

G.P.S. (God's Perfect System) For Christian Young People

*Navigating through the teen and young adult years
with guidance from above.*

Written By:
Daniel J. Caram

Version 2.0

G.P.S. for Christian Young People

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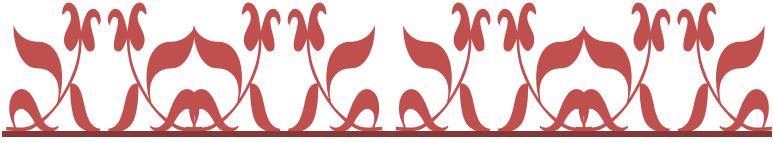
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Dedication

Before I became a father, someone told me that I would never know how deeply I could love another human being until I had children of my own.

They were absolutely right.

I dedicate this book to my wonderful son and daughter, Paul & Victoria Caram. Please know that I love you both with all of my heart. I always have. I always will.





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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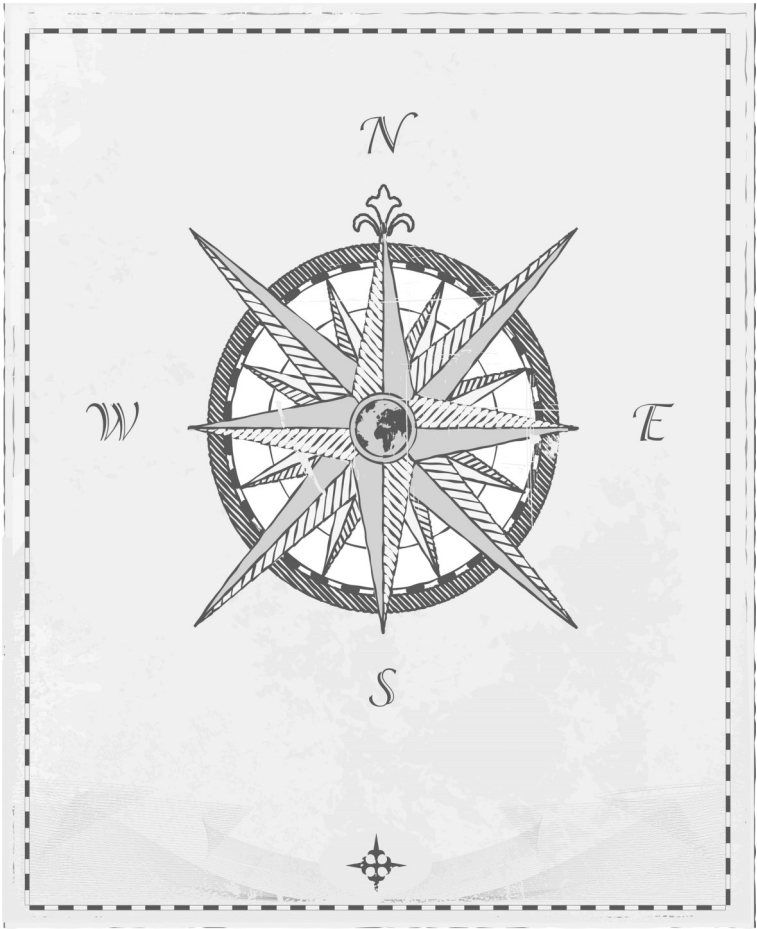


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GPS for Christian Young People



Introduction

They told me you would not read this book

Who are they? You know: “they,” - the experts - the ones who supposedly know everything. They said, “Young people don’t read books about spiritual subjects; they are too busy: texting, hanging out with friends, working, listening to music, studying, participating in sports, going to the mall, playing video games, watching TV, etc. There simply are not enough young people who want to read a Christian book.”

I disagree (obviously).

I believe there are many young people who, in their quiet moments, think about the big questions. What is the purpose of my life? Where am I going? What does God want from me? What about the sin in my life?



There are a lot of intelligent Christian teenagers and young adults who are seeking answers; but they feel as though nobody understands. They are battling

with struggles, temptations, confusion, and despair, while the whole world is seemingly against them trying to live a Christian life. It is for these thoughtful young people that I humbly present this book.



I have wanted to write this for years, but never could seem to find the time in my schedule. It was not until I was sidelined with a shoulder surgery (thankfully I could still use the keyboard) that I made the commitment to finally record these thoughts.

To be honest, I made a severe mess of my teenage years. One of my main motivations in writing this book is that I hope to save you from the grief and misery I brought upon myself during that time. I am not setting myself forth as an example of someone who did things right – in fact, quite the opposite.

I became a Christian at the age of 6; but after a few years I began making the wrong friends, and consequently making the wrong choices. My teenage years were lived far from God and it was not until age 21 that I recommitted my life to the Lord. I look back on my teenage years with regret - I wish I had been a different person. But it does not have to be that way for you.

A Travel Tip

My advice for you as you explore this book is: Do not speed. This is not a school assignment, and there are no deadlines. As with any memorable trip, part of the experience is the journey itself, not just the destination.

I hope you will enjoy *G.P.S. for Christian Young People*. It is my sincere prayer that you will find this book worthy of your time and that as you read it, the Lord will speak to your heart.

Love to you all,
Pastor Daniel J. Caram





Time Travel

When I was young, I enjoyed reading science fiction. Time travel often turned up as the theme in many of the stories. The theory of time travel has captivated dreamers and fantasy writers for hundreds of years. Authors and movie directors have envisioned what it would be like to speed ahead into the future and see the life that awaits us. Even Albert Einstein did studies in the theory of relativity, studying the speed of light and other variables to see if time travel was possible.¹ At Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida there is a whole section called “Tomorrow Land”, which is filled with exhibits featuring what the world might look like in the years ahead.



If you had time travel at your disposal what would you use it for? Perhaps you would go ahead a few years to see what stocks you should buy now so you could be a multi-billionaire by the age of 25; Or you could use time travel to journey into the past and experience some of the amazing events that have al-

ready occurred. Imagine watching Noah build his ark, David killing Goliath or Lazarus being raised from the dead. What about observing Ludwig Van Beethoven conducting his *5th Symphony*, or looking in on Leonardo da Vinci as he created the *Mona Lisa*, or how about witnessing the opening performance of a William Shakespeare play?

In the Bible, God did allow certain people to travel in time. Moses was shown things that happened thousands of years before he was born so he could write the book of Genesis. Ezekiel was taken out of his body so that God could give him a tour to see the idolatry that was going on all over Israel, and John the Revelator was an eyewitness to awesome events that have not happened yet. While these time travelers could not *change* the past or future, they were permitted to observe many astounding things.

As fun as it is to dream about, science fiction stories of time travel are really just that – fiction. My tenth grade English teacher had the saying “TIME AND TIDE WAIT FOR NO MAN” written in large letters across the front of his classroom. I often thought about that truth as the words loomed above me for an entire school year. No human being can stop time. Genesis 8:22 tells us that the seasons are set up by God. They will not change. In a way, though, time travel *does* exist. We are all traveling through time; but it only goes one way – forward.



You have what they want

As a young person, you possess the extremely precious gift of time. Hundreds of millions of people would do anything to have more time and you most likely do not even give it a second thought.

Imagine an elderly person who is on his death bed right now. Perhaps he has only been given a few days or maybe only a few hours to live. As he looks back upon his life, he realizes all the mistakes he has made, and wishes he could do things differently. Oh, if he could only start over, now that he knows what to do. Even if he had a billion dollars in the bank, he would probably give it all away if he could go back in time and become the age that you are right now! Elizabeth the First is quoted as saying on her deathbed, “All my possessions for one moment of time.” But as we know, time is unstoppable. It waits for no

man. It marches on; and no one can do anything about it. That dying person wants the flow of time to reverse, stop, or at least slow down. You, on the other hand, are probably wishing that time would speed up. Hurry up, age 16, so I can get my driver's license! Hurry up, age 18, so I can leave home! Hurry up, age 22, so I can graduate from college and get on with life!

Time Flies

When you are 1 year old, 1 year is 100% of your life

When you are 2 years old, 1 year is 50% of your life

When you are 10 years old, 1 year is 10% of your life.

When you are 20 years old, 1 year is 5% of your life.

When you are 40 years old, 1 year is 2.5% of your life.

The truth is that not only can time not go backwards, it actually appears to accelerate as you get older. Why does it seem this way? Because as you age, one year becomes a smaller percentage of your life. (Take a look at the box above). Now you know why, when you were a little kid, it seemed to take forever for your birthday to arrive! When I was a boy, I overheard my mother talking about a "young man" who had just died at the age of 60. "C'mon Mom," I thought, "60 is young?" I figured that by the time a person was 60 they were about ready to drop dead at

any moment anyway. However, I am now about the age that my mother was when she made that statement – and you know what? Age 60 seems pretty young to me, too.



Aside from the mathematics, time seems to go faster as you get older for another reason - you get busier. As a little child you complained sometimes about being bored and not having anything to do. However, as you get older and get into high school and then college, you might find yourself wishing there were more hours in the day. You will hear yourself asking, “How am I possibly going to have time to get all of this work done?” And guess what? Your responsibilities and your schedule become even more demanding as you age.

Maybe you will get married and have a family. Your job will consume at least 40 hours a week, not including travel to and from work. You will want to spend time with your husband/wife and children; there will be things that need to be done around your house; and most people, if they get eight hours of rest each night, sleep one-third of their life away.

At the private school I attended for a few years, all of the grades - from Kindergarten to twelfth - were in one building. I remember one day when I was six years old, and in the second grade, I looked down the hallway and saw “giants”. Actually, they were just twelfth graders, but to me they looked so big that they may as well have been a classroom of Goliaths. I thought to myself, “I will never, *ever* get to the 12th grade!” But the years flew by, and before I knew it, I had graduated from high school and was looking back at the “little” 12th graders.

How many years of life do you have left? According to the World Health Organization², 70 years is the average life expectancy at birth of the global population but remember these are just averages, not guarantees. Some people live well past 70, and others never live past childhood or early adulthood.

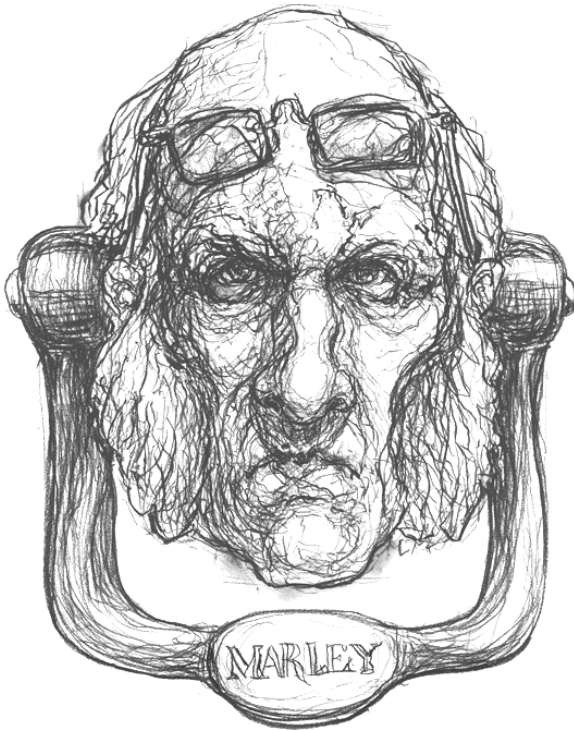
When I was in high school, I had a classmate whose little brother got into a fight with a young boy from another school. These 15-year-olds were arguing about which school was the best; then the one boy walked back into his house, came out with a shotgun. He shot and killed my friend’s little brother right in the boulevard of the quiet little neighborhood where we lived. We never know when our last day will be.

The Next Best Thing

We cannot go back in time, but there is another option. We can alter our way of living now so that the future will change for us. The decisions you make in the next few years will be ones that will have an impact on your entire life. We were just imagining an elderly person on his deathbed. Now imagine *yourself* at the end of life. Will you be proud of the choices you are making right now? The next best thing to going backwards at the end of life in order to correct mistakes, is to make the right moves now so you will not have a lot of mistakes that need to be corrected.

One of my all-time favorite stories is the novel *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. In the story, miserly old Ebenezer Scrooge has a terrifying visit from the ghost of Jacob Marley, his business partner who had died seven years earlier. Marley is bound with chains; and he moans and wails with anguish as he thinks about his life. It was too late for Marley to change and he was forced to wander through the world and witness how he might have turned others to happiness if only he had not been so concerned about himself. He cries out about the “incessant torture of remorse” – in other words, the unending regret that he had not lived differently. Marley’s ghost comes back from the dead to warn Scrooge that if his life does not change, he too will share the dark fate that Marley is doomed to endure. By the end of the story, Scrooge was shown his entire life and was giv-

en a final chance to finish well. How thrilled and relieved Scrooge was to come back to a time when he could make a difference! But what about all the years that Scrooge had already wasted? How much better it would have been if he had been wise at a young age.



Drawing by: Jamin Hoyle

The Best of Both Worlds?

Life seems backwards. When people are young, they have physical strength, opportunity, and time, but not the wisdom that comes by experience to help them make all the right decisions. On the other hand, when people are old, they may no longer have those opportunities they had when they were young, yet that man or woman may now possess much wisdom acquired through the trials, successes, and failures they experienced in life. Question: Can young people have the best of both worlds? Can they have the strength and vitality of youth *plus* the wisdom that comes from having lived a full life? Answer: Absolutely Yes.

G.P.S. (God's Perfect System)

I love maps. Old ones or new ones, they fascinate me; and I admire the work that went into them. I am captivated by online computer map programs that allow you to explore almost any street, mountain, lake, or building in the world.





When travelling to a new place, I like to chart out my path ahead of time. There's security in knowing that someone has gone before me and scouted out the land. The map designer (cartographer) has reached the destination beforehand and is now showing how to get there and what to avoid along the way. He or she spent a lot of time taking photos and making detailed diagrams of roads, rivers, highways, canyons, and state parks - all so I would know exactly how to plan my trip. But wouldn't it be great if someone would give us a map of life so we would know exactly where to turn, which dark areas to avoid, and where the pleasant and scenic places are located along the journey?

Today we can easily access the G.P.S. (Global Positioning System) on smartphones, laptops, tablets and other electronic devices. Portable G.P.S in our vehicles can talk to us and give helpful advice like: "Turn

right,” “Go ahead two miles,” or “Turn up the heat!” – wait a second, that last one was my wife. Anyway, how useful it would be if we could have a G.P.S. to guide us through life, telling us: “Don’t eat that,” “Apply to this college,” “There is going to be a surprise quiz in Chemistry today,” “Your outfit does not match,” etc.

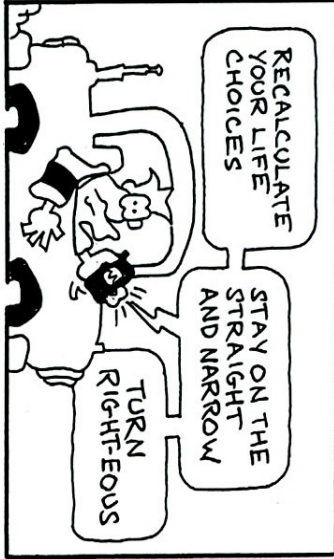
There is a heavenly guidance system provided called the Bible. Think of it as a G.P.S. (God’s Perfect System) designed specifically for you. It does not audibly speak, but it does provide a map that will guide you through life. We learn from studying the mistakes and triumphs in the lives of those who have gone before us. The Bible is relevant today because even with all of our cool gadgets and scientific advancements, the heart of man is unchanged; it has the same problems it did 6,000 years ago. But consider this – even if you have the most current, state of the art, guidance system available, it will do you absolutely no good if you do not listen to it.

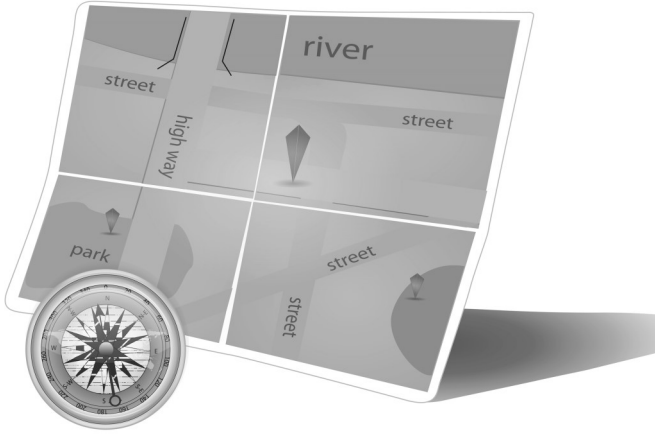
Someday our body is going to die – there is nothing we can do about that. We can exercise, lift weights, run five miles every day, only eat raw vegetables, whatever; but the reality is that no matter what we do, our bodies are going to quit working someday. It might be just through a gradual process of aging, or maybe as the result of an accident, but however it happens, our bodies cannot last forever. Our bodies are just vehicles that carry our soul around. They

take us to the end of this life's journey (however long that is); but the eternal part of us keeps on going forever. Once we cross over to the next life, there is no coming back so it's absolutely crucial that we make the right choices while we still have the chance. Moses prayed that God would help him to make the most of the time he had left: "So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).

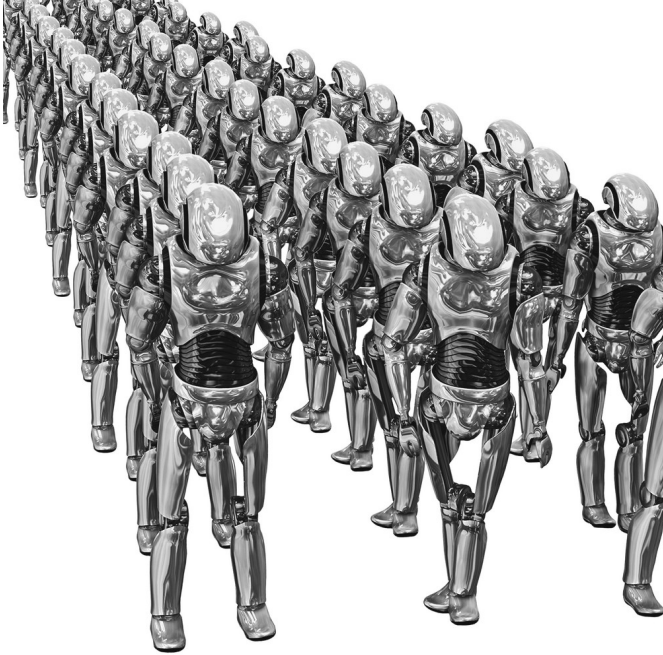
Right now, time is statistically on your side. You will not be able to use time travel at the end of your life to correct your mistakes, but God has made all the necessary wisdom available for you *now*. If you will hear, you will save yourself a lifetime of sorrow and regret. Wise people will hear and obey. Proverbs 1:5 says, "A wise man will hear and increase learning, And a man of understanding will attain wise counsel". God is the greatest Cartographer of all time. He has mapped out the best way to get through life, if only we will listen.


