. Even the most upright and revered people cannot deny their need of God's forgiveness. The Bible says, "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth has no place in us" (1 John 1:8). Pope John Paul II, one of the most admired and loved of all popes, commented on the problem of priests who sin, saying, "God alone is the source of holiness, and it is to Him . . . that we must turn for forgiveness, for healing and for the grace to meet this challenge with uncompromising courage and harmony of purpose."<sup>2</sup>

In the Bible we find that people of all backgrounds experienced the miraculous—shepherds, kings, widows, soldiers, fisherman, children, beggars, and others. None of them

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<sup>2</sup> Cathedral of St. Raymond, "When Priests Sin," Pope John Paul Speaks: Notable Quotations from Pope John Paul II and Official Teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, <http://www.rc.net/joliet/straymond/pulpit/pope-3/htm#sin> (accessed January 24, 2006).

were perfect. It appears that the only prerequisites for a miracle are that you have a need and that you focus your trust in the one true God.

## **WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE GOD TO DO FOR YOU?**

### **Provide a Happy Family?**

Many people around the world grow up in very difficult circumstances, such as poverty, abuse, divorce, crime, drugs, alcoholism, and so forth. It is no surprise that many in such situations wish to eventually find someone special to whom they can commit their lives and love—someone with whom they can spend a lifetime and raise a happy family. They may even ask God for His help in this area and look forward to a special miracle.

I know a married couple who longed to have their first child, but the young lady could not conceive. Not only that, she did not feel well anymore and suffered with fevers and bleeding. After medical tests, doctors found that her uterus was filled with fibroid tumors. Sadly, the physicians recommended a hysterectomy. It was a severe blow to both husband and wife who longed to know the joy and responsibility of parenting. They began to pray fervently, asking God for a miracle. Many months went by with no change, but they kept praying for God to intervene. Then, strangely, one day the young woman felt different. On a follow-up visit to her doctor and after medical tests, it was discovered that all her tumors were gone and that she was pregnant. Months later, she gave birth to a perfectly healthy baby boy. The doctors have no explanation for what happened. I would call that a miracle.

Yet psychologists and even common sense tell us that it is unfair to expect a man, a woman, or even your own child to fulfill all your needs and wishes. Why? No person alive is capable of that. What I mean is, even if you are perfect (which you are not), your mate is inevitably going to have his or her own set of needs. Your children will have to deal with challenges of all kinds and have needs too. So, while families are great, they do not assure total contentment or joy.

### **No Financial Worries?**

Some think the greatest thing that could ever happen to them would be to never have a financial or material worry again. Many people spend a great deal of money on gambling, lottery tickets, and bets, hoping to win and put

an end to their needs. In fact, it is not uncommon for some gamblers to pray for a “miracle” before making a bet or buying a lottery ticket. They also make promises about the good things they will do if they win.

Is God against wealth? Not necessarily. Can He supply our needs miraculously? Of course. When Jesus was on earth, He multiplied a small amount of bread and fish and fed a huge multitude of five thousand men plus women and children. The Bible teaches that God knows all about our needs and can supply them according to His riches. Sometimes the way He provides for us is truly miraculous.

However, God is against us making money an idol. That is, when we start loving money or anything material more than God or people, there is a problem! Contrary to popular opinion, having wealth does not always guarantee that a person “lives happily ever after.” It is interesting to note that some people who win large amounts of money squander it quickly and end up far worse than before they became rich. I personally know a man in Spain who won a sizeable amount of money in the lottery. However, because of his unwise investments with his winnings, he lost it all and ended up owing more money than he did before he won the lottery prize.

The following are true stories from the United States of America: When Ken, a machinist, won \$1 million in the lottery, he decided to go into the car business with his brothers. Within five years, the money was all gone, and he had to file for bankruptcy. Two years after winning \$3.1 million in 1989, another man, Willie, was not only out of money but also charged with murder. According to his lawyer, Willie spent his fortune on drugs and a divorce. A woman named Janite won \$18 million in 1993 and generously gave to many political, educational, and community causes. But Janite filed for bankruptcy eight years later with only \$700 in the bank and no cash.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, not everyone can handle wealth. Maybe we should rethink whether getting rich would really be the greatest miracle.

### **Provide Good Health?**

My son was born with a physical handicap (one of his hands never formed in the womb), and when he was a boy, he struggled at times, wishing he had two complete hands. Sometimes he told other kids that

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<sup>3</sup> Ellen Goodstein, “8 Lottery Winners Who Lost Their Millions,” MSN Money, <http://moneycentral.msn.com/content/Savinganddebt/Savemoney/P99649.asp> (accessed January 24, 2006).

a shark bit off his missing hand. Later we discovered that he also had a learning disability. My son is not alone in dealing with handicaps. In fact, many people struggle with disabilities, illness, and pain. Some think that receiving healing would be the greatest of all miracles.

Certainly, the Bible encourages us to present all our needs to God in prayer, including our desire for physical health. A man I work with, Willard, contracted polio in 1950 at the age of eight. He became paralyzed in his neck, back, and left leg. His concerned parents took him from one hospital to the next for treatment. Then, on one of the trips, they stopped in a town where a religious service was being held in a tent and a minister was praying for sick people. Willard said that as the preacher prayed for him, he felt something like an electric current run through his body. From that moment on, all pain and paralysis left him. He was still kept under observation for two weeks, yet to this day, over fifty years later, no trace of polio has ever been found. Never discount what God can do!

However, please allow me to add that as wonderful as good health and a fully functioning body might be, some of the world's greatest achievers were and are people with serious physical impairments. Do not think of your life as inferior to another just because you may have a handicap. For example, Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882–1945) suffered with polio but was elected President of the United States for four terms. At age 46, Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) became deaf yet went on to create the most famous Spanish art of the nineteenth century. John Milton (1608–1674) was an English author and poet. He became blind at age 43, but that did not stop him from creating his most famous epic, *Paradise Lost*. The famous German composer Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) wrote some of his best music after becoming deaf. Stephen Hawking (b. 1942), one of the most brilliant physicists and mathematicians of our time, is confined to a wheelchair and needs a computer to speak due to Lou Gehrig's Disease. Famous singer and composer Ray Charles (1930–2004) was blind by age seven due to glaucoma. These physically challenged achievers actually accomplished more than many individuals who never suffered with physical problems.

### **An Even Greater Miracle Than Family, Riches, and Health**

I hope you understand that God is able to do great things in your life. He can do more than you can ask or imagine because He is mighty and

really loves you. However, let me suggest that there is a miracle even greater than a having a happy family, possessing enough wealth to meet all your needs, or obtaining excellent health. That is what the rest of this book is all about. The greatest miracle is this: to experience the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.

In light of eternity, nothing else compares to this miracle. One split second after you die, it will not matter how much fulfillment your family brought to your earthly life or how much money you managed to stash away or whether you enjoyed great health. The only thing that will really matter is whether you had a relationship with Jesus Christ leading to forgiveness. On the night Jesus was betrayed and arrested, He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane. He said, “Father, the hour has come: glorify your Son so that your Son may glorify you; so that, just as you have given him power over all humanity, he may give eternal life to all those you have entrusted to him. And eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:1-3).

You may go to confession regularly and attend Mass every Sunday, pray the rosary, and take communion faithfully. Or, you may be someone

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***The greatest miracle is this: to experience the gift of forgiveness and eternal life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior.***

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that is not very religious. In either case, you may feel like Jesus Christ is very far from you. You know about Him, but you do not know Him experientially. Friend, I assure you that it is possible to have a relationship with Jesus and experience the power of His love and mercy. You can have confidence that you are going to heaven someday. By the end of this short book, you will see clearly what to do and why from a biblical point of view. Interested? Curious? I invite you to discover the amazing reality of personally knowing Jesus Christ.

