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July 2018

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EIGHT STEPS TO HEAVEN

(My friend, Ray, is visiting Grand Junction. He loves and serves the Lord in a very humble way from his home in China. Ray told me that several years ago he was reading the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 and started wondering why Jesus had selected these eight particular characteristics to start his most famous teaching. Ray said that God showed him the natural sequence portrayed in these eight attitudes. Following is the abbreviated form of this revelation...from **MATTHEW 5:3-12:**)

STEP 1 – I NEED YOU, GOD!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.

In order to begin my journey to heaven, I must really know that I need God. A person who is satisfied with his condition in life will never draw near to God.

STEP 2 – I SEE MY SIN, AND I HATE IT!

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

As I come into the Light, it exposes my sinful, pitiful life and causes me to mourn and to repent. Not those who mourn their losses, what their sins have cost them and their loved ones, but what their sins have cost God and their relationship to Him will receive God's comfort.

For the kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There is no regret in that kind of sorrow. But worldly sorrow, which lacks repentance, results in spiritual death. (2 Cor. 7:10, NLT)

STEP 3 – I KNOW WHO AND WHAT I REALLY AM.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

If I am going to come to God and be usable by God, I must come to understand who and what I really am.

1. A sinner in desperate need of God.
2. Precious to God (*For God so loved the world...*)
3. Forgiven and accepted by God.

I come to have a peaceful and quiet heart, a meek spirit, not a meek personality.

STEP 4 – I HUNGER FOR GOD.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.

In steps 1 – 3, we are emptied of self. Until we do this we can't be filled with God. In Step 4, it's time to be filled with the Holy Spirit. It's time for Matthew :7-8, *Ask and you shall receive. Seek and you shall find...*

When I hunger for God, He gives me His best. He fills me with His Holy Spirit and begins to form His own nature and character in me.

STEP 5 – MERCY BEGINS TO BE FORMED IN MY HEART

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.

As I hunger for God and begin to put on God's nature, I start experiencing and expressing mercy. Mercy is a foundational aspect of God's character and our new character. Saved people are always merciful. They forgive others because they have been forgiven. (Matthew 6:14-15)

STEP 6 – I START TO YEARN FOR THE CLOSENESS WITH GOD THAN CAN ONLY COME WITH PURITY.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

As I continue hungering for God, he starts to purify me, one step at a time, helping me to be rid of bad habits and attitudes. This is always a process.

Each step in this process comes only with my acknowledgement, consent and cooperation. God respects our free will in every step of our life's journey. *Without holiness, no one shall see the Lord.* (Hebrews 12:14)

STEP 7 – AS MY NATURE CHANGES, I BECOME A PEACEMAKER

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Steps 1 – 6 are about heart preparation. Now I am ready to begin useful ministry. As Christ's ambassador I start to bring peace between God and people and therefore among people. *God has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.*

(2 Cor. 17-21)

NOTE: God's main concern is my heart, not my ministry! As He fills me and purifies me, He will use me to bring His peace (Shalom, well-being) to others.

STEP 8 – AS CHRIST WAS PERSECUTED, WE SHALL ALSO BE PERSECUTED

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you for my sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Wherever the peace of God is most clear and pronounced on earth, it always arouses Satan's opposition. If in that situation I forgive my persecutors, it accomplishes more to destroy Satan's kingdom and extend God's kingdom than anything else.

Example: The stoning of Stephen in Acts 7. That one act of love and sacrifice resulted in the conversion of Saul of Tarsus and must surely have released God's grace in a way that was immeasurable.

Example: The death of our Lord Jesus Christ on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice that released God's grace sufficiently to save everyone in the world who would come to Him in simple faith.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God. For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls. (Hebrews 2-17)

LIVING BY FAITH

We humans live by faith in the normal course of our lives. All the important matters of life concern not what we know but what we believe:

- Did the cosmos evolve by natural forces, or was it designed?
- Is your life an accident or does it have a purpose?
- Is there an objective right and wrong, good and evil, or do you decide about that?
- Is mankind the only God there is, or is there some God beyond man?
- There are many religions, many Gods, which one is right?
- Is there life after death?
- Is there a judgment?

