

Tools for
**Spiritual
Growth**



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Tools for **Spiritual Growth**

Are you desiring a closer relationship with God? If so, where do you start? What tools can you use to grow spiritually and build that all-important relationship with your Creator? This important study aid will set you on the right path. Read and begin implementing these important elements today!

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The Privilege and Power of Prayer

“Then [Jesus] spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart” (Luke 18:1).

Phone home!” Sound familiar? Maybe you heard it from your parents. Parents want to hear from their children—because they love them. God wants to hear from His children for the same reason—because He loves us.

What is prayer? It is speaking to and conversing with our Creator. Everyone can do it and *should* do it. What is breathtakingly inspiring is that God hears, is interested in and answers prayers! Prayer is effective—in other words, prayer from those sincerely responsive to God gets results.

Phone home! God is never asleep or too busy to listen. There is never a bad connection or a bad time. You never get a busy signal or voice mail or get put on hold. You have unlimited free minutes—and hours. So no excuses!

The most powerful man in history

Even though Jesus Christ was God in the flesh (John 1:1-5, 14), He knew the importance of praying to our Heavenly Father. The Bible gives us many examples of Jesus fervently praying to His Father, not only praising God but asking for help. Jesus clearly knew that God in heaven was the ultimate source of success in every endeavor.

If Jesus Christ needed help from His Heavenly Father, how much more do we! And we have many other role models as well. All the dedicated people of God in the Bible and in history have been people of prayer.

Jesus' disciples soon realized their Master's source of power. They said, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luke 11:1). Would you like to learn Christ's teachings regarding prayer? You probably have them in your home. They are scattered throughout the Bible.

Anyone can begin to pray even before he has learned anything about prayer. God hears and appreciates the simplest of prayers. Jesus made it plain: “Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Matthew 7:7). It's noteworthy that in English the first letters of the key words “ask, seek, knock” spell *ask!*

But God wants us to *grow* in understanding and application of how to

pray. Like learning a new hobby, sport or activity, satisfaction and rewards increase with added knowledge and skill. So it is invaluable to read and understand the biblical teachings regarding prayer.

We can gain much understanding and inspiration from many wonderful examples of prayers in the book of Psalms and throughout the Bible. Daily *practice* naturally leads to added proficiency and pleasure in prayer. Countless people have attested to this.

Talk to God as your Father

When His disciples said, “Teach us to pray,” Jesus began His lesson in prayer by giving them a brief outline of some of the most important things to pray about on a daily basis. Commonly called “the Lord’s Prayer,” Jesus’ instruction is found in Luke 11:2-4 and Matthew 6:9-13. (For help in understanding it, see “The Lord’s Prayer as a Guideline.”)

Note that Jesus suggested that the most frequent way we are to address

The Lord’s Prayer as a Guideline

In Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, right after instructing people not to use vain repetition in prayer (Matthew 6:7), He gave a model prayer now referred to as the Lord’s Prayer—or “Our Father” for its first words (verses 9-13). In Luke 11:1-4, one of Jesus’ disciples asked that He teach them to pray, and He gave basically the same prayer. Sadly, many have missed His point and recite the wording of this prayer with rote repetition—just as He said not to do.

When Jesus taught that we pray “in this manner” (Matthew 6:9) or said, “When you pray, say . . .” (Luke 11:2), He did not mean that we repeat verbatim His words that followed. Rather, he gave an *example of the kind of things to say or an outline of categories to cover*.

Looking at the structure, we see that He opens and closes with praise to God and places requests in between. Let’s note the progression:

“*Our Father in heaven.*” We are to be mindful of whom we are addressing, the great God of heaven, and that we are privileged to come before Him in a close relationship as His children. The “our” focus here is an outward one of including others.

“*Hallowed be your name.*” We express a desire that God’s name and all that it stands for be treated as holy—praised, honored and respected—by all, and especially by us as we express praise and thanks to Him.

“*Your kingdom come.*” We express eager support for God’s plan, pleading that His rule over the world come swiftly to set things right—mindful of what is currently wrong in the world. And we personally desire that God would reign in our own lives now. (Note that all the requests of this prayer will find ultimate fulfillment when God’s Kingdom comes.)

“*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*” We ask that all would perfectly obey God just as the angels of heaven do—and that we would seek and obey God’s will in our lives.

“*Give us this day our daily bread.*” We ask that God provide for our immediate needs—both physical and spiritual. We should ask for others too and not just ourselves. And we should express thanks for what God has already blessed us with. The phrase harkens back to the “daily bread,” or manna, by which God sustained the ancient Israelites in their 40 years of wandering in the desert wilderness to teach

God is as “our Father in heaven.” We can and should have many relationships with God, which are revealed by the names and titles for God found in Scripture. But the most important relationship is that of *our Father*—an all-loving and perfect father.

All human beings can and should think of God as their Father since He is their Creator. And as their relationship with God becomes closer, that father-child relationship builds to deeper and more intimate levels.

So how should we talk to God? He wants us to come to Him as to a beloved parent. We should feel confident, secure, understood, appreciated and loved in coming before Him. When we talk with our physical fathers, we are not repetitious or scripted, we don’t use an unnatural syrupy tone or a monotone. And we don’t use archaic language because we think it sounds more religious. Neither is this necessary with God.

Our Heavenly Father cherishes prayers offered with complete honesty and sincerity, even if they include respectful complaints. The prayers in the

them that they were ultimately reliant completely on Him—a vital lesson for us as well.

“*And forgive us our sins [or debts] as we forgive those who sin against us [or who are indebted to us]*”—the debt aspect here concerning paying the consequences we deserve. With a repentant attitude, we ask that God forgive us where we’ve done wrong, thankful for His great mercy and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and recognizing that we must have a forgiving attitude toward others who’ve wronged us in some way (Matthew 6:14-15).

“*And lead us not into temptation [or severe trial].*” We ask that God would help us to learn lessons quickly and do right immediately rather than having to go through chastising hardship and tribulation to get our act together.

“*But deliver us from the evil.*” We ask for protection—from harm or calamity as well as malevolence directed against us. We seek deliverance from the evil *one*—Satan the devil—and His demonic accomplices along with the society they have influenced. And we seek rescue from our own corrupt selves with our selfish nature.

“*For Yours is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.*” We end our prayers as we began, with praising God. This is a condensed form of David’s praise in 1 Chronicles

29:11 (see also Psalm 145:10-13).

“*Amen.*” This concluding affirmation means “truly” or “so be it.” And in line with Jesus’ instruction that we pray to the Father in His name (John 16:24, 26), it is fitting to include before the final amen the phrase “in Jesus’ name” or the equivalent.

Again, we should think of the above parts of the prayer not as exact words to say but as *examples* of what to say—or even as category headings of subjects to elaborate on. Consider that the incense of God’s tabernacle and temple service in the Old Testament was to figuratively represent the prayers of God’s people (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 5:8; 8:3-4). And this incense was to be “beaten fine” (Leviticus 16:12). This seems to symbolize the importance of expressing fine detail in our prayers.

Of course, some prayers will be shorter and others longer—it depends on the circumstances. In any case, we must make time to pray.

Never think that you don’t have anything to pray about. Jesus gave a whole list of subjects here. Also, the Bible contains other prayers providing further examples—including the psalms. And as you consider these passages, you can always pray that God will help you to pray. The words will come.

book of Psalms certainly portray candid honesty.

When people pray nice words while thinking and doing contradictory things, they apparently think God can't read minds. When we use our tongue to "bless our God and Father, and [to] curse men," our prayer is counted as hypocrisy (James 3:9-12, 17; see also Matthew 7:21-23).

Imagining what God is like is relatively easy for someone who has had a loving and attentive earthly father. Admittedly, it is much more difficult, especially at first, for someone whose parental experience has been with a cold, uncommunicative, abusive or absentee father.

Such a person should make a major effort to learn what an ideal father is like and establish that picture in his or her mind's eye. Some inspiring and encouraging descriptions of God as our Heavenly Father are found in Matthew 7:9-11, John 3:16-17, James 1:5, 17, 1 John 4:8-19, Psalm 103 and Luke 15:11-32 (the father in the parable of the prodigal son).

Life is about relationships

Of all God's creatures, human beings have the unique and awesome privilege of being created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27). The greatest benefit of this is being able to have a personal relationship with God.

Throughout His Word, God repeatedly stresses the importance of right relationships. In fact, Jesus said that the two greatest commandments are to love God and to love our fellow man (Matthew 22:35-40).

Beginning with our creation, God has done many things to initiate a relationship with us. It is up to us to respond to Him and show initiative in nurturing that relationship with good communication. "Draw near to God and He will draw near to you," James 4:8 tells us. Our prayers keep us connected to God. (Later chapters of this booklet cover Bible study, meditation and fasting and how they also help us draw near and stay near to God.)

Jesus said to His disciples, "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). Here Jesus explained a crucial factor in true friendship—*ongoing open and sincere communication*. A true friend is someone you talk with openly and regularly.

God is the Great Communicator. He records in the Bible His revelation of everything we need to know about His plan for our lives. His Word gives us His worldview, the framework for a true perspective on life—past, present and future. Plus He communicates with us and guides us in other ways—by His Holy Spirit, through His Church, through other individuals, through circumstances and through experiences that He sets up.

But a good relationship depends on *two-way communication—a dialogue*. Prayer and Bible study go hand in hand, along with serious thought

and introspection about how to apply God's teachings in our own lives. Each of us must ask: How good a friend am I to God? How good a son or daughter am I to my Father? Call home daily!

Without prayer, life is precarious

Physical, frail human beings are highly vulnerable to countless dangers—physical, mental and spiritual perils. The greatest danger is from our greatest enemy, Satan the devil, who "walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (1 Peter 5:8).

Ephesians 6:10-20 explains how we need spiritual armor "to stand against the wiles of the devil," and prayer is an important part of that armor (verses 18-19). Why face life's battles with no armor? If we don't pray, we become prey to this ruthless predator.

We are terribly foolish to try "going it alone" in this evil and dangerous world—neglecting to rely on God. Some suffering is punishment from God, particularly when people knowingly sin against Him. But most suffering comes automatically from our own actions, the actions of others, or time and chance.

However, God will intervene for those who are relying on Him to protect them from the majority of mishaps. At times God allows His followers to suffer personal trials to learn certain lessons, but He protects them from most dangers. For those who seek to do God's will and ask for help, He will continually guide, help and protect them. If we don't forsake God, He will never leave or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). What a promise! And what peace of mind that promise brings!

Of course, we must do our part in striving to remain faithful to God. (See "God Has Conditions for Answered Prayer" on page 8.)

In the name of Jesus Christ

Some people have not learned that Jesus Christ is the one "door" and the one "way" to God (John 10:9; 14:6). Does God ever answer their prayers anyway? Because God is immensely merciful, He probably does. If a person's religious practices at first fall short of true biblical Christianity, God may for awhile answer some of that person's prayers *in spite of his or her religious ignorance* rather than because of it. But that won't last if the person makes no effort to learn and do as the Bible teaches.