## THE GREATEST MIRACLE

### **Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *Think back. Is there evidence that God has helped you in time of need or performed a miracle in your life?*
2. *How can you tell the difference between real and false miracles?*
3. *Why do some people flatly reject any possibility of miracles happening?*
4. *Do you agree with the author that the greatest miracle is knowing Jesus Christ and experiencing the gift of eternal life?*

*DO MIRACLES STILL HAPPEN TODAY?*



# 2 WHERE CAN I FIND TRUTH?

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## **IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE FACTS:**

- The Bible claims to be inspired by God.
  - It makes sense that God would leave a permanent revelation of Himself to mankind
  - The Bible is the best preserved book in history.
  - The Bible has had enormous positive influence in the world.
  - The Bible contains amazing prophecies that have been fulfilled.
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In the last chapter we considered the possibility of miracles and identified the greatest of all miracles—experiencing the gift of eternal life through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. But how can we be confident that this is the truth? We have this confidence because it is in the Bible. In this chapter we will learn why we can trust the Bible.

## **DO NOT BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU HEAR OR READ**

Most people want good reasons or explanations for the things they are asked to do or believe. For instance, if someone told you that little green men lived on the moon, you would want reasonable proof for that statement. You would not automatically accept such a claim. If you went to your doctor this week for a simple medical checkup and he informed you that you were suffering from a serious disease requiring expensive treatment, what would you do? I'm sure you would require him to provide reasonable proof for that diagnosis. You might even go for a second opinion. If you take your car to the shop because you hear a strange rattling sound under the hood and the mechanic tells you that

you need to replace the motor, you would want him to show you what is broken and why he thinks you need a whole new motor. You would not be willing to spend a fortune on your car unless you really have to. This desire for reasonable proof is normal and wise!

The story is told of a Frenchman traveling in Europe in the late nineteenth century. When he came to a certain border crossing, the guards asked to see his passport. He explained that he was Paul Gustave Doré, the famous artist, and that he had lost his passport. The Frenchman hoped the guards would recognize him and let him pass, but they did not. Moreover, they explained that many people tried to cross the border by claiming to be persons they were not. They wanted proof that he really was who he claimed to be. Finally, one of the guards said, “We’ll give you a test, and if you pass it we’ll allow you to go through.” Handing him a pencil and a sheet of paper, the guard told the artist to sketch a picture of several peasants standing nearby. The Frenchman, who was in fact Paul Doré, sketched so quickly and skillfully that the guards were convinced and let him through.<sup>1</sup>

## WHY TRUST THE BIBLE?

If I tell you that the Bible is trustworthy, why should you believe and accept my statement? I can offer you several simple but good reasons. Now, one reason alone might not seem to be enough proof, but add them together and you will find a strong case for accepting the Bible—even if you are not a seminary-trained theologian or an expert in religion.

## Inspiration Of God

First, the Bible claims to be inspired by God. St. Paul wrote, “All scripture is inspired by God and useful for refuting error, for guiding people’s lives and teaching them to be upright. This is how someone who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work” (2 Timothy 3:14-17). Christians have maintained this important position from the very earliest days of the church. They have even suffered and died for this conviction.

## Logic

Second, if God is truly loving and caring and if humanity is truly needy, is it not logical to assume that God would want to communicate with us

<sup>1</sup> “His Work Confirmed His Word,” *Our Daily Bread*, January 6, 1993.

somehow and reveal His plan for our salvation as well as offer instructions for life? Since evidently God does not leave huge written messages in the sky, we must assume that He has chosen to give us His revelation in a different form. He spoke in times past through the prophets and apostles. He revealed himself through His Son, Jesus Christ. God has also given us a record of His communication—the Holy Scriptures.

### **The Best Preserved Book in History**

Third, the Bible has been around for a very long time. In fact, it is the best preserved of all books from ancient times. Only a small number of books of any kind survive more than twenty-five years. An even smaller number last for more than a hundred years. Only the most revered of books live a thousand years. Think of this: the entire Bible has been with us for almost two thousand years, and parts of it are close to 3,500 years old. Many have tried to destroy it and suppress its message, from the Roman emperors to the barbaric regimes of our present time. Yet no king, emperor, dictator, or nation has ever succeeded in exterminating the Bible. In fact, the greater the attempt to eliminate the Bible, the more it has flourished.

### **The Influence of Good**

Fourth, we can believe that the Bible is trustworthy due to its incredible influence. While unscrupulous and wicked people throughout history have distorted the Bible's message and committed terrible acts in the name of Christianity, the Bible itself does not promote violence and evil. We must distinguish between human failings and Christ's high and noble ideals for His church.

Certainly Jesus never advocated cruel or sinful behavior. He taught His followers to love God and their fellow humans. He spoke of the importance of forgiveness. He encouraged His listeners to treat others the same way they would want to be treated. Whenever and wherever people take the Bible—particularly Jesus' teachings—seriously, the world becomes a better place!

Without a doubt, the Bible, more than any other of the world's holy books, has inspired the greatest acts of human kindness, mercy, charity,

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humility, and unselfish behavior. Think of the hospitals and orphanages started by Christian organizations. Think of the shelters for the homeless and drug addicts. What countries provide the bulk of humanitarian aid to the poverty-ridden and disaster-stricken parts of the world? A simple analysis shows that such aid comes largely from areas of the world influenced by Christianity at some point in the past.

## Prophecy

Fifth, the Bible is not merely a book of moral guidelines (ethics) and spiritual help. It also contains prophecies about future events. How is this possible? The answer is simple: God is able to make the future known. God revealed to certain people, such as the prophets, advance knowledge about particular coming events.

Examples include the rise and fall of many real nations, in particular the fate of Israel. The biblical prophets also predicted and recorded numerous details about Jesus Christ. For instance, they foretold that Jesus would be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14) in the city of Bethlehem (Micah 5:2), that He would spend time in Egypt (Hosea 11:1), that His birth would spark a slaughter of Jewish children (Jeremiah 31:15), that He would live in Galilee (Isaiah 9:1-2), that He would die with sinners and be buried in the tomb of a rich man (Isaiah 53:9,12), and that He would rise after three days (Psalm 16:10).

Today, thanks to archaeology and historical study, we can verify the fulfillment of much biblical prophecy. In fact, no archaeological find has ever repudiated a single biblical truth or prophecy. Moreover, a number of prophecies in Scripture are being fulfilled even in our day, such as the proliferation of violence and wars (Matthew 24:6), the increase of evil in the world (2 Timothy 3:1-13), and the return of Israel to national and spiritual life (Ezekiel 37). Other prophecies are yet to be fulfilled, such as the return of Christ (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

There are many other ways to demonstrate that the Bible is thoroughly trustworthy, but I will leave those for another book. I encourage you to find a Bible and begin reading it. It is not a book of mysteries that only a priest would understand. It is not presumptuous of you to

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## *THE GREATEST MIRACLE*

want to learn what it says for yourself. The Bible is God's Word for the common individual as well as the learned. It is authoritative, clear, and self-interpreting, and it centers around one Person, Jesus Christ. Believe it or not, the Bible is a book that understands you!

A good place to start reading the Bible, especially if you are not familiar with it, is the Gospel according to Mark. Why? The Gospel according to Mark is the shortest of the four accounts of Jesus Christ. It clearly portrays Him as the miracle-working Savior. It describes His exceptional life, death, and resurrection from the dead. It will help produce faith in Jesus Christ who loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life. In the next chapter we will consider why we must experience Christ personally in our lives.

**Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *Consider the author's statement: "Most people want good reasons or explanations for the things they are asked to do or believe." Do you agree that this also applies to religious issues?*
2. *Why do some Catholics neglect Bible reading?*
3. *Practically speaking, why is it important to be sure that the Bible is really God's revelation to the world?*
4. *Think back. Have there been times when the Bible has definitely helped you find guidance, strength, comfort, courage, etc.?*

# 3 AREN'T MOST PEOPLE BASICALLY GOOD?

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## IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:

- Can human beings perform enough good works to merit heaven?
  - Have all people sinned against God?
  - What is sin?
  - Where did sin come from?
- 

## GOOD WORKS

I imagine that most of you who are reading this book are trying to live a good life. What I mean is, you have a conscience that is active and reminds you of your need to avoid evil behavior. You know that there is a morality in the universe that transcends mere cultural and societal morays. When you step over the line and commit an evil deed, you feel bad and want to make things right. You might attribute your lifestyle to a good religious upbringing, loving and wise parents, a somewhat sheltered and protected childhood, self-discipline, or any combination of the above.