- Is there a heaven and a hell?
- Is there a devil?
- When you pray, is Someone really listening? Do you think your prayers make a difference?
- Do you think you have done something that is unforgivable?
- Is it reasonable that God, the Creator of all things, could really care about you and desire a personal relationship with you?
- Do you think you will be judged/rewarded for the way you live?
- Do you think the Bible is a hodge-podge of ideas about God, or is it really a revelation about God? Is it really trustworthy?
- Do you believe that there is a God, and He is good and worthy to be loved and served?

The way you live each day demonstrates very clearly what you believe about the questions in this list. What you say you think or believe about these questions is irrelevant. (That is the reason the Bible says that we will be judged by our deeds or actions.)

We Christians refer to our belief system as “the Christian faith.” It’s a faith, a collection of beliefs. It is more than that, but it is also that. It is by definition unprovable, just as the things in the above list are unprovable. It is risky to believe in the God of the Christian faith. He intended for it to be risky. It costs you something. Actually, it costs you everything.

For many years I was tormented by certain questions: “Jesus said that He was the truth. ‘*I am the way, the truth, and the life.*’ What in the world does that mean?” I also struggled with this thought: “I believe from the evidence that I see in Christians’ lives that living the Christian life ‘works;’ that is, it makes people better and more peaceful and can save them from the self-destruction caused by anger, fear, self-hatred, addictions, etc. But is it objectively true? Are the creation stories in Genesis supposed to be taken literally or figuratively? (Adam and Eve, a serpent in the Garden, Noah and the flood.) Did the miracles really happen? (They are, after all, pretty outrageous: water from a rock, walking on water, multiplying food, healing the blind, raising the dead?)” Did these questions ever bother you? Do they still bother you? They bothered me a lot, but now I have everything figured out. (Ha!)

The Way of Faith

Given all of the above, it is not unusual that, according to the Bible, God chose faith as the way man would connect with God: come to know Him, walk with Him and please Him during our lives.

Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness. (Genesis 15:6)

And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that he exists and is a rewarder of those who seek him. By faith, Abraham... Isaac... Jacob... Joseph... Moses... Gideon.... David... the prophets (Hebrews 11:1-40)

That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:8-21)

Faith is a Body of Beliefs, and Faith is Trust in God

I exhorted you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude 1:3) (“The faith” in this verse is a body of beliefs, a collection of teachings, given by God to believers, the church.)

Through Christ you believe (trust) in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith (trust) and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:21) (The faith, belief, and hope in this verse represent personal trust in God.)

Faith is a Gift, and Faith is a Choice

On the one hand, faith is a gift that comes to us supernaturally as we simply hear and believe the Gospel, the Good News, that God loves us so much that He gave His Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for our sins:

This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:22)

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves – it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. (Ephesians 2:8-10)

On the other hand, faith is a choice, a key part of the free will God has given us: *I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life...* (Deut. 30:17-20)

Choose you this day whom you will serve. (Joshua 24:14-27)

They hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord. (Proverbs 1:29)

If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. (Luke 9:23-27)

Faith is a Struggle! Faith is not just a one-time experience but is a process, a lifetime process, of walking with God. Paul taught that holding onto faith and living by faith in God is a fight, *Fight the good fight of faith.* (1 Tim. 6:12) Those of us who have accepted God's invitation will acknowledge, one and all, how extremely difficult this walk of faith is. Amen?

Modern churches tend to feature testimonies of spiritual successes, never failures, which make the strugglers sitting in church feel worse. Have you ever heard an inspiring sermon or testimony and wondered, "I've never had an experience like that or heard God in that way. What's wrong with me?"

In the New Testament, it sometimes seems that Jesus went out of the way to make things hard for people to believe. Remember that story in John 6 where Jesus was teaching that He was the true Bread that came down from heaven? He says to the people, *Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you can't have eternal life!* The people didn't understand. You and I probably would not have understood. They were offended and started leaving. Instead of calling them back and explaining his statement, Jesus let them go. And He said to His disciples, *Are you going to leave, too?* Peter replied, *Lord, to whom would we go?* Sometimes that's my thinking, also. "Lord, I don't like the way this life of faith is working out for me, but I've tried that other life and I surely don't want to go back to it. Please help me to understand!" Have you ever been in that place?

I want to intersperse some of Phillip Yancey's insights on this subject from his book, Reaching for the Invisible God, as I write about some of the practical difficulties of this subject of faith. Phillip says, "If I asked every person to stop reading whose faith has wavered – as a result of a tragedy or a confidence-shaking encounter with science, or with another religion, or disillusionment with the church or with individual Christians – I might as well end the book with this sentence.

"Job's friends were offended when he expressed his doubts. They said, in effect, 'Stop feeling that way! Shame on you for having such scandalous thoughts!' But God was angry at the friends and told Job to forgive them and pray for them. Books such as Job, Ecclesiastes, Psalms, and Lamentations show that God values honest human doubt." Psalms was the Jews' book of prayer and praise. Listen to some of the cries of doubt and pain expressed in this beautiful collection of prayers:

Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (The cry of Jesus from the cross was taken from Psalm 22.....or perhaps Psalm 22 was taken from Jesus' cry from the cross although it would take place far in the future.) *Why are you so far from the words of my groaning?*

O my God, I cry out by day, but you do not answer, by night, and am not silent.

But the many cries of despair are balanced by many strong expressions of affirmation and trust in God:

I will now arise, says the Lord, I will protect them from those who malign them.

But I trust in your unfailing love; my heart rejoices in your salvation. I will sing to the Lord, for He has been good to me.

I call to the Lord, who is worthy of praise, and I am saved from my enemies.

“If the book of Job teaches one lesson, it is that human beings have no business trying to figure out why things happen. We, like Job, assume that God has somehow arranged all events, then draw false conclusions: ‘God doesn’t love me. God is not fair.’ Faith offers the option of continuing to trust God even while accepting the limits of our humanity, which means that we cannot answer the “Why?” questions.

“In a letter to Dr. James Dobson, a young woman asked this anguished question: “Four years ago, I was dating a man and became pregnant. I was devastated! I asked God, ‘Why have you allowed this to happen to me?’ Susan Smith, the mother who pushed her two sons into a lake to drown, wrote in her official confession: “I dropped to the lowest point when I allowed my children to go down that ramp into the water without me. I took off running and screaming, ‘Oh God! Oh God, no! What have I done? Why did you let this happen?’”

“Exactly what role did God play in a teenage couple losing control in a backseat, or a mother drowning her children? Did God arrange these incidents as tests of faith, or were they demonstrations of human freedom on a fallen planet?”

“The Bible gives many examples of suffering that, like Job’s, have nothing to do with God’s punishment. In his miracles of healing, Jesus overturned the widespread notion that suffering – blindness, lameness, leprosy – comes to people who deserve it. Jesus grieved over many things that happen on this planet, a sure sign that God regrets them more than we do. Not once did Jesus counsel someone to accept suffering as God’s will; rather he went about healing illness and disability and broken hearts.

“For many people, it takes the jolt of tragedy, illness or death to create an existential crisis of faith. At such a moment, we want clarity, God wants our trust. A Scottish preacher in the last century lost his wife suddenly, and after her death he preached a very personal sermon. He admitted in the message that he did not understand this life of ours. But still less could he understand how people facing loss could abandon faith. ‘Abandon it for what!’ he said. ‘You people in the sunshine may believe in faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else.’”

TO BEHOLD THE FACE OF GOD

(Adapted from Francis Frangipane’s book,

I Will be Found by You.)

Have you not deeply desired to see God, to know Him intimately and truly? Beloved, to see Jesus is to behold God. Let us not consider it heresy: we can surely see God! But first we must renounce every perception of the Almighty other than what we have found proven true in Christ.

Therefore study the life, the teachings, and deeds of Jesus Christ, and you will remove the veil of mystery surrounding the nature of God. Jesus said, *He who has seen Me has seen the Father* (see John 14:9). What truth could be more profound? Each time we read of what Jesus did, we are actually beholding the nature of God. Every time we listen to what Jesus taught, we are hearing the voice of the living God.

Jesus is the image of the invisible Father (see Hebrews 1:2-3). *In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form.* (Col. 2:9) Jesus is God’s form. He mirrored on earth those things He saw His Father doing in heaven. He echoed the words the Father whispered to Him from eternity.

Do you truly desire to see God? Christ’s words are windows through which the pure in heart behold the Almighty. Certainly others can edify our souls greatly, but no prophet, apostle, or teacher excels the revelation of God in Christ. Ponder Christ and you contemplate the nature of God. Eat His words and you assimilate into your spirit the substance of the Almighty.

God spoke to the prophets *in many portions and in many ways*. Indeed, all their words inspire, correct, and guide our souