

15 Common Pitfalls Study

What Is This Study About?

This study builds off the Sin and Faith Circle study. When you realize how fear and control dominate your behavior, it is necessary to identify *why* you think the way you do. The 15 Pitfalls is organized into 4 main areas where our thinking may be wrong.

- 1) The Nature of God
- 2) Spiritual Warfare
- 3) Sin Creates Inner Conflict
- 4) Proper Expectations

How Will This Help Me?

You may not struggle in each of these four areas, but I am confident you struggle in at least one. What should we expect when we walk as aliens in a foreign land? The world is under the influence of the evil one, and we live with the effects of that influence every day. Satan is the father of lies, and it is our job to rightly discern God's truth from Satan's lies. That sounds simpler than it is. We are told to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. Yet, if our worldview is based on what we hear in the media, from our governmental leaders, and even our friends and family, our perceptions may be based on things that are not true. I have realized that some people's thinking is so distorted, they truly believe that what they are thinking and doing is right when it is very wrong. They are not intending to be rebellious, but they are walking in darkness and not light.

The most obvious place to begin is to compare what you believe to God's Word. This study is a brief overview of areas where your thinking may be leading to bad actions.

How to Use

My suggestion is to begin with prayer. Earnestly ask the Holy Spirit to lead you into all truth and reveal where your thinking may be incorrect. Start with the Nature of God. Write down things you believe to be true about God. What is your perception of God? Is He the lover of your soul or do you see Him as harsh and ready to punish you for any bad behavior? Does He see me? Does He care about me? Why did He not answer my prayers for the healing of a loved one?

Take your time and work through all four areas systematically. Listen to what the Holy Spirit is saying and what other verses He may be leading you to consider. He will be your guide.

After you have finished this process, go back to your sin circle and see if you have more clarity as to how your thinking leads to your behavior and emotions. Do you feel more peaceful? Do you feel more joy?

15 Common Pitfalls

How to Use

I have helped hundreds of people find their freedom throughout the last several decades. I have also talked to others that have done the same and shown them this list of 15 common pitfalls. I cannot think of a person whose main struggles were not on this list. By using the title “pitfalls”, I am not implying these 15 items are all the pitfalls. Not properly understanding these topics can and does lead to confusion.

Most people are overwhelmed when they look at the vast resources available to Christians. Where do they start and what do they read are hard questions to ask. At Freedom in Christ, the number of resources available can make it tough to know where to start. This study intends to give you a grid or template to assist you in that process. It is a very simple outline to help guide your thinking.

You will not struggle with every item on the list. I encourage you to begin with the nature of God. Take some time to consider who God is and what He is like. Is He loving? Is He good? Is He angry with me? What you think about God will determine how you live your life. The four topics under the nature of God are very brief explanations of His character. I also reference other Freedom in Christ books that will give you a deeper dive into the topic. The summaries are not exhaustive and are intended to be a springboard into deeper study.

As I am writing this, I cannot think of a single person that did not have some level of misunderstanding about God. Under item 1, most do not understand Jesus came to give us life, life to the full, and that life begins now and not in eternity. We are not existing and trudging through life as we wait on eternity. Most do not realize Jesus came to destroy the works of the enemy. That is a huge concept because Satan is the reason the goal of Eden was not realized. Most do not fully understand item 2: God’s intentions. We forget God never intended man to live in a fallen world and struggle with the sin nature inherited

from Adam. We live in this condition because Adam forfeited his God-given authority to Satan, the rebel holder of that authority. Why does God allow bad things to happen to good people? Why does God not heal everyone? These are common questions. If you do not have a proper understanding of how things were meant to be, you begin to question God and His goodness. This is the case for many unbelievers today.

Item 3 is Righteousness and Justice. Righteousness is the state of a person in right relationship with God; Justice is a divinely righteous act by God to promote equality among humanity. These two concepts are the foundation of God’s throne and at the heart of who He is and what He does. To misunderstand that is to miss the big point.

Item 4 is Adoption. I hear testimonies from people who testify they feel heard and seen. That is the desire of every person on earth. We want to be significant and loved. We want to matter to someone. The entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of adoption. As a believer, you are a son or daughter, and every other believer is a brother or sister. We do not have to earn the love of God. We have that as part of being in the family. It is a beautiful thing. We can approach God boldly and call Him Abba (daddy). He invites us into His presence and loves to see us happy. Think with me for a minute about how intensely you love your children and grandchildren (if you have them). Is there anything you would not do for them? Don’t you feel their happiness and their sadness? Of course you do. If we who are sinful and selfish can love that much, how much more pure and powerful is the love from the Creator of the Universe?

Do you see how misunderstanding any part of this brief description of the nature and character of God can skew your thinking? I read *Knowledge of the Holy* by A.W. Tozer at least 10 times. Tozer had an intense love and understanding of the splendor and beauty of the nature of God. I would read a page of the book



and spend the rest of the day thinking about what it meant. I would ask God to show me more of who He is. I want to know God deeply. I want to reflect His great love to a world that desperately needs it. I want kindness, mercy, and grace to ooze from my body. I want the sweet aroma of Christ to be present when I leave the room. I don't want to stink the place up because of my presence.

I pray that is your desire! Take your time and work through this list. You do not have to be in a rush. You can read the summaries of any of these topics in less than 5 minutes. That is intentional. The emphasis is not on more knowledge and facts. The emphasis is on a summary of often overlooked areas that you need to re-visit. Sit down with a cup of coffee and an open Bible. Read something on the list and ask God to speak to you. Open your heart to him and let Him talk with you. He loves you with the most intense love you can ever imagine. He is most glorified when we find pleasure in Him. He is our daddy and He has a plan for our lives. He is inviting us into a deeper relationship.

You cannot help but sense the surge of evil in the world today. It seems like so many people lost their minds overnight. God is searching the whole world looking for men and women to show Himself strong to. Allow the struggles and sufferings of living in a fallen world to grow your faith and prove your belief in Him is worth it. Allow the power of God to move in you. Imagine the largest nuclear blast you can imagine exploding on the earth. That doesn't begin to compare to the power God wants to make available to and through us. It is the power of love that overcomes every objection and obstacle. If evil is increasing, you can rest assured God is pouring out more of His Spirit upon us who believe.

This is the time I waited for all my life. All the reading, studying, meditating, praying, and thoughts about God are for this time and season. For decades I have said a time is coming when unity in the body would be a necessity, not an option or luxury. Well, friend, I believe that time is now. I urge you to cleanse the temple (your body) first. Go through the *Steps to Freedom* and confess (agree with God) and repent of any sin present in your life. Do not let sin block the flow of the Spirit and the saving blood that cleanses us.

It's game time. What a wonderful time to be alive. I believe with all my heart Satan will misplay his hand in a big way very soon. He knows his time is short and he is desperate to deceive as many as possible. But his tactics and his influence on the elites of our world and their thirst for control and power will backfire. Their use of fear to change the world order will cause great suffering for us. That suffering will produce a confidence in Christ many do not currently possess. 1 Peter 4:1 says "he who has suffered in his body is done with sin." Extreme suffering to the point of loss of life or imprisonment for our beliefs will accelerate our maturity exponentially.

Can you imagine believers who have suffered and persevered determining they are done with petty sins? Every breath they take from here on out is to advance the Kingdom of God at all costs. There is no fear of death or what any person or government can do to them. They are fearless and unafraid. It will be the army that ushers in the return of Christ. I pray I see that in my time on this earth. I am seeing a rise in courage and conviction amount other believers. The outpouring of the Spirit at Asbury college happened right before this was written. That outpouring spread to other places, and I believe it is merely the outer bands of a tremendous storm of righteousness coming upon the earth.

