



# GRACE: GOD'S SOLUTION FOR SIN

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# THE NATURE OF SIN

*A refresher: Sin began with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Giving in to the temptation to rebel against God by eating forbidden fruit infected the whole of creation and mankind with sin. God's holiness and justice requires death as the penalty for sin. God's love and mercy compelled Him to find a solution that enabled Him to forgive mankind of sin. The solution was for the Son to become fully human, live a life without sinning, and to become a willing sacrifice that would pay the death penalty for sin on behalf of all mankind. All those who believe in Christ as Son of God and Savior, who turn from sinful ways to follow Christ's ways, are forgiven. This is the concept of GRACE.*

## VOCABULARY TIME!

**LEGALISM** – Attempts to earn God's favor through strict adherence to rules and regulations (and in some cases by good deeds). It is works-based and human-based, therefore it ends up leaving us feeling inadequate. The big pitfall is that achieving salvation by works would require us to perfectly fulfill every one of God's laws. The only human who ever did that was Jesus Christ when He became human.

A legalistic mindset leads to a rigid interpretation of scripture (often an erroneous interpretation). Adhering to rules becomes more important than living the spirit of the law and demonstrating God's love to others. We become judgmental, prideful, and unforgiving. We are like the Pharisees: Pious and impressive on the outside but far removed from God on this inside. Their adherence to the letter of the law caused them to miss out the fulfillment of the Law in Jesus the Messiah.

**ANTINOMIANISM:** Rejects any connection between justification and ethical conduct. The problem with this perspective is that it interprets God's grace as permission for us to continue to sin. Paul asks us plainly in Romans 6:1 whether we should continue to live in sin when we have symbolically died to sin when we became forgiven in Christ. A life without morality leads to self-destruction, broken relationships, disregard for others and spiritual stagnation.

A balanced understanding of grace and justification means understanding there is harmony and balance between God's grace and our response (which should be obedience and gratitude, hope and desire to share God's love with others in turn).

When we live out grace and justification, our perspective and engagement with the world is transformed. We can face temptation with confidence in the promises God has made us and hope for our ultimate salvation. We should view others with more empathy, compassion, patience, forgiveness, and love. We extend support, encouragement, and love to others--- and we extend grace, compassion, and mercy towards ourselves rather than condemning ourselves because we cannot achieve perfection without Christ's help. This is a lifelong journey that we undertake when we enter relationship with God.



Keep these points in mind as we continue the lesson: God loves you. God wants relationship with you. God does not want to see you hurt yourself by sinful behavior. God does not want to see others hurt because of your sinful behavior. God has dedicated the entirety of history and given His own blood because he wants to free you from being enslaved by sin so that you can grow into the person that God means for you to become.

But, the process comes with some emotional pain. This is the beginning of healing. When we choose to follow Jesus, when we begin to examine the Word of God, the Holy Spirit will at some point use the Scripture to illuminate things within us that God wishes to change. It can be as simple as a feeling tugging at your heart. It can be an encounter with another person that shines a light on the sinful behavior. It can be a gentle leading or a metaphorical (or maybe a literal) slap in the face. For most believers, we will have both kinds of experiences. When we reach the point of self-awareness that we can acknowledge whatever sin (or sins) has us in its grip, we have the choice whether to live with it or repent of it. This is the process of *conviction of the heart*. What we do next will determine our spiritual growth and our relationship with God. We can let the weight of the sin hold us down, even crush us spiritually and emotionally, or we can turn to the God who wants to lift that weight off our shoulders.

There are several ways that we can respond when we desire to free ourselves from whatever sinful behavior is affecting our relationship with God, people, and our own peace of heart. The first response when we feel the weight of sin on our hearts is always to go to God in prayer. There is no substitute for taking your burden directly to the Lord so that His Spirit can help guide you into reconciliation and transformation. When you've identified destructive behaviors and emotions through honest self-reflection, try next to determine what external and/or internal triggers are causing the behavior. **DO NOT BLAME OTHERS FOR YOUR SINS.** Remember that much evil was done to Jesus during His earthly ministry, but His reaction was to pray for those who harmed Him (even those who put Him on the cross). Before we can seek God's forgiveness, we must be willing to give forgiveness to others in turn for the harm they've done to us.





If we have harmed others, peace with God requires us to attempt to make peace with them. In fact, the Bible tells us to seek reconciliation with those we've harmed before we even come to God to worship or ask forgiveness for ourselves. To be clear: You have no control over whether the other person forgives you. If they don't, that is a matter for God to resolve. All God asks is that you sincerely, honestly make the attempt to correct whatever sin has caused others harm, then come to Him to seek forgiveness. This action requires the humility that Jesus modeled and expects of believers.

Self-compassion is also important. Being honest with yourself does not mean beating yourself down emotionally or psychologically. Let's be honest: If we were perfect people, Christ wouldn't have had to die for us. There hasn't been a living Christian in history who lived a life without sin and could have been an atoning sacrifice for us except for Christ. When God says that you are forgiven, the matter is settled. Your concentration should no longer focus on the past but rather look ahead to ways that you can avoid repeating your sins. Seek the counsel of spiritual brethren among the church, particularly spiritual mentors. Join a support group that will help you remain accountable to avoid the behavior if you need to. Talk to family and friends and ask their help remaining accountable (transparency is part of relationships with God and with people). Do not hesitate to seek professional help if you need it. Remember that God places doctors, psychologists, counselors, and other helpers in this world for the benefit of His children. We always go to the Lord first, but that doesn't mean we can't utilize the resources He places in this world. Finally, focus your efforts on positive actions that foster healing. Community service, especially as part of the church, can be healing. Hobbies and constructive activities can also foster a sense of giving something positive into our lives and maybe even the world.

And remember: You will probably sin again. We may be perfected through Christ, but we are still existing in a fallen world where temptations and wickedness is abundant. Forgiveness is NOT permission to keep sinning, but we will be contending with sin until such time as Christ returns. Seek (and give) forgiveness as many times as your need to remain in relationship with God.

# Grace: God's solution for sin

## THE BASICS:

- 1) **It's a free gift from God, not something earned by good deeds.**
- 2) **It is an on-going process of self-examination and reflection**
- 3) **It's a commitment to spiritual growth**
- 4) **Relies on the power of the Holy Spirit**
- 5) **Requires vigilance against temptation, doubt, spiritual dryness, and discouragement**
- 6) **Requires us to extend grace and forgiveness to others**
- 7) **Fosters gratitude to God and hope in His promise for eternal life and motivates us to live in ways that please God.**

God's grace rescues us from sin. This is a free gift for every believer because of God's great mercy, love, and forgiveness. Jesus's self-sacrifice on the cross was the ultimate expression of God's love and grace and His unwavering commitment to reconciling believers to Himself.

Grace encompasses repentance, justification, sanctification, and salvation. It amounts to a complete cleansing of the believer from sin and restoration of his or her broken relationship with God. There are two parables of Jesus which speak to grace and reconciliation: The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the parable of the lost sheep (Luke 15:4-7).

The parable of the prodigal son shows: 1) God's desire to share the fullness of His kingdom with mankind as our Father, whose love is unwavering and unconditional. 2) The prodigal son as a symbol of people who have rejected Christ or people who have fallen away from faith or are experiencing spiritual dryness in their relationship with God. 3) The return of the prodigal son symbolizes the believer turning away from self-destructive choices (sin). 4) The elder son's resentment and self-righteousness represents those who have a legalistic approach to faith (that is, those who attempt to achieve salvation through good deeds rather than understanding it as a gift of God's grace).

The parable of the lost sheep symbolizes God's relentless love in pursuing every sinner so that he or she might be restored to salvific relationship with Him. Every individual sinner is of personal concern to God, priceless to Him, and God experiences joy when the sinner is restored to relationship with Him and cleansed through faith in Christ. God doesn't passively await our return. He actively and relentlessly pursues us to rescue us from sin and death even when we feel unworthy and separated from Him.

Experiencing God's forgiveness is emotional and transformative; in fact, His forgiveness is the foundation for the lifelong process of transformation as we move away from the destructive pattern of sin to relationship with God. Let's be clear: Grace means freedom *from* sin, not freedom *to* sin. Sincere repentance come when our sins cause us pain, shame, and grief. If we are treating repentance and accepting Jesus as a "get out of jail free card" to remain in wrong behavior, we are not sincerely repenting. God knows our hearts. Jesus says His sheep know His voice. We cannot deceive the Lord or catch Him in a technicality.





The parable of the lost sheep is also symbolic of the role of believers towards the unchurched and the unbelievers (particularly when God appoints us to be pastors, evangelists, or teachers). Believers are not called to passive faith and complacency but rather to share the Gospel message with others, to seek those who are spiritually lost and in danger of eternal separation from God. We are called to help others to receive Christ and then to support their spiritual growth through love, support, guidance, encouragement, and correction (so long as it comes from a place of love and not judgement). This is why ministry and community service and mission in the larger world is an important part of our relationship with God, so that we can be reflections of God's unwavering love and grace for others to see. Every believer is equipped by the Holy Spirit to serve in some capacity. No act of service is too small when it comes from love that is rooted in Christ.

This requires INITIATIVE on the individual's part, first to repent and seek relationship with God and then to ENGAGE in ministry in the name of the Lord. This comes from EMPATHY and emotional understanding of others that is comes a heart that the Holy Spirit has TRANSFORMED. As we are forgiven, we must forgive others, following the example of Christ. This is empathy because one who has made the lifelong choice to turn from sin understands the struggle to resist the temptations and behaviors that interfere in our relationship with God. We follow Jesus because He understood what it meant to be human, with the vulnerabilities of the flesh, and endured on our behalf. In turn, we extend a hand to help others who are still trapped in their sin.