Do the following examples describe you? If you find a purse or wallet on the street, you do not automatically remove the money inside and keep it for yourself. Instead, you try to locate the owner and return the lost item to him or her because deep down you know it is the right thing to do. You make an effort to be friendly and kind to your neighbors and people you work with even though sometimes you may despise them. You are even kind to animals. You have given money to charity. When an attractive member of the opposite sex walks by, you normally resist the urge to lust.

When confronted by selfish desires, you often restrain them. You try to avoid unnecessary gossip even though a juicy morsel of it is hard to

resist. You try not to use profanity very often. You would never think of taking dangerous drugs into your body. You have never robbed a bank or killed another human being. You work hard at your job and try to be truthful even though every once in a while a small lie may slip out. After all, nobody is perfect.

In short, you would describe yourself as a very good person, maybe even a role model. You believe in the inherent goodness of humanity—even if most people do not meet up to your standards. You hold to the opinion that if people were just educated correctly and exposed to the right religious and moral norms, they would generally do what is right. You may think that humanity is slowly evolving into something even better. You anticipate that someday people will transform this world into a truly wonderful place where pride, greed, war, and cruelty are sad relics of a more violent past.

## A SHATTERED WORLD

While all sane individuals would certainly approve of a society of good people, unfortunately the abundance of laws, police, judges, courtrooms, lawyers, jails, and prisons testify that something is wrong with humanity—and you and me in particular. This world is not as it should be. The good that people expect or at least hope to see in themselves and others is shattered by the reality of vice and malevolence. Although acts of human kindness and love at times can be found even in the darkest and foulest places on earth, humanity is gripped by a dark inner force that pulls it downward. We call this the problem of evil.

## All Have Sinned

The Bible addresses this problem very clearly. Remember, we have already seen that the Bible is a reliable testimony of God's view of things. The apostle John writes, "Every kind of wickedness is sin" (1 John 5:17). Isaiah, the prophet who predicted Jesus Christ's virgin birth, declares, "We had all gone astray like sheep, each taking his own way" (Isaiah 53:6). That includes even the very best among us. The apostle Paul states, "For though the will to do what is good is in me, the power to do it is not: the good thing I want to do, I never do; the evil thing which I do not

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***Although acts of human kindness and love at times can be found even in the darkest and foulest places on earth, humanity is gripped by a dark inner force that pulls it downward. We call this the problem of evil.***

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want—that is what I do” (Romans 7:19). Is it not a bit shocking that a famous early church leader like St. Paul admitted to having evil urges? He also tells us, “All have sinned and lack God’s glory” (Romans 3:23).

Even the best of us must acknowledge that we have sinned against God. Sin is falling short of God’s commands or transgressing the laws of God. While we may not have broken all the holy commandments, even if we transgress in just one area, we are justifiably considered “sinners.” Read what the apostle James writes: “You see, anyone who keeps the whole of the Law but trips up on a single point, is still guilty of breaking it all” (James 2:10).

Let me try to show you what this means. Imagine you are placed in a shiny new steel cage. A chain is lowered from a tall construction crane and attached to the top of the cage. The crane then hoists you seventy-five feet into the air. How would you feel? Safe? Insecure? You know, if just one of the links in the chain snapped, you would be in big trouble. In the same way, if we break even one of God’s commands—if we lie, if we steal, if we covet, if we disobey our parents, if we take the Lord’s name in vain—we become a sinner needing mercy and grace. Furthermore, once we have broken a command, there is no way we can save ourselves.

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***While we may not have broken all the holy commandments, even if we transgress in just one area, we are justifiably considered “sinners.”***

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## **Two Ways to Commit Sin**

There are basically two ways we can commit sin: (1) failing to do what God commands and (2) doing something God forbids. Sin can be committed in word, deed, or even thought. We can seem to be conforming to what God wants on the outside but actually rebelling on the inside! The story is told of a man with a strong-willed ten-year-old son. As they were about to drive to a store, the father told his son to sit down and fasten his seat belt. The child ignored the request and was jumping around in the backseat. The father repeated his instructions, this time with more sternness. Still the boy continued his antics in the backseat. Finally, the father threatened punishment if his son refused to comply. Recognizing that he was perilously close to having a painful experience, the youngster sat down and buckled up. However, he wanted to let his father know exactly how he felt and added the following comment: “Daddy, I’m sitting down on the outside, but I’m still jumping around on the inside.”

The Bible tells us that nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight, so all our sins are visible to the Lord. Have you ever thought how God must feel being constantly exposed to humanity's sins? It must be very sad! If you or I see or hear something that offends us or is too awful to bear, we close our eyes or cover our ears. If it is on television or the radio, we simply shut the device off. God, on the other hand, observes all the wickedness in the world in one huge, penetrating, all-knowing, unceasing glance. You and I could not bear it.

## **Sin's Origin**

You might be asking where sin and evil in general came from. The Bible teaches that a beautiful and mighty angel named Lucifer and a third of the angelic beings in heaven rebelled completely against God. Pride appears to be the main source of Lucifer's revolt. You see, the Lord created the angels and humankind with free will. He did not want robots inhabiting heaven or earth but thinking and feeling creatures capable of making free choices. Although powerful, Lucifer and his forces were no match for an omnipotent God. Their sin justifiably had serious consequences, and they lost their place in heaven. Some of the sinful angels were immediately consigned to a place of eternal separation from God called hell. Lucifer, twisted and warped by evil, exists now as the malevolent being we know as Satan. He rules over the rebellious angels not immediately consigned to hell and who now inhabit the world as demons.

Satan and his demons have one principal goal: to thwart the purposes of God. Satan deceived Adam and Eve into rebelling against God too. This brought sin into the human race. In their original state, Adam and Eve were able not to sin. After they rebelled, they were not able not to sin. This is what it means to have a sinful nature. Because Adam and Eve were the progenitors of the human race, they passed onto all their descendants—you and me included—a sinful nature. Given time, everybody sins. It might be a lie or stealing or taking God's name in vain, dishonoring our parents, or any number things.

The Bible teaches that this sin in us alienates us from God. Though we have physical life, we walk in spiritual death. In other words, our relationship with our Creator is broken, and we ourselves cannot repair it. Notice what the apostle Paul tells us: "And you were dead, through the crimes and sins which used to make up your way of life" (Ephesians 2:1).

Even if you consider yourself to be a good person, the truth is that you too have erred and stand condemned as a sinner. Your sins might not be as obvious to the world as those of a notorious terrorist, rapist, gang member, or bank robber. But what about pride in your own good works? The Bible says that our own efforts at goodness are actually like filthy rags in God's sight (Isaiah 64:6). What about impure sexual thoughts? Jesus taught that even if a man lusts after a woman only in his heart, in God's sight it is as though he has committed the physical act of adultery (Matthew 5:28). What about feelings of hatred for another person? The Scriptures teach us that, in God's sight, hatred for a fellow human is equivalent to murder (1 John 3:15).

## **The Slippery Slope Into Sin**

### **Poor Decisions**

Some of you reading this book once tried to live a good life but failed miserably. Please understand—I do not write this to condemn you. I too have made many mistakes and need God's forgiveness. At some point in your life, perhaps against your better judgment and the advice of people who tried to warn you, you decided to just give in to the wants and desires of your mind and body. Sadly, you discovered that you were on a very slippery slope.

Each day, you may find yourself sliding deeper and deeper into behaviors that you once thought only really bad people practiced. You have been in and out of many immoral sexual relationships. You find that alcohol or nicotine or some other kind of substance has become a dominant force in your life—a chain from which you cannot break free. You have lied so many times that it's hard now for you to simply speak the truth. Profanity and obscene language color your once thoughtful words. Perhaps you have given into violent urges and have physically harmed others. You have alienated people that loved or still do love you because of your obsessive desire to have it your way. What once brought a sense of shame and guilt now seems to have no effect on you.

Still, you may say, "I may be bad, but there are people far worse than me!" Or you might assume that there is no way out of your lifestyle. "It's too late for me to change!" The good news, dear reader, is that although you cannot find strength to change, Christ can change you!

## Stolen Virtue

You may be someone who encountered an unexpected situation that has led to great heartache. You faced a dilemma of monumental proportions and made a quick choice, thinking it was the right thing to do. However, now you are ashamed of it and haunted by it. You have regretted it for years. You know now that you acted unwisely, and you feel that what goodness or virtue you might have had was stolen from you.

I remember talking to a man who had served as a soldier and found himself thousands of miles from home in a foreign land. It was a bloody conflict with much guerrilla activity. One day on patrol, he and his comrades were confronted by a group of local women and children who came rushing upon them. In another time and place, the soldiers would have thought nothing of it or even stopped to converse with them, perhaps offering some food supplies. However, in this war women and even children were sometimes strapped with lethal explosives. The man and his companions had only seconds to decide what to do.

The man confessed that he and the other soldiers felt their lives were in danger, opened fire, and killed them all. So much for trying to live a good life. How do you bounce back from such an experience? For years the man was unable to sleep soundly and constantly rehearsed in his mind the awful events that claimed his innocence. He felt that nothing could ever remove his shame and remorse.

Consider a young lady from West Africa, raised in a traditional home. She reaches her eighteenth year and has high hopes that someday she will marry, raise a family, and make something of her life. But for now, her family has needs. Her parents barely earn enough to provide food and clothing for her younger brothers and sisters. They encourage her to find work. One day a friend tells her about employment opportunities in Europe. She discovers that a certain man will pay her way to a European country if she will only agree to work for him for a year or so. "What a deal!" she thinks. As soon as she repays him, she can start to save and send money home. How proud her father and mother will be of her. Without thoroughly investigating the background of the individual making the generous offer, she contacts him and signs a contract of sorts.

All the arrangements are made, and soon the date arrives for her departure to Europe. It is a big day, and her family gathers to wish her well. Upon arriving in Europe, she is taken from the airport to an old dilapidated

apartment building where other young women from several countries are housed. The neighborhood is dirty and unkempt. This is not the Europe she dreamed of. Then she is repeatedly raped, threatened with injury or death if she tries to escape, and forced to sell sexual favors to men on the street to earn her living. She is terrified at first but eventually goes about her duties with little protest, realizing that she is trapped. She feels dirty, abused, like a slave, and no end is in sight. Her virtue has been stolen. Now she finds herself experimenting with drugs, alcohol, and other forms of “entertainment.” Her parents wonder why she does not write or call.

### Final Assessment

One of the most important biblical truths is that humanity is tainted and warped by sin. People who try hard to do what is right and genuinely make an effort to improve the lot of others may resent that assessment of humankind. But the reality is that all of us have sinned against God. Because of sin, we hurt ourselves and others.

Our wrongdoing also creates a huge debt that we can never possibly pay. Sin affects us at every level, but its most devastating effect is that it separates us from God. That means the consequences of sin are felt not only now in this world but also potentially in the age to come. I hope you will continue to read, because in chapter four we will talk more about the subject of life after death.

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***Sin affects us at every level, but its most devastating effect is that it separates us from God.***

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**Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *Do you remember when it dawned on you that the world is far from an ideal place? How did you feel?*
2. *Think about the following statement from the chapter: "Even the best of us must acknowledge that we have sinned against God." Do you agree with the author? If so, why? If not, why?*
3. *Have you or do you know somebody who has become trapped in a sin that holds a tight grip?*
4. *How do you think God feels about the problem of evil in the world?*

# 4 WHAT REALLY HAPPENS WHEN WE DIE?

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## IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:

- Is there life after death?
  - Is purgatory real?
  - What is hell like?
  - How could a good God send anybody to hell?
  - What is heaven like?
- 

## THE ACHE OF MORTALITY

Sooner or later, it dawns on us that we are mortal. We realize that we are not going to live on earth forever, that the day will come when our lifeless flesh will lie cold in the grave. For some, this is not a pleasant thought. A famous comedian is said to have commented, “It’s not that I’m afraid to die, I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

We all wonder at times when death will take us. That is only natural. We speculate as to what might be the cause of our death—old age, an accident, disease, a natural disaster, violent crime, terrorism. We hope those we leave behind will be able to cope and handle the grief that is sure to come. We may wonder if we will have courage to face death with dignity. Not only do we ponder questions about death itself, but we long to have answers about life after death. What really happens after we leave this world?

### The Anticipation of Annihilation

I asked a taxi driver in Madrid, Spain, once what he thought he could expect after death. He looked rather stoically at me, let out a laugh, and said, “Nothing, just a wooden suit.” Here was a man who had lost

faith in God and the eternal. Many people today, even those raised in religious homes and societies, dismiss any prospect of life beyond the grave. After all, modern science has endeavored to teach us that life sprung into being by pure chance, that no Creator was involved, that human beings are merely the product of a long evolutionary process.

This kind of thinking has serious implications. If true, then your life has no real meaning or purpose other than that which you or others attach to it. It also means that ultimately you are no more important than an animal or a plant or an insect. Furthermore, if there is no afterlife, you might as well seek to gratify your wants and desires now. In fact, you ought to always seek the maximum amount of pleasure in all you do—no matter how it may affect others. After all, if there is no all-knowing, all-powerful God, who will hold you accountable for your actions?

I've heard the story that once when a terrible plague came to ancient Athens, many people there began to commit horrible crimes and engage in every lustful pleasure they could imagine. Why? They believed they did not have much time left and would not have to pay any penalty.

If we believe utter annihilation awaits us, that can also lead to despair. People may ask, "What is the point of doing good or learning or serving or striving to achieve goals in life if in the end it means nothing but absolute obliteration?" If we just vanish someday only to be mourned briefly and then forgotten, it is foolish to pretend that our lives have ultimate significance.

### **The Malaise of Uncertainty**

Many people do not rule out the possibility of life after death, but they hold no firm conviction as to what is going to happen once their earthly existence ceases. Most hope that if a place like hell exists, they will not end up there. A small minority are under the impression that hell, if it is real, is one big, long, raucous party. Someone once boasted to me, "Well, if there is a heaven and a hell, I'd much rather go to hell. After all, that's where all my friends are going to be!"

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Many expect that if a place like heaven exists, they will make it in. They assume that God is going to weigh their good and evil deeds on a celestial scale, and if their good deeds tip the scale, they will be allowed into heaven.



Still others think that they may come back to earth as a different person or some other kind of living creature. In other words, they hope to be recycled or reincarnated. But the bottom line is that they have no certainty about their eternal future.

## The Pain of Purgatory

Many of us have been taught that when we sin, we store up punishment that someday will be exacted upon us in a temporary place of suffering called purgatory. Purgatory is viewed as a necessary intermediate state of suffering after death that cleanses us and makes us worthy of heaven.

Imagine a twelve-year-old boy cautiously tiptoeing into his parents' bedroom and removing emergency money that they keep in a small wooden box. The child wants to go to the local candy store in his neighborhood and purchase a few of his favorite treats. He does not think his parents will even miss the small amount of money he is taking. Sadly, this is not the first time he has done this.

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***Purgatory is viewed as a necessary intermediate state of suffering after death that cleanses us and makes us worthy of heaven.***

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Now, the boy's mother, knowing her son's weakness for sweets and having noticed that small amounts of money have disappeared from the emergency money box without explanation, anticipates his actions. She hides in the closet and with great disappointment watches through a small opening as he takes some of her emergency money. While the youngster hastily stuffs the coins into his pants pocket, she quietly steps out and approaches him from behind. She calls out his name sternly, and he jumps a foot in the air.

The boy slowly turns to face his mother's disappointed and angry look and, with head hung low, makes a full confession. His mother senses his sincerity but feels duty-bound to lecture him on the dangers of stealing. He listens without protest and then says, "Please forgive me, Mom. I promise you that I won't do it again." Tears stream down his cheeks. However, she informs him that his actions require her to punish him, and she grounds him from watching television, playing video games, and having friends over for two weeks. The boy's shoulders slump—two weeks are an eternity to a twelve-year-old. Still, he believes the worst is over: He has been caught, lectured, punished, and forgiven.

