

Program Transcripts

For May 2020



IN
SEARCH
OF THE LORD'S WAY[®]

SEARCH PROGRAMS

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Topics subject to change without notice

MAY 3 – BORN IN SIN?

When God made man, did He make him good or evil? Some say people are born entirely in sin and are incapable on their own of responding to the grace of God, but we want to what the Lord has to say about the nature of man.

MAY 10 – FAITH ALONE?

God's grace saves us through faith, but does He save us through faith alone? A study of the Scriptures reveals that faith is necessary to please God but not the only thing necessary. In this lesson, we'll see what God desire from us.

MAY 17 – FREE WILL

Does man have free will, or has God already made every decision affecting his salvation? Some say each of us is already predestined to heaven or hell and we cannot change God's decision about our destiny. What does the Bible say?

MAY 24 – CAN CHRISTIANS BE LOST?

Some say once you become a Christian, you can never lose your salvation. Is this true? May Christians live any way they please and still be saved, or can they lose their salvation if the turn away from God?

MAY 31 – DOES JESUS CARE?

Life can suddenly become harsh, causing us to question whether the Lord cares about us. However, a sparrow cannot fall from the sky without the Lord's knowledge. He knows and cares for us through every storm of life.

Born in Sin

When God made man, did He make him good or evil? Some say people are born entirely in sin, but we want to hear from the Lord. We think you do, too. The Lord's way is the way to an abundant life on earth and eternal life in heaven. Nothing is more important! Riches lose their luster, and health and youth fade, but God's promises grow sweeter and better day after day.

Years ago, I heard a preacher teach that every person from birth has a nature that is totally corrupt, perverse, and sinful. Because of this inborn corruption, he said the natural man is totally unable to do anything spiritually good. The sinner is so spiritually bankrupt that he can do nothing pertaining to his salvation. He cannot believe on his own or repent of his sin. This natural man is enslaved to sin he said; he's a child of Satan, rebellious toward God, blind to truth, corrupt, and unable to save himself or prepare himself for salvation.

He said that when Adam chose evil in the garden, he plunged himself and the entire human race into such spiritual ruin that mankind cannot choose spiritual good over evil. He no longer has free will. He said men inherited this total depravity. The only answer to these problems is a miraculous change from God; and once man is saved, he can never be lost. This doctrine also suggested that God arbitrarily chose from heaven who would be saved and who would be lost; that man has no choice in the matter.

Over the next few weeks we will examine the Scriptures to see whether this doctrine is true or false. We want to know what God's Word says because God's Word is utterly reliable.

Our reading today comes from Paul's letter to Titus 2:11-14. "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus, who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds."

We're asking today what the Bible says about the spiritual condition of the soul when a baby is born. First, let's go to Romans 7:7-11. "What shall we say then? Is the Law sin? May it never be! On the contrary, I would not have come to know sin except through the Law; for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, 'You shall not covet.' But sin, taking opportunity through the commandment, produced in me coveting of every kind; for apart from the Law sin is dead. I was once alive (speaking spiritually) apart from the Law; but when the commandment came, sin became alive and I died; and this commandment, which was to result in life, proved to result in death for me; for sin, taking an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good."

Romans 7 teaches that people learn from the commandments what is right and wrong. When we allow evil desires to cause us to break the commandment, we sin against God and spiritually die. James 1:13-15 describes more specifically when spiritual death takes place: he says "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am being tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death." Sin is an act, not an inheritable trait. You can't inherit the act of stealing, or the act of gossip, or fornication. People choose to act. Sin is accomplished after a choice, not inherited.

God's Word everywhere holds each person responsible for his or her own sins. I urge you to read the entire chapter of Ezekiel 18 for yourself. God clearly doesn't hold children guilty for the sins of their parents or parents guilty for the sins of their children. Ezekiel 18:1-4 says: "Then the word of the LORD came to me, saying, 'What do you mean by using this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying, The fathers eat the sour grapes, But the children's teeth are set on edge?' 'As I live,' declares the Lord GOD, 'you are surely not going to use this proverb in Israel anymore. Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die.'"

Some people think that children inherit the guilt of their parents. Some say we, as children of Adam and Eve, have inherited their wicked nature and are guilty of their sin. Some say an infant who dies is lost eternally; others say they go to limbo. You cannot find the concept of limbo in Scripture; that's made up; it's of human origin. But little children who die aren't lost; they haven't inherited Adam's guilt. Why? Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The person who sins will die. The son will not bear the punishment for the father's iniquity, nor will the father bear the punishment for the son's iniquity; the righteousness of the righteous will be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked will be upon himself." Babies don't know right from wrong and they cannot sin. One can only be lost for his own sins.

Romans 14:12 says, "So then each one of us will give an account of himself to God." You may be kin to the most godly person in the world, but that will not help you on Judgment Day. You can't inherit someone else's righteousness. Your father may be a preacher or an elder, and your mother may be a saint, but you cannot inherit salvation from your parents. You must choose to follow the Lord yourself.

You may be kin to the most sinful person in the world, but God will not hold you responsible for what he or she has done. God will hold you responsible for your own actions. Second Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil."

We all tend to want to blame others for our sins or to look down on others for their wickedness. I recently received a touching card from a viewer who said, "As much as I would be astonished at the sins of others, with an honest appraisal I am much more astonished and offended at my own." My friends, if I'm lost on judgment day, I'll have nobody to blame for my sinful life but me. I may have learned to sin from other people, but it was my choice to do it myself.

Spiritual death means a person is separated from the grace of God. Isaiah 59:1-2 says, "Behold, the LORD'S hand is not so short that it cannot save; nor is His ear so dull that it cannot hear. But your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear." When people allow sin and iniquity in their lives, that's when they separate themselves from God. Sin means that God turns His back on us and will not hear our prayers.

Sin causes animosity between God and man. Sin takes place when man selfishly says to God, I won't live by Your rules; I will do what I want to do. Sin utterly offends God and alienates us from God. James 4:4 says "whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." When you choose to embrace a sinful world and reject God, you make an enemy of God. You didn't start out an enemy, but you became one through your sin.

Paul preached to some pagan philosophers in Athens who didn't know God at all. In spite of this, he said to them in Acts 17:29 that we are all "offspring of God." Hebrews 12:9 reveals

that God is “the Father of spirits.” Whether you know God or not, the spirit that is inside you came from God. You are His offspring, created in His image. God didn’t make you evil. You chose to do evil. Psalm 58:3 says, “Even from birth the wicked go astray; from the womb they are wayward and speak lies.” These are not newborn babies; these are people that have gotten a little older and they go astray; they’re not born astray.

The Scriptures do not describe us as totally depraved; rather they describe us as weak. Saying humans have a weakness to sin is not the same thing as saying they’re totally unable to do any good. The Lord Jesus told the apostles in the Garden of Gethsemane, “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matthew 26:41). We want to do good but we often find ourselves doing the wrong thing.

God told Adam and Eve not to eat fruit from “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” This is not the tree of the knowledge of evil and evil; it’s the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve received knowledge of good as well as evil. They were not totally corrupt in knowledge. Though they sinned, they had a knowledge of good.

The Lord God said, “I will never again curse the ground because of man, for the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth (not from the birth, but from youth)” (Genesis 8:21). All of us have these same selfish, evil desires inside of us. Yes, they tempt us to sin against God. We have to fight them all of our days, but that doesn’t mean that we cannot also do good.

In the parable of the sower, there are different kinds of soils or hearts. The Bible says, “But the seed on the good soil stand for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop” (Luke 8:15). This good and honest heart belongs to a person who’s not yet a Christian, not yet saved. Remember Cornelius, the first Gentile convert. The Bible says that Cornelius, though not saved was nevertheless “devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly” (Acts 10:2).

The apostle Paul spoke of this spiritual battle going on inside of him, that goes on inside of all of us. He said, “So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Romans 7:21-23). We all, everyone of us, face this battle of wanting to do right and often finding ourselves doing the evil things that we hate. But this doesn’t mean that we are totally corrupt and incapable of believing.

Let me ask some questions for those who believe we are totally depraved and incapable of good. Hebrews 11:6 says, “without faith it is impossible to please God.” My question is, why would God demand faith from all men when He knows that men are incapable of believing what is written in His Word? The Lord Jesus said, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:5). Why would Jesus Christ condemn people for failure to repent if they’re incapable of repenting or doing any good thing toward their salvation?

Luke 18:15-17 says, “And they were bringing even their babies to Him so that He would touch them, but when the disciples saw it, they began rebuking them. But Jesus called for them, saying, ‘Permit the children to come to Me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Truly I say to you, that whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all.’” How can this be if infants are born wholly corrupt and unable to do good? Why would the Lord speak so glowingly of babies if they were so bound up in sin?

At this point, someone is probably asking, “Phil, don’t you know about Psalm 51:5?” Here the NIV reads “Surely I have been a sinner from birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.” Doesn’t this imply that we are born in sin? The NIV translates poorly here. Literally, David’s words would be translated: “Behold in iniquity I was born and in sin my mother conceived me.” David is saying he was born in an evil and sinful world. Let’s remember that sin is an act; it’s a transgression of God’s law. Sin is not an inherited trait; it’s learned and acted out.

I am speaking English because I was born in an environment that speaks the English language and I learned it. In Acts 2 the apostles spoke with the miraculous gift of tongues to people from many nations. When they heard the apostles, they marveled and said, “Why, are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we each hear them in our own language to which we were born?” (Acts 2:7-8). People are born in a language. One learns a language by being born into an environment that speaks it. In the same way, one learns sin by being born into a world that practices it.

To make this passage say that David was born depraved and sinful as a baby would make it contradict what David said in Psalm 22:9-10. “Yet You (God) are He who brought me forth from the womb; You (God) made me trust when upon my mother’s breasts. Upon You I was cast from birth; You have been my God from my mother’s womb.” From the time he was little, David learned both good and bad, both trust in God and later on, sin.

God didn’t make us totally evil and incapable of believing or incapable of repenting. We’re all weak, but we can change. Thank God for that!

Second Corinthians 5:19-20 says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Why do Christians urge others to be reconciled to God? The word “reconcile” means “to bring back into harmony.” A reconciled husband and wife were once in harmony, then they separated, and later restored to harmony. If an infant is born utterly in sin, he cannot be reconciled because he was never in harmony with the Lord in the first place. God’s answer to man’s sin came in the form of preaching the cross of Christ, telling people what God did for them so that they might believe, repent, and obey. We’re not totally depraved. Infants are born spiritually pure; they separated from God when they sinned and now need to be reconciled to God by responding to the gospel.

The Lord God gave up His Son Jesus to atone for our sins, and offered the gift of salvation to those who respond in faith, love, and obedience. Even in our sins we can respond to the gospel. Because of God’s grace, we can change.

Believe Jesus is the Christ! Turn your heart from sin to the Lord. Confess Jesus the Christ as the Son of God. And be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. “Be saved from this crooked generation.” God made you capable of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism. You don’t have to remain in sin. In Acts 2:41, those who gladly received the word were baptized. All through the book of Acts, lost people responded to preaching; they believed it and they obeyed. And my friend, you can, too!

Faith Alone?

God's grace saves us through faith, but does He save us through faith alone? The Lord's way is right and true. It never fails. The Lord's wisdom is far beyond our own. Proverbs 3:5-7 says, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil." Because we trust God, we turn to His Holy Word. We strive to please Him in all that we do, and His Word reveals the way that is good and acceptable and perfect.

Today, we're continuing to look at how man relates to God. Last week we learned from God's Word that man is not born totally corrupt but is capable of responding to the will of God. The Scriptures teach that people grow up in a sinful environment and are weak, but God made us capable of believing.

Faith comes not through some miracle, but through hearing the Word of God according to Romans 10:17. John 20:30-31 says, "Therefore many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name."

That faith is necessary for us to be saved is indisputable, but some say that we are saved by faith alone. Does God require more than faith for a person to respond to God's will? The answer lies in the Scriptures, so let's go to the Word of God.

Our reading today comes from the letter of James 1:22-25. "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he's like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he's looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was. But one who looks intently at the perfect law, the *law* of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, this man will be blessed in what he does."

There's no doubt that faith is necessary for forgiveness. The Lord Jesus said, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son (or "only begotten Son"), that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:16-18).

The Lord Jesus said, "He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned" (Mark 16:16). In John 8:24, the Lord said, "Therefore I said to you that you will die in your sins; for unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins." Hebrews 11:6 says, "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him." So, there can be no doubt that unless we believe in God, our Father, and Jesus as His Son, we will die in our sins.

The apostle Peter told Cornelius about Jesus Christ, "Of Him (that is, of Jesus) all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (Acts 10:43). The Bible says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our

introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2).

The Scripture clearly declares that faith is absolutely necessary for us to be saved from sin. But, the necessity of faith doesn't mean that other things are not also necessary. If I say I need oxygen to survive, that doesn't mean I don't need water, food, and shelter. No one would say that they live by oxygen alone. In the same way, the Scriptures teach that faith is necessary but don't rule out the need for other things to have life in Christ.

I've talked with people who believe that they're saved by faith alone. This doctrine makes Christianity convenient for a lot of people because they rely on the passages about faith, but often to the exclusion of other passages. Here's what I mean. People who hold to "faith alone" will start saying you don't have to do anything but believe, but the Scriptures do not limit what God requires of us to have faith alone. It's true that we're saved by faith, but it is not the whole truth. The Scriptures, in fact, tell us that we're saved by many things.

When I've discussed this doctrine with others who are adamant about being saved by faith alone, I often find that they back off of their conviction when other matters come into the conversation. For instance, when I bring up being saved by grace through faith, according to Ephesians 2:8, they gladly admit this is true. If we're saved by grace through faith, we're not saved by faith alone. Salvation also demands the grace of God, doesn't it?

I've asked people, "Do you have to love God in order to be saved?" There are several passages that teach the necessity of love to be right with God. The Bible says, "If anyone has no love for the Lord (speaking of Jesus), let him be accursed" (1 Corinthians 16:22). The word accursed here means someone is lost and condemned eternally. The Bible clearly teaches the necessity of love for the Lord.

The Lord Jesus said, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matthew 10:37). The Lord doesn't merely ask to be loved, but to be loved more than family, more than anything.

Mark 12:28-30 says, "And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, 'Which commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" God requires our wholehearted love and will settle for nothing less.

So, if I ask a person who says he believes in faith alone whether love is necessary to be saved and please God, he must take it back. Faith without love won't please God.

When I've talked with people who believe in faith alone, I've asked the question, "Do you believe it's necessary for a person to repent?" The Lord Jesus said in Luke 13:3, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." So serious was the Lord about repentance that He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it's better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it's better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Matthew 5:29-30).

When the apostle Paul preached to Stoics and Athenians on Mars Hill, he concluded his sermon with these words, "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all

people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31).

Having studied what God said about repentance, the people who say they believe in faith alone have to admit that we must repent to be right with God. If repentance is also necessary to be saved, then we aren't saved by faith alone, are we?

I've asked some if it's necessary to obey God to be saved. The Bible clearly says in Hebrews 5:8-9, "Although He (that is, Jesus) was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered. And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation."

John the Baptist said, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (John 3:36). I realize the King James Version translates this verse, "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abides on him." But the words "believe" and "believeth not" are different in the original language. The first "believeth" is the common word for believing, but the second word for "believeth not" describes a person who will not be persuaded and so is disobedient. It is usually translated as disobey or to be disobedient.

The contrast here is not between whether one believes or not, but whether one believes enough to be obedient. If he won't obey, he really doesn't believe. If he doesn't obey, he won't see eternal life; but the wrath of God will abide on him. The Bible never treats obedience as if it were optional. To say that we're saved by faith alone and have no need to obey clearly contradicts the teaching of Scripture.

When I've brought up the need for denying oneself and taking up the cross, the people who hold to "faith only" must admit the Lord requires that as well. The Lord Jesus said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it" (Luke 9:23-24). Denying self and taking up a cross is not optional.

When I've brought up the need for obedience to the person who believes in faith alone, he begins to talk about a works salvation. He begins to argue that we're saved by faith and not by works. I know Ephesians 2:8-10 says, "For by grace you've been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

We're not here suggesting that a person can earn his way to heaven by works. You can't earn salvation, no! Salvation is the gift of God's grace or favor. But let's not suppose that this gift is unconditional. God has every right to place conditions on His gift of grace. God distinguishes those who will receive His grace from those who will not by placing conditions.

Suppose I were to bury a priceless treasure in my backyard and promise to give it to you. You're interested in getting this great gift, so you ask what you need to do to get it. I have the right to make conditions to my gift. I tell you that you must go to the exact location and that you've got to dig it up. Do you honestly believe that the small effort you put into digging up the treasure earned that treasure for you or made it any less a gift?

Salvation is the same way. What God asks of us to receive His great mercy and grace are not meritorious works to earn salvation. Meeting God's conditions doesn't mean salvation is not a gift. Faith is certainly a condition for receiving that gift. What we need to understand is that loving God, repenting of sin, and obeying the Lord are responses of faith that meet God's conditions. They don't obligate God to save you; they don't save you without the grace of God. They are merely conditions that God has required for you to receive His marvelous gift.

Hugo McCord, a Bible scholar and one of my teachers at Oklahoma Christian, described faith as a "package" word. He said believing includes far more than agreeing that something is true. The word "faith" describes all that man does in response to God's grace. Faith is more than a mental act. Here's an example. Galatians 3:26-27 says, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." The concept of faith included being baptized and clothing ourselves with Christ. The Bible never, never, never contemplates the idea of a believing Christian who is not baptized.

Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter" (Matthew 7:21). Having a relationship with the Lord takes more than just mere faith; the person who talks faith but fails to live out his faith with love is actually fooling himself. The Bible says, "Whoever says 'I know him' (that is, I have a relationship with God) but does not keep his commandment, that person is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word (that is, obeys the commandments), in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him (that is, we have a relationship with Him and we abide in Him): whoever says he abides in Jesus in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked" (1 John 2:4-6). The doctrine of salvation by faith alone, although it is popular, does not come from God, but from men. God wants more than faith; He wants everything that's in your heart and in your life.

The Bible says, "Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God" (John 12:42-43). This is a secret faith that fails to confess Christ and fails to show love for God. Does this kind of faith please God? We must honestly answer no. We've all met people who say they believe but they don't live their faith. If they believe that their faith alone will save them, they're deceiving themselves.

James 2:18-20 says, "But someone may well say, 'You have faith and I have works; show me your faith without the works, and I will show you my faith by my works.' You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder. But are you willing to recognize, you foolish fellow, that faith without works is useless?"

My friend, put your faith into action by confessing Jesus as the Christ, turning away from every sin, and by being baptized for the forgiveness of your sins. When you are baptized, the Lord washes away your sins (Acts 22:16). Take up your cross daily and follow the Lord. Love the Lord and love others. Believing in the Lord Jesus also means being involved at church. When you place your faith in Christ and are baptized, the Lord adds you to His church and He expects you to get involved as one of His people in the church. The Father created you in Christ for good works, and as one of His people. Don't just talk your faith, live it! Serve the Lord with all your heart. We hope that today's study about a living faith has challenged you to put your faith in action.

Free Will

Does man have free will, or has God already made every decision affecting his salvation? Today, we're asking if man is free to choose God. The Lord's way is wise and good. It leads us in the path of righteousness and away from sin. The Lord's way leads us to love and blessing. No other path is so important to your soul. Some people hold the view that God has already predetermined everything that we think or do. They think God has made us the way we are, predetermined our motives and attitudes, and even predetermines the choices that we will make. According to them, we may think we are free to choose right or wrong, but God has already determined whether we will follow Him or follow the world to destruction.

While we recognize that God is sovereign and has a plan for this world, we also understand that God has made each of us a free moral agent. If God predetermined every motive and intention on our part, how could we ever freely love and choose Him from our hearts? If man has no free will, then he is but a puppet on a string. We maintain that our choice to take up our cross and follow Christ is not forced upon us. We do so out of committed love and faith, not out of compulsion.

The Bible says, "This is good, and it's pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4). God wants you to come to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him. So, we study and we try to learn the truth so that we may know how to please Him and to be saved from sin. This allows us to live with Him eternally.

Our reading from God's Inspired Word comes from the prophet Isaiah 1:18-20. "Come now, and let us reason together," Says the LORD, 'Though your sins are as scarlet, They will be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They will be like wool. If you consent and obey, You will eat the best of the land; But if you refuse and rebel, You will be devoured by the sword.' Truly, the mouth of the LORD has spoken." Let's pray together. Father, we're grateful that You have given us Your will so that we may understand it, and You have taken time to reason with us through Your Word. O, Father, help us to consent and to obey. May Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen!

The word "if" has but two letters, but it's one of the most crucial words of the Bible. In the passage in Isaiah, God wanted to reason with Israel so they would take a different path than the one they had taken earlier. In that first chapter, the people had abandoned and despised the Lord. They were spiritually sick; their worship was offensive to God because of their sin. God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, "Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause" (Isaiah 1:16-17). They were sinners, but they didn't have to continue in sin. They could change. They could cease their evil and they could learn to do good. God believed they could change and expected them to do so. Life is filled with so many choices, and we must learn to choose wisely. Since we have to live with the consequence of our choices, we must be careful to choose what is right. The Bible teaches that we have that ability. Many passages teach that man is free to choose between good and evil, and between God and Satan, and that man can change his choice.

In Romans 2:6-11, the Bible says God "will render to each person according to his deeds: to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal

life; but to those who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, wrath and indignation. There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil, of the Jew first and also of the Greek, but glory and honor and peace to everyone who does good, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For there is no partiality with God.”

God hasn't arbitrarily chosen some people for salvation and other people for condemnation. He permits each person to make a choice either to do good or to do evil. People can follow the commandments of God or they can refuse to obey the truth. We're all choosing what we follow. If we choose to follow God, we'll find life and blessing; but if we choose to follow sin, we'll only find death. We each are choosing what we will follow and serve in this life, and it will affect the next life.

In Romans 6:16-18 God's Word says, “Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, that you're slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, you have become slaves of righteousness.” You make the choice of your master. You'll present yourselves to someone as an obedient slave.

Notice that the people who were at one time slaves of sin made the decision to leave that life. They were enslaved to sin but they were still able to make a choice. They could leave their old master and come to a new master. They could be freed from that sin, the sin that was destroying them, and serve a master who would give them eternal life. They did this by obeying from the heart. They weren't forced! They wanted to make a change!

Remember the prodigal son, he thought he was serving himself, but actually he was really serving sin and Satan. He thought he was free, but his sins were destroying him. Sin will lead you where you have nothing left, just like he had nothing left. When this boy finally came to his senses, he left the pig farm, confessing his sins and repenting. He decided to go home. He changed his ways. He didn't have to stay in sin, and he wasn't going to!

The people that Peter preached to on the Day of Pentecost were guilty of crucifying the Lord Jesus Christ. When they sought for an answer to their guilt, they asked Peter “what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). They were not told they could do nothing about their sins. They were not told that God would have to work a miracle in their lives. Oh no, they were told to repent and to be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins.

Peter then said, “Save yourselves from this perverse generation” (Acts 2:40). What does that mean, “Save yourselves”? Are we suggesting that a person can earn his way to heaven? No, by no means! We're saying a person can and must repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of sins in order to respond in faith to God. No one earns salvation, but we are given salvation when we respond to the gospel; you “save yourselves” by responding to the grace and the forgiveness that God offers to you. God's not going to save you against your will.

If you're drowning and I throw you a rope and a life preserver, don't you have to grab hold? God graciously provides our salvation through the blood of Jesus, but we have to

respond by faith and obedience to that grace. We can't save ourselves by our own efforts, but we can respond to the gracious gift of salvation, and we have to. Wouldn't it be foolish to have God's rope of grace extended to us and then we just throw up our hands and say, "oh we can't do anything." Of course, we can do something. We can grab hold of the life that Christ purchased for us at such a great price.

On another occasion the same inspired apostle Peter wrote about how people are saved. He wrote, "Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God" (1 Peter 1:22-23). People purify their souls when they hear and obey the gospel truth.

They are born again not through some miraculous movement of God, but by obedience to the preaching of the Word of God. It is the gospel that saves (Romans 1:16). Paul said, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). This was God's choice of how to save people, giving them a gospel and saving them through their response to that message.

That man has free will to accept the gospel message or to reject it is also very clear in the Scriptures. Throughout history, people have made choices as to whether they will obey God or not. Joshua, late in his life, addressed the people of Israel. He said, "Now, therefore, fear the LORD and serve Him in sincerity and truth; and put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Now if it's disagreeable in your sight to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; (and then he says) but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (Joshua 24:14-15. Joshua knew people could choose which god they served, whether the God of Heaven or some other false god. They had freewill.

The prophet Elijah faced off against 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of the Asherah on Mount Carmel. The prophets of Baal were completely overcome by the God of Heaven when the fire came down and consumed Elijah's sacrifice. Before the challenge, Elijah went before the people and said, "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him" (1 Kings 18:21). Of course, Baal was just an idol and was never anything but a figment of the people's imagination. The God of Heaven, however, was real and sent fire down from heaven, which convinced the people to kill the prophets of Baal. When the people saw the evidence, they chose God and rejected Baal. They had free will, and, my friend, so do you. Revelation 22:17 says, "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come.' And let the one who hears say, 'Come.' And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost." God invites us to believe and obey! The gospel promises blessings and He gives them to "whosoever will." Whosoever means anybody; anyone and everyone who wants to come to the Lord may come to the Lord!

The Bible says, "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). God doesn't wish anybody to be lost, but He will not make you repent. You have to decide that for yourself. God allows you to make that decision; He won't make it for you.

The belief that God has predestined us for heaven or hell and we have no choice in the matter goes against the grain of Scripture. If we cannot change, why does the Bible urge us to believe? Why does it urge us to love God? Why does it tell us to repent? Why does the Bible warn us about sin? Such language becomes absurd if you have no free will.

The very word temptation refers to a moral testing, whether we will choose to do right or give in to the wrong. Choice is involved. The Bible says, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13). If people cannot make a choice to do right or wrong, they cannot be tempted; but every person faces temptation regularly.

You're not a puppet or a robot. You're a person made in God's image and accountable for your choices. If a person were arbitrarily predestined to heaven or hell, no matter what choices he made, how could God be just? How can man be held accountable to God for his actions in judgment without free will? Only people with choice can be held responsible for their choices. Wouldn't God be unjust to condemn someone arbitrarily and eternally when that person could not choose? The God of all grace is not so monstrous.

God does not show partiality. Peter told the first Gentile convert Cornelius, "I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right is welcome to Him" (Acts 10:34-35). God wonderfully, marvelously, graciously offers to us the blood of Jesus to cleanse us from sin. We can choose to be crucified with Christ and we can enjoy God's grace and forgiveness; or we can rebel against God and live our lives as we wish. Oh, friend, what will you choose, what will you do? Let's pray together. Father, we're thankful that you give us the opportunity to love You, to believe and trust in You, to Know You, and to obey You. Father, help us to be the kind of people that are willing to do all of those things. May Your will be done in our lives on this earth, just as it's done in heaven. In Jesus' name, Amen!

Sin, all sin, is a serious issue. When we choose to sin we must face the consequences. We can't ignore our sins and hope they'll go away. We can't wish our sins away. We can't blame anyone else. We can't hide our sins from God. Sin is that huge issue coming between God and us. Sin offends God and it separates us from Him. God will not simply forget what we did. Sin has to be dealt with.

Sin that's left unresolved will cost us our souls. That's why we need the blood of Jesus to be saved. How do we come into contact with that blood? By believing in Christ, repenting of our sins, confessing Jesus as the Christ, and by being baptized. When we, from the heart, obey the gospel, we're baptized into the death of Christ, and that's where the blood was shed. It's in baptism that the blood of Jesus is applied to our souls, and washes them clean. That's the time our sins are washed away (Acts 22:16). My friend, do you want to be saved today?

You have to make a choice. You can rebel against God and stay in your sins or you can come to Christ. You can live your life on your own terms or you can listen to the Lord. Today, is the very best day you'll ever have to change your life, to leave the old man of sin behind, and to follow the Lord. Oh, I hope you'll be like the prodigal son and come to your senses. Isn't it time to come back home to God and to the abundant life in Christ. God has given you free will. Use it! God is offering you eternal life in Christ. Why not grab hold of life and never, never, let it go?

Can Christians Be Lost?

Some say that once you become a Christian you can never lose your salvation. Is this true? God is the author of Scripture, and we can believe the Bible because God was behind the writing of every verse, every chapter, and every book. We can trust it to give us the truth that God wanted us to know, truth that is sufficient to lead us to eternal life. We need that truth, so we go to the Bible.

The doctrine of “once saved, always saved” suggests that the Christian, once truly saved, can never do anything to lose his salvation and finally be lost in hell. This belief says Christians have an unconditional security in Christ. They suggest that any person who appears to be a Christian and falls away was never truly converted in the first place. They say that Christians do sin; but when they sin, they are punished in this life and forfeit privileges in heaven, but not entrance into heaven.

But is heaven conditional? What is a condition? A conditional statement is usually introduced by words such as “if” or “unless.” When Jesus said in Luke 13:3 that unless you repent, you will perish; we understand that repentance is a condition to keep from being lost. The Bible says “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin” (1 John 1:6-7). There are conditions.

Our reading today from God's inspired and all-sufficient Word comes from 2 Peter 2:20-22. “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, ‘A dog returns to its own vomit,’ and, ‘A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.’” That's a big, big, big warning coming from the Word of God.

The doctrine of “once-saved, always saved” is built upon the belief that God's grace is unconditional. Some say once grace is given, a Christian cannot lose it. But the doctrine of unconditional security ignores the conditional, qualifying statements in Scripture about whom the grace of God saves. Several passages show our salvation is conditional. We must remain faithful to God.

For instance, the Lord Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, if anyone keeps My word he will never see death” (John 8:51). But what will happen if a person stops keeping God's Word? The Lord said, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me (now notice that the branch is already in them) that doesn't bear fruit, He takes away; and every branch that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit” (John 15:2). When a branch in Christ no longer bears fruit, it's taken away. John 15:6 says, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned.” This is the end of a Christian who will not bear fruit.

Moreover, your moral life matters. A Christian who turns to fleshly passions can lose his soul, but one who puts away sin can live with God. Romans 8:12-13 says, “So then, brethren (he's talking to Christians), we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you (that is, you Christians) are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by

the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” Morality is a condition of salvation.

The Lord expects His people to hold firmly to their faith. Our salvation depends on it. First Corinthians 15:1-2 says, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word that I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.” If they don't hold firmly to their faith, they will have believed in vain and could lose their salvation.

Colossians 1:21-23 says, “And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach—if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.” Holding firmly to the gospel is a condition of our salvation.

Remaining active in church attendance and our efforts for the gospel is a condition of our salvation. In Hebrews 10:25 the inspired writer noted that some Christians had forsaken assembling with the church. In response to this he said, “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (verses 26-27). Yes, a Christian who quits on God can lose the blessing of eternal life. God expects us to stay involved in church as long as we are able.

The second epistle of Peter was written to Christians urging them to remain faithful and not to fall away to immorality or false teaching. Second Peter 2:20-21 says, “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, (these people are Christians) they are again entangled (that is, go back into those sinful things) in them and overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, (that is, to become a Christian), than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them.” This clear Scripture shows that if a Christian gets overcome by sin he can find himself worse off than before he became a Christian. It would have been better if he had never known the way of the Lord.

In 1 John 1:6-7 the Bible says, “If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, then we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.” This was written to Christians. Our freedom from sin is conditional on whether we follow the Lord or follow the world. I've presented several conditions that God has placed on our salvation, and there are many more. But if there were just one, just one Scriptural condition on this list, that would be enough to show that our salvation is conditional.

In addition, the Scriptures often warn Christians to remain faithful and committed to the Lord. Paul said, “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win (that is, give it all you've got). Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath (but we do something more than that), but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and I make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27). Paul knew that he could lose his crown of life if he didn't discipline

himself and stay free from sin.

In Galatians 5:19-21, Paul warned the Galatian Christians about the deeds of the flesh. He said, "Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you, just as I've forewarned you, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." Why would Paul forewarn Christians about these sins keeping them out of heaven if Christians couldn't lose their salvation?

Our faith and commitment to Christ is a lifetime effort. The Lord Jesus said, "whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). This passage says the believer possesses eternal life but doesn't say anything about the person who stops believing or stops hearing the word. John 8:51 says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, that if anyone keeps my word, he shall never see death." But what about the person who quits keeping the Word? John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." One has eternal life as long as he believes and obeys. But if he stops believing or he stops obeying, he can lose that life.

Can a person stop believing? Some think not, but we have an example in Scripture of Israel coming out of Egypt. Study Psalm 106, and study it closely. Psalm 106:12 says, "Then they believed His words; They sang His praise." But verse 13 says, "they quickly forgot His works." In verse 21 the Bible says, "they forgot God their Savior." And then Psalm 106:24 to 25 says, "Then they despised the pleasant land; They did not believe in His word, but grumbled in their tents; They did not listen to the voice of the LORD." Can people stop believing and hearing God? The Israelites did. And, my friend, you can, too. Beware!

In the parable of the sower that's very familiar to us in scripture, Jesus described different kinds of soil: there's the soil that's beside the road, then there is the rocky soil, the thorny soil, and the good soil. These types of soil actually describe people's hearts. Jesus tells how the Word of God or the seed is planted in the rocky soil and what happened. The Lord said, "Those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, they receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away" (Luke 8:13). They stopped believing. Sadly, we've all known people like this who believed at one point in their life and quit believing in another.

Paul predicted, "But the Spirit explicitly says that in later times some will fall away from the faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:1). When you stop listening to the Lord and His Word, and you begin to pay attention to others, you can stop believing. To believe in the Lord Jesus means that you believe what He teaches. How can you say you believe the Lord if you will not accept the things that He teaches.

Consider Hebrews 3:12-14 that is written to brothers in Christ. "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end." To fall away is to abandon the Lord willfully. These brothers had been deceived and hardened by sin and they lost their faith. Again, we are partakers of Christ only if we hold firm our faith to the end.

At this point someone says, "Well, Phil, don't you know no one can snatch us out of the

Lord's hand? Don't you know that we can never be separated from God's love?" Yes, I well know the two precious promises first found in John 10:27-29 and second in Romans 8:35-39; I know them quite well. They say that no one and nothing can separate us from God. These verses, however, don't take into account what happens to a person who decides to separate himself from God. Jude 21 advises us to "keep yourselves in the love of God"; and John 15:9-10 teaches us that we must abide in God's love. Oh, no one else can separate us from God, but we can decide to leave the Lord. Christians can choose to fall away! They can choose to leave God; and, sadly, sadly, many have.

Another person objects, "Well, if a Christian falls away, he was never truly converted in the first place." Are you sure? Have you never changed your mind? The Bible says in Hebrews 6:4-6, "For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away (that is, by their choice), it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to an open shame."

It's clear that these people were once Christians. They were enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, partakers of the Holy Spirit, and they've tasted or experienced the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come. You couldn't have these spiritual blessings outside of Christ. You can't fall away from something unless you were first part of it. These Christians fell away by willfully rejecting Jesus Christ. Others could not get them to repent because they didn't want to repent. To fall away is a willful choice to abandon the faith.

In a different situation, Galatians speaks of Christians who followed a different gospel than Paul preached by binding circumcision and the Law on Gentile Christians. Paul said, "You've been severed from Christ, you who are seeking to be justified by law; you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4). Here are people under the grace of God, but they fell away from it; they severed themselves from Christ. To be severed implies that they first belonged to Him. My friend, a Christian can fall from grace. I pray that you never do.

Thank God for a second law of pardon for Christians who have sinned. Even when a Christian strays from the truth, God has a way for him to return to salvation. Like the prodigal son, he can come home to God.

When Simon the Sorcerer, in Acts 8, offered money to buy the apostles' gift, Peter rebuked him for his sin. Peter said, "You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God. Repent, therefore, of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you. For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (Acts 8:21-24". God expects Christians to repent of their sins and ask for forgiveness if they wish to be pardoned.

The Bible says, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). God is faithful to His people. He will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness, if...if...we confess our sins, repent of them, and ask for his forgiveness. God offers pardon, but there are conditions to our forgiveness.

The same thing is true for the person who wants to become a Christian. The Lord Jesus offers salvation as a gift to those who will believe, who will repent of their sins, who will confess His name before others, and who will be baptized. Baptism is an immersion in water in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38). Meeting conditions won't earn you salvation; but if you fail to meet them, you cannot enjoy the grace and blessing of God.

Does Jesus Care?

Life can suddenly become harsh, causing us to question whether the Lord cares about us. When I'm hurting, does Jesus care about me? We have no doubt that the Bible will give us the truth, so we keep on looking to it for the answers. Our goal is to please God because we love Him and we want to be close to Him. Longing to be close to God is natural, especially when you're hurting. The sons of Korah described the heartache of longing for God. "As the deer pants for the water brooks, so my soul pants for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God? My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all day long, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:1-3).

When tough times come, many feel that God is distant. They wonder if the Lord is watching or if He cares. They long for God's help and comfort. Does Jesus care when our hearts are broken with grief, when the bills pile up, when the children are hungry, or when we can't seem to get well? Does God know what you're going through and hear your prayers?

Nothing escapes the notice of God. Luke 12:6 says that not even a sparrow can fall to the ground apart from God's knowledge. God not only sees what happens outwardly, He can also see the troubles inside your heart. He knows all about you, because He created you. He knows your every need and knows your every heartache. There's never been a single moment in your life when God has closed His heart and not wanted to be close to you and bless you.

Our reading today gives us some details about an event in the life of Jesus. They come from Mark 4:35-39.

On that day, when evening came, He said to them, "Let us go over to the other side." Leaving the crowd, they took Him along with them in the boat, just as He was; and other boats were with Him. And there arose a fierce gale of wind, and the waves were breaking over the boat so much that the boat was already filling up. Jesus Himself was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke Him and said to Him, "Teacher, do You not care that we are perishing?" And He got up and rebuked the wind and said to the sea, "Hush, be still." And the wind died down and it became perfectly calm.

Frightening, life-threatening storms happened suddenly on the sea of Galilee. In this storm Jesus is asleep, with "his head on a cushion." The disciples cry out "Master, don't you care that we are perishing?" We all ask questions like this, and we need an answer. We see the world's agonies and wonder if God is paying attention. We need help from Someone bigger than we are and we need His help now.

Jesus didn't answer their question immediately. Instead, He rebuked the storm and made the water calm. Then Jesus asked the disciples, "How is it that you have no faith?" In so many cases in life, the question is not whether God cares, but whether we believe.

Of course, Jesus cares. Mark five, in the first 20 verses, describes how the Lord Jesus delivered Legion, a demon-possessed man who lived like a beast. Later in the chapter, verses 25 to 34, Jesus heals a woman who had a hemorrhage for twelve years; and then later on, verses 35 to 43, He raised the daughter of Jairus.

Someone objects, "But why doesn't God stop every problem? Why is it the Lord seems asleep and uncaring?" Here is the assumption: if God doesn't stop all our problems, He doesn't really care about us. We want God to keep us free from any struggles or difficulties. It's tempting to question God's love when we face challenges or disappointments. We think if God loves us, that He will protect us from any and every problem.

But, is a painless world free from any problems, really the best for us? It may be convenient and comfortable, but is it best for our character? Doesn't the person who faces no problems and gets everything his own way think that the whole world revolves around him?

Challenges shape us into people of character. James 1:2-4 says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." We may see trials and struggles the wrong way. God permits them because He sees a greater good with them than without them. Struggles help us become the strong people that God desires. So, let's rejoice in our trials, because God uses them to mold us into His people.

James 1:12 says, "Blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." It doesn't say, "Blessed is the man who has no troubles," but "blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." He's the man who won't quit on God on a rough day. Because he loves God, even in tough times, God will reward him with the crown of life.

The Lord demonstrates that He cares. You might ask the question, "How?" First, He shows that He understands suffering in that He himself suffered for our sins. He Himself endured the punishment that rightfully was our own. First Peter 2:24 says, "He Himself bore our sins in His body." It was personal, and He did it on the cross, "so that we might die to sin and live to righteousness; for by His wounds you were healed."

God loved His Son, Jesus, but He didn't stop the crucifixion. Jesus prayed with tears in the Garden to let this cup pass, but God sacrificed His Son because He loved you and me, just as He loved His Son. Atoning for sin was more important to Jesus Himself than freedom from suffering. Have you considered how greatly our Father suffered in sacrificing His Son? No one has grieved over human evil more than God Himself has. No one has suffered more than Jesus, who bore the cross for our sins. He showed unmistakably how much He loved us. This loving God asks us to trust Him when we and our loved ones cry out for help.

First Peter 2:21-23 says, "For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth; and while being reviled, He did not revile in return; while suffering, He uttered no threats, but He kept entrusting Himself to Him who judges righteously." This is what the disciples in the boat needed to do and what we need to do: entrust our souls to God! First Peter 5:7 urges us to cast "all your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you."

God inspired the apostle Paul to write the book of Romans before the Christians began facing great persecution. Paul asked, "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, 'For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered'" (Romans 8:35-36).

Paul answers the question in verses 37 to 39, "No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure," I'm convinced, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Their problems did not separate them from the love of God; and my friend, your problems won't separate you either.

God didn't stop the apostles from being beaten; He didn't stop Stephen from being stoned; and He didn't stop James from being beheaded by the sword. God didn't keep Paul from imprisonment. They knew God would stand by them. Suffering may tempt us to quit on God. Remember, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted or tested beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it" (1 Corinthians 10:13).

These temptations or tests don't single us out, but they are common. We all suffer, and that suffering can challenge our faith. God isn't hiding when the trials come. He is faithful! You can trust Him! Nothing that you encounter today, nothing tomorrow, or nothing at any time will ever be bigger than what God and you together can handle. He doesn't remove all of our problems, but God does give us the strength and the ability to bear those challenges and those temptations and those tests. When the problem gets so big that we can't handle it, God makes a way of escape so that we'll never be overcome by it.

God sometimes uses the physical struggles that we face to keep us from doing ourselves spiritual harm. God gave the apostle Paul some tremendous, miraculous revelations to help him in his ministry. But, God didn't want Paul to exalt himself, so He gave him "a thorn in the flesh" to torment him and keep him from exalting himself (2 Corinthians 12:7). Paul prayed three times for the Lord to take away his "thorn in the flesh"; but God refused and said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness."

Paul realized that this thorn was not going away. Was he bitter? No! He learned something valuable: God's power is perfected, made stronger, in weakness. Paul said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). Struggles remind us that we need God. Many folks think that they can manage without God; but in our darkest moments, we see how much we really need God.

God's grace is indeed sufficient. Yes, it is! Suffering may torment your body, but it can't take away your soul. Suffering may open up for you an opportunity to see the great power of God, to help you sustain yourself even in times of weakness. Jesus does indeed care. Just as Jesus wept with Mary and Martha at the death of Lazarus, so He weeps with us. The Lord knows when we hurt, and He provides the comfort and strength that we need to overcome.

Sometimes people continue to ask, "Why the Lord doesn't stop all evil right now?" But if the Lord stopped all evil, wouldn't that also include the evil that you do? You know if we ask God to stop all evil, we need to consider the wrongs that we do. Your sin hurts; it hurts God; it hurts you; and it hurts others. The Lord patiently loves you enough to lead you to a better way. He asks you to change your life by repenting.

Repentance is not punishment, but healing. The Lord knows that there is a better person inside of you, wanting to come out. He knows that your repentance will not only bless your life, but bless all the people that you touch. When you come to Christ and stop the old way of sin, you bless people that you formerly hurt. He graciously gives us time to repent. "The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Jesus loved you and gave you the righteous example to follow. He showed us how to forgive and how to be forgiven. He gave us his Word to guide our lives. He could say, "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you

and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” (Matthew 11:28-30).

Times of crisis call for the best in people. Bravery, heroism, love, self-sacrifice—all of these things flourish in times of crisis. People who exhibit such traits are cherished and honored as having gone “above and beyond the call of duty.” Was this not the very point that Christ was making when He said, “Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

The most important question is not, “why did this happen to me?” but rather, “what shall I do now?” Some reject God and abandon Him when sorrow comes their way. Some turn inward in self-pity. Others exercise their faith and find that God has not forgotten them. They entrust their souls to Him and find His promise is true, which says “And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28).

Not everything that happens to us is good; but let’s not assume that the only way that God can care for us is to prevent our troubles. God also shows His care by taking the harshest things in our lives and using them for good, not only to bless us, but also to bless others. God has the power to prevent; and we have no idea all the harm from which He has protected us already. But, God also has the power to take the things that are at their worst and make good out of them. He can also do that for you.

Instead of blaming God for pain, look to Him for strength. Struggles remind us that God never intended this world to be our home. We are pilgrims, and our lives here are brief. Paul said, “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). We too must learn to see with the eye of faith and trust. The last chapter of our lives has not yet been written. When Jesus comes again, He will bless and comfort His own.

Jesus cares about you. He wants to be your friend. He cares about your physical welfare, your finances, your family, and your future. More than anything, Jesus cares about your soul. The Lord Jesus knows all about you, the good and the bad. He even knows the number of hairs upon your head. In spite of it all, He loves you and He cares greatly about every detail of your life.

Sometimes we concentrate so much on our longing for God to act that we forget God is longing for a relationship with us. The Lord deeply desires that we draw close to Him. When we forget Him or get caught up in sin, He yearns for His people to come back. The Lord Jesus died on the cross for sinful people, yearning to have a relationship with them.

Do you have a close, loving relationship with God? Does the Lord see you as someone who is devoted to Him? In your quiet moments as you look into your heart, do you see yourself as a friend to God? If you have not given yourself to the Lord; today, is the right day to come to Him. Come to the Lord in faith, trusting in Him and His Word. Confess Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God. In repentance, make Jesus your Lord; let Him rule your life.

Having done these things, be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. In baptism, the Lord will cleanse you from sin (Acts 22:16); He’ll cause you to be born again (John 3:5); He’ll give you newness of life (Romans 6:4). In baptism, the Lord will also add you to His church (Acts 2:47). When you become a Christian, you’ll find the strength and grace to deal with all of life’s struggles. God cares enough to give us the strength to bear what He does not take away. Trust Him! Trust Him!