The only *promise* of answered prayer on a regular basis is to the true followers of God the Father through His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus is the One who, though divine, became a human being, lived a perfect life and suffered and died to pay the penalties of sin for all mankind. He is the Savior of the world. Speaking of Jesus, the apostle Peter said, "There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted

to mankind by which we can be saved” (Acts 4:12, Revised English Bible)

Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you” (John 16:23-24; see also John 14:13-14). As human beings, we do not of ourselves have the right, authority or privilege to approach God’s throne with our prayers because of our own goodness. But through faith and commitment to Jesus Christ, He authorizes us to call on God in His name, acting with His authorization. Thus, with His approval, we have access to God when we pray “in Jesus’ name.”

Jesus further serves us as our High Priest by interceding and mediating on our behalf with the Father (Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1-2). This assures us that we have access through Him to the fullness of God’s mercy and forgiveness (Hebrews 2:17; 4:14-16; 10:19-22). Then God the Father makes the decision as to how to answer the prayer, and Jesus Christ carries out the Father’s will.

Other points on how and when to pray

God certainly “hears” silent prayers, and someone who is close to God may utter silent prayers often throughout each day. The Bible tells us to “pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). But God is also pleased to have us vocalize audible prayers. Numerous times the Scriptures mention the praying person using his voice, mouth, lips and tongue. The Bible also

God Has Conditions for Answered Prayer

It is only logical that God expects us to fulfill certain conditions if we want His help. He will not continue to answer prayers for someone whose attitude is not right or who is unwilling to do his or her part. So what does God expect of us when we come to Him in prayer?

- Obedience to God is a vital condition for answered prayer. If we expect God to continue hearing our prayers, we must begin obeying the Ten Commandments and His other commandments (1 John 3:22).

- Confess your sins to God so that your sins will no longer stand in the way. Remember that to be forgiven, we must be forgiving of others (Isaiah 59:2; Matthew 6:12, 14-15).

- One’s motives should not be selfish, greedy or trying to impress others (James 4:2-3; Matthew 6:5-6; 18:9-14).

- Study the Bible to know and pray accord-

ing to God’s mind and will (John 15:7; 1 John 5:14-15; Matthew 4:4).

- Believe—have full faith in God’s love, mercy and promises—and expect answers (Mark 11:24; Hebrews 10:22, 38-39; 11:6; James 1:5-6).

- Be extremely grateful to God and express thanksgiving and praise profusely (Philippians 4:6; Colossians 4:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18).

- Be wholehearted, fervent and passionate in prayer (James 5:16; Psalm 119:145; Hosea 7:14).

- Multiple repetitions of words and phrases are worthless, although Christ taught persistence in repeating a petition to God day after day (Matthew 6:7-8; Luke 11:5-13; 18:1-7).

- Ask God to guide and inspire you with His Holy Spirit (Romans 8:14-15, 26-27; John 14:26).

frequently uses expressions like *cry*, *cried out*, *cried aloud*, *called to*, etc.

Certain biblical references to frequency of prayer, like twice daily (Psalm 88:1) and thrice daily (Psalm 55:17; Daniel 6:10), probably refer to the number of audible prayers, not the number of total prayers.

Regarding bodily positions during prayer, the Bible mentions several—kneeling, standing, sitting, lying down. Circumstances, including health problems, sometimes limit us in what positions we can choose. We can talk with God while taking a walk or driving a car. The most important consideration is to always do your best to express humility and deep reverence.

The Bible includes examples of appropriate public prayer and group prayer, but the majority of our personal prayers should be private communication with God (Matthew 6:5-6). However, *family prayer* is also vitally important. It’s important to teach children from a very young age to pray. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to Me” (Matthew 19:14). God is very interested in and responsive to their prayers.

Busy? Most of us are. Lack time to pray? Consider that *we all make time for those things we consider most important*. And we will accomplish more in the long run when we put God first. Hence we cannot afford to *not* pray. Prayer needs to be a top priority and a daily habit.

In your prayers, besides going through your needs and wants, make sure to take time to thank God for the many ways He has blessed you in your life. And take time to pray for others.

If you’re coming to God about a problem, pour out your heart to Him about it without dictating what His solutions should be. Father knows best. God always responds in the way that is best for us spiritually. And that sometimes means the answer is “no” or “not now,” or the answer is a partial response to our prayer or something other than what we expect or want.

Phone home

“What is man that You are mindful of him?” asked David in Psalm 8:4. It’s a wonder of wonders how God cares for His little creatures—that He would listen to each of our prayers and give us His personal attention. But it’s true—He does.

Let’s not let the wonderful spiritual tool of prayer go to waste by not using it. Let’s walk with God—obey Him and talk with Him—in prayer.

The Bible compares this life to our being pilgrims living in tents far from home. Our goal is enter the Kingdom of God—to “dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6). Home is wherever God is, and our destiny, after Christ returns to earth, is to dwell with Him forever.

In the meantime, we can stay in touch—daily and more than daily—with our Father and our elder Brother, Jesus Christ.

Phone home. *Pray.*

Learn, Live and Love the Bible

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

The Bible is boring, I concluded. I was about 10 years old, had some reverence for the Bible and decided I should read it—from Genesis to the maps at the back. I didn’t get very far.

I was proud of my progress until I almost crashed in chapter 5, a boring genealogical record. However, being a sequential person who hadn’t learned when to skim or skip while reading, I struggled my way through, verse by verse. But then in chapter 10 I hit another genealogical record! At that point I gave up on the Old Testament.

At least I’ll read the New Testament, I thought. Surely it would be more interesting. But the New Testament *begins* with a genealogical record! Though somewhat ashamed of my lack of spirituality and commitment, I gave up on reading the Bible. Based on my unfair sampling, I decided it was not very user-friendly.

Then when I was 12, one of my younger brothers died. I began to think much more seriously about the meaning of life and about life after death. Looking back on it, I see how God gradually used that painful memory to begin to turn my life around.

The real turning point

But I didn’t read the Bible until I was forced to. A required one-semester university course for engineering students was Survey of the Bible. We were assigned to read a wide variety of selections throughout the Bible. That opened my eyes. I was fascinated and amazed at much of what I read!

I learned many impressive things about the Bible, including how it ranks right at the top among mankind’s greatest works of literature. Even in secular writing, the Bible is quoted, knowingly and unknowingly, far more than any other book.

Also I came to appreciate the meaning of the Judeo-Christian heritage—the profound influence the Bible has had on Western civilization. Today

one can buy whole books of quotes from many of America’s founding fathers stating their strong beliefs in the Bible.

That class was the great turning point of my life. I soon began eagerly studying the Bible. A whole new world had opened up to me. I was discovering how valid and valuable the Scriptures are—how reliable and relevant they prove to everyday life. My perspective on everything changed—and changed for the better.

Above all, I was not only learning *about* God, I was coming to *know* God in a real and personal way. From then on when I read the Bible, it was *God talking to me!*

At the same time, I was studying a lot of science and math. It became clear to me that every



God indeed did give us His revelation of what we need to know but could not learn on our own. It is a handbook for life that we call the Bible.

detail in the universe is the result of perfect planning, engineering and construction—it could not have happened by accident! I figured that if the Bible is from God, it too must be absolutely perfect—and I set out to prove whether this is so.

Indeed, God has revealed Himself in two ways—His *words* (the Bible) and His *works* (the creation we see around us) (compare Psalm 19:1-4; Romans 1:20).

The Maker’s instruction manual

Of all the earth’s creatures, it’s obvious that human beings are unique. We have magnificent minds with amazing intellectual capacities. Human minds also have spiritual potential and a hunger for spirituality. This is not surprising once we learn that “God created man in His own image”—in the image of God Himself—to have an intimate relationship with Him! (Genesis 1:27).

All physical life-forms are governed mainly by instinct, except for human beings. We need a roadmap—a guidebook for life—or else our intellectual and spiritual interests will go in all the wrong directions.

It makes no sense that God would create His masterpiece and then leave us in the dark as to why we are here. God indeed *did* give us His

revelation of what we need to know but could not learn on our own. It is a handbook for life that we call the Bible.

The English word “Bible” is derived from the Greek word *biblion*—meaning “books.” The Bible is a collection of what we now have as 66 books—39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New. These were composed by about 40 writers with different writing styles, living in 10 nations, over about 1,500 years!

However—miracle of miracles—in spite of the Bible’s great *diversity*, there is astounding *unity*. It is consistent and coherent all the way through.

How could that be? It is because God inspired and directed every writer. Thus the real Author behind the scenes was always God (2 Timothy 3:16).

So the Bible is also *one* book. It is *the* Book—the Book of books. Many religions claim to have a sacred book. But the *Holy Bible* is exactly that—*God’s Book*. It is divine revelation to man and therefore the literal and actual “Word of God.” It is *complete*, and God warns in the Old and New Testaments not to add to it or take away from it (Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Revelation 22:18-19).

In fact, the Bible even gives us myriad first-person quotes from God that are introduced by such phrases as “Thus says the LORD . . .”

One Bible in two parts

Ironically, many Christians ignore the Old Testament as being irrelevant, while most Jews reject the New Testament. Both views are wrong. *Together* the two testaments constitute the written Word of God. The New Testament cannot be properly understood without a foundational knowledge of the Old, and the Old Testament must be understood in the light of the New. They complement and complete each other.

Jesus Christ and the writers of the New Testament repeatedly quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures we call the Old Testament. For many years they were the only Scriptures the early Christian Church had. These Scriptures, as amplified by Jesus’ own statements, were the basis for Christian teachings and practices. Later, by the time the apostle Peter wrote his second epistle, some parts of what became the New Testament were also being accepted as “Scriptures” (see 2 Peter 3:16).

Many people erroneously believe that during His ministry Jesus Christ criticized the Pharisees and other Jews for teaching and living by the Old Testament. Not so. Jesus scolded them for *not* living by the Scriptures! It was as if they had not even *read* the Scriptures, because Jesus repeatedly asked, “Have you not read . . . ?” Jesus also said, “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (Mark 7:9; see verses 5-13).

Today, Judaism is much the same. Plus, most of Christianity also favors

human religious traditions over the Bible, and many of those traditions are in *conflict* with the Bible.

What comes from God is perfect. The original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts of the Bible were infallible (although no human translation of those texts is perfect). The Bible is true, and it is truth—the ultimate truth (John 17:17).

The Bible should serve as the foundation for all areas of knowledge. Harmony with the Bible is the ultimate filter or test of truth. If an idea or theory is in conflict with the Bible, it cannot be correct. The Bible is especially necessary for understanding the absolutes of life, such as what is good and what is evil.

New Testament Church vs. today’s skepticism

Notice this emphatic statement by the apostle Paul: “But this I confess to you, that according to the Way which they call a sect, so I worship the God of my fathers, believing all things which are written in the Law and in the Prophets” (Acts 24:14). True Christianity was called “the Way”—for it is *a way of life*, not just a belief.

And “the Law and the Prophets” here is a reference to what we call the Old Testament. So Paul said he believed *all things* in the Old Testament!

Great Themes of the Bible

The Bible is unified by profound themes running through it. Although it contains a number of major themes, here are three of the most important:

Jesus Christ. Not only does the New Testament give us the life and teachings of the Son of God, much of the Old Testament includes prophecies of His first and second comings (Luke 24:44). The greatest event of the past was Christ’s first coming to earth as God made flesh. The greatest event in the future will be His second coming as glorified God in power and majesty. Although few understand this, Jesus Christ was the Creator and God in the Old Testament, acting on behalf of the Father (see John 1:1-14; Hebrews 1:1-2; Colossians 1:13-16; 1 Corinthians 10:4). To fully understand, be sure to read our free booklet *Jesus Christ: The Real Story*.