But then comes something unexpected. His mother says, “Now, son, even though I have forgiven you, this matter is not over yet. When your father gets home from work, I will tell him what you have done. You can be sure that he will be very angry and will want to give you a hard spanking. Only then can we be assured that you have learned your lesson. Only then will we consider this issue settled!”

In the same way, the doctrine of purgatory tells us that we must pay for our sins after death before God considers us worthy to experience the full joys of heaven. In my opinion, the doctrine of purgatory questions the genuineness of God’s offer of complete forgiveness to sinners now. The Bible says, “If we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil” (1 John 1:9). If purgatory exists, it really does no good to argue with God or plead innocence or even remind God of the fact that we already asked to be forgiven and did penance.

Some reasons offered for the reality of such a place are as follows: (1) whoever comes into God’s presence must be perfectly pure; (2) some people die with faults for which no true repentance is possible or without having fully paid for their sin in this life; (3) it would be unfair to let certain people who lived worse than others into heaven without exacting some kind of punishment for their sins; (4) the belief that God must punish sins after death is ancient, found in the beliefs even of the Jews and pagans long before the advent of Christianity.

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However, when considering the issue of purgatory, we must ask ourselves if it accurately represents the teaching of the Bible. I have good news for those of you who might be concerned about spending an inordinate amount of time in purgatory. Not one verse in the Gospels or any other part of the New Testament refers to purgatory. It is a teaching invented by humans, not given by God.

## **ONLY TWO POSSIBILITIES EXIST**

The Holy Scriptures refer to only two possibilities for people after death: heaven or hell. The truth is that no one goes to a temporary place

of torment to be made ready for eternal bliss. God has determined that the choices you and I make here and now during our earthly lives establish where we will spend eternity.

Let me first discuss the biblical teaching on hell. This is going to be tough for some of you to read. Probably no other matter causes more outrage among non-Christians than the biblical teaching about hell, but in just a few pages, I will also be sharing about heaven. I assure you that the good news about heaven far outweighs the bad news about hell.

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■

### The Heartbreak of Hell

Jesus talks about hell a lot in the Gospels. In fact, no one ever drew a more vivid and realistic picture of hell than the Son of God. He emphatically warned people about its existence. One of the most dramatic statements Jesus ever made is found in Luke 12:4-5: “To you, my friends, I say: Do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that can do no more. I will tell you whom to fear; fear him who, after he has killed, has the power to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, he is the one to fear.”

Jesus made it clear that hell is not a symbol or metaphor but a very real place where people are conscious and aware. If you have a Bible, take a moment right now to read Luke 16:19-31. In this excerpt from Luke, Jesus describes a wealthy and selfish man who dies and finds himself in hell. I want you to notice several important things:

- First, the rich man in hell knew exactly where he was. He was conscious, tormented, and very much aware of his surroundings.
- Second, the rich man in hell had memory of his life on earth. People would like to be able to forget many things they think, say, do, or experience while alive on earth. The passage of time and senility help to diminish pangs of guilt. Yet God keeps excellent records, and in hell there is excellent recall. Every foul word, every rebellious act, every unclean thought will remind the sinner of why he or she is there.
- Third, the rich man in hell discovered there was no escape from his suffering. He wanted relief from the fire, but none was offered.
- Fourth, the rich man in hell wanted to warn his brothers who were still alive on earth about this place of anguish. He begged for

Lazarus, a poor but righteous beggar who made it into paradise, to be returned to earth and warn his five brothers to turn from their wicked ways lest they join him in hell. The request was denied because once we leave this world our fate is sealed forever.

Jesus pictured hell as a place of suffering where there will be weeping and grinding of teeth (Matthew 13:41-43). Hell is also described as a place of darkness and loneliness never reached by God's light and love (Matthew 8:12). Perhaps the greatest torment of hell is not the pain, the darkness, or the loneliness but the knowledge that heaven is lost, that there is no possibility of salvation. I am reminded of a line in Dante's *Inferno* that describes a sign over the gates of hell. The sign reads, "Abandon hope, all ye who enter in." Hell's inhabitants must groan in despair, realizing there is no escape. They are beyond God's mercy. They are lost forever.

### How Could a Good God Send People to Hell?

We have to deal with the age-old question: "How could a good God send people to hell?" Is it not true that God is love? That is undeniable, for the Bible tells us so. However, God is also holy and just. The same Bible which teaches that God loves sinful people so deeply that He sent Christ to die for them also teaches that God must deal with all who cleave to sin and refuse His gift of salvation. (We will talk specifically about this in the next chapter.) The idea that God is ambivalent about sin or unwilling to punish the unrepentant is not scriptural and has led many to ignore the reality and dangers of judgment and hell.

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***Perhaps the greatest torment of hell is not the pain, the darkness, or the loneliness but the knowledge that heaven is lost, that there is no possibility of salvation.***  
■

Let me put it another way. Hell teaches us that there is ultimate justice in the universe. Evildoers who refuse to turn to God for forgiveness will be held accountable for their actions. Would God be just and perfect if He did not eventually deal with unrepentant sinners? Would God still be praiseworthy if He made no distinction between the wicked and the righteous? I do not think so. You could say the fact that God has committed himself to judge the world and even made a place of eternal separation for unbelieving and unrepentant sinners is proof that God is a perfect and just Being. Let me add one more thing that you need to understand: hell is completely avoidable! As you continue to read, you will learn about the alternative to hell.

## Happiness in Heaven

We should not be embarrassed to talk about heaven. Some inform us that belief in a place called heaven is a form of “escapism” and that we should be concerned more with trying to make the world a better place now than with escaping someday to heaven. The truth is that we should be very interested in making the world kinder, more generous, friendlier, and more helpful. We applaud all the efforts to make planet earth a better place to live. But eventually we will depart from this life. Is it not better to know you are headed for heaven rather than for perdition?

The Bible offers Christians wonderful promises that God has prepared an amazing and wonderful home for us called heaven. I like what C. S. Lewis, a medieval literature professor and author of the now famous *Chronicles of Narnia*, said: “We are very shy nowadays of even mentioning Heaven. . . . But either there is ‘pie in the sky’ or there is not. If there is not, then Christianity is false, for this doctrine is woven into its whole fabric. If there is, then this truth, like any other, must be faced, whether it is useful at political meetings or no.”<sup>1</sup>

In other words, even if skeptics scoff and laugh at our talk of heaven as some sort of fantasy dreamland, if the Bible says it is real, then we must believe it. Catholic dogma is accurate in telling us that heaven is a place and condition of perfect bliss where people fortunate enough to be there enjoy the immediate vision of God and the perfect love of God.

## In Heaven We Will Be with the Lord

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***Heaven is a place  
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Being in heaven will not be boring. You will not eternally float around on clouds playing a harp. It is a real place with angels, people, and dwellings. However, the greatest thing about heaven is finally seeing the Lord and enjoying unbroken communion with Him. Jesus referred to heaven as His Father’s house, saying, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You trust in God, trust also in me. In my Father’s house there are many places to live in; otherwise I would have told you.

I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you to myself, so that you may be with me where I am” (John 14:1-4).

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), 149.

## Troubles Will Be Over

We will find that all our troubles are over in heaven. During our earthly days, we face many kinds of temptations, sickness, battles, challenges, farewells, and pain. Life is full of surprises that aggravate and distress us. Friend, the Bible's marvelous sneak preview of life in heaven is in full contrast to our uneasy existence in this world. The apostle John writes that heaven's citizens "will never hunger or thirst again; sun and scorching wind will never plague them, because the Lamb (Jesus) who is at the heart of the throne will be their shepherd and will guide them to springs of living water; and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes" (Revelation 7:16-17).