Pontius' Puddle





ROBOTS IN HEAVEN



Why doesn't God just kill the devil? God is good; He hates evil; He is all-powerful and yet there is evil everywhere. That does not make any sense, does it? Steve Jobs, the co-founder of Apple, gave up on Christianity at the age of 13. He saw a picture of starving children on the cover of *Life* magazine and concluded that Jesus could not be a loving God and

allow such suffering of innocent people. He asked his Sunday school teacher if he knew what would happen to those children. When the Sunday school teacher could not answer his question, Steve walked out and never went back to church again. He was a highly intelligent person, but he was offended when he could not understand the ways of God. He went off to dabble with drugs and Eastern religions;³ and although he became rich and successful, it appears that he died without having the saving knowledge of Christ. I do not want that to happen to you.

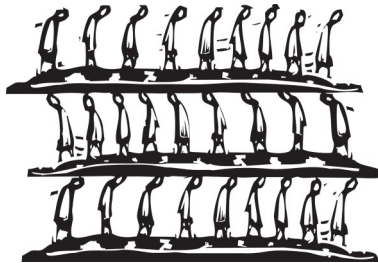
Have you ever considered why there is so much evil in the world? My heart absolutely breaks when I see pictures of the Holocaust during World War II.



When you study this section of history, you just cannot believe how merciless and cruel that people could be to their fellow human beings! Innocent men, women, and children were murdered or made to work in prison camps under horrific conditions. Six million Jews died under the reign of terror imposed by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi regime. There are black-and-white films of these terrible events since they happened within the last 100 years; but hideous stuff like this has been going on since the dawn of time, many thousands of years before video cameras were invented and could record all of the horror.

In Genesis chapter two, God created Adam and Eve, and they had some children. In Genesis chapter four, we see that one of their sons, Cain, killed his younger brother Abel. Right there in the very first family there was murder! There are gruesome stories all the way through the Bible: maiming, rapes, cutting up dead bodies and sending the parts to other people – you name it, someone has done it. Where was God? Why didn't He intervene?

Or maybe on a more personal level, you have been the victim of someone's cruelty. Perhaps you have been abused or molested by a relative or someone you trusted. It might have even been someone who called themselves a Christian who hurt you. Maybe you feel that God let you down when He allowed a loved one to die at a young age. Whatever the bad experience, we wonder, "Why would God allow these things? Why is there so much evil and suffering, and why doesn't God do anything about it?" Life appears to be very unfair at times.



These are difficult questions that humans have been wrestling with since time began. One of the oldest books in the Bible is Job. In this book, Job wonders why it is that wicked people live long and are mighty in power but good people die young. It would be arrogant of me to claim that I have all the answers – I do not. But here are a few things to consider.

Points to Ponder

The first thing to realize is (drum roll please) - We are not God. That's right. God gave you a mind and an intellect and the ability to observe and question your world and the things around you. Curiosity is a natural and healthy thing, but we must realize that there are limits to what we can know in this life. After all, if we could know and understand everything that God knows, then *we* would be God, right? There would be no need for the Almighty because we would have it all under control and figured out for ourselves. So the first thing we have to resolve in our minds is that we are not God, we will never be God, and there are things that we will not understand in this life; so we will just have to trust Him. The good news is that we serve a kind and loving God.

The next thing to remember is that God did not intend for this world to be like it is now. His original plan can be seen in the story of creation (Genesis 1). When God makes things, He makes them good.

When He was finished creating the Garden of Eden and filling the earth with beautiful trees, peaceful animals, clean oceans, and a perfect man and woman, He looked back and said that it was very good (Genesis 1:31). That is how He wanted things to remain. God put one simple restriction on Adam and Eve: Do not eat of the “Tree of The Knowledge of Good and Evil” in the middle of the garden (Genesis 2:17). They could do whatever they wanted – except that one thing. But God also gave man and woman something else – free will.



God does not do evil, and He does not tempt any man with evil (James 1:13); but He does *test* people’s character and gives them the freedom to make their own choices. God wanted to see if Adam and Eve would willingly choose to obey their Heavenly Father who had only done good to them. So after a time in the Garden of Eden (we are not told how long) they failed this one test, ate the fruit, and as a result, sin and death entered into the world. Romans 5:12

(NLT) says, “When Adam sinned, sin entered the world. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.” They would have lived forever in that state of paradise if they had not sinned. Sin=death.

When Adam and Eve sinned, it did not just affect the human race, but all of God's natural creation as well. Nothing has been right since. Diseases, tornadoes, poisonous spiders, animals attacking and eating each other, etc. - these were not part of God's original design or intention. Right up to this very minute, God's creation is under the curse. Romans 8:22 (NLT) tells us, “For we know that all creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.”

Something that surprised God?

There is a verse in the Bible that has always captivated me. It says that during the time of Noah, God looked down from heaven and saw the great wickedness of man, and He observed that every imagination of the thoughts of man's heart was only evil continually. But this is the verse that really stands out: “And the Lord was sorry that He had made man on the earth, and He was grieved in His heart” (Genesis 6:6). God is all knowing - He knows the past, present, and future; yet here it seems that even *He* was surprised by how totally corrupt man became. It was

so bad that God actually regretted ever creating man. The people He made, had totally perverted themselves with their free will. He gave them the freedom to choose good or evil and they consistently chose evil.

God, who is all-powerful, allows man (who is like a speck of dust) to override His will. For example, the Lord is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9) – yet He will not force Himself on a person. If God is willing but the sinner is not willing – the sinner wins! Imagine that. God will not override our free will if we are determined to reject Him. If someone is drowning and you throw a flotation device to them, you cannot force them to grab hold of it. In the same way, the Lord Jesus Christ provided a sacrifice – a way of es-



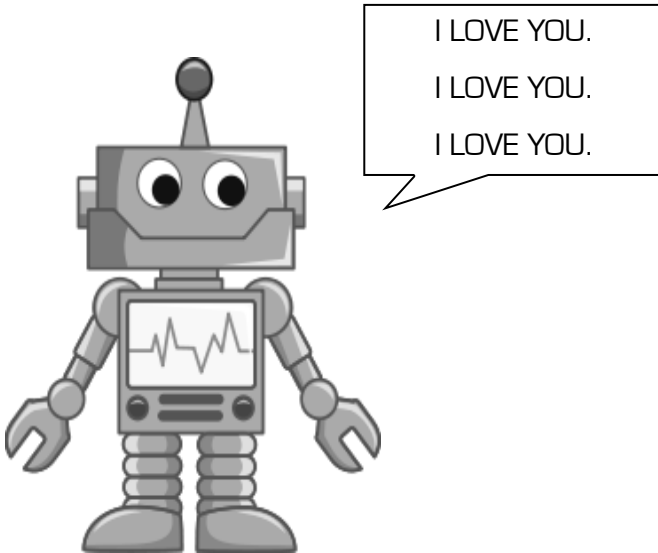
cape; but most people, using their own free will, choose to reject their only means of salvation. So why did God give us free will in the first place? Could He not just have formed us to be only good?

Your Robot Buddy

We have to get back to one basic question – Why did God create us? The Bible says we were created for His pleasure (Revelation 4:11). Let us look at things from God’s point of view. If you were going to create beings for companionship, would you rather have people who chose to love you because they genuinely enjoyed being with you, or would you prefer millions of robots, all programmed to repeatedly say “I love you. I love you. I love you” in their mechanical voices every two seconds. Yes, they would do your bidding without question, but you would know that they were just doing it because that is how they were wired, not because they truly cared about you.

Many grocery stores, post offices, and other various businesses, provide automated machines from which you can purchase or check-out items without ever interacting with an actual human being. When you are finished, the machine spits out a receipt, and the final screen displays a message that says something like: “It has been my pleasure to serve you.” I feel like asking the machine, “Really? It was your pleasure? You genuinely enjoyed accepting that payment from me?”

Actually that screen could just as easily have displayed the phrase “Let’s eat a light bulb.” or “You have a funny haircut.” or “ $5+5=\text{chocolate pudding.}$ ” The point is – that machine has absolutely no feelings, opinions, or preferences. It will flash on the screen exactly what the designer tells it to display. Would you want to have a machine like that to be your best friend? You could have it programmed to say, “I love you.” “You are so beautiful.” “Let’s be friends forever!” You might have to change the batteries occasionally, but you could take your little robotic buddy with you everywhere; and whenever you wanted to be cheered up – just press the button. But that is not real friendship, is it? God did not want to populate heaven with robots.



How God could rid the world of all evil

What would God have to do if He wanted to rid the world of all sinful acts? He would have to go right to the source. So where do evil deeds originate? Most people think the answer would be Satan. But in the book of Revelation it tells us about a time in the future when Satan is bound for 1,000 years (often referred to as the “Millennium”) -- yet even during this time all kinds of rebellion occurs. The devil may have introduced sin to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, but after they disobeyed God, the sin nature became such a part of them (and us) that the devil’s existence is not even necessary for sin to continue. It is the sinful heart which we are all born with that is full of wicked imaginations; so even if the devil were gone, we would still have hearts that would cause us to stray. Sin is conceived in the heart of man. The bank robber strategizes the heist in advance; the Mafia “hit man” devises a way to kill his victim without getting caught, the teenager plans weeks ahead to have a party at the house when his parents leave town. Sin starts with our thoughts. God would have to remove all wrong ideas from our minds *before* they developed into sinful actions. To remove all hatred, lust, and every other evil from mankind, He would have to alter our minds. All freedom of thought would have to be removed; and He would be back to a robot creation.

Happily Ever After

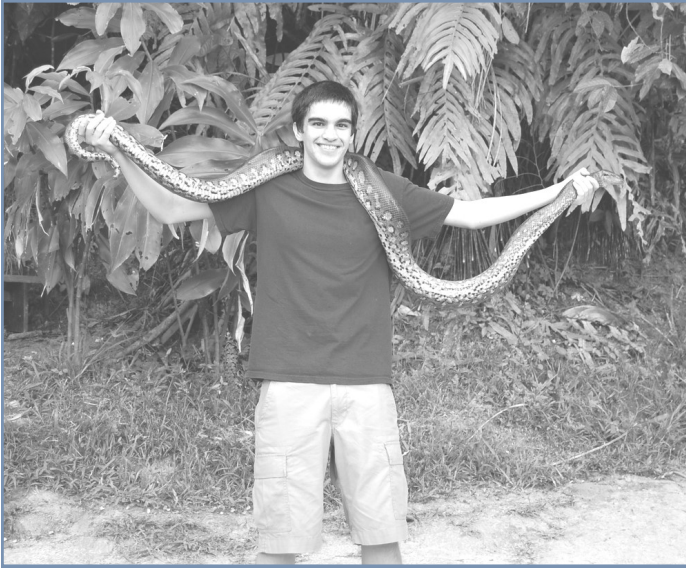
In the end, God will make all things right. The wicked and the righteous will both be rewarded according to their deeds. In Psalm 73, Asaph was envious of the wicked. He saw that they had success and more possessions than their hearts could wish for, even though they cursed God and did not believe that He noticed their evil actions. In his frustration, Asaph came to the point of believing that serving God had been a waste of time. He thought “I have tried to do what is right, and what good has it done for me?” Eventually, however, he comes to the realization that at the end of their lives, the wicked are utterly consumed with terrors (73:19), as they pass on to a gloomy eternity. For God’s people, the hard times in life will be forgotten - we are going to heaven!

Proverbs 15:3 - “The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the evil and the good.” There will finally be lawfulness. There will be no unsolved crimes, because the Lord will judge all things righteously. Ultimately no one gets away with anything; and in the end, evil does not triumph. Everything will be set right. People who got away with villainy in this life will answer for it before the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (Genesis 18:25)

So actually all of the good things we want to see happen - *will* eventually happen. We want to live in a place of beauty, with no evil or sickness – and that is what God wants for us too. If we are Christians, when we go to heaven, we will find that things will be the way they were back in the Garden of Eden (only better). There will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain (Revelation 21:4). We will be with our Heavenly Father, not as robots, but as His sons and daughters.



My Pet Snake



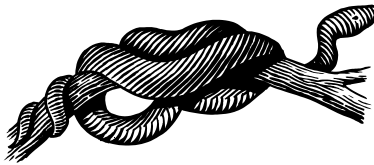
As I recall, the story went like this. There was once a boy in a remote village who found a small anaconda and decided to adopt it as a pet. An anaconda is a type of constrictor snake that coils itself around its victim and constricts its muscles until it crushes its prey to death.

When the boy first discovered the snake it was just a small reptile. He enjoyed wrapping it around his hand and watching the little snake try to crush his fingers, but the boy could easily break its grasp. When the snake grew a little larger, it progressed to wrapping itself around the young boy's arm. Again

the boy could always wriggle himself free, although now it took a little more effort than before.

The boy took his slithery friend with him everywhere he went. The reptile was growing all the time so that now it could wrap itself around the boy's chest and arms. Soon the boy began wrestling with the snake in front of the other children. The boy thought of himself as quite the hero. "None of the other children are as strong as I am," he reasoned; and although the girls hid their eyes when he starting wrestling with the huge snake, he suspected that they secretly admired his bravery.

Some of the older villagers were alarmed as they witnessed the frequent battles of strength between the serpent and the boy. They warned him that soon this snake would grow too large and overpower him. "Fools!", he thought. "I have always been able to break the grasp of my pet snake and I always will. Besides, my snake likes me and would never turn against me and do me harm."



Well, you probably can guess the dreadful end of this tale. One day the boy was once again wrestling with the snake. The snake's bulging coils wrapped around him tightly, but this time the snake would not release its powerful grip; and the boy could not break free. He began to scream, but could not get enough breath and began to turn a dark color. Suddenly the struggling ceased and he fell to the ground. His pet snake had finally squeezed the life out of him.

That horrific account made an impression on me, and I never forgot it. It made me sad to think that if the boy had just listened and not toyed with this deadly creature, he would have been spared a gruesome death.

Why do I relate this tragedy? You probably do not have any reptiles as pets and you would not be so foolish as to wrestle with a mighty serpent until it crushed you, right? Now revisit the story - but this time substitute the word "sin" for the word "snake". People never start playing with sin thinking that it will eventually overpower them. Sin, like the baby snake, starts off looking small and harmless. We think we can handle it, that we can stop whenever we want; but if we do not "kill the snakes" in our lives before they get a chance to grow, they will kill us.

Fun at First

Have you ever met anyone at school who proudly proclaimed to everyone that one day he would like to grow up and become an alcoholic? Of course not. Yet there are millions of alcoholics. How did that happen, if no one wants to be one? Well, people start off experimenting with a little alcohol, maybe just at parties. No big deal. Then they start drinking a little more, even when by themselves. Soon their bodies start to build up a tolerance to alcohol and they have to drink a larger amount to get the same feeling that just a little alcohol gave them before.

Drug dealers often look for kids loitering about and give them drugs for free. That's right – free! Why would they do that? Do they want to be kind and generous? Are they just letting some of the young ones in on the good feelings they are having? No! They give them drugs for free *at the beginning*. The dealers know that once these young people begin using the drugs, their bodies will start to crave them more and more and they will become hooked. These desperate little addicts will come back to the dealers, who can now charge them whatever outrageous price they want. The kids will rob stores, mug innocent pedestrians, or steal from their own parents in order to feed their drug habit. This “snake” has gotten them in its coils, and they now cannot break free.

Satan never informs us about the results of sin. He wants us to focus on the fun and pleasure that is available right now. For example, when you see television commercials advertising beer, it is usually a funny commercial featuring handsome men and beautiful women. But what about truth in advertising? I have yet to see a commercial that featured a drunk lying in his own vomit on a street corner, or a father who had spent his paycheck at the bar instead of using it to provide for his household, or a smashed up car filled with a dead family because a drunk driver crossed the line and hit them. We never see a wife who is beaten because her husband is abusive when he gets drunk, or children in that family who receive the same treatment or worse. No, all we ever see in advertisements are the “great times.”



I know of a married woman with young children who started down the dangerous path of drinking and soon found she was unable to stop. Her doctors warned her that if she did not quit immediately, she would lose her life; but she was in the grip of alcohol, and it would not release her. Ultimately she came to the point where her thirst for alcohol was greater than the love she had for her family. She died in her twenties and left a grief-stricken husband alone to care for their two small children.

A friend of mine was so bound by alcohol that when he passed by the bar on the way home from work, he could not keep himself from going inside to drink, *even though he did not want to do it!* But this addiction had such a tight, constricting grasp on him, he had no choice. Sure enough, night after night, he found himself sitting at the bar instead of at home with his family where he belonged. One night he got into a violent car crash because of his drinking and almost lost his life.

Now what do these stories have in common? Answer - None of these people ever set out to become addicted. They all thought they could toy with the little snake without any lasting consequences. They persuaded themselves that it was *other* people who get addicted, “Those who are weak, but not me!”

Sometimes these little snakes are adopted in the high school or college years and then manifest their true strength and ugliness later on in life. The college freshman who begins drinking at campus parties may not experience any problem until he hits middle age and only then realizes he is unable to put the brakes on. It is not just drugs and alcohol that slowly enslave a person.

Cigarettes, and pornography, can all start off in a small way, yet once they have a person in their clutches it is often too late for a person to wriggle free. Proverbs 5:22 says “His own iniquities entrap the wicked man, And he is caught in the cords of his sin.” This verse explains to us that sins are like strong ropes that wrap themselves tightly around the sinner.