I pray that this simple summary of things to consider and reconsider will help you get ready for this exciting time to be alive. I pray that He will give you understanding and the power to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the amazing love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph 3:18-19)!!

Why Jesus Came

Ask most Christians why Jesus came, and they say to die for their sins. If they receive Christ, their sins will be forgiven, and they will go to heaven when they die. The answer is true, but it is incomplete.

Why does that matter?

To understand why this is important, let's look at what happened in the garden. Man and woman are tempted by the evil one, are separated from the presence of God because of their sin, and die spiritually.

Jesus came to restore what was lost. He came to first, destroy the works of the enemy (1 John 3:8); second, die for our sins so we are forgiven and our relationship with God is restored (Romans 6:23, 1 Timothy 1:15); and third give us life and life to the full (Romans 6:23, John 3:16, John 10:10).

We were deceived, separated from God, and lost spiritual life. The death and resurrection of Jesus accomplished two-thirds of the gospel. **We have access to God, and we have a new spiritual life that begins now, not in eternity.** And the reason we fell is that we were deceived by an enemy, but his power over us has been destroyed.

Many Christians struggle today because they understand only a part of the gospel. They know their sins are forgiven, they believe eternal life begins when they die, and they are unaware they have an enemy. But this third of the gospel — that we have an enemy but

his power is destroyed — is what most of the world's population is waiting to hear. Spiritism is the dominant religious orientation in the world. More people practice spiritism than any other religion. They consult witch doctors, shamans, medicine men, avatars, and spirit guides. Psychic hotlines are on TV commercials at all hours of the day.



Colossians 2:13-15 shows the three things accomplished by Jesus in one verse. When you were dead in your sins and the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, **God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins,** having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross. And having **disarmed the powers and authorities**, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

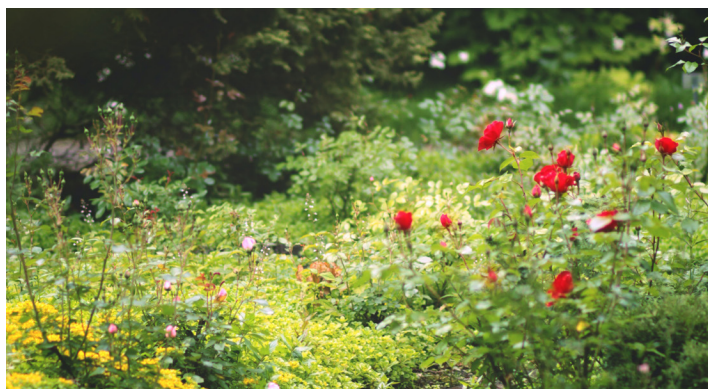
See Chapter 2 of *Victory Over the Darkness* (revised and updated edition), and Chapter 1 of *Restored* for more teaching on this topic.

God's Original Intent

Eden: Genesis 1 & 2

In Genesis, God created the perfect world for Adam and Eve. It was a place of life, joy, beauty, and communion with God. There was prosperity for all, no oppression, no sickness, no poor, no war, and no famine. Man was in harmony with God and the earth. God blessed them and said be fruitful and populate the earth, subdue it, and rule over the fish, birds, and every living creature that moves on the ground. We must understand this was God's original intention, the way He intended for us to live.

Then, Adam and Eve are deceived by Satan, and Satan usurps their authority and right to control. Now we know that the whole earth is under the control of the evil one (1 John 5:19). Adam and Eve are banished from the garden, and the peace and tranquility they enjoyed is relinquished.



The In-Between Time of Rescue, Redemption, and Restoration

After the fall, the world became a place of loss, anxiety, violence, and death. The earth is

cursed and does not readily produce food. Eve was to be the mother of all life and now suffers in childbirth. Adam was to rule the earth and now he will return to the dust he was created through death. The world becomes a place of competition with others, and there is a constant dread that their labor will not be enough.

Paradise had been shattered, and man becomes self-centered. Death, disease, sin, pain, suffering, and oppression are the new normal. *This was never God's will for man.*

When Jesus came, he came to usher in the new kingdom. This is a complicated topic to understand. The kingdom came, the kingdom is coming and the kingdom will come fully in the future. In Matthew 28, Jesus begins the Great Commission with these words, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." We live in the tension of the kingdom coming, and the prayer that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

My understanding of this tension is we have the authority of Christ, and the fear of death and the works of the enemy have been defeated. We still die, but there is no fear because we are in right relationship with God and will live with Him forever. Satan has no power over our lives unless we yield it to him. He cannot control a believer. When we sin as believers, we are simply choosing to sin. We are no longer under the power or compulsion of sin.

We are called to suffer as Christ suffered. We will suffer persecution because the world hated Jesus and will hate us. We have been adopted as sons and daughters of the King and we should live in the spirit of adoption and not the spirit of competition. Life is not perfect, but perfect peace is possible through our trust in Him. People still get sick and die. Sometimes God heals and sometimes he does not. That is a mystery that does not have a clear answer on this side of heaven. It makes me sad when I hear people tell the sick they are not healed because they do not have enough faith. I have personally watched dozens of very close, very devout, faith-filled believers die while believing in God for their healing or for someone they love. The thought that God could heal and chooses not to can cause them to be bitter and question the goodness of God. But please remember, He did not create the world like it is. Man sinned and we all are living with the consequences of that original sin. Why does God wait so long to come back and make things right? He is patient and loving. He does not wish any to die separated from Him. A time will come when God says that is enough and Jesus will come back.

New Jerusalem — New Heaven and New Earth: Revelation 21 & 22

In Revelation 21 and 22, we see God fulfill all Eden was meant to become. Mankind is redeemed and restored. All things are as they were originally planned to be. Heaven has come to earth. The new order has come, and the old order has passed away. There is no death, sickness, mourning, crying, or pain. We do not need the sun or the moon because the glory of God gives it light. The gates will never shut because there is no night there.

God's original intention is fulfilled in the end and we will live with him for eternity if our names are found in the Lamb's book of life. No circumstance on earth can steal our joy because we know we have Jesus now and forever. He is our blessed hope!

For more on this topic, see chapter 1 of *Victory Over the Darkness* (Revised and Updated Edition), chapter 7 of *The Bondage Breaker* and chapter 1 of *Restored*.

Righteousness & Justice

Psalm 89:14 says “Righteousness and Justice are the foundation of your throne; love and faithfulness go before you. Isaiah 28:17 says, “I will make justice the measuring line and righteousness the plumb line.”

This concept is one of the more misunderstood issues I have seen in believers. They do not understand God’s intentions or his will, and it causes them to live out their lives incorrectly.

This concept is so important to our understanding of scripture. I encourage you to write R or J every time in your Bible you see the word righteousness or justice. You will look at the scriptures differently when you see R and J on so many pages of the scriptures. To gain a better understanding, let’s define the terms. **Righteousness is the state of a person in right relationship with God (as he ought to be). It is being in right relationship with God and man. Justice is a divinely righteous act by God or man to promote equality among humanity. It is actions taken to restore righteousness and prevent injustice. So, righteousness is being right and justice is doing right.** That is a bit over-simplified, but it helps you grasp the intent of the terms.

When we think of justice, we think of someone getting what they deserve. We want the perpetrators of a crime to face justice. Our word for that is **retribution** which is punishment inflicted on someone for a wrong or criminal act. We also want those wronged to have **restitution** which means the

restoration of something lost or stolen to its proper owner.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, our call to do justice is clear. “How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy, deliver them from the hand of the wicked” (Psalm 82:2-3). “Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice, and encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow” (Isaiah 1:16-17).

It was never God’s intention for anyone to suffer oppression at the hands of another person. So, God calls us to risk our safety and security to stand up for those that cannot stand up for themselves. Oppose the wicked that oppress the needy. Oppose the courts that will not rule for justice. And expect nothing in return because the needy have no way to repay you.

Abraham believed and it was counted to him as righteousness. He came into the right relationship with God through his belief in God. Righteousness also refers to the saving actions of God. It is so much a part of God’s character that He told us in Matthew 6:33, “But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” The things to be added when we seek His kingdom and righteousness are what we wear, what we eat, and the basic necessities of life.



If we understand that God never intended for sin to enter the world and separate man from God, we can better understand the importance that righteousness and justice play. God is slow to anger. He is compassionate and gracious and abounding in love. His desire is for all men to believe in him and trust him. He wants life for us as it was originally intended in the garden.

When we seek justice, let us not be quick to desire retribution and for someone to “get what they deserve.” Too often we want mercy for ourselves and justice for others. If we want mercy for ourselves, we must be quick to extend mercy and grace to others that have wronged us and pray that God brings them into the right relationship with himself.

I appreciate the intentions of the social justice warriors of our day. Communism and socialism attempted to eliminate injustice. Man simply cannot fix the woes of the world without God. Without God, stronger men will always rule over the weaker. The rich and powerful will rule over the poor and control things to their advantage. Only when we confess our sins and turn in repentance to God can we carry out justice and righteousness on the earth. Without that, we simply project our hurt, hate, and sin tendencies upon the world we are trying to help.

Adoption

Adoption as sons and daughters is a concept that swept me off my feet. The understanding that the creator of the universe, knowing my every thought and action, loves me and accepts me as a father blows my mind. It is a thought so lofty I have to often remind myself it is true.

To summarize this concept, I am paraphrasing from the wonderful book by J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, Chapter 19. You can sum up the whole New Testament teaching by saying it is the revelation of the Fatherhood of the holy Creator. If you want to know how well a person understands Christianity, find out what he thinks about being God's child and having God as his Father.

Our understanding of Christianity cannot be greater than our grasp of adoption. God sent his Son to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full (adoptive) rights of sons (Gal 4:4-5).

The New Testament brings a new relationship. His covenant name has now become Father. The fear of approaching God and His throne is replaced by our faith in Christ which allows us to approach God with freedom and confidence (Eph 3:12). We have been adopted by God. We are His sons and daughters. Adoption is a family idea born out of love by our Father. Closeness, affection, and generosity are at the heart of the relationship.

To be right with God the Judge is a great thing, but to be loved and cared for by God the Father is greater.

“Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the sons of God” (1 John 3:1). We can not fully feel the wonder of the passage from death to life which takes place in the new birth until we see it as a transition, not simply out of condemnation into acceptance, but out of bondage and destitution into the safety, certainty and enjoyment of the family of God.



The entire Christian life has to be understood in terms of adoption. Sonship must be the controlling thought. Take a moment to consider your new identity in Christ. I am a child of God, God is my Father, heaven is my home, every day is one day nearer, my Savior is my brother and every Christian is my brother.

That is your identity. Your Father's happiness is voluntarily bound to your happiness. We know as humans that we are happiest when those we truly love are happy. I pray that this awesome knowledge changes the way you view God. He doesn't give you rules to follow to restrict your happiness. He created you and loves you as His son or daughter and wants you to be fully alive in Christ.

Forgiveness

I believe forgiveness is one of the most important and overlooked keys to living free in Christ. Many people have asked me what spiritual warfare looks like. They expect an answer that is creepy and looks like the movie *The Exorcist*. In reality, it looks as simple and innocent as unforgiveness. I cannot remember talking with a single person that did not have areas of unforgiveness in their life.



Unforgiveness by Christians affords Satan his greatest access to the Church, and many believers are bound to the past because they have failed to forgive others as Christ has forgiven them.

Satan uses unforgiveness in the lives of believers to stifle their growth and intimacy with the Father. Our desire to be strong and self-protect makes it easy for us to miss the importance of forgiveness to God. I want to point out a few common areas where misunderstanding or deception has held those I've tried to help in bondage:

1. Don't forget to forgive yourself. We tend to be harder on ourselves than anyone else in our life. Many hold themselves to an

unachievable standard of perfection and have disgust over their failures.

2. Don't forget to forgive God. He has done nothing wrong, but we still blame him for things that went wrong and we believe he could have prevented them.

3. Forgiveness is not forgetting. You may never forget what someone did to you, but you can forgive them.

4. Forgiveness is a choice of the will. God gives you the ability to extend His grace and forgiveness as you have received it. We are never more like Jesus than when we choose to forgive.

5. Forgiveness is not reconciliation. It is possible to have forgiven and continue to be estranged from a relationship. Reconciliation is dependent on two people agreeing to be in a relationship; forgiveness is up to you.

6. Forgiveness is not letting someone off the hook for their bad behavior. You are letting yourself off the hook. We cling to the memory and pain of past hurt, and it occupies our thinking. The offender may not acknowledge they did anything wrong and probably seldom thinks of you.

7. God requires us to forgive. In Matthew 6:9-13, Jesus told us how to pray. We need to remember verses 14 and 15 that say, "For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you."

But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” We do not have the luxury of asking for God’s forgiveness, mercy and grace for ourselves while we choose not to extend that to others.

8. Forgiveness is not a weakness. It takes a courageous person to not hang on to anger and seek revenge. Trust God with the outcome for those that hurt you. Pray that they repent and turn back to God. One of the ways you know you have truly forgiven someone is when you feel the desire to pray for them again.

Freedom in Christ has a lot of material on forgiveness. Please refer to chapter 4 in the free resource book, *Restored*, chapter 11 in *Victory Over the Darkness* (revised and updated edition), and Step 4 of the *Steps to Freedom in Christ*.

Satan's Schemes

One of the duties of a football coach is to study the opposing team and come up with a game plan to defeat them. What defensive scheme does a team run to shut down a potent offense like the Kansas City Chiefs? The scheme is a result of studying the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing team and calculating where they might have an advantage. The coaches and players watch hours of film to spot a potential weakness they can exploit.

That is exactly how Satan plans his attack against us as believers. Satan knows that Jesus died to restore and redeem mankind into a right relationship with God. He knows believers have the mind of Christ and the Holy Spirit residing in them. With that knowledge, what would be your plan if you were Satan? They cannot be defeated if they believe the truth. So, his only plan is to make us doubt the truth.

We are told to not be ignorant of Satan's **schemes (2 Cor. 2:11)** and take every **thought** captive to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). **The word for schemes and thought is the same word, noema, that means mind.** The playing field (or battlefield) is between your ears. **The battlefield is your mind. If Satan can control your thoughts, he can control your life.**

If you want to change your behavior or emotions, change what you think.

Identifying wrong thinking is not as simple as it sounds. Satan deceives us into believing lies. I have seen people so deceived in certain areas

that their thinking is clouded and confused. They do not process information correctly and end up with bizarre behavior that is abnormal for them. They do not understand they have been deceived. The potency of deception is the deceived person does not know they are deceived. Bad actions lead to bad habits and repeating bad habits leads to strongholds. A stronghold is like a deep rut in the woods. You see a mudhole and steer your truck to the higher ground, but the truck ends up sliding into the slippery rut and you get stuck. Strongholds are mental ruts in our thinking, and they are the reason why many of us stay stuck.



I routinely tell people we are not to be ignorant of Satan's schemes and ask them what is his scheme against them. I have not had one person answer that definitively. I get a blank stare and the question, "what do you mean by that statement?" This entire series—the Sin and Faith Circles, the 2 Peter Study, and the 15 Common Pit Falls—is an attempt to help you determine where your thinking and behavior is not aligned with the Word of God.

As you go through these studies, ask God to reveal to you where and why you struggle. Most people can identify the top one or two areas where they struggle but cannot tell you why. The intention is to help you get past the common areas of struggle and move on to maturity in Christ.

Have you ever run a three legged race? You tie your left ankle to another person's right ankle and then run the race. It is a comical site to see two people take a few strides and fall to the ground. It is impossible to run a race tied to something else. If you want to run the race effectively, it is necessary to untie your feet first and remove your blindfold of deception.

For additional resources on understanding Satan's schemes and strongholds, see Chapter 9 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, revised and updated edition, Chapters 4, 10 and 11 of *The Bondage Breaker*, completely revised and expanded, and the Stronghold Buster Seminar on the free resources section of our website, www.ficm.org. It is also recommended you read *Victory Over the Darkness* in its entirety.

People Are Not the Enemy

When we think about the armor of God in our western mindset, it is easy to translate it into an offensive mindset that is going to battle. Paul is careful to tell us we are not fighting against flesh and blood. People are not our enemies. We put this armor on to enable us to stand against the enemy's schemes. These schemes come through the rulers, the authorities, the powers of this dark world, and the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm. Paul is directing our attention to the cosmic, unseen world he has been talking about in the entire book of Ephesians.

What exactly does this unseen world look like? Ephesians 1:17-23 gives us a little more insight. Paul prays that the glorious Father would give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we may know Him better. Wisdom and revelation are a gift from God. Our ability to know the unknown and to see the unseen is not natural...it is from the realm of the Spirit. He goes on to pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened. This inner awareness brings clarity and lets us see something invisible to the natural man. We become aware in our inner being that the power that raised Jesus from the dead is working in us. This is the power that not only raised Jesus from the dead but seated him at the right hand of God, far above all rule, authority, power, and dominion. God placed all things under his feet and appointed him head over everything. This list of evil forces includes any evil that exists today or may exist in the future age. He is Lord over all things and all spiritual beings are subject to Him and His authority.

We see in Ephesians 2 that God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus. What a beautiful picture of triumph and conquest! Jesus has defeated Satan and his demons and they get to watch Jesus sit down at the right hand of God. Game, set, match. The game is over, and they are defeated. And to add insult to injury, he escorts the believers in and sits them down with Christ. Don't miss the rub-in-your-face aspect of verse 7 to the enemy. We are in God's trophy case in plain view of all the evil forces as a testimony to the riches of the grace of God expressed by his kindness to us in Jesus. We are trophies of His grace.

Now, in this context, we are told in Ephesians 6 to put on this armor so that we can take our stand. We are not standing against a force like a strong wind that can blow us over at any moment. We are standing in the presence of a foe that knows he is defeated and knows our place of authority. This is why the armor is not meant to arm us to gear up and go attack. The battle has already been fought. We simply are told to stand firm in the knowledge of what has already happened and who we are in our new identity with Jesus. Psalm 23 describes how I view the posture we are to take. Imagine being in a place where your enemies have surrounded you. You look around and start to fear their attack. God calmly tells you to not fear any evil because He is with us. He prepares a table for you in the presence of your enemies. Can you imagine the insult the enemy feels when you see them around you and you ignore them and simply sit down for a meal? You turn your back on them, relax and

enjoy your time with your Creator. They are no threat to you while you are in the presence of your shepherd.

In light of this knowledge, how do the rulers of evil try to defeat us? They have to lie. Their job is to convince you that what Jesus has done for you is not enough. Through craftiness, deceit, schemes, and constant false accusations, they lay the groundwork that eats away at our peace and slowly drains the joy from our lives if we believe their lies. After all, we are not fighting humans, and we can't wage this war with logic and human understanding. This battle is fought on two fronts. The first front is ourselves. We fight against all the condemning thoughts that run through our minds about our lack of consistency in following Christ. We all struggle with this and the condemnation sounds reasonable to us. It sounds like this... If you loved God, then why did you think or do that?



The second front is the assault from others. We have constant conflict and struggles with family, friends, coworkers, and people we don't even know. If Satan can make you think someone with skin is your enemy, he has the focus on them and not on him. We are fighting an unseen force that wishes to remain unseen. We are told to resist the enemy and he will flee. Too many believers today are unaware

of the methods and schemes the enemy uses against us daily. The evil spiritual forces have observed your behavior, your personality, your tendencies, how you promote yourself, how you defend yourself, how you indulge yourself, what makes you happy, and what makes you sad since you were born. They are crafty, and they study your life like a pro football team studies the other team before a game.

Again, the battle we fight is not physical, and people are not our enemy. We must know the truth of God's word and see the assaults against our minds as lies from the enemy. These lies are like the arrows that were lit on fire and shot at the opposing army. We hold up our shield of truth that extinguishes the flaming lies of the enemy. We remind ourselves of God's truth and we stand firm in that truth. Eventually, our emotions will follow what we believe.

The only advancing assault we are to carry out is to approach our enemies with the love of Christ. We love them and forgive them rather than retaliate against them. This task is the hardest thing we will ever do and is impossible to carry out in the flesh. Only the Spirit of the living God can enable us to love those that hate us and hurl insults at us. Turning the other cheek is not an easy thing to do. When our enemies see the love and mercy we are extending, it is the true reflection of Christ in us. It is the power of love lived out in our lives.

For more teaching on this topic, see chapter 12 of *Victory Over the Darkness* (revised and updated edition).

The Truth About Repentance

Repentance is one of those words we have heard 1000 times. Most of us can define the word but somehow have a wrong impression of what it means. We know it means to change your mind and to go in the opposite direction.

I was in Wales several years ago and got to visit a local church with a friend that attended there. Wales was already in a post-Christian state. The locals were not interested in attending and thought the church was irrelevant. When asked if they wanted to attend a special Easter service, their answers were filled with vulgarity and anger. To survive and not lose their buildings, the church rented out space to the townspeople. They had weddings, funerals, art classes, dance lessons, and a host of other activities. One of the offerings was a get-to-know Jesus class. I attended that class with 10 locals that had a small desire to learn about Jesus.

I listened carefully and observed the class as they listened to the teacher. How do you explain terminology to unbelievers, most of whom had never heard of God? The teacher struggled, and the class was disconnected. I asked myself, “what would I say if I had a chance to talk?” At about that time, my friend asked me if I wanted to say anything. I jumped at the opportunity to engage the class as I asked God to lead my thoughts and words. I asked them why they were so angry at the church. How do you feel when people from the church say you are lost? What does it mean to repent? The class was suddenly awake and energetic. They were getting a chance to talk and not listen. They vented their anger at God and the church.

Then I explained repentance to them. Imagine you are suddenly aware for whatever reason that God is real. You find yourself standing face to face with Him in the fullness of his glory. The light of His presence is so bright you cannot see anything but light. You are suddenly aware that He is holy and you are not. You fall on your face before Him in fear and shame. He approaches you and gently reaches down and lifts your head until your eyes meet His. The kindness and love flowing from His eyes overwhelm you and you look down again. He says it is OK to look up because He loves you and desires a relationship with you. You ask Him to forgive you for your unbelief. Your many sins flood through your mind, and you drop your eyes yet again. He softly tells you He has covered those sins and shame if you will only trust Him and let Him be your God. You burst into tears, and He embraces you as only a father can do. This is where you always belonged and all of a sudden you realize that.



As you are basking in this new relationship, you remember some past sin that was pleasurable. You turn your gaze from God and toward your sin. The longer you think about your sin, the easier it is to forget His presence. Finally, you turn and walk away from the light into

the darkness and pursue your sin. The further you walk, the darker it becomes. You hear His voice inside of your soul calling you to return. The last place you want to be when you are in the dark and in sin is to be in His presence. In His great kindness, He tells you it is OK to turn and come back to Him. He reminds you He is so much greater than your sin and will give you His peace and comfort if you return. As you walk back into the light, you see Him approaching you with the same love you saw before. He loves his child and welcomes you back with amazing forgiveness and warmth.

And that, my friends, is repentance. Some in the room were in tears and all were quiet. I asked them what they thought, and the common response was “is that true? Does he love us like that?” They thought of repentance as someone yelling at them from a pulpit to REPENT or burn in hell, which turned them away from Christianity. Allowing them to vent and feel understood gave me the opportunity to tell the story. They resisted the image of angry church leaders and an angry God but were changed by the image of a loving father.

The Steps to Freedom in Christ is a practical, in-depth process of repentance. I urge you to walk through the steps with the image of a loving father gently inviting you back into a proper relationship. He is not an angry God, and He longs for you to walk in the light as He is in the light.

Trials & Temptations

James 1 concentrates on trials and temptations. It is important to understand what each means. **God sends trials to bring out the best in us** (see Abraham in Gen 2:21), **but Satan sends temptations to bring out the worst in us. Trials come from things and events outside of us. Temptations come from the evil desires within us** (James 1:14).

One of the best tests of Christian maturity is enduring difficulty. When we go through personal trials and hardships, we discover what kind of faith we possess. We quickly discover whether our faith is on solid or unstable ground.

We are told to consider it pure joy whenever we face these trials. Doesn't that sound a little strange? It may at first, but not after you have endured many trials. The trials are meant to show you your weakness as well as the compassion and willingness of God to sustain you through the trial. Endurance (patience) through trials produces perseverance which works in us to form our character.

As new believers, the sudden onslaught of problems or circumstances usually brings terror and confusion. But as we are tested and tried by God, we gain experiential knowledge that God will see us through everything that happens to us in this life. He controls the events of the world, and He has a purpose behind every event.

Have you noticed there are things that tempt some people but don't tempt others? Why is that? **Temptation gains its power when it**

connects to a corresponding desire within you. If sexual desire is strongly present in your mind, any temptation in that area has power. Likewise, if you have never used alcohol or drugs, those temptations have no power over you. We tend to think we can continue to think about sin in our minds as long as we do not act upon those impulses. That is exactly what Satan wants you to think. If we give mental space to sinful thoughts and desires, they eventually show up in our life and are a magnet for sin.

Jesus was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. Yet, Jesus had no inner cravings or desires that were sinful. Jesus said, "The ruler of the world is coming, and he has nothing in me" (John 14:30).

An interesting thought on trials and temptations is they can show the possibilities in a person, both good and bad. Our greatest strengths exercised in the spirit may be our greatest weaknesses exercised in the flesh. As an example, a pastor's greatest gift may be his compassion and willingness to help those in his congregation. Suppose a woman with a struggling marriage seeks out his help. Over time, she notices the pastor listens intently and is concerned about her well-being. She feels heard and understood. She does not have that in her husband and always desired that in a man. The pastor's greatest strength of compassion and genuine concern exercised in the spirit can easily turn into misguided affection in the flesh. That temptation will have power if he entertains evil desires in his mind.

We must be aware of our inner cravings and desires and practice regular repentance. We have the ability to control what we allow in our minds.

It's natural to blame others for our sins and bad decisions. We blame our spouse, our parents, our boss, even God. But James offers a sharp rebuke to those who blame God for their sinning. "When tempted, no one should say God is tempting me. For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone, but each one is tempted when by his own evil desires, he is dragged away and enticed" (James 1:13-14).



The source of the temptation is from within each of us. It is our own evil desires, lust, or inner cravings that come from our flesh. It's important to note that not all desire in itself is sinful. What I am talking about here is evil desires arising in our flesh that cause us to act out in sinful ways. Lust means to add to, meaning something is being added to a normal drive. When we are tempted, we are dragged away and enticed to sin. The words dragged away and enticed are hunting terms that form an image of a hunter or fisherman using bait to lure the prey.

So, a person both builds his own trap and then gets baited by it. It's like designing a fishing

lure with a sharp hook and casting it into the water. You then jump out of the boat and grab the lure you built and suffer the effect of the hook. **Temptation always uses a bait that appeals to our specific desires. The bait attracts and disguises the fact that yielding to that sinful desire brings sorrow and punishment.** David would have never sinned with Bathsheba and had her husband killed if he had thought through the consequences of his passion. Temptation can override your senses and cause you to make terrible decisions.

The man that is tempted and gives in to the temptation five minutes later does not know the power of temptation. He cannot imagine what life could be like 24 hours later had he asked God to give him the strength to overcome. The more you say no to temptation and allow your mind to be conformed to Christ, the more temptations begin to lose their power.

Temptation always begins with conscious thought. The moment the thought hits our brain, we have the choice to entertain the thought or reject it. **Practice threshold thinking** that immediately dismisses any and every thought that is not consistent with God and His word. **Through God's help and the power of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to resist temptation and not act on these sinful desires.** It can be helpful to remember the consequences of sinful behavior in your life or the lives of people around you. Sin is pleasurable for a season, but it always leads to death.

Jesus modeled this for us when He was tempted by Satan in the wilderness. He

resisted Satan with the Word of God. Hide His word within you that you may not sin against God. When you know the word and are walking intimately with Jesus, you can see the bait and deal with it decisively. We were meant to walk by faith and not by sight.

For more information on trials and temptations, see chapter 1 and 9 of *The Bondage Breaker*, completely revised and expanded, and chapter 9 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, revised and updated edition.

Emotions vs. Trust

People usually seek out a professional counselor or therapist because they have uncontrolled emotions or behavior. They desperately want to find out what they need “to do” to fix the problem. I had a dad call me and tell me his daughter was acting strangely bizarre. She was climbing out of her window at night and rebelling against any form of order in the home. I surprised him when I said I’m not as concerned about what she is doing as I am with what she is thinking. I asked if he had any idea what his daughter was thinking. He had no clue. He was attempting to modify her behavior without understanding what was causing it. Another time a mom told me her daughter was suffering from terrible panic attacks and depression. I told her virtually the same thing—I was more concerned about what her daughter was thinking than how she was feeling. She also had no clue as to what her daughter was thinking.



When our thinking is faulty, our bodies and emotions get out of sync. **In Lamentations 3, Jeremiah was depressed and hopeless because he wrongly believed God was against him and the cause of his problems.** Later in the chapter, he reminds himself of the

truth about God, his hope is restored and his depression fades away. He did not focus on the depression; he fixed his wrong thinking, and his emotions changed. I call this Stinking Thinking. Wrong thinking always leads to stinky outcomes.

Hope is the emotion I pay the most attention to. Psalm 147:11 says, “The Lord delights in those who fear him, who put their hope in his unfailing love.” When properly focused, the heart is overflowing with hope. Romans 5 talks about faith, hope, and love. Through our faith, we have been justified and have peace with God. We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint because God has poured out his love into our hearts. **When someone has lost or is losing hope, it is an indicator that their thinking is distorted.**

Hope is not unfounded optimism or positive thinking. It is founded on God’s love. Hope comes before faith because nobody steps out in faith if there is no hope. Faith is being sure of what we hope for (see Hebrews 11:1). Life with God is endless hope, and life without God has no hope and is a hopeless end.

I have met people that stuff their emotions and see others’ emotions as weaknesses. I have also seen others that live by what they feel. Both extremes are not healthy. Our emotions are to our souls what physical feelings are to our bodies. Just as we respond to physical pain, so we should respond to our emotions. Emotions are like indicator lights on the dashboard of

our car. When an indicator light is flashing, you do not ignore it. You read the car manual if you are unfamiliar with the light and open the hood to fix the problem.

The emotional reactions of anger, anxiety, depression, and fear are all related to how we think and what we believe. If you want to change how you feel, you need to change what you believe.

I talked with a person struggling with a complex diagnosis of depression. Normal life had become burdensome, and their hope was mostly gone. We spent hours talking about the situation and what they believed to be true about God. Eventually, we went through *The Steps to Freedom in Christ*, and they found great relief. We spent over 5 hours in *The Steps to Freedom in Christ* and never mentioned the word depression. In this case, depression was not the real problem, but a result of faulty thinking about God and the person's inability to trust God with outcomes. Outcomes in the past had turned out poorly, and their trust was gone. When trust was gone, hope was gone, and when hope was gone, depression set in.

However, sometimes depression is more complicated than just fixing wrong thinking. A variety of physical, genetic, and biological factors can contribute to depression. In these cases, treating depression may require additional or ongoing help.

I will say it again because it is so important. Do not ignore your emotions. They let you know what your soul is experiencing. But you cannot control your emotions without changing what you think.

For more information on this topic, see Chapter 1 and 10 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, revised and updated edition, and chapter 1 of *Letting Go of Fear* and our website ficm.org for specific resources on treating depression.

Sin Is a Choice

Do you feel like you have no control over sin? Does it seem more powerful than you and overwhelms you? The simple answer is sin has no power over us and God has given us everything we need in Christ to overcome sin. **As a believer in Christ, sin is always a choice.**

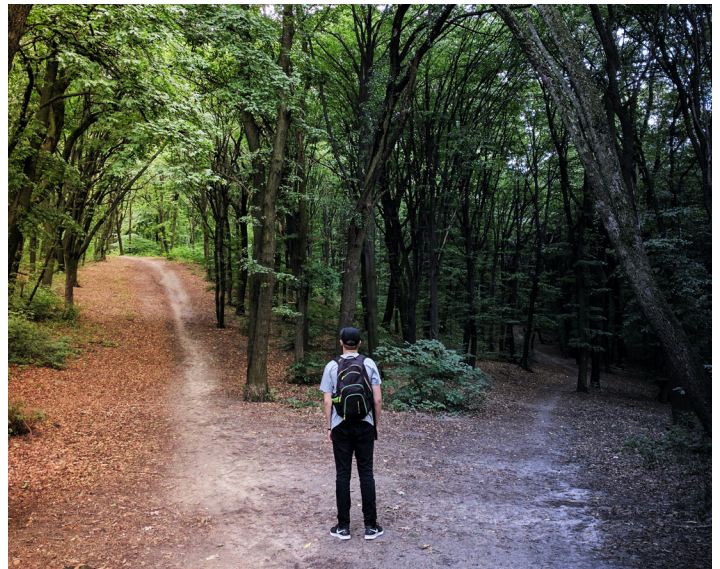
That brings up an uncomfortable reality. If sin has no power over me, then I am willfully and rebelliously choosing not to follow God and choosing to follow sin. That is a bit of a gut punch, but it is true. As humans, we have no choice but to live under a spiritual power—either the Creator of the universe or the god of this world.

When we choose to follow Jesus, we have a new relationship of sonship and a Father we now serve. Our former way of life was walking according to the influence of Satan. We lived according to the lusts of our flesh and indulged the desires of the flesh and the mind. We were by nature objects of God's wrath. But in Christ, we have the authority and power to do God's will, because all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus (see Matthew 28:18).

With this change, our actual natures change. God has given us His Spirit and His mind to cause us to do the things we could not do before. Your new nature replaces your old sinful nature. Your heart becomes His heart and is directed to God rather than toward sin and your old behaviors. The evidence of this change is the conviction you feel when you choose to sin. What you are choosing to do

(sin) is no longer consistent with who you are in Christ.

Nature determines what you do. Fish swim, birds fly, and monkeys climb trees. The new nature in you is like a new spiritual DNA. Romans 6 talks about being dead to sin and alive to Christ. "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?...For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin" (Romans 6:1-2, 6-7).



So, you are instructed to count yourself dead to sin and offer your body to God as an instrument of righteousness. **SIN IS NOT YOUR MASTER!** It goes on to say that when you offer yourself to someone to obey them, you are a slave to them. Therefore, you are either a slave to sin which leads to death or a slave to God which leads to righteousness.

WHATEVER YOU YIELD YOURSELF TO, CONTROLS YOU.

For guys, this should be a chapter of the bible you memorize. I have never met a man that did not struggle at some level with his sexuality. You cannot participate in sexual immorality without offering your body to sin. Sin in the body carries much guilt and shame. The man that has control over his body but not over his mind, struggles almost as much. You are not truly free until you are free physically and mentally.

Old ways of thinking and acting are like ruts in our thinking. It is easy to slide off the road and end up stuck in a muddy rut. Remember, God is merciful and forgiving. Keep reminding yourself who you are. **Romans 5 encourages us to become in practice what we already are in Spirit. In other words, start acting like the person you already are. I tell people we spend our entire lives trying to get into a room we are already in. We are accepted and loved by God and seated in the heavenlies with him. Think about that the next time you struggle with sin.**

Does sin have power over you? Not unless you choose to offer yourself to sin and let it rule over you!

For more on this topic, see Chapter 4 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, revised and updated edition, and chapter 3 of *The Bondage Breaker*, completely revised and expanded edition.

Control

The most common meaning of sin is to miss the mark, deviate from the goal, or take the wrong road. Man was created to live in utter dependence upon the grace and provision of his creator. The fact that God is sovereign essentially means He has the power, wisdom, and authority to do anything He chooses within His creation. He knows all things and controls all things. We sin when we miss this concept. We miss the mark and take the wrong path when we assume control and the outcomes of our lives.

Control is comprised of three components: pride, unbelief, and rebellion.

Pride refuses to depend upon God and be subject to him. It depends on self and does not trust in God. Pride in my life was like an odorless, deadly gas. I did not detect it. It was present and caused a myriad of problems without my notice.



Unbelief refuses to accept the concept of God. The Holy Spirit was sent to convict the world of sin because they did not believe in Jesus. The unbeliever refuses to hear the words of God and obey because he does not

believe. The believer hears the words of God and can be deceived by the enemy to believe they do not apply. I routinely see believers that are prone to performance-based acceptance struggle with the basic understanding that God sees them as perfect in Christ. They often feel inadequate and are burdened by the nagging thought they are not doing enough.

Rebellion means to oppose, resist, or defy one in control. In 1 Samuel 5:23, “For rebellion is like the sin of divination (witchcraft).” Rebellion is subtle. As believers, we can refuse to obey what the Holy Spirit reveals to us because we do not fully understand it. Faith and obedience come before understanding. If you wait to understand before obeying, you will engage your mind in an exercise that exhausts most people and rarely results in obedience.

It is easy to see that the combination of pride, unbelief, and rebellion is a perfect representation of Satan. The word Satan means adversary. He represents everything that is evil and intends to deceive, tempt, torment, and destroy. Before Satan rebelled, he was called Lucifer, meaning light bearer. He was the morning star, the son of the dawn. He was an anointed angelic being that was beautiful. He was blameless in his ways from the day he was created till wickedness was found in him. **His heart became proud because of his beauty.** His wisdom was corrupted because of his splendor. Isaiah 14 contains five “I will” statements that Satan was condemned for. The last one was “I will make a name for myself.” He wanted to be God.

It is important to understand what made Satan fall because he is the one that deceives us. He is the first sinner and the first one to tempt us. Look at his first interaction with mankind in the garden of Eden. The scene shows Satan basically telling Eve she can't trust God. He says to her "God is not good, and He is holding out on you...You will be in control of all things because you will know all things."

The struggle to be in control is nothing less than wanting to be our own god.

The illusion of control is such a silly concept if you take the time to examine it. **To really be in control, you must have perfect knowledge of all things past, present, and future.** Recognizing that we do not have perfect knowledge should be proof enough that we need someone who does possess perfect knowledge and perfectly controls all things. But many people don't see it that way. Pride and self-sufficiency keep them from believing in Jesus.

Control stems from the fact we don't fully understand and trust God. To the extent we misunderstand him, we will live our lives incorrectly.

Control can be confusing though. We are told to have self-control as a fruit of the spirit. Self-control is controlling how you think and act which is admirable. The control I am talking about is the desire to control outcomes. It is a funny thing to think we gain self-control as a fruit of the Spirit when we submit our will to God. We lose control to gain self-control. But, most would rather control outcomes and people than exercise the gift of self-control.

Look back at your life. What happens when you suddenly feel out of control? You receive the news you are losing your job, you or a loved one has a terminal disease or a child is rebelling and spinning out of control. Often, the immediate response is fear. You may also feel a sense of anger over the apparent loss of control. Negative emotions flood our minds and seep into our behavior.

To have peace in our lives, it is mandatory we surrender control to a loving, caring God that has numbered our days and perfectly knows everything about us. He can be trusted to be in control. He is good and wants you to find your contentment in Him. He allows us to participate in the advancement of His Kingdom on earth. Philippians 4:7 says, "The peace of God that surpasses understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." This peace is freedom and deliverance from all the strife and distress that come from sin. It is trusting a heavenly Father to guide our lives. It takes the pressure off.

When you realize you are not in control and have never been in control, you have two options. Submit yourself to your heavenly Father or to the father of lies who has deceived you into believing you can be in control. Submit yourselves to God, and you have peace. Submit yourself to Satan, and he will destroy you. Remember, whatever you submit yourself to will control you. Satan is clever enough not to ask you to submit to him. Instead, he encourages you to submit to yourself which is the original sin.

See chapter 5 of the free book *Restored* for more teaching on this topic.

Expectations and Goals

For years, I often found myself disappointed as a follower of Christ. I kept journals and noticed this was a repeated pattern. So, I made it a matter of prayer because I did not want God to think I was disappointed in Him. I remember hearing in my spirit to write down what disappointed me. I was somewhat surprised that my list was things that I had hoped to accomplish for God but had not happened.

Again, I heard God ask me a very pointed question that penetrated my heart. “Did I promise you that?” My answer was no, but my heart was set on doing great things for God. He gently showed me that my zeal for Him and advancing His Kingdom was actually my pride and ambition. They were noble things to accomplish but came from my flesh. God gently reminded me That He would complete everything in me that He had purposed for me.

My disappointments were born from my misguided expectations. In Luke 24, we see two people walking on the road to Emmaus after the resurrection of Christ. They were discussing what had just happened when Jesus appears and walks with them. But they do not recognize him and Jesus then asks them what they are talking about. With downcast faces, they begin to tell Jesus about what happened to Him and how He was crucified. Verse 21 says, “**But we had hoped** that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.”

“But we had hoped” is an expression of a disappointed heart and mind. We all have walked this road. But we had hoped the diagnosis would not be cancer, the marriage

would get better, the job would not be lost, and the daughter would live. It is a blatant reminder of our desire to control outcomes.

God gives us self-control as a gift of the Spirit, but we would rather control outcomes and other people rather than ourselves.

In the New Testament, the word for hope as a verb and as a noun means to have trust and confidence. It is an expectation of what is sure to come. It is active and living. It is faith-filled waiting on God to fulfill what He promised. My desire to do great things for God and my subsequent disappointment when they didn't happen reveals that my hope was not in God, but in myself. I was trying to make something happen instead of waiting on God to fulfill what He promised.



My expectations are now bound to the hope I have in Christ. The Spirit guides and comforts me, and I surrender outcomes and expectations to Him. He is my provider, my portion, my sustainer, and my rock. One day I will see him face to face, and I will know in full what I now only know in part.

I encourage you to take time to write down what disappoints you in life. What are your expectations? God's goals and expectations for our lives are often different than our own goals and expectations for our lives. There is much peace of mind and joy that comes when our expectations are managed properly.

Goals and Desires

In Chapter 7 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, there is a brief section on goals and desires. This one simple concept has helped me and many I have helped find freedom. This section follows the section on expectations for a reason. What we expect and try to control determines our mental state of mind.

A good beginning point is to establish the definition of a goal and a desire.

A godly goal is anything that reflects God's purpose for your life and is not dependent on other people or circumstances beyond your right or ability to control.

A godly desire is any result that depends on the cooperation of other people, successes or events, or favorable circumstances that you have no right or ability to control.

This is simple yet so often misunderstood and the cause of much grief. A godly goal can only pertain to yourself. You are the only person you have the right or ability to control. If success is dependent on any other person or thing, it falls under a desire, not a goal. We have the right and ability to control what we eat, what we think, how much sleep we get, etc. Self-control is a fruit of the Spirit but attempting to control things outside of yourself becomes sinful and hurtful.

Once, I was invited by a pastor of a large church to participate in leadership meetings and conversations with his senior staff. I was given time to share my observations with them

after several months of meetings. I decided to focus on goals and desires. I wrote the definitions for each on the whiteboard and listed several things on the board. I asked the staff about 20 people to get up and write beside my list whether each item was a goal or desire. The list included Sunday School attendance, church attendance, baptisms, and community outreach goals. Every staff person listed these items as godly goals along with the other items on my list.



I asked them to go back and read the descriptions of godly goals and desires. I told them everything listed on the board was a godly desire, not a godly goal, because each item was dependent on the people in the church and community. After some discussion, they realized they were wrong to call these goals. What should our church goals be then? they asked. I told them that was their job to answer those questions in respect to what they had the right and ability to control. They prayed, collaborated, and came up with a great plan for the church. It involved asking people to be responsible for their own godly goals and allowing everything else to be simply a desire.

Why does that matter? When we elevate a desire to a goal in our minds and it gets blocked, we struggle with anger, anxiety and depression. This is because we think we can control the outcome. By comparison, when a desire isn't met, we will only face disappointment.

God's desire is that all would repent and live, but not all will. It is God's desire because he knows not all will repent and live. God has no blocked goals.

God's goals are never blocked. Jesus will return, we will live with him forever, Satan will be cast into the abyss for eternity and we will receive rewards for our faithfulness. God will do what he has determined to do.

Throughout my years of helping others walk in freedom, I have observed three main areas where people struggle the most: forgiving others, dealing with sexual sin, and understanding the difference between a godly goal and desire. I have personally observed innumerable marriages, relationships, business partnerships, and church staffs united after properly understanding the difference between a godly goal and desire and implementing appropriate boundaries and expectations for each. I am eternally grateful to Dr. Anderson for his insight into this. I know it has helped millions of people around the world!

For more on this topic, see chapter 7 of *Victory Over the Darkness*, revised and updated edition.