## Reaping Rewards

There will also be rewards for God's children in heaven. Jesus declared, "Look, I am coming soon, and my reward is with me, to repay everyone as their deeds deserve" (Revelation 22:12). Some imagine that it is utterly selfish to hope that God will reward us for faithfulness, godly living, or obedience. To illustrate, a woman found a friendly little dog at her doorstep one day with the morning newspaper in its mouth. She said, "Delighted with this unexpected 'delivery service,' I fed him some treats. The following morning I was horrified to see the same dog sitting in front of our door, wagging his tail, surrounded by eight newspapers."<sup>2</sup> Some would suggest that we who look forward to Christ's rewards are little better than that small but ambitious canine, that we are mere mercenaries, selfishly seeking something in return for serving God. I beg to differ.

The truth is that God himself wants to motivate us and encourage us with the promise of reward. He knows that our world is full of difficulty and that our lives are tested here in many ways. The apostle Paul writes with great honesty, "If our hope in Christ has been for this life only, we are of all people the most pitiable" (1 Corinthians 15:19). However, I am sure that experiencing even one day of heaven's goodness will repay all of our sorrow and sufferings.

We truly have something to look forward to. As Paul writes, "let us never slacken in doing good; for if we do not give up, we shall have our harvest in due time" (Galatians 6:9).

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<sup>2</sup> Marion Gilbert, *Reader's Digest*, February 1994, 12.

## A Family Reunion

In heaven Christians are reunited with all other true followers of Christ. In essence, everyone in heaven is part of one big, happy family. In chapter 1 of this book, we discussed how most people dream of enjoying an enduring relationship with someone, of forming a family. A healthy family shares dreams, possessions, memories, smiles, and gladness. Someone has said that a family is “a shelter from the storm, a friendly port when the waves of life become too wild. No person is ever alone who is a member of a family.”

We do not lose our identities or personalities in heaven. We will recognize each other. We will be relieved to know that never again will we experience any painful partings. As God’s family we will enjoy His presence and blessings for endless eons. There will be great joy and contentment, and nothing will ever diminish it—not sin (it will be gone forever), not infirmity (we will no longer be confined to a mortal body), not sorrow (God will wipe away every tear), not worry (everything we need will be provided without end).

Much more can be said about heaven, but I think you get the idea. It is one place you do not want to miss. Heaven is where God wants you to go when your earthly life has run its course. He has also provided the way for you to join His family. Here is news that may surprise you: you cannot work your way into heaven by simply trying to be good. God has a different plan, and that is what we will discuss in the next chapter.

**Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *Do you remember when you realized that you are mortal? Does the thought of death trouble you?*
2. *Where do you think you will spend eternity?*
3. *Is the Catholic teaching about purgatory acceptable in your opinion?*
4. *Does the biblical teaching about hell trouble you? Do believe in such a place?*
5. *What do you feel is the best thing about heaven?*



# 5 HOW TO FIND GOD'S FORGIVENESS

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**IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:**

- Why is God willing to forgive our sins?
  - What is the meaning of Jesus' death on the cross?
  - What does God require for entrance into heaven?
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## FORGIVENESS

In a book called *The Sunflower*, a survivor of the Jewish Holocaust, Simon Wiesenthal, recalls a remarkable experience that happened to him while in a concentration camp. One day he was taken to a dark room in the camp hospital. Inside, a young German SS officer, horribly wounded in combat, lay dying on a bed. Covered in bandages, the soldier almost looked like a mummy. He expressed to Wiesenthal his desire to confess his evil deeds to a Jew, a member of the race he had helped to slaughter.

The German explained how he had joined the Hitler Youth against his father's wishes, how he had fought at the Russian front, and how he and his SS unit had callously and cruelly murdered many Jews. Wiesenthal wanted to run away, but the officer grabbed him tightly and concluded his confession by asking Wiesenthal to forgive him. He said, "I know that what I am asking is almost too much for you, but without your answer I cannot die in peace." Wiesenthal wrote that he stood there for some time, staring at the German's bandaged face. In the end, he pulled away and left the room without saying a word. He could not forgive the German and left him to die in his pain and guilt.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Wiesenthal, *The Sunflower* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976).

Wiesenthal faced a terrible dilemma that most of us never will. My point in sharing this story with you, though, is to contrast humankind's weakness and seeming inability to forgive at times with God's heart of love and supernatural capability of forgiving sinners. When I speak of sinners, I mean the whole gamut—from those who have tried to be good but failed to those who have seemingly delighted in evil. If you have any doubts about the Lord's mercy, recall what Jesus said, even while Roman soldiers crucified Him: "Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

Prior to becoming a follower of Christ, the apostle Paul violently and fanatically persecuted early Christians. He hounded and arrested them, even consenting to their deaths. Yet he found forgiveness. Read his own words: "Here is a saying that you can rely on and nobody should doubt: that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. I myself am the greatest of them; and if mercy has been shown to me, it is because Jesus Christ meant to make me the leading example of his inexhaustible patience for all the other people who were later to trust in him for eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

## JESUS SUFFERED AND DIED FOR US

God is more willing to forgive than we can imagine! We can be sure because Jesus Christ, God's Son, suffered the penalty we deserved to pay. You see, God is holy (separate from all that is wicked) and hates evil. He has no choice but to punish sinful behavior. At the same time, God in love did not want to consign the entire sinful human race to an eternity separated from Him. There was only one solution.

That way out was not the establishment of another major religion with rites, rituals, and requirements. Two thousand years ago, the peoples of the world had innumerable religious systems and worshiped many gods. Sadly, their practices often promoted idolatry, terrifying superstitions, immorality, and a wide assortment of evil acts. Even among the Jews of Jesus' day were great religious hypocrisy and falsehood.

The answer to humanity's sin problem was for the Lord himself to pay the penalty on our behalf. That is why Jesus, God the Son, came to earth—to suffer the punishment we deserve.

***God is more willing to forgive than we can imagine! We can be sure because Jesus Christ, God's Son, suffered the penalty we deserved to pay.***

Notice His words: “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Although completely innocent, Jesus suffered for our sins, took our punishment, satisfied divine justice, and purchased our freedom from sin.

We truly owe our forgiveness and salvation to Jesus Christ. It is because of His sacrifice that God the Father so willingly offers to wash away the guilt of our sins and make us into new people. And because Jesus rose from the dead and is alive to this day, we can enter into a personal relationship with Him. Over and over again, the Bible talks about knowing Christ. This, my friend, is what real Christianity is all about!

## GOD REQUIREMENTS

You are right in thinking that God does require something of us if we are going to be forgiven, know Christ, and enter heaven. However, it is probably not what you think! God does not expect us to try to prove our own goodness to Him because, frankly, none of us can ever do enough to satisfy His righteous demands. He does not demand that we belong to a certain religion or practice an austere way of life.

Does this surprise you? To experience forgiveness and enter into a personal relationship with Christ, God requires only two things of us: (1) repentance and (2) faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. Let us talk about what these words mean.

### Repentance

Repentance is the first step to finding forgiveness. When Jesus was on earth, He told people, “Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is close at hand” (Matthew 4:17). Repentance is not just feeling bad or sorrowful about our mistakes, errors, and sins; it is an internal decision to turn away from them and turn to God. Prisons and jails around the world are filled with people who are sorry they were caught but who have not repented of their sins. Given their freedom, some would go out and commit the same crimes that got them into trouble in the first place.

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***Repentance is not just feeling bad or sorrowful about our mistakes, errors, and sins; it is an internal decision to turn away from them and turn to God.***

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When we repent, we see all our sins (large and small) as God sees them—as acts of rebellion, as falling short of His requirements, as

breaking His moral law. We do not consider it a small thing that we have offended the God who made heaven and earth.

To illustrate, imagine moving to a region that has been struck by numerous ferocious hurricanes. Your new neighbors have recounted agonizing accounts of death and destruction inflicted by these gigantic storms, but you yourself have never experienced one. Then one day you hear a news bulletin saying that within forty-eight hours a massive hurricane is due to make landfall precisely where you live. How would you react? Would you call your friends and sponsor a “hurricane party” at your house or apartment? Would you stand out on your porch and dare the gale-force winds, rain, and hail to dislodge you? I doubt that you would take lightly the peril of your situation. You would begin to take appropriate measures to preserve your life and belongings. Repentance is that way. It’s the first step we must take to assure our salvation.