Consider a teenage boy who begins to look at pornography. Perhaps he starts looking at magazines full of lustful pictures at a friend’s house, or maybe he stays up late at night in his room viewing pornography on his laptop after he has convinced his parents that he is working on a homework assignment. He reasons to himself, “How bad can this be? It’s not as though I’m hurting anyone. I



am only looking at something that God created.” But he is deceiving himself. The snake is subtly curling himself around the unknowing victim. Just wait until this young man tries to stop! Pornography has been proven to have the same addictive qualities as drugs. He only *thinks* he can stop whenever he wants. Eventually he will need to see more graphic content to get the same pleasure that milder pictures once provided. His mind has been poisoned; and even when his eyes are not actually viewing something, his brain can bring back the images, just like photos stored on a computer. After a time, looking is not enough, and he will have an urge to act out or imitate those stored images. Even after marriage, this snake can crush the purity out of his marriage. And to think it all started with “just looking.”

A young woman might decide to smoke because of peer pressure and have no noticeable physical ailments for 40 years, until the doctor diagnoses her with cancer and gives her six months to live. I worked with a very nice lady who smoked every day on her break. One day I saw her looking around the room like she was lost. She told me she could not concentrate and did not know what was wrong with her. She went to the doctor and received the terrible news; she was full of cancer in her brain and in her lungs. She died shortly afterwards. All of this agony was because she allowed herself to nurture a “pet snake.” “For a man is a slave to whatever has mastered him” (2 Peter 2:19b NIV).

While wise King Solomon did not write about little snakes, he made the same point by writing about little foxes. Song of Solomon 2:15 (NIV) says, “Catch for us the foxes, the little foxes that ruin the vineyards, our vineyards that are in bloom”. He said it was these small furry guys that we needed to guard against. The vineyard is a symbol of the things growing and flourishing in our hearts. Solomon warned that it was the small varmints that caused the damage and spoiled the vine.

Snake antidote

What can you do to avoid being a “snake” victim? The easiest thing is to avoid adopting any baby snakes in the first place. There is always hope that God can help a person overcome an addiction, but it is better to never have the addiction to begin with. Do not take that first puff. Do not allow that first look. Do not swallow that first drink. Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States said, “It is easier to suppress the first desire than to satisfy all that follow it.”



Here are some things to remember when you are tempted. Alcohol is illegal for minors. Drugs are illegal for anyone at any age. When people tempt you with this, tell them you would prefer to go through life with a clean slate, *not* a criminal record.

Cigarettes make you smell terrible, cause your face to become wrinkled as you grow older, cost a ton of money, and cut your life short. The plus side of smoking? There is none. You are the temple of the Holy Ghost (1 Corinthians 6:19) and you do not want to fill that temple with exhaust fumes.

Pornography pollutes the mind. Make a promise to God, yourself, and your future spouse that you will not let this sewage into your brain.

Victory over the Old Serpent

Maybe while reading this chapter, you have started to have the uneasy feeling that there might be some “snakes” that have already begun coiling themselves around you. While you are still breathing – there is hope. The great preacher, Charles Spurgeon, said, “There are two equally damning lies Satan wants us to believe: 1) Just once will not hurt. 2) Now that you have ruined your life, you are beyond God's use, and might as well enjoy sinning.” In other words, when we are tempted to sin, the enemy says, “Hey, one time is no big deal! Give it a try.” Then after we give in to that temptation, he says, “You’re ruined, and God is finished with you! Just give yourself over to your addiction.” See how he works?

The truth is that there is no power or addiction on earth that is too hard for God. Be encouraged with this thought - the scripture says Christ defeated the old serpent (the devil) on the cross (Revelation 20:2). If you cry out to Him, He will be faithful to destroy every snake in your life as well.





FATHER GOD IS NOT A GRANDFATHER

The Godhead is composed of three parts; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We have all seen various paintings of Jesus, but what does God the Father look like? The Bible tells us that no man has seen the Father at any time (John 1:18). There are those, like Moses, who have seen His form and shadow, but no one has looked upon the face of the Father while on earth. I have no idea what He looks like, but it always seems that in art He is depicted as an old man with a long flowing beard. I can tell you this; no matter what He looks like, God is *not* a grandfather. Now let us see why that fact is so important.

The dictionary definition of grandfather is – “the father of one’s father or mother.” Father God only has children, not grandchildren. If God’s children have natural children, those children are not in God’s family until they come to Him personally – then they also become His children. *Your relationship with God has nothing to do with your parents’ relationship with God.* Read that last sentence over a couple of times. Got it? We either know Him as our Heavenly Father or we do not. We are not getting into heaven just because our parents are Christians.

The Heavenly Carload Special

Sometimes amusement parks have carload admission specials. You cram as many people as you can into a car, and everyone gets in for one price. So of course, families and friends overload the vehicle, trying to squeeze as many people in as humanly possible. That is great for entrance to the roller coaster park, but heaven does not work on that principle. We are not going through the Pearly Gates just because Dad rolls down the window and pays a discounted admission price for the whole group.



When I was a little boy, my father used to work as a manager in a grocery store. There were times when I went to see him at work; and if he was not out in the main part of the store, I would look for him in the back rooms. To get to where he was, I had to go

through two big swinging doors that had a sign on them that read “Keep Out - Employees Only”. For some reason I got a big thrill pushing open those doors. That sign was for *other* people, but because my dad was the manager, I could just ignore the signs, and walk right through. My dad was on the other side; so the rules did not apply to me. It made me feel important. That was a harmless thing; and nobody ever cared that I walked past those doors. In fact, over time, many of the employees came to recognize who I was and would say “hi” to me. But when it comes to your spiritual walk with God, you do not get in because of who your dad (or mom) is. Your place in eternity is based on what you and you alone have done.

Sour Grapes

What if someone said to you – “You’re exactly like your father!” How would that make you feel? Well that would all depend on what kind of person your father is. If your father is kind and respectable, that person just paid you a compliment. On the other hand, if your father is a criminal, or a lazy deadbeat disliked by all, that person just insulted you. Notice that it is the same statement; but it can be kind or cruel based on who your father is.

Ezekiel 18 is an important and interesting chapter in the Bible that I hope you will take the opportuni-

ty to read sometime. It is about God's relationship with people not being based on their parents. God says in this chapter that He will not judge a good man because he has an evil father and He will not pardon a wicked man because he has a good father.

Here is one of the key verses from that chapter: "Why do you quote this proverb concerning the land of Israel: 'The parents have eaten sour grapes, but their children's mouths pucker at the taste'?" (Ezekiel 18:2 NLT)

The Israelites had the totally incorrect idea that people were destined to be just like their parents. This little saying about the sour grapes meant that the children and the fathers were so connected that if the father would eat a sour grape, the children would taste it. The Lord's response to this was: "What are you talking about? I judge everyone individually!"



Ezekiel 18:20 says, "The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself." In other words, everyone will be judged or rewarded based on their own life, not their parents' lives.

You are a combination of both of your parents. The character and nature you were born with was determined by what kind of people your mom and dad were at the time you were conceived. That is what you *start* with, but that is not automatically how you *finish*. You are not your parents. You can change, either for better or worse.

Good Parents / Bad Children

If you have godly parents, you are blessed with an advantage that many people do not have, but this does not guarantee what you will ultimately become. The first parents, Adam and Eve, had many children, and among them were two sons in particular that we already mentioned in Chapter 2 of this book. They were both raised exactly the same and had identical opportunities and instruction. However, Jesus called the younger son (Abel) righteous, and the older one (Cain), who was influenced by Satan, He called a wicked murderer. They grew up to

be two totally different characters, even though they had the same parents.

Scripture refers to Lot as a righteous man (2 Peter 2:7-8), yet Lot's own sons would not listen to him when he warned them of their impending doom. They ignored their father when he told them of the angels from heaven who came to rain down fire and destroy the wicked city of Sodom in which they all lived (Genesis 19:14). Lot's children lost their lives in the fiery blaze and were not spared, even though their father was righteous.

There was a famous American evangelist in the 1900's named Billy Sunday, who started his career as a successful professional baseball player. Billy Sunday held the record as the fastest man in baseball and could circle the bases in 14 seconds flat. In the middle of all this triumph, he became a Christian, and even though the Philadelphia Phillies offered him a lot of money to stay, he turned it down so he could become an evangelist and preach the gospel. He was a wonderful man who was responsible for leading tens of thousands of people to the Lord.⁴

This fiery, dynamic "baseball evangelist" conducted approximately 300 huge outdoor meetings in the 39 years of his ministry, preaching to over a hundred million people. In spite of all this, his sons did not

walk in his footsteps. The three Sunday boys embarrassed their parents with their sinful lifestyles. His three sons (George, Billy Jr., and Paul) all divorced their wives. George was arrested for drunkenness and auto theft before he committed suicide by jumping from a tall building. Billy, Jr. died in an automobile accident, and Paul, a test pilot, died in an airplane crash.⁵ None of his children lived past the age of 42.

Sometimes young people who come from Christian homes feel they have an “in” with God. They reason that because their parents are righteous and are on their way to heaven, God would not break up the family in eternity; so He will just let them slide in. They reason, “It would be too painful for my parents to live in heaven without me so God is going to give me a free pass.” Believe me, there are a lot of young people who think exactly like this, but they are only fooling themselves.

Actually, some of the worst sinners are those who had a godly upbringing, knew the truth, and then walked away from it. Samuel was one of the greatest prophets who ever lived, yet his boys did not walk in his ways. They were greedy, they took bribes and they perverted justice (1 Samuel 8:1-3). Another example is Nadab and Abihu who were the sons of Aaron the high priest. When they broke God’s law and burned strange incense on the holy

altar they were struck dead by the Lord God, even though their father had an important spiritual position (Leviticus 10).

The prophet Ezekiel mentioned the three most righteous people who had lived up to that point (Noah, Daniel, and Job); but he said that when God judges, even if those three righteous ones were there, they could only save themselves and not their families (Ezekiel 14:14-20). Daniel did not have children. Job lost all of his children at the beginning of his trial, but was given more children at the end. Noah had three boys; two of them were godly and one was cursed. So you see, every family situation is different; it is not having a righteous parent that saves you, it is knowing God as your Father that saves you.

Bad Parents / Good Children

The good news is that if we have evil parents, we do not have to be like them. There are a lot of awful parents out there, but evil parents do not necessarily have wicked children. I worked with a man who told me about his horrific home life. His father would beat him with belts and lock the refrigerator so he could not eat unless his father permitted it. The boy never celebrated his birthday because his father would not even tell him what day he was born. The father even went out of his way to ruin the boy's Christmas every year. Perhaps you live in a home

where you witness horrible things such as drunkenness, immorality, or abuse. You are not doomed to repeat this cycle in your own life!

King Amon was an evil king who served and worshipped idols. He was so wicked that his own servants conspired together and assassinated him. Before Amon died, he had a son named Josiah who turned out to be the most righteous king the kingdom of Judah ever had. You would never have guessed that such a wonderful person could have come from such an abominable father.

Numbers 16 tells the story about a great rebellion in the wilderness. There were some leaders and their families who decided to rise up against Moses, overthrow him, and seize control. These families all lined up together in outright defiance against God. In Numbers 16:27, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram came out and stood at the door of their tents with their wives, their sons, and their little children.

Notice that the children of Korah were there with their parents at first, but within a short space of time they made a choice that would forever alter their destiny for the better. Should they obey their father and join in the rebellion, or should they obey Father God and get on His side? It was to their eternal benefit that they broke away at the last second. Just in time too, because God was so angry with the rebels that He

opened up the earth and all of them fell alive into hell! (Numbers 26:10-11). The sons of Korah went on to have a very successful ministry in music, writing beautiful psalms of worship and praise unto the Lord that we still sing today.

Let me be clear that while you are under your parents' authority you are to obey them. This is the fifth commandment, and it is the first commandment with a promise. Ephesians 6:1-3 says "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother; which is the first commandment with promise; that it may be well with you, and you may live long on the earth." Notice, the verse says obey them "in the Lord" which means you are not to obey if your parent's commandments contradict God's laws. Would you commit murder if your parents told you to? You must obey God's higher law even if it means making a break from the way your parents are going.

I think about my own son Paul. As he grows older I can see that he is becoming more like me in many areas. We have the same tastes in many things; we like the same food, laugh at the same humor, enjoy the same movies, like to compete at the same board games. We even have similar habits like having a fan on in our bedrooms at night to help us get to sleep. Yet, in spite of all these similarities, I have told him that he will have to make his own decision to follow Jesus. He is not going to heaven because

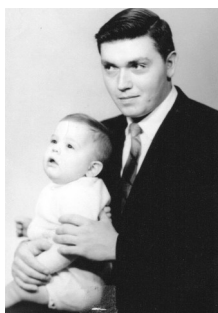
I am a Christian. My responsibility is to train him to do the right things now, but there will come a time when he grows up and leaves our home, and it will be up to him to continue in his Christian walk. My relationship with God cannot save him.

On Your Own

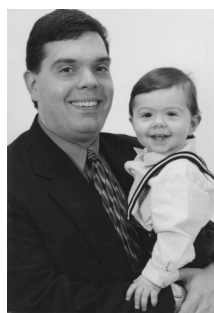
Romans 14:12 declares: “So then each of us shall give account of himself to God”. God loves you; He sees you as a unique person, not simply as a natural extension of your parents. We are all invited to make an individual choice for Him. Then we will become the sons and daughters of Father God – the Father who will never have any grandchildren.



My grandfather
holding my dad



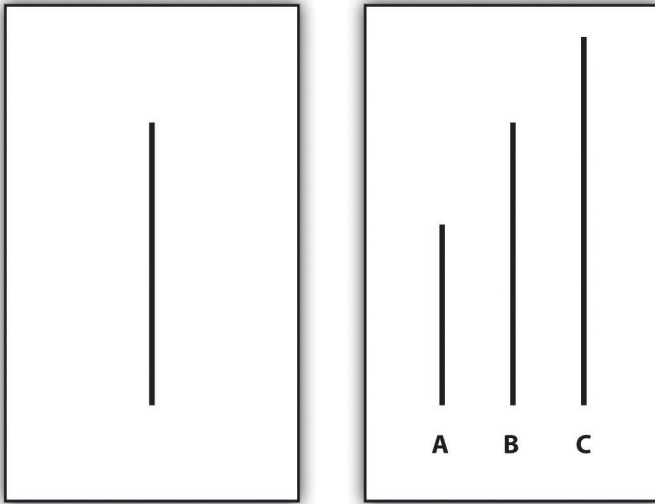
My father
holding me



Me, holding my
son Paul



FOREVER FRIENDS



Take the Quiz

See if you can get the correct answer on this intelligence test. Look at the two charts above. Which line in the chart on the right (A, B, or C) is the exact length of the line in the chart on the left? Have you got the answer? Good. Remember it. We will come back to this later.

What kind of person are you?

There is a simple, yet quite accurate way to tell what kind of person you really are. Ready? Look at your friends. That's right. The best way to tell what sort of person *you* are is to take a good hard look at the people you like to hang out with. Your friends are a reflection of your character. In some ways, looking at them is like looking into a mirror.

Have you ever been to a zoo and seen the lions and the penguins in the same cage? Are the otters and the monkeys together, or the elephants and tigers? No, of course not. The hippos go with the hippos, the fish go with the fish, and the giraffes go with the giraffes, because even in nature "likes go with likes". Another way to put it is, "Birds of a feather flock together." And it is just as true with people. The people you are comfortable around are just like you.

Sometimes Christians justify their close friendships with ungodly people by thinking they will be a good influence on them. They think that by remaining close, they will reform their friends and make them better people. This almost never happens. Instead, the Christian will sink to the level of their ungodly friends, *not* bring them up to their level as planned. If you are honest with yourself, you know what I am saying is true. Can you keep your Christianity *and* your sinful friends? The Bible says, in James 4:4

(NIV): “Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God”.



There is an expression, “One bad apple spoils the bunch.” It is not just a saying, it is a scientific fact. An apple that is already infested with mold will contaminate the apples around it, which in turn will contaminate the apples around them, until the con-

tamination spreads through the whole basket.⁶ That is why fruit farmers are careful to sort and remove any blemished apples from their containers. The Bible says, “Do not be deceived: evil company corrupts good habits” (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure is the influence that causes you to do something simply because everyone else around you is doing it. It is a tremendous force that is hard for people, especially teenagers and young adults, to withstand.

One day I noticed a group of young teenage girls coming out of a shopping mall. They were all wear-

ing the same odd shaped sunglasses that a certain female singer had made popular at the time. Every one of them looked ridiculous, but a person wearing “normal” sunglasses would have been the oddball in this group. Maybe you have seen teenage boys wearing baggy pants, or wearing regular pants so far down from where they were designed to be worn that the wearers could not even walk correctly. Because the whole group is doing it, each one just conforms to what the guy next to him is doing, and they all shuffle down the street together.



Nerd peer pressure.

Other than looking odd, these trends are relatively harmless. Consider though, what may happen when you are in the back seat of a car with your friends and they start passing around a marijuana joint or a can of beer? Most people cannot endure the reproach of being the odd one out, and they will do whatever it takes to be accepted by the crowd, even when they know it will harm them.

Peer pressure can actually be fatal. There was a group of boys who started a contest amongst themselves to see who could smoke the most cigarettes in a row without stopping. One of the boys died from carbon monoxide poisoning. He could not bring himself to stop and say, "This is stupid and it is killing me." In college, when incoming freshmen want to join a fraternity or sorority they are often subjected to horrible abuse to prove they are "worthy" of membership. To join, these pledges submit to humiliation, pain, dangerous pranks, and stunts that can result in serious injury or death. One young man at the University of Texas fell to his death from a fifth-story apartment. He was given large amounts of alcohol and was subjected to physical abuse. Reportedly he and other pledges were beaten with bamboo rods, deprived of sleep, and shocked with cattle prods.⁷

In another incident, two young men were pledging at California State University on a frigid February night. They were doused with gallons of cold water while powerful fans blew cold air on them. They were forced to do calisthenics while standing on one foot and were made to drink several gallons of cold water. One of the boys collapsed as a result of hypothermia and brain swelling. He died about two hours later from water intoxication.⁸



I read a news report about a group of teenagers in a certain town who entered into a suicide pact together.⁹ Imagine that. Some people are so intent on being part of the group that they would actually kill themselves to fit in! A whole life wasted because of the inability to say “No!” to peers. The Bible says, “My son (or daughter), if sinners entice you, Do not consent” (Proverbs 1:10).

