

You are more than you think

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Contents

Discovering the unique you

This is you! -----	1
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Your body

A perfect creation -----	4
Jars of clay -----	5
The eye gate and ear gate -----	6
My (big) mouth -----	7
The struggle for control -----	10
A temple for God -----	12

Your soul

Beneath the surface -----	16
The mind -----	17
The heart -----	17
The will -----	22
From values to action -----	24
Attitudes -----	27
Decisions -----	29
Actions -----	30

Your spirit

The center of who we are -----	32
A new spirit -----	33
It depends on one's heart condition -----	34
Recognized by your fruit -----	36

What makes you special?

Fitting the pieces together -----	39
Your talents – virtues of the body -----	40
Your personality – virtue of the soul -----	41
Your gifts – virtues of the spirit -----	48
Your past -----	52

A new spirit

The transformation -----	58
A change of heart -----	60
Temptation, sin and guilt -----	61
Facts, faith and feelings -----	70
Worship -----	76

Our future

The tent we live in -----	81
A new body -----	83
A final thought -----	86
A prayer of blessing -----	87



YOU
ARE MORE
THAN YOU
THINK

I praise You because I am fearfully
and wonderfully made; Your works
are wonderful, I know that full well.

Psalm 139:14

Discovering the unique you

Introduction: This is you!

From the sound of your voice to the distinctive pattern of your eyes and fingerprints, the evidence that there is only one person like you is undeniable.

Perhaps you'd prefer not to be so unique, to blend in better with your friends. On the other hand, you might only be too glad to change a few things if you could. You might wish to be more popular, better at sport, achieve higher grades or have the looks of a movie star. But have you ever considered that it's not only your physical features that make you different?

You have other, more important characteristics that set you apart and make you special. In fact, it is the combination of these characteristics, selected by God, that is your greatest asset. As such, you have a lot more going for you than you might have realized.

From the beginning – even before the day you were born – God has been shaping you and fitting you together exactly as He wanted you to be. He also placed you in the family and country where he wanted you to grow up. Just think, the great God of the universe took time to fit every part of you together perfectly. So don't let anyone tell you that you are just average!

God doesn't mass-produce people. In fact, to show how much He cares about you, He keeps an up-to-date record of the hairs on your head. And if God cares enough to keep track of the smallest detail of your life, how much more will He not care about what's going on inside you – the

way you feel, what you're thinking and what you believe. He knows what makes you mad, what gives you hope, what makes you laugh and what makes you sad. This is how David put it in one of his psalms:

O LORD, You have searched me and You know me.

You know when I sit and when I rise;

You perceive my thoughts from afar.

You discern my going out and my lying down;

You are familiar with all my ways.

Psalm 139:1-3

Life can be demanding and confusing, and as time goes by there are so many questions about the big issues in life that we stop asking questions about ourselves; our purpose, why we feel the way we do, and why that even matters.

Your
body makes
you aware of
the world.

Your
soul makes
you aware of
yourself.

Your
spirit makes
you aware
of God.

As you read this book you will hopefully come to realize that you are nothing less than a walking miracle made in God's image – just like Him. That's what gives us purpose and makes us different from all other living beings on earth: God breathed His eternal spirit into man. "The LORD God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7).

Firstly, it is obvious that we have physical bodies. Secondly, Genesis tells us that we have something equally real on the inside of us: God breathed an eternal spirit into us. The soul of a person is the third important part of our make-up. By the time that you've finished this book you should have a clearer understanding of what makes you you on the outside and the inside – how one's body,

soul and spirit interact. A simple example shows how easily this interaction takes place.

In the morning as you wake up, the first thing that makes you aware of yourself is your body, which may be rather reluctant to get up.

As your mind gets itself organized, feelings begin to surface – some barely discernible: a nagging fear, a tinge of sadness, or perhaps a sense of excitement. There may even be a jumble of feelings in your mind much like a pile of clothes that hasn't been sorted. Within seconds, the soul's thoughts and emotions pick up from where they were put on hold the night before.

Suddenly, your thoughts focus on a potential problem that makes you aware of your need for God. And so you pause and allow your spirit to reach out to Him in a prayer of commitment.

Now you are ready to face the day!



Your body

A perfect creation

God has given us bodies specially designed to live on this planet. From the food provided by nature to the air that we breathe; from the force of gravity to the temperature of the sun, our bodies' specifications are absolutely perfect for living on this planet.

God created man differently from the way He created other creatures. Up to the creation of man, God had spoken everything into being. At His command the fish, the birds and all other living creatures were created.

Then God reached down, scooped up some dust and shaped it into a man. God breathed His life into the pile of earth, and Adam became uniquely different to all the other creatures – he had the personal characteristics of his Creator, although in a limited form (Genesis 9:6).

Then God made Adam to fall into a deep sleep, and while he slept, God created a partner for Adam from one of his ribs; someone similar, yet different, who would complement Adam's needs and be a close friend. Together, Adam and Eve would be able to have children, thereby bringing into being offspring, who like them, would have a spirit within.

God has made our bodies so complex and efficient that scientists cannot explain some of the mysteries of the human body. This is what David wrote about his body while God was forming it before he was born:

“For You created my inmost being; You knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (Psalm 139:13-14).

Jars of clay

When we are young life seems endless, and because there is so much to cram into every day, we barely have time to think of the coming week, let alone, eternity. But Paul reminds us that life is fragile; that our bodies are not going to last forever here on earth: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Corinthians 4:7).

He compares our bodies to clay jars that get chipped, cracked, and broken. Yet, within every believer there is an everlasting treasure – the Holy Spirit who fills us with the light of God (2 Peter 1:19).

Yes, we are hard pressed on every side but we are not crushed; we may

be confused by the things that happen to us, but we never give up. We may even be struck down physically or emotionally, but the devil can never destroy those who believe in God. Because life is what it is, we do get hurt and bruised and sick, and although the body is designed to heal itself, there are limits to the damage

Our bodies
are God's
temple -
the home
of the
Holy
Spirit.

it can repair. That is why God wants us to love our bodies and look after ourselves (Galatians 5:14). Our bodies are His temple – the home of the Holy Spirit. We should therefore not take foolish and unnecessary risks that could lead to permanent injury. Neither should we expose ourselves to that which is unhealthy or habit forming. The Bible warns about excesses – when too much of a good thing becomes a bad thing – because our bodies, with their physical limits, are but fragile containers of our lives on earth.



The eye gate and ear gate

We live in a physical world, often referred to as the real world, subtly implying that anything unseen is not real. As mentioned, our bodies are perfectly suited to living here on earth, but God has a higher purpose for us than to merely exist on this planet for a set number of years. His purpose spans eternity.

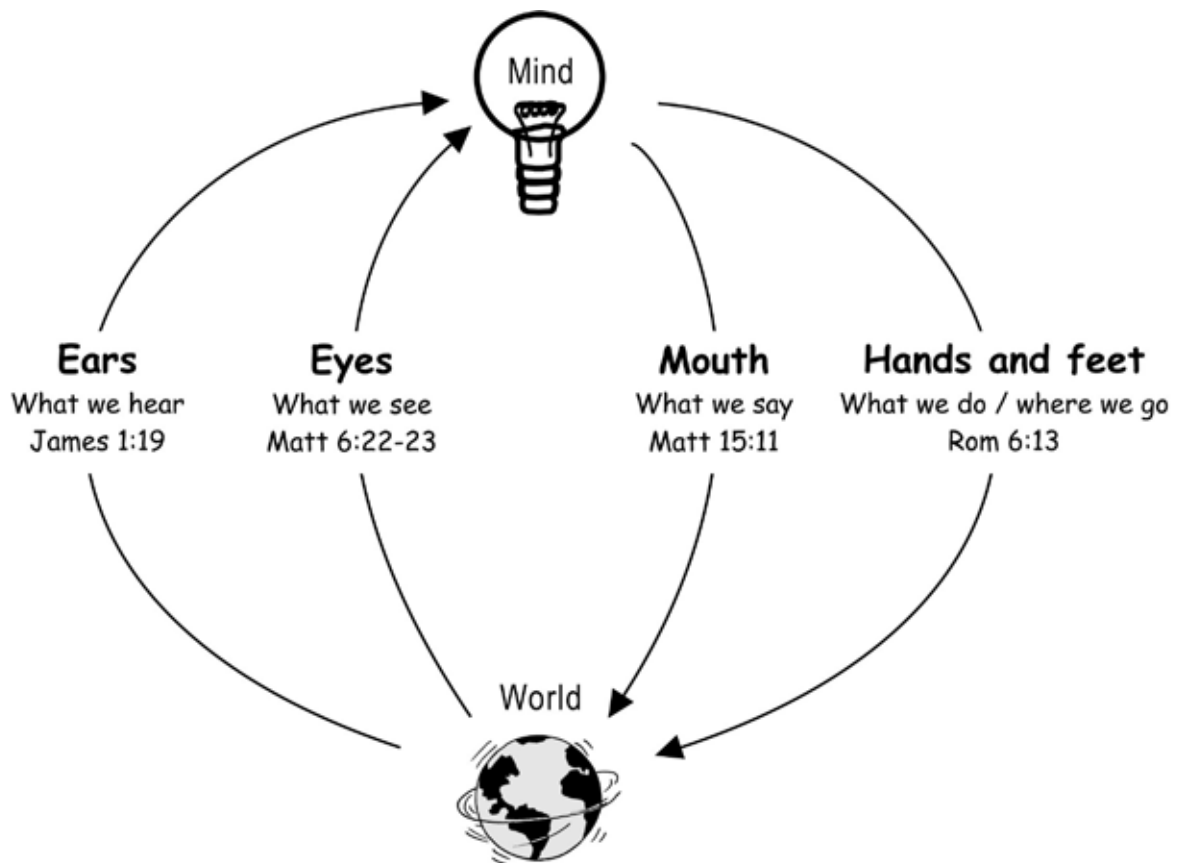
Because we are made in God's image, we have the ability to communicate with each other through our senses. Humans have learned to communicate verbally and by means of visual signs.

We interact with the world around us through our bodies. It is not surprising, therefore, that the devil uses our two main senses – our eyes and ears – to get as much evil into our hearts as he can. Everything we see and hear enters the mind and from there it settles in the heart. In addition, every bad thing we see and hear stays lodged in our minds, consciously or subconsciously (whether we're aware of it or not).

Jesus warned about letting evil enter our lives by what we see. "The eye is the lamp of the body," He said. "If your eyes are good, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!" (Matthew 6:22-23).

The things we see leave a lasting impression on us because we have the ability to visualize scenes repeatedly in our minds. That is why we should be cautious when selecting movies and TV programs, and wise regarding our choice of books and magazines that we read.

The other "gate" that leads to our inner lives is the ear gate. Be careful, therefore, not to leave this gate unguarded by listening to music that stirs up a rebellious attitude, or by being around those who tell dirty jokes.



Our interaction with the world

Bad language, blasphemy and suggestive talk are automatically stored in your memory, and the devil takes every opportunity to use what you've heard to taint your heart.

My (big) mouth

So far, we've looked at the two main ways of receiving information, which are, through our eyes and ears. Now we look at the most common way of transferring a message, and that is, with our mouths.

We speak, whisper, shout and sing words in a meaningful way to tell someone what we want them to know. The words we choose and the way in which we express them allow us to convey information as well as feelings.

Because words are so powerful, the Bible warns us to guard this gate too. The mouth can so easily be used to express the bad and hurtful thoughts stored up inside:

“The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:6).

The power of words

Blessings and curses

Words can bless and encourage, or they can hurt and destroy. It's even possible for praises and cursing to come out of the same mouth, but this should never happen (James 3:9-12).

The heart
is the
real
source of
the good
or
evil that
we speak.

Yet it's not the mouth that is the real problem. The mouth merely responds to what we're thinking, and in turn, the mind is prompted by the heart where our attitude is formed.

The heart is therefore the real source of the good or evil that we speak. “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

Words that save

The mouth has an important part in our salvation. When, at first, we believe in Jesus and realize our desperate need of Him, it is the Holy Spirit who touches our spirit. He is the One who gives us the understanding and faith to believe. But that moment of spiritual insight alone does not ensure a lasting change. We need to respond. It is only when we confess our sins and express our faith in the saving power of Jesus that our spirit is reborn and eternal life begins. “For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:10).

Resisting temptation

Jesus used words (Scripture) to keep Himself from being drawn into the devil's trap of temptation – yes, Jesus was also tempted just as we are! Yet, He never sinned once. Jesus quoted Scripture to contest every lie and argument of the devil until the devil finally gave up and left (Luke 4:1-13).

Words of power

Whenever Jesus performed a miracle, He simply spoke and it happened. At the Sea of Galilee He commanded the fierce storm to be stilled. Jesus commanded evil spirits to come out of people, and even called to a dead man and raised him back to life! Going back to the beginning of time, we see that God

created the whole universe by the words of His mouth – He literally spoke everything into being! God's words still have the same power today to change seemingly impossible situations and make things new.

When we speak words in Jesus' name, and believe, those words have the power to bring about His will. Jesus told us as His followers to ask in His name when we pray to the Father, and by doing so, God the Father receives the glory for the answered prayer (John 14:13-14).

Jesus said that if you have faith the size of a mustard seed you can move mountains! What is your mountain right now?

Words to glorify God

Words can be used to glorify (uplift) God. There are many psalms, like the ones below, in which the writer used his mouth to praise and glorify the Lord:

My mouth is filled with Your praise,
declaring Your splendor all day long.

Psalm 71:8

I will extol the LORD at all times;
His praise will always be on my lips.

Psalm 34:1

My tongue will speak of Your righteousness
and of Your praises all day long.

Psalm 35:28

Reading a psalm is a great way to start the day, and it doesn't take long. You could mark the Scripture verses where the psalmist glorifies the Lord with his mouth, or you could even try writing your own psalm of praise.

The struggle for control

When you need to make a decision or when you are faced with temptation, do you trust your natural desires to lead you or do you allow your spirit to help you do what is right? In other words, does your body or your spirit determine what you do and what you don't do?

Our natural desires are usually quick to take charge of a situation by acting instinctively. The body will always assume that it has full control and unlimited rights when it is not governed by the conscience God placed in us. In order for us not to be controlled by our inherited sinful nature, the body must be subject to (dependent on) the spirit, which requires the body to be trained and disciplined. The focus here is not on fitness training but on "denial" training – not letting the body make all the decisions. As with any training, one can start with easy exercises and build up from there. Our spiritual race is not a sprint but a lifelong marathon that will only end when we see Jesus. Paul said,

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last

forever. Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize”

1 Corinthians 9:24-27

The body is set on satisfying its natural needs and desires. Though many of these are perfectly legitimate, the body needs to be limited to the boundaries determined by God, or else it will run headlong into one of Satan’s traps. Even once we’ve made a decision to follow Jesus, our natural desires are still a part of our lives. That is why Jesus said, “If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me will save it” (Luke 9:23-24).

Denying ourselves means to lay down our selfish desires and be willing to put God’s purposes before our own. Obviously, this doesn’t mean that we never get to choose the things we like doing. Jesus came to set us free – not to make us slaves of a cramped lifestyle. Because Jesus sets our spirits free from the grip of sin, that freedom is passed on to the body so that it too can enjoy life to the extreme. “It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1).

Denying ourselves also means saying no to the natural desires in us that lead to sin. To be practical though, how do we deny ourselves?

We can keep our bodies disciplined by deciding to restrict a legitimate need or pleasure for a time in order to restrain the body’s nagging demands, and that strengthens our willpower.

Daniel, a slave in a foreign country, made a decision not to eat of the royal food offered to him when he was enrolled as a servant to the king. Instead, he asked to be given only vegetables to eat and water to drink. God was pleased with Daniel’s decision and honored him for taking such a stand (Daniel 1).

When we voluntarily give up rightful pleasures it certainly will not go unnoticed, for the Lord sees the intention of our hearts and takes pleasure in our desire to put Him above our wants and needs.

A temple for God

From the outside to the inside

What we do with our bodies affects who we are on the inside. We can either use our bodies to sin or we can use our bodies to glorify God.

For the believer, the body is the living place of the Holy Spirit who comes to live inside everyone who is born again. When Paul heard that the Christians in Corinth were sinning with their bodies, he wrote to them saying: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:19-20).

In Old Testament times – before Jesus came to earth – God would meet with His people in a temple: a beautiful structure where people could go to worship the Lord and bring Him offerings.

Then Jesus came to earth in flesh, and one day while He was speaking to a woman at a well, the conversation turned to worship. Jesus said to her, “A time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks” (John 4:23).

Jesus was saying that the Holy Spirit would come to live in us and make our bodies the temple of God. We would therefore no longer need to go to a specific place to meet God because He would dwell inside us (1 Corinthians 3:16).

The man-made temple of the Old Testament had to be built exactly as God had instructed, with every detail in place (1 Chronicles 28:11-12). There were also many rules regarding the use of the temple so that people would realize that they were meeting with a mighty, holy God.

People had to follow certain rules to make sure they were clean and acceptable to God. Only priests were allowed in the sacred part of the

temple; and only the High Priest was allowed into the very holy part of the temple to meet with God once a year. God has not changed – He was, and will always be, perfect and holy. If God, through His Spirit, comes to live in us, can you imagine the kind of lives that we are supposed to be living?

Through sin, the devil became our master and took ownership of all that we are and all that we possess. We literally became his slaves. But thank God, the moment we ask Jesus to save us, He not only rescues our spirits from death, He buys back every part of us. When Jesus died for us, He gave up His body, soul and spirit in order to rescue every part of our being from the devil's grip (Hebrews 7:25). Therefore, we belong to Jesus totally. We are not our own – we have been bought with a price. This means, firstly, that we should look after the bodies that God has entrusted to us and care for them, making sure that we eat healthily, keep fit, and stay away from things that can harm us physically.

Secondly, we should guard against exposing ourselves to temptations that come through our physical senses and control our words and actions. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Corinthians 5:10).

The actions of the body affect the spirit. Here are some examples:

- With our bodies, we are able to serve others practically and receive a spiritual blessing (Matthew 10:42).
- The body is the dwelling of the Holy Spirit. When we sin with our bodies, we grieve the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- The sinful deeds of our bodies lead to spiritual death (Romans 7:5).

We belong
to Jesus
totally.

We are
not our
own we
have been
bought
with a
price.

From the inside to the outside

A close relationship with the Lord energizes us emotionally and sustains us physically. The power released within our spirits is like a spring that revives our entire being.

“He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint” (Isaiah 40:29-31).

One day, when Jesus’ disciples had gone into town to buy food, Jesus stayed at a water pit in order to meet with a woman who had a spiritual need. When the disciples got back, they encouraged Jesus to eat some of the food they had bought.

But Jesus replied, “My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me and to finish His work” (John 4:34).

At times, Jesus would go without food or sleep in order to help someone or to pray, yet He never lacked the physical strength for each day’s task. Of course, Jesus did eat and sleep just as His disciples did in order to sustain His physical body, but Jesus stuck to His priorities: to glorify His Father and show His love to humankind.

We know that when someone is excited, he or she is energized, and if that’s true regarding the effect that our mental outlook has on our physical energy, how much more will our relationship with the Lord provide us with motivation and drive?

When we spend time with someone who loves us and wants to share our problems – who sees the potential in us and motivates us to be our best – it is so much easier to keep going.

In fact, God has given us a specific day of the week on which to rest and spend time with Him – a day to recharge our physical and spiritual “batteries”. However, one day a week with the Lord is not enough to keep us connected to His power all week.

Even Paul, living at the slower pace of biblical times, drew his energy and joy from the Lord: “To this end I labor, struggling with all His energy,

which so powerfully works in me” (Colossians 1:29). Paul got his power by staying connected to God at all times. He said, “Be joyful always; pray continually” (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Joy and prayer go hand in hand. The inner joy that stirs you up and keeps you going only fills you as you stay in touch with the One who created you and knows you best.

God’s temple – first impressions

Because your body is so special, you don’t want to mess it up by the kind of clothes you wear. So whether you dress funky, casual, smart, sloppy, weird or plain, that’s up to you. But be aware that people’s perceptions are formed by what they see.

So wear what you feel comfortable in and what is acceptable in the company of those you are with. Remember though that you are not your own – you belong to God (1 Corinthians 6:20), and honoring God with your body includes the clothes you wear.



Your soul

Beneath the surface

One seldom hears people talk about the soul in everyday conversation, except perhaps when using an expression like "bless my soul". But where is the soul and what is it for?

Unlike animals, we have an awareness of God's moral standard imprinted on us from birth, namely, our conscience (Romans 2:14). Therefore, we don't just exist as a part of nature's ongoing cycle of life on earth. Our lives on earth has a higher purpose: to bring pleasure to God and prepare us for our eternal destiny.

The soul is the center of who we are – our temperament, our character, our thoughts, our feelings and our will. It is the part that makes us aware of ourselves and others, and also, what is right and wrong.



The mind The heart The will

Every part of the body is connected to the brain by a network of nerves, making it the process and control center of the body.

The process part is where you think about things and make decisions. The control part is where those decisions are transformed into the actions that you want your body to perform.

The inner you is where your values and opinions are formed.

These private thoughts – in the form of a conversation with yourself – help you to work through issues that affect life. The Psalms has an example of such a conversation as the writer thinks about the past, reasons with himself, and then pictures the way things are going to turn out: “These things I remember as I pour out my soul ... Why are you down cast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God” Psalm 42:4-5.

Even though the psalmist is far from his usual place of worship, his spirit encourages his troubled soul to hope in God. By reasoning with himself, the psalmist begins to recognize that God is bigger than his present circumstances. Suddenly the light comes on and his new-found perspective gives him courage, and so he praises God his Savior.

The mind The heart The will

Feelings may not seem that important to those who are more focused on the tangible things in life. The reality is, though, that our emotions form an integral part of our everyday lives.

Feelings keep us human. They cause us to be fallible (imperfect) and they make us vulnerable as we expose our inner selves to the outside world.

Though unseen, our feelings are even powerful enough to affect us physically. Think back to a time when you messed up in a big way and were about to be found out. Your mouth dried up and your stomach went into spasm. The physical effects from feelings such as guilt, anger, fear and love show how the mind sends out a message to the body, which reacts with controllable responses such as one’s facial expression, as well as involuntary reactions such as a quickening heartbeat.

Are emotions good or bad?

Like the five physical senses of the body, God has also equipped our souls with emotional sensors. These help us to act appropriately in our

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relationships and also serve as spiritual feelers. Our emotions are usually an indication that action ought to be taken or that a change of attitude is necessary.

Emotions are therefore neither good nor bad in themselves, but influence us for the better or for the worse by the effect we let them have on us. For example, anger can compel a man to protect a child from being mistreated, or anger can get him to react wrongly by losing his temper at work.

"Positive" emotions motivate and uplift us; "negative" emotions drain our energy. When emotions such as jealousy and bitterness are not dealt with quickly and appropriately, they lose their value as signals of our sinful thoughts and become part of the problem. Emotions such as guilt become a

heavy burden and anger becomes like fiery coals inside.

Inner turmoil, if left unchecked, makes it increasingly difficult to determine the initial cause of those emotions and so to deal with them effectively. This emotional baggage not only wears us down but also stunts our relationships and distorts our view of life. In short, emotions that are left to deteriorate will result in a negative attitude; while emotions that are harnessed for good, result in a positive attitude.

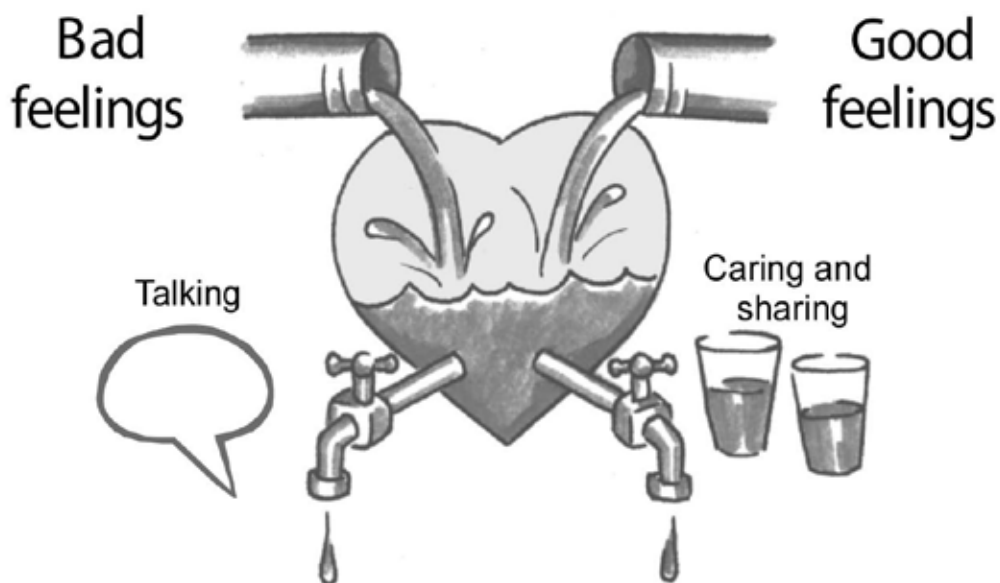
Moods

Moods are the expression of our emotions. Our moods tend to affect the way we act, and the way we act affects our relationship with others.

It is important, therefore, to be aware of the way in which we express those inner feelings, especially through our speech and body language. On the other hand, covering up our feelings is like hiding behind a mask, pretending that things are okay when they're not.

The ideal is to release our feelings in a controlled, undamaging manner by letting others know how we feel and, if possible, what caused us to feel that way. Then those around us won't automatically assume we've got something against them. Most of our friends and family will make allowances when we have a "blue day" and may even be sympathetic; but if we snap at people without them knowing why, they'll snap back or avoid us. Either way, it won't make us feel any better.

The mood you are in usually depends on what happens around you or what happens to you. A strong feeling can flood your soul in an instant and take days to subside. When there is a constant inflow of bad feelings, and no outlet, one can easily be swamped with a sense of hopelessness. Trying to control circumstances and the feelings they cause is like trying to hold back a powerful surge of water. In other words, one has little or no control over the cause and intensity of one's feelings, that's why it is far better to focus on opening safe outlets through which bottled-up emotions can be released.



Some try to counter negative emotions by going after fleeting pleasures, which only provide a distraction at best. Strong negative feelings cannot be effectively neutralized by simply "adding positive feelings." If anything, the churn of conflicting emotions only causes greater turmoil. It is far better to take appropriate action that will allow negative feelings to be released constructively. (But give yourself some time to "cool off" first and thereby gain perspective.)

Note that negative feelings have a purpose: they become a driving force that compels you to deal with the cause of your distress.

To stay emotionally healthy, good and bad feelings need feelings to flow. Good feelings can be channeled to areas that make you more productive, creative and caring. Bad feelings can be released by talking about the problem; forgiving; accepting that life isn't perfect or by clearing up a misunderstanding.

Once you have found an emotional outlet, don't let it get all clogged up with ongoing resentment.

Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult,
but with blessing, because to this you were called
so that you may inherit a blessing.

1 Peter 3:9

Let go of the reasons for feeling as you do – the reasons are probably legitimate and completely understandable, but let them go! (Psalm 37:8).

Relationships and emotions

Emotions play an important role in forming and strengthening our relationship with others and with God. Emotions are at the core of what potentially brings us closer together or pushes us apart.

From love and affection on one side to hatred and intolerance on the other, emotions affect the way that people relate to each other. Fear, anger, sadness, guilt, jealousy, love and joy arise from our interaction with others. These emotions are experienced with varying intensity determined largely by the circumstances that brought them about and, to some extent, one's temperament.

Just as our bodies enjoy pleasing sensations, through relationships our souls can experience uplifting feelings that provide a sense of self-worth and completeness.

On the other hand, just as our bodies feel pain in order to keep us from carelessly hurting ourselves, our souls experience emotional sensitivity in order to avoid that which could ruin our inner being. Like physical pain,

we instinctively react to emotional pain by either confronting the source or by evading it, if possible. Enduring the pain is seldom an option. Where there is indifference, this could be a sign of emotional numbness or detachment.

Respecting others

If you know what it feels like when someone step on your toes, you can virtually feel the pain when you see someone else get hurt. Similarly, a person who has experienced rejection understands what it feels like to be ridiculed. In order to value and protect relationships, Jesus has given us a simple but important rule by which to live: “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (Luke 6:31). Realizing what it must feel like to be taunted may get us to think twice before saying and doing things that break others down.

Reaching out

Our own hurts and disappointments can help us to become more caring toward others as our feelings turn to action: reaching out a helping hand, listening, and being there for someone who needs us. By supporting people with physical and emotional needs, we form friendships and grow in our emotional maturity.

Resisting provocation

Bullying has become increasingly subtle as technology enables bullies to remain anonymous and distant. If you are a victim of such cowardly action you have an inner protection – the sense of self-worth that minimizes the pain of offensive remarks.

Self-worth should not be mistaken for pride (who we are in our own eyes), but based on your worth in the eyes of Jesus.

The Creator who made you sees you as beautiful and glorious, and that is what you are (Psalm 8:4-5). And if Jesus, the King of kings, considers you worth dying for, does it really matter what others say?

The mind The heart The will

Our will is the conscious choices we make when faced with alternatives. When our will is disciplined, it has the power over our actions and emotions, and controls them. And yet, how often when faced with a decision, our will follows the well-worn channels formed by our sinful nature. A selfish attitude leads to selfish decisions, but a positive attitude is reflected by constructive decisions.

How we respond

Although we make hundreds of reactive decisions every day, these are virtually automatic, and because we don't consciously think about options, our will is not involved.

If someone suddenly throws an apple at you, you may reach out and catch it or duck instinctively. We are born with reflexes that help us evade harmful situations. As we grow up we can train our reflexes to respond faster and more precisely to certain conditions, as in a game of sport.

When referring to our will, however, it only includes the decisions we consciously think about when weighing up various options.

The will is what we want or what we choose – it is the outcome of our conscious thought process.

The process of making a decision

When you make a decision, the process part of your mind retrieves relevant information from your memory, as a computer does. However, your emotions add a "human touch" to your logical reasoning. Your personality aligns the decision to be consistent with your temperament. Most importantly, your spirit plays its vital role through your conscience and sensitivity toward God.

Imagine you want to buy a pair of shoes, which you need for the weekend to wear to a friend's party. After a long search, you find the perfect pair marked down to half-price. But regrettably, the assistant informs you that they don't have those shoes in your size. For a moment you consider taking the smaller size in the hope that they'll stretch, but you recall having made that mistake before.

Disappointed and upset, your mind considers the options of trying other shops or buying a different pair. Meanwhile, your frustration becomes obvious by your body language. On the one hand, your impulsive nature is prompting you to buy a more expensive pair and pay it off. On the other hand, you realize that God may be teaching you to trust Him.

In this way, your mind combines the input from your memory, your emotions, your personality and your spirit and ends up making what is hopefully a good decision.

A weak will

A person with a weak will is someone who is influenced or persuaded easily and who generally takes the easy way out when faced with a challenge. Samson is an example of a weak-willed person who was, ironically, a physical champ. He had everything going for him but threw it all away. When he finally did come to his senses, his desperate attempt to fulfill his mission cost him his life.

God had given Samson supernatural strength to rid the land of the heathen Philistines. But Samson failed to focus on what God wanted him to do, and instead, flirted with a Philistine woman who secretly set out to destroy him. When Samson was finally captured by the Philistines and humiliated, he prayed a final prayer, saying: “Let me die with the Philistines!” (Judges 16:30). Then he pushed with all his might against the pillars on either side of him and brought down the temple on the Philistine rulers and all the people gathered there.

Samson’s weak will got him to dishonor his parents, compromise his mission, and disobey God.

A strong will

A person who is strong-willed generally makes up his or her mind about something and stubbornly sticks to that way of thinking.

Although a strong will has its downside, it can be a good thing depending on the issue at stake. Consider the strong-willed apostle Paul who went from persecuting Christians to actually becoming one.

At first, Saul – a man of influence – was determined to destroy Christianity. He not only hated Christians, he hounded them. After his encounter

with Jesus (when his name changed to Paul) he became one of the greatest missionaries the world has ever known. He started many churches in countries where the gospel had never been preached and wrote much of the New Testament.

Near the end of his life he wrote these words in a letter to the Philippians: “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

A God-controlled will

Whether you are someone who is generally happy-go-lucky and compliant, or someone who is determined and stubborn, the problem most of us face is the struggle that takes place in our hearts between our will and God’s will – the tension of wanting our way and letting God have His way in our lives (Romans 8:5).

One would think that Jesus, being God, would not need to check with His Father regarding His day-to-day routine. Yet while on earth, Jesus said and did only the things His heavenly Father wanted Him to: “For I have come down from heaven not to do My will but to do the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38, also see John 8:28).

If, for Jesus, the most important thing was to do His Father’s will, how much more should it be our number one priority to do what God wants; to please Him regardless of our temperament or mood.

From values to action

Values

Everything we say and do – whether planned or unplanned – is a reflection of who we are on the inside. Deep down at the core of who we are, our values form the long-term principles, ambitions and beliefs that are important to us.

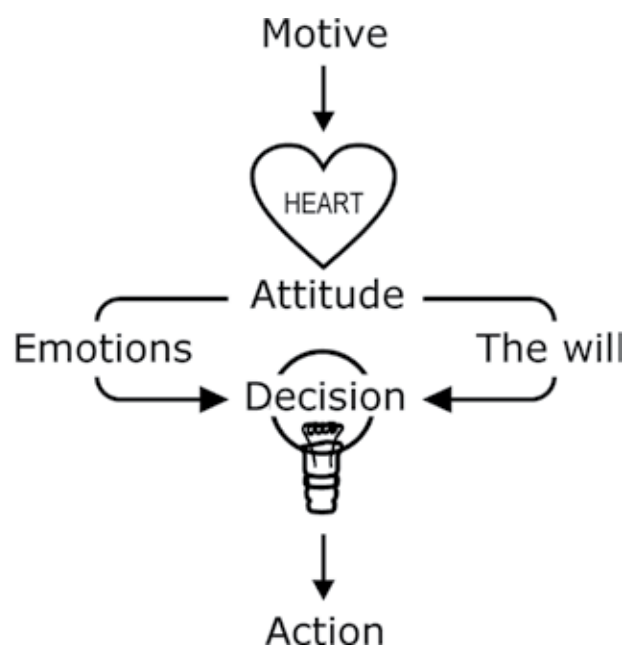
For example, it may be one’s family, a career or a certain cause. These values are personal and may be shaped over time by one’s upbringing, influential people, or by life-changing experiences.

Values are formed by way of interaction between the heart, the mind and the will. The heart is the motivator; the mind uses its storehouse of memories and facts; the will is the driving force that leads to action.

A value could be defined as that which ...

- gives meaning to your life
- takes priority
- inspires and motivates you
- influences your decisions
- makes you take a stand
- ultimately defines your character.

Motives



Our motives – based on our values – determine how we interact with others.

Motives come from the heart and are therefore influenced by who or what controls the heart. Something, someone or the Lord, by means of the Holy Spirit, influences the reason that we do things.

Our motives may be hidden from the outside world but the Lord knows our every intention (1 Corinthians 4:5). Even so, He chooses to test our

hearts from time to time to reveal those motives to us and allow us to prove our true motives to Him.

The test is often painful, humbling and confusing, but through it we learn and grow when we respond in the right way.

The Israelites had to travel through a hot, barren desert to receive their reward – the Promised Land. This is what Moses, their leader, said as he reminded them of the reason for their desert experience: “Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep His commands” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

The book of Job in the Old Testament provides an account of a man who was accused by Satan for having an ulterior motive for serving God (Job 1:6-11). To prove Satan wrong the Lord allowed Job to be tested, and although Job lost all he had, including his health, he remained true to God. After Job’s test God blessed him with twice as much as he had at first. Satan’s scheme had backfired!

Sometimes, the Lord’s ways make no sense on a human level, for God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways His ways (Isaiah 55:8). An example of this, though extreme, is where God instructed Abraham to lay his son on an altar and sacrifice him. Surely, this was too much to ask! This went against all that Abraham believed about God and the promise He had made. (But it was only a test, and God did not intend for Isaac to be killed). When God saw that Abraham was obedient and willing to go all the way in faith, the angel of the Lord called out to him, “Do not lay a hand on the boy. Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from Me your son, your only son” (Genesis 22:12). Abraham’s reward for his obedience and trust – even when things didn’t make sense – was that God blessed his descendants and made them as numerous as the stars in the sky.

When tested, Abraham had a choice – Job didn’t. In fact, Job didn’t even know what was happening, neither could he see the bigger picture of what God was doing and he probably struggled with the same questions you may have.

Why does God need to test us at all? Surely, He knows our thoughts and motives and knows how we would respond in any given situation. That being so, the Lord is fair and gives us a chance to prove our faithfulness in whatever way, and for whatever reason He chooses to test us. It may be ...

- by allowing us to struggle with moral or ethical issues: “I know, my God, that You test the heart and are pleased with integrity. All these things have I given willingly and with honest intent” (1 Chronicles 29:17).
- to give us an opportunity to do good: “For the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts” (1 Chronicles 28:9).
- to see what motivates us – what is important to us: “When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures” (James 4:3).

Our motives give birth to our attitudes, and through our day-to-day interaction with others, our attitudes reveal where our priorities lie.

Attitudes

Paul, in his letter to the Philippians, said that our attitudes should be the same as that of Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not think of Himself as being equal with God, but made Himself nothing by taking on the nature of a servant (Philippians 2:5-6).

Jesus is our perfect example, and while on earth, He not only taught us about having the right attitude, He lived what He taught. Matthew 5-7 shows how Jesus raised the standard of a godly lifestyle way above that of the religious leaders of that time, yet He made living a holy life so practical that anyone can follow His example.

So, how do we know whether our attitudes measure up to the standard that God has set? We can ask Him to examine our way of thinking and show us how we shape up. That’s what the psalmist did when he prayed, “Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind” (Psalm 26:2).

When you pray this prayer, God will most likely answer by letting you encounter situations that will make you aware of your heart's attitude. But He will never allow you to be tested beyond what you can handle (1 Corinthians 10:13). You may also be glad to know that the results of the test

"He knows
the way
that I
take;
when He
has tested
me, I will
come forth
as gold."
Job 23:10

are between you and God. He doesn't compare you with others, so neither should you, lest you become proud of your success or discouraged by your failure.

God has a growth plan for each of us, and every believer is at a different stage in his or her growth. Realizing this removes competitiveness from our relationship with the Lord as we look to Him alone for approval.

In God's time, we will all get there: "He knows the way that I take; when He has tested me, I will come forth as gold" (Job 23:10). As God's purifying heat is applied to our lives through difficulties, the things that are weak and worthless burn up, leaving us more pure and more like Jesus.

Having the right attitude toward every one all the time seems impossible, especially when we're trying to change our attitudes on a human level (without God). For our attitudes to be like that of Jesus, we must do more than just smile and try to be nice. Unless God's love fills our hearts, we can never hope to get it right because it is there, in our hearts, that our attitude is formed. It is only when our hearts are in tune with God's Spirit that pleasing Him becomes as natural as breathing (Ephesians 3:16-19). For us to see how a spiritual lifestyle is lived out practically we should study the life of Jesus and learn from the way He handled real-life situations. Read about the life of Jesus in the first four books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In short, when faced with a tough situation we should ask ourselves what Jesus would do. The reason Jesus placed so much emphasis on our attitudes is that our attitudes form the basis on which we make decisions.

Decisions

Of all the decisions you make in life there is one that stands out above all others – the decision that determines where you will spend eternity. After that other important decisions follow, like those affecting your life and your relationships.

Depending to some extent on people's temperament and upbringing, some people are rational, weighing up the pros and cons before making a decision, while others let their hearts guide them, relying on their feelings for insight. One's preferred method of decision-making is not as important as the basis on which those decisions are made.

If we live by the principles of the Bible and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us, He helps us to make good choices that are pleasing to God.

In Luke 14:28-33, Jesus appeals to the calculating type urging them to count the cost before making a commitment to follow Him: "Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? In the same way, any of you who does not give up every thing he has cannot be My disciple." Elsewhere, Paul tells us to give freely – not counting the cost – but letting our hearts guide us: "Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2 Corinthians 9:7).

The extent to which our will and emotions combine to influence everyday decisions depends largely on the issue at stake. However, the significance of "small" decisions shouldn't be underestimated because they form the basis of bigger, more important decisions.

Those seemingly insignificant decisions are stones used for laying the foundation of your future.

The Holy
Spirit
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choices
that are
pleasing
to God.

Common sense or divine guidance?

An issue Christians often struggle with is when to ask God for guidance regarding a decision and when to use their common sense to decide. Although there is no simple formula to fit all situations, one can generally apply the following guidelines:

- Decisions that form part of normal everyday life can be made spontaneously within our God-given freedom to choose; and as Christians, we have the added benefit of having the mind of Christ in terms of spiritual wisdom and insight (1 Corinthians 2:16).
- Decisions that affect others and those that have long-term consequences should be made carefully and prayerfully.
- Decisions that have moral implications should be made on the basis of God's Word; and where the Bible is not specific, decisions should be made with a clear conscience. As we allow the Word of God to fill our minds, the wisdom of God will fill our hearts. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom" (Colossians 3:16).

Actions

What we do makes us who we are. Our actions define our character and our character determines the direction our lives will take.

In other words,

- our actions either build our character or break it down, and
- our actions have consequences that plot the course of our lives.

From childhood, our actions reveal who we are on the inside. "Even a child is known by his actions, by whether his conduct is pure and right" (Proverbs 20:11). Without temptations, problems, and imperfect people who provoke us, we would never detect our hidden, sinful motives or recognize the need for Jesus to change us (Romans 7:7, 13).

Our actions are therefore the visible display of our hidden motives. If you want to find out how you shape up in this area, don't compare yourself against the standard set by others, but measure your progress by the

standard set for us in the Bible: “Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else” (Galatians 6:4).

We are often not aware of our true motives until we are faced with a situation where our feelings suddenly surface. It may be a jab of jealousy as a close friend suddenly becomes more popular, or perhaps pride, when you’re treated like a hero for the first time.

Since we don’t have direct control over the way we feel, we are not judged by our feelings – we are judged by what we do (Genesis 4:6-7 and 1 John 3:7). By making a decision to do what is right – and actually doing it – we overpower the feelings that so often keep us from being our best.

Imagine that a grouchy lady across the road were to ask you a favor. For a moment, you are undecided. Although you don’t feel particularly loving toward her you know that there’s no one else to help her. So you agree, and before long, your attitude becomes a bit more tolerant. Soon you are surprised that you actually care about her. Your actions (not your feelings) have taken the lead, and that brought about a change of attitude.

Finally, every action has lasting results – it bears fruit (good or bad), and it’s by the kind of fruit you bear that others will discover the real you (Matthew 7:16-20).

Why not make a list of the things you do on a typical day, categorizing each activity under the headings, “beneficial” and “worthless”. Then ask yourself, and be honest: are you living the full and meaningful life? (John 10:10).



Your spirit

The center of who we are

Your spirit is the part of you that will always be. In a thousand years or ten thousand years from now you will still exist. So, instead of thinking of yourself as a person who has a spirit, you could think of yourself as a spiritual being with a temporary body.

As mentioned in the first chapter, the thing that sets us as humans on a different level to all other creatures is that we have a spirit. God breathed His eternal life into Adam, and for a short time before Adam sinned, he was destined to live forever with a perfect body in a perfect world. But Adam's disobedience brought death and decay to the whole world: "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

God had said to Adam, "You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17). The moment Adam disobeyed, his spirit died; and although his body didn't die straight away, an aging process triggered the countdown of his life on earth.

From that day on, Adam no longer enjoyed a close relationship with his Creator. He became aware of evil and discovered what guilt feels like. His guilt made him so ashamed and afraid that he tried to hide when he heard the Lord God in the garden.

Adam's sin not only separated him from God's presence, his "disease" was passed down to all humankind and separated our spirits from God too (Isaiah 59:2).

Because the spirit of a person cannot live in isolation – separate from the Creator of life – his spirit is dead. But while we were still dead in our sin, God sent Jesus to earth to die for us so that we (our spirits) can be made alive to God. "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. He was put to death in the body but made alive by the Spirit" (1 Peter 3:18).

God in His love wants to have a close relationship with us the way He had with Adam before there was sin. However, because God is holy He cannot tolerate sin. The only way that God's Spirit could possibly "connect" with our spirits is if we were totally sinless.

When Jesus died on the cross He took the whole world's sin, and the punishment for that sin, on Him – as if He had sinned.

"He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

God gives us the choice of receiving His forgiveness and being made sinless, or, being judged with our sin and punished for it.

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can be
made alive
to God.

A new spirit

Your spirit is either dead in sin or alive to God – the responsibility for that choice lies with each person (Deuteronomy 30:15-19).

One evening, a religious man named Nicodemus went to Jesus to find out whether he was on the right track regarding his religious belief. Jesus got straight to the point and said to him, "You must be born again" (John 3:7).

Totally confused, Nicodemus asked, “How can an old man like me be born again?” Jesus, however, was not speaking about his body being born again, but his spirit.

When we believe in Jesus and trust Him to save us, He puts a new spirit in us – a spirit that lives forever. From the moment that Jesus changes us, eternal life starts! And that is why Jesus came to earth: “For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him” (John 3:16-17).

It depends on one's heart condition

Within the soul

The heart is the place where we sense emotions such as sadness, guilt and anger. An example is found in Proverbs 12:25: “An anxious heart weighs a man down, but a kind word cheers him up.” Many other Bible verses also link emotions like envy, joy, love and peace with the heart.

The heart is also the center of one's being where the things that are important and precious to us are prioritized. Jesus said that where our treasure is, there our heart will be also (Luke 12:34).



Within the spirit

Within the spirit of an unbeliever, the heart is the place where unforgiven sin lies and where it can spread like a virus until it threatens even the potential good – the desire to seek God and follow in His ways.

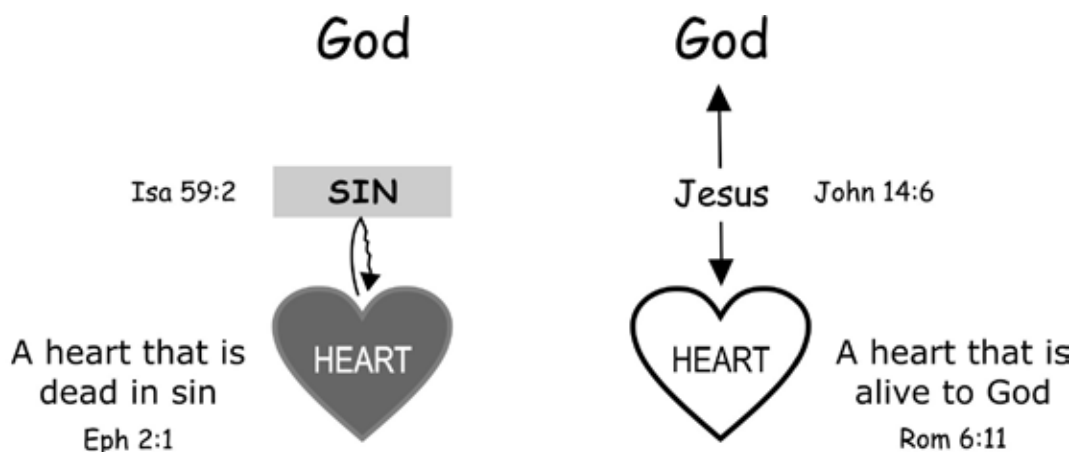
The good news is that there is a cure for the sin within us. By God's grace, the heart can be cleansed from all sin and made completely pure. God says,

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit
in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone
and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26

The heart is like a spring that bubbles over with whatever is inside; that is how one can tell the condition of a person's heart.

Jesus said, "The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart" (Luke 6:45).



Eternity is in the heart

There is a part of us that lives forever, but for now, it is a seed within a shell – our body. Ecclesiastes 3:11 tells us that God has set eternity in the hearts of men; not our physical hearts, which supply blood to various parts of the body, but our spiritual hearts with which we respond to God.

It is only when we die that our outer “shell” is cast off, thereby releasing the seed of eternal life that God planted in our hearts at birth.

Eternity is in the heart of every person, but for those who reject God, it is not eternal life. It is, in fact, eternal death: a state of complete consciousness but separated from God – an unimaginably lonely, scary and dark way to spend eternity.

But for those who are born again, the new spirit within becomes an imperishable seed – one that will sprout into everlasting life with God, as He promised in His Word: “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23).

Recognized by your fruit

"You did
not choose
Me, but I
chose you
and
appointed
you to go
and bear
fruit -
fruit that
will
last."

John 15:16

A fruit tree is not planted for its shade or beauty, but for its fruit. Similarly, God has not placed us on earth merely to fill up our little space on earth, but to bear fruit. “For we are God’s workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10). You have life and you have a purpose; living out that purpose is bearing fruit.

There is a similarity between trees and weeds: they both grow from seeds. But that’s where the similarity ends. Weeds are useless. “People do not pick figs from thorn bushes, or grapes from briars” (Luke 6:44). Jesus’ statement implies that unless we have His seed of new life in us, our efforts on earth are short lived at best and have no eternal value.

It is only through Him that our God-given task can develop into eternal fruit. Jesus said, “You

did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last” (John 15:16).

What is this peculiar fruit that we should bear and how do we recognize it in ourselves?

The fruit of the Spirit

The fruit in a Christian’s life ought to be as obvious as the fruit on a tree. With our lives rooted in Jesus, our fruit is the result of the Spirit’s work in us and through us. Spiritual fruit is the evidence of a changed lifestyle, and though not edible, it should be noticeable. “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

While our varied temperaments do make some of the virtues listed in Galatians easier to live out than others, each is an important part of every Christian’s life. It is not up to us to choose the fruit we would like to bear because it is not us who produce the fruit. The Holy Spirit produces the fruit in us.

That is why it is called the fruit of the Spirit, which grows and ripens in our souls and becomes a harvest of blessing through our actions. In practical terms we are the Spirit’s hands and feet here on earth.

Pruning for growth

For those unfamiliar with horticulture, pruning seems counterproductive – one cuts back perfectly good branches that have potential to bear fruit. So why would a farmer or gardener prune a tree year after year instead of letting it grow as big as possible? The reason is simple: the tree’s seasonal growth either supports the growth of wood, or if that is limited by pruning, flows into buds to produce a harvest of juicy fruit.

Jesus said to His followers, “I am the true vine, and My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in Me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit He prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (John 15:1-2).

Each of us is connected to Jesus, the Vine. We are part of Him as He is part of us (John 15:4-5), but when we grow in a direction where we are not absorbing God’s light, or if we grow too big and bushy, we need to be

pruned. In Jesus' analogy, the gardener even prunes branches that are already bearing fruit, which means that we can all expect to be pruned from time to time.

But what kind of things does God cut from our lives, and does it hurt? The Lord uses situations in our lives to bring hidden sins, such as disobedience and pride, to the surface so that they can be dealt with. For example, if you've lashed out at someone but you go back and make things right, pruning has taken place.

When you are humbled by an embarrassing incident, pride is cut down. Situations like these may be unpleasant, and dealing with our natural reactions can be a challenge, but if we are willing to change, the Holy Spirit even uses our shortcomings for good.

Though pruning may be regarded as painful in some ways, there are no lasting wounds, and the quicker we respond, the less there is to cut.

Stunting growth is not the same as pruning, though. In nature, growth is stunted by drought, disease or damage. Spiritually, our growth is stunted when sin restricts God's flow of blessing through us, thereby limiting our fruitfulness.

Now you must *rid yourselves* of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have *put on the new self*, which is being renewed in knowledge in the *image of its Creator*.

Colossians 3:8-10



What makes you special?

Fitting the pieces together

Besides your physical features, other important virtues set you apart as an individual. Although your friends may be similar to you in some ways, it is the combination of your virtues that make you unique.

Your talents, your personality, your spiritual gifts and your past are like pieces of a mosaic, each with the perfect color and shape to complete the beautiful picture of your life.



Your talents -virtues of the body

Talents and skills are the abilities we have to use our hands, our minds, our voices and our bodies in a special way.

Each of us is born with certain talents – things we are good at and find easier to do than others would.

Some talents may be passed on to us from our parents. They form part of the physical characteristics (likeness) we inherit from them. We should remember that although our talents may seem like natural abilities, each one is given to us by the Lord.

We read in the first few verses of Exodus 31 that God filled people with His Spirit and with the skills, ability and knowledge to do specific tasks.

As we grow up, our abilities improve as we develop them through coaching and practice. Talents, which are as varied as the individual, include a flair for sport, music, art, technology, languages, numbers, communication and other such abilities.

Sometimes, people don't realize that they have a special ability until they discover some thing they do well or simply like doing.

Have you discovered your talents yet? Who knows what "hidden" talents are waiting to be discovered?

God, through His Spirit, blesses every talent that is yielded to Him and radically changes all who let Him have His way in their lives. "The Spirit of the LORD will come upon you in power, and you will be changed into a different person. Once these signs are fulfilled, do whatever your hand finds to do, for God is with you" (1 Samuel 10:6-7).

Focusing on your strengths

What are you good at, not compared with others, but when you consider the positive things you are involved in and enjoy doing? Whatever it is, that is your special talent. Work on it!

Being even slightly better than average at two or more things opens up a world of opportunities. For example, a person who is good at writing and is particular when it comes to detail would make a great journalist. An-

other person who may also be good at writing but is more creative would probably do better at writing lyrics or a script for a play.

Once you have identified your strengths, think of ways to combine your talents to enrich your life and bring glory to God.

Your personality - virtues of the soul

Just as your body is unique, so is your personality. Even though your personality cannot be seen, it shows a distinctive pattern like a fingerprint by the way you act (or react) in various situations.

You were born with a basic personality carefully designed by God to suit His purpose for your life.

Over time, your personality has been shaped by people close to you and by your life experiences. Sad and hurtful incidents, joys and thrills, successes and failures – all become woven into your personality.

But there is no need to get stuck in a place that has been molded by others and by circumstances. You can learn to master certain personality traits and find acceptable ways to deal with the others. So, if you tend to be quick-tempered, blaming your personality isn't an acceptable excuse to explode repeatedly.

You can shape aspects of your personality by deciding beforehand how you want to react when facing a challenge, and you will surely get many opportunities to practice.

It is important to realize that no particular personality type is the ideal or perfect one. Don't let others make you feel that you're missing out or are inferior because your personality is not like theirs. And don't try to become like someone else, because the person you're trying to imitate isn't who you are deep down.

You will only become frustrated. Besides, a different personality would not make you more perfect.

Think about the disciples who were carefully handpicked by Jesus. Were they perfect? No. Yet each one was chosen for a specific reason, and as such, made their unique contribution to the team.

Does that mean we should accept the way we are and never step outside our comfort zones? No, our personalities should keep on growing toward full maturity, and for that to happen, change is inevitable.

Personality weaknesses

Each personality type has its challenges. A teenage guy who is not naturally outgoing may wish he was a “born leader”, and an impulsive girl may wish she were able to evaluate the options before acting. Some may cringe at the thought of making a speech in front of a large audience, while for others it may be a stimulating experience.

It takes courage and effort to attempt those things that don’t come naturally. The spin-off is that as we deal with our shortcomings we develop character – something we are not born with. By improving the weaker aspects of our personality and by accepting those that we cannot change, we grow in patience, endurance, humility, and the acceptance of others. Building up qualities like these takes real determination and it is those who overcome their weaknesses who stand out above the rest.

Accepting yourself the way that God made you makes it easier to get along with others and accept their differences. That is why Jesus said we should love others as we love ourselves (Matthew 22:39).

Accepting
yourself
the way
God has
made you is
the key to
unlocking
your full
potential.

In order to love yourself you must be willing to accept yourself. If you find this hard to do, be honest with the Lord and tell Him how you feel, but keep your heart open toward Him so that His love can become your source of love.

Personality strengths

Each personality type also has certain strengths. Because they seem so natural they are often overlooked as being a valuable asset.

Accepting yourself the way God has made you is the key to unlocking your full potential. A key to a lock has a unique pattern of notches cut at varying levels to fit a particular lock. A key’s combination of highs and lows are like different

aspects of your personality. If the notches are not at the precise levels, the key is useless. Someone with a different personality cannot unlock the doors you can. God has no duplicates. There is only one person like you.

Your personality is the exact combination He needs to unlock certain doors for His grace to flow in.

Personality and character

Personality should never be confused with *character*. Our personality is part of our make-up – our character is shaped by our behavior. Character displays honesty, loyalty and perseverance in the face of temptations and obstacles. Those with a strong character do not opt for an easy way out when the pressure is on to compromise. They are dependable when entrusted with a task and have the willpower to reach the goals they have set for themselves.

Character is independent of age, status or temperament. A small child may be more honest than a compromising adult and a quiet person more courageous than a loud-mouthed leader.

It is said that a person's real character is seen for what it is when there is no one else around. Character also shows up best when it's put to the test through temptation and difficulties.

Resisting temptation builds us up spiritually; enduring or overcoming difficulties helps us grow in our personality.

Personality types

The word personality indicates that the aspects that make you you, are very personal. Just as there are things about your body that you cannot change, like the color of your eyes, there are certain traits that will always be a part of your core personality.

And just as there are things about your body that you can change, like the length of your hair, there are certain aspects of your personality that you can work on.

Being aware of the typical weaknesses associated with your personality type can help you:

- avoid common pitfalls of your temperament
- identify areas that could be improved
- realize that you are not the only one struggling with certain imperfections.

Knowing the typical strengths of your personality type can help you:

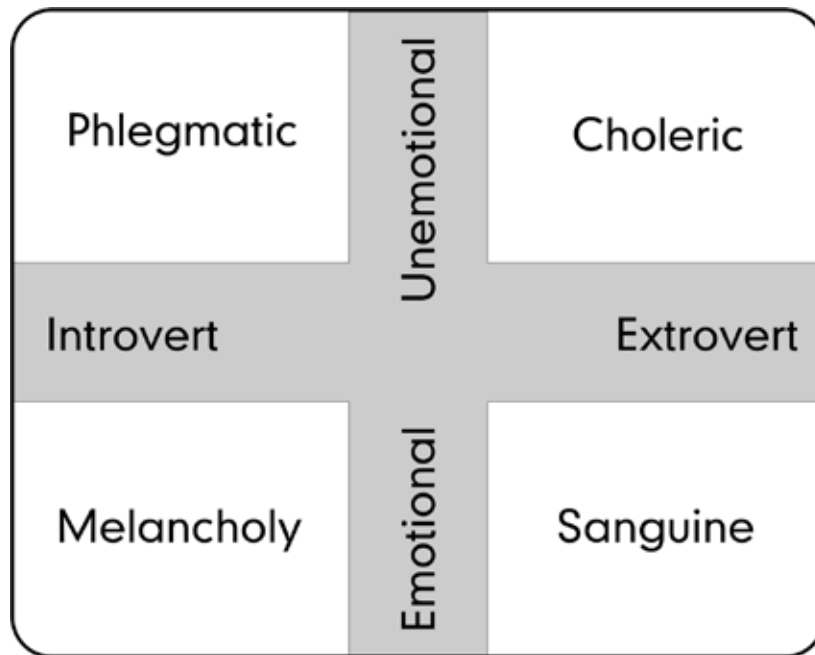
- recognize and develop your good qualities
- discover hidden potential
- grow spiritually as the Lord uses your abilities to fulfill His Master Plan.

Your unique personality

When categorizing temperaments, the basic personality types commonly referred to are: choleric, sanguine, melancholy and phlegmatic. Concerning the diagram on the next page, note the following:

- One usually has one dominant temperament. However, having traits from more than one personality type is quite common and is referred to as a personality blend.
- One does not necessarily display all the characteristics of one's personality quadrant.
- One may have overcome certain weaknesses, which therefore will no longer apply.
- No particular temperament is better than another!

Personality types



This diagram shows how the combination of two personal characteristics forms four basic personality types.

The *vertical* axis \updownarrow indicates the expressiveness of one's emotions.

The *horizontal* axis \leftrightarrow indicates where one's focus lies – inside or outside oneself.

Discovering your temperament

There are numerous scientific methods used to determine one's basic personality, the results of which are not always consistent due to one's emotional state while doing the test and one's changing life experiences.

It is not the purpose of this book to cover the subject of personalities in detail. Therefore, a simple method – based on the knowledge of yourself – is used to help you understand your unique make-up.

The method:

1. Mark the circles on the following two pages that coincide with the traits that are usually or regularly visible in your life. Use a pencil to mark the circles so that they can be erased again once you have determined your result.

2. Add up the number of marked circles under each of the four categories. Strengths as well as weaknesses point to your specific temperament, so combine the totals of each. Your basic personality is indicated by the personality type with the most marks.

3. For fun, you may want to ask a friend to evaluate your personality and then compare that score with yours.

Note: A character description may apply to some degree or only under certain conditions, so it is best to think of a number of situations that reinforce or diminish your identity with the description.

Characteristics of the four personality types

PHLEGMATIC TEMPERAMENT	
Strength	Weakness
<input type="checkbox"/> Faithful friend	<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisive
<input type="checkbox"/> Reliable	<input type="checkbox"/> Self-centered
<input type="checkbox"/> Tolerant	<input type="checkbox"/> Unenthusiastic
<input type="checkbox"/> Calm	<input type="checkbox"/> Not self-motivated
<input type="checkbox"/> Easy-going	<input type="checkbox"/> Judgmental
<input type="checkbox"/> Peacemaker	<input type="checkbox"/> Resists change
<input type="checkbox"/> Thinks before acting	<input type="checkbox"/> Uninvolved
<input type="checkbox"/> Sympathetic	<input type="checkbox"/> Fearful
<input type="checkbox"/> Good listener	<input type="checkbox"/> Compromising

CHOLERIC TEMPERAMENT	
Strength	Weakness
<input type="checkbox"/> Pioneering	<input type="checkbox"/> Insensitive
<input type="checkbox"/> Confident	<input type="checkbox"/> Impatient
<input type="checkbox"/> Strong-willed	<input type="checkbox"/> Stubborn
<input type="checkbox"/> Natural leader	<input type="checkbox"/> Bossy
<input type="checkbox"/> Organizer	<input type="checkbox"/> Argumentative
<input type="checkbox"/> Purposeful	<input type="checkbox"/> Inflexible
<input type="checkbox"/> Dynamic	<input type="checkbox"/> Unsympathetic
<input type="checkbox"/> Goal-focused	<input type="checkbox"/> Impulsive
<input type="checkbox"/> Delegates work	<input type="checkbox"/> Manipulative

MELANCHOLY TEMPERAMENT	
Strength	Weakness
<input type="checkbox"/> Analytical	<input type="checkbox"/> Has low self-image
<input type="checkbox"/> Talented	<input type="checkbox"/> Indecisive
<input type="checkbox"/> Creative	<input type="checkbox"/> Moody
<input type="checkbox"/> Self-sacrificing	<input type="checkbox"/> Pessimistic
<input type="checkbox"/> Avoids limelight	<input type="checkbox"/> Withdrawn
<input type="checkbox"/> Loyal	<input type="checkbox"/> Insecure
<input type="checkbox"/> High Standard	<input type="checkbox"/> Dreamy
<input type="checkbox"/> Deep	<input type="checkbox"/> Need for approval
<input type="checkbox"/> Sensitive	<input type="checkbox"/> Touchy

SANGUINE TEMPERAMENT	
Strength	Weakness
<input type="checkbox"/> Warm-hearted	<input type="checkbox"/> Impulsive
<input type="checkbox"/> Enthusiastic	<input type="checkbox"/> Talkative
<input type="checkbox"/> Expressive	<input type="checkbox"/> Weak-willed
<input type="checkbox"/> Friendly	<input type="checkbox"/> Mood swings
<input type="checkbox"/> Sociable	<input type="checkbox"/> Undisciplined
<input type="checkbox"/> Spontaneous	<input type="checkbox"/> Distractible
<input type="checkbox"/> Forgiving	<input type="checkbox"/> Easily angered
<input type="checkbox"/> Emotional	<input type="checkbox"/> Unreliable
<input type="checkbox"/> Humorous	<input type="checkbox"/> Loud

Your gifts -virtues of the spirit

Unlike your natural abilities and your inherent personality, you were not

You
receive
your
spiritual
gifts
when you
make a
commitment
to follow
Jesus.

born with spiritual gifts. You receive your spiritual gifts when you make a commitment to follow Jesus and have the Holy Spirit living in you.

“You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit” (Ephesians 1:13). You are born again by confessing your sin and making Jesus Lord of your life.

As the Holy Spirit comes to live in us, He gives us spiritual gifts to use for God’s glory and for helping others. Because the Holy Spirit decides which gifts suit His purpose for our lives we should accept and use the gifts He has given us (Hebrews 2:4).

It is not wrong, though, to desire and even ask for a certain gift, especially if our intention is to use the gift in love and humility.

The gifts of the Spirit

Individual words of a language are different in length, in their meaning and in their grammatical usage. On their own, words are limited in their usefulness, but when strung together correctly in a sentence, they convey a message. Some words are active and some provide structure. Certain words complement others while some words are used to join a sentence together.

Likewise, there are various gifts of the Spirit, each quite different. Some can be recognized easily while others go almost unnoticed. Yet each is equally important in God's eyes. What matters is not which gifts you have, but whether you use them faithfully. Remember that having certain gifts don't make us better Christians and they certainly don't make us more important than others.

Romans 12:6-8 The gift of ...

Encouragement – Lifting up those who are discouraged and comforting those who are sad.

Giving – Freely and cheerfully sharing what you have with others and giving generously to God through the offerings at your church.

Leadership – Being able to lead a group to do a specific task or heading up some form of ministry.

Mercy – Caring for the weak and needy who have no way of helping themselves. Mercy can also mean showing forgiveness and kindness to those who do not deserve it.

1 Corinthians 12:8-10 The gift of ...

Wisdom – The ability to make fair judgments; knowing the right thing to do or say in a sensitive or complicated situation.

Knowledge – An understanding of the way God is leading us. It is also the ability to know something that couldn't have been known unless it came from God.

Faith – Having a special trust in God and a confidence that He is able to do what has been asked for in prayer.

Healing – Bringing healing to the sick and disabled through faith in God's healing power.

Miracles – Being used by God to do things that are above human ability and go against the laws of nature.

Prophecy – Receiving a clear message from the Spirit for a person or group of people that helps them in their relationships with God.

Discernment – Knowing whether something is good or bad. It is a special insight given by the Spirit to be able to "see" things in the unseen spiritual realm.

Tongues – Praying in a heavenly language by the power of the Holy Spirit. The prayer may be a special message to God's people or it may be a private conversation between your spirit and God's Spirit.

Interpretation – The ability to understand and explain a message from God that has been spoken in tongues.

1 Corinthians 12:28 The gift of ...

Apostleship – Starting a new ministry or Christian group by sharing the good news of Jesus.

Teaching – The ability to share and explain the Word of God in a way that others can understand it.

Helping – Wanting to help with the work of God in a practical way that makes it easier for others who minister.

Administration – An ability to plan, coordinate and do certain tasks in order for a ministry to run smoothly.

Ephesians 4:11 The gift of ...

Evangelism – Telling others the good news of the Bible and sharing one's testimony so that people get to know Jesus.

Shepherding – Caring for new believers by gently guiding them until they are strong enough to help others.

1 Peter 4:9-10 The gift of ...

Hospitality – Making others feel welcome and inviting them into one’s circle of friends.

Using your gift/s will energize you spiritually and help you realize that you are involved in something significant and lasting.

Identifying your gifts

Firstly, it is important to understand that if you have put your faith in Jesus, you already have one or more spiritual gifts. Maybe you are not even aware of a certain gift even though you are using that gift in some way already. Here are some points to consider as you “dig” for the treasure inside yourself.

The Lord has given you a gift – ask Him to help you discover what it is so that you can use it the way He planned; otherwise it’s like never unwrapping a present to find out what’s inside.

Read through the list of gifts on the previous pages again so that you know what they are. Do some gifts draw your attention more than the others? Does something inside you connect with the description?

Gifts are usually matched to our personality and ability, like the gift of leadership or administration; though a gift may well stretch our natural tendencies. Certain gifts, such as the gift of shepherding, involve other people; others, such as the gift of helping, are purely hands-on and practical. But rest assured, our gifts will not be completely out of character with the way God has put us together.

Are there aspects of church life in which you are involved or would like to be involved in? Remember, your gift is mainly used to build up the body of Christ – the church, so that is where you will use it the most (1 Corinthians 14:12). You are more likely to discover your gift when you are actively involved, than if you sit on the sideline expecting a sign from above. The Lord is not going to unwrap your gift for you.

When you think of serving somewhere in God’s kingdom and dream of something you would like to do, what comes to mind?

This could well be your gift, or be closely related to it.

Growing in your gift

“Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10). We grow in our gifts firstly by using them, and secondly by following the guidelines in the Bible. In fact, Paul encourages us to excel in our gifts, especially those that build others up.

Because every member of Christ’s body has a gift and because our gifts are not all the same, we as individuals need each other. Like bricks in a building, we support each other by having a specific place and purpose in God’s living temple.

In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in Him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.

Ephesians 2:21-22

Your past

In the business world, relevant job experience adds merit to one’s qualifications. Similarly, life experience adds considerable value to one’s spiritual gifts.

Did you know that God can use all your life experiences to shape and refine your character? God puts His loving hands around your life and molds you the way He wants you to be.

If your heart is soft and teachable, gentle pressure is all that is needed to shape your life. Instead of resisting what God is doing in your life, allow Him to shape you for His purpose.

God didn’t just create you and then put you aside while He carries on with other things. He is completely absorbed in you

and keeps His hands on you all the time. “Yet, O LORD, You are our Father. We are the clay, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand” (Isaiah 64:8).

It is important to understand that it is not God who brings pain and temptation into our lives. Everything that has the tendency to drag us down and make us less effective for God comes from the devil. The devil hates God and despises every part of His creation. He tries to destroy all physical and spiritual life – everything that has the potential of glorifying God. Yet, because God is all-powerful He can even use the very things the devil drags into our lives – the things that go wrong – and turn them into good (Romans 8:28).

Hardships strengthen our character and deepen our faith. Peter, in his letter to persecuted Christians, wrote, “These [trials] have come so that your faith – of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). If an artist were limited to only bright colors like yellow, green and blue, he’d find it virtually impossible to bring any depth and reality to a painting. But if the artist is given rich colors like crimson, emerald green and royal blue, he is able to add countless shades that give the painting depth. He can also add outlines to sharpen images and mix realistic colors that make the painting come alive. That is what God wants to do with our lives.

Bright, happy colors are great, but if we only live on this shallow plane, we will miss out on the richness that God wants to bring to our lives – experiences that make our lives more beautiful.

Without dark times in our lives, the bright times wouldn’t stand out as highlights. What’s more, it is only as shadows are added that we become aware of the source of light. Each painting that God paints is uniquely different. God is working on your life every day, using bright colors to cheer you on, and darker colors to enrich your life. So don’t be discouraged when things go wrong; when you mess up or when someone hurts you. The Lord knows about every incident and even feels the pain you feel when others mistreat you. He cares about you so much that He’ll never allow you to go through a crisis alone. Instead, He draws you closer to Himself through what’s happening in your life.

Remember, “The LORD Himself goes before you and will be with you; He will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged” (Deuteronomy 31:8).

Remembering the past

Thinking back on God's goodness

As the Israelites traveled through the desert to the Promised Land, God had to remind them repeatedly of the miraculous way He had rescued them from slavery and how He had taken care of them (Deuteronomy 15:15). After forty years of wandering in the desert, when the Israelites were finally ready to possess the Promised Land, God instructed them to build an altar to remember the day He parted the Jordan River for them to enter Canaan.

By thinking back to the times when God has done something special in our lives we have even more reason to thank Him for His unfailing goodness. In addition, when we remember God's faithfulness, it strengthens our confidence in His ability to help us in our present situation as well as the future.

Remembering gives us perspective

Taking time out to think about life helps us to see the present as a short, but important time between where we have come from and where we are going. It is like zooming out in order to get a bigger picture of our lives. We can see how far we've come, how high we've climbed, or perhaps, how far we've slipped back.

In the last book of the Bible, Jesus appears to John in a vision and gives him a message for each of the seven churches (in Asia). One of the messages was for the church in Ephesus to remind them of the love they had when they first became believers (Revelation 2:4-5). By remembering how they had once lived passionately for Jesus, the Christians in Ephesus had a standard, which they themselves had set, and by which they could check how their attitudes had changed over time.

Remembering adds to our experience

Our failures, though we may prefer to forget them, can serve as firsthand experiences that form valuable lessons for life. After all, we have all the "before" and "after" images stored in our minds.

We remember what led up to the event, we know what went wrong, and we experienced the result. So when we're faced with a similar situation

we can use our experience to avoid making the same mistake.

Those who are wise learn from the experiences of others, thereby avoiding common mistakes. Others take the long route and learn by making the mistakes themselves.

Then there are those who lose out altogether, learning neither from the mistakes of others nor from their own mistakes and blunder on through life.

Forget it by looking ahead

While it is good to keep certain memories alive, bad memories that hold you back are best forgotten: regrets and failures that continue to haunt; harsh words that break you down; wrongs that have been forgiven, and things you can't undo. These hold you back and keep you from doing your best by living in the victory that Jesus won for us.

The apostle Paul stripped off every thing that could possibly weigh him down in his race of faith. He focused only on what lay ahead – his prize: “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13-14).

Picture a lush countryside with tall green grass and shrubs. Yet, this is not what the landscape looked like during the dry season after a devastating fire had swept across the valley, leaving a charred wasteland in its wake. But spring had brought new life.

The transformation reminds one of the tragedies and disappointments that come to us so unexpectedly, when a cruel fire sweeps through our lives, wiping out all that we regard as precious and safe.

At such a time, the charred remains seem to leave little hope for the future. Yet in time, as the seasons of life change, God sends His rain of blessing and we discover that the things that seemed totally lifeless were

Those who
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of others,
thereby
avoiding
common
mistakes.

only blackened. As our roots soak up God's love and goodness, new life and color return.

To reword Paul's statement and make it a motto, we could declare: For-

Forget
what
happened
in the
past;
focus on
God's plan
for the
future.

get what happened in the past; focus on God's plan for the future.

This renewing of our lives through hardship does not happen automatically. Without God, hurt and loss can make people hardhearted and bitter. Healing can only come as we allow God to soften our hearts and make us sensitive toward Him. This in turn requires an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness – something we may need to work on with the help of trusted friends or family, or perhaps a church leader. But above all, with God's grace. Just as nature opens itself up to the life-giving rain and the warmth of the sun, so we must allow God's healing love to sweep over us and change us.

This poetic passage from Hosea 14:5-6 was a message from the Lord to His people in exile far from their homeland:

I will be like the dew to Israel; he will blossom like a lily. Like a cedar of Lebanon he will send down his roots; his young shoots will grow. His splendor will be like an olive tree, his fragrance like a cedar of Lebanon.

In the same way the Lord promises to revive and restore everyone who looks up to Him for help and comfort.

Traumatic events

Forgetting the past is not that easy when it comes to the recurring flashbacks brought on by a traumatic incident. Images of the event may be triggered by anything that makes you remember a specific detail of what

happened. It could be a sound, a distinct smell, a friend's comment or a dream.

Sometimes the details of what happened are vague because our minds have blocked them out. The numbing of our memory helps us cope with the situation at a superficial level so that our thoughts and energy can be focused on surviving the ordeal.

For example, those involved in a serious vehicle accident may not remember the collision or the events shortly thereafter. Once the situation becomes more normal, delayed shock can set in as one's mind slowly recalls the "missing pieces".

People who have experienced a traumatic ordeal should seek professional counseling as soon as possible after the event. This allows the subconscious memories linked with fear and pain to surface in order to deal with them rationally from a position of strength. Trauma counseling helps victims deal with natural fears so as to prevent these from becoming irrational fears (phobias).

The memory of the event is not the only issue that needs to be addressed. Traumatic incidents affect one's emotions. A person who feels responsible for a tragedy may experience a persistent feeling of guilt, or depending on circumstances, there may be a feeling of sadness and loss. Without the comfort and support of someone who cares, prolonged sadness can lead to a sense of hopelessness and even depression.

Above all, the power and grace of Jesus is able to help us deal with our past and face the future with renewed hope. This is the promise we have from God Himself: "The God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ ... will Himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast" (1 Peter 5:10).



A new spirit

The transformation

When you ask Jesus to renew your life, you don't just get a clean-up or a make-over. Jesus puts a new spirit in you and that is how God, who cannot even look at sin, can actually come and live in you through His Spirit. Jesus takes away every single sin and fills you with His goodness: "God made Him who had no sin [Jesus] to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Why then do we still have a tendency to do wrong since we have this new spirit from God inside us? (Ezekiel 36:26).

Surely temptation and sin should be a thing of the past. Yet we know only too well that the human factor is still as real as it was before. How can we be perfect in God's eyes when it is obvious that sinless perfection is humanly impossible?

Hebrews 10:14 tells us that through the death of Jesus, we who are saved have already been made perfect forever, even though we are still in the process of being made holy. So, while our spirit is perfect the moment we are born again and filled with His Spirit (John 3:6-7), we continue to undergo a transformation of the soul in order that we may become more like Jesus in our everyday lives. "We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

This metamorphosis doesn't happen overnight, nor is it automatic. Our free will is integrally involved in our spiritual growth. In other words, our growth has as much to do with our obedience and attitude as it has with God's grace in our lives.

Take note of *your* role in becoming more like Jesus: "Now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossians 3:8-10).

When you believe in Jesus and are committed to following Him, your name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 3:5). No one can take that away from you! Although sin will always be part of your fallen nature, the Holy Spirit patiently makes you aware of things that need to change and helps you overcome bad habits. So, even though your spirit is perfect and ready to enter God's presence, your soul – your heart and mind where sin resides – is not. That is why you need to continue asking Jesus to cleanse your heart whenever sin comes between you and God.

John, writing to Christians, says, "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1).

God has given you the freedom of choice – He will not "reprogram" your mind or block out the bad thoughts that you choose to entertain. As long as you live on earth, the choice will always be yours to do what is right, or wrong. It is up to you to transform your mind by shaping your thought pattern on the truths of the Bible – not according to the values of this world. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be

When you
believe in
Jesus
and are
committed
to
following
Him, your
name is
written in
the Lamb's
Book of
Life.

transformed by the renewing of your mind” (Romans 12:2). God renews your spirit; you are responsible for the renewal of your mind.

A change of heart

A desire to do God's will

As you renew your mind day by day, your heart will change as well. Instead of craving for the pleasures of the world, your heart will long more for the things that please God. Rest assured, that doesn't mean having a good time with others is something of the past, and it definitely doesn't mean that you should stop enjoying life – many fun things are perfectly okay. Remember, the devil tries to rob you of what you really want in life while Jesus wants you to get as much as you can out of life. This is what Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10).

When we love the Lord, obedience to Him is no longer a big issue – it's not a heavy burden we carry around. We do what is right because we want to please Him, not because we religiously live by a set of rules and laws. That is what the Pharisees did and that is why they were so miserable. They had nothing to live for! Jesus compared them to whitewashed tombs – beautiful on the outside, but dead on the inside. For us, the joy of a loving relationship with God defines our love for Him and makes us want to change: “This is love for God: to obey His commands. And His commands are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3).

We have been released from the written law (set of rules) and now serve God in a new and exciting way, as we are led by the Spirit who now lives in us (Romans 7:6). The Holy Spirit guides our hearts and allows us to run freely along the path of right living. “I run in the path of Your commands, for You have set my heart free” (Psalm 119:32). It is as though God has taken down the fences and trusts us to stay within the boundaries. The boundaries of God's principles have been transferred from a written set of rules to our hearts and our minds: this is what God promised, “I will put My laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Hebrews 10:16).

As we read the Bible, the Holy Spirit writes God's guiding principles on our hearts (the motivation), and our minds (the detail) in order to help us do and say what is right – even in situations where the Bible doesn't provide specific guidelines.

King of your heart

While it is the Holy Spirit who comes to live in your heart, Jesus must receive authority over your heart. In Revelation 3:20 Jesus says that He stands at the door and knocks. If you open the door and let Him into your life, you are giving Him permission to rearrange the priorities of your heart (also see 1 Peter 3:15).

As Jesus starts to rearrange things, He brings order where there is confusion, peace where there is anxiety, love where there is unforgiveness, and acceptance where there is bitterness.

At the same time, some stuff has to go – trash that's been piling up for years inside you. But be assured, everything that goes makes space for something new and better, and that comes with Jesus' peace, which now rules in our hearts (Colossians 3:15).

Temptation, sin and guilt

Temptation

As the glory of God's creation, people are the number one target of the enemy. Because we are created in God's image, the devil tries to break us down through temptation, sickness and discouragement. His most popular tactic is to distract us from focusing on the Lord by bombarding our senses with things that dishonor God. The devil wants us to see and hear all kinds of bad things, which he then continues to use in our lives to tempt us and make us fall.

The first step along the path of temptation is usually unavoidable as your body interacts with a fallen world through your senses. (Remember that temptation itself is not sin.)

Your mind receives the input and immediately tries to apply logical reasoning to decide what to do next – to continue down the path or to stop. Being human, this is where your heart gets involved and a struggle begins

in your soul – a battle of heart and mind. If you rely on your own strength to resist the temptation your will becomes fatigued and is it likely to be overpowered. And, the moment your will surrenders, sin follows through with its final blow.

However, if the Lord has control of your life, your spirit helps you to see the danger up ahead and gives you the wisdom to back away from the temptation and continue along the path that glorifies God.

Something inside us wants to do what is right, yet we find ourselves repeatedly falling for the things we later regret. If only it were easier to do what is right! As the psalmist said, “Oh, that my ways were steadfast in obeying Your decrees!” (Psalm 119:5).

Even the apostle Paul had a constant struggle to break free from the grip that sin had on him. In his spirit he wanted to do what is right and good, but the law of sin at work in his body (through his senses) was constantly looking for an opportunity to capture his thoughts.

For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.

Romans 7:22-23

It seemed to Paul that the law of sin – like the law of gravity – was pulling him down. In his own strength he could not escape sin’s hold on him and so he cried out in frustration, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24). Then he makes this conquering claim, which is our hope as well: “Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:25).

The devil has been using the same basic tactics to tempt us since he lied to Eve in the Garden of Eden. Eve saw the forbidden fruit and was attracted to it because it looked so good to eat (Genesis 3:6). Adam and Eve should have rather stayed far away from the tree that God had warned them about. This is the lesson we learn from them: don’t hang

around places where you are likely to be tempted. Don't keep company with those who are likely to drag you down, and don't expose yourself to things that entice you. Before you know it you'll be caught in a trap of sin and guilt.

“When tempted, no one should say, ‘God is tempting me.’ For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death” (James 1:13-15).

We will continually be confronted by all kinds of temptations and the devil will keep adapting his strategy to catch us out.

How then can we prepare ourselves to stand firm and not be swept off our feet when temptation catches us off guard? Thank God, we are not powerless.

We can overcome by:

Arming ourselves

God has not called us to a trouble-free, easy-going lifestyle. While we are in this world we will face many temptations. In John 16:33 Jesus told His disciples to expect nothing less. But He gave us this assurance: “Take heart! I have overcome the world.” As believers, we are in a constant struggle, but our fight is not against people; it is against the unseen forces of darkness. God, in His sovereignty, has provided us with all we need to protect our hearts and overcome the evil around us with good (Romans 12:21).

God has not left us exposed and helpless to face the enemy with our bare hands. He has equipped us in every way – literally from head to toe! “Therefore put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand” (Ephesians 6:13). The Scripture verses that follow provide a list of the spiritual armor that helps us stand our ground:

Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled
around your waist, with the breastplate of

righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace.

In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.

Ephesians 6:14-17

Resisting the devil

“Submit yourselves, then, to God” (James 4:7). We can only serve one master – God or the devil. There is no neutral ground. If you belong to God, you must be willing to serve under His leadership – that’s what it means to submit to Him. Serving God means to follow His general instructions given in the Bible as well as His specific (personal) instructions given to us by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit guides our thoughts as we speak to God in prayer and allow time for God to speak to us. When we act on those thoughts, the Spirit confirms that we are on the right track by giving us peace in our hearts – a confident assurance that we are doing God’s will. But when we feel uneasy about something, it is best to wait until we have clearer leading.

The second part of the Scripture verse in James 4:7 tells us that when we resist the devil, he will flee from us. All we have to do is to stand firm, and guess who does the running! Remember, God has given us tough armor and a powerful weapon – His Word. And we don’t have to fight in our own strength; we have God’s power, which is given to us through faith (1 Peter 1:5).

Using Scripture

Cars are fitted with all the parts needed to make them go in the desired direction and to stop when required. If a car is serviced regularly it is safe and useful, providing the driver with complete control.

A short-sighted owner may reason that as long as there is nothing broken, servicing the car is a pointless hassle. Relating this analogy to our lives, we too should be moving forward spiritually and changing direction

as God leads. But we also need to apply the brakes when we're suddenly faced with temptation. When we neglect the state of our spiritual lives, we are like a car that is unable to stop. And as we plunge into sin, others are often involved and we end up with hurts and regret.

In the same way that a car's brake fluid needs to be checked and topped up, we must keep our minds filled with God's Word in order to avoid the hazards of life.