Love. “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). The two “great commandments” are love for God

and love for neighbor (Matthew 22:35-40). The Ten Commandments and God’s other laws show us how to love God and how to love other people. The Bible is a love story—God’s love for the whole world and how all people must learn to love God and others in turn (John 3:16; 1 John 3:16; 5:3).

Salvation. “Jesus” means “God Is Salvation,” and He came to “save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). The greatest set of miracles related in the Old Testament was the deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian slavery. That and all the other times that God rescued His people are symbolic of the miraculous spiritual liberation, conversion and transformation of those whom God calls out of their spiritual Egypt of sinful life “into the glorious liberty of the children of God” (Romans 8:21). This is only possible because of the supreme sacrifice Christ made for us so our sins can be forgiven and we can be saved by His grace (Ephesians 2:8).

Many “Christians” today don’t believe everything in the New Testament, much less the Old Testament!

In today’s world, the tragic trend is toward disbelief in and apathy toward the Bible. “Christianity” is increasingly disconnected from the Bible. Most professing Christians don’t even *read* the Bible, and even fewer obey its teachings. Many of the beliefs and practices that they *assume* come from the Bible in fact *do not*.

Many people avoid reading the Bible—and some even hate it—because they know or suspect that it will correct them for sins and other habits they are not willing to give up.

Proofs of the Bible

God doesn’t want blind faith. He wants you to have faith based on solid evidence. “Test [prove] all things; hold fast what is good,” He tells us (1 Thessalonians 5:21). You can prove the divine origin, authenticity and accuracy of the Bible.

To help you prove whether the Bible is true and trustworthy, request our free booklet *Is the Bible True?* Many other published books are also very helpful.

Some of the major proofs of the Bible’s divine inspiration are:

Fulfilled prophecies. Many past events were prophesied in the Bible and came to pass exactly as foretold. It will be even more impressive to see future prophesied events happen exactly as promised. For more information, download or request our free booklet *You Can Understand Bible Prophecy*.

Internal harmony. The Bible never contradicts itself! This is truly miraculous considering that it was written over the course of some 1,500 years by about 40 different authors! Some details in the Bible may seem to contradict at first glance, and many skeptics point to apparent discrepancies to try to disprove divine inspiration. However, several good books have been written that explain such alleged discrepancies, showing that when properly understood they are not contradictory. If there are a few that we can’t readily explain, they merely show our human lack of understanding, not errors in the Bible.

Science. There is no conflict between true science and the Bible. (Evolution is a theory for explaining certain observations in science, not science itself.) When science and the Bible seem to conflict, one or the other is not being correctly understood. The Creator God who inspired the Bible understands science better than all scientists put together.

Archaeology. This is the study of the material remains of past people’s lives and activities. Many biblical sites have been found, and the amount of evidence confirming the biblical record is enormous. No archaeological discovery to date contradicts the Bible (though some mistakenly *interpret* some findings as doing so).

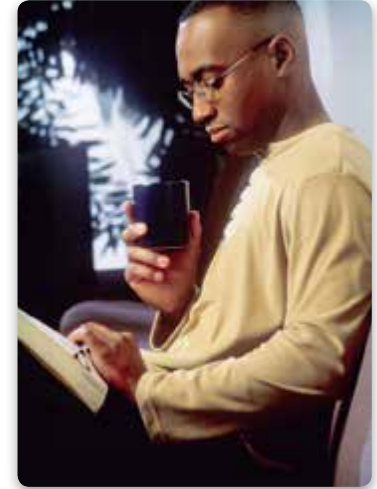
Promises and prayers. God gives us many promises in His Word. Seeing promises fulfilled is evidence of God’s faithfulness. And God promises to answer prayers of His people, especially prayers that are in harmony with His will and promises. Answered prayer can strengthen one’s faith in God and His Word more than anything else.

The Bible works! God’s ways work. The Bible teaches countless practical principles for daily life. Just as nature teaches us about invisible physical laws, the Bible teaches that there are also invisible but absolute *spiritual* laws governing every aspect of human life. The better we understand all those laws and get in harmony with them, the healthier, happier and more successful we will be. God’s ways work, and they work wonderfully!

We are also increasingly bombarded with skepticism and attacks against Christianity and especially Bible-based beliefs. Some claim only the “uneducated” would hold such beliefs. As Jude 18 notes, there will be “mockers” as the end of this age of human misrule under Satan draws near.

All of this can be quite confusing and intimidating. This is where you need courage. Be much more concerned about what *God* thinks than what any *man* thinks. Don’t rely on someone else to tell you what the Bible says. Read it for yourself! Swim upstream. Be among the few who choose the “narrow gate” that leads to life, not the many who choose the easy “broad gate” that leads to destruction (Matthew 7:13-14).

Keep this in mind. Noah preached the truth all the time he was building the ark, but only eight people believed and were saved from the Flood (2 Peter 2:5). Jesus



Take time—make time—out of your busy life to devote to daily Bible reading. Make it a high priority.

Christ preached to multitudes for a few years, but His Church began with only 120 disciples (Acts 1:15). Be among the few who listen well. Then go do the right thing!

The Bible is “good news”!

The message of Jesus and the apostles was called “the gospel.” The word *gospel* comes from the Old English *godspel*, meaning “good news.” But good news of what? Most Christians could not tell you exactly.

The message was more fully referred to as “the gospel of the kingdom of God” (Mark 1:14). Christ, we must realize, preached the good news about His future return to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, and how human beings can become a part of that eternal Kingdom and family of God! It truly is a message of *hope* for all mankind (Romans 15:4).

We may think of the gospel as being relayed only in the New Testament, yet this message is also found throughout the Old. Indeed, all of the Bible is interrelated, so in one sense the gospel is the *entire* Bible. Scripture has a great deal of bad news about “this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4), but the long-range news is wonderful and very hopeful

—a soon-coming new world under the reign of Jesus Christ!

Keys to understanding the Bible

How can you get the most out of reading and studying the Bible?

Following are some important keys.

Take time—*make* time—out of your busy life to devote to daily Bible reading. Make it a high priority. Many great and successful men and women have been dedicated daily Bible readers. Even some U.S. presidents followed this practice while occupying that enormously important office. If *they* made time for daily Bible reading, if *they* could fit that in, why can't you?

Reflect and think deeply about what you read, and consider how you will apply the lessons in your life. You cannot make a better investment of your time.

For understanding, pray for God's help. "Ask, and it will be given to you" (Matthew 7:7). Prayer, the subject of the previous chapter, and Bible study go hand in hand.

Be sure to take advantage of human and technical resources. When an Ethiopian official was reading the book of Isaiah, Philip asked him, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The man responded, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" (Acts 8:26-31). It helps tremendously to have Bible teachers show you where to look for answers to life's important questions. So we invite you to ask for help from the United Church of God as well. We offer many free resources that are crucial for gaining a foundation of biblical understanding (see "How to Read, Study and Understand the Bible" on page 17).

Note that the Bible can be understood on many levels. A person with no interest in God can read through the Bible and gain much understanding of history (His story!), human relationships and many other subjects. Scripture is full of great wisdom.

But to understand the Bible on a deeply spiritual level requires the reader to meet some important conditions. One key is a *humble, teachable attitude*—being receptive and responsive to God's instructions!

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do His commandments" (Psalm 111:10). To really comprehend God's Word requires us to have an attitude of deep reverence for Him and submission to His authority. God blesses readers with understanding when they show that they are willing to *apply* and *obey* what they learn.

In Luke 4:4, Jesus quoted from the Old Testament in saying, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word of God" (see Deuteronomy 8:3). Consider the significance of this statement:

- It should first be observed that the purpose of God's Word is for us to *live by it*.
- Second, this is what *strengthens and sustains us spiritually*, as bread does physically.
- Third, we should have an inquiring mind *hungering* for God's Word.

How to Read, Study and Understand the Bible

Author Bruce Barton called the Bible *The Book Nobody Knows*. That is practically true, but *you can* know it.

How should you read and study the Bible? The overall answer is *any way that works for you!* Just do it! Starting something new seems strange and difficult. So new Bible students are the ones most likely to become discouraged and give up altogether.

What is important is to *get started* and then *stick with it*. Take the most interesting approach and begin to get familiar with the content. Whet your appetite, and hopefully the Bible will be a big part of your diet for life.

Many books and articles offer helpful suggestions for Bible study approaches, and we recommend that you eventually read and consider them. But don't feel obligated to take a certain approach or to follow a rigid structure or to stick with an approach when you would rather switch to a different one.

For example, one approach is to read the Bible all the way through in chronological order to get an overview. It's good to do that eventually, but it's not necessary to start that way. You can go through the books in any order. Another popular approach is topical Bible study, studying all the scriptures on any one topic.

We offer a very helpful booklet, *How to Understand the Bible*, to get you started. We also offer a free, eye-opening, 12-lesson *Bible Study Course* that gives a new student a very good foundation of understanding. All are yours free for the asking.

We're also in the process of producing a

commentary on the entire Bible—*The Good News Bible Reading Program*. You can access it at www.ucg.org/brp.

It's also fine when part of your personal Bible study is reading trustworthy articles, booklets and books *about* the Bible that explain it accurately. Of course, any such sources should be compared against the Bible itself to make sure they properly represent the Bible's teachings (see Acts 17:11). Indeed, over the long run be sure that much of your study is reading the Bible itself so that you become thoroughly familiar with the content and context of the Scriptures.

As you can afford it, you may want to purchase various Bible helps—reference books and computer programs that provide assistance in your studies.

If you have difficulty reading, you can take advantage of the fact that the Bible and many books are now available as audio recordings.

Also be sure to avoid the classic mistake many people make. Don't start out with preconceived doctrinal ideas and try to find verses that appear to provide support and justification for those beliefs. Read the Bible with an open mind and see for yourself what it says. Have the attitude of Jesus Christ who prayed to the Father, "Not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Above all, seek to know the mind of God and His plan for your life. Apply what you learn in your life. Be a doer of the Word, and use the Bible as a spiritual mirror to see how you need to change (see James 1:22-25).

Read the Bible. *Study* the Bible. *Live* the Bible.

- Fourth, Jesus included *every* word of God, not just *some* of the words of God.
- Fifth, how can we live by the words of God if we have not read them?
- Sixth, “you are what you eat.” Ingesting the words of God can make us increasingly godly.

Even children can gain a remarkable understanding of the Bible, partly because they tend to have humble, teachable attitudes.

Also remember that God’s thoughts are infinitely higher than our human thoughts (Isaiah 55:9-11). God’s Spirit is essential to an ever-deepening understanding of spiritual truth and the power to live by that truth. Later in this booklet we will discuss the wonderful process of obtaining the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The Bible? Priceless!

God’s revelation of how He will bring human beings into the Kingdom of God is a “treasure”—the “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:44-46; see also Proverbs 3:13-18). It is worth every sacrifice. God wants us to dig and seek and search with our whole hearts to enter His Kingdom.

One definition of “disciple” is “student,” so God would have us all become students of Jesus Christ. Blow the dust off your Bible then. Open your Bible and open your heart to listen to what God has to tell you.

Bible reading is “profitable” for many reasons (2 Timothy 3:16-17). The Berean believers were called “noble” because they “searched the scriptures daily,” making sure that what was being preached to them conformed to its teachings (Acts 17:11, King James Version).

Bible study is a serious matter. The only reliable security we can have in this life is God. If we don’t hear today, we can be gone tomorrow. What really matters is life after death. For that, we must become disciples and “doers of the word” (James 1:21-25). And any sacrifices we make in this life are tiny compared to the glorious everlasting life God is offering us (Romans 8:18).

The longest chapter in the Bible is Psalm 119. How fitting that it is an extensive love song praising God for His Word and His laws! The writer said, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (verse 105). May His Word light your path!

Be enthusiastic and passionate for God’s Word. Immerse yourself in it! With increasing understanding comes increasing satisfaction and enjoyment. Try it—you’ll like it (Psalm 34:8)! And it will transform your life!

The following verse from Revelation 1:3 applies directly to the book of Revelation, but it is true of the entire Bible: “Blessed is he who reads and those who hear [understand] the words of this prophecy, and keep [obey] those things which are written in it; for the time is near.”

Meditation: What’s on Your Mind?

“Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer”
(Psalm 13:14).

What were you *thinking*? What *are* you thinking? What am I thinking? God knows very well, and He is concerned. We had better be concerned!

Our minds are what matter most. We are what we are inwardly. The Bible has much to say about the human “heart,” a word that can be synonymous with “mind,” but which emphasizes the functions of thought, attitudes, emotions, personality and character. In the King James Version of the Bible, the word “heart” appears 833 times!

God judges us largely by what is taking place in our hearts. “For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart” (1 Samuel 16:7).

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5 through 7, Jesus Christ made it clear that obeying God with our thoughts is as important as obeying with our words and actions. Thus the *spirit* of the law is as important as the letter of the law. No wonder God hates hypocrisy. Speaking to hypocritical religious leaders, Jesus said, “Even so you also outwardly appear righteous to men, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness” (Matthew 23:28).

Thoughts are seldom hidden forever—they usually lead to words and actions. “For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45; see also Matthew 15:19).

In the last two chapters we covered the vital spiritual tools of prayer and Bible reading and study. But the quality and effectiveness of our prayers and Bible study are greatly enhanced when we *think carefully* or *meditate* about what God is saying to us and what we are saying to God. Taking time to really think makes our prayer and Bible study meaningful instead of mechanical, inspiring rather than superficial.

Many kinds of “meditation”

Contemplating and reflecting on a subject is commonly called *meditation*. Of itself this is not a religious word. The Bible does not make a major

distinction between *thinking* and *meditating*. The Bible was originally written almost entirely in Hebrew and Greek. A particular word may be translated *think* in one English translation and *meditate* in another translation, or with similar words such as *ponder*, *consider*, *imagine* or *muse*.



Here is the point: In the Bible, meditation is never portrayed as a religious, mental or emotional ritual. It is simply directed thinking, reflection, contemplation or concentration. Certainly the *quality* of our thinking can continue to improve, especially when we regularly pray for God's guidance.

Prayer, Bible study and meditation take *time*. Most people are tempted to neglect these because they feel they are too busy, which is like the life of a young seedling being choked out by too many weeds (Luke 8:14). Find a quiet, comfortable place and take time—*make* time—for God! Our relationship with

When meditating, the supreme focus of our attention and adoration should be our awesome Creator God.

God needs nurturing, which requires time and communication.

Today we see a virtual mania for all kinds of *unbiblical* meditation. Meditation that is truly Christian is worlds apart from the meditation of Eastern religions. (See “Misguided and Mystical Meditation” online at www.ucg.org/christian-living/misguided-and-mystical-meditation/.) Even much of what has been written about “the power of positive thinking” is more humanism, faulty psychology and a rage for New Age “mind over matter” than anything biblical. Some of this is worshipping the mind rather than the Creator of minds!

For many Christians, and non-Christians, meditation is viewed as a mental or religious ritual. This discourages many believers because it makes meditation to be something awkward and difficult. This may come as a shock to some, but the Bible never mandates that we meditate—just as it never tells us to think—the presumption being that we already do. It does, however, tell us what we are to meditate *about*.

What do you think is the most common type of meditation? Probably it is *worry*. How sad! Instead of worrying about problems (or *possible* problems), we should *pray*! In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus Christ tells us *not*

to worry—but to put God first and trust Him for our needs.

There are many constructive types of meditation, such as analysis, planning ahead and problem solving. Meditation should be *practical*! But much thinking, while not evil, is spent on trivial subjects. Beware of wasting your time and life that way.

Sadly, many thoughts are carnal and destructive—dwelling on fears, resentments, jealousy, lusts, pride and the like. God, however, wants all of our thoughts to be clean, wholesome and godly. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). We expel wrong thoughts from our minds by filling them with *right* thoughts. And purity of heart can only come about through true spiritual conversion. We need God to heal our “heart” trouble!

Matters to meditate about

Let's take a closer look at what God tells us to think about. For a more thorough study, you can use a Bible concordance to find and read all the verses that mention such words as *meditate*, *think*, *commune*, *ponder*, *imagine*, *remember*, *examine*, *watch*, etc.

We find two classic verses on this subject from the apostle Paul in Philippians 4. In one he says: “Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!” (verse 4). And in the other he tells us: “Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever

What Should We Meditate About?

What are some of the things we might meditate on to get our minds more attuned to God's way of thinking? Here's a short list to get you started:

- God's astounding creative power as revealed through His creation.
- How God is a Father to us.
- God's awesome plan as revealed by His Holy Days.
- Jesus Christ's sacrifice.
- What the Kingdom of God will be like, both in the Millennium and beyond.
- Jesus Christ's perfect example of what God wants us to be.
- Jesus Christ's teachings—how can we best live by them?
- The blessings that come from obeying God's laws.

- The curses that come from disobeying those laws.

- How to overcome various sins.
- The many promises in the Bible.
- The experiences of biblical figures—what can we learn from them?
- Read any section of the Bible and ask, What does God want me to learn from this?

God's Word is filled with subjects on which we can meditate. The important thing is that we take time to do so, and in so doing learn to see things as God sees them. As He tells us in Isaiah 55:9, “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” What a privilege and blessing it is to have many of those thoughts written down for us in the Bible so we can learn to think as God thinks!

things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things” (verse 8).

The supreme focus of our attention and adoration should be our awesome Creator God! We tend to be *self*-conscious when we need to be *God*-conscious. “If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth” (Colossians 3:1-2).

Meditate on your Maker and Master. Contemplate His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence. Be filled with gratitude for His goodness, grace and glory. Ponder His perfection, personality and providence. *Be in awe* of God.

Meditate on God’s words and works

Read and meditate on God’s revelation to mankind, the Holy Scriptures. This is truly *listening* to God.

As noted in the previous chapter, how appropriate it is that the longest chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119 with its 176 verses, is totally devoted to praising God for His Word and His laws. “I will meditate on Your precepts, and contemplate Your ways” (verse 15). “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (verse 97). “My eyes are awake through the night watches, that I may meditate on Your word” (verse 148).

We can learn much about our loving Creator and Designer by contemplating His incredible creation (Romans 1:20; Psalm 19:1-4; 139:13-18; Job 38–39). One great way to meditate is to spend time outdoors marveling at God’s flora and fauna!

We should also ponder our relationship with God and His plan and purpose for our lives. David beautifully expressed this in Psalm 8: “When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?” (verses 3-4, New International Version).

When to have spiritual meditation

Ideally, we should meditate every day and night about God and the things of God! Psalm 1:2 speaks of a righteous man whose “delight is in the law of the LORD, and in His law he meditates day and night.” Make time to pause and meditate about what you are reading in the Bible to gain spiritual understanding and inspiration.

Think of the parallel between eating and spiritual nourishment. Food is better digested when we eat slowly and chew it well. To digest and absorb God’s Word, we need to “chew” *it* well and relish each morsel. It’s interesting that the word *ruminate* can refer either to a ruminant mammal chewing its cud or to turning a matter over and over in one’s mind.

As we reflect on God’s truth, we absorb, internalize and personalize God’s words and ways. Rather than words engraved in stone or written on paper, God’s laws become written on our hearts! (Hebrews 8:10).



The foremost reason for meditating on God’s Word should be to analyze how we can *apply and practice* what we are learning. As God told Moses’ successor Joshua: “This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall *meditate in it day and night*, that you may observe *to do according to all that is written in it*. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then *you will have good success*” (Joshua 1:8, emphasis added throughout).

And intersperse your prayer with meditation. Then your worship is a two-way

As we reflect on God’s truth, we absorb, internalize and personalize God’s words and ways. Rather than words engraved in stone or written on paper, God’s laws become written on our hearts!

conversation with God. Pray and meditate about God’s solutions when you have problems. And meditate with thanksgiving as you count your blessings.

Meditation should include self-examination

Spiritual growth requires introspection to discover the sins and faults we need to remove (compare Lamentations 3:40; 1 Corinthians 11:28; 2 Corinthians 13:5). Pray for God to help you see yourself the way He sees you. Fasting for humility (covered in the next chapter) can help like a spiritual mirror. As we evaluate ourselves and do this “soul-searching” based on the standards of God’s Word, the gift of His Holy Spirit is necessary for deep spiritual understanding. (How to receive God’s Spirit is also covered later in this booklet.)

Once we recognize sins, we must confess them to God and seek His forgiveness. We find an inspiring example of repentance, confession and prayer in Psalm 51, written by King David: “Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin . . . Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me” (verses 2, 10).

When meditating on God’s Word, we should use it as a mirror to help us see what we need to change (James 1:22-24).

Danger of mind manipulation

Now for a strong word of warning. Consider the powerful influence of modern media in manipulating our thoughts. For example, no matter how long a movie lasts, it usually keeps our full attention. And with all of today's technological realism, we viewers vicariously experience and respond to everything in the drama.

Television and movie producers often have an agenda for shaping the values of the audiences. If they want us to sympathize with an atheist living an immoral lifestyle and be disgusted with a sincere Christian family man, they can easily manipulate our feelings in that direction (compare Isaiah 5:20). And ultimately behind all evil influences and deception is a real Satan the devil (1 John 5:19; 2 Corinthians 11:3, 14).

Rather than be naive about the dangers, we must protect our minds from being infected with spiritual pollution—garbage in, garbage out, as the saying goes. When we are repeatedly exposed to evil such as immoral sex, pornography, violence and foul language, our consciences become insensitive and our personal standards are pulled down. Actions become habits and habits become addictions.

We can all regularly pray the request in Psalm 119:37: “Turn away my eyes from looking at worthless things, and revive me in Your way.” We can ask ourselves, what movies and TV shows would Jesus Christ watch? What music would He listen to? What books and magazines would He read or look at? And what would He be thinking about?

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life” (Proverbs 4:23, NIV). Rule your heart! Better yet, let *God* rule your heart!

God reads minds

People tend to believe it doesn't matter if thoughts are sinful, as long as they don't act on them—because no one knows their thoughts. But *Someone does*. God knows every thought of every person (see Psalm 139). And He holds us accountable for our thoughts as well as our words and ways (see Matthew 5).

In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5 the apostle Paul speaks of the spiritual warfare we should be waging. He says we must be “casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, *bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ*” (verse 5). That is impossible humanly speaking, but not when we allow God to work through us. Along with Paul, we can say, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).

May the conclusion of the beautiful Psalm 19 in verse 14 be our prayer: “Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.”

Fasting: A Spiritual Power Tool

“‘Now, therefore,’ says the LORD, ‘Turn to Me with all your heart, with fasting . . .’” (Joel 2:12).

The only thing most people know about fasting is that it can be a way to lose weight. But there's much more we need to understand about fasting than that.

The Bible has much to say about this very important but often-neglected spiritual key. God desires and expects His followers to fast. Jesus Christ was asked why His disciples did not fast like other religious people. He replied with a short parable explaining that it was because He was still present with His disciples. He stated that after He was no longer among them (referring to His impending return to heaven), “*then they will fast*” (Matthew 9:14-15).

By that He meant that *all of His future disciples would fast*. Why? Because we *need* fasting with prayer to help us maintain a close relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ. And there are other major spiritual benefits of fasting, as we shall see.

When Jesus spoke to His disciples about *how* to fast, He clearly was expecting that they *would* fast (Matthew 6:16-18). He did not say “*if* you fast” but “*when* you fast.” And note that in this chapter, Jesus emphasizes fasting as much as praying and doing good works.

Fasting is mentioned prominently in the Old and New Testaments. The biblical record of who fasted is a virtual “who's who” of the Bible and includes Moses, David, Elijah, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Anna and Jesus Christ. The apostle Paul engaged “in fastings often” (2 Corinthians 11:27).

What is fasting?

In a sense, everyone fasts. When we are in bed asleep, we go without any food or drink. That is fasting. That is why the first meal of the day is called *breakfast*. However, when people speak of fasting, they usually mean a longer period of time of deliberately *choosing* not to eat and drink. It can be for a whole day, part of a day or more than a day.

A health fast is any temporary restricted diet that is supposed to have certain health benefits. But we are addressing fasting for one's *spiritual*

health, which involves abstaining from food and drink while spending a lot of extra time in prayer, meditation and Bible study (Exodus 34:28; Ezra 10:6; Esther 4:16; Acts 9:9).

Ideally, we should spend most of the waking part of a fast period praying, studying and reflecting. If this is not possible, at the very least we can do that during the extra time when we ordinarily would be eating.

Misunderstandings about fasting

A healthy person who is not perspiring much can go without food and water for about three days before the body begins to be stressed. And a healthy person can go without food for several days if he is drinking water. Thus, the amazingly long 40-day fasts by Moses, Elijah and Jesus Christ (Deuteronomy 9:9; 1 Kings 19:8; Luke 4:2) were possible only by God's supernatural intervention.

How long we might safely fast depends on our individual health. If you are unsure about your health limitations, it would be wise to get a medical checkup, and we strongly advise it. Then start with skipping a meal or two before gradually increasing to a full day fast—being alert to the beginning of any adverse effects.

However, we shouldn't consider mere discomforts—including feeling hungry, thirsty and less energetic—as “adverse effects.” For most people, a headache is simply a symptom of withdrawal from regular caffeine consumption. It's wise to taper off from caffeinated beverages before beginning a fast.

Another option is a *partial* fast, such as that mentioned in Daniel 10:3. Here one takes in only as much food and/or water as necessary to be safe and spends extra time in prayer, Bible study and meditation. This, too, can be very profitable spiritually.

Fasting is unpopular in a culture of instant self-gratification. People tend to think that every day they need three large meals plus snacks. In a culture of continual feasting, it seems there is no place for fasting! From that standpoint alone, fasting is good for character building—developing self-discipline, commitment, moderation and better eating habits.

Important reasons for fasting

Fasting is an important part of building a right and strong relationship with God (Luke 2:36-37; Acts 13:2).

Godly fasting is poles apart from hunger strikes used to gain political power or draw attention to a personal cause. Fasting is an exercise in self-discipline over our fleshly cravings while keeping God first in our thoughts. It liberates us from slavery to our appetites while we focus on the true “Bread of Life,” Jesus Christ (John 6:48-51, 63). When fasting,

we make a small self-sacrifice to focus on our Savior's awesome sacrifice and plan for us.

By nature we are egocentric (self-centered), and must work at becoming *God*-centered. A major purpose of fasting is to learn humility—to better understand how great God is and how weak, sinful and needy we are. King David understood this when he wrote, “I humbled myself with fasting” (Psalm 35:13).

God delights in humble hearts. He said in Isaiah 66:2, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word” (NIV). In Matthew 5:3 Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit [humble and dependent], for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus made it clear that if we fast to show off—to “appear to men to be fasting”—we are hypocrites and will have no reward from God (Matthew 6:16-18). Jesus did not mean that it's always wrong to tell someone you're fasting. Often there's a practical need to tell someone, like your spouse. Jesus was talking about the necessity of right *motives and attitudes*.

Jesus spoke a parable in which a proud Pharisee bragged to God, “I fast twice a week” (Luke 18:9, 12). The man imagined himself to be humble and was proud of it! Fasting with such a conceited attitude is worthless.

God wants us to “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). When we fast, we increasingly feel hungry and physically weak. In addition to reinforcing the fact that God is the One who sustains us and supplies all our needs, an important lesson of this is that we rapidly become weaker spiritually when we neglect the nourishment of prayer, Bible study and all other efforts to be God's spiritually transformed sons and daughters.

The Bible has only one command regarding when to fast. God's people are commanded in Leviticus 23 to fast on the Day of Atonement for 24 hours—from sundown to sundown (verses 27-32). This fast day is listed here among God's annual appointed times or spiritual feast days.

Besides the ordinary personal benefits of fasting, the Atonement fast has prophetic significance. To learn about the meaning of the Day of Atonement and its accompanying fasting, download or request our free booklet *God's Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*.

Secondary purposes of fasting

Besides the primary purposes of worshipping God, drawing closer to Him, denying and humbling ourselves and growing spiritually, it is appropriate to have secondary purposes in fasting as well—beseeching God in prayer for His help with one or more serious needs for ourselves or for others.

When God has not answered prayers for a certain need, try fasting with prayer. In one instance when His disciples could not cast out a demon, Jesus told them that “this kind does not go out except by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:14-21). Proper fasting often results in significant spiritual breakthroughs. While we rely on the spiritual tools of prayer, Bible study and meditation on a daily basis, we occasionally need the *power tool* of fasting.

There can be many reasons to fast, such as a personal problem, a difficult-to-overcome sin, facing a major decision, a Church crisis, a threat of danger, the need to change someone’s attitude, or expressing thanksgiving, among others. For a very enlightening study, use a Bible concordance and look up all the passages that contain the words *fast*, *fasted* and *fasting*. Read why people fasted, what they were praying about and what God did as a result of the fast.

However, we must never view fasting as pressuring God to get what we want (Isaiah 58:3). God wants us to pray about our problems, but not to try to dictate the solutions. Our attitudes should be like that of Jesus Christ when He prayed, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

It is fine for a group such as a church congregation or circle of friends to decide to fast together concerning an urgent matter. When his country was being invaded, King Jehoshaphat “proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah” (2 Chronicles 20:1-3). At the preaching of Jonah, “the people of Nineveh believed God [and] proclaimed a fast” (Jonah 3:5).

To beseech God for His protection, Ezra proclaimed a fast for all the exiles returning to Judah (Ezra 8:21-23). Esther requested that all the Jews in the Persian capital city fast so that they would be spared from genocide (Esther 4:16).

Isaiah 58:1-12 is a profound passage that contrasts right and wrong attitudes in fasting. It clearly shows that fasting must not be a mere ritual. Fasting should teach us to be *willing to sacrifice* in many ways in the service of others. How much are we willing to sacrifice to “undo . . . heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free . . . to share your bread with the hungry, and that you bring to your house the poor who are cast out; when you see the naked, that you cover him?” (verses 6-7).

God’s Word exhorts us to “stand fast in the Lord” (Philippians 4:1; 1 Thessalonians 3:8). Here the English word “fast” means *firmly fixed or steadfast*. From what the Bible teaches us about fasting, we see that people who sincerely and regularly fast and pray to God will very likely “stand fast in the Lord”!

Repentance: A Profound Turnaround!

“Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin” (Ezekiel 18:30). “God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32, New Life Version).

“**G**ood Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?” The question was addressed to Jesus Christ (Matthew 19:16). What would your answer be?

Here was Jesus’ answer: “If you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.” When the man asked, “Which ones?” Jesus quoted several commands from the Old Testament, mostly from the Ten Commandments (verses 18-19).

This is one of many, many scriptures that make it absolutely clear that God still requires obedience to His instructions—yet many churches teach the opposite! Why is this? Because of human nature influenced by Satan and this world under his evil influence! “For the outlook of the unspiritual nature is enmity with [or hostile to] God; *it is not subject to the law of God and indeed it cannot be*” (Romans 8:7, REB).

But God’s laws are good and good for us (Romans 7:12)! If we want to become more and more like Jesus Christ, God’s laws *define* the godly character He wants to see in us.

Two obstacles and a twofold solution

Two major obstacles stand in the way of our attaining eternal life. First, it’s impossible for us on our own human strength to perfectly obey God’s commandments. Second, even if perfect obedience from now through the rest of our lives were possible, it still would not make up for the guilt of past sins. The death penalty we had incurred would not be removed.

So what are the solutions? First, we must somehow receive God’s forgiveness for all our past sins. Second, we must receive the gift of God’s Holy Spirit that will gradually replace our ingrained selfish nature with a new Christlike nature.

And what must one do to receive these precious gifts? In Acts 2 we read about the apostle Peter preaching to the assembled crowd on the day of Pentecost. His powerful sermon convinced those gathered that Jesus was the promised Messiah and that their sins were responsible for His death by crucifixion. How did they react?

“Now when they heard this, *they were cut to the heart*, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Men and brethren, *what shall we do?*’” (Acts 2:37). They felt the deepest shame and sorrow. They were willing to do whatever it took to obtain forgiveness, reconciliation to God and salvation.

“Then Peter said to them, ‘*Repent, and let every one of you be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission [forgiveness] of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’” (verse 38).

Each part of Peter’s authoritative statement has great significance. And note that in this one sentence Peter refers to the twofold remedy for human sinfulness—forgiveness of sins *and* the gift of God’s Holy Spirit!

Steps to Initial Repentance and Conversion

What must take place for us to receive God’s forgiveness and grace? First, a person must be spiritually called or drawn by God. Jesus said, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him” (John 6:44).

To call someone, God causes him to hear (or read) the preaching of the “gospel” (the good news of God’s plan for the salvation of mankind) while using His Holy Spirit to enlighten and convict the person with spiritual understanding (compare Romans 10:14-15; 2 Thessalonians 2:14; Matthew 13:11; 1 Corinthians 2:10-14).

Once God calls a person, He expects a twofold response expressed by Jesus in Mark 1:15: “Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Faith and grace are gifts of God (Ephesians 2:8). Likewise, God *grants repentance*, especially when a person prays for it (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25). And Paul said, “The goodness of God *leads you to repentance*” (Romans 2:4).

As we read in Acts 2:38, once a person repents and believes the gospel, he must then be baptized to receive forgiveness of sins and

spiritual conversion. The word *baptize* means immerse or submerge, and other scriptures clearly show that Peter meant total immersion in water as a sign of one’s repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Master.

Why is this important? *Because of what baptism represents*. Being put into and under water pictures a burial, and rising from the water pictures a resurrection.

Baptism actually pictures *three* deaths, burials and resurrections. First, baptism symbolizes our faith “that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures” (1 Corinthians 15:3-4).

Second, it symbolizes our acknowledgement of the need for our old sinful way of life to be “put to death” and be buried forever (Colossians 3:5; 2:12). And our rising from the water symbolizes our beginning to “walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:3-6). Of course our spiritual character isn’t immediately transformed in those few seconds. Baptism is a sign of our life-

What is repentance?

On a later day, Peter similarly instructed others, “*Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out*” (Acts 3:19). In both cases the first thing Peter said to do was “repent.” What exactly is that? It’s *vitaly important* that we understand!

Dictionary definitions of “repent” and “repentance” emphasize *feelings* of remorse, regret, contrition and penitence for one’s wrongdoing. Indeed, God expects deep feelings of “godly sorrow” for our sins (2 Corinthians 7:9-10). The more we recognize how numerous our sins have been, and how evil they are in God’s sight, the greater will be our shame and sorrow.

But feelings alone aren’t enough. Saying “I’m sorry” over and over again is not enough. The biblical meaning of “repent” emphasizes *change*—change of attitudes and actions to completely forsake one’s lifestyle of habitual disobedience.

A biblical synonym for repent is *turn*. Paul said, “I preached that they must repent of their sins and *turn* to God and *do* the things that would

long dedication and commitment to that goal.

Third, baptism symbolizes one’s faith in the hope of the literal resurrection to come—“that there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust” (Acts 24:15).

Baptism is a vital step. God holds each person guilty of *every sin he has ever committed* until those sins are blotted out at baptism (Acts 3:19; 22:16). At the moment the repentant person is immersed in water, all his past sins are forgiven! What a joy it is to stand clean before God!

But we are not forgiven just to go back to the way we were. We must be changed. And that comes through the next step.

Acts 2:38 states that after a person genuinely repents and is baptized, he will receive God’s Holy Spirit. The gift of the Holy Spirit does not come during the baptism. Scripture shows that God gives His Spirit immediately afterwards during the *laying on of hands* by one of God’s ministers as he prays for the baptized person to receive the gift of God’s Spirit (Acts 8:14-17; 19:6; 2 Timothy 1:6).

Once you have the Holy Spirit, you have “Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). You are “baptized into Christ” (Galatians 3:27). You abide in

Christ and He abides in you (1 John 3:24). You are among the “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). You have a “new heart” and are becoming a “new man” (Ezekiel 18:31; Ephesians 4:24).

“Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, *he is not His*”—he doesn’t belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). He is not a true Christian or “son of God” (verse 14). To become a real Christian, you must believe, repent, be baptized, experience the laying on of hands from one of God’s ministers, and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Once a mature person has spiritual understanding and faith and has repented of his sins, he should not delay baptism. When God is offering you a gift, why not accept it? Jesus warned against rejecting God’s offer: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:16). As Ananias said to Saul (later referred to as Paul), “And now why are you waiting? Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins” (Acts 22:16).

After one receives the Holy Spirit, that is when real spiritual growth begins! (To learn more, download or request our free booklet *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion*.)

show they had repented” (Acts 26:20, Today’s English Version).

Besides one’s initial repentance, a person must repent each time he realizes he has slipped and sinned—and this applies long after conversion to the end of one’s physical life. When a person first comes to God, initial repentance is a surrender to God and an *about-face* from life aimed away from God to one of heading in God’s direction. After that, whenever a believer strays even a little from the “way of God,” He must repent or return to the right path, making a *course correction* to get back on track with God (Acts 18:25-26).

What is God’s way? It is the way of genuine love, for “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). Jesus Christ taught that the two greatest commandments are love for God and love for our fellow human beings (Matthew 22:37-40). And love for God includes obedience to His laws. “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

The Ten Commandments broadly define *how* to love God and *how* to love one’s neighbor, which includes everyone. The other spiritual laws in the Bible give us additional details about how to love God and all people. (For a broader overview, download or request our free booklet *The Ten Commandments*.)

Repent of what?

This brings us to the question, “Of what do we repent?” The answer is *sin*. But what is sin? Ask a dozen people and you would likely get a dozen different answers. But the *Bible* is where we should look for the correct answers to life’s important questions.

The clearest definition of sin is found in 1 John 3:4: “Whoever commits sin also commits lawlessness, and sin is lawlessness.” Any breaking or violation of God’s law is sin.

Repentance, therefore, means to turn away from *lawbreaking* and turn to *lawkeeping*! God summed up true repentance when He pleaded with His people: “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity [lawlessness] will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit” (Ezekiel 18:30-31).

God then went on to express His deep love and desire to forgive and save everyone: “For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies . . . Therefore turn and live!” (verses 31-32). Yes, you can have a joyous life now—and, more importantly, everlasting life!

In addition to repenting of our sins, we must repent of sinful attitudes and the downward pull of human nature, as they are the main cause of

our sinful actions. Jesus made it clear that, compared to God, all of us are evil (Matthew 7:11). God said, “The heart is the most deceitful thing there is, and desperately wicked. No one can really know how bad it is!” (Jeremiah 17:9, Living Bible).

Like King David, we must repent and pray, “Wash me . . . create in me a clean heart” (Psalm 51:7-10).

Godly sorrow vs. worldly sorrow

God gave us a conscience so that when we are aware of wrongdoing, we will feel guilt, shame and sorrow. Once a person clearly sees the great love of his Creator plus his own *lack* of love, of gratitude and of righteousness, he should feel truly sorry—with godly sorrow!

Paul explained, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:10).

What is the difference between the two kinds of sorrow? Godly sorrow is directed toward God (Psalm 51:4; Acts 20:21). It is grief and mourning over having disappointed and transgressed against Him, the One who gives us every good thing. It leads to a commitment to permanently *change*—to truly repent.

Repentance, Penance and Grace

It’s essential to understand that God is pleased with repentance but *not penance*. An ascetic form of penance is to act penitent or remorseful and punish oneself (see Colossians 2:18-23). Another form of penance is trying to do enough good deeds to outweigh and make up for one’s sin. Both imply that we must *pay for* our own sins—but none of us could ever do enough to pay for even one sin.

All sins are evil because they violate the perfect, loving laws of our Creator God. The only sacrifice great enough to pay for the guilt of our sins has already been offered—the suffering and death of the Son of God, Jesus Christ. So doing penance is a gross insult to God. It implies that Jesus’ sacrifice and God’s grace are unnecessary.

And what is God’s “grace”? It is the totality of all the gracious gifts that God offers to mankind. And among the greatest of those gifts is the complete forgiveness of all past sins. That, in

turn, opens the door to all the rest of God’s gifts, including the ultimate gift of eternal life (Romans 6:23). “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8, King James Version).

But don’t confuse grace with its counterfeit —“cheap grace.” Grace means forgiveness of past sins, not permission to continue sinning, as Satan would like for us to think. Jude warned of “godless men, who change [pervert] the grace of our God into a license for immorality” (Jude 4, NIV; compare Romans 6:1-2).

Grace is made possible by Christ’s sacrifice and by Him serving as our merciful Mediator, Advocate and High Priest (1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1-2). “Seeing then that we have a great High Priest . . . let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Worldly sorrow, however, is *self-centered*—feeling humiliated that one’s wrongdoing has been exposed, or feeling sorry for oneself because of the penalties he is suffering, such as Jacob’s twin brother Esau experienced (see Hebrews 12:16-17).

In Romans 7, we read how the apostle Paul felt deep sorrow over his sins of commission (doing sinful things) and sins of omission (failing to do the right things). In Psalm 51, we read of David’s heartfelt prayer of sorrow and repentance. When the patriarch Job came to better understand the greatness of God and at the same time his own weakness and self-righteousness, he said, “Therefore *I abhor myself, and repent* in dust and ashes” (Job 42:6).

It is very hard for human beings to see their faults, admit them and apologize. But real repentance requires confessing your sins to God, telling Him how sorry you are and asking for His forgiveness—and *determining to change, to strive with His help to turn from and overcome your sins*. (God does not require confession of sins to a human priest or minister to obtain forgiveness, as some claim.)

David said, “I acknowledge my transgressions” (Psalm 51:3). John said, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Maintaining our relationship with God—obedience and the supply of the Spirit

John wasn’t speaking to those who were not yet converted but to those who were already Christians—showing that confession of sins and repentance is an ongoing process through the Christian life.

But again, it isn’t enough to just admit our faults and be sorrowful. To maintain our relationship with God and continue to grow spiritually, we must commit to obeying God’s laws and follow through.

Consider our communication with God. The first spiritual tool covered in this booklet is prayer. Do you want your prayers to be answered? Then, as previously pointed out, you must be striving to obey God.

Our sins place a barrier between us and God: “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; nor His ear heavy that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; and your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear” (Isaiah 59:1-2).

But committed obedience has the opposite effect: “Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep [in contrite repentance]! . . . Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up” (James 4:7-10).

Then our prayers to God will be answered. John tells us that “whatever we ask we receive from Him, because we keep His commandments and do those things that are pleasing in His sight” (1 John 3:22).

What about hearing from God in the second spiritual tool we covered—studying the Bible? True spiritual understanding comes through God’s Holy Spirit: “God has given us His Holy Spirit that we may know about the things given to us by Him” (1 Corinthians 2:12, NLV).

God’s Holy Spirit is a source of spiritual empowerment given to us from Him as a “supply” (Philippians 1:9; Galatians 3:5). (To see that the Holy Spirit is not a person, as widely believed, download or request our free booklet *Is God a Trinity?*)

God initially gives the Spirit upon repentance in faith and baptism (see “Steps to Initial Repentance and Conversion” beginning on page 30). Yet we are also told that “God gives His Spirit to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32, NLV). This shows that our initial repentance must include committed obedience. And for the supply of the Spirit to continue, our commitment and obedience must be ongoing through our Christian lives, repenting and striving to obey anew whenever we slip and fall.

As we grow in obedience, so will our comprehension of God’s Word, thus making our use of the tool of Bible study more fruitful, as touched on earlier: “A good understanding have all those who do His commandments” (Psalm 111:10).

Realize too that obedience through faith empowers further obedience. We need God’s help through His Spirit to continue in obedience. And when we submit to His help and obey, He supplies more of His Spirit to obey further. Then, as we obey more and more, it becomes habit—and eventually instilled as our character (see our free booklet *You Can Have Living Faith* to learn more).

Of course, we will not achieve instant perfection. Our transformation is a lifelong process. But remember that whenever God’s children stumble, our Father in heaven is always willing to help us back on our feet. But we must repent, confess and ask for help. After that, know that God has forgiven you. Then joy and peace of mind should once again blossom and dominate your heart because you know that your sins are no longer separating you from God (Psalm 32:1-2).

Remember also that God loves and wants to save every single person. He is “not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). In Luke 15:10, Jesus said, “There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Will the next one be you?

The Church: Help for Greater Growth

“We . . . [are to be] growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of his body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love” (Ephesians 4:15-16, New Living Translation).

Jesus Christ loves His Bride—the Church! He “nourishes and cherishes it”! Jesus has a close relationship with the members of His Church, describing them as “members of His body, of His flesh and of His bones” (Ephesians 5:25-30). “Also Christ is head of the church,” providing loving care and leadership (verse 23).