No one can make you repent of your sins. It is your choice. If you feel sorry for the wrongs you have done and desire to turn away from them, why don’t you just tell that to God right now? You can say something like this: *“Dear God, I understand now how I have offended You, and I am sorry. I do not want to continue in my sins.”* Obviously, though, just saying words is not enough. You must mean what you say.

## Faith

Jesus said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son” (John 3:16-18).

The point of Jesus’ statement is that we must put our faith in Him completely and unreservedly. He is not asking us to become more religious or to try harder to be good. He is saying that we must believe He really died for our sins and paid in full the debt we owed. Friend, this is the greatest news you will ever read! It is up to us to receive forgiveness and eternal life by faith as a free gift based on what Jesus did for us. When we do that, God performs an incredible miracle in our lives. All our sins are forgiven,

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washed away just as though we had never done them. We are adopted into God's family. We receive a new heart. We receive eternal life.

If you think about it, we employ faith all the time. If we fly in an airplane, we must have faith that the pilot and crew know how to safely operate the aircraft. If we undergo a complicated operation, we must have faith that the doctor has sufficient surgical experience to correct our medical problem. However, our faith is not completely without basis. It is supported by certain facts. The airplane pilots and crew have logged thousands of hours of flight. The surgeon has studied and trained for years to know how to use a scalpel on a human body.

Our faith in Christ is not just a blind leap in the dark either; it is based on facts. If you are convinced like I am that the Bible is God's Word and contains an accurate historical account of Jesus' death and resurrection, faith in Christ is not so difficult. It makes sense!

In fact, we have everything to gain and nothing to lose by completely trusting in Christ for forgiveness and salvation. Think about it—if we do so and this message of salvation is true, we gain eternal life, a place in heaven, and everlasting joy. If this free offer of salvation were false (which it is not), we would still end up happier than the average skeptic and unrepentant sinner because we would find ourselves dedicated to a noble purpose, living a moral life, and loving people the way Jesus did. On the other hand, if we stubbornly reject the offer of salvation and it really is God's plan for our deliverance, we lose everything. Life here on earth would be nothing more than a huge experiment, devoid of ultimate purpose and meaning. Moreover, we lose out on heaven.

## **Today Is Your Day To Experience Christ In Your Life**

Are you ready to trust in Christ and only in Him for forgiveness, salvation, and the gift of eternal life? The fact that you are still reading this book indicates that you are probably very serious about spiritual matters. You can be sure that the Holy Spirit has been at work to help you come to this point. I wish I were sitting next to you to tell you personally how happy I am for you. It is time for you to tell the Lord you are ready to accept His forgiveness and eternal life. I invite you to say this prayer:

## HOW TO FIND GOD'S FORGIVENESS

*“Father in heaven, I believe You sent Your Son Jesus to earth to die for my sins on the cross. I know that I cannot do enough good things to earn a place in heaven, so I am going to have to trust in You completely for forgiveness and salvation. Please wash away all my sins. I believe that Your Son rose from the dead and is alive right now. I invite Jesus to come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. I thank You for Your promise to save completely all who come to You. I thank You for washing away all my sins. From this day forward, I am a new person. A miracle is happening in my life right now. Please give me strength to serve You each day until I go to be with You in heaven. Amen.”*

**Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *Do you believe God is really willing to forgive sin?*
2. *Consider the author's statement: "We truly owe our forgiveness and salvation to Jesus Christ. It is because of His sacrifice that God the Father so willingly offers to wash away the guilt of our sins and make us into new people." Do you agree?*
3. *Why is it difficult for people to accept God's plan for salvation—repentance or turning away from sin and faith in Christ?*
4. *Have you asked the Lord to come into your life and be your personal Lord and Savior yet? If not, why?*

*HOW TO FIND GOD'S FORGIVENESS*



# 6 EXPERIENCING JESUS DAILY

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**IN THIS LESSON YOU WILL STUDY THESE QUESTIONS:**

- What is prayer all about?
  - How is a committed follower of Christ different from one who is not?
  - What keys exist to understanding the Bible?
  - What role does the Holy Spirit play in our lives?
  - Can anything be done to make church attendance more meaningful?
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If you said the prayer at the end of the last chapter and meant it with all your heart, you truly have become a new person—not because I say so, but because the Bible says so. All your sins have been forgiven because God always keeps His word. Christ has come into your life. Not only that, you are really on your way to spending eternity with the Lord. You have every right to be full of joy!

It is only natural that you will want to experience more of Jesus and follow His guidance. People have many interesting ideas about how to determine what is best for their lives. Many believe in some undefined force called “luck” to lead and guide them. If they feel lucky, they might buy a lottery ticket. They base decisions on so-called “lucky feelings.” Others go to fortune-tellers or psychics. Large numbers of people are hooked on horoscopes. You do not need to rely on any of these things.

According to the Bible, we do not have to just drift through life. God wants us to have clear direction. In Ephesians 5:17 we read, “This is why you must not be thoughtless but must recognize what is the will of the Lord.” As a Christian, have confidence that God has a plan for your life—one that is very exciting and fulfilling. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God says, “Yes, I know what plans I have in mind for you, Yahweh declares,

plans for peace, not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope” (Jeremiah 29:11). You should be thrilled about discovering your God-given destiny.

## **PRAYER IS INDISPENSABLE**

Prayer is a vital part of the process of experiencing Christ and receiving guidance from our Father in heaven. Philippians 4:6 says, “Never worry about anything; but tell God all your desires of every kind in prayer and petition shot through with gratitude, and the peace of God which is beyond our understanding will guard your hearts and your thoughts in Christ Jesus.” We need to talk to God about all that is on our hearts. That means we should request His help when we feel overwhelmed by problems and need guidance. Feel free to talk to the Lord in normal, everyday language. James writes, “Any of you who lacks wisdom must ask God, who gives to all generously and without scolding; it will be given” (James 1:5).

Sadly, prayer is the last thing some people want to do. They see it as a last resort or something you do only in a church building. However, prayer should be a regular part of our lives. Daily prayer draws us closer to the Lord and strengthens us. As we pray, we find ourselves exercising faith.

Let me suggest that you find a quiet place to go to daily for prayer and spend five minutes talking to God. Thank Him for His many blessings. If you have failed Him in some way, confess that to Him. If you have needs, present your requests to Him. If you are concerned about others, take their problems to God too and ask Him to bring about positive change. If you are sick, ask Him to heal you. It has been said that “daily prayer is the gymnasium of the soul.”

I guarantee that soon you will find that five minutes of prayer per day is not enough and you will begin to want to spend even more time talking to God. Also, be sure to spend some silent moments in prayer. Prayer is two-way communication. God may also want to impress His thoughts on your heart. Listen when He reveals himself.

## **GOD WANTS YOU TO LIVE A NEW KIND OF LIFE**

In Romans 12:1-2 the apostle Paul reveals an important key to the Christian life. He writes,

I urge you, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your

behavior on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and mature.

What key are we referring to? It's godliness. Godliness basically refers to being God-centered. It also carries the idea of living in a way that pleases the Lord. As Christians we are called to love God with all our hearts. This love is demonstrated daily by a life of obedience to the Lord's commands. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

Paul compares living a godly life to the Old Testament concept of offering a sacrifice. In obedience to the law of Moses, the ancient Israelites slaughtered animals and presented them to God as sacrifices. As the blood of innocent sacrificial animals was shed for their sins, repentant Israelites could rest assured of God's forgiveness. These sacrifices pointed the way to the final sacrifice Jesus would make on the cross for our sins. No more animals need to be offered now. He paid the price for our complete forgiveness.

However, godliness implies that we offer ourselves to God as living sacrifices. This is a new concept. How do we do this? Our lives are to be holy and pleasing to God. We cannot live like we did before knowing the Lord. The transformation must start with our minds and be reflected in our attitudes and behaviors.

You may ask, "But what happens if I make a mistake in my moral life?" We must understand that, as human beings, we will still blunder from time to time as long as we live in this world. However, we should go to God as soon as we realize we have done wrong. Notice what the apostle John tells us: "If we say, 'We have no sin,' we are deceiving ourselves, and truth has no place in us; if we acknowledge our sins, he is trustworthy and upright so that he will forgive our sins and will cleanse us from all evil" (1 John 1:8-9). The godly, prayerful follower of Christ can rest assured that he or she is on God's "radar screen." God has such an individual in sight and knows how best to lead and guide him or her.

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## STUDYING SCRIPTURE

Many people, including good Catholics, have never taken time to seriously read the Bible. It is time to open it up and discover the wonderful treasures God has placed there. Some people think the Bible ought to reveal what color socks to wear, what kind of car to buy, or whether to take a vacation to Miami or Moscow. They may even open the Bible randomly and put their finger on a verse and read it, thinking that God will speak to them that way.

Please understand this—the Bible is a book of principles. If you come to God’s Word to find out whether to buy a blue chair or a green chair, or to discover whether to ride the train to work or drive your car, you’ll probably be very disappointed. But if you come to God’s Word to learn the principles of Christian living, you will be richly rewarded. David wrote, “Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path” (Psalm 119:105).

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***A lot of questions,  
 or even confusion  
 about God’s will,  
 evaporate when  
 you keep your  
 priorities straight.***  
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Let me share with you two examples of these great principles. One principle is to always put God first. Jesus said, “Set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God’s saving justice” (Matthew 6:33). What we are talking about here are priorities. One old recipe for rabbit stew starts out with this line: “First catch the rabbit.” In the Christian life, the most important duty is to put God first. Nothing else will work in life unless He is first.

Please take time to think about what you have been putting first in your life up until now. Has it been your job, hobbies, friends, money, or something else? God is not against your experiencing joy in all these other things, but He does not want to compete with anything. He must be first. A lot of questions, or even confusion about God’s will, evaporate when you keep your priorities straight.

Another important principle is discipleship. Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). This principle helps to remind us that as Christians we are called to follow, serve, and obey our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Disciples keep their eyes on Jesus. Their focus is Jesus. He must always be in the picture.

In a Berlin art gallery is a famous painting by Adolf Menzel (1815–1905). What makes the painting unique and interesting is that it’s only partially finished. The artist intended to show Fredrick the Great speaking with some of his advisors. He painted the advisors and background but left

a place in the center of the canvas to paint the king, outlined in charcoal. However, the artist died before he finished the painting, and Fredrick was never in the picture. Always let Jesus be in the picture of your life.

You need to spend time reading and studying God’s Word. As I suggested in chapter 2, the Gospel of Mark is a great place to start reading. It is the shortest of the four Gospels and maybe the simplest to understand. Read slowly and interact with the words you read. Ask God to help you understand them. It takes time and effort, but the rewards are certainly worth it.

## THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US

God is a Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Many verses in the Bible reveal how much the Holy Spirit does for us. Here are two examples: Romans 8:14 says, “All who are guided by the Spirit of God are sons of God.” Jesus says in John 16:13, “When the Spirit of truth comes he will lead you to the complete truth.”

What is the significance of this? You could say that true Christians have an internal guidance system in the person of the Holy Spirit. For many centuries, boats and ships relied on external methods of guidance. Sailors looked at the stars. They followed the shoreline when possible. Then compasses were invented. Later, sailors began to use radio, sonar, and radar to help them navigate. Still, these were all external forms of guidance. However, in the 1950s, a new means of guidance was implemented. It did not require stars, land, radio waves, or anything external to function. This new “internal guidance system” was based on gyroscopes. Because of it, one nuclear-powered submarine was able to leave Hawaii and travel to the North Pole submerged—even navigating under the ice—and then cruise to England still submerged. Think of the Holy Spirit as an internal, living, all-knowing, all-powerful personal navigator guiding your life. Pretty exciting, isn’t it!

Let us be specific now. What does it mean to have the Spirit guide us? Does He always speak audibly to us? Too many people go around claiming, “The Lord said . . .” or “The Lord told me . . .” when in fact the Lord said nothing specifically to them at all. Do not ever get into the habit of talking that way. It borders on sacrilege. Occasionally the Spirit speaks audibly to individuals, but it is not the normal method.

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***Think of the Holy Spirit as an internal, living, all-knowing, all-powerful personal navigator guiding your life.***

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What does the Spirit reveal to us? Here are four things to keep in mind about the Spirit's guidance:

- Normally, the Holy Spirit's guidance comes as a steady impression that does not leave us. It is more than just a passing whim or feeling.
- The Holy Spirit's impressions on our heart and mind will often guide us away from a dangerous course of action.
- The Holy Spirit's communication will guide us to a place where He can use us. In Acts 8, the Spirit led Philip the evangelist to share the gospel with an Ethiopian traveler. As a result, the Ethiopian believed in Jesus Christ and was baptized.
- The Holy Spirit will give us peace and confirm to us when we are on track in doing God's will. If we get off track, the Spirit will be quick to show us that too.

Ask the Lord to lead you by His Spirit daily and expect His help. As a safeguard, carefully compare any impression you think may be from the Spirit with the principles already revealed in the Bible. If the impression is really from the Spirit, it will always conform to God's revealed will in Scripture.

## THE CHURCH

Maybe you have gone to church all your life. Perhaps in recent years you have entered church only to attend a funeral or a wedding. I know many people whose impression of churches in general is that they are cold, empty buildings with little of interest inside. Maybe you find the religious messages by church leaders to be stuffy, irrelevant, and boring. Have you considered the possibility that perhaps it is time to find a new church home?

I want to speak candidly to you at this point, and I hope you will give me a fair hearing. Simply going to confession and Mass as a weekly duty will not satisfy your need to worship God, experience His presence, or learn from His Word. If I were you, I would be very excited about getting to know other people who have experienced the love of Christ and forgiveness in a personal way. I would want to share with them what the Lord has done for me, study the Bible with them, and pray with them.

May I suggest that you visit an evangelical church? I myself was raised in a good Catholic home, but after having a life-changing encounter with Christ, I found that the ancient rituals and rites of my religious upbringing did not encourage my newfound faith and experience. This is not to say

that my appreciation and love for Catholics at all diminished but that I needed something the Catholic Church could not offer. I found people who also experienced the greatest miracle I had in an evangelical church.

What do evangelicals believe? We believe the Bible is God's Word. We believe in the Holy Trinity. We believe Christianity is meant to be an exciting, joy-filled experience. We believe in sincere prayer. We believe in loving people of all races and religions. We believe God wants to perform the miracle of salvation in all people's hearts. We have church leaders called pastors who preach and teach God's Word. We worship on Sundays and have wonderful activities for people of all ages during the week.

## **FULFILLMENT IN CHRIST**

Miracles still happen today! By now I trust that you have encountered Christ personally and know the joy of forgiveness and the hope of eternal life. Being a Christian should not be drudgery. The most fulfilled people I know are those who passionately follow Christ and desire to be in the center of His will. David Livingstone, the famous Scottish explorer of Africa and missionary, spent many years in remote corners of the continent. He was often sick and faced innumerable hardships. Once, he was attacked and mauled by a lion, leaving one of his arms virtually useless. He lost friends and loved ones. Still, he declared, "I had rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God."

## **A FINAL PRAYER FOR YOU**

"Father in Heaven, I thank You for my friends who have read this book and received Your Son, Jesus Christ, by faith. Protect, guide, and bless them richly. Let faith fill their hearts daily. May Your love surround them and keep them faithful until their journey on earth is over. Help them to find others who love You and want to serve You. Empower them by Your Holy Spirit so they persevere in difficulty, live a life worthy of You, and boldly tell others about the greatest miracle available to humankind. I ask all this, dear God, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."

**Questions for individual or group study:**

1. *In what ways has prayer been meaningful to you?*
2. *How has God been helping you live a godly life?*
3. *What principles of the Bible have helped you?*
4. *Have you experienced the Holy Spirit's guidance and help?  
How?*
5. *Do you believe it matters where you attend church?*



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Thank you so much for reading *THE GREATEST MIRACLE*. If you have enjoyed this book and would like to let us know how it has helped you, please tell us how on the following lines.

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We would also request that you tell us how you feel about Jesus Christ. Have you experienced the miracle of forgiveness and eternal life through repentance and faith in Him? If you have, please tell us about it.

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