Jesus was never caught off guard when the devil tempted Him, but opposed (resisted) him every time by using Scripture.

Jesus knew the Old Testament Scriptures and quoted words of Truth to set the devil's lies straight. As we read and learn Scripture, we store up spiritual ammunition in the arsenal of our hearts to use against the devil whenever he attacks us. By knowing what the Bible says, we won't be tricked by the devil's lies, but instead we can say with confidence, "I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You" (Psalm 119:11).

Filling our minds with good things

The Bible tells us to think of things that are true, right, pure, lovely and excellent (Philippians 4:8). In other words, we should fill our minds with good things (not necessarily just spiritual things). When our minds are filled with good thoughts there's no room for bad stuff – the things that pollute our minds and poison our hearts.

The Bible says that, "To the pure, all things are pure, but to those who are corrupted and do not believe, nothing is pure. In fact, both their minds and consciences are corrupted" (Titus 1:15).

Forgiveness from God

The Bible tells us that every single person has sinned against God and fallen short of His standard of perfection (Romans 3:23). It's not even as if we were good by God's standards for a part of our lives, or the day we were born. In one of David's prayers, he admits to God that he was already sinful at the time of his birth (Psalm 51:5).

Purity cannot come out of something that is impure, neither can perfection be born from sin. A chicken can not hatch from a rotten egg even if

all the external conditions are perfect. We are born as sinners, that is why nothing good can come from us unless God changes us on the inside. We do not become sinners the first time we sin; we are sinners from birth. In fact, we sin because we are sinners.

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Some mistakenly believe that they will make it to heaven because they've lived a good enough life. The apostle Paul believed this before Jesus confronted him while on his way to Damascus. Only after Paul's dramatic encounter with the living God did he realize that not even the most religious person is sinless. He later wrote, "Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Others may admit that they have sinned but believe they can counter sin with good deeds. The Bible makes it clear that we can never remove sin from our lives. But there is Someone who can wipe out every single sin we have ever committed. He has already taken the blame and punishment for our sins. The person is Jesus.

Because Jesus died in our place, God says, "Come now, let us reason together. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool" (Isaiah 1:18). God wants to forgive you – all you have to do is ask.

Then there are those who feel so rotten because of what they've done that they wonder whether they could ever be forgiven.

God's Word assures us that the blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin (1 John 1:7). No person is too bad or beyond the reach of God's love and forgiveness. Jesus died for every person so that no one needs to stay separated from God. Instead, we can live for Jesus while on earth, and live with Him in eternity (2 Corinthians 5:14-15).

No matter what you have done, God is more than willing to forgive you if you ask Him to – no strings attached. There is absolutely nothing more you need to do because God delights in being merciful to the undeserving (Micah 7:18).

Forgiveness from others

The first thing you need to do if you've offended someone – or even if you think you have – is to say sorry. It seems pretty obvious, but we often tend to talk around the issue rather than actually saying, “I'm sorry.” And the longer it takes to say it, the harder it is to do. When you delay, you allow tension to build up.

Also, remember that when we hurt others, we sin against God. In addition to saying sorry to the person we have offended we must ask God for forgiveness.

We should also put things right. In other words, we should clean up the mess, fix what has been broken and replace what is lost (if and where possible).

Forgiving others

In Jesus' prayer, when He taught His disciples to pray, He said, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). The word *as* is pivotal in this Scripture verse, implying that if the second part of the verse doesn't happen, the first part can't happen.

In other words, the condition on which you receive forgiveness from God is that you forgive the wrongs others have done to you. And should you think that it is easier for God to forgive than it is for you, consider that your sin cost the Father the death of His Son. For us, forgiveness is a mere decision. (For a more down-to-earth perspective, read the account of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:23-34).

Forgiving others is not an option – it is a requirement. When we bear grudges and stockpile wrongs for revenge, we build a wall between God and ourselves. Our worship is then no longer acceptable to Him (Matthew 5:23-24), and because our sins can't be forgiven, our prayers are no longer heard (Psalm 66:18). Consequently, we restrict God's flow of blessings through us, and by doing so we stagnate. Before long, every part of our lives becomes contaminated by the poison of unforgiveness. The sludge of resentment eventually spills over as anger, and as a result, our relationships with others sour. Every time we replay a hurtful incident in our minds we get more and more worked up! The more we dwell on

the wrong that was done to us, the angrier we become. There is only one way to break the destructive cycle – hit the stop button and forgive!

Forgiveness does not mean ...

- that we should necessarily have a warm, loving feeling for the person who hurt us
- that we'll somehow forget all the details of the incident
- that the hurt will disappear instantly.

What forgiveness does mean is ...

- that it must be offered without preconditions or exceptions.

We should forgive even when the person ...

- doesn't apologize
- doesn't realize how much he or she hurt us
- does it again and again (Matthew 18:21-22)
- doesn't deserve it.

Let's be honest, that is not easy! If forgiveness were merely a matter of saying the words, "I forgive you" – like stating that the sky is blue – it wouldn't be so bad. But, somehow, those powerful words of forgiveness seem to choke us up even as we say them.

It takes willpower to break down the protective wall of our emotions and make ourselves vulnerable. It takes determination to wrestle with our sense of right and wrong. It takes courage to face someone when you're not sure of the reaction you'll get. But, you can do it!

Making it easier

Below are a number of points to consider that will hopefully make it a little easier to forgive:

- Forgiveness does not mean that the wrong that was done to you is suddenly okay. It also does not mean that injustice is somehow swept under the carpet. It is natural that our God-given sense of justice makes us feel that it is unfair for someone to be let off the hook. So what happens when we forgive?

The moment we forgive a person, we refer the injustice to a higher Judge – the Lord Himself – who judges all things. Injustice, which is sin, cannot go unpunished. God will avenge those who belong to Him and the Bible makes that clear:

“Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written: ‘It is Mine to avenge; I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:19).

But what if that person is a believer or asks for forgiveness?

When a person who wronged you asks to be forgiven, the punishment for the injustice that was done to you is transferred to Jesus (just as your sin was when you asked for forgiveness). Jesus bears the full punishment for what was done to you, unfair as it seems. That is the way God planned it. Sin cannot go unpunished, yet God loves us so much that He does not want us to bear the punishment. He sent Jesus down to the earth to take the punishment for us.

Forgiveness goes one step further. It leads to a restored relationship. Do you remember the rebellious son who returned home to his father, and do you remember the welcome he received? He was not just forgiven; he was taken back and loved as a son. That leads us to the next point:

- Forgiveness is as much an act as it is a decision. Once you have decided to forgive, act on it. A thoughtful action or kind remark breaks the tension and makes it easier to talk about things, especially when there’s an awkward atmosphere.

Also, being kind to someone who continues to be mean to you makes him or her feel pretty uncomfortable. Maybe that is why Paul, having told us not to take revenge, goes on to say, “If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head” (Romans 12:20).

We are all different. We see things differently and we react differently. We should give others enough space to be who they are (with all their imperfections) without taking things too personally. “Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you” (Colossians 3:13).

Forgiveness should be an attitude that enables us to tolerate one another's shortcomings. For the sake of stable and strong relationships, we should be willing to give up our claim to be right. So, before confronting someone, ask yourself; in the long run does this really matter?

- Admittedly, forgiveness is not easy. When you've been hurt deeply, ask Jesus to help you forgive. Tell Him that you are willing to forgive, but that there is a struggle inside of you that keeps reminding you of the incident.

Once you have prayed for God's grace to flow through you, go tell that person that you have forgiven him or her, or write a note, if that is easier. Also let the person know why you feel upset about what happened. That act alone will go a long way in restoring the bridge between you and the other person.

Finally, should unforgiving thoughts nag your spirit from time to time, consider doing something tangible or symbolic to remind yourself of the day and place that you have put the incident behind you. Whenever a recurring thought does pop up, focus on your milestone.

Facts, faith and feelings

Facts – that which the mind receives and stores

From birth, the human mind is eager to gain knowledge – to learn through experience and soak up facts. A baby puts everything in its mouth to discover what is edible and what is not. A toddler explores the world by touching everything.

While a little girl is driving her mom crazy with a barrage of questions, her brother is busy pulling things apart to see what makes them work.

It comes as no surprise, then, that in man's search for God, he wants facts – scientific proof that God exists and undeniable evidence that the Bible is true. How foolish, though, to think that man with his limited understanding could even think of probing God's nature or question His existence by embracing the theories of mortal men.

Why is it that many find it easy to trust a science book or a history book, yet doubt the Bible and its claims about the Creator of the universe? The

answer is in the Bible itself: “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they [the things of God] are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Faith – that which comes from the spirit

Faith that is based on things that we can see and experience is not really faith at all. We don't need to consciously exercise our faith in a chair that has been sat on hundreds of times. The fact that it exists is obvious. The odds that it might break are slim. Through experience, we learn to trust things that are tangible and reliable.

But God wants us to believe in Him even though we cannot see Him, and trust Him even though we cannot see the future: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1). This kind of faith can only come from the spirit within us. It is only as we believe the Bible that the truths therein “become” facts in our own minds.

Note that:

- Facts remain facts whether you believe them or not.
- Faith is believing facts whether you can prove them or not.

Feelings – that which is sensed by the soul

Where do our feelings fit in as we grapple with the everyday issues of life?

We can allow our feelings to form a bridge between facts and faith, or a barrier. Love is an example of a bridge that can span the gap between the seen and the unseen because love reinforces trust, and trust in God is faith (1 Peter 1:8).

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One of the areas that many Christians struggle with is an assurance that they are genuinely saved; the other is knowing God's will at a particular point in their lives.

We should realize that our feelings are not a dependable measure of our spiritual standing with God or a reliable pointer when making spiritual decisions. This leaves us with facts and faith as the two unmovable pillars in our relationship with an unseen God.

Assurance of salvation

While at the crossroads of making a decision, feelings can play an important role. A feeling of guilt (conviction) may lead some people to repentance. Fear of eternity in hell may give others the courage to make a commitment. Even a sense of failure, loneliness and abandonment may help someone find true love and acceptance in Jesus.

In some way, these feelings and others accompany us to the cross; but once there, we need to take the last steps in faith and bow before Jesus as an act of the will – that is, by making a considered decision.

Sometimes, as the Holy Spirit renews people on the inside, an almost instant exchange of feelings takes place. Guilt and anger are washed away as peace and joy rush in. But the emotional rush cannot remain at a high forever. Feelings subside, and when they do, our faith needs to stand out above the daily ups and downs.

It is not uncommon for those who have made a commitment to Christ to start having doubts after a while. Somehow, that simple act of faith may seem distant and virtually insignificant.

Or maybe due to an ongoing weakness some Christians start wondering whether their lives are any different from those of their unsaved friends.

If you have such doubts, go back to God's book of truth and remind yourself that "it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8). It's not your own goodness that saves you, but Christ's holiness in you that makes you acceptable to God. Your worthiness is not even dependent on the amount of faith you have because even that is given to you by God (Romans 12:3). You are saved by God's grace and by your positive response to His grace.

Seeds of doubt can also take root when you get caught up in discussions about worldly philosophies and religions. By all means, be ready to speak out for what you believe, but avoid getting sucked into idle conversations with those who don't follow the ways of the Bible. Their ideologies and arguments may sound reasonable on the surface, but they hold no value since they are based on speculations and perceptions – not truth. This is what Paul wrote to a young Christian: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to your care. Turn away from godless chatter and the opposing ideas of what is falsely called knowledge, which some have professed and in so doing have wandered from the faith” (1 Timothy 6:20-21).

Evidence of a changed life is summed up by these three Scripture verses from John's first letter:

- Belief in Jesus, God's Son, our Savior. “Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 5:1).
- Obedience to Jesus. “Those who obey His commands live in Him, and He in them” (1 John 3:24).
- A love for others. “We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers” (1 John 3:14).

Most Christians go through a crisis of faith at some stage – a time when the very foundation of their faith seems to be in question. In such times it is comforting to know that it's not a matter of us holding on to Jesus, but Jesus' powerful hands holding on to us. Jesus said, “My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand” (John 10:27-28).

Consider the example of Peter, a well-known disciple. As Jesus neared the time of His arrest and crucifixion, He knew that Peter was heading for a crisis of faith. So He prepared Peter and prayed for him. “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32). Jesus knew beforehand that Peter would crack under pressure. He even shared some details of Peter's denial ... and that night it happened. Peter denied knowing Jesus, even cursed, and disowned the Son of God with whom he had walked and talked for the past three years (Luke 22:54-61).

After His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus met up with Peter and used the same challenging words He'd used a few years earlier at the Sea of Galilee, "Follow Me!" (John 21:15-19). Jesus had prayed for Peter before his time of testing, and now having found him, entrusted him with a special task. Jesus had also prayed for the other disciples ... and He also prayed for you!

Jesus said to the Father, "My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in Me through their message" (John 17:20).

Now, two thousand years later, Jesus is sitting next to the Father, talking to Him about you by name (Romans 8:34).

He pleads to God on your behalf through every hardship you face. And if your faith does crumble and you do let Him down, it is not the end! Jesus loves you too much to let you go: "If we are faithless, He will remain faithful, for He cannot disown Himself" (2 Timothy 2:13). We are in Him and He is in us – now and forever! (John 14:20).

Guidance

Choices are unavoidable. Along the path of life we encounter many forks in the road, and sometimes even an intersection of choices with no chance of turning back. Where to now?

When a decision can be delayed it allows one to see the alternatives more clearly, yet all too often the diversion is unexpected and there's an urgency to choose a certain course and press on. Though the choices may be clear, where each path leads is always less certain.

Besides the variety of options – each with different factors to consider – for a Christian there is an added dimension to bear in mind; God's will. This dimension helps us make choices that leave no regrets because the wisdom to make those choices comes from God who knows the future. To be practical, though, we should look at real-life examples from the Bible. Take someone like Paul; how did he discover God's will at various points in his life?

- God allowed Paul to use his mind to consider the advice of his friends. It was a group in the Church at Antioch that sensed the Holy Spirit selecting Paul for a special mission. Paul listened, thought about it,

and left with Barnabas on their first missionary journey (Acts 13:2-3). Yet Paul did not always take the advice of others. At one point when he was warned not to go to Jerusalem because of the persecution there, he decided to go anyway, willing to face what awaited him (Acts 21:10-15). God has given us a mind with which to reason and weigh up the advice we get.

- God prompted Paul's spirit through the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

At times, the Holy Spirit stopped Paul from going to a certain place; at other times, he was directed through dreams (Acts 16:6-9). Today, the Holy Spirit mainly speaks to us through the Bible. He guides us to a part that is relevant to our situation and confirms in our hearts that it is a direct message to us. By faith, God's written Word becomes His living (specific) word for our situation.

- God placed a passion in Paul's heart to reach an unsaved world.

Paul's desire was to preach in Rome, but his dream only became a reality after many years. The flame in Paul's heart was kept alive by a deep longing that God had placed there (Romans 1:15). Eventually, unable to contain his emotions, Paul sent a letter to those in Rome in which he expressed his eagerness to see them.

The Lord places a passion in our hearts too and waits to see how we respond. Does the desire of our hearts mirror God's heart?

- God used physical circumstances to direct the way Paul had to go.

Many times, circumstances slowed Paul down or made him change his course (Romans 1:13). Due to many years of commitments, obstacles and imprisonment, Paul's dream of preaching in Rome was delayed until the closing years of his life (Acts 28:16, 30-31).

Circumstances are probably the most obvious signs to recognize, yet circumstances in themselves should not always be seen as direct signs from God as they also form a part of everyday life.

God used various ways to guide Paul throughout his life. If you are serious about knowing God's will, He will also make sure that you don't take a wrong turn. There is no set formula for determining God's will though because He does not lead us according to a fixed pattern. Our part is to

be obedient – even in small things; to spend time alone with God and to grow in every area of our lives as Jesus did.

In conclusion

A single verse sums up the teenage years of Jesus, and it is this: “Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52). Jesus had to grow up as a child and learn as we do. Being entirely human, nothing came easier for Him than it does for us. His mind and body developed at the same pace ours do, and as He grew, He steadily matured on a social level and in His relationship with God the Father.

In the same way, the Lord wants every part of our being – body, soul and spirit – to be integrated in all aspects of life, whether it is spending time with friends, studying, exercising, or growing in our faith.

Worship

God created people to have fellowship with Him – to enjoy a close, personal friendship with Him and bring Him glory. That is the essence of worship. Worship requires all we are, all we have and all we are able to do.

Nature can display God’s awesome creativity; birds can sing and even the trees can rustle their leaves (Isaiah 55:12), but in all of creation, only humans have the ability to worship God.

In the Old Testament, God instructed people to love Him with all the energy and passion of body and soul: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This love forms the heart of worship. God wants our adoration, not our affection.

Our love for Him must be a way of life – a minute-by-minute part of everything we do.

That is why God made this commandment the first one. It is also the commandment on which all the others are based (Matthew 22:38-40).

Worship involves our spirits

Worship in the Old Testament centered mainly on an outward expression of an inward faith. In obedience to the Lord and by faith, His people followed the required form of worship that was mainly associated with the tabernacle, and later, the temple.

When Jesus came to earth, He unveiled a completely new dimension to worship. Speaking to a woman at a well in Samaria, He told her of a lasting gift He could give her: "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:13-14). Jesus was referring to the Holy Spirit whom He would send from heaven. This event was prophesied in the Old Testament and became a reality when the Holy Spirit filled every believer (prophesied in Joel 2:28 and fulfilled in Acts 2:17).

Thinking that Jesus was a prophet; the woman evaded Jesus' statement about her lifestyle by raising an age-old dispute regarding the right place to worship; was it on the nearby mountain or in Jerusalem?

Jesus replied, "Believe Me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. God is spirit, and His worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth" (John 4:21, 24).

When Jesus saves us, He sends the Holy Spirit into our hearts and we become God's temple – the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 2:21-22). Our spirits, which were once dead, immediately become the spring of life that Jesus spoke about – a fountain of adoration and praise bubbling from a pure heart.

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When we worship God who is Spirit, there is only one source from which true and acceptable worship can flow – our spirits.

Worship involves our souls

The soul is literally at the center of worship, combining the body and spirit in adoration of the Lord.

When a woman who had lived a sinful life ...
learned that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's
house, she brought an alabaster jar of perfume,
and as she stood behind Him at His feet weeping,
she began to wet His feet with her tears. Then she
wiped them with her hair, kissed them and poured
perfume on them.

Luke 7:37-38

This woman's act of worship began with a desire in her spirit to see Jesus and so she looked for an opportunity to meet Him.

Worship requires effort on our part. When we genuinely seek the Lord, He reveals Himself to us: "You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

When the woman found Jesus, she went to fetch her precious jar of perfume and sneaked into the stranger's house.

Her will and emotions became involved. This woman was not required to do what she did. For many others with whom Jesus had had an encounter, life simply went on. This woman decided to take the risk of being humiliated in front of strangers – men who despised her. Once her actions had driven her to the feet of Jesus, emotions of love, regret about her past and gratitude welled up and overflowed through her tears. She humbly wiped Jesus' feet with her hair and kissed them, and then poured out her most precious possession on them. That is worship.

Others standing around were quick to criticize her. Their logical reasoning quickly calculated the "waste" and they impulsively suggested a better way that the money could have been spent. But Jesus commended

the woman and said, “She has done a beautiful thing to Me” (Matthew 26:10). Rational thinking, if it gets in the way of true worship is best left at the door, letting our hearts guide us in expressing our devotion to Him. In whatever way we express our worship, if it is pure and sincere, it is like the fragrance of that sweet perfume.

Worship requires our free will – it cannot be forced or faked. If it is, it becomes hypocrisy. Without love and adoration we miss the meaning of worship. However, even when feelings are absent, when there is no bubbly feeling inside, we can still worship the Lord meaningfully by letting our *will* take the lead. We must simply obey Him, and as we come near to Him, He will come near to us (James 4:8).

Worship involves our bodies

Our bodies become engaged in the outward expression of our inward relationship with God. It may be through music and song, creative writing and movement, through prayer, acts of service or the giving of meaningful gifts. By means of these physical activities we offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. Though the action is initiated and expressed by our *physical* bodies it is a *spiritual* act of worship (Romans 12:1).

When we worship, our bodies becomes part of the offering (gift) that we lay before the Lord. And as with any sacrifice, the offering must be perfect, which means our bodies must be holy and pleasing to Him.

Worship requires effort

Our body, soul and spirit must unite in the discipline required for meaningful worship. If the body resists because it is lazy, the spirit cannot be taken where it longs to be. If the spirit is unwilling to worship, the body merely performs a meaningless ritual. If the soul is unenthusiastic or distracted by worldly thoughts, worship is restrained.

An example of the effort and the reward of worship is found in the beginning of the New Testament where Magi (wise men) traveled a great distance from an eastern country to Jerusalem in search of the newly born King – Jesus. They had seen an unusually bright star, and, convinced in their spirits that it was worth the trip, they loaded up their camels and set

off on their journey. They believed that the star was a sign that a great king had been born, and so, by faith they followed the moving star.

When they eventually got to Jerusalem, they asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him” (Matthew 2:2).

But the people in Jerusalem and even the king were unaware of the great event. Eventually, as the Magi went on their way, they saw the star again and were overjoyed. Even though by this time they were probably travel-weary, their souls were filled with joy and that joy kept them going until they finally found the place where Jesus was.

“On coming to the house, they saw the Child with His mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped Him. Then they opened their treasures and presented Him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh” (Matthew 2:11).

Even in their excitement, the Magi showed profound respect by bowing before Jesus, young as He was. It was an outward sign of inward submission. Then they laid costly gifts before the Child, little knowing that this was the Son of the living God who had come down from heaven and would die for them, so that they would enjoy eternal life with Him.

Their expedition turned out to be the journey of a lifetime well worth the risk and the effort they had invested.



Our future

The tent we live in

Everyone is on a journey through life – a journey with ups and downs, joys and sorrows, storms and sunshine. We are as vulnerable as a hiker in a tent; for that is what the body is – a flimsy covering. Nothing on earth is permanent, least of all, life. But the best is yet to come: “Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands” (2 Corinthians 5:1). So, whatever the situation at present, our hope is not dependent on a better life here on earth, but an unimaginable life in eternity.

There are two possible ways for us to enter the presence of God (in heaven); one is when we die, and the other is when Jesus returns to take all believers to be with Him. No one can be sure which will happen first and no one knows when either will happen. What we can know for sure is where we will spend eternity – in heaven or hell. Every person must make that choice for him or herself, and if you have not given your life to Jesus and you would like to, why not do so right now?

Before Jesus returned to heaven He told His disciples, “In My Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with Me that you also may be where

I am” (John 14:2-3). For those who love and follow Jesus, that is the one future event we can be sure of. There is an awesome future for all who believe in Him.

For some, though, the thought of eternity in heaven brings no excitement because of their limited (earthly) understanding of the spiritual realm. Their vague ideas of heaven may include Peter at the pearly gates; angels sitting on clouds playing their harps, or perhaps, God sitting on a

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huge throne as Judge. As for eternity, people have tried to define it and describe it, but as humans limited by time and space, we simply have no idea. We simply cannot imagine what God has prepared for those who love Him (1 Corinthians 2:9).

However, looking forward to heaven can only provide hope if we’re certain that we are actually going to heaven. Some believers may wonder whether they are good enough; others may reason that if sin cannot enter heaven, any unconfessed sin in their hearts may keep them out too.

Firstly, God does not require us to be sinless. In fact, He knows that we cannot be, even once we become Christians. That is why God ap-

pointed Jesus as an Advocate to defend us – not to excuse our sin, but to fulfill the requirements of the law on our behalf and take the punishment for our failure. “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1).

Secondly, once we believe in Jesus we have a permanent sign from God inside us – His Holy Spirit. “Having believed, you were marked in Him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13-14). Once we become believers, we belong to God and our names are written in the Book of Life. We will

always have sinful bodies while on earth, but our spirits, which have been renewed, are made perfect (Hebrews 10:14).

When we sin, our bodies are stained and our hearts are tainted, but our spirits remain pure. This is why, when Jesus comes back for us, only our bodies need to be made new.

In other words, our entrance into heaven is not dependent on how good we are, but on our faith in Jesus who said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6). And for those still feeling the need to do something to earn his or her salvation, the message is clear: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

A new body

What happens to your body when your spirit goes to heaven? If you are not sure, you are not alone.

In New Testament times, the Christians in Thessalonica were expecting Jesus to return in their lifetime, but as time went on, some died. Those still alive started to wonder whether they too would die before Jesus came, and if so, whether they'd miss out on that great event when Jesus returned.

So Paul wrote to them explaining what would happen:

Brothers, we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep [die], or to grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. For the Lord Himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.

And so we will be with the Lord forever.

1 Thessalonians 4:13-17

Does this mean that believers who have died will only go to heaven when Jesus comes? In order to understand the sequence of events, we need to distinguish between the body and the spirit.

When Jesus was on the cross, a criminal on a cross next to Him asked to be remembered when Jesus came into His kingdom. Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, today you will be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Clearly, Jesus’ statement indicates that when a believer dies, he or she is immediately in the presence of Jesus.

This is borne out by Paul who realized that until he leaves his body (until he dies) he could not go to be with his Savior whom he longed to see (Philippians 1:23-24 and 2 Corinthians 5:1-8).

Jesus told about two people – a rich man and Lazarus – who both died. The rich man found himself in a place of torment while Lazarus was carried by angels to a place of bliss. We know that this happened immediately after they had died because the rich man wanted Lazarus to go warn his brothers, who were still alive (Luke 16:19-31).

Then, there was Stephen, who saw Jesus standing at the right-hand side of God as he was being stoned to death, and prayed that the Lord would receive his spirit (Acts 7:55-56, 59).

In death, the spirit is separated from the body: the spirit of the believer goes to be with the Lord while the body remains of earth. Our bodies, which have been corrupted by sin, cannot enter the spiritual kingdom of God (1 Corinthians 15:50).

But that’s not where it ends. God has made known to us His Master Plan to re-unite our bodies with our spirits:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep [die], but we will all be *changed* – in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the *last trumpet*. For the trumpet will

sound, the dead will be raised imperishable,
and we will be changed. For the perishable
must clothe itself with the imperishable,
and the mortal with immortality.

1 Corinthians 15:51-53

Wow, that's quite a mouthful! Paul is saying that when Jesus comes back, believers who have died, and those who are still alive, will rise to meet Him in the clouds – not as spirits, but in our glorified (changed) bodies. Our new bodies won't only be everlasting, they will be absolutely pure. We will never sin again, which means; no more crying, no more pain, no more sadness, and no more death (Revelation 21:4).

Why would God want to raise our old bodies and make them new instead of giving us brand-new bodies? At the beginning of this book we saw that God formed each person's body the way He wanted it to be. Well, there was nothing wrong with His part of the design, but sin changed things and made every one imperfect.

Scientists have discovered that each cell in the body has a DNA structure containing all the information needed to create another you. So, technically, God could create your new body from a single cell. (That's the way you came to be in the first place). However, God can obviously recreate your body in any other way He chooses; you simply need to trust Him.

This new body will be far better than the body you have now – it will be perfect, like the glorious body of Jesus. “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables Him to bring everything under His control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body” (Philippians 3:20-21).

So, whenever you are having a bad day; when things aren't working out; when you see injustice all around and even nature is taking strain, remember that this is not all there is to life – the best is yet to come! If you have given your life to Jesus, your spirit has been redeemed. You have been bought back from the devil and saved from destruction. “And if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, He

who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit, who lives in you” (Romans 8:11).

And when Jesus returns, your body will be released from its vulnerable state. With trouble and turmoil all around, you would surely agree with Paul who said, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:22-23).

Then, at last, you will be whole once again and your soul will be perfect; filled with pure love, amazing peace and unimaginable joy (1 Peter 1:9).

A final thought

If you’ve ever wondered why Jesus doesn’t take us to heaven straight after we are born again, and so spare us the problems of life, consider the prayer He prayed for His disciples toward the end of His ministry: “My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15).

Here are some thoughts from God’s Word:

- God wants us to grow in grace. “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope – the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:11-13).
- God is patient and wants us to tell others about Him. “The Lord is not slow in keeping His promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting any one to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).
- God is giving us the opportunity to store up eternal treasure. “Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal” (Matthew 6:20).

- God wants us to become more like Jesus. “We, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into His likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Use the life you have now to make a difference for eternity!

A prayer of blessing

May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who call you is faithful and He will do it.

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24

Amen.



Putting it together

Below is a simplified representation of our complex makeup. However, one's body, soul and spirit cannot be distinguished as separate parts. You are ONE very special person, handmade by God (Psalm 139:13).