Suffering and Persecution

Do you want to know what your calling is? What God has planned for your life? Of course, you do. We all want to know God's will and plans for us. God's plan is to conform us to His image to bring light, life, and hope to those around us. Part of that conformity to His image is going through suffering.

1 Peter 2:20-21 says, **“But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this, you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.”** I think most of us missed this point when we became a follower of Christ. God is gracious to us in that He reveals His will to us in a progression we can tolerate. He gradually exposes us to new truths and deeper understanding. As God reveals deeper knowledge, we must choose to walk out what we believe.

1 Peter 1:6-7 says, “In this, you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. **These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire, may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus is revealed.**”

As a younger believer, I understood suffering and persecution to be something I had to tolerate. It was something I hoped to avoid if possible. I knew the world would hate me because they hate God and I represent and belong to him. I also knew God would use this to shape in me something that did not

yet exist. I viewed it the same way I would view joining the army and being required to endure boot camp. It was necessary but not anticipated and surely not to be desired.



Recently, God has shown me that suffering and persecution are actually the gateways into His presence and His power. It is an invitation into intimacy with Him. When I read about Paul, I longed to be used like that for God. In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul boasts about his sufferings. He tells of his frequent prison terms, floggings, being beaten with rods, stoning, shipwrecks, and being in danger everywhere he went. And in chapter 12, he tells about the thorn in his side, a messenger of Satan, to torment him. And the Lord refused to remove the thorn because God tells Paul that His power is made perfect in weakness.

“Therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude, because he who has suffered in the body is done with sin” (1 Peter 4:1). The person who has faced death and survived realizes the petty sinful desires and practices they once indulged in do not matter any longer. They’ve had a spiritual awakening, a new perspective on what is important in life. A person that has suffered

near the point of death possesses a maturity that is advanced compared to most.

It is only when we realize we are weak and incapable that the power of God is real to us. Our faith takes a giant leap. It goes from something we believe to be true to something we have complete trust in and the confidence to walk in. In 1 Peter 4, it says you have spent enough time in sin. The end of all things is near. It is time to be clear-minded and self-controlled. We are instructed to not be surprised at the painful trial we are suffering as though something strange was happening to us. **It goes on to say rejoice that you participate in the suffering of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.** If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you.

Do you see the invitation to intimacy? If you participate in His sufferings, you also participate in His glory.

In another section of this study, I covered expectations. We are to expect and anticipate suffering and persecution. I've seen football players that were unaware they were about to be hit. Because they were unaware, the hit has more impact and pain. The player that sees and anticipates the hit is braced for the blow and able to reduce its impact. The same is true with our faith. Suffering is not some strange thing that comes upon us, it is part of our calling.

When the apostles were persecuted in Acts 5, they rejoiced because they had been counted worthy to suffer disgrace for the name of Jesus. It is a privilege to be identified with Christ. We

are part of His family. In some profound way, we are image bearers and breath carriers of the Almighty. 1 Peter 3 instructs us not to fear what they fear or be frightened. No matter the outcome of our suffering on this earth, we have the blessed hope we will be with Christ for eternity. **Do not be afraid!**

J.I. Packer says, "In this world, royal children have to undergo extra training and discipline which other children escape, to fit them for their high destiny." It is the same with the children of the King of Kings. The clue to understanding all God's dealings with us is to remember that throughout our lives, he is training us for what awaits us, chiseling them into the image of Christ. "The Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes **everyone he accepts as a son.** Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons... No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it" (Hebrews 12:6-6, 11).

See chapter 18 of *The Common Made Holy* for more teaching on this topic.



Legalism

I heard a pastor once say we are all recovering legalists. Legalism is attractive to followers of Christ because it gives us a feeling that we are doing our part; it makes perfect sense in our minds. The religious leaders of Jesus' day struggled with legalism. The early church struggled with legalism. And the church today struggles with legalism. The book of Galatians is a wonderful study of legalism.

How do you define legalism? How do you recognize legalistic tendencies in yourself? It is somewhat easy to explain but almost undetectable to the practicing legalist. I remember having a conversation about legalism with a very legalistic person. They agreed with all of the points we discussed but were greatly offended when asked to consider if they had these tendencies. "Of course, I am not a legalist," they said.



The majority of believers struggle with a constant feeling of guilt that they are not doing enough or shame for continuing to struggle with sin. The fact we struggle with these feelings is evidence that we believe our performance makes a difference in

our acceptance by God. There is a huge difference between conviction through the Holy Spirit and condemnation from Satan.

Legalism is rooted in our desire for acceptance before God, the desire to be pleasing to God in all we do. In Galatians 2:1-10, you see a picture of legalism as doing the right things with the wrong belief. In verses 11-14, you see a picture of hypocrisy as right belief with wrong behavior. And in verses 15-21, you see a picture of faith as the right belief with the right behavior.

So, what does it look like to do the right things with the wrong beliefs? **The legalistic person begins living life according to religion and not relationship. The Christian life becomes an intense focus on duty and rules.** This person begins working in their own power, according to their own rules, to earn God's favor. They are self-driven and insensitive to others and often to the Holy Spirit. They are often seen as angry, bitter, tired, judgmental, and lacking peace and joy. They always seem in a hurry and are easily frustrated when things aren't going according to their plan.

They have a sour effect on those they are around and can be rejected as unloving, harsh, and demanding. Their main fear is not pleasing God and losing their positions of influence. Sadly, these people are usually in positions of leadership in our churches. They hinder the Spirit and the work of God.

What are some antidotes to legalism? We must remind ourselves of the foundations of our faith.

We cannot work in our own power.

We must have the power of the Holy Spirit working through us.

We cannot work according to our own rules. A controlling spirit is deeply rooted in legalism. We must realize the spread of the gospel is not about us—it is about Jesus. Jesus never did things the same way. His methods of healing varied depending on the person and situation. I believe that was meant for those of us who look for a pattern in life. We want a template to follow, to do things the same way every time, and expect others to do the same. But that is simply not the way it works in the Spirit. We must stop and ask the Spirit to lead us in every situation.

We must realize we are not “working” for God. Galatians 5:1 says “it is for freedom that Christ has set you free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.” To go back to following all the rules puts us under the burden of the law, and we miss the grace of God.

We must recognize that legalism blocks the glory of God, undermines our salvation, and destroys our confidence. The mind set on doing everything right in its own strength will eventually stumble under its own weight. Legalism always brings condemnation and discouragement because legalism motivates through fear and guilt. Legalists see themselves as defenders of the faith. In reality, they can look more like a Pharisee than Jesus.

When I hear other believers telling me what I should be doing, I quickly get away from them. The rules and structure of legalism are easy to fall back into. If you are struggling with exhaustion, disappointment, and frustration, I encourage you to be quiet before God. Give Him the freedom to show you whatever He wants to show you. Take the burden of legalism off your back and take His yoke. It is easy and light.

Legalism never focuses on relationships but on the law. God allowed the law to show us we could not keep it in our own power. **The law is perfect because it always pointed to Jesus.** He kept the law perfectly and because He did, you do not have to. We are saved by grace alone and through Christ alone. I pray you can unburden yourself from legalism and rest in His joy. If you are a believer, God sees the perfect work of Christ when He looks at you. You are pleasing in His sight and loved as a son or daughter. Praise be to God!

For more teaching on this topic, see chapter 2 of *The Core of Christianity* and the entire book of *Grace That Breaks the Chains* by Neil Anderson and Rich Miller. Another great resource is the article “Salvation from the Pleasure of Sin” by A.W. Pink. It details the struggle between flesh and spirit.