The members of His Church, while still human, are far from perfect or sinless. But for those who are submitting and committing themselves to the Master’s rule over their lives, Jesus is very busy “washing” them to spiritually transform them into “a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing . . . that [it] should be holy and without blemish” (verses 26-27). Nothing is more miraculous or awe-inspiring!

Defining the Church and its mission

Jesus said that part of His earthly mission was to “build My church,” and He began by training 12 principal disciples and other followers (Matthew 16:18). The Greek word here translated “church” is *ekklesia*. This explains why the English word *ecclesiastical* means “relating to the church.”

This Greek word means essentially “those called out to an assembly”—which indicates that someone has authority over them to *summon* them to the assembly. Church services are called “holy convocations” in the Bible (Leviticus 23:2). The word “convocations” means *commanded assemblies*, and they are “holy” because it is *God* who has commanded or convoked them. This means that God expects His people, whenever possible, to be in attendance when He convokes an assembly.

Jesus gave orders to His disciples (and those who would come after them in the future) regarding their mission: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV; see also Matthew

10:7; 24:14; Mark 1:15; Luke 9:2, 60; Acts 28:30-31).

And He further commanded them: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

Jesus summarized this aspect of the mission another way when He told Peter to “feed My sheep” (John 21:15-17). Later, Paul reminded the elders to “shepherd the church of God” (Acts 20:28). This primarily means to teach and preach the Word of God, stressing the practical application in our daily lives (2 Timothy 2:15; 3:14-17; 4:2).

It also means attending to the spiritual needs and sometimes



The Bible describes the Church as a loving and zealous community of believers—those who commune and communicate with each other and strive for unity.

the physical needs of God’s people with comfort, encouragement and a helping hand (Matthew 25:31-46; 1 John 3:16-18).

But beyond proclaiming and teaching Jesus’ message, the Church was also intended to be a body in which members would help one another in growing in godly character.

A community of love and encouragement

The Bible describes the Church as a loving and zealous *community* of believers—those who *commune* and *communicate* with each other and strive for *unity*! God wants *cooperative coworkers* to work *together* in the gargantuan task He has given His Church.

Consider the circumstances of the early New Testament Church: “Now all who believed *were together*, and had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). In the King James Version of the Bible, the English word *together* appears 484 times. God likes *togetherness*!

What did Jesus say would be a primary identifying sign of His followers? “By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

In the Bible, *love* includes *unselfish actions of service*, not only

emotions. How can Christ's disciples serve one another if they don't know each other and aren't together? Hebrews 10:25 emphasizes the need of the "assembling of ourselves *together* . . . and so much the *more* as you see the Day [of Christ's return] approaching."

The preceding verse (24) stresses the need to "stir up love and good works" among one another. Through Christian fellowship with other believers, we do just that—encourage, strengthen, comfort and help one another. God knows that it's difficult to survive spiritually on our own—that we need the support and encouragement we get from being with others of like mind.

The focus of church services should be about worshipping God and learning more about His Word and how He wants us to live. Paul describes the Church as "the pillar and foundation of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15, NIV). The Church is the primary source through which God's truth is taught and learned.

But another focus of the Church is on *giving of ourselves* to one another. Notice this essential evidence of spiritual conversion: "We know that we have passed from [spiritual] death to life, because we love the brethren . . . By this we know love, because He [Jesus] laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (1 John 3:14, 16).

Becoming a Member of God's Church

Surprisingly, an individual cannot "join" the Church of God on his or her own. First, God must call or draw you to Christ (John 6:44-45, 65). Then you become a member of God's Church when "the Spirit of God dwells in you," as Paul put it. He explains that "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Romans 8:9). "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (verse 14).

Paul also wrote, "For by one Spirit we were all baptized [immersed, inserted] into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13). That "one body" is "the body of Christ" (verse 27). Christ's "body . . . is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

How does one receive God's Holy Spirit? As was explained in the last chapter, once a person believes the Bible, has repented of his sins and has been baptized "for the remission [forgiveness] of sins," he will "receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38) through the

laying on of hands of God's ministry. Receiving the Holy Spirit sets apart or sanctifies the convert as a new child of God. That is why the Bible frequently refers to members of God's Church as saints (1 Corinthians 1:2)—that is, those sanctified or set apart to God.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, "For I have betrothed you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:2). God's forgiveness cleanses us of sin, and the indwelling of God's Spirit imparts God's righteousness. This is how we become saints or spiritual virgins betrothed to Christ.

At the return of Christ, the saints will be raised in a resurrection to eternal life and glory (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; 1 Corinthians 15:50-54; Revelation 20:6). The "marriage of the Lamb" to His betrothed Bride will then take place (Revelation 19:7). The Church of God will then enter the Kingdom of God!

The most common fulfillment of "laying down our lives" is that we give of our *time* for our brethren.

Members of God's Church should be striving to become like Jesus Christ, but are far from that perfection. Each member is a "work in progress," endeavoring to be "transformed" by God and gradually "conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 12:2; 8:29).

Every member is at a different point in his or her spiritual progress. Sometimes problems arise just like those we read about in the Bible. But we know that God expects the people He has called to His Church to not only work on themselves, but also to love, forgive and encourage others as well.

Contact with God's people vital

Let's expand on this oft-neglected factor that's critically important for our spiritual growth. Using this tool, I have seen people undergo remarkable spiritual growth and transformation in their lives. I've seen them faithfully grow from spiritual and biblical novices into mature, converted Christians who have increasingly become more like God.

On the other hand, I've also seen many well-intentioned people start off with great zeal for learning the Bible and imitating the life of Jesus Christ. But they eventually lost their spiritual enthusiasm and vitality. They effectively withered and died, like an uprooted plant, falling far short of fulfilling God's purpose for their lives.

What was the difference? It was this: Those in the first category fully committed themselves to using the spiritual tool of Christian fellowship—interacting and communicating with other members of God's Church. They recognized the Church as priceless and eagerly sought to be an active part of it. They knew the people in the Church are far from perfect. In fact, that is partly why we all need God's "workshop"—to learn God's ways and practice them together! Miraculous change and growth can take place when God is at work in and among us.

Meanwhile, those in the second category never fully appreciated or eventually lost their appreciation for the wonderful blessings and benefits of membership and active participation in the Church of God, and their spiritual growth stopped.

The Church is a major part of God's plan for mankind. His Church is a spiritual organism headed by Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18). If we are called to Christ, we are called to His Church because His Church is His "body" (verse 24; Romans 12:5).

Paul described how every Church member is important to God, and how every member should appreciate, love and function with other members as individual parts of that one body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31). We do

this through spending time together with one another—again, fellowship. This fellowship with one another is actually an essential part of our fellowship with God the Father and Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9-10; 1 John 1:3, 6-7)—as the Father and Christ dwell within all the members of the Church through the Holy Spirit.

Some, due to such factors as health, age, geographical isolation or even the culture in which they live, are simply unable to meet regularly with other believers. But whenever and wherever we *are* able to attend Church services, we should not neglect this God-given opportunity.

We need each other

Let's delve deeper into a passage we just touched on, Hebrews 10:24-25: "Let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching."

These two verses reveal several crucial truths.

First, God knows that *we need one another*. He didn't design us to be alone; that's why we naturally crave relationships with others. Some have to give up friends and family for God's truth. But Jesus promises He will give us far more friends and family (Mark 10:29-30) through His Church.

Of course, we avail ourselves of this wonderful blessing of companionship only through getting to know others in this extended family God has provided.

Second, God knows that *the right kinds of friends will encourage and strengthen one another in the right way*, spurring each other to "love and good works." On our own, it's all too easy to neglect these Christian responsibilities and make excuses. But true friends—and who could be truer friends than others whom God has called to be part of His Church alongside us?—will encourage one another in Christian growth, providing positive peer pressure to help us succeed.

The ministry of the Church plays an important role in teaching and encouraging. Yet those among the general membership also instruct and motivate one another, helping to keep each other on the right track (compare Galatians 6:1-2, 9-10; Proverbs 27:17).

Third, God knows that *we need "the assembling of ourselves together"*—or, as the New Living Translation puts it, "let us not neglect our meeting together." Sad to say, those who willingly choose to go it alone place themselves in serious danger. A lone believer is a much easier target for Satan's attacks. And being isolated from others, he or she lacks the encouragement and support Jesus Christ provides through other believers.

Coming together on a regular basis enables the companionship, instruction and exhortation already mentioned. Besides spiritual learning, weekly Sabbath services provide a regular venue for praise and worship of God. This helps participants to face the coming week with a renewed spiritual zeal and focus.

Fourth, God knows that *we all need encouragement and support*—and His Church is intended to be a powerful support group in hard times. It's a miserable feeling to go through trials and difficulties all on our own, with no one there to help, offer encouragement or sometimes simply listen. As Paul



God knows that the right kinds of friends will encourage and strengthen one another in the right way, spurring each other to "love and good works."

wrote in 1 Corinthians 12:25-26: "The members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it."

At times we all need encouragement to hang in there, to "endure to the end." As Paul said in Acts 14:22, "We must through many tribulations enter the kingdom of God." Jesus Himself described this way of life as narrow and difficult (Matthew 7:13-14). Satan would like nothing more than to discourage and distract us from Christ's coming Kingdom, and all the more so as it draws ever nearer. Encouraging and supporting one another are absolutely crucial for our spiritual health.

God, through Jesus Christ, gives much of His spiritual nourishment, guidance and encouragement through His Church, "the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15). Much of this comes in the form of sermons and Bible studies on Christian growth and living, emphasizing how to apply God's Word to all aspects of our lives.

Don't choose life on the edge!

God does not call people to be independent of contact with other believers. An animal that has strayed from its herd is at much greater risk. That's why a "good shepherd" searches for the sheep that has strayed (Matthew 18:10-14). "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the

devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). We need each other!

Generally, even crops growing at the edge of a field do not survive and thrive as well. The plants are apt to get less fertilizer and irrigation,

The Church Behind This Publication

The New Testament Church belongs to our heavenly Father and to His Son, Jesus Christ. Together they inspired the New Testament writers to refer to the Church with a name most English translations render as the “Church of God,” which means it is a spiritual organism that belongs to God.

Thus the legal name chosen for the church organization that publishes this booklet is “United Church of God, an International Association.” Our chosen name first reflects our commitment to using the biblical name of the Church.

Furthermore, God expects His people to get organized and coordinate their efforts to more effectively fulfill His work. The word “United” reflects our goal of striving for spiritual unity and harmony, which the New Testament heavily emphasizes (Ephesians 4:1-16; 1 Corinthians 12).

“An International Association” reflects our representation in many countries around the world and our commitment to fulfill Christ’s mission to “go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation” (Mark 16:15, NIV). We are trying to reach everyone of every race in all nations to give them the wonderful “words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

We in United Church of God fully believe that “all Scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16). And Christ’s followers must be “doers of the word, and not hearers only” (James 1:22; Revelation 14:12).

We are deeply dedicated to fulfilling the twofold commission Jesus gave His Church—to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God in all the world and to shepherd and nurture the Church’s members. Our recognition of and commitment to this instruction is reflected in our logo: “Preaching the Gospel, Preparing a People.”

