

A New Creation – Who we are in Christ

The keystone Scripture for this series is 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, *he is* a new creature [or as some translations say “a new creation”]; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

This passage describes the tipping point in a believer’s life. That critical moment that leads to an unstoppable and irreversible change and development.

That moment is when we are placed into Christ or as Jesus calls it in John 3, “born-again.”

We can see the parallels and contrasts between our first, physical, birth and our second, spiritual birth.

First, physical birth	Second, spiritual birth
Introduced into a new place that the world that is all around us	Introduced into a new place that is the world that is spiritual and unseen
From the physical darkness of the womb to the light and color of the world	From the spiritual darkness of the world to the light and majesty of the heavenly realm
It is the start of our physical, emotional, intellectual growth	It is the start of our faith growth
We are dependent on other more powerful people to survive	We are dependent on the all-powerful God to survive

The second part of this Scripture is that we are new. Now you may say that you don’t feel new. That when you look in the mirror it is still the same, old you with all the same blemishes and aches. But that is what this class is all about—telling you how you are new.

Realize that we are all made up of three parts. In order of descending importance there are:

Spirit—That is the part of us that interacts with the supernatural. When we are unsaved God says in Ephesians 2 that this part is dead.

Soul—This is our personality, creativity, intelligence, psyche.

Body—This is the physical part of us.

God is going to make the greatest changes in those parts that are the most important. Therefore, our spirit is raised up and made alive and seated in the heavenly places.

Our soul is also changed but not as much.

Finally our body is changed the least, if at all, because it is, in God’s view, the least important.

The old things have passed away and new things have come or, since the Greek indicates a continuing state, it should really read “have come and are continuing to come.”

In verse 18 notice the beginning, “Now all *these* things are from God...” When we are saved, God does not put us into a position where we can get more from the world. He doesn’t put us into better jobs, or allow us to eat in better restaurants, or upgrade our car. What He gives us is even better; He gives us blessings that are eternal. He doesn’t want us to look better or be more important; He wants to give us pleasures and satisfaction that go deep into our souls. Psalm 16:11 sums this up well, “You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.”

In this series we are going to look at:

- How God has changed our perspectives
- How He has changed our abilities
- How He has changed who we are and who we can be
- How He has changed us spiritually

The first part we are going to examine is how God has given us new perspectives.

A New Perspective

A life coach said, “I think there is no right perspective. There’s also no wrong perspective; only different, often limited, perspectives exist.” Hardly ever more wrong words have ever been spoken. If your perspective is that God doesn’t exist and that Jesus Christ is not the Savior of the world is that a merely limited perspective? When you are in Hell because of that perspective you will realize that it was far more than merely limited.

Our perspectives are crucial. They affect whether we have peace or stress, how we deal with trials and setbacks, and how we decide critical choices such as who we marry, on what we spend our money, how we raise our children and so on.

For example, if your perspective is that an embryo is just a lump of cells and that your body as a woman is paramount then how will that affect your decision to abort or not? Contrast that to someone who believes that an embryo is a full human being at the time of conception—how will that affect your decision to abort or not?

Probably the greatest influence on our perspectives is whether we have a worldly perspective or a spiritual perspective.

P. Teilhard D. Chardin, who was a French philosopher and Jesuit priest, said: “we are not physical beings having a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings having a physical experience.”

When we are saved we gain a new perspective on so many things. Salvation is said to be a 180 degree turn. But when we turn we do not turn our bodies around and leave our head facing the original direction. That would actually hurt. Instead, our heads and our eyes are now looking at things totally new. Our horizons have changed and our walking path to those horizons has also changed. We have new perspectives. And though this list of changed perspectives is huge, we are going to examine ten of these new perspectives.

1) Temporal vs. Eternal

Before we are saved our eyes are on the temporal. We have glimpses of the supernatural and oftentimes a longing for something more but it like watching a movie on a screen that is a mile away. We can see that something interesting is happening there, but we can't quite figure it out.

But what is the temporal?

Everything that we think and every action that we take and everything that we touch can be divided into two categories: that which will last eternally and that which will eventually be annihilated.

In the Bible the eternal things can go by several names:

- Things not seen
- The things above
- Treasures that neither moth nor rust destroy
- Treasures that thieves cannot steal

[What are some things that are eternal?]

Some of the things that will last forever are:

- Each and every person
- The deeds, motives, desires, and thoughts of each one of us
- Our salvation decision or non-decision one way or the other
- And, of course, everything related to God

1 Peter 1:23, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God."

Isaiah 40:8, "The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever."

Isaiah 57:15, "For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy..."

The temporal can also go by several names: "things which are seen" and "the things that are on earth."

[What are some things that are temporal?]

Some of the things that will eventually be annihilated are:

- Cars
- Houses
- Physical looks
- Money

Basically everything not on the eternal list

2 Corinthians 4:18 is a key passage contrasting the eternal and the temporal, “while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”

2 Corinthians 5:1-5, “For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. ² For indeed in this *house* we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven, ³ inasmuch as we, having put it on, will not be found naked. ⁴ For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened, because we do not want to be unclothed but to be clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life. ⁵ Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us the Spirit as a pledge.”

Here is the contrast that these passages illustrate.

Temporal	Eternal
Seen	Not seen
Tent	Building
Stuff made with hands	From God
Does not quite fit us properly; it feels wrong	The place that we truly long for
Earthly	Heavenly
We groan, feel burdened, feel naked	Makes us totally complete

In John 4 Jesus makes the contrast between the eternal and temporal using water. Israel being a dry land made wells very valuable. We can see their importance throughout the Bible in that they were used as landmarks and sometimes even given names. The ownership of a well could be hotly disputed sometimes even resulting in violence. So Jesus meeting this woman at a well made it extremely significant. Verse 13 is the central point of this encounter: “Jesus answered and said to her, ‘Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again; ¹⁴ but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him shall never thirst; but the water that I will give him will become in him a well of water springing up to eternal life.’” Here is Jesus making the contrast. Earthly water will satisfy you but only for a moment, but Jesus will satisfy forever. You pour out water onto your hand and it flows off of it and disappears into the dirt. But Jesus, even after being murdered on a cross, pierced with a spear, and put into a small cave with a rock across the front, rose from the dead and is still among us. Temporal water vs. eternal water.

In the movie “Constantine” there is a scene where a man is cursed with an unholy thirst. No matter how much he drinks, and he is obsessed with guzzling everything that he can, he is never satisfied. After a short amount of time, like minutes, he dies. This is a slight picture of the things of the world. In the end, they never really satisfy.

Colossians 3:1-4, “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your mind on the things above, not on the things

that are on earth. ³ For you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is our life, is revealed, then you also will be revealed with Him in glory.”

Paul here is not saying that we should never think about the things of the earth. Plenty of Scripture tells us to take care of our family and to do well at our jobs. Scripture also does not tell us to forsake money but rather to not love it and to use it wisely. But here God is telling us that these earthly things are not our real treasure. They are not our goal or what determines our personal value. Nor are they our master. Rather our heart, soul, mind, and strength should be more focused on godly things. This is a huge change in perspective.

I was once in a museum that had famous art that was created centuries ago but which still mesmerized people today. As I was approaching one particularly famous painting with my eyes focused on it a guard told me to watch my step. Someone had spilled something which was mopped up but that the floor might still be wet and so slightly slippery. I briefly looked down as I stepped past that spot on the floor but then quickly resumed my gaze upon the painting. This is how we should be: mindful of the earthly things but keeping our gaze fixed up the eternal.

Setting our minds on the things above.

- Keeping in prayer
- Serving in church
- Having a constant attitude of worship
- Reading our Bibles
- Doing the will of God

And much more.

This is a great change in perspective.

Which leads us to our second perspective change:

2) Rewards only on the Earth vs. Rewards in Heaven

The unsaved person has no choice but to invest everything that he has into the temporal. According to Ephesians 2:1 he is spiritually dead. He has no presence in the heavenly world let alone a bank account. It is like a dead person on the earth. That person cannot invest in anything here anymore. He can do nothing but just lie there unaware of anything around him or of any sensation no matter how bright the light or how loud the noise. But in this case the person is lying dead in the heavenly realm. He only has one bank account and that is a temporal one and when he dies that bank account is destroyed. It doesn't matter how much he has in it or how diligently he guarded it while he was still alive. It is all gone as far as he is concerned the instant that he dies. As has been said, you never see a hearse pulling a U-Haul trailer.

But a saved person has a choice. He has been raised up and seated in the heavenly places. He has a dual citizenship so to speak: one on earth and one in heaven. He also has two bank accounts and can choose which one he wants to put his treasures into.

This concept of two bank accounts is what Matthew 6:19-20 is referring to, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal”

What is put into the temporal bank account will disappear. What is put into the heavenly bank account will last forever.

I knew someone who was on a trip when his wallet was stolen. He lost maybe \$100 and the usual stuff that one keeps in his wallet. It was infuriating but that can happen to any of us at any time. But that same person kept his real valuables—jewelry, expensive keepsakes, important documents—in a safe deposit box at a bank. No one has ever come close to taking those items. Would he be smart to put everything into his wallet which can disappear in an instant or to put the best and most valuable in that safe deposit box? We have the same choice.

Though there is nothing wrong with investing money or having a rainy-day or retirement fund, our real treasure should be stored in heaven.

Should we spend 50 hours at work so that we can make more money or should we use those extra ten hours and spend them with our family?

Because of our high pressure/high paying job do we get stressed out and cranky or angry because we want that bigger house or do we settle for a smaller house and peace in it with a job that is less pressure but lower pay?

Do we make sure that we catch all of our TV shows but forget to read the Bible and pray?

As Christians we have a choice.

1 Corinthians 3:10-15 is a masterful passage on heavenly rewards for the Christian.

¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. ¹¹ For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if any man builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³ each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it because it is *to be* revealed with fire, and the fire itself will test the quality of each man’s work. ¹⁴ If any man’s work which he has built on it remains, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If any man’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

The instant a person becomes a Christian God gives us a new foundation which is Jesus Christ. Then for the rest of our lives we build on that foundation. At the end of our time on Earth God will judge what we have built. What we have built with eternal things symbolized by gold, silver, and precious stones will survive the fire of God’s judgment and follow us into heaven. What we have built with temporal things symbolized by wood, hay, and straw will burn up and be gone forever. That opportunity can never be replaced; it is lost. There is no “Groundhog Day” like the movie in anyone’s life.