Remember the test at the beginning of the chapter? The correct answer is B. Easy right? Well consider this - A study was done in which ten high school students were brought into a room. They were shown three lines of different lengths on cards labeled A, B, and C. The researcher instructed them to raise their hand whenever he pointed to the longest line. But what one of the students did not realize was that the other nine students were previously told to point to the *second* longest line. The purpose of the experiment was to test the effects of peer pressure on an individual. When the nine teenagers pointed to the wrong line, the lone teenager got a confused look and then slipped up his hand with the rest of the group. He knew it was not the longest line, but he did not want to be the only one who did not raise his hand. As they continued to bring in new teenagers to the test, the results remained the same. They found that 75% of teenagers would conform to the group and give the incorrect answer – *even though they knew it was wrong!*¹⁰



The reality is that if you are doing what most other people are doing, then you are probably doing the wrong thing. Why is that? It is because the majority is usually wrong. A number of years ago there were some terrible riots in Los Angeles, California. A large number of people were enraged at the outcome of a certain trial, and went crazy in the streets. Innocent bystanders were robbed and shot. Stores were burglarized and set on fire. Television cameras captured the images of an innocent truck driver being pulled out of his vehicle and beaten with a fire extinguisher and a cinderblock, as his tormentors danced around him. The rioting continued for six days. Widespread looting, assault, arson, and murder took place, and property damages topped roughly \$1 billion. In all, 53 people died and thousands more were injured. When some of these criminals were captured and brought to court, the presiding judge dismissed the charges against them, turning them loose; because, according to him, they were caught up in the “riot mentality” and therefore were not responsible for their actions.

The Lord, the Righteous Judge, looks at things differently. We will be judged individually on what we have done. We will not be able to use the criminal behavior of those around us as an excuse for our own sins. The Bible warns us in Exodus 23:2a, “You shall not follow a crowd to do evil.”

When I look back at my own life, I am ashamed of a lot of the things I did when I was younger. Most of the trouble I got into was because of my poor selection of companions. As a result of being with these friends, I did things I never would have done on my own. I did not have the courage to stand up for what I knew to be right, and therefore made poor choices. Yet I *knew* better; I was not exempt from facing the consequences of my own actions.

My circle of friends immediately changed when I recommitted myself to the Lord and I informed several of them that I would not be going out with them anymore. I remember two friends in particular who were going the opposite direction of one another. I could not be pals with both of them, so I had to make a choice. I started to examine the path that each one was on, and thankfully, I made up my mind to befriend the decent person, and to let the other friendship end. Proverbs 13:20 says, “He who walks with wise men will be wise, But the companion of fools will be destroyed.”



Gathered To Your people

You will be like your friends, and will do what they do. However, did you realize that this truth concerns not only this life, but the next one as well? There is an interesting phrase that is used at least six different times in the KJV Bible when someone had just died. It does not just say they were dead, but adds this little bit of information: - “They were gathered to their people”. This means that when we die, we are going to spend eternity with our “people” – those to whom we were joined while on earth – in other words, our family and our close companions. There is a song written by the English rock musician Morrissey titled “There’s a Place in Hell for Me and My Friends.” A horrible truth is contained in this title; it is certainly not a joke.

Unfortunately we even have to be careful about selecting friends from among those who claim to be Christians. There is an incredibly dangerous doctrine being taught in churches today that states that once a person is saved and professes Christ, then no matter what they do after that point, they can never lose their salvation. Many have allowed themselves to believe this lie. Though they are committing the exact same sins as the “unsaved” people around them, they believe they will go to heaven when they die because they said the “sinners prayer” years ago. I am not referring to genuine Christians who have real struggles in their lives as they are trying to live



for Christ, I am referring to people who make a habit of sin, feel no remorse, and have no desire to change. They reason that they are fine because they once were saved - even though they have long since

stopped obeying God's commandments and have given themselves over to a life of sin. Please do not fall for the logic of these unrepentant "Christian sinners". There is no such thing as a Christian drug user, Christian fornicator, or a Christian thief. Proverbs 21:16 (KJV) says, "The man that wandereth out of the way of understanding shall remain in the congregation of the dead."

In 1 Corinthians 5:11 (NLT) Paul says, "I meant that you are not to associate with anyone who claims to be a believer yet indulges in sexual sin, or is greedy, or worships idols, or is abusive, or is a drunkard, or cheats people. Don't even eat with such people." The apostle Paul says, we are to separate ourselves from people like this. The Lord declares in Jeremiah 5:26, "For among *my people* are found wicked men."

Numbers 25 gives an account concerning a time when the whole camp of Israel (God's people) was worshipping idols and having sex with the neighbor-

ing Midianite women. One of the men was even brazen enough to bring a woman into his tent right in the sight of Moses. This man and woman were killed; and 24,000 other Israelites who had sinned died from a plague sent by the Lord. The moral of the story - just because people are living in God's camp, does not mean they are necessarily living uprightly.

Good Friends

It is not good for a man or woman to be alone (Genesis 2:18). This does not just refer to marriage. We need companionship to get through this life. We need friends who will pull us up when we fall. Ecclesiastes 4:10 tells us: "For if they fall, one will lift up his companion. But woe to him who is alone when he falls, For he has no one to help him up."

Ask God to bring a good friend into your life; or even more importantly, ask God to make you a good person, so other good people will be attracted to you. Sometimes to get a friend, you must show yourself friendly. According to Proverbs 18:24, "A man who has friends must himself be friendly." It is better to have one or two righteous friends than to be a very popular person surrounded by a bunch of bad apples who will ultimately contaminate you. In John Bunyan's classic story *Pilgrim's Progress*, Christian had a good friend named Faithful. They encouraged and helped each other as they traveled the dangerous road to the Celestial City (Heaven).

The importance of who our friends are cannot be overstated, because we will usually do what they are doing, be like them, and eventually spend eternity with them. We will be “forever friends.” The question is - Where will that forever be spent?





THE MOST EXPENSIVE MEAL IN HISTORY



Have you ever gone out to eat only to be shocked when you found out how much the final bill was? This chapter is about a man who paid way, way, *wayyyy* too much for a meal. His name was Esau, and God hated him because He knew the man he would eventually grow up to be (Romans 9:11-13). If God hated Esau, then he deserved to be hated. Let us find out why. You can read the whole story in Genesis 25:21-34.

In Old Testament times, the firstborn son had a special place in the family. He was entitled to blessings, honors, rewards, and all sorts of benefits that his younger siblings were not given. Esau was the first born (even though it was only by a few minutes) of twin brothers, and was therefore in line to inherit a lot of great stuff from his father Isaac. Scripture tells us that Esau was a *profane* man. (See Hebrews 12:16)

First things first; what does profane mean? Usually we associate the word “profane” with swearing, as in: “That golfer used a lot of profane language when he missed his shot!” While this is an accurate definition, the broader meaning of profanity is “irreverence or disrespect for what is sacred.” It is to treat holy things lightly. Esau was unconcerned about the blessings that would be his when his father Isaac died. He wanted to have his lusts and desires met at that very moment. He could not care less about the inheritance that was coming later in life. His eyes were only set on what he wanted “right now.” Esau could not wait for anything; he wanted everything easy and fast. He would worry about the future some other time. The Bible tells us that he was also a fornicator; in other words, he would not wait for marriage before engaging in sex. He needed those lusts fulfilled right away, too.

We live in a world where everything is instant. Compose an email and “click” - it is on the other side of the world. You can text an instant message to your friends from your phone. You can “nuke” a meal in your microwave in a couple of minutes. If you take a photo on your digital camera, you can print it out immediately. Buy a tune for your music player at the touch of a button and you can begin listening right away. Purchase an electronic book in a fraction of a second and you can start reading it immediately. We can buy a movie and watch it instantly on a whole variety of video devices. Fast is definitely convenient. I love fast things, too – fast motorcycles, fast cars, fast roller coasters, but in the Christian journey, good things come to those who are willing to wait for God’s timing.

God knows when we are ready to handle certain responsibilities and liberties, and He also knows the danger of getting what we want right away. The prodigal son said, “Give me what is coming to me right now!” (Luke 15:11-32). What did he do when he was given his inheritance immediately? He blew it on fast women and fast living, and soon found himself bankrupt and sitting in a pigpen. The Bible warns that an inheritance gained hastily at the beginning will not be blessed at the end (Proverbs 20:21).

I heard of a widowed mother who decided to have a will put together so she could let others know what was to be done with her money and property when she died. She directed in the will that her son, who was just a young adult at the time, would inherit nothing until he reached the age of 50! This mother knew that her son needed to grow up and mature before he could be trusted to handle his inheritance. She reasoned that if he received his inheritance too early, he would certainly waste it all away. I think Father God sometimes deals with His children (you and I) in the same way. He can easily afford to give us whatever we want, but are we able to receive His blessing without ruining ourselves? It is because God cares for us that He often makes us wait.

The Marshmallow Test

Years ago, a researcher conducted a study on young children ages 4-6 to test their ability to wait to receive something they wanted. He went to a nursery school and over time conducted his experiment on more than 600 children. The little boys and girls were put into an empty room one at a time, where a treat of their choice (usually a marshmallow) was placed on a table, by a chair. Each child was told that they could eat the marshmallow, but if they waited fifteen minutes without eating it, they would be rewarded with a second marshmallow. The researcher then walked out of the room and shut the door. Some of the children would consume the marshmal-

low as soon as the door closed. Of those who attempted to wait the 15 minutes in order to get their extra treat, only 1 in 3 made it. When the researcher followed up on the same children years later, he found that the ones who had waited averaged 210 points higher on their college entrance exams than the ones who did not wait. Those who had not learned to delay gratification had trouble maintaining friendships and had behavior problems.¹¹



Photo of Andrew Kropf taken by Daniel J. Caram

Let us get back to Esau. We now see Jacob, the scheming younger brother, entering the picture and deciding to take advantage of this “Give it to me now!” weakness of his big brother. Jacob, who was not a profane man, desperately wanted the blessings that Esau took so lightly. One day, when Esau was returning home after a day of hunting, Jacob had a

hot stew all prepared. Naturally, Esau could not think beyond what was happening at that very minute, so he demanded, “Give me some of that stew right now!” Jacob anticipated this reaction from Esau and responded with an outrageous offer. Jacob said, “Sell me your birthright and you can have the stew.”

Now a thinking person would have stopped right there and said “What? Are you out of your mind? Give you the double portion of the wealth that is coming to me? What kind of a fool do you think I am? Nice try, but no stew on the planet is that good! You are not considerate enough to share supper with your big brother? Fine. I’ll just take 30 minutes and put together something for myself. Get out of my way.....”



It was not that way with Esau; he had a big appetite (except for anything spiritual or worthwhile) that had to be satisfied immediately. Now I will be the first person to admit that fasting is not enjoyable. Going without food for several days is painful, but it will not kill you. Esau was out hunting for less than 24 hours and thought he was going to die of starvation right there on the spot!

This is where Esau made the mistake of his life and paid the highest price for any meal in history. He agreed to give away the natural and spiritual rights of the firstborn for a bowl of stew. Incidentally, his father Isaac was a very rich man. Maybe Esau reasoned to himself that he could just back out of the deal later, or maybe he thought Jacob would not actually go through with it and try to claim the inheritance when their father died. All we know for certain is that Esau proved once again that he had no temperance or self-control whatsoever. He wanted to be satisfied right away, so he hastily agreed to trade something eternal for some fast food. Esau would never have passed the marshmallow test.

A Bad Trade

When I was in seventh grade, I started buying baseball cards on a regular basis and over a period of time ended up filling a large shoebox with my collection. Eventually I moved on to other interests, and

the cards just sat there, unused. One day Mike, a schoolmate of mine, found out about the cards and offered ten dollars for them. I reasoned that since I was not using them and they probably would just sit there collecting dust, I might as well score a quick ten bucks. That was more than 30 years ago, and when I look on the internet and see how much baseball cards in mint condition from that decade are worth now, it sends a shiver down my spine. Mike is probably living in his 25,000 square foot mansion overlooking the ocean, attached to his five car garage that is filled with all his sports cars and expensive motorcycles. I do not even want to know how much money I lost on that horribly short-sighted deal.

At least I only lost some money; what Esau lost in exchange for his bowl of stew had eternal consequences. Later on in his life, Esau cried and tried to repent, but it was too late (Hebrews 12:17). It is truly a tragic story. What about us? We would never be that stupid, or would we?

What is on your list?

Think about this: Anytime we put aside the eternal plans God has for us in order to pursue what we want right here and now, we are behaving like Esau. Most people go through life living just like that. Everything they do is based on the idea of squeezing

every bit of enjoyment they can out of this short life. Have you ever heard of a ‘bucket list’? It is a personal list of things that a person wants to accomplish before he dies or, as people sometimes say in America when referring to death, “kick the bucket”.

There are books about this, and many internet sites where you can formulate your own list and compare it with others. Lots of people are making bucket lists. Some popular items on the lists include: skydiving, swimming with dolphins, seeing the northern lights, running a marathon, going zip lining, learning a foreign language, etc.



Let me emphasize that there is nothing wrong with goals, or even with having a list of things you would like to accomplish in life (my family is trying to visit all 50 states), but we must be careful that these aspirations do not consume our lives and ultimately

leave us empty. Are our lives just going to be a never-ending quest for thrills, or are we going to have the objectives that God wants us to have? It is excellent to have goals, but not at the expense of an eternal inheritance. You could cross every item off of your massive 500-item bucket list, gain the whole world, and still lose your own soul.

Something that is hard for us mortals to keep in mind is that the invisible things are eternal – they last forever. Every single thing you can see, touch, or taste is temporary, so why spend your whole life trying to do a whole bunch of stuff that does not last? Are we willing to trade everything of value for immediate satisfaction? The Bible tells us that Moses was willing to give up the pleasures of this world for a little while, so he could acquire the everlasting joy that comes through Christ. Moses esteemed the reproach of Christ greater than the treasures of Egypt (Hebrews 11:26).

There was a wonderful young missionary named Jim Elliot who went to Ecuador in the 1950's to minister to the primitive tribes. His motto was: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose." He was killed on that mission field at the age of 28. Did he waste his life? I guarantee you that he is enjoying eternal life far more than all the millions of people down here pursuing the 101 things on their bucket lists. The prophet Samuel warned, "And do not turn aside;

for then you would go after empty things which cannot profit or deliver, for they are nothing” (1 Samuel 12:21). Heaven is so vast compared to earth and we will have all of eternity to explore the beauty and wonders of it. We will not lose out by investing in things above. Christianity can be frustrating if we try to keep up on everything that the world has to offer *and* follow God’s will.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with having times of relaxation, vacations, and diversions. God is not an unreasonable taskmaster. I am certain that God would not have gone through all the thought and planning to design the world in all of its glorious detail and beauty if He did not want us to enjoy it. If we, however, get to the point in our lives where sports, hobbies, school, video games, or other entertainments get in the way of church attendance, Bible reading, tithing, or prayer, then it is time to rearrange our priorities. We can tell what we love the most by how we spend our time, money, and thoughts. What about formulating a “spiritual bucket list” - a list of goals that will strengthen your Christian life? Suggestions for this list might include: reading your Bible all the way through from Genesis to Revelation (yes, even Leviticus), going on a short-term mission trip, or being a mentor to a lonely child.

The apostle Paul says that we are called to be part of the “church of the firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). Like Esau, we are in line to inherit great things. Will we be fooled by immediate temptations and “take the marshmallow” right now, or can we wait for the double portion that is coming to us if we will be patient and put God first? Let us learn from the mistakes of “Esau the profane,” and not take the things of God lightly. Let us have an eternal perspective on life.

THE JUDAS GOAT



Photo Source: www.flyafrika.info

Sheep are not the smartest animals in the world. They are timid and have no way of protecting themselves from predators. One of their greatest talents is the ability to “get lost”. If a sheep meanders off and gets separated from the rest of the flock, it will simply continue to wander around aimlessly with no clue how to find its way home. They can be easily fooled, and this (cue the sinister music) is where the Judas Goat comes in.

Although it is not as common as it once was, some stockyards use a sneaky tactic to slaughter their sheep. To keep the sheep from milling around aimlessly in the pen or to keep them from digging in their heels and refusing to move in the desired direction, a Judas Goat is placed among the sheep. Without the aid of a Judas Goat, the sheep would not willingly enter or travel the chute to the slaughterhouse. When it is time to take the sheep to slaughter, the the trained Judas Goat leads them out of the pen and down the chute. At the last second, the owners of the stockyard allow the Judas Goat to escape by a side-gate while the sheep continue on to their grisly end. The Judas Goat is then returned to the stockyard where he will again trick another group of mindless sheep into following him to their doom.



In the Bible, people are called sheep. Isaiah 53:6 says, "All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way." Just like sheep, people are easily lost and lose the sense of where they are headed. They are looking for someone to follow. In Mark 6:34, we read, "Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd." When people do not know where they are going (cue sinister music once again), then the "Judas Goats" come on the scene. The enemy uses all kinds of Judas Goats to lead the gullible off the right path to the path of destruction.

Modern-Day Judas Goats

Psalm 12:8 (KJV) declares, "The wicked walk on every side, when the vilest men are exalted." That is exactly what is happening today in our world. The vilest, most foul-mouthed, immoral people imaginable are exalted. They are the ones who have their picture on the covers of most of the magazines and star in many of the major movies; they are the singers, and the well-paid athletes. This is why people are not afraid to be wicked themselves because they see that it is the worst people who are worshipped and honored by the masses.

Every year there is a magazine in the United States that publishes their “100 Most Beautiful” issue. It is filled with pictures and short articles about those who the editors deem to be the most beautiful people alive today. As I leafed through an issue, there were indeed photos of many famous, good-looking men and women. Musicians, models, politicians, actors, athletes were all there, yet, as I went through the list, I could not find *one* person whose life was worthy of imitation. Outwardly they were beautiful, but inwardly they were dead and empty. The smiles and glamour hid their dark souls, and some of them were deeply depraved, yet these Judas Goats are put out there for the rest of us “sheep” to follow.

Actors: The Bible says that “fools make a mock at sin” (Proverbs 14:9). Late night comedians make us laugh at things we should not be laughing at. Television actors in prime-time programs routinely portray homosexual relationships as being normal. Raunchy movies that joke about fornication and drunkenness, and are filled with wall-to-wall obscene language, regularly rake in hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office. There is a popular, well-paid actress who has starred in some blockbuster movies. What is lesser known is that before achieving stardom, she attended a Christian middle school but left the path of righteousness. She has now given herself over to vulgarity and lewdness, but to her it was worth it. Some of the actors in the most vulgar movies imaginable are being paid tens of millions of dollars *per movie!* This amount is far

more than the average person will earn in an entire lifetime, yet these actors can earn this for a couple months of “work”. The devil pays his servants well. They are accomplishing his desire by leading many down the wide path to destruction.

Sports Heroes: These men and women are admired by the crowds for their athletic ability, but many of these physically strong baseball, football, and basketball players are morally weak. If you watch sporting events on television, you will notice that the voices of the players are constantly being “bleeped” out because of the extremely vulgar language. The Olympic Village, the vast restaurant and housing complex that hosts the world's top athletes every four years for the duration of the Olympic games, has become famous because of the rampant sexually immoral behavior that occurs there between competitions. When a certain Olympic gold medalist came to my hometown years ago to make a speech, he started off the evening by introducing himself, then saying “I’m gay and I’m proud of it!” The whole room broke out in applause. One particular basketball superstar, boasted in his autobiography about the thousands of women he had sex with. What will your end be like if you emulate morally bankrupt Judas Goats like these?

Musicians: Some of the most popular musicians performing today have traded their eternal souls in exchange for fame and success. I have seen interviews where various music stars have admitted to selling their soul to the devil in order to achieve fame. One female musician, who is currently one of the most wildly successful and well paid musical artists in the world, has composed songs so obscene that I cannot even print the *titles* to them. Here is a woman who has totally sold herself to work wickedness, being absolutely reprobate in heart, mind, and deed. It is shocking to see how corrupt a woman can make herself, but more disturbing still is the fact that millions of people have become devoted fans - even those who call themselves Christians! Many years ago another pop singer told an arena full of concert-goers in Australia “I don’t care if I go to hell!” Well if you were following her, where do you think you would end up?



It disheartens me when I see *believers* looking up to and idolizing the wicked. I read an article by a Christian who wrote about how much he admired the talent of a certain guitarist. This musician was an occultist who went on to found a popular satanic musical group.¹² This Christian man also wrote of his admiration for a popular singer who made the following statement. “Christianity will go. It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue with that; I'm right and I will be proved right. We're [the band] more popular than Jesus now; I don't know which will go first - rock and roll or Christianity.” This singer was assassinated at the age of 40 – I wonder what he thinks of Jesus Christ now? Why would any Christian honor him?

The Judas Goat is spared as long as he keeps providing service for the slaughterhouse, but on the day his usefulness is over, the escape door will not open for him and he will be slaughtered along with those following him. These famous, beautiful people all have their moment in the spotlight when they are popular and adored, but eventually their star grows dim and everybody moves on to the next big attraction, while they move on to eternal judgment.

Perhaps you say, “Well I might watch or listen to some of these people, but I do not actually *commit* any of their sins.” That may be true, but the scripture says that not only will those who commit these sins come under judgment, but also those who “have

pleasure in them that do these things” (Romans 1:28-32). I am not saying you must avoid all forms of entertainment – that would be unrealistic, but be extremely careful about trying to pattern your life after these people. Why follow a Judas Goat who is ultimately lost himself? Now might be a good time to reexamine what posters you have hanging on your bedroom wall.

Finding good role models

Admittedly, there are not many positive role models for young people today. Most of the people the world honors and lavishes praise and money upon are ungodly. If we are going to dwell with the Lord, we must not esteem vile people (Psalm 15:4). It is better to find role models that are closer to home; a parent, a pastor, a godly relative, or perhaps an upright member of the church for example. 1 Peter 3:13 says, “Be followers of that which is good”.

Of course there are great people who have already died and gone to heaven, such as upright historical figures, or biblical heroes of the faith. These are also safe people to pattern our lives after. Paul said on a few occasions, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). Paul put himself up as a role model for others to follow.

Jesus referred to Himself as the “Good Shepherd” and He said, “My sheep hear my voice”. The Judas Goat leads the sheep to lose their lives, but the Good Shepherd gives His life to save the life of His sheep. What a contrast! We read in John 10:11, “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” Jesus was constantly calling out to others: “Follow me.”

Grazing in the Right Pasture

One way to make sure you are not following a Judas Goat is to be grazing in the right pasture. Years ago, a friend of mine told me about an experience he had soon after becoming a Christian. He was accustomed to going to rock concerts so, even though he knew better, went to another one after he became saved. My friend was only at this concert a short time when an evil looking man in the row directly in front of him, whom he had never met, turned around, pointed at him, and said, “You don’t belong here!” This man had more discernment than the new Christian. The evil man saw the light of salvation in the new convert and knew he was in the wrong environment. My friend got up and left the concert. He realized he was in the wrong pasture.

Whose pasture are we in? Are we under the care of the Good Shepherd (The Lord) or are we being led to destruction by a Judas Goat?

We see in 1 Corinthians 14:10 that there are many voices in the world. They are all competing for your attention, but it is up to you to have the discernment to know which voices to follow. Who is leading you?

At the end of time, there is going to be a separation of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25:32-33). Let us have good role models, be in the right pasture, avoid following the Judas Goats, and instead listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd.



THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT DECISION

The absolute most important decision you will ever make in your life is to accept Jesus Christ as your Savior so that your name is written in the Book of Life and you will go to Heaven when you die. What is the second most important decision of your life? The answer: Deciding who you are going to marry.

The Things We Do for Love

Attention young ladies — are you desperate for male companionship? Well, guess what? I can guarantee a way to get guys interested in you almost immediately. That's right! All you have to do is dress in a provocative way and let it be known that you have low morals and no real standards. There is absolutely no doubt that you will have more male attention than you will know what to do with. Of course, the downside to this is that not only will you compromise your own character, but the type of guys you will attract will be of low character as well. Guys will be drawn to you not because they truly love, respect, or trust you - in fact quite the

opposite. They assume (correctly), that if you acted in a loose way to snag them, you are just as likely to repeat your actions and move on to another guy, so they will get *what* they can *while* they can.

Guys and girls are very different in the way they look at the concept of love. Girls by nature are romantics. Young girls love to watch princess movies. These films all end the same way - with the young lady getting the perfect man and then living happily ever after. Teenage girls enjoy reading romantic novels and women of all ages like to be romanced and have flowers sent to them. My young daughter Victoria loves it when I take her out on a date. It might just be to a movie and then out for a chocolate milkshake, but she still insists that I dress up. Girls think about their wedding day from a very young age and are forever wishing that someday, as in the movie *Snow White*, “their prince will come.”



Guys, on the other hand, usually do not read romantic novels or watch romantic films, but we are easily influenced by sight. When we see a beautiful girl, all rational thought goes out the window, and we will do all kinds of crazy stuff to attract the object of our desire.

In the animal kingdom, the male bowerbird builds big elaborate structures out of twigs and decorates them with feathers, flowers, or even rubbish to attract a female. Male frigate birds dress up to attract the object of their desire. They wave their wings and heads, wobble their chests, and clack their bills to make a loud noise. Peacocks spread their brightly-colored tails to impress a would-be mate. Crickets rub their legs together to make a chirping noise. Male elephants spray water over the female elephants they are interested in and frogs croak to attract a mate. With human males, it is not much different. OK, we might not spray a girl with water, or make a house out of twigs and garbage – but just about everything else has been tried. We attempt to impress her with our car, our muscles, our grades, our talent, our humor, and our clothes. “Just notice me!” God has a much better way to put a Christian couple together.

Map to Marriage

When I was a teenager, I had an older friend who drew a simple diagram for me that illustrated how to find the right woman for my life. He drew a little stick figure man who was traveling all over the paper, leaving a little dashed line everywhere he went, stopping at little X marks here and there. Then he drew another little stick man who traveled in a straight line, with one little solitary X intersecting his path. He explained that I could be like the first guy – look-

ing here, there, and everywhere, trying to find the right partner for my life. I could actively search for women at concerts, school, even at church, but, he warned, that by taking this approach, I would be fishing in all kinds of waters and would probably end up feeling empty and dejected. He suggested that I be like the second little guy. “The key is this,” he said, “find the path for *your* life; find out what *you* are supposed to be doing, and the right one will intersect *your* path.” His advice was exactly right.



Remember, your own life must first be in order for this to work. I have yet to see anyone who was far away from God make the right choice in marriage. Once you are in right relationship with the Lord, do not worry about looking all around to find the right one; just start charting your own course with God’s help, and the right one will come to you. That is precisely what happened to me. When I think back about it, that little diagram was a crudely drawn

treasure map. Finding the right mate for your life is like finding great wealth, because the Bible says that her value is greater than rubies (Proverbs 31:10). My friend's drawing was simple, but brilliant.

In the Right Time

Somewhere in my stack of photo albums at home, there is a picture that was taken of my wife and I years before we actually met one another. There were several Christian youth groups that joined together to spend the day at an amusement park in Darien, New York. At the end of the day, someone took a picture of the entire gathering. Cheryl and I did not even notice or speak to each other that day, but there she was, right there, just a few yards away – the girl who I would spend the rest of my life with – but our eyes had not been opened to each other. There were things that needed to happen in our individual lives before the time would be right for us to become a couple.

We have to be ready to marry in *His* time, not our own. You do not want to marry out of frustration, or because you see that your friends are getting married and you are still single. I know couples who have waited until their 40s to marry for the first time and now have great marriages. It is far better to wait and get the right one than to jump in quickly and have a lifetime of regret.

Some girls have such a low opinion of themselves, they will run off with the first opportunistic guy who swoops down to show them affection. Perhaps some of these girls did not have a close or loving relationship with their fathers and so they crave male attention from anyone who will give it. Maybe they think they do not deserve better, or they think they are getting too old, or whatever. You should be extremely particular about the one you choose to spend the rest of your life with; it may take some patience to wait for the one that God has ordained for you.

Marrying the Witch Doctor

Imagine that a girl takes a two-week mission trip to a primitive Third World country. While there, she meets the tribal witch doctor and they strike up a friendship. When she returns to her homeland, she breaks the happy news to her parents: she is getting married! Is that not wonderful? Of course, her parents would be horrified. She might say, “But Mom, Dad, so what if he’s got a bone through his nose and he’s wearing a necklace of shrunken skulls around his neck? I’m certain that after we are married, he will change! He’s already told me that he’s really open to discussing my religious beliefs. Even though he’s been practicing witchcraft all of his life, I can tell that he’s got a good heart. After he sees my good example, I can lead him to the Lord, and he’ll forsake

his pagan ways and start going to church with me on Sundays. What? You don't want me to marry him? Oh boo hoo, you just don't know him the way I do! Can't you at least just give him a chance?" She then runs off to her room, sobbing hysterically because her parents just do not understand.



OK, I admit that was an extreme example; what is the difference, though, between a female missionary marrying a witch doctor so she can convert him and a young woman marrying any other kind of non-Christian in the hope that he will eventually change? If an unbelieving guy wants to marry a girl who is a believer, he will say *whatever it takes*,

maybe even make a casual statement of faith to get her to stop nagging him about his religious beliefs, or to calm her nervous parents. If there is no genuine deep-down conversion, the odds are, there never will be. What about when they have children? When there were a bunch of mixed marriages in the time of Nehemiah, the Bible says that the children spoke half the language of the Jews and half the language of the heathen (Nehemiah 13:24).

In 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV) we read, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” There are so many people trapped in mixed marriages who would warn you, “Don’t do it!” A mixed marriage results in fighting, children who are unstable, and lots of tension in the home. It is a marriage comprised of two people going the opposite direction at the same time. Marriage can be challenging even for Christian couples because there are a lot of difficulties that can come along in life. Why add the huge problem of being yoked together with a person who is looking at life in a completely different way than you are? What about the call of God on your life? Your partner is going to say, “Go to the mission field? Are you kidding? No Way!” Then there is the prospect of spending your lifetime with someone, and then after death being separated from them for all of eternity.

Playing the field

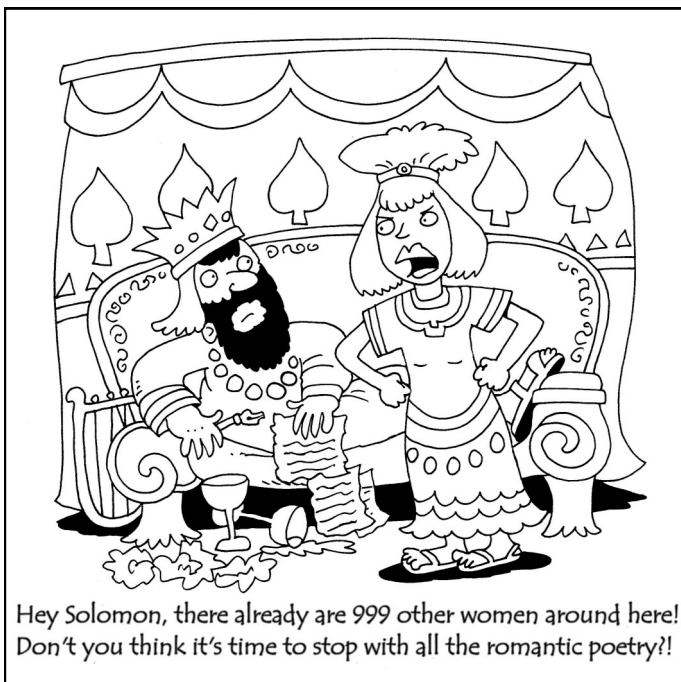
Do not start a close friendship or begin seriously dating someone unless that person is a potential candidate for marriage. Why frustrate yourself by beginning something that has no chance of success? What about saying, "Let's just be good friends..." to people of the opposite sex? Trust me; there are rare exceptions, but this *almost never works*. This usually leads to some having their heart broken; so why even start down this road?

God's desire for marriage

From the beginning, it was God's desire to put man and woman together in marriage (Matthew 19:4-5). Notice that marriage is between one man and one woman. (This should be obvious, but in our current times, sometimes we need to reestablish the basics). Marriage is God's real-life example of how He loves His Church. During my lifetime, I have had the privilege of witnessing some wonderful marriages - marriages in which the husband and wife love God, love each other, and have raised respectful, God-fearing children. Their homes are full of peace, and they are doing something meaningful with their lives. This is exactly what God wants for your marriage. There are so many times when I realize that if I had married anyone else instead of my wife Cheryl,

I would never have made it through various difficult circumstances. She encourages me, helps me correct my attitude when I need it (and that's quite often), and she is a wonderful mother. A good marriage is worth waiting for.

Artwork by: Richard Gunther



Bad Marriages

Marriage should be heaven on earth, but often that is not how it turns out. I have several close friends who have endured a life of agony because they married the wrong person. King Solomon had more experience with women than probably any man who ever lived. He married beautiful princesses from all the

surrounding nations, yet at the end of his life he was bitter and depressed because he had not found one righteous woman in his 1,000-member harem (Ecclesiastes 7:28). His wives turned his heart from God and caused him to serve their heathen idols. He wanted to hide from them. He said it was better to dwell in a corner of a housetop or to dwell in the wilderness than live in a house with a contentious woman.

Safeguards

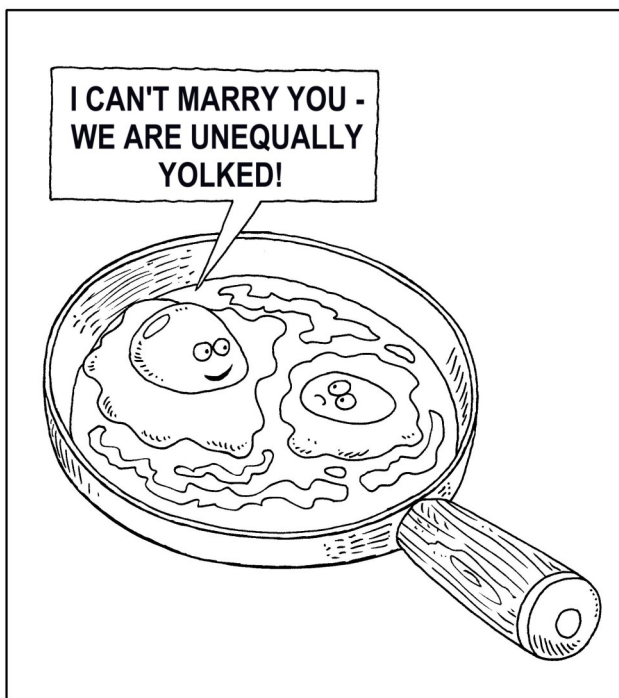
You see that guy or girl you are interested in as they are right now, but what will they be like in the future? They may be absolutely beautiful in your eyes – you are totally in love, you cannot imagine anyone else being better for you, but can you trust your own heart? Here are three safeguards to help you make the second most important choice of your life.

1) Ask God. Your heavenly Father cares deeply about who you marry. It is of extreme importance to Him because He loves you very much. The Heavenly Father cares more than any earthly parent could, so bring your relationship before Him in prayer.

2) Ask your parents. They fed you, clothed you, consoled you, played with you, took you to the doctor's office when you were sick, made sure you had braces if you needed them, took you on vacation if they could afford it, prayed with you and prayed for you,

drove you to the mall, to school, to your friend's house, went to your sporting events, music recitals, bought you Christmas gifts, gave you birthday parties, helped you through college, cried with you, and laughed with you. They want the best for you. If parents love you, they will do whatever it takes to keep you from marrying the wrong person. (Note - There are exceptions to this rule depending upon the spiritual state of your parents. We will look at these in the next chapter under the heading "Parents Can Hinder").

Artwork by: Richard Gunther



I heard of a girl whose parents pleaded for her not to get married to a certain young man. She defied them and ran off and got married anyway. One week later she came back from her honeymoon and proclaimed, "I hate his guts!" She made a lifelong commitment to someone she now despised. If only she had listened.

3) Ask your spiritual authority. If you are in a good church, you will have a pastor that is concerned for your spiritual welfare. He can be objective because he is not related to you (usually) but still cares for you very much.

Till Death do you Part...

Choosing to become a Christian is the most important decision you can make. The second-most important decision, the one about marriage, will have a tremendous impact on the course of your life. You do not want to make this decision quickly. May God give you the wisdom to make the right choice regarding marriage so that your days will be filled with peace and joy.



Hey Peter - Mind Your Own Business



Imagine that you are walking along the beach, and out of the corner of your eye you notice what looks like a little golden lamp, half buried in the sand. You walk over, cautiously pull it up and begin to rub the sand off of it - and WOOSH!

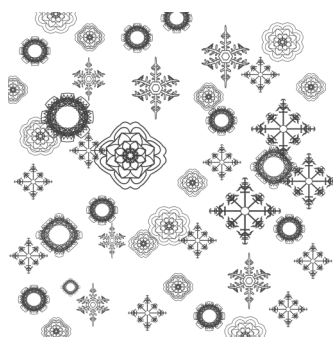
Suddenly a magical genie appears! He informs you that he will grant you three wishes (and do not try wishing for more wishes), whatever you want, just name it. What would you wish for? Well, the goal in life is to be happy, so you will go with money for wish #1. OK, make me super rich. I want so much money I will not know how to spend it all - how about ten trillion dollars? Let me see, for wish #2 - I will take power. I would like to be the most powerful person in the land - whatever command I give will be obeyed! Wish #3 - I want to be irresistible to the opposite sex; so I'll wish for 100 - no, no make that 1,000 women (or men if you're a female) to love me! Woo hoo! This is the best day ever! I am set, and guaranteed happiness for the rest of my life!

This actually happened to someone in the Bible. No, not the genie in the lamp part, but the rest of it. His name was King Solomon. He was the richest man who ever lived. He was blessed with more wealth than any man before or since. If he desired something – he took it. When people came to visit his palace, the richness and splendor of it took their breath away. His house was one of the most beautiful buildings ever constructed. He had swimming pools, he drank wine, and he had singers and comedians to entertain him. He was king over the land; and he had absolute power over the people of Jerusalem. He was a ladies' man who had 1,000 women in his life (as we saw in the previous chapter), and yet *he was absolutely miserable*. That is right, in spite of having everything a person could possibly want, we read in the book of Ecclesiastes that he was totally depressed at the end of his life. None of it brought him lasting happiness. Why is this? It is because the only thing that satisfies a person is doing the will of God for their life and Solomon had moved very far away from Him.

You are unique

You are original. There are about 7 billion people on planet Earth, and not one of them is exactly like you. In fact, there is no one that has ever been born in the history of the human race that is just like you. Until the end of time, there will never be anyone born who is your identical clone. Have I made that clear

enough? People are not formed from a big cookie cutter, with everyone having the same look, personality, likes, and dislikes.



Just as there are no two identical blades of grass, fingerprints, or snowflakes – there are no two people that are exactly the same. King David was in awe of God’s individual plan for each life. “Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous - how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed. How precious are your thoughts about me, O God. They cannot be numbered!” - Psalm 139:14-17 (NLT)

One day the apostle Peter asked the Lord, “What is your will for John’s life? What do you want him to do?” (John 21:21). The Lord answered Peter, “That is none of your concern. *You follow me.*” The Lord said to Peter in a nice way, “Peter, mind your own business. I’ve got a specialized plan that has been specifically designed just for John.” It was true; Peter was used in mighty miracles, he

wrote two books of the Bible, and ultimately became a martyr for Christ. John, on the other hand, was exiled to the isle of Patmos, where he received awesome visions and wrote the book of Revelation, which foretells what is going to happen in the last days. God had two totally different (but equally important) plans for two totally different people.

No one has ever achieved greatness or distinction by doing the exact thing everybody else was doing. As you try to find your place in life, you will be greatly influenced by other people. If you decide to attend college, everybody will ask, “What’s your major?” The truth is that you might not have any idea. “Hey, that guy looks like he’s successful; I’ll try to copy what he is doing!” What God has for someone else has *absolutely nothing* to do with you. What is success anyway? Is it having a ton of money, or being famous? Is it having a position of power? We have already seen that none of these things in themselves make a person happy.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I remember sitting with a friend on a bench by a large, illuminated fountain inside a big shopping mall. Tears filled my eyes as he and I ended our conversation and parted company. He was accepted to a prestigious college and was leaving town in a few days. At the same time he was going on to bigger and better things, I was devastated as I saw all of my college plans go up in smoke. Everything I

had planned on doing with my life literally vaporized overnight. It was an incredibly painful time for me. Many years have since passed, and the life of my former friend is still quite different from that of my own. He has multiple university degrees, but is totally without Jesus. He has no wife or children; he is involved in protest movements against the government, and he has no idea what life is really about. How did all that education benefit him? I look back at that pivotal time of my life, and now realize that if I had fulfilled my own plans, I would not have the wife, family, and Christian walk that God has blessed me with.

So what does God want me to do?



Many Christian young people ask, “What is the will of God for my life?” He wants everyone to come to repentance - that is first (2 Peter 3:9). Another thing that is God’s will for everybody is that they should be morally pure. We read in 1 Thesalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality.” But there is more in the life of a Chris-

tian than just being saved (although that in itself is wonderful); God has a further purpose for your life. Matthew 7:21 says, “*He that does the will of my Father* is going to enter into the kingdom of heaven.”

God needs people in every area of life. He needs Christian doctors, firemen, soldiers, and yes, even lawyers. He needs those who will represent Him as construction workers, nurses, pilots, mothers, and housewives. Of course there are also ministry positions within the church to which God can call a person.

What if God calls me to do something that I hate?

There are a lot of people in church, even pastors, who think that God will search your personality, find out exactly what it is that you truly dislike, and then send you off to be a missionary in some place that specializes in that thing. For example: Hate cheese? You must be called to France. Afraid of snakes? Then you are destined for India. Can't stand the cold? Start packing your bags for the Arctic Circle.

There was a song written a few years ago entitled “Please Don't Send Me to Africa.” In this humorous prayer set to music, the writer (Scott Wesley Brown) is afraid that God is going to send him to be a mis-

sionary in Africa. In the song he bargains with God and gives him a whole list of things he is willing to do, like wash communion cups, volunteer for the nursery, or even tithe 11%, just as long as God will not make him do what he fears most—go to the African mission field.



Please do not misunderstand, God will often ask a person to move out of their comfort zone and shift away from the things that are familiar. There can definitely be some uncertainty as you step out in obedience. When God called Abraham, he left everything and did not have any idea where he was going. Hebrews 11, known as the faith chapter, talks about wonderful people who endured some terrible things, including martyrdom.

Following God is not always an easy thing, but God did not carefully form you with the exact skills, abilities and desires that you have, just so He could make you miserable by forcing you to do the opposite. If

God is calling you to a country, He will give you a love for that country. I am always amazed at my missionary friends who come back home to the United States after being on the foreign field for a few years. After several weeks, they start to get anxious and are soon eager to leave the comforts of their homeland and return to their work. Why? It is because God has given them a love for what He has called them to do.

I have wondered if I could convince God that I have a fear of white sandy beaches, tropical breezes, and crystal clear water so He will send me to Hawaii; so far, that has not worked out. Seriously though, what kind of employer would relocate an employee to a place that the employee despises and then ask him to cheerfully represent the company? Is God less intelligent than a human boss? No, He knows us better than we know ourselves.

Parents can hinder

Sometimes even well-meaning parents can be a hindrance to God's will for their children. In the Old Testament there was a man named Terah (ever heard of him?) who was an idolater. He had a son named Abraham (I will bet you have heard of him). God commanded Abraham to leave his father because God had unique and special plans for him, but they could not happen if he was in his father's house. Prince Jonathan in the Old Testament is

another example. He should have left his madman father Saul and joined with godly David, who had the promises of God. Jonathan let his attachment to his own father cloud his judgment, and it kept him from joining God's chosen man David. (It also got him killed in his dad's army).

Consider these three examples:

1) A family I knew had a son that felt a call to attend Bible School, but his parents did not want that for him and instead put him into a secular college. There, he became sidetracked from the purposes of God for his life and died unexpectedly before ever receiving his degree.

2) There was a church service, during which the minister gave people the opportunity to come up, kneel at the altar, and dedicate their lives to Christ. One of those who responded to the call was a young boy. His mother was furious when she saw him go forward, and literally dragged her son away from the altar saying, "I don't want that kind of life for my son!"

3) Once when I was eating dinner at a restaurant, I could not help but overhear the conversation of the people at a nearby table. The older man in the group was lamenting to his friends about the fact that his daughter was "wasting her life" on the mission field.

In all three of these true stories, parents were trying to thwart the higher purposes of God for their children's lives.

We must honor our fathers and mothers, but *we do not disobey God to obey them*. The will of God for our lives is greater than the will of our parents. The Lord Jesus said He would cause divisions within the family (Matthew 10:35-36). I know wonderful people who are in the ministry today that would not be there if they had followed their parents' advice.

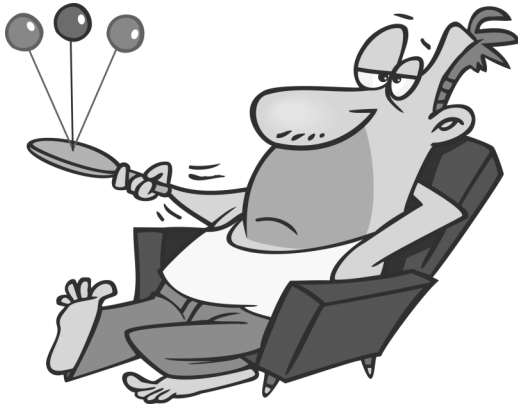
Procrastinators of the world unite!

(Tomorrow)

Ask the Lord to give you direction now so you do not squander all your years with things that do not matter. I have read the Bible through many times, and I have noticed something about the people that God uses. He can use prostitutes, kings, fisherman, military leaders, fruit farmers, widows, and everything in-between, but He has never used a lazy person. Wasting your whole life is quite easy actually – in fact you do not have to do much at all. Your wasted hours turn into wasted days, which turn into wasted weeks, which turn into wasted months, which turn into wasted years, which ultimately result in a wasted life. Just make a habit of doing very little, and before you know it you will have burned through all your time with nothing to show for it.

The Number 1 Emotion

What is the #1 emotion in the universe? I believe it is *regret*. In hell people regret all the pain and suffering they caused other people. They will eternally regret not accepting Christ as their Savior. Even in heaven, many will regret that they did not do more for the Master. They have safely arrived in heaven, but when they recognize what God's ultimate plan was for their life, compared to what they actually accomplished, they will weep. The Lord will wipe away all tears from their eyes (Revelation 21:4), but I have sometimes wondered why those tears are being shed in the first place? We must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ and give an account for what we have done with our lives (Hebrews 9:27). We do not want to have an eternity full of regret.



Proverbs 29:18 “Where there is no vision (or goal) the people perish.” Without knowing God’s plan for our lives, we can wander around aimlessly. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the other things will be added to you (Matthew 6:33).

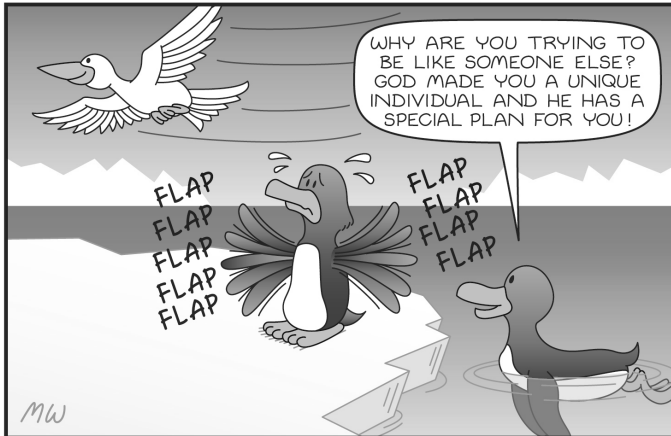
What will you be known for?

In history, people are usually known for one or two things that summarize their whole life. For example, the sixteenth president of the United States, Abraham Lincoln was known as “Honest Abe,” who freed the slaves; King Richard was the Lion Heart; Esau was the Profane, who sold his birthright; Moses was the man who parted the Red Sea; David is known for killing the giant Goliath and for his adultery with Bathsheba. When you die, you are only going to get a paragraph or two written about you in the newspaper obituary column (many do not even get that). The Bible says that our life is like a tale that is told (Psalm 90:9). We can sum up the life of someone who has died with just a few sentences. What will people say about you? What will you be known for? You can have a master’s degree, graduate with honors, have a terrific salary, have a great house, and lots of cool toys, but if you are not rich toward God, it is meaningless. No one is going to read your bank balance at your funeral service. There is a saying: “Only one life; it will soon be past; only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Father God had a specific plan for you before you were born. There is a unique and special purpose for which you were created, so do not be like Peter and be concerned about what God is doing with someone else. Happiness and fulfillment in life depend on finding out His will and then being faithful to do it until the end of your days.

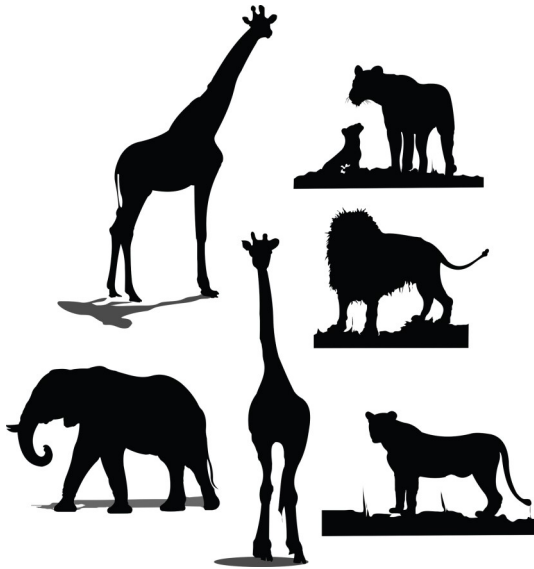
ENVIIOUS PENGUIN

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



A heart at peace gives life to the body,
but envy rots the bones.

— PROVERBS 14:30 NIV



WHAT ABOUT SEX?

Hey guys - did you turn to this chapter first? I was just wondering. It is totally natural to be interested in sex. Everything God does is good. He invented sex, so that is good too. There is nothing dirty or wrong with sex if it is enjoyed as God intended. Sex is God's gift to married couples so they can have children and enjoy the pleasure of physical love with each other, but this gift is given only to husbands and wives. In Genesis 2:24, God said "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." The sexual relationship makes this possible. In many public schools, students are taught from a very young age about "safe sex", but the only safe sex can be found where God intended it – within marriage.

As wonderful as this gift is, there are serious consequences for straying outside of the inflexible boundaries God has placed around sex for our protection. Hebrews 13:4 says "Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge." Sex within marriage is blessed, but outside of marriage it is a sin that God will judge. The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, "Be not deceived, no adulterer, homosexual, or fornicator will inherit the kingdom of God." That means if you are

having sex outside of marriage you are in danger of hell – it is that serious! Having sexual relations with anyone who is not your spouse is a sin and a clear violation of one of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not commit adultery.”

Sadly, many teens who call themselves Christians do not behave any differently than teens who do not profess Christianity. A survey conducted among Christian and non-Christian students who were attending college found there was almost no difference between the two groups in their attitude towards sex.¹³ There is no such thing as “Christian fornication” although there are those who preach that there is. One minister actually wrote a book which stated that “total abstinence from sex was not God’s choice for unmarried Christian couples.” He will have to answer to God for all of the young people who go into a dark eternity because they followed his suggestions. I would not want to be that man on Judgment Day.

Another thing most people do not realize is that sex is not just a physical act. There is a spiritual transference that occurs as well (Please read 1 Corinthians 6:13-19.) The apostle Paul writes that, unlike other sins which are outside the body, immorality contaminates the inner temple.

Every time God's laws on sex are violated, there is sadness. If God created sex, then how could it be dangerous? How can something so wonderful have such strict limitations on it? Actually, there are a lot of great things that have restrictions on them. You can drive a car 70 miles per hour down the highway, but if you do that through a school playground, you are going to kill some little kids. Even if you somehow manage not to hurt anyone, you are still likely to go to prison. Fire is a useful tool for heating and cooking, but fire used incorrectly can destroy hundreds of thousands of acres of land, turn beautiful homes to ashes, and take innocent lives. Dynamite is exactly what is needed for leveling portions of mountains so that coal can be extracted for generating electricity, but would you give a child in kindergarten some dynamite to play with? You certainly would not! Just because something is good and right in one setting, does not mean it is good in all settings.

Two Big Lies About Sex

Satan twists and perverts the good things God has made, into something they were never meant to be. Satan is the father of lies (John 8:44), and here are two really big lies he would love for you to believe about sex:

Lie #1 "Everyone is doing it." In today's culture, the virgin is always portrayed in the media as some nerd, geek, or loser. According to the world, those who want to remain pure and faithful to God's commandments must be freaks! Those who are not engaged in

sexual activity are made to feel like there is something wrong with them and that they are being left out of all the fun. The truth is - not everybody is doing it. There are millions of young people who want to save their gift of virginity for their future husband or wife. In the chapter “Forever Friends”, we discussed peer pressure. Sex is definitely one area where you do not want to compromise what you know is right, just because “everyone else is doing it”.

Lie#2 “There are no downsides to sex outside of marriage.” In television and movies, sex outside of marriage is depicted as an amazing thrill ride with no consequences whatsoever. Even fictional heroes like Ironman, James Bond, Batman, and Indiana Jones are depicted on film having sexual relations outside of marriage. We have already seen how fornication (sex before marriage) and adultery (sex with anyone other than your spouse after you are married) will keep a person from going to heaven, but there are natural consequences as well. Here are just a few:

Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STD’s) can ruin a person’s health; there are over 25 major types of these right now. Some venereal diseases do not have any immediate symptoms, but they can manifest later. Doctors say that a major reason that some couples today cannot have children is due to venereal diseases they caught before they were married. What about AIDS? There is no cure for this disease. If you contract it, it can be fatal. Herpes can disfigure a person; there is no cure for that either.

Guilt: Many people carry around a burden of guilt from being involved in pre-marital sex. They wish they could undo the past, but this is impossible. If a girl breaks up with a guy she has had sex with, she will regret having given herself to him. Even after marriage, people suffer tremendous remorse because they wish they had waited to give themselves only to their husband or wife.

Unwanted pregnancy: When an unmarried girl becomes pregnant, many times the guy will abandon her. Her chances to finish high school or go on to college will be greatly reduced. The child will probably grow up in a home without having both a loving father and mother, and will likely have behavior problems and difficulty in school. If the girl decides to get an abortion, then she only adds to her guilt, because she has murdered her child. It is a terrible cycle, but it does not have to be this way.

Born this Way

What the Bible says about homosexuality

When God created the world, He did not place two men or two women together in the Garden of Eden, rather He created one man and one woman and gave them the joyful command to be fruitful and multiply. The precise and glorious design of the male and female anatomy, (human, animal, and plant) plainly shows the intention of heterosexual

union. If homosexuality had been permitted by God, all life forms would have quickly become extinct.

In almost every culture and religion throughout the ages, the practice of homosexuality has been condemned. It has only been recently that this unacceptable lifestyle has gained acceptance. Yet just because society has changed its mind on the matter, does not mean that God has changed His. The Bible strictly forbids homosexuality in numerous places in both the Old and New Testaments. Romans 1:21-28 tells us expressly that this is a sin which results after God has given a person over to a reprobate mind as a judgment for rejecting Him. 1 Corinthians 6:9,10 gives a somber warning that those who practice homosexuality will not inherit the kingdom of God. It could not be clearer. What about when a person makes the argument, "I'm gay but I can't be held responsible because I was born this way"? The truth is that every one of us is born with a sin nature that manifests itself in a variety of awful ways. One person may have a ten-



dency to alcoholism, another to fornication, and another to violence, but this does not give us permission to yield to these natural urges. Homosexuality is not an unpardonable sin. Paul told the people in one of his churches that although some were guilty of this practice, when they repented and turned to Christ, His blood had washed them completely. God can forgive any sin, but that does not mean we are to excuse it.

How to avoid sinning

The first thing to realize is that being tempted is not a sin. The Bible does not provide any specific examples, but we know that Jesus was tempted in this area too. Scripture says that He was tempted in *all ways* that we are tempted, yet without sin (Hebrews 4:15). We do not think of Jesus as being tempted by sex, but it is undoubtedly true. He, however, never gave in to His natural urges and, therefore, remained spotless. Temptation in itself is not a sin, but we still must avoid it at all costs. People do not just suddenly have sex for the first time; they have to willfully walk past some big red flashing warning signs before they cross the line. They do not simply “fall into sin” but purposely step over many boundaries and safeguards before going ahead and doing what their conscience is warning them not to do.

Is it possible to remain upright in this immoral world? When Jesus walked the earth, He called the people of His generation “wicked and perverse” and it has only gotten worse in the 2,000 years since He said that. Our society is saturated with the wrong kind of sex. Job said he made a promise to himself that he would not look lustfully at a young woman. In his day the custom was for the women to be covered up, in modest dress – but not so today. Advertising, music, videos, magazines at the checkout counter, TV, movies, and of course the internet, all provide easy access to sexual content.



I read about a well-known supermodel who suggested that girls go on their honeymoon first, then come back and have the wedding. This sort of advice is so destructive. If you want to remain pure, you have to fight against society. The front page of my local newspaper had an article about an engaged couple

who made a promise to each other that they would wait until they got married before they had sex - and this was front page news! Why? Because according to the world's standard, this is a bizarre event. It is actually the world that is backwards; this couple had it right.

There are things we can do to keep ourselves out of dangerous situations. The number one thing is to keep company with the right friends, and separate ourselves from the sinful ones. The Bible has specific warnings to both guys and girls. The warnings to the young ladies are in Proverbs 2:11-13 - "Discretion will preserve you; Understanding will keep you, To deliver you from the way of evil, From the man who speaks perverse things, From those who leave the paths of uprightness to walk in the ways of darkness". Girls, please notice that the men you are being warned against here are those that have *left* the path of uprightness. In other words, they were Christians at one time. Do not allow a guy to sweet talk you into giving up your virginity. The oldest line in the book is, "If you really loved me then you would have sex with me." Once he has gotten what he wants, you are no longer special to him - no longer a prize to be won; after a time he will move on to some other girl and use the same flattery on her. Your response to that statement is, "If you loved *me*, you would respect my decision to remain pure."

Then there is a warning to the guys about the immoral woman. This also is someone who has left the path of uprightness. Proverbs 2:16-19 says “Her house leads down to death.” A wrong relationship can ruin your life forever. It is not worth it!

Strolling through the Vineyard

Another thing we can do is to take ourselves out of tempting situations. You cannot pray, “Lord, keep me from temptation as I spend the evening at my boyfriend’s house while his parents are away.” That does not work. The Bible tells us about Samson, the world’s strongest man. He boasted about killing the lion in the vineyard, but what was he doing strolling



through the vineyard in the first place? Because of his Nazarite vow, he was forbidden to eat any fruit of the vine, but there he was just a few feet from all those grapes. He should not have been anywhere near the vineyard. This was a pattern in his life and it led to his downfall with women. He had made a habit of not keeping himself from temptation. There is a joke about a man who says to his physician,

“Doctor, I broke my arm in two places”. The doctor replies, “Well then, stay out of those places!” There is a truth in that joke.



Joseph was the exact opposite of Samson; he overcame temptation because he fled. His master’s wife was trying to seduce him, but Joseph feared God, even though no one else would have known if he had given in to her (Gen 39:1-12). Notice that he did not pray with her or try to witness to her – he ran from her! Another important scripture is: “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7).

You Go Where You Look

Where are your eyes leading you? If you are viewing pornography, you will soon desire to partake of what you are looking at. Many years ago, Mazda Motor Company had a commercial on TV.

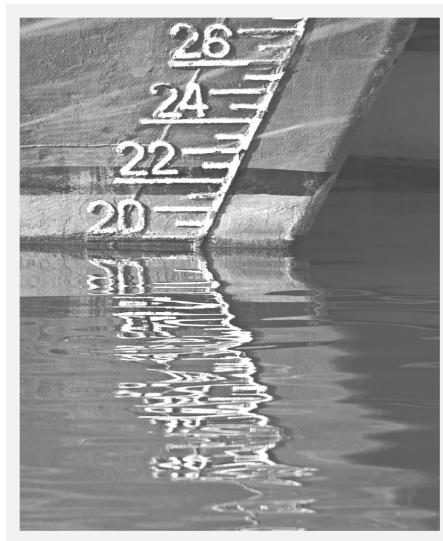
Their slogan was “The more you look, the more you like!” Mazda was encouraging people to keep looking at their vehicles, because they knew that people would desire one of their cars if they just looked long enough. In the area of “lust of the eyes” this is true as well. If we continually feed lust with immoral movies, magazines, and websites, it will grow stronger. If we stop feeding lust with our eyes, it will eventually weaken and loosen its grip on us.

I love my motorcycle, and I ride it as much as possible. When I was first learning to ride, one of the first rules I was taught was that “You go where you look.” If you see a big pothole in the road and you fix your eyes on it, you will surely end up hitting it. You should, instead, put your eyes on the escape route. Focus on where you *want* to be, and your motorcycle will follow your eyes. See the connection here?



The Plimsoll Mark

Have you ever heard of the Plimsoll mark? There was a British politician in the 1800's named Samuel Plimsoll who fixed a serious problem in the shipping industry. Ships were being overloaded, often causing them to sink, with loss of lives as a result. Plimsoll worked to reform the shipping laws, and an important new law was established that required a mark to be made on each ship. If the water level was above that mark, it meant that the ship was overloaded and some of the cargo would have to be removed.¹⁴ Those marks are still on shipping vessels today. What is the point? The point is that God knows where our "Plimsoll mark" is, and He will not allow us to be overloaded with more temptation than we are able to bear.



The Bible says in 1 Corinthians 10:13, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.”

At the end of his life, Solomon concluded that the best way to avoid the sinful woman is to please God (Ecclesiastes 7:26). If we look unto Jesus, He is the One who is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24).

Second virginity

Sex is an extremely powerful temptation and many people have terrible battles and struggles with lust. If you have crossed the line and are suffering guilt from not doing what is right, make absolutely certain that you read the final chapter in this book “Erasing the Files”. To close this chapter, though, I want to encourage those who have made shipwreck in the area of sexual purity. You are not alone - many people have crashed here. God knows our weaknesses, and He is compassionate. If anyone repents, turns from their sin, and asks the Lord Jesus to forgive them, He will. He can cleanse your record and give you a fresh start.

I do not want you to be cast down or dejected if you have stumbled, because the blood of Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness. Jesus met a woman who had been married five times and was living with someone else. She accepted Jesus and became an evangelist in her town, leading others to Christ. The Bible tells the account of another woman who was caught right in the act of adultery. The religious leaders humiliated her by dragging her out before Jesus so he could pronounce judgment on her. Jesus did not condemn her, but instead forgave her and said, “Go and sin no more”. In the book of Joshua, we are introduced to a prostitute named Rahab. She made a choice to help the people of God and is listed in the Faith Chapter (Hebrews 11) right along with all the other great men and women of scripture. It is never too late to start over.

Conclusion

This world wants you to conform to its twisted way of looking at the gift of sex. With God’s help, and by doing your part to avoid temptation and dangerous situations, you can overcome the lies of the enemy and have the blessing of God upon your life, both before and after marriage.



G.I.G.O.



Judging the book by its cover

I love the great fictional detective Sherlock Holmes. I was always fascinated as I watched the movies or read the novels, by how he could correctly tell so much about complete strangers just by looking them over for a minute or two. Dr. Watson, Holmes' trusted associate, was consistently amazed as Holmes would quickly and accurately assess individ-

uals he had never met before. He could tell if they were married, what their occupation was, what their first name was, if they had children, where they had traveled, if they were wealthy, and sometimes why they had come to him for assistance. “Elementary, my dear Watson,” Holmes would say; and then proceed to tell Watson that the man’s hat, walking stick, watch, monogrammed cuff links, wear on his shoes, and calluses on his hand all told a story about him. It all seemed so simple after Holmes explained it. “Fantastic Holmes!” Watson would exclaim.

You may have heard the expression, “You can’t judge a book by its cover.” Well, that is not exactly true. Take the book you are holding now, for example. You probably bought or borrowed this book largely due to the cover. If the cover of this book had pictures of quilts, ceramics, or potted plants on it, you would not have been interested, right? You get a glimpse of what is on the inside of the book by what is shown on the outside.

Maybe you do not have the extraordinary powers of deduction that Holmes did, but it is often quite easy to tell a lot about a person after meeting them for a only a few minutes. How? By simple observation. If they are sports enthusiasts, they will soon begin talking about last night’s game, or maybe they will be wearing a jersey emblazoned with their favorite team’s colors and the number of their favorite player, or perhaps they are carrying a copy of the sports sec-

tion of the newspaper. There are all kinds of obvious clues to help you determine what is inside this person. *But the most important clue is what they say.* What is coming out of their mouth?

There is a computer programming acronym "G.I.G.O." that is used primarily to call attention to the fact that computers will unquestioningly process the most nonsensical of input data ("Garbage In") and produce the corresponding nonsensical output ("Garbage Out"). In other words, if you input instructions to a computer, no matter how ridiculous they are, the computer will obey them. You can write a program to display the words "Elect Orange Juice for President!" two billion times, and even though it is pointless, the computer will still process your commands. Garbage went into the design, and garbage will come out.

To figure out what is inside a person, all you really have to do is listen. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). The rule is this: what comes *in* to a person, will eventually come *out* of their mouth. The Apostle James asked, "Can a fountain bring forth bitter water and sweet?" (James 3:11). This is why it is crucial for us to be careful about what we ingest. What is pouring out of us? It is going to be the result of what we have been pouring in.

The Third Category

I have heard people say that everything comes from either heaven or hell. It is either God or Satan that is the author of all that is produced. I disagree. There is a lot of material that falls into a third category – the human spirit. There are things that are of satanic origin, and there are those things that are authored in heaven, but what about the big middle area?



Consider “Jingle Bells.” Most people have heard of this snowy song, right? Would you say that this little tune has its origin in the pit of hell? Of course not. On the other hand, would you call this a worship song that improves your spiritual life and brings you closer to God?

Again the answer is obviously “No.” It is a song from the human spirit, celebrating the joy of driving your horse drawn sleigh through winter weather. This is part of that middle neutral ground, the “third category” that neither harms nor helps your Christian walk.

Even food can fall into good, bad, and neutral categories. Some foods are great for you and you can always eat them (unless you have some sort of allergy) without fear - Apples, lettuce, eggs, bananas, and tomatoes for example. Other substances, however, you would never, *ever* ingest into your body. You are careful about even touching things like rat poison, acid, or gasoline – much less putting them anywhere close to your lips! Now what about a pastry? It is not great for you, but in moderation it is not going to kill you. You would not want a steady diet of cream-filled éclairs, but it certainly would not be instant death.

Something that is important to remember is this: *We take in the spirit of the author* when we read, watch, or listen to something. This is why it is important to monitor what we allow our minds to soak in. Let us briefly examine a few different categories for some practical examples.

Movies and Television

There are many films you can view without feeling guilty, but again, you do need to be very careful what you permit yourself to watch.

Movies based on classic novels or historical events can actually teach valuable lessons. Some movies portray stories of courage and admirable human

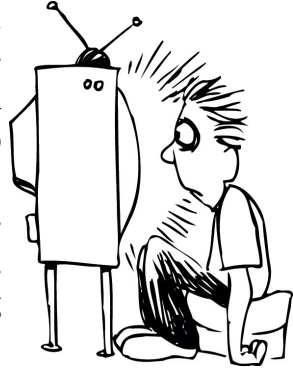
character. There are a number of Christian or family oriented websites that provide recommendations and reviews that can be helpful in selecting movies that are suitable to watch.

Some of the classic television comedy is also clean and enjoyable. My family and I have a great time watching some of the older shows. Many of these programs are hilarious and we do not have to worry about dirty comedy or foul language. While this material may not be offensive, having a constant diet of this material alone would not develop spiritual growth.

In spite of some positive examples, the majority of stuff coming out of Hollywood today is absolute filth. Other than educational, historical, or classic channels, television is mostly unwatchable. The dramas, music videos and even so-called “family comedies” are filled with material that pollute the brain.

I am often disappointed when I see the evil stuff that some Christians enjoy. Raunchy comedies, while popular, have no place in the life of the Christian. The apostle Paul says that we should avoid “coarse jesting” (Ephesians 5:4), which means dirty jokes or filthy humor. Horror movies are also a big money maker, yet these films are full of disgusting violence, gore, and dark spiritual con-

tent. These movies can influence and twist the mind. King David wrote in Psalm 101:3, – “I will set nothing wicked before my eyes.” Hollywood writers and producers never take any responsibility when someone gets a horrific idea from one of their movies and then duplicates it in real life. They say, “Oh, it’s just entertainment; we can’t actually affect the way people think.” Oh really? Then why do companies spend millions of dollars to broadcast a 30-second commercial into people’s homes? They must believe think that television is influencing people, or it would not be worth their advertising dollars.



Video Games

Video games are all the rage, especially among young men, who can seemingly play for hours non-stop. Many of the sports and arcade games are fun diversions, but there are others that simulate murder, rape, or mindless cruelty. Some games encourage the player to take on the role of a crime lord, drug kingpin, cop-killer, or assassin. One particular computer gaming company specializes in producing games which portray graphic brutality, strong language, and sexual content. Should a Christian steep their mind in this stuff? The answer is a resounding “No!”.

Music

What music should we listen to? There are verses in scripture which suggest that before Lucifer fell from heaven and became Satan, he was a musician (Ezekiel 28:13-14, Isaiah 14:11). He lost his heavenly position, but he did not lose his talent; it just became corrupted. He knows that, working through music, he can influence the minds of the listeners. Here are some quotes from a few famous rock musicians in history:



A lead guitarist for a popular rock band, who was referred to as the “guitar demon;” once admitted that something takes control of the band during their concerts: “...it’s like I’m on automatic pilot. By the time we’re halfway through the first number someone else is steering me. I’m just along for the ride. I become possessed when I get on stage.”

Another widely acclaimed group was described this way by the wife of one of the band members, "They were like mediums. They weren't conscious of all they were saying, but it was coming through them."

Here is a quote from one of the highest regarded rock musicians of all time, "I can explain everything better through music. You hypnotize people... And when you get people at their weakest point you can preach into the subconscious what we want to say."¹⁵

"Stairway to Heaven" (written by Robert Plant and performed by Led Zeppelin) is considered by most music critics to be the greatest rock and roll song of all time. Plant stated in several interviews that he did not seem to be writing—that something else was moving his pencil for him. Said Plant: "I was holding a pencil and paper, and for some reason I was in a very bad mood. Then all of a sudden my hand was writing out the words. I just sat there and looked at the words and then I almost leapt out of my seat."¹⁶ What kind of spirit do you suppose was behind that song?

Music is powerful. It is an area where we, as Christians, need to be on guard when we pick our listening choices. Most classical music comes from the human spirit and can be both soothing

and enthralling. It also belongs in the “third category”, that entertainment that is neither harmful to the spiritual walk, but also does not promote Christian growth.

What about Christian Rock?

When it comes to building ourselves up in the faith with music, we need to use wisdom. Some people only like slow worship songs when they select their Christian music while others desire more upbeat praise songs. Just because a person prefers one sort of Christian music, does not mean that someone else’s choice is automatically wrong. However, there is much about Christian rock that should cause us to pause.

First, just the phrase “Christian Rock n Roll” is contradictory. The term “rock n roll” was originally used in the 1900’s as slang to describe a premarital sexual act. So could you say “Christian Pre-marital sex act”? It does not work does it? Even if you put the terminology aside, where are the influences of Christian Rock coming from?

One Christian rock band made the comment, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?” Actually, the devil does not have *any* good tunes and it reveals something about this “Christian” group’s

character that they thought he did. Many of today's Christian rock stars have very *anti-Christian* groups as their inspiration and role models. They admire and respect the talents of some of the most reprobate people to ever pick up a guitar. How much spiritual discernment could they possibly have? If these bands are emulating satanic groups and simply putting Christian lyrics to the music, it needs to be avoided. Not all contemporary Christian music is wrong, but much of it is questionable. When I hear or read interviews with some of these musicians, I question if they are even born again.

Books

Books can also fall into the three distinct categories. The immensely popular *Harry Potter* series of books has sold millions of copies, but has also promoted witchcraft to its young readers. On the other hand, much classical literature falls into the "human spirit" category. What about Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* for example? It is not harmful in any way, but it would not be used to build a person's spiritual life. It is simply a romantic story, written in the 1800s, that is enjoyed by girls all over the world. For spiritual growth, John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is a fantastic book. Also, stories about Christians, like *The Hiding Place* or *The Cross and the Switchblade*, can strengthen one's faith.

Time to Clean House?

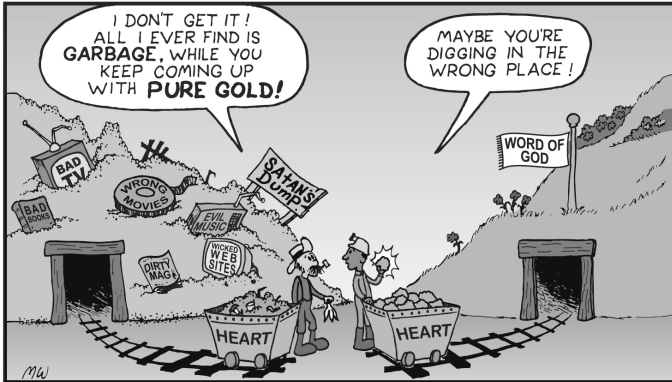
The Israelites were commanded to burn the heathen pictures and idols when they conquered other lands (Numbers 33:52). When I rededicated my life to the Lord, I had to do some serious housecleaning. I threw out a lot of music, books, and movies that were part of my old life. I filled up a couple of garbage bags with stuff and sent them off to the dump. I no longer wanted or needed them. When we accept Christ, there are things that need to change in our lives. The apostle Paul asks, “For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?” (2 Corinthians 6:14). On the first day of Creation, God separated the light from the darkness. We must do the same in our own lives. As you mature in your Christian walk, some of the things you once loved will begin to fall away and lose their appeal.

The Best-Selling Book of all time

We have already seen that what comes into us will affect us, and that we take on the spirit of the author. Therefore, the best thing a person can read on a regular basis is the Bible because the author of that book is the Holy Spirit. In 2 Peter 1:21 we read, “for prophecy (of scripture) never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

GARBAGE DUMP

A Joyful 'toon by Mike Waters



www.joyfultoons.com © 2008 Michael D. Waters

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 NIV

Here are a few more reasons we should feed on the Word of God every day:

God thinks highly of His Word. Psalm 138:2 says “for you have magnified Your word above all Your name”. As holy as the name of God is, He has put His Word even above that. If God thinks highly of His Word, then we should too.

It cleanses. Ephesians 5:26 speaks of the “washing of the water of the word.” Reading God’s Word is like taking a “spiritual shower.” It can cleanse us from the filthiness that comes upon us from being in the world.

We will be approved of God. God's opinion is the only one that truly matters. What does He think of us? Paul says, in 2 Timothy 2:15 – “Study to show thyself approved unto God.” If we study God's Word, we will be approved by Him.



His Word gives guidance. Are you seeking to know what to do in your life? Turn to the Bible. Psalm 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” The 26th American president Theodore Roosevelt was quoted as saying, “A thorough knowledge of the Bible is worth more than a college education.” Some people are very intelligent, yet are ignorant of the Word of God. I saw a brilliant contestant on a quiz show incorrectly answer the final question and lose the game because he did not know the answer to an elementary Bible question that most children in Sunday School could have answered.

His Word brings spiritual growth. You will not grow as a Christian without feeding on the Word of God. Consider the good advice from 1 Peter 2:2 - “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.” We will become strong Christians as we feed on the Word of God and do what it says. Reading through the Psalms can help your prayer life, and reading through Proverbs will fill you with wisdom.

Formulate a game plan. You can easily read through the entire Bible in a year’s time if you put your mind to it. There are a lot of 1-year reading plans you can find online. My own children are in the habit of reading the Bible every day, and I have been told by the staff at three different Christian organizations, “Your children know the Bible better than most of our teachers”.

You say you do not have time? How can we, in good conscience, watch an entire baseball, football, or basketball game, and then claim we cannot find fifteen minutes a day to read our Bible? If we skipped a meal we would notice it, but many Christians miss weeks or months without ever having a spiritual feeding. We must discipline ourselves to make this a daily priority.

It eventually comes out

What is in our heart will eventually come out of us. Luke 6:45 says, “A good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth good; and an evil man out of the evil treasure of his heart brings forth evil. For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.” In other words, G.I.G.O. – garbage in, garbage out. We must avoid evil entertainment, enjoy secular diversions in moderation, but actively pursue and seek after that which will keep us clean and cause us to grow spiritually.



ERASING THE FILES

This chapter ends joyfully, but before we get to the great news, let me ask a question. Are you a sinner? And if so, what type of sinner are you?

When you hear the word “sinner”, what do you think of? Terrorists? Rapists? Thieves? Blasphemers? Drunkards? Names of mass murderers such as Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin come to mind. You are absolutely correct; these are all examples of sinners, but there are actually several types of people who fall into the sinner category. Let us look at a few.

The unconcerned sinner - Some people know they are bad people but are unconcerned. They might even joke about how nasty they are and about how they are going to hell with their buddies when they die. A man once called the host of a radio program that featured dirty jokes and obscene language. The caller asked the host, before a live radio audience, if he knew he was going to hell. The host replied that he fully expected to go to hell when he died, and then laughed it off.

Years ago, a bestselling book was published which sold over 1 million copies. It contains the writings of a man who entertains the reader by telling stories about all the many sins he has committed. Sinners like this think life is all a big joke. Their motto is, "Let's have as much sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll as our bodies can withstand; and we'll worry about the afterlife (if there is an afterlife) later". I saw a man wearing a T-shirt that said "Heaven doesn't want me and hell is afraid I'll take over". They are headed for the edge of the cliff, but do not care. When these people die, however, the laughter immediately ceases and the terrifying reality of eternity sinks in (Psalm 9:17). The scriptures are full of descriptions of hell; Jesus spoke more about that place than He did about heaven. It is real. If you are unconcerned – start getting concerned.

The hopeless sinner - Then there is the sinner who knows he is a sinner, and is definitely concerned about it, but figures it is hopeless because he is so bad there is no chance of forgiveness from God - and even if God *did* forgive him, he would probably just sink back into his old addictions in a couple of weeks anyway. Maybe this person was even following God at one time in his life, but now they are messed up and have given up. They might even contemplate suicide, or start hurting themselves (cutting, etc.). They believe they are past the point of repair.



I knew a young adult who was a singer in a heavy metal rock band. He was into drugs and had darkness all around him, but then got saved and turned his life over to Jesus. He stopped taking drugs and started singing hymns at church and even began preaching short messages from the pulpit from time to time. I loved to hear him sing and speak; he had a genuine conversion. After a time, however, some circumstances came into his life and he returned to his former lifestyle. He strayed for quite a number of years, but eventually realized that he needed to come back to the Lord.

Though the pastor and his old Christian friends in the church tried to convince him that he could be forgiven and that God could totally restore him, he refused to believe it and instead walked around under a

black cloud of depression. One day I received a phone call with terrible news; he had killed himself. The Lord Jesus had made provision for him, and wanted to save him, but the man just would not receive it. He thought his sins could not be forgiven.

Have you ever thought that it was hopeless? That your sins were too terrible to be pardoned? If so, then you need to recognize that this is a lie from the enemy of your soul. Are you saying that the sacrifice of Jesus was not sufficient to cover your sins? What more do you need than the ultimate sacrifice that He provided?

Maybe as you have been reading through this book, you feel as though you have sins that are too great. Perhaps you have already messed up portions of your life, and you think that you cannot undo the damage. The truth is that forgiveness is available; you must simply accept it. People choose to perish by not grasping onto the lifeline that has been thrown out to them.

The “mostly good” sinner – This person looks at life in a totally different way than the unconcerned sinner. Whereas the unconcerned sinners know they are bad, but do not care, the “mostly good” sinners see themselves as being basically nice and therefore not needing forgiveness from God. Oh yes, they will admit to the occasional small sin or bad thought, but overall they are good, moral, decent people. They

like law and order and are patriotic to their country, and maybe even serve in the military. Perhaps they give money to charity, volunteer at a homeless shelter, or donate blood at the blood bank. They have never been in trouble with the law and are well thought of by their friends and neighbors. They consider themselves to be better than most people; they have never hurt anyone, and always pay their taxes. They expect that when Saint Peter meets them at the Pearly Gates (incidentally, there is no reference in the Bible to Peter welcoming people into heaven), he will give them a little wink, and in they go.

They reason that the smaller percentage of their life where the bad things occur will be overshadowed by the larger percentage of their life where they do the good stuff. They envision God putting their life on a balancing scale and as long as the good side is heavier than the bad side, they will come out as “basically good” and not a sinner when God judges them.

These people have failed to realize how wretched sin truly is. Scripture says that even one sin keeps a person out of heaven. James 2:10 says that if we break even one of God’s laws, we are as guilty as if we broke *all* of them. Try going just one week without sinning in word, thought, or deed – pretty difficult, right? Actually it is impossible to be perfect; and just being a good citizen cannot erase our sins.

Please carefully consider this question: If we could save ourselves simply by being a good person, then why did Jesus come to earth and suffer and die on the cross? If you watch the movie *The Passion of the Christ*, you will see the agony and tortures that Christ went through on Calvary, but if just being nice would qualify us for heaven, then He went through all of that misery for nothing. No, there is only one way to get rid of sin, and it is not having your good deeds outweigh your bad ones - it is trusting in Christ alone for your salvation.

Next we come to the “Christian sinner”. Is there such a thing? I already referred to these misguided souls in the chapter “Forever Friends.” These are people who commit all the sins that regular sinners commit, but somehow they feel they are different because they go to church. The apostle Paul writes about these people. They call themselves Christians but they are sexually immoral, covetous, drunkards, etc. Paul says, “Don’t even have dinner with these people!” The English writer G.K. Chesterton said, “Just going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than standing in your garage makes you a car.”

The ones in this category have really deceived themselves. They already said ‘the sinner’s prayer’ years ago so they do not see the need for living uprightly now. Some of them go to church with their parents, and maybe even attend youth group. They know

what to say to make grandma feel OK about them; they have everyone fooled – even themselves, but they have not fooled God.

Some of the most evil people come from this group, like the strange woman who forgot her covenant with God, and the man who left the path of righteousness, spoken of in Proverbs 2. There will be a large number of people who will say to the Lord on Judgment Day, “Lord, haven’t we done all this great stuff for You?” He will reply, “Depart from me into everlasting darkness because you work iniquity!” (Matthew 7:21-22). They thought that their church attendance and ministry would cancel out their bad deeds, but they were terribly mistaken.

What do all these categories have in common? Answer: the word ‘sinner’. Whether we care or not, whether we believe it or not, we have all sinned. Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” All means all. Everyone has sinned and is in need of forgiveness. We can do nothing to cleanse our own sins, but there is tremendous news! I have saved the best category for last...

The forgiven sinner. This is the category we want to be in. Let us look at it together. Get this truth into your mind - *God wants you to make it!* He is not looking for a reason to disqualify you from

eternal life. Sometimes we envision God as a big brutish policeman looking down at us from heaven just waiting for us to step out of line so He can crack us over the head with a club.

A few years ago I was talking to a pastor of a strict church. This church has laws for everything, and they believe that a person is made holy by obeying a bunch of legalistic rules. One rule they have is that men have to wear long sleeved shirts at all times, even in the hot summer months. Now, I am all for people dressing modestly, but long sleeves in 100 degree weather? I asked the pastor, “Do you think that God would send a person to hell for wearing short sleeves?” His answer shocked me. He replied, “Well, I’m not sure, but I’m not going to take that chance.” What a distorted view of God!

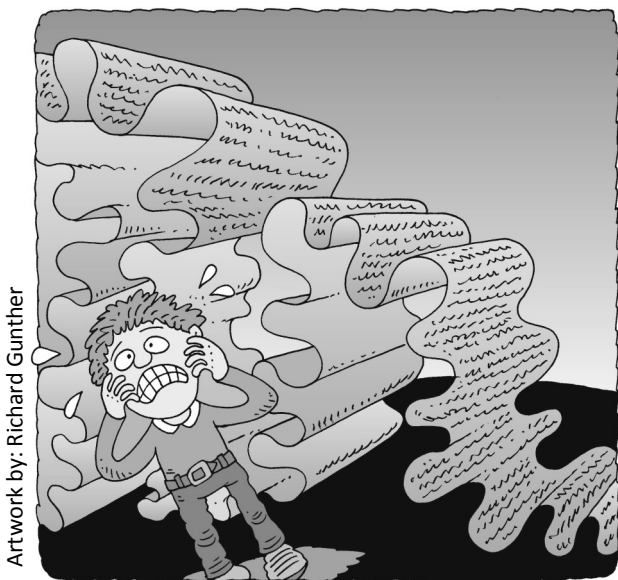


God the Father gave His best, His only begotten Son, that we would not perish. Romans 8:32 says “He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?” The Lord is on your side! He is rooting for you, wanting you to make it! He died for you, and if you were the only person ever born, He would still have died for you. He does not want anyone to perish and He suffered greatly to make provision for you. He certainly is not going to damn a person for wearing a short sleeved shirt!

Erasing the Files

What if you lost everything you had ever created on your computer? All of your music, schoolwork, videos, photos, and projects stored on your hard drive or backed up online —gone with no hope of ever getting them back! How would you feel? You probably would be sick. But if those files were all just evidence and records of your sins and misdeeds; you would be thrilled that they were gone for good and that no one could ever see them again. There are a lot of things I am ashamed of and wish I had never done, but in spite of this, my record in heaven is clear. The Lord Jesus Christ specializes in forgiving sins, and He does a complete job.

Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us.” Do you know why that verse says our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west, and not as far as the north is from south? Imagine you were holding a globe. If you took your finger and began to move it north to the top of the globe and kept going, it would eventually start going south. Now take your finger and begin to move east along the globe. Your finger would keep moving east forever and it would never go west, *because east and west never meet*. That is the illustration that the Bible uses to teach us about forgiven sins – God removes them completely from us.



SIN LIST

There is a song written by Keith and Melody Green entitled “When I Hear the Praises Start.”¹⁷ There is a line in it that says:

*“I see no stain upon you
because you are My child,
and you know Me.
To Me you’re only holy;
nothing that you’ve done remains,
only what you do for Me.”*

In other words, when we repent, He only remembers us for good. The church in Corinth had some members who had done terrible things. Almost every sin possible was committed by these people, but the Apostle Paul told them that despite all their past depravity, they were now washed, cleansed and justified (as though they had never sinned) in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God (1 Corinthians 6:11).

Proverbs 28:13 tells us, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes them will have mercy.” Of course, this does not mean we should just go off and willfully sin and then presume God will forgive us. It is not wise to play games with God, but when we do slip and fall, if we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).

The Bottom Line

Do you realize how very special you are to God? He created you for a specific purpose and has reserved an eternal inheritance for you. He wants you to know His goodness.

He is not searching around for any little excuse He can find in order to punish you or separate you from Himself. If He did, He would not have to look very far. All He would have had to do is leave you as you were - wallowing in your sins. You and I were already enemies of God, but the wonderful truth is that God is not willing that any should perish. God's specialty is forgiving sinners.

Job 33:27-28 (KJV) says, "He looketh upon men, and if any say, I have sinned, and perverted that which was right, and it profited me not; He will deliver his soul from going into the pit, and his life shall see the light." He wants you to spend eternity with Him in heaven. He designed you and is intimately familiar with every aspect of your life. He knows all of your good points, as well as your sins and failings, yet He still loves you. When He died on the cross He did it so you could have forgiveness and cleansing from sin. He has erased the files that contain your sins and He can give you victory in every area of life.

CONCLUSION

Let's Finish Well

Congratulations - You have made it to the end of the book. We have discussed all kinds of heavy topics, like: free will, music, sex, friends, addiction, marriage, and “waiting for marshmallows.” Now, how do we wrap everything up into a neat little package? Let’s talk about ‘The End of the Matter’.

Years ago, my uncle gave me a small wooden plaque that he brought back from Indonesia. On it are three little words: “Let’s Finish Well”. I keep it in my study to help me remember that it is how we finish life’s race that truly matters. As we have learned in this book, the decisions that we are making *right now* will determine what our spiritual state is going to be like at the conclusion of this life.

Life is limited, and the length of it is uncertain, so we need to make wise choices now while we still have the opportunity. Rev. Billy Graham made an excellent point in one of his books: Everyone chooses – even by *not* making a choice. He used the example of a person deciding whether or not to get on a scheduled airline flight. If the airplane is scheduled to leave at 11:00 AM and you do not make a choice to

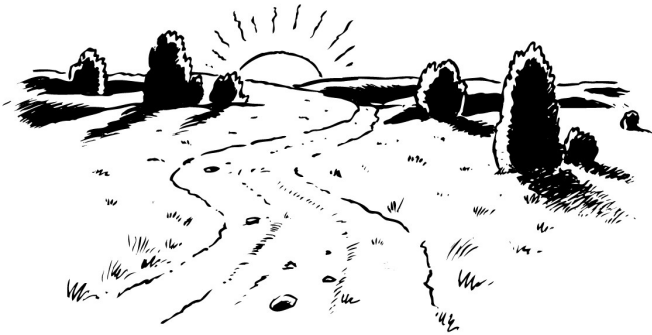
board before that time, the airplane will leave without you, *and you have made your choice by simply doing nothing*. The plane is now airborne and there is no possible chance for you to change your mind.



High school students spend countless hours trying to determine which college to attend. They read brochures, practice for entrance exams, visit web sites, and even travel to prospective schools to help them determine where they want to spend the next four years of their life. If that much care goes into the decision of school selection, would it not be a good use of your time to give thought to where you will spend the next trillion years?

There was a relative of mine who, upon his death, wanted his name engraved on a tombstone that depicted a weary cowboy slumped forward on his horse, with arrows through his hat. The stone said, "The end of the trail". However, death is not the end of the trail, as some people believe; it is actually the start of eternity. How we complete this life determines where we will begin the next one. No matter how you started out here, while you are still alive you have the hope of finishing well with God's help. Do not give up!

The heavenly navigation system that God has provided through His Word, will keep you on the path that grows brighter and brighter unto the perfect day. If you follow God's Perfect System (G.P.S.) throughout life's journey, it will bring you to a glorious destination.



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NOTES

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