The Bible is full of many warnings to beware of deceitful teachers, such as those who preach about the *Messenger* but don’t teach His *message*, much less the rest of the Bible (2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 13-15; Matthew 7:20-23; 24:4-5, 11, 24-25). Much of today’s “Christianity” is *syncretism*, meaning a blend of ideas from many ancient religions. Jesus expects His religion to be essentially the same in this 21st century as it was in the first century (Hebrews 13:8).

The Church as described in the Bible obeys all of the Ten Commandments. This includes the Fourth Commandment about remembering the day that God made holy at creation (Exodus 20:8-11; Genesis 2:1-3). All places in the Bible that mention the weekly Sabbath mean the same thing—the seventh day of the week, which is Friday sunset to Saturday sunset.

Therefore our weekly worship services are on the biblical Sabbath. This is the day God made holy. No human being can make any day holy or transfer the Sabbath to another day. And there is not a shred of evidence that God ever took the holiness from the seventh day and transferred it to some other day. (Our free booklet *Sunset to Sunset: God’s Sabbath Rest* gives abundant proof that the Sabbath is still God’s weekly Holy Day and that God gives great blessings to those who reverence it, celebrate it and obey Him in this manner.)

We warmly invite all who are interested—and your children—to visit our Sabbath services any time. Or you may desire to talk with one of our ministers first. Contact us for the location of the nearest congregation or pastor.

To learn more, download or request our free booklet *This Is the United Church of God*.

and they are more exposed to wind, foraging animals and infestations of pests. All of nature teaches this truth: Being alone or on the fringe can make one vulnerable to many dangers.

Spiritually, this is especially true. Christians who are sincerely involved, engaged, immersed and active in a congregation are spiritually healthy and growing (Ephesians 4:11-16). Together they have the joy not only of continually growing to become more like Jesus Christ, but also of doing the work of God as they help prepare the way for Christ’s second coming!

In a prophecy in Malachi 3:16-17, God takes special note of those who practice Christian fellowship and the other spiritual tools covered in this booklet, promising them future protection and reward: “Then those who feared the LORD *spoke to one another*, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance



Christians who are sincerely involved, engaged, immersed and active in a congregation are spiritually healthy and growing.

was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. ‘They shall be Mine,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son, who serves him.’”

Be sure to seek out and maintain fellowship with God’s people. You can learn more about God’s Church in our free booklet *The Church Jesus Built*. And for more information about the Church organization that publishes this booklet, see “The Church Behind This Publication” on page 42.

The next and final chapter in this booklet will show how to use *all* the biblical tools to continue your spiritual progress—so that, as Paul said in Ephesians 4:15, we “may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ.”

Spiritual Growth: From Immaturity to Immortality

*“Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life”
(1 Timothy 6:12).*

The purpose of this temporary human life is to seek and prepare for life after death in God’s eternal Kingdom (John 3:15-16). If you haven’t already, God wants you to make this the number-one goal of your life (Luke 12:31). So *use* your understanding of His spiritual tools and *get started* toward that goal! Or maybe you started but got discouraged or sidetracked, or relapsed into old habits. Read on, and we’ll show you how to enjoy solid, steady progress.

Physical life is evidenced by ongoing growth and development, and so is *spiritual* life. We must always be *learning, changing, overcoming and serving* to become more and more like Jesus Christ. For those spiritually dead or asleep, God’s Word says, “Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and . . . [make] the most of the time” (Ephesians 5:14-16, Revised Standard Version).

Don’t feel overwhelmed. God doesn’t expect giant leaps. What He is looking for is that our steps, no matter how small, are going *forward* and not backward. Don’t dwell on past mistakes or future worries. Focus on what you need to do *today* and thank God for each bit of progress (Philippians 3:12-14; Matthew 6:33-34).

When we are first “baptized into Christ,” we are as “babes in Christ” (Galatians 3:27; 1 Corinthians 3:1). But we must not *remain* as spiritual infants. “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word that you may *grow* thereby” (1 Peter 2:2).

Christ didn’t say following Him and thereby entering the Kingdom would be easy. He compared it to squeezing through a narrow gate, saying that few in this age would be able to do so (Luke 13:24). But what is most valuable deserves the highest price. As noted earlier, Jesus compared God’s Kingdom to a treasure and a “pearl of great price” (Matthew 13:44-46). God’s Kingdom is worth any and every possible sacrifice (Luke 14:33).

God doesn’t expect us to rely on our own human strength. He *does* expect us to *work* diligently as if success all depends on ourselves, but to *pray regularly and earnestly*, knowing that success will depend primarily and ultimately on Him (Philippians 2:12; 2 Timothy 2:15; Proverbs 3:5-6).

Spiritual tools and weapons

Paul compared God’s “tools” or strategies for entering the Kingdom with *armor* and *weapons*, because anyone trying to be a follower of Christ is automatically involved in spiritual warfare with our archenemy, Satan the devil (Luke 10:19; 2 Thessalonians 3:3).

We are not defenseless if we are courageous and use God’s equipment. In Ephesians 6:11, Paul states, “Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes” (NIV). And in the next few verses he lists God’s protective armor.

Verse 17 defines the primary offensive weapon—“the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God”—which means our need to study, understand and live by



Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us, “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us . . .” It’s not enough to train for a big race. It’s not enough to start a race. What really counts is crossing the finish line.

God’s Word, the Bible. This is linked in the next verse with *prayer*.

God’s weapons and armor are *mighty* (2 Corinthians 10:4). The question for us is: Will we put on the armor, and will we wield the weapons—and will we use the spiritual tools laid out in the previous chapters of this booklet?

To recap the main points we’ve covered, make your goal to *pray and read your Bible*, as well as *meditate, every day*. Just as we begin to feel weak when we miss meals, we begin to weaken spiritually when we miss a day of spiritual nourishment.

We need to *fast* occasionally for the reasons explained in the chapter on fasting. We need to sincerely *repent* every time we realize we have been guilty of a sin—turning back to God and humbly obeying Him.

And we need to be *actively involved* in the Church the rest of our lives—for the many benefits we receive and for the opportunities to serve God by serving His people.

Don't let up—go on to maturity

We must not let up, but must keep growing! In Ephesians 4, Paul

Bearing Fruit: A Crucial Part of Spiritual Growth

God expects us to be *productive* and get *results*. In some parables, spiritual accomplishment is compared to investing and earning a profit for our Master (Matthew 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27). In some biblical passages it is compared to constructing a building or temple (1 Corinthians 3:9-17; Ephesians 2:19-22).

But the Bible's main metaphor for accomplishment is *producing fruit*. God compares His people with vines and trees that must "*bear much fruit*" (John 15:5, 8). We must continue to grow and bear fruit until the end of our lives.

Christ's parable of the fig tree emphasizes that, spiritually speaking, a fruitless fruit tree is worthless (Luke 13:6-9). "A certain man . . . said to the keeper of his vineyard, 'Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; why does it use up the ground?' But he answered and said to him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down'" (verses 7-9).

The parable tells us that God expects us to bear fruit. But it also shows that God will not give up on us as long as there is still hope that we will bear fruit.

Also take note that just as a branch will die when it is cut off from a vine or trunk, we will die spiritually if we are cut off from Jesus Christ. "Abide in Me, and I in you," He tells us. "As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me . . . for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:4-5).

This is why contact with and becoming a part of God's true Church is so crucial. As head of that Church (Colossians 1:18), Jesus Himself guides and directs the spiritual growth of all those who submit to His leading (Ephesians 4:11-16). As the "pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15), the Church is the source of correct understanding and teaching of His instruction. It is also a source of much-needed encouragement and exhortation to not abandon the race, but to continue growing (Hebrews 10:25).

The parable of the sower teaches us four different ways that people respond when they hear (receive the "seed" of) the truth of God (Luke 8:4-15). Each of us should read this parable occasionally and examine ourselves as to which category or categories we fall into. We need to be in the fourth group described—the fertile soil. "The seeds that fell in good soil stand for those who hear the message and retain it in a good and obedient heart, and they persist until they bear fruit" (verse 15, Good News Bible).

What kind of fruit does God expect of us? "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23, NIV). (See our free e-booklet *The Fruit of the Spirit* at www.ucg.org/booklets.) God also desires the fruits of good works and service to others (Titus 3:14; Matthew 5:14-16; 25:31-46). Beautiful and desirable fruit, indeed!

Stay healthy and strong spiritually, keep growing and *bear much fruit!*

beautifully explains the purpose of God's Church and its leaders: "To prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity . . . and become *mature* . . . Then we will *no longer be infants* . . . Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things *grow up* into him who is the Head, that is, Christ" (verses 11-15, NIV).

Perhaps the best definition of spiritual maturity is the godly *love* described in "the love chapter," 1 Corinthians 13.

When Paul wrote to Timothy, he had reason to believe that Timothy's zeal was cooling off, like a campfire starting to die out. Paul wrote, "Therefore I remind you to *stir up* the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands" (2 Timothy 1:6). If your fire is dying, stir it up and fan it into flames!

When the author of the book of Hebrews, apparently Paul, wrote to Jewish Christians who had been in God's Church for many years, he knew that many of them had quit growing and had "become dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5:11). He said they were so immature spiritually that they still needed "milk, not solid food" (verse 12, RSV). He exhorted them, "Let us . . . *go on to maturity*" (Hebrews 6:1, RSV).

Finish the race

Paul compared the life of a believer to a race in which the winner receives a valuable reward: "*Run* in such a way that you may obtain it [eternal life]" (1 Corinthians 9:24). He said, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may *finish the race* and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me" (Acts 20:24, NIV).

Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us, "Let us *run with endurance* the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith."

It's not enough to *train* for a big race. It's not enough to *start* a race. What really counts is *crossing the finish line*. Ultimately, the only thing in this life that matters is crossing from mortal life to immortal life.

When Paul knew his "departure" was near, as he would soon be executed, he said: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:6-8, NIV).

Let's hope we can say the same thing at the end of our lives. We can if we use God's tools for spiritual growth, are faithful to Him and keep growing!

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If You'd Like to Know More...

Who we are: This publication is provided free of charge by the United Church of God, an *International Association*, which has ministers and congregations throughout much of the world.

We trace our origins to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. We follow the same teachings, doctrines and practices established then. Our commission is to proclaim the gospel of the coming Kingdom of God to all the world as a witness and to teach all nations to observe what Christ commanded (Matthew 24:14; 28:19-20).



Free of charge: Jesus Christ said, "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). The United Church of God offers this and other publications free of charge as an educational service

in the public interest. We invite you to request your free subscription to *The Good News* magazine and to enroll in our 12-lesson *Bible Study Course*, also free of charge.

We are grateful for the generous tithes and offerings of the members of the Church and other supporters

who voluntarily contribute to support this work. We do not solicit the general public for funds. However, contributions to help us share this message of hope with others are welcomed. All funds are audited annually by an independent accounting firm.

Personal counsel available: Jesus commanded His followers to feed His sheep (John 21:15-17). To help fulfill this command, the United Church of God has congregations around the world. In these congregations believers assemble to be instructed from the Scriptures and to fellowship.

The United Church of God is committed to understanding and practicing New Testament Christianity. We desire to share God's way of life with those who earnestly seek to follow our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our ministers are available to counsel, answer questions and explain the Bible. If you would like to contact a minister or visit one of our congregations, please feel free to contact our office nearest you.

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