Recently I saw an international competition of sand sculptures in Atlantic City. They created incredible pieces of work: intricate castles towering seven feet tall, fanciful pieces of mermaids riding giant snails, and a warrior battling a roaring lion. But when the rains come and the winds blow they will eventually again become piles of sand. This is the life of the non-Christian. They can build empires, amass great wealth but as Psalm 73 says, "Until I came into the sanctuary of God; *Then* I perceived their end."¹⁸ Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors!"

But we are different, very different. They spend their lives making headlines and being famous. We get up every morning and trudge to work. The only time when many of us will be in the newspaper is our obituary. Yet, yet, what we do for God, no matter how small and simple, will follow us into eternity. We may envy them now, but it is a false envy. Ultimately we are the ones who are rich because we can put our treasures into a heavenly bank.

One of the saddest verses in the Bible to me is 2 Samuel 18:18, "Now Absalom in his lifetime had taken and set up for himself a pillar which is in the King's Valley, for he said, 'I have no son to preserve my name.'" So he named the pillar after his own name, and it is called Absalom's Monument to this day."

This verse shows just how desperate people are to ensure that they aren't forgotten. Absalom had no son and so the best that he thought that he could do to resist fading forgotten into history was to erect an obelisk or pillar, something that itself will eventually crumble and be forgotten. This is how pathetic the world can be. There monuments may last a little longer than themselves but ultimately even they will be gone. What choice do they have? But we have a choice. We have two bank accounts.

Store up your treasures in heaven. Put what you do, what you think, what you desire into your heavenly bank and you will still see it an eternity from now.

We have a new perspective. What we do and think can last forever.

3) Eternal uncertainty vs. Blessed Hope

Before I was a Christian, I had a picture of Jesus on my wall. He was beautiful and radiant. He was more the man of GQ than the Man of Sorrows. I really didn't know what that picture would do for me, but I kind-of hoped that it might give me a bit of edge in the heaven lottery. After all, "If I've got your picture hanging on my wall, God, that's got to count for something."

I used to think that it must be great to be a Catholic priest because if anyone knew that they were going to heaven it had to be them. I mean, if anybody had an in with God then it had to be them. Look at the robes, the mystery, the dedication. They would be the ones who would be first in line at the heavenly feast. If I was lucky maybe I would be able to get a few scraps.

When your system of acceptance into heaven is based on your goodness then there is always that suspicion that you're falling just a bit short. Some rely on extreme means to give themselves that edge.

During Lent in the Philippines some will whip themselves to a bloody mess as a means of atoning for their sins.

Others will put on hoods and lie prone on public sidewalks.

There are churches in Mexico with pathways made of jagged stones that people will crawl on their knees to do penance.

But how do you know with certainty when you think that you are being weighed against everyone else in the world? How do you determine the cut-off point? Is it at 50% so if you are better than half the people in the world then you'll make it. But what if it is at 75%? What if you wind up at 74.99%; someone has to land on that percentage. What if it turns out to be you? Maybe if you had read your Bible one more time that would have pushed you over. How can you ever know? What if you relax a little for a couple of years and your standing slips a little and before you know it you're below the bar. That is why they do it year after year.

1 John 5:13 changes all of this, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life."

The word "know" means "to know with settled knowledge."

Most of the time when we receive Jesus into our lives as Savior it is because we have messed something up and either want Jesus to come and straighten things out or because we need forgiveness. And as we struggle through life our focus is usually on God's grace, guidance, mercy, patience, and so on. But that is because we already have peace of mind regarding heaven. We already have our ticket and no one can snatch it out of our hand.

We don't have to trace a map to Heaven with our finger making sure that we don't miss a turn. We don't have to constantly listen to the supernatural GPS so that we don't get lost. We are guaranteed that we will arrive at our destination. Heaven isn't a likely thing; it is a sure thing. So that means that we can focus on and enjoy the trip/journey that we are on.

When we make our choices we don't have to ask, "Is this going to mess up my chance to get into heaven?" Instead we can ask, "Is this going to delight God?" And that is a huge difference. It is like working at your job to keep from being fired versus working well at your job because you love being there. Our new perspective is that we can enjoy life because we know how the journey will end.

Titus 2:11-14 drives this home.

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, ¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, ¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

Uncertainty has been replaced with a "Blessed Hope." We know with settled knowledge that one day all of these health problems, all of the financial problems, all of the relationship problems will go away. He will wipe away every tear from our eyes and we will spend an eternity in bliss in the city of God. And all of our saved family and friends will be there.

This is indeed the greatest hope that anyone can ever have. Some hope to win the lottery. Some hope that this new pill will solve their problems. Some hope that others will just leave them alone. But our firm and blessed assurance is that we will be with God forever. Think about that. How does knowing that change how you live? How does it change how you think?

That is why Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:17 can call this time on the earth “momentary, light affliction” when compared to “an eternal weight of glory [that is] far beyond all comparison.” This is our blessed hope. We can more easily endure the trials of today because we know the glory of tomorrow.

Then look at verse 15 in Titus 2, “These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority. Let no one disregard you.”

“Let no one disregard you” or literally means “let no one think around you.” I.e., let no one, including and especially the Devil, try to get you to doubt this. God’s word says it. It is true.

If you are born-again, you HAVE eternal life and no one can take that away from you.

That is a new perspective that changes everything.

4) Live for self vs. Live for others

In Atlantic City there is a restaurant called “Ego” whose tagline is “It’s all about you.”

There is a book titled, “Teen Success: It's All About You! Your Choices - Your Life: A Pocket Guide to Teenage Success.”

A magazine is called “Self.”

And I won’t get into the boutiques, spas, and stores named “It’s all about me.”

Advertising isn’t about how you can make your family and friends better; it’s always about how you can make yourself better.

When we are not saved we have to “look out for number 1” because we don’t expect that anyone else will. Most people are going through life looking to grab. We spend half of our time trying to get and the other half trying to keep.

But God changes this.

If I ask the question, “Why did Christ die?” I’d probably hear:

He died for our sins.

He died to bring us to God.

He died to give us eternal life.

And those are certainly all true.

But 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 gives us another reason as to why Christ died, "For the love of Christ controls us, having concluded this, that one died for all, therefore all died; ¹⁵ and He died for all, so that they who live might no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf."

Jesus died so that we might no longer live for ourselves. Tell that to the advertisers. See how well that goes over.

So if we no longer live for ourselves then will we become empty and unsatisfied? Will we be the ones who drive the beat-up car, wear the wrong make-up and clothes, drink the wrong beer and have everyone laugh at us?

Here is what God says in Isaiah 58:10-11

And if you give yourself to the hungry
And satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
Then your light will rise in darkness
And your gloom *will become* like midday.
¹¹ "And the LORD will continually guide you,
And satisfy your desire in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a watered garden,
And like a spring of water whose waters do not fail.

Do you see here what God is saying? If you give yourself to others and especially to the most needy then look what you'll get back in return.

- The darkness that you might feel that you stumbling in will begin to be filled with light.
- Your gloom, despondency, and struggles will be replaced with the warmth of midday.
- God will guide you.
- Your will be more content.
- You will be strengthened.
- And you will grow and prosper.

Not a bad deal.

But why is this so important to God? Because God Himself is an infinitely giving being and He commands us to be like Him. You start with the first verse in the Bible where God us creation and end in Revelation with God giving Himself back to us by returning at the Second Coming. And everything in between is about how God gave us His only begotten Son.

God gives and gives and gives and when we give to others He says, "There you go! Now you're just like Me."

When we are not saved we are empty and so we try to fill our lives with whatever we can. But when we are born-again we are filled with the Spirit of Christ. We have abundance. We can give and give and never run out. Our gauge will never lean towards empty.

Luke 6:38 makes this clear, “Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, *and* running over.” Running over. Way more than enough for ourselves and plenty to give to others.

We give ourselves to others when:

- We listen
- We ask them questions
- We remember what they say
- We pray for them
- We comfort them
- We provide for them
- We bring them Jesus

Before we are saved we have to look out for number 1 because no one else will. It is truly every man for himself.

Once we are saved we know that God is looking out for us. The Scripture reassures us of this.

Isaiah 58:8, “The glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.” God protects us from our past. He allows us to be able to forgive hurts, get rid of grudges, and to move on from regrets. Truly God has our back.

Isaiah 45:2, “I will go before you and make the rough places smooth.” God goes before us so that we might make right decisions. He guides us and lights the path before us. The future may be unknown but it is not filled with fear.

Psalms 91:4, “He will cover you with His pinions, And under His wings you may seek refuge.” God covers us from those who arrogantly stand above us and make accusations. Because we know our value in God and are confident in who we are, curses and put-downs should not affect us. And even if they are true then that means that we now have an opportunity to grow and become more like Him.

Deuteronomy 33:7, “The eternal God is a dwelling place, and underneath are the everlasting arms.” God is under us to cushion and comfort us when we fall. If we mess up it is not fatal. God is great in forgiveness, patience, and faithfulness. The righteous man or woman can always rise again because God is always there to lift us up again.

Psalms 125:2, “As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the LORD surrounds His people from this time forth and forever.” God is to our left and to our right to guard us from unexpected attacks. He surrounds us.

We can give ourselves to others because we know that we are not standing by ourselves fighting the rest of the world. We have God on our side and one person plus God is a majority.

Our perspective changes from looking inward to looking outward.

5) Grudges and bitterness vs. Forgiveness

You don't have to look very far around you to find strife: family members that don't talk to one another, neighbors that hate each other, co-workers that are practically at war.

- The divorce rate in America for first marriage is 41%
- The divorce rate in America for second marriage is 60%
- The divorce rate in America for third marriage is 73%

The United States is tied for the fifth highest divorce rate in the world.

Look at what is going on around the globe right now. It is estimated that there are now over 50 million refugees worldwide. Why?—because of hatred. Many of these conflicts are because of grudges going back centuries. No one is willing to let go.