God's love has transformed our hearts so that we can humbly place the needs of others ahead of our own, even when others have wounded us. God's love has healed us of this pain. True repentance means acknowledging how our sins have affected others and seeking their forgiveness as well as God's. This shouldn't be shameful. Think of the effort to seek reconciliation with others we have harmed (or extending forgiveness to those who have harmed us) as evidence of the transformative effect God has on our hearts. David speaks of his emotions of grief and repentance for his sins (including adultery and murder) in Psalm 51. As God was gracious and just to forgive David, He is gracious to forgive us.

Repentance, receiving Christ as Savior, and being forgiven through God's grace culminates in God's promise for our salvation. Salvation is another gift from God's grace. It does not come as a reward for good deeds or self-works. It comes when we choose to believe in Christ as our Savior and to follow in His ways. Humans have a tendency towards "perfectionism" (thinking that we have to be good enough to deserve God's forgiveness and salvation) and self-determination (Western culture especially rewards merit and performance and achievement). Again, focusing on self-works to attempt to earn salvation is the error of legalism.

Galatians 2:16 tells us that we are justified by faith, not by works. Think of it this way: Attempting to be worthy by self-works only leads us to a sense of shame and guilt, feelings of hopelessness, inadequacy (how can we ever hope to be holy enough to please God by our own efforts) and ultimately to despair that leads us away from Christ. It leads us to compare ourselves to others and to a distorted sense of self.

Justification by faith and grace brings feelings of freedom, peace, humility, hope and gratitude to God. It brings us to reconciliation with God, love of God, and new purpose from our place in the ekklesia (church) of Christ. We are free to live in a way that reflects God to others and to express our gratitude for the gift of grace by sharing God's love with those around us by witnessing for Christ and serving others. It is a lifelong process of being conformed to God's image because the Spirit is at work in our hearts.

Justification means that God has declared us not guilty of the sins that we have committed because of our faith that Christ has already taken the penalty for us. The result of being justified is that we can now claim God's promise of salvation and the hope for eternity with Him. This salvation is inclusive, meaning it is available to everyone who believes in Christ, regardless of their past, their gender, race, or perceived worthiness.

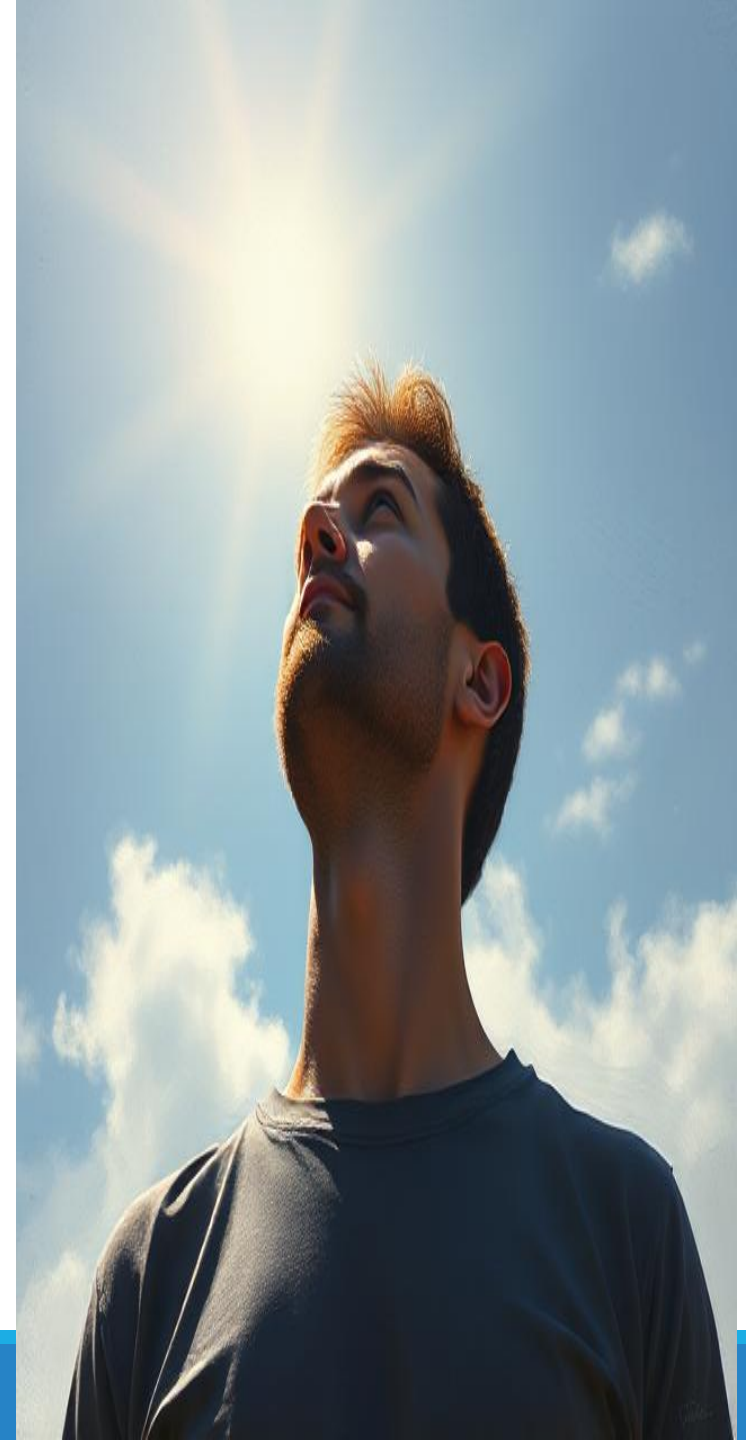


Keep this in mind: Cultivating a deeper relationship with God is not about religious duty or checking boxes. It's about spending time with God because we want to know Him better and become closer with Him. I call it "Dating My Savior" because there are many similarities: When we want to know if we love someone, the only way we can figure it out is to *really* invest time and effort getting to know that person (their past, their values, their plans for the future, their family, etc.) . This is the same process by which we fall in love with Christ, our Savior. This isn't just a relationship for the rest of our lives---it's a relationship for eternity.

We have to remember that good works are the *fruit of faith, but not the root of faith*. Paul tells us in Romans 3:20: "Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin". In other words, the reason that the Bible teaches us the things that God calls sinful is to make us aware of our fallen condition and to make us understand that we need a Savior, that we cannot be saved by self-justification but by Christ. This frees us from the relentless pursuit of perfection and self-condemnation.

Another clarification: We have not been declared sinless when we are justified. We are declared righteous IN CHRIST. We are made the image of God IN CHRIST. In other words, the righteousness of Christ is credited to us because we have received Christ in faith. This is the *imputation of Christ's righteousness*. It's somewhat paradoxical: We still remain beings who have sinfulness within us, but by faith we are united with Christ and gifted the status of righteousness before God. Knowing this sustains our faith and helps us navigate life's challenges.

It is then that good works begin to flow from us, not because we falsely think that our own acts earn our salvation but rather that we are grateful to God for the gift of His grace. We recognize the need to live by Christ's example of serving and ministering to the needs of others, forgiving others, extending the same mercy and grace that we have received. The Bible says that the things which come from our mouth will defile us because they come from our heart. This means our actions and our words show the true condition of our hearts and whether we are truly being transformed.





# How does baptism factor into salvation?



Two kinds of baptisms are part of the Christian spiritual journey. Water baptism and baptism of the Holy Spirit.

There are some misconceptions about water baptism. Why do Christians get baptized? First, it is a public declaration of our faith in Jesus Christ and our receiving Him as our Savior. The Bible says that when we are not ashamed to declare Jesus before others, Jesus will declare us before God on the day of judgement. Second, it is the symbolic act of us dying to sin as Christ died on the cross, being buried just as Christ was buried (in our case by going under water, not underground), our death to our old sinful selves, and our future resurrection with Christ (coming out of the water). Rising from the water symbolizes our entry into new, eternal life alongside Christ and our commitment to follow in His teachings. It is an outward sign of God's grace working within our hearts.

## Some points to remember:

Make sure that you are baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, for they are three in one and it is the work of all three persons of the Godhead that has brought about your salvation.

Water baptism *follows* salvation. It is not a legalistic requirement in order to receive salvation, otherwise baptism would be a self-work. It is our demonstration of gratitude for the fact of our forgiveness and salvation, which has already been accomplished by Christ on the cross.

Baptism is performed within the community of believers, a shared experience that fosters our unity with the body of Christ, our belonging with them, our commitment to be part of that body of Christ is love, mutual support, faith, service, and accountability. We are aligning ourselves with generations of believers who came before us, all the way back to those believers in the Bible.

Baptism is not contingent on our "worthiness". If you want to declare Jesus and follow His teachings, He has made you worthy of baptism. It is an act of obedience, a step of faith, and a declaration of loyalty and commitment to Christ.

“Spirit baptism” (baptism of the Holy Spirit) can be a confusing concept. You see the apostles become baptized in the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), when the Spirit descended on them as fire and they began to speak in tongues to the crowd. This does not mean that baptism in the Spirit is accompanied by miraculous signs and wonders. Understand that every believer receives the Holy Spirit when we accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. The Spirit becomes an indwelling presence that facilitates transforming our hearts to reflect God to the world and empowers us to follow the teachings of Christ. John 3:5-8 tells us that we cannot enter the kingdom of God without the indwelling Holy Spirit. Fortunately, the Spirit is given to us as a gift of God’s grace. The Spirit regenerates us from the inside to new life in Christ.

Spirit baptism builds on the initial reception of the Holy Spirit. It represents a deeper immersion and empowerment by the Spirit for our service to Christ and for Christian living. We have surrendered more fully to the Spirit’s control and the Spirit is making us more effective in witnessing and ministry. Water baptism was our cleansing and identification with Christ. Spirit baptism is our empowerment and fullness in the Spirit. It is part of our ongoing surrender to the Spirit’s leading in our lives.

Herein lies the danger for some believers. There are Christian denominations for whom baptism in the Holy Spirit is expected to manifest in certain ways, most notably by speaking in tongues. Believers might sink into feelings of inadequacy if they don’t manifest sudden Spirit-given abilities like speaking in tongues. Paul had to reprimand his church in Corinth because the believers became so obsessed with ecstatic spiritual experiences and valued speaking in tongues as a particular sign of favoritism. The truth is that the working of the Holy Spirit is sometimes grand and miraculous, but it can also be subtle and manifest in humble ways. Understand that the Spirit will place something within you that is needed for service in the body of Christ, but there are many forms of gifting and empowerment. You could be empowered in tongues, interpretation, preaching, teaching, evangelizing, planting churches, praying, supporting others, or helping with the various ministries within the church. No one gifting is more important than the other, We are all part of the body of Christ, and every part of the body serves a necessary purpose.



I will say it again: God wants you just as you are: A believer committed to lifelong relationship with Him. He is not searching for the “spiritually elite”, in fact the Bible teaches that God’s strength is perfected by our weaknesses. Why? Because when we are at our weakest, our most sinful, we are most dependent on God’s saving grace. Where was the power of Christ most on display during His ministry? When He ministered to the blind, the lame, the demon-possessed, the sick, and those most desperately seeking God’s mercy. Jesus did not withhold mercy from the centurion who confesses that he was unworthy of the miracle he asked of Christ (Matthew 8:8). He chose apostles whom the culture of the time would have deemed unworthy. God doesn’t ask you to be worthy, He doesn’t ask you to be perfect, He doesn’t ask you to perform signs and wonders...**don’t confuse your job with God’s job**. He asks you to believe in the Son whom He sent and to choose to follow Jesus to the best of your ability, in humility and obedience allowing the Spirit to be your source of strength and your guide.

The community of Christ is there to help us experience the fullness of the Holy Spirit and to encourage us to pursue a deeper relationship with God, to help us navigate the challenges of life and grow in our faith. If this isn’t your experience with your current church, find the church where you feel this support, encouragement, purpose, and accountability. Pray about it and be attentive to the Spirit’s guidance.

Both water baptism and the baptism of the Holy Spirit are important to spiritual growth. Baptism of the Spirit isn’t a one-time, overly dramatic event as much as it is the on-going infilling of the Spirit on our lifelong journey of being sanctified in Christ. It is the sustained fellowship that we have with God through the Spirit, growth that is supported and encouraged by the body of believers.

The real manifestation of the Spirit in our lives will take subtle, but powerful and significant forms. We will see it when we develop greater love for others, when we experience joy in our worship and our time with God, when we experience peace that comes from the end of striving to be worthy and the beginning of real relationship with God as we trust in His promises, and the patience we have with ourselves and others that comes from extending God’s grace to ourselves and others. It takes the form of new inclinations towards kindness to ourselves and others and gentleness of speech and action as we submit to the leading of the Spirit. It takes the form of self-control when we face times of temptation, doubt, spiritual dryness, and suffering. It takes the form of the goodness that has been imparted to us when we identified with Christ and were indwelt by the Spirit. (Galatians 5:22-23). Faith was the seed planted within us. It was nurtured by the works of the Holy Trinity, and the fruits that come from this seed are these qualities in our hearts as we continue to grow spiritually.



# Obstacles to Our Relationship with God



Cultivating our relationship with God requires that we remain aware that our faith will be challenged. This is part of spiritual warfare. The enemy will use temptations and lies to fracture our bond with God. Recognize that the voice of God will always speak the truth with love to build you up, not tear you down. The voice of the enemy brings deceit, despair, doubt, and discouragement. It builds a case against your faith. Also remember, the enemy does NOT know your thoughts. He is not omniscient. He is not all powerful. In other words, he is NOT GOD. He cannot remove you from God's hands, but he will always try to lure you away. Watch out for:

- DOUBT. Be clear about this: Having a time of doubt is not failing in your relationship with God. Doubt will be part of your spiritual journey. It is an opportunity to build up your trust in God. It can happen in times of difficulty, suffering, grief, or when we don't see answers to our prayer. It can happen when we see tragedies in this fallen world, such as floods, mass shootings, physical and sexual abuse, disease (especially when it affects children), poverty, famine, discrimination, and hatred of all kinds. Go to God with honest prayers when you experience these times of doubt and be sure that your heart and mind is open to what God has to say.

God directs the flow of history, therefore He knows the consequences of even the smallest action. There will be times that His will does not align with our wishes or expectations. His plan is for the good of all believers, and His direction of history and the timing of His actions align with this plan. The Lord knows every single sheep of Jesus' "flock" (those in the past, those alive now, those yet to be born). It is His will that every person appointed to Christ has the opportunity to hear the message of the Gospel and receive Christ. The Bible clearly says that the Word of the Gospel must be preached to all corners of the earth before the end comes. God delayed the end times so that you could be born, hear the message of the Gospel, find faith in Christ, and be saved by that faith. God now asks you, who believe in Him, to trust in His love and endure with confidence in God, until the time when suffering ends and we are united with Christ in the New Kingdom. It isn't easy. God understands this. Find comfort in prayer, worship, in the company other believers and in family, and purpose in your place. God has plans for you that cannot be thwarted by the enemy in this world.

- TEMPTATION. We discussed this pitfall to faith. Forgive yourself when you fail, sincerely repent, and accept God's gracious forgiveness. Don't feel like you are the only Christian who ever stumbled. Culture and societal expectations are some of the biggest temptations and challenges to our faith. Many of the modern messages and moral standards of society are directly at odds with biblical teachings. Culture can influence us in subtle, subversive ways. Consider that the whole industry of advertising and the profession of social media influencer are designed to influence consumer choices and to instill trending values (or lack of values) into us. The entertainment industry is fond of the buzzword "compelling".

Ask yourself: What is this influencer, this commercial, this t.v. program, this political speech, this movie attempting to teach you or "compel" you to do? Is it telling you that your happiness rests in acquiring material goods or sex? Is it telling you to vote a certain way in an upcoming election? Do these messages align with what God tells you is righteous behavior? Consumerism leads to envy, disappointment, and resentment of those who have what we cannot afford, and neglect of time with God, family, church, and friends in pursuit of more money and goods. It does not lead to happiness. When you follow temptations such as sexual temptations, it leads you to be dissatisfied with your life, your spouse, neglect of time with God, disobedience of God, and to guilt and shame but not genuine happiness.

- Culture will place us in moral dilemmas over many issues. There is an enemy at work to conform us to his image rather than to the images of God. Culture and society is a catalyst. At worst, cultural and societal pressures foster hatred of people who are different from us (racially, religiously, morally, politically). Social memes make such hateful behaviors easy and entertaining while providing a shield of anonymity for us. Be clear about this: THERE IS NO ANONYMITY FROM GOD. What you do in private, He sees. If your behavior is causing pain to others, you are accountable to God who defends against injustices.







It is critical that the Bible is our source for moral teachings and that the discernment from the Holy Spirit guides us to recognize what is right and wrong, just and unjust in this world. On that same note, be aware that there are many false theologies in this world that can lead you farther from God, not closer to Him. Do not allow the media, the politicians, cult leaders, unbelievers, or any secular or cultural influencers to present you a theology that contradicts the Bible. It is good to read books, attend conferences, and engage with people who hold different viewpoints, especially in ministry as it affords us the chance to broaden our understanding and to equip us to preach God in a world that finds ever-changing ways to reject Him.

Be aware of self-serving theologies that use Bible passages out of context to justify their beliefs that do not align with the complete message of the Bible (the fallacy of “proof-texting”). Many people follow theologies that tell them what they want to hear instead of the true Word of God. Don’t distort God’s Word just to make it palatable to others. Speak the truth with love.

**PERSECUTION** can range from discrimination to suffering, and in extreme cases to martyrdom. Jesus warns us to expect opposition to our faith, to expect trials that will test our faith. The good news is that fire sharpen steel and testing refines, strengthen, and grows our faith. When our grows stronger, we are better able to resist the attacks of the enemy. (see 1 Peter 3:14 and John 15:18-20). Respond to the people who bring you suffering in the same manner as Christ responded to those who persecuted Him even to the cross: Love, compassion, and forgiveness. Pray for them. Do not allow them to make you deny your faith in Christ. This doesn’t mean that what they have done to you is acceptable. It means you are trusting God with the outcome. When people harm us or withhold their forgiveness from us, that is their sin. When we respond in kind, it becomes our sin. Bullying is an insidious and destructive form of persecution, whether you are being bullied for your faith, your appearance, your social or familial situation, your race, your past, whatever the reason.



- **YOU WILL ALWAYS HAVE WORTH IN THE EYES OF GOD.** Unfortunately, the enemy in this world will always find ways to attack your self-worth in order to discourage you, deter you from faith, lead you away from hope in God to hopelessness and despair. The Holy Spirit within you will speak the truth, but will do so from love, not to shame you or convince you that you are a worthless sinner but rather to tell you that you are a beloved child of God who is lost and needs to return to the Father. You are worthy to be forgiven, and you are worthy to be saved. Any voice that tells you differently is speaking untruths from the enemy. Cling to the Word of God and trust in His love.
- **SPIRITUAL DRYNESS** is part of doubt and discouragement. This is a feeling of emotional or spiritual detachment from God, a lack of enthusiasm for Scripture, worship, or prayer. It leaves us feeling isolated or discouraged. The enemy will tell you that you lack faith, but that is not the truth. Use this time to reflect on the areas of your faith that require attention and repair. It is especially important to bring yourself back to the lifeline of prayer and Scripture, even if you don't immediately feel it. What we think are unanswered prayers may eventually be revealed as acts of God's protection, redirection, or preparation for our future blessings. These are chances to grow spiritually, refine our faith, and to more deeply understand God's sovereignty and character. This deepens our relationship with God. Be persistent and don't get discouraged or feel that you've become unworthy of God's love. He loves you. For real.
- **SCIENCE** is also a point of contention between society and Christianity and causes struggles for believers. These two realms are almost always presented as directly competing with one another (i.e. you must believe science or you must believe the Bible, but you can't accept both). Let's begin with a reminder: The Bible is not a science textbook nor is it a history book in the academic sense. The Bible does not present a precise geological timeline for the events it presents (it does not say how God measures "a day", it does not attempt to give a date for how long ago the earth was created). Science attempts to explain the mechanics