James 4:1 tells the brutal truth, "What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members?"

The cause of conflicts is that we want for ourselves and if someone takes from us or prevents us from getting what we want then there is war.

One of the most difficult things that anyone can do is to forgive. But why?

The main reason may be because we don't want to.

- You might not want to forgive because you want to see them suffer for what they did.
- You might not want to forgive because you want them to feel the same hurt that they made us to feel.
- You might not want to forgive because you want to give them the message that if they hurt me then they will feel pain also, so they better think twice about hurting me again.
- You might not want to forgive because you are angry or frustrated.
- You might not want to forgive because you want revenge.
- You might not want to forgive because you enjoy playing the victim.
- You might not want to forgive because you really don't like that person and you want to keep it that way.

We want the other person to suffer to at least the same point of pain that we felt. And actually, maybe just a little more just to ensure that they really get it, that they really know how it feels.

Before we are saved the way that we usually handle personal offenses is to:

- Go on the attack
- Give a cold shoulder or just break off the relationship altogether
- Let enough time go by so that, as is said, "Time heals all wounds."

But none of these are forgiveness. Even for the last one, we may act like all is forgiven but in reality we've tucked that offense into our back pocket and will pull it out whenever we think that it is necessary.

However, one of the greatest and most critical aspects of salvation is that God forgives us of all our sins and makes us righteous before Him.

2 Corinthians 5:21 proclaims this, "He [the Father] made Him [Jesus] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

Jesus is the only person whose sole purpose for being born was to die. And He had to die because we were totally helpless and, in ourselves, hopeless to be pleasing to God and enter into heaven. Even one of our sins put us into owing God an infinite debt. Now think about the thousands of sins that we'll commit over our lifetime. What good deeds can ever balance that out?

Forgiveness must be a work of God alone.

The word "forgiveness" has several meanings.

In the Hebrew it means to "lift off a burden."

The Greek has at least two meanings.

- 1) To cancel out a debt. This is the idea of Colossians 2:13-14, "When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions, having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross."
- 2) To remove; to send away. This is the symbolism that is expressed in Ps 103:12, "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us." If we start at any point and head north we will eventually be heading south again. So north is separated from south only as far as the Earth is tall. But if we start at any point and head east no matter how many times we circle the globe we will still be heading east. In fact we can head east forever. This is how far God has removed our sins from us; an infinite distance.

There are a ton of verses in the Bible on forgiveness but let's just quickly look at Isaiah 55:7, "Let the wicked forsake his way, And the unrighteous man his thoughts; And let him return to the LORD, And He will have compassion on him; And to our God, For He will abundantly pardon."

- You may think, "But you don't know what I have done."
- Or "If you could only get inside of my head you would be so appalled that you would never come near me again."
- Or "I can't see how God could ever forgive me for this sin."

But look at verses 8 – 9, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways,’ declares the LORD. ‘For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts.’”

We oftentimes use this verse in the context of God’s plans or how everything about God is inscrutable. But the context of this verse is forgiveness. We just don’t get forgiveness. It doesn’t make sense.

So God is using this passage to rebuke our way of thinking.

- “I am such a sinner that God could never use me.”

“For He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.” It doesn’t make sense but we must believe it as true.

- “But I have some sins that I seem to never escape from. Why would God ever want to be close to me?”

“For He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.”

- “I am no good. I’ve committed a sin that God will never forgive me of and if I told you what it was you would never talk to me again.”

“For He will abundantly pardon. ‘For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,’ declares the Lord.” It may not make sense to us. It may seem too good to be true. But that’s why we can’t comprehend God’s thoughts. God dying for us, who can believe that? But God told us that it is true and even if we cannot understand it, we can still believe it. And the more that we believe it, the more that it changes everything. That is why in Luke 7:47 Jesus said, “For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.” If you want to love God more then study and believe more deeply His forgiveness of your sins.

God does not forgive you because you are good; God forgives you because He is great.

God does not forgive you because you have straightened up your ways; God forgives you because He is compassionate.

You are the sinner; God is the dying Savior.

Likewise, God does not want us to forgive others because they are good. God wants us to forgive others because He has forgiven us and has given us the grace and strength to do the same.

We have a new perspective because of what God has done for us.

Following the Civil War, Robert E. Lee was visiting in Kentucky where one lady showed him the remains of what had been an enormous, old tree. This tree stood directly in front of her house. She bitterly cried to General Lee of how its limbs and trunk had been shattered by Federal artillery fire. Having poured out her anguish she looked to the old soldier for a condemnation of the North. Following a brief silence, Lee responded, “Cut it down, my dear madam, and forget it.”

It is better to forgive the injustices of the past than to allow them to take root and add bitterness to your future.

There is always a time to forgive and that time is always now.

- Your season of bitterness is over.
- Your season of anger and plotting revenge is over.
- Your season of chaining yourself to this other person's hurt or disappointment is over.

It is a new season, a fresh season, a season to plant something new.

Do you want to forget what was behind?

Then do what Paul did in Philippians 3:13, "but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead."

Do you want to forget the past?

Then forgive; chop down that broken tree and nurture something new and exciting. Discover what God wants to do with you once you've freed yourself from the bitterness of your past. Live in the present and the future and not in the past.

This is new perspective that God gives to us.

6) Immediate family vs. Church family

Before we are saved we usually have some family members that we can turn to and maybe a few longtime friends. But for most people, they have no one wise and caring who will stand by them and counsel and comfort them.

Look at Mark 10:29-30, "Jesus said, "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake,³⁰ but that he will receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life."

There is a lot in this passage but let's look at one aspect. Before you are saved you may have brothers, sisters, a mother, and a father. But after you are saved you now have a hundred times that. Who are these hundred times people? The church, of course.

Look around you right now. These people are your friends. They will pray for you, they will stand with you, they will counsel and comfort you. You just don't have a few friends; you have an army of friends.

On one of my shirts I noticed a single thread dangling from the shoulder. So I gave it a quick tug hoping that it would break off. Rather, it pulled all along the seam and created a gaping hole. The shirt was ruined. That one thread had a big impact.

An interesting verse is Colossians 2:2. It states that we should be “knit together in love.” Each thread in a cloth weaves itself over and under many other threads. Whereas a single piece of thread can be easily broken, once it is woven into a cloth they form something strong. This cloth can offer protection, comfort, and even make a statement. Each thread was designed to be part of something else.

Likewise, each Christian is like a single thread. Alone we are weaker, more easily confused, and tempted. Our struggles can be lonely and overwhelming.

But once we are saved God weaves us into a body of believers. Some people we are woven under. We support them with mercy, fellowship, and giving. Other people we are woven over. They support us with discipleship, concern, and prayer. Together we form a community that is strong enough to protect us from the lions that prowl about seeking to devour (1 Peter 5:8). We are better equipped to encourage one another and to forgive each other. And as a community we can be a greater force to make a statement for what is right: we can preach the Good News of Freedom, heal the brokenhearted, and open the prison doors of the enslaved. This is Jesus Christ’s church. What sews and binds us together is love.

The world has no equivalent. There are moose clubs and elk clubs, chess clubs, and car clubs. But none of those can offer what the church, the body of Christ, can offer.

The church offers us so much in so many different ways.

And one of the greatest benefits of the church is that it makes each one of us part of it. We are given spiritual gifts and are made to be a part of the body of Christ. This gives us meaning and value. We can contribute to other people’s lives and make a positive difference even if we have no talents or special abilities in ourselves.

One snowflake by itself is frail and vulnerable. The slightest bit of heat or pressure and it melts. But put enough snow together and it can stop a city.

The Christian is a lot like that. When we are off by ourselves we can easily wither under the heat of a difficult job or constant demands from people. The pressure from broken relationships or the world’s temptations can cause us to cave in. But when we surround ourselves with other Christians we can all help absorb the blows. We can hold each other up and guide each other away from wrong influences.

Sometimes the world can be like a raging furnace and it is times like that where the fellowship of church can allow us to reset our priorities and chill out. We may find ourselves being devastated by some sin, but when we are with Christians and lean on each other then we can stop any sin. Satan can easily pick off individual Christians with his withering attacks, but against a righteous army he must turn and flee.

We can easily take the church for granted. But we should never think of it as something that we need to do once a week. We shouldn’t go to church because we have to. We should go to church because we want to. It is our family.

God has taken us from being a small troop hacking our way through the jungle and put us into an army where are extremely valuable and surrounded by people who are there to help.

That alone should greatly change our perspective on how we will not just survive but succeed in life. We are not alone.

7) Survival vs. Heroism

We are going to devote an entire lesson to this topic so I'm just going to touch on it here.

Henry David Thoreau said, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation." And that is so true. Many people are just trying to make it through work each day, make it through raising children, and make enough money to meet some modest goals. Their evenings are spent lying on the couch watching TV so that they can summon up enough energy to do it all again tomorrow. Why are weekends so short?—because weekdays are such a grind.

The only sense of greatness is in our fantasies. We are the winning Super Bowl quarterback, or a rock superstar, or a movie celebrity. These are the people that the world sets up as heroes.

Or we see in the movies superheroes who wear spandex and capes. But these heroes are all unattainable. There will be only one winning Super Bowl quarterback each year. It's unlikely that any of us will even be in a movie let alone be movie stars. And I can guarantee you that none of us will fly or climb the sides of buildings and capture bad guys in webs.

So where does that leave us? We are nothing more than the same as billions of other people just sloughing our way through life. We are ants in a nest, never the queen, always the workers. Heroism is only a fantasy.

But the Bible tells us differently.

God's definition of the hero is not the headliner, not the most popular, not the one with the most Facebook likes or Twitter friends.

God's definition of the hero is the person who does the will of God.

Who are some of the heroes in the Bible?

In Exodus 1 the midwives did not put to death the Hebrew male newborns in defiance of Pharaoh's orders. The result was that God blessed them.

The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair in Luke 7.

The woman who put in the two mites into the treasury in Mark 12.

How do we know that they were heroes? Because God, who has an infinite storehouse of stories and wisdom to share thought those people important enough to include in His only book to all of mankind. And these people were included as examples for us to follow: their faith, their actions, and their character. And if God thinks that someone is worthy to be an example to billions of people for the next thousands of year then they are a hero indeed.