- ,the hypotheses for “how” the earth and the universe came about while the Bible focuses on the “why”. It focuses on why life came about through God’s intervention. Creationism versus evolution is perhaps the most famous debate between science and Christianity. The interpretation of miracles is another point of contention (science seeks natural explanations while the Bible teaches us of supernatural intervention in events such as the Great Flood).
- **THEODICY** is the theological effort to reconcile God’s goodness with the existence of evil and suffering. We have touched on this quandary in other lessons. This world is fallen and corrupt, because of that people who submit to the influence of that corruption will do evil, harmful things. The bodies we are given in this world are subject to decay and death (fortunately we will be given resurrection bodies at a future time), therefore there will be disease, injury, pain, and death and it will affect people of all ages because (unlike God) the enemy who dominates this world does not know mercy, love, or compassion. Our knowledge and understanding is limited. God has the bigger picture, God has the plan for the future. Hold to the promise that God’s love for us remains in all seasons.

Every believer will have tribulations (suffering and all kinds of challenges). Jesus told us this. When you find yourself in a season of suffering, it does not mean that God is displeased with you or that He has abandoned you. Remember how Job’s “friends” misunderstood his suffering, calling it divine retribution and failing to offer the encouragement, support, and discernment that should come from true believers. God’s nature is merciful, just, compassionate, and loving. The nature of our enemy is harmful and deceptive. Because the enemy is at work in this fallen world, there will be times of suffering. In Isaiah 41:10, God tells us not to become discouraged during these times because He is with us. We see biblical examples like Joseph and Job, who found comfort in God.



## What can we do to overcome these obstacles to our relationship with God?

- Continue to cultivate that relationship with God. Remain constant in **prayer, worship, and studying the Scripture**, for these things build our resilience and our faith.
- **Experience the power of the Holy Spirit**, which means surrendering to God's will. This means we must relinquish pride, see forgiveness, but when we experience the Lord at work in our lives (whether with subtlety such as a new sense of purpose or in miraculous ways), it leads to joy. We need to be attentive and discerning to recognize the Spirit at work. Bottom line is that (unless God has appointed you to mission like Moses or Paul), you won't find God if you aren't looking for Him. If you are **seeking God, cultivate expectancy that you will find Him. Remain in close relationship with God always.**
- **Build a support system within the church body** (ekklesia) of Christ. Having fellowship with other believers means sharing in their wisdom and experiences, especially if they've been through the temptations or suffering that you are enduring. They ekklesia provides us encouragement, strength, support, and accountability. Engage in acts of service and ministry to others (it takes our focus off ourselves for a time and refocuses us on Christ). The body of believers is our bulwark against the pressures and temptations in the fallen world around us. Spiritual leaders should seek to educate the membership and equip them with the Word of God to prepare them to engage with the community, to be responsible citizens, and to play a role in shaping a just, equitable, loving society. Don't just preach the word of God to passive membership; engage with the church community in meaningful dialogues that foster understanding, love, and spiritual growth. When the church goes forth into society, it should do so with humility, recognizing the limits of our understanding but with confidence in God's greater wisdom. The body of believers must also remain rooted in prayer for discernment from the Spirit. We are not bulldozers tearing down society, we are a river that subtly and gently reshape the world around us into God's image.
- **Practice gratitude** by remembering the promises that God has made, the promises that He has already kept, and the good things He has promised for our future.



# OUR ROLE AS THE BRIDE AND BODY OF CHRIST

Any relationship will transform us in ways that we cannot anticipate. In the case of our relationship with Christ, the transformation renews our hearts, our identity, and our purpose in this world.

## **Living Between the Cross and the Crown**

As we trace the journey from Pentecost through two millennia of church history, we arrive at a profound realization: modern believers stand at a unique intersection of time, positioned between Christ's completed work on the cross and His promised return in glory. This temporal location is not accidental but providential, placing contemporary Christians in a sacred trust as stewards of the Gospel legacy and ambassadors of the coming Kingdom.

## **The Modern Believer's Role in the Church: Grounded in Christ's Saving Work**

The foundation of every believer's role rests unshakably on the finished work of Jesus Christ. The cross has already secured our justification, breaking the power of sin and death that held humanity captive. The resurrection has validated Christ's divine nature and guaranteed our own future resurrection. The ascension has established Christ's sovereign reign and sent the Holy Spirit to empower the church. These historical realities form the bedrock of Christian identity and mission.

**Personal Transformation as Foundation** Modern believers, like their first-century counterparts, must first experience the personal reality of salvation through faith in Christ. This transformation from death to life, from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, provides both the motivation and authentication for Christian service. Without this fundamental change, church involvement becomes mere religious activity rather than Spirit-empowered ministry.

The believer's identity flows from this saving work: we are adopted children of God, members of Christ's body, temples of the Holy Spirit, and citizens of heaven. This identity transcends cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic boundaries, creating a unified people called to represent Christ in the world.