But notice something about these three stories.

They were unnamed. Celebrity does not you a true hero.

But here is the key. What they did is attainable for all of us. I mean, no, of course, none of us will wash Jesus' feet with our hair for the simple reason that He isn't on the Earth anymore. But the point is that, in her place, any of us could have done the same thing.

These people were not superheroes in spandex that leaped tall buildings in a single bound. They were just like you and me.

We can truly be a hero. Not necessarily the winning SuperBowl quarterback whose name is splashed across all of the headlines, but a cosmic hero in God's universe. Besides, the first is good only until the next big thing.

Who remembers Emil Jannings? He was the very first winner of an Academy Award for best actor in 1927.

How about Florence Lawrence? She is often referred to as "The First Movie Star." She appeared in almost 300 films.

Anyone remember Chester A. Arthur? He was the 21st president of the United States.

Most of us don't remember these people even though they were at the top of the headlines in their time. But we are still reading about a nameless woman who dropped two small coins in a charity box 2,000 years ago.

Our perspective changed from being just another one in a billion to being someone who can be a real hero. That should dramatically change how we view our everyday lives and who we are.

8) Own skills vs. God's grace

Before we were saved what did we have to rely on to overcome our own limitations?—many people just resort to cheating. Why would people cheat? Because they want something, they want to be winners, but they realize that they don't have what it takes to do it the right way.

70% of high school students cheat on tests.

65% of high school athletes admit to cheating.

42% of Harvard's incoming class cheated. In fact, studies show that the higher up the academic scale the more likely a student will cheat.

Lance Armstrong cheated so that he could win seven Tour de France titles.

When I was young and I played someone at Battleship I used to move my ships around to avoid being hit. Why? Because I wanted to win at any expense and I figured that I wouldn't get caught.

But once we are saved that all changes. We no longer have to cheat to get ahead because we have something greater.

The word "grace" is used 125 in the Bible.

Here is a sample of some of the things that grace gives to us.

- Grace enlightens our eyes (Ezra 9:8)
- Grace blesses us (Psalm 45:2)
- Grace saves us (Acts 15:11)
- Grace builds us up (Acts 20:32)
- Grace guarantees that God's promises will be fulfilled in us (Romans 4:16)
- Grace gives us victory over sin (Romans 5:20)
- Grace gives us spiritual gifts that we might have a place in God's church (Romans 12:6)
- Grace gives us power (2 Corinthians 12:9)

Look at 2 Corinthians 9:8, "And God is able to make all grace abound to you, that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed"

Do you notice how many words denoting completeness or fulfillment Paul uses in this one verse?

"all grace"

"abound"

"always having"

"all sufficiency"

"in everything"

"an abundance"

"every good deed"

And, of course, it starts with the one ultimate word for completeness—"God."

But this promise isn't for the leaders in the church. It isn't claimed only by the Billy Grahams and the John MacArthurs and the John Pipers. It is just as much for you and me.

Is Paul trying to make a point here? Absolutely. You have everything that you need to do whatever God wants you to do because the power comes from God Himself.

When anyone of us is struggling and fearful we should remember 2 Timothy 1:7, "For God has not given us a spirit of timidity, but of power and love and discipline."

Power gives me the strength and confidence to confront and overcome our fears.

Love replaces fear because instead of focusing on what others will think of me I am focused on what I can give to God and to others.

Discipline pushes away those voices that tell us that we are no good or a loser and instead holds tight to righteous and God's word.

We don't have to cheat to be winners. God has given us all grace, abounding, with all sufficiency in everything so that we may have an abundance for every good deed.

Throughout the bible there are people who had a reason or excuse as to why God could not use them. There were those who never started (the rich, young ruler in Matthew 19), those who gave up (Demas in 2 Timothy 4), and those who compromised (Abram with Hagar in Genesis 16). But then there were the ones who believed God and acted despite their own inabilities. Moses protested, "I have never been eloquent" (Ex. 4:10). Abraham questioned, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old?" (Genesis 17:17) And in Luke, Mary asked, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

Sometimes these reasons are legitimate: we have a limiting weakness or, as with Mary, the situation seems impossible. Sometimes our reasons are not legitimate: we are simply lazy or do not want to be bothered. But in all situations, God provides all sufficiency. God gives us His promises because He knows that we are weak and afraid. In this passage God provided to Mary that which He promises to all of us: "the Holy Spirit" and "the power of the Most High." Because Mary obeyed and acted there was a great result: God was true and faithful and the virgin bore "the holy one... the Son of God." The weak gave birth to the Almighty and the doubter gave us the surest thing: a Savior.

Our perspective has indeed changed. We are no longer bound by our limitations. We are only bound by our excuses. We have the power of the Holy Spirit. We have abundant grace. We have all that we need. Let's live like the people that God has made us and not like the people that we were.

9) Some people have value to me vs. all people have infinite value

What is the value or worth of a person?

Your answer may easily be determined by whether you are a Christian or not.

If you are not a Christian then your answer might be, "It depends on what they mean to me" or perhaps unspoken but realistic variations such as:

"The more they contribute to my life the more valuable they are."

"Family and friends are valuable, everyone else doesn't matter."

Generally, people's values were determined by what they mean to us. Everyone else, eh.

But once we are saved we see everyone's true value. Each and every person becomes someone for whom Christ died.

1 Peter 3:18 states, "For Christ also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit..."

And of course John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”

God died for that person! He or she is not just an annoyance or bother in our lives. That person was worth enough to God to die for. We should look at each person and see the cross. We see God weeping for their soul. This changes everything.

But we also see everyone as being made in the image of God.

Genesis 1:27, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.”

That alone gives everyone tremendous worth and dignity. This sets apart every person from the rest of creation. We are not just “better” [evolved] apes. We are not just more complex globs of goo. We are not just the ones who have figured out how to talk.

We are created in the image of God and thus we have been endowed with aspects of God’s nature such as wisdom, love, justice, holiness, mercy, and patience. A key aspect of God designing us similar to Himself is that we can have a personal and endless relationship with Him. That we have similar natures draws us to each other. We see this principle throughout creation: Lions form a pride, fish swim in schools, and ants live in colonies. Whereas all the rest of creation has only one type that they are similar to—their own species—we are unique because there are two types that we are similar to and, therefore, can form deep relationships with: other people (individually and in community) and God.

That person is of extreme value to God and so he or she should be the same to you.

So when we are hurt by someone we seek the power and grace of God to forgive.

When someone is unsaved we share the Gospel with them.

When someone is in need we do what we can to help them.

Because everyone is in God’s image we have no right to belittle or look down on someone. There is no place for prejudice in God’s world. Neither race, age, country of origin, ethnicity, looks, or disability has any implication on someone’s worth because every single person equally meets back in the image of God.

Therefore salvation radically changes how we view people. This perspective shifts from what do they mean to me to what do they mean to God.

10) Stability found in wealth, power, health, popularity, or appearance vs. stability found in God

In my area there are many wetlands where the soil is loose. Whenever there is a storm many of the trees growing there fall over. They do not crack at the trunk, rather, their roots pull up out of the ground

and so you can see the entire tree including the bottom of its roots lying on its side. As you head north where the ground is firmer there are no fallen trees because they are more securely anchored.

The Bible speaks many times about how important a person’s foundation is and uses many contrasts.

Psalm 1 says that the righteous “will be like a tree *firmly* planted by streams of water.”

But the wicked “are like chaff which the wind drives away.”

A tree is solid; its roots go down deep into the earth. It provides shelter for many animals and oftentimes food. It takes a lot to knock down a tree and the more mature a tree the harder it gets.

Chaff is the outer, dry shell of grain called the husk. It is loosened and removed from the grain in a process called threshing which is usually by pounding or milling. Once the threshing is done the chaff is separated from the grain by winnowing. Winnowing is done by tossing the grain and chaff mix up into the air and letting a light wind blow away the chaff leaving only the nutrient rich grain. Chaff is chaff; no matter how mature it is it can still be easily blown away by a light breeze.

Do you see how vividly God contrasts the stability of the believer to a non-believer?

Believer	Non-believer
Solid, thick	Flimsy, light
Grows stronger as it matures	Is always the same
Has deep roots	Has no roots
Hard to move sometimes even taking a major storm and, even then, may still remain standing	Blows away with a light breeze
Provides shelter and food	Is waste and useless
Lasts a long time	Is very temporal

[What does the non-believer have to use for his or her stability?]

- Wealth
- Health
- Popularity
- Looks
- Power
- Family
- Being better in some way than most other people such as talent

Yet how fleeting all of these things are. One slip-up, one mistake, one tragedy and any of these things can be gone in an instant.

Eliot Spitzer was governor of New York one day and then in shame the next because of his immorality.

Lance Armstrong was a sports champion. Now they have stripped him of all of his metals. He is a disgrace because he cheated.

What about Tiger Woods?

Bernie Madoff swindled \$65 billion from investors many of whom lost their entire retirement funds and are now forced to work again for perhaps the rest of their lives.

General Custer, remember that as a general he was at the top of his field, made one arrogant and wrong decision and now the Battle of the Little Bighorn memorializes the place of his last decision.

A light breeze and it is all gone.

Look at Jeremiah 17:5-8

Thus says the LORD,

“Cursed is the man who trusts in mankind
And makes flesh his strength,
And whose heart turns away from the LORD.

⁶ “For he will be like a bush in the desert
And will not see when prosperity comes,
But will live in stony wastes in the wilderness,
A land of salt without inhabitant.

⁷ “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD
And whose trust is the LORD.

⁸ “For he will be like a tree planted by the water,
That extends its roots by a stream
And will not fear when the heat comes;
But its leaves will be green,
And it will not be anxious in a year of drought
Nor cease to yield fruit.

Notice again the key aspect of this contrast: stability.

The unbeliever is a bush in the desert on a stony waste. The soil is weak and easily blown away. The rocks also inhibit root growth.

But the believer is once again like a tree planted by water. Notice the reference to roots: “That extends its roots by a stream.” It is the central focus of this passage right in the middle. Why? Because God is telling us that stability is important. Not the leaves. Not the size. Not the fruit. But the roots. The part of the tree that holds it firmly in the ground.

[As Christians, what are our roots sunk into?]

- God in Jesus Christ

This is our foundation? We cannot get a more solid and trustworthy foundation than God. Our health may fail, our relationships may break, our career may be lost, but Jesus Christ will never fail us. The heart of Christianity is that we can have a personal relationship with God that can develop and grow. The more we read our Bible, go to church, pray, and worship the firmer our foundation will be and as our roots sink deeper into God the more stable and secure we will be as a person.

What happens when someone in the world who relied on their looks gets old and wrinkly and droopy?

What happens to the rich when the security of their wealth is lost in a recession or a bad investment?

What happens to the popular person whose security was in people liking them finds people disagreeing with them?

They are devastated.

They are bitter.

They become insecure and exhibit all of the bad behavior of insecure people.

But the Christian is secure in what is eternal, in what is promised by the sovereign God, and in God Himself.

If we lose our health we can say with the psalmist in Psalm 73:26, "My flesh and my heart may fail, But God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." What a promise! What equivalent does the world have for that assurance?

If we lose our wealth we can say with Paul in 1 Timothy 6:17, "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly supplies us with all things to enjoy." What does God give us so richly?—peace, fellowship, eternal life, forgiveness, guidance, and much, much more. How much of that can money buy?

If we lose our looks or never had them to begin with we can find assurance in 1 Samuel 16:7, "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.'" Does the world look at our hearts? Do advertisements care about our hearts or are they all about image?

So much of this is summed up in the words of this great Christian hymn.

Glory hallelujah, I shall not be moved
Anchored in Jehovah, I shall not be moved
Just like a tree that's planted by the waters
I shall not be moved

In His love abiding, I shall not be moved
And in Him confiding, I shall not be moved

Just like the tree that's planted by the water
I shall not be moved

Though all hell assail me, I shall not be moved
Jesus will not fail me, I shall not be moved
Just like the tree that's planted by the water
I shall not be moved

Though the tempest rages, I shall not be moved
On the rock of ages, I shall not be moved
Just like the tree that's planted by the water
I shall not be moved

I shall not be, I shall not be moved
I shall not be, I shall not be moved
Just like the tree that's planted by the water
I shall not be moved

You know who wrote this song? Perhaps the most oppressed people on earth: slaves. Though they didn't have freedom or self-determination they knew where their stability was.

We can lie down at night and know that our security is in someone who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

We don't have to worry about someone coming and stealing our stability or scheming to take our away from us because nothing shall separate us from the love of God.

This new perspective of stability and security in God is tremendous. We should never take it for granted.

We can go on regarding how our perspectives have changed.

Though we could list hundreds of these changes in perspective here are a few more abbreviated.

Unfairness vs. Justice

If an evil person dies soon after being brought to justice then the unbeliever feels cheated because they feel that that person never really paid for their crimes and got off easy. But the Christian knows that there is the Great White Throne Judgment and the surety of Heaven and Hell. God will ensure that all justice will be applied to even the minutest detail. Death is not the end. There isn't annihilation.

Your own reputation vs. God's glory

Non-believers are primarily interested in building up themselves and so must disguise their flaws. They are so often playing a game of deception to try and look better than themselves. Self-promotion is big. The Christian knows that we are sinners and so can be honest about our flaws. We can concentrate on proclaiming God's glory and since God is perfect in all ways we never have to make excuses or apologies for Him.

Surrounding ourselves with sin vs. Surrounding ourselves with what is pure, honorable, right, and holy

Do we have pornography stashed under the desk or do we have a Bible on our nightstand?

Do we spend more time in bars than in church?

Do we surround ourselves with bitterness or do we forgive?

We now have Philippians 4:8 before us, “Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.”

Work for self vs. Work for Jesus

At work, it usually isn't hard to find people who are doing as little as they can to get by. That is because excellence isn't their goal. Their goal is simply to get a paycheck for as little effort as necessary. So they spend a good portion of the day on the internet or socializing.

Contrast this to what God tells us in Colossians 3:23-24, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.”

When we go to work we aren't trying to please just our boss, someone who isn't omniscient or omnipresent. We are trying to please God who sees everything that we do or don't do.

Self-pity vs. Confidence

If we are apart from God and things go badly then we have a tendency to feel sorry for ourselves. The party that we like the best is a pity party.

But once we are saved we have God's great promises to encourage us. One is Jeremiah 29:11, “For I know the plans that I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope.” We know that God is on our side and is looking out for us. Our confidence isn't in our circumstances but in knowing that God is our rock and fortress.

Heroism

{Note: Some of this is taken from Dick Keyes' study on “Heroism Today.”}

[How do you think most people would define a successful person?]

[If I ask you to define a hero what would you say?]

Here is the beginning of an article entitled, “Where are Today's Hero Role Models?”

If you are an average American you have no living heroes at all.

Thinking I might have become an old cynic, I asked several of my friends - young, old and in-between - to quickly name two present-day heroes.

All blanks.

Not so many years ago, heroes were an important institution of American life. They added dimension and inspiration to our conduct and to our confidence as a nation.

Now we seem to have become too sophisticated, too smug and too self-centered to emulate others of stature.

Perhaps it is because we no longer seem to admire the qualities of achievement, character and challenge which combine to create heroes.

At any rate, the heroes have stolen out of our lives. With them has gone the drive to be great.

What is a hero? There are several definitions depending on your perspective but we are going to answer that a little later.

Some people say that one of our most basic needs is to be a hero. Being a hero gives meaning, value, and purpose. We want to be heroes. Our fantasies about ourselves are usually heroic. We are a great sports figure, or military hero, or have accomplished something great that commands the cheers and admiration of the crowds.

We also need heroes to emulate. But when we deny or trivialize the supernatural then we must make our heroes from the visible world. So we look to the wealthy, famous, or powerful. And then what we have done is to replace the hero with the celebrity. Celebrities get our adoration but have usually done nothing noteworthy. They may have a talent and it might even be an extraordinary talent but our fascination with them is based more on their being well-known than on their character. We respect and emulate a hero because of what they have accomplished; we envy a celebrity because of what they have. But most of us don't have that talent or their money and so their life is inaccessible.

Yes, you will see stories about someone in the military or a policeman or firefighter who is called a hero, but that story plays out quickly and then we are back to the lives of celebrities. I looked at the top 45 stories on the internet one day. Thirteen of them were about celebrities. None were about anything heroic.

Each one of us has morals and models.

We have morals which are right or wrong, guilt or innocence.

We also have models which are those people that we imitate. These can be heroes or fools.

Which has the bigger influence in our lives? I would argue that it is models. We see this as early as children. The child's question is not "Do I want to be good?" but "Who do I want to be like?" Their

morals are built not from dictates and commands but from watching people, from their models. You want to know how parents act; then watch their children.

But today's culture breaks down even our concept of heroes.

Human science tells us that the universe started from something as big as a beach ball which exploded as the Big Bang. We then evolved into a set of particularly complex set of chemicals. This theory undercuts human greatness. We're all the same and in the end we are all annihilated.

Compare that to what the Bible says that we are in Psalm 8:4-6.

⁴ What is man that You take thought of him,
And the son of man that You care for him?

⁵ Yet You have made him a little lower than God,
And You crown him with glory and majesty!

⁶ You make him to rule over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,

The media also distorts what a hero is.

In so many movies today the hero is not the one who follows a moral and ethical path. In fact, the "hero" is the one who breaks all guidelines and conventions to accomplish what he wants. Sometimes he is even a drunk or divorced or battling some inner demon. But he is usually not noted for his righteousness.

In many of Stephen King's books the religious person is the biggest fool.

One of our greatest battles with culture is not abortion or gay marriage but is who we are. What makes a person extraordinary?

So if our culture has warped the definition of a hero then what does the Bible say a hero is?

A hero is someone that we should imitate because they imitate God. Because of their faith they obey God.

Hebrews 11 lists people that we should imitate. It is often called the "Hall of Faith" or as we could also call it: the "Hall of Heroes."

If time allowed it would be good to first read this entire chapter but let's make a few observations first.

- 1) The Bible is unsparing with its heroes. It points out their sins and their weaknesses. There are no larger than life heroes in the Bible.

James 5:17 contains an extraordinary phrase that can easily be overlooked as we are otherwise caught up in power of the event. Elijah was one the OT's greatest prophets. John the Baptist—the forerunner and proclaimer of the Messiah—was described by Jesus, "John himself is Elijah who was to come." On the Mount of Transfiguration it was Elijah who was there. While on the cross, the people around Jesus

thought that He was calling for Elijah. And in Revelation 11 it is thought by many that one of the two witnesses is Elijah. And here in James we read how Elijah prayed and it didn't rain for 3.5 years and then he prayed again and it finally rained. This is a powerful miracle. Think about being able to control the weather for an entire nation not just for a day or two but for 3.5 years. You lean back and think, "Wow, what a spiritual giant! He is clearly something special." But then we read that phrase, "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours..." He was not a superman. He was someone who was just like you and I am today. We can't ignore that. God put that little phrase in there for a reason. Do you know what that means? Heroism is accessible to us.

Look at some of the other people mentioned in this chapter.

- Moses who at one time was naked and drunk
- Rahab was a harlot
- Samson who broke all of his key Levitical vows
- David who was an adulterer and a murderer

The Bible's heroes had flaws just like you and me. God doesn't require us to be perfect to be hero; He just wants us to obey.

2) These people weren't heroes because of who they were but because of what they did. Again, this is the opposite of our culture's list of heroes. Society puts celebrities on a pedestal: sports figures, movie stars, and some people whom I just don't get. Why is Paris Hilton famous? Why is Kim Kardashian famous? Yet for a good amount of time you couldn't escape their names. They are well-known for being well-known. But the Bible's heroes are people who accomplished God's will. Look at some of the verbs associated with these people in Hebrews 11.

- Abel offered
- Noah prepared
- Abraham obeyed
- Isaac blessed
- Moses refused [sin]
- Rahab welcomed

Notice that the actions that put these people into the "Hall of Heroes" are not grandiose. We don't see: conquered, lead, destroyed, rallied. Instead these actions are simple: offered, prepared, obeyed, blessed, refused, welcomed.

Because you know who the hero in the Bible is? It is the person who shines God's glory and righteousness no matter how simple.

In the Bible, you never see a relationship between heroism and leadership. So today, God's heroes aren't necessarily the tele-evangelists or the well-read authors, or even the pastors. They can, and usually are, people like you and me. True heroism, God's heroism, is not equated with greatness; it is not equated with popularity; it is not equated with how much you can move the masses. It is equated with simple obedience. And that means that you and I can be heroes just as much as anyone else.

The real question is not how much we delight the crowds but how much God delights in us.

Now think about that, let that sink in. Our culture measures greatness or value by how many times our name shows when googled or by how many friends we have on Facebook or by how many people follow us on Twitter. With that standard only very few are at the top. We can only fantasize about that fame. But in God's book the hero is the person who obeys Him and glorifies Him. That can be you or me.

Do you think that is actually true though? We've been so conditioned to think of heroes as being the stellar, those at the top, those with the most internet hits that this concept seems to be reaching. Let's look at the third point to pull out of this chapter.

3) Many of God's heroes aren't even named

Verses 35-38

Women received *back* their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, so that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶ and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸ (*men of whom the world was not worthy*), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground.

Society's heroes fly in jets; God's heroes wander in deserts. Society's heroes live in mansions; God's heroes lived in caves and holes in the ground. Society's heroes aren't anybody unless their names are splashed everywhere. God's heroes aren't even named.

Rihanna has over 60 million friends on Facebook, Eminem is a close second, and Shakira is third with 55 million. Some unnamed person wandered the desert in a sheepskin and then was killed with a sword. Which one is the true hero?

Most of this Scripture paragraph is a list of facts: people were mocked, some were stoned, some were put to death with the sword, some were afflicted, and so on. But right in the midst of all of this God inserts His own opinion: "of whom the world was not worthy." If you were to ask 100 people on the street who were the most worthy people who ever lived you'd probably get names like: Da Vinci, Einstein, Gutenberg, Galileo, Newton, Napoleon, Shakespeare, Caesar, Luther, Mohammad, Buddha, and so on. But no, they'd be wrong. Hebrews chapter 11, these are the people of whom the world was not worthy. And you know what? These people are us. This is not a list of supermen or superwomen. These are common people but what they did was to obey and glorify God.

So why is this important?

It means that each one of us can be heroes in God's sight. Heroism is not for people with supernatural powers wearing spandex and capes. These type of people are inaccessible. When we got saved God gave us the very real capability to be a real hero. Not in the sense of everyone can become president of the

United States because, let's face it, in each of our lifetimes there may be only about a dozen presidents. But you and I can truly be one of God's heroes today or tomorrow.

Do you still not believe this? Then that is because the world continues to warp your definition of a hero.

The world says that a hero must be someone who is extraordinary.
God says that a hero can easily be you or me.

The world says that a hero is someone who is all over the news or the internet.
God says that a hero may be someone who toils unnoticed.

The world says that a hero must be someone who moves the crowds.
God says that a hero is someone who only needs to move Him.

Do you get what this means?

Because of God, you have tremendous value. You are not like everyone else, just one in six billion. You, too, can be one of those of whom the world is not worthy.

So go out and be a hero. Obey God. Bring Him glory. Be a godly model. If, because of you, other people become more Christ-like then you are indeed a hero.

What can God use?

[Some of this is taken from Francis Schaeffer's book "No Little People."]

[Bring a staff or large branch in for show-and-tell]

In Exodus 3 Moses was "Pasturing the flock." He was a shepherd.

When I say "shepherd" what are some things that you think of? ...

Of those items what is perhaps the simplest and humblest?

His staff, which was a stick of around 4 to 6 feet long. Keep that in mind.

In verse 2 the angel of the Lord appeared to him and told him that he was to lead the oppressed Israelites out of Egypt.

What was Moses' first response? Verse 11, "But Moses said to God, 'Who am I...'" Moses' first thought was, "I can't do it. Look at me. I've got too many flaws. You're going to have to get someone else."

How many times does God tell us to do something but we either don't want to or don't think that we can?

But God reassures him, "Certainly I will be with you." That makes Moses feel better and he even gets a bit fired up and says, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel..."

We hear a powerful sermon or exhortation and that pumps us up. We're now really to go out and conquer that sin or share the Gospel or even walk up to that new person in church and say "hello."

So God proceeds to tell Moses what is going to happen and how it will go. But then God says, "But I know that the king of Egypt will not permit you to go, except under compulsion." Uh oh, so this is not going to be easy. In fact, looks like there is going to be some serious confrontations here.

But then we think about it some more or the emotional fire fades and we realize that it is not going to be all glory and fast track success. There might be rejection. We might look bad. Our confidence might be shaken.

So in chapter 4 Moses starts with his excuses, "What if they will not believe me or listen to what I say?" He is afraid of rejection. How did God reassure Moses? Did God tell Moses that he was going to be given a commanding presence that would dazzle and impress everyone around him? No, God said, "What is that in your hand?" Probably not the response that Moses expected from God, but then God is not always predictable. Moses looked down and said quite simply, "A staff." If a shepherd found a staff that he really liked then he would hang onto it for as long as he could. Moses had been a shepherd for 40 years at this point. It is very possible that this was the same staff that he had used for all of this time. Let's recap. God told Moses to lead a million people out of the powerful nation of Egypt. Moses is nervous and doesn't think that he can do it. So God directs his attention to what?—a dead tree branch. God tells him, "Throw it on the ground." Then it turned into a serpent and Moses fled from it. If this was a comic book God would have given Moses eyes that shoot laser beams that blast apart walls or strength that can bend thick iron bars. But what would have happened? Moses would have gone out confident in what he was. Instead, God took something weak and seemingly useless—this stick--and used it to demonstrate His power. So then when Moses went out he wouldn't necessarily be confident in who he was but he would be confident in who God is and how God wanted to work through him.

We are, likewise, tempted to use similar excuses. "I can't do that because I'm not as smart as..." Or because "I'm not as good looking as..." Or because "I'm not a celebrity like..." But God doesn't make us smarter or better looking or more famous. Instead, He takes our weaknesses and uses them.

Exodus 4:20 tells us this transformation, "Moses also took the staff of God in his hand." Notice that it was no longer Moses' staff; it was God's staff. Likewise, our weaknesses when given to God become His. They are not our hinderances; they are now God's tools.

2 Corinthians 12:9, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

It's not who you are. It's not what you are. It's what you let God do through you. There are no great people in God's kingdom. There are no small people in God's kingdom. But there are people who let God be great through them.

Throughout the rest of Moses' life do we ever really read about Moses by himself doing something incredible? Rather, we see this same staff coming into play.

Throughout the ten plagues we see that Moses "stretched out his staff."

At the Red Sea when it parted God said, "lift up your staff."

When Israel was thirsty and grumbling in the wilderness God told Moses to strike the rock with his staff and water would flow out.

A final use of Moses' staff came 40 years after they started so by now this staff was over 80 years old. In Numbers 20 Israel was once again thirsty and grumbling. What is the first thing that God says to Moses in verse 8? "Take the rod..."

Moses led a million people out an oppressive slave state, across a wilderness for 40 years, and successfully delivered them into the Promised Land. This is one of the greatest feats of leadership ever recorded in history. What was the main quality that allowed Moses to do this?

Was he strikingly handsome? We don't even a description of him.

Was he incredibly diligent? In Numbers 11 Moses said, "it is too burdensome for me" and "please kill me at once."

Did he have great self-esteem and confidence? In Numbers 11:15 Moses says, "do not let me see my wretchedness."

So what was it? What was it about Moses that allowed God to use him so greatly?

Numbers 12:3, "(Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.)"

There is the key—humility.

What does this mean for us?

If we want to be great for God then we shouldn't be motivated to do things so that we will impress others. We don't need to be better than others in some area or in all areas. What will make us great for God is to be on our knees. To know God. To obey God. To be humble.

At the Red Sea why didn't God want Moses to lift up his hands instead of his staff? Why didn't God have Moses tap the rock with his hand rather than strike it with his staff? I believe that it is because the people needed to know that their success wasn't in the hands of a charismatic leader, it wasn't in the hands of a brave warrior, it wasn't in the hands of a genius. Rather it was in the hands of someone whose heart was given to God. The focus was a weathered stick and since everyone knew that the stick in itself wasn't worth anything they had only one conclusion—it was God alone.

2 Chronicles 16:6, “For the eyes of the Lord move to and fro throughout the earth that He may strongly support those whose heart is completely His.”

God doesn't need great people; God wants weak people who will be used by a great God.

[Take the rod and have someone stand next to it.]

We have here a stick and a person. Which do you think can be used more in the hands of God? Yet we just saw how much God used a stick. Imagine what He can do with this person.

So what do we get out of that? Our self-esteem is usually wrong because we base it on what we think of ourselves or what others think of us rather than what God thinks of us. But something else that we usually get wrong is our value. We see ourselves as too small. We don't see how we can really be used by God. And the reason that we are usually wrong is because we look at ourselves and our abilities and think, “Nope, I don't really have any or certainly nothing that would be useful to God.” Or we compare ourselves to others. “He's more dynamic than me.” “She's really got a way of drawing people to herself.” “He knows his Bible far better than I ever will.” “She's just got that get-up-and-go and I barely roll out of bed.” But what we are weighing is how great we think that we are or aren't. What we should really be weighing is how great our God is.

This is the caution of 2 Corinthians 10:12, “For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding.” Notice here that Paul is saying that if we compare ourselves to others then we are what?—without understanding. Or to put it more colloquially, “You just don't get it.” Be yourself; everyone else is already taken. Let God use your unique gifts, talents, and character. That's why He created you that way.

But here is where we can go wrong. We are not partners with Jesus. It is not like we are driving down the highway of life and we see Jesus standing on the side of the road hitchhiking and we stop and say, “Jesus, please get in, but I want You to drive.” No, we are sinners; He is the Savior. We were prisoners enslaved by sin groaning in our misery. Jesus came and set us free. He delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of His beloved Son. We didn't grab His hand and walk across that chasm with Him. He did all of the work. He carried us. We were helpless. We needed grace. We were the paraplegic on a mat. He took our hand and lifted us up. We can do all things only *through Him*. Our sufficiency is only in God. It is all God; we are only vessels. There is no partnership; there is no team. God gives grace to... the humble. We participate with Him but it is not an equal relationship. To those who let themselves be used by Him. It is those who know that they are but sticks and not those who think that they are celebrities. But when you think about it, that is good. If we were partners then the success would depend on what we could contribute. But the key is not what we can give, it is what we are willing to take from God.

In 2005, thieves broke into a British museum and stole a modern sculpture whose value was \$6,000,000. It was never recovered and it is feared that they melted it down for perhaps a few thousand dollars of scrap metal. They did not understand or appreciate its value. We look at this story and think about what

fools they were yet how often are we the same when we view ourselves? We sell ourselves short. We have this image in our minds as to what the ideal Christian is and then we weigh ourselves against this image. And because we know our sins, our evil thoughts, our wrong actions we fall short of this image. Since we can't hit perfection we shrug our shoulders and settle for far less than we should. We melt ourselves down. God sees our value in the millions, but we see our value in dollars.

What is our big mistake? We forget that we are sinners and that God knows that we are sinners and that God works with sinners. All of the great people in the Bible had blemishes or worse.

- Adam and Eve disobeyed God's one and only one command.
- Noah lay drunk and naked.
- David committed adultery and murder.
- Joseph was arrogant.
- Abraham lied.
- Isaac lied.
- Jacob cheated his brother.
- Sarah laughed at God.
- Rebekah schemed against her own husband.
- Moses disregarded God's clear command.
- Aaron created an idol of a golden calf, led an entire nation away from God, and then lied about it.
- Miriam challenged God's appointed leadership.
- Joshua did not drive out all of the peoples from the land as God commanded.
- Samson broke all of his Levitical vows.
- Elijah was so despondent that he wanted to die.
- Solomon married many women and turned to idols.
- Peter denied Jesus.

And we could go on. The lesson here is not that it is OK to sin because God will use us anyway. Paul said in Romans 6:1-2, "What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be!" The lesson is that we are all weak; we are all sinners. God knows this. That's why we need grace.

But look at these people and look at how God used them. Yet look also at their sins. Then think about your sins. Despite your sins God can use you too. Sin can be a hindrance but it is not an excuse nor is it a termination. We can still accomplish great things for God even though we are not perfect. God does not need to wait for people to reach a certain level of spirituality before He can use them.

Look at this contrast.

Exodus 4:10, "Then Moses said to the Lord, 'Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since You have spoken to Your servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.'"

That is how Moses saw himself. “Slow of speech and slow [or thick] of tongue.”

Now look at Acts 7:22, “Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds.”

This is God saw Moses, “a man of power in words and deeds.”

Here is the challenge. Do you describe yourself using excuses or limitations or do you describe yourself as someone whom God can use if you’d only let Him?

So where do you start?

Luke 16:10 is a good place, “He who is faithful in a very little thing is faithful also in much; and he who is unrighteous in a very little thing is unrighteous also in much.”

Start with the little things. No one will walk with God in a great place until they first walk with Him in a small place.

- Read your Bible every day without fail.
- Attend church at least every week.
- Pray at least twice a day.
- Serve in the church somehow even if it is cleaning up.

If you cannot do even these things then how will you expect God to use you more?

Jeremiah 12:5 reiterates this but much more eloquently, “If you have run with footmen and they have tired you out, then how can you compete with horses? If you fall down in a land of peace, how will you do in the thicket of the Jordan?”

If you can’t read your Bible everyday then don’t offer to teach a Bible class.

Each one of us can do more. We just need to pray and let God use us.

Small Acts

How can we tell that we are being used by God? Does the greater the magnitude of the act indicate the greater our humility? To be used by God do we need to shoot for the stars?

Mark 12:41-44

⁴¹ And He sat down opposite the treasury, and *began* observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. ⁴³ Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; ⁴⁴ for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.”

There are at least four key things that we know about this woman.

- 1) She was poor. She didn't have the influence and power of money. She probably had to spend a lot of her time just trying to make ends meet.
- 2) She was a widow. She wasn't surrounded by great people. She was pretty much on her own.
- 3) She was nameless. She wasn't a celebrity. She didn't have an entourage. She was just another person in the crowd. Nothing about her made her stand out.
- 4) And perhaps most importantly, she came. She didn't wait until she felt a special calling. She didn't wait until she was asked. She simply did what God wanted her to do.

It wasn't a great act in itself. The amount of money that she gave probably didn't do much. But 2,000 years later we are still reading about it. Why? An unknown woman. A small deed. Not great results. But... but she honored God. She sacrificed for God. She did something. She came to serve. She came. Get that. It's important. She didn't wait. She came.

Who do you think is honoring God more? The pastor or evangelist who is preaching in front of thousands but whose heart is thinking, "These people love me. Look at how much influence I have over them. They love my stories, my jokes and I can really pull on their emotions when I want to." Or the person who after everyone else has left is sweeping up the garbage but in his heart is thinking, "Thank you, God, for giving me this chance to serve You. May You be blessed with each push of this broom."

Zechariah 4:10 is a huge verse, "For who has despised the day of small things?" Don't beat yourself up because you didn't accomplish spectacular things today. Small things done for God are greater than magnificent things done for yourself.

You've probably heard of B.F. Skinner. In a June 2002 survey, Skinner was listed as the most influential psychologist of the 20th century. He wrote 21 books two of the most well know are "Walden Two" and "Beyond Freedom and Dignity." He was one of the signers of the "Humanist Manifesto II."

Here is something that he wrote in his diary. "Sun streams in (indistinct) room. My hi-fi is midway through the first act of Tristan and Isolde. A very pleasant environment. A man would be a fool not to enjoy himself in it. In a moment I will work on a manuscript which may help mankind. So my life is not only pleasant; it is earned or deserved. And yet, yet, I am unhappy."

Compare this to Habakkuk 3:17-19,

"Though the fig tree should not blossom
And there be no fruit on the vines,
Though the yield of the olive should fail
And the fields produce no food,
Though the flock should be cut off from the fold
And there be no cattle in the stalls,
¹⁸ Yet I will exult in the LORD,
I will rejoice in the God of my salvation.
¹⁹ The Lord GOD is my strength,
And He has made my feet like hinds' feet,
And makes me walk on my high places."

One had everything. Fame, fortune, comfort, a sense of accomplishment and yet he was unhappy.

The other had nothing. No fruit, no grain, no sheep, no cattle and yet he rejoiced.

[What was the difference?]

B.F. Skinner signed the "Humanist Manifesto II." Here are some quotes from it.

"As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to live and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith. Salvationism, based on mere affirmation, still appears as harmful, diverting people with false hopes of heaven hereafter. Reasonable minds look to other means for survival."

"Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices."

"There is no credible evidence that life survives the death of the body."

"Traditional religions often offer solace to humans, but, as often, they inhibit humans from helping themselves or experiencing their full potentialities. Such institutions, creeds, and rituals often impede the will to serve others. Too often traditional faiths encourage dependence rather than independence, obedience rather than affirmation, fear rather than courage."

Habakkuk believed in the Bible. Here are some quotes from it.

Romans 8:1

"Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

Romans 8:28

"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to *His* purpose."

Titus 2:11-13

"For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,¹² instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,¹³ looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of [\[h\]](#)our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus..."

Revelation 22:3-5

"There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him;⁴ they will see His face, and His name *will be* on their foreheads.⁵ And there will no longer be *any* night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever."

Rudolph Rummel was professor emeritus of political science at the University of Hawaii. He concluded that in the last century around 262 million people were killed by their own governments. This is six times as many people who have died in battle.

The world will never improve on its own. It claims to offer a better life based on knowledge but knowledge can have a dark side that can be exploited. If anything, the world is getting worse. Governments are killing their own.

Jesus also offers better means but because His way is based on unconditional love it has no dark side. For true peace and harmony in the world we do not need better science; we need more of Jesus around us and in us. The rulers of this world will oppose and murder people to maximize their own power and control. Jesus, the King of the Universe, frees and gives life to His people to maximize their worth and joy.

Science can never tell us, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Do not let your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful." - John 14:27. Only Jesus can promise this.

A humanist is someone who is blindfolded and led into a vast room. Then the blindfold is removed but the room is still dark. He sees nothing. He stretches out his arms but doesn't feel anything but air. He may move and eventually reach a wall but it tells him very little about what is around him. This is his life.

A Christian is likewise blindfolded and led into the same room. But when his blindfold is removed the room is lit up and sees that he is in the Sistine Chapel. Above his head and out of reach are magnificent frescoes of God and the heavens. There are Creation scenes, great Biblical prophets, and Noah's Ark among many other great depictions. As he turns and takes in all of this glory his heart is filled with joy. His understanding is deepened. This is our life.

Both men were in the same room but only one was illuminated. One groped around and could only make guesses as to what was around him. His conclusions were shallow and cold. The other could see what really was there. His life was more complex and meaningful.

This is what God gives to us: a life with more meaning, a life with more answers, a life surrounded with truth.

What is God's definition of greatness?

Mark 10:42-45

⁴² Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

In this definition of greatness we do not see the words “popular,” “charismatic,” “eloquent,” “powerful,” “rich.” Instead we see two very similar words: “servant” and “slave.” The great person is not one who has others do things for him. In the Kingdom of God, the great person is the one who does things for others.

Here again we see one of the keys to being what God wants us to be. Jesus came.

What are some of the differences between Jesus and the Pharisees?

The Pharisees had an attitude of neglect whereas Jesus had an attitude of doing.

We see that the Pharisees:

- Neglected the weightier provisions of the law (Matthew 23)
- Neglected the condition of their hearts (Matthew 23)
- Neglected their father and mother (Matthew 15)
- Neglected sinners (Mark 2)
- Neglect the commandment of God (Mark 7)
- Neglected (rejected) God’s purpose for themselves (Luke 7)

But we see that Jesus:

- To start His ministry at His baptism, “In those days Jesus came from Nazareth in Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan.” (Mark 1:9)
- When it came to preaching the Gospel, “Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God” (Mark 1:14)
- When Peter, James, and John were scared and trembling on the Mount of Transfiguration, “And Jesus came to *them* and touched them and said, “Get up, and do not be afraid.” (Matthew 17:7)
- At Jesus’ greatest trial He wasn’t dragged kicking and screaming, “Then Jesus *came with them to a place called Gethsemane” (Matthew 26:36)
- After the Resurrection when the disciples were scared and hiding behind closed doors, “Jesus came and stood in their midst and **said* to them, ‘Peace *be* with you.’” (John 20:19)
- It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Timothy 1:15)

What a contrast.

If we want to be Christ-like then we, likewise, need to come and do. If not, then we should make excuses and neglect what we can and should do.

What we see here, also, is that it levels the playing field. Not everyone can be a great teacher. Not everyone will go to a foreign mission field and see villages come to Christ. Not everyone will write best-selling books. But everyone can serve. And because everyone can serve that means that everyone can be great.

But let's be clear here, we do not serve because we think that it is the easiest and most reliable path to greatness. We serve because we want to be like Christ. And if God then wants to make us great then that is purely His choice and, after years of service, if we complain because we haven't gotten anywhere special in the kingdom of God then that right there shows us why we haven't gotten anywhere.

In one Bible story, a group of people worked on a great project. It required a tremendous amount of planning, resources, and hard work. The results were spectacular. Another story is about one anonymous person who did something that took a few minutes and very little money. Which was greater? The first was the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11. The second, in Mark 12, was about a widow putting two small coins into the temple treasury. In the first, God Himself had to stop the work lest the people became proud. For the widow's offering Jesus used it as a timeless example of faith.

Today's media teaches us to admire the great and the spectacular. But what is the greater display of grace: the baseball player who slugs the game winning home run or the single parent who is struggling to run a household and pay the bills but still makes the time to teach her children to be godly? Is it the millionaire who gives thousands of dollars to charity or the person whose health is failing but still manages to go to church every week and bless other people? Small things done with God's grace are always great.

Greatness is not measured by the grandeur of the project but by obedience to God no matter how small the task.

Does God help those who help themselves?

What are some things that the following share in common?

The axe head of a prophet fell into water. Elisha threw a stick into the water and the axe head floated and was recovered. 2 Kings 6:1-7

Jacob put almond and poplar and plane tree sticks in front of the strong members of the flock so that when they mated the offspring would come out striped, speckled, and spotted and so would be his. Genesis 30:37-43

[Elisha struck the waters of the Red Sea with Elijah's mantle and the waters divided so that he was able to pass through them. 2 Kings 2:14]

Elisha put some meal into a pot of poisonous stew and now it was safe to eat. 2 Kings 4:38-41

Moses struck a rock with his staff and water abundantly poured out, enough to quench hundreds of thousands of people. Numbers 20:11

When God sent fiery serpents among Israel that bit them, those who looked upon a bronze serpent on a standard were the ones who lived. Numbers 21:6-9

A bunch of people marched around a great city blowing trumpets and when they shouted the walls fell down. Joshua 6:1-21

[What are some things that the following share in common?]

They were all miracles.

God took an unfavorable situation and made it better.

They show God's care for people; they weren't just ostentatious (flashy) displays of power.

But look at these again. One thing that they share in common is that someone or a great number of people were in trouble and God had someone do something illogical or unreasonable that solved the problem.

Would throwing a stick into water really make an iron axe head float? It isn't like the axe head was stuck at the bottom and the stick stirred up the water and dislodged the axe head so that it could float to the surface. Iron doesn't float at all.

Would putting a peeled stick in front of breeding sheep actually affect the color of their offspring?

Does meal really contradict the effects of poison?

Does hitting a rock with a stick really cause torrents of water to flow out?

Does looking on a bronze snake really heal the poisonous effects of being bitten?

And you can strike up an entire brass orchestra for as long as you want and they aren't going to knock down solid brick walls.

The truth is that doing none of these things would have, in any way, accomplished the end results. In fact, it is obvious that what God had the people do didn't make any sense at all. So why do it? Why did God have these people, and many other instances in the Bible, do these kinds of things?

It is because God wants us to participate with Him—in the miraculous and in the mundane. We are not spectators in the stands cheering God on while He does all of the work. We are the team on the field, not the cheerleaders jumping up and down on the sidelines shaking pom-poms.

Look at some of these Scriptures where Paul talks about laboring in the Christian faith.

1 Timothy 4:10

For it is for this we labor and strive, because we have fixed our hope on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of believers.

1 Corinthians 3:8

Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor.

1 Corinthians 15:10

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

Colossians 1:29

For this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Revelation 14:13 tells us one of the great blessings of Heaven

And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, "Write, 'Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!'" "Yes," says the Spirit, "so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them."

They labored hard while on the Earth and now is the time that they can rest from them. We may quit our jobs when we are in our 60s and sleep in in the mornings. But Christian retirement is called Heaven.

Peter walked on the water

In Matthew 14 after feeding the 5,000 Jesus made the disciples go into a boat. There was a storm that the disciples struggled against all night. Then at around 5:00 AM Jesus came to them walking on the water. They thought that He was a ghost which, in that culture, if you saw a ghost it meant that you were going to die. Then Jesus used a phrase that He used often. No it wasn't "Buck it up you ninnyes and deal with it." It was "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid." Then Peter walked on the water. We always focus on Peter because what he did was stupendous and there are a ton of lessons that we can get out of these events. But what about the other disciples? You don't hear much about them. Why not? Because they just sat there. They were spectators. We can talk about Peter's losing sight of Jesus and looking at the turmoil around him and sinking. Yes, the other disciples didn't sink but they didn't walk on water either.

Mother Teresa said, "God doesn't require us to succeed; he only requires that you try."

Peter tried and God honored that effort enough to include it in the Bible. The ones who sat there and watched don't get a mention.

When Mother Teresa, when asked by a reporter where God is when a baby dies in a Calcutta alley responded, "God is there, suffering with the baby. The question really is, where are you?"

And that is the question to you and me.

When people are dying and going to Hell where are you?

When children—children—are being trafficked as sex slaves where are you?

When people in our church are hurting or lonely where are you?

Part of participating with God means persevering.

John 21:3-6

Simon Peter *said to them, "I am going fishing." They *said to him, "We will also come with you." They went out and got into the boat; and that night they caught nothing. ⁴ But when the day was now breaking, Jesus stood on the beach; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ So Jesus *said to them, "Children, you do not have any fish, do you?" They answered Him, "No." ⁶ And He said to them, "Cast the net on the right-hand side of the boat and you will find *a catch*." So they cast, and then they were not able to haul it in because of the great number of fish.

Here is the scene, the disciples were fishing all night and they didn't catch anything. When Jesus asked them if they caught any fish they replied "no." So what didn't Jesus ask them to do?

[Any thoughts? What didn't Jesus ask them to do?]

- He didn't ask them to stop and pray.
- He didn't ask them to examine their lives and see if there was any sin that might have been keeping God from blessing them.
- He didn't tell them to come back in.
- He didn't tell them to stop and have a Bible study.

He told them to try again. And here are the key words, "so they cast." They did something and they got God's blessing.

If they instead responded, "You know what, we'll just stand here and pray and watch God do a miracle" do you think that they would have caught any fish? Almost certainly not.

They took action. They partnered with Jesus.

Had Thomas Edison not been a man of faith, perseverance and determination, we may still be working by gaslight or at least, it may have been many years before the first electric light was seen. It has been reported that Edison failed over 6,000 times before perfecting the first electric light bulb.

On one occasion a young journalist challenged Edison saying to him, "Mr. Edison, why do you keep trying to make light by using electricity when you have failed so many times? Don't you know that gas lights are with us to stay?"

To this Edison replied, "Young man, don't you realize that I have not failed but have successfully discovered six thousand ways that won't work!"

Because Edison believed an electric light was possible, he refused to give up. He tried countless types of material in his search for a filament that would work. He sent men to China, Japan, South America, Asia, Jamaica, Ceylon and Burma to search for fibers to test in his laboratory--all to no avail.

On October 21, 1879, after thirteen months of repeated failures, Edison finally succeeded in finding a filament that would work. While experimenting the thought came to him, "Why not try a carbonized cotton fibre?"

After going through two spools of cotton, he eventually perfected a strand only to break it while trying to place it in a glass tube. He refused to give up and persevered with this idea for two more days and nights without sleep. Finally he succeeded in placing a carbonized thread into a vacuum-sealed bulb! Eureka! It worked.

This is the same Thomas Edison who said, "I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward." Thomas Edison holds 1,093 patents. He also said, "Many of life's failures are men who did not realize how close they were to success when they gave up." And one last quote from him, "Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work."

In Exodus 14 Israel had just left Egypt and were at the Red Sea. Pharaoh changed his mind about letting them go and pursued them with all of the chariots of Egypt. Israel was trapped because the sea was on one side and the Egyptian army was on the other.

Moses had delivered Israel before and had great miracles performed through him. So here he once again takes charge. Notice what he says in verses 13 and 14.

¹³ But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent."

This seems reasonable. Moses is pointing the people to God and telling them to watch what miraculous salvation God will do.

But he left one key player out of the equation.

Look at verses 15 and 16.

¹⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward.

¹⁶ As for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land."

God rebukes Moses because Moses wanted God to do everything while he just stood back and watched. But God wanted Moses and the people to do something. The key words here: "go forward." Do something. And to Moses God told him to "lift up your staff and stretch out your hand."

When we are in a crisis oftentimes we want to stop trying and let God take control. Many times when we want to stop, step aside, and let God take care of everything He wants us to "go forward." We want easy, but God wants effort. Maybe we think that we are stepping aside and "getting out of God's way" but, instead, God wants us to stay on the path and to "go forward" with His strength.

Our action coupled with God's grace can produce astonishing results.

The strength comes from prayer but the results oftentimes come from going forward.

Jesus wasn't crucified for His moderation. He wasn't persecuted for His excuses. He was murdered for what He said and did.

Does God help those who help themselves? When done apart from God's grace then no. Those people God leaves to their own devices. And oftentimes God helps those who cannot help themselves. But many, many times God will only work with those who make an effort.

So cast out your net again, participate with God, and go forward.