## **Empowered by the Spirit**

Just as the early church received power at Pentecost, modern believers have access to the same Holy Spirit who enables supernatural transformation and effective ministry. The Spirit's work in sanctification progressively conforms believers to Christ's image, while His gifts equip the church for service and witness.

**Spiritual Gifts in Contemporary Context** The diverse gifts mentioned in Scripture—teaching, prophecy, healing, administration, mercy, evangelism—remain vital for today's church. Modern believers must discover and develop their spiritual gifts, understanding that each person has a unique contribution to the body of Christ. Technology and globalization have created new opportunities for exercising these gifts, from digital evangelism to international humanitarian work.

**The Fruit of the Spirit as Authentic Witness** In an increasingly skeptical world, the believer's character often speaks louder than words. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control serve as the authenticating marks of genuine faith. These qualities, produced by the Spirit's work, provide credibility to the Gospel message in both personal relationships and public witness.

### The Church as God's Primary Vehicle

Understanding church history reveals that God has consistently worked through His people as a corporate body, not merely as isolated individuals. The modern believer's role is intrinsically connected to the local church and the global body of Christ.

**Local Church Engagement** Active participation in a local congregation provides the context for spiritual growth, mutual accountability, and collaborative ministry. This involvement includes:

- Worship:** Joining in corporate praise and hearing God's Word proclaimed
- Fellowship:** Building authentic relationships with other believers
- Service:** Using gifts to strengthen the church and serve the community
- Stewardship:** Contributing time, talents, and resources to support ministry
- Discipleship:** Both receiving mentoring and investing in others' spiritual growth

**Global Church Awareness** Modern communication allows believers to maintain unprecedented awareness of and connection with the worldwide church. This global perspective should foster:

**Prayer for persecuted churches:** Interceding for believers facing oppression

**Mission support:** Contributing to evangelistic and humanitarian efforts globally

**Cultural sensitivity:** Understanding how the Gospel transcends cultural boundaries

**Unity in diversity:** Celebrating different expressions of faith while maintaining doctrinal essentials

### Mission in the Present Age

The Great Commission remains the church's primary mandate, but modern believers face unique challenges and opportunities in fulfilling this mission.

**Evangelism in a Pluralistic World** Contemporary evangelism requires cultural intelligence, genuine relationship-building, and respectful dialogue. The modern believer must be prepared to:

**Give a reasoned defense:** Articulating faith intellectually while maintaining humility

**Demonstrate authentic love:** Showing Christ's character through actions and attitudes

**Engage diverse worldviews:** Understanding different philosophical and religious perspectives

**Utilize modern tools:** Leveraging technology and media for Gospel witness

**Social Justice and Compassionate Action** Following the biblical pattern of caring for the marginalized, modern believers are called to address contemporary social issues:

**Economic inequality:** Supporting initiatives that provide opportunity and dignity

- Racial reconciliation:** Promoting unity across ethnic and cultural divides
- Care for creation:** Stewarding environmental resources responsibly
- Human trafficking and exploitation:** Fighting modern forms of slavery and oppression

•**Care for refugees and immigrants:** Showing hospitality to displaced persons

**Anticipation of Christ's Return**

The promise of the Parousia provides both urgency and hope to the believer's earthly mission. This future expectation should shape present priorities and actions.

**Living with Eternal Perspective** Awareness of Christ's return cultivates:

- Urgency in evangelism:** Recognizing the limited time for sharing the Gospel
- Patience in suffering:** Understanding present trials in light of future glory
- Hope in adversity:** Maintaining confidence despite temporary setbacks
- Investment in eternal values:** Prioritizing spiritual over material pursuits
- Readiness for accountability:** Living as those who will give account to Christ

**Stewardship of Time and Opportunity** Modern believers possess unprecedented access to information, resources, and global connectivity. This privilege carries corresponding responsibility to:

**Maximize Gospel impact:** Using available tools and platforms effectively

**Build Christ-centered communities:** Creating environments where faith can flourish

**Prepare the next generation:** Discipling children and young adults for future leadership

**Address contemporary challenges:** Applying biblical wisdom to modern ethical dilemmas

### **The Tension of the "Already" and "Not Yet"**

Modern believers live in the tension between the Kingdom's inauguration at

Christ's first coming and its consummation at His return. This reality creates both privilege and responsibility.

### **Privileges of the Current Age**

**Access to the complete biblical revelation:** The full canon of Scripture

**Historical perspective:** Learning from two millennia of church experience

**Global connectivity:** Unprecedented opportunities for fellowship and mission

**Religious freedom:** In many contexts, the liberty to worship and witness openly

**Technological tools:** Resources that enhance study, communication, and service

### **Responsibilities in Light of These Privileges**

**Faithful stewardship:** Using advantages for Kingdom purposes rather than personal comfort

**Sacrificial service:** Following Christ's example of self-giving love

**Doctrinal vigilance:** Maintaining biblical truth in the face of cultural pressure

**Unified witness:** Working toward Christian unity while preserving essential doctrines

**Intergenerational faithfulness:** Passing the faith intact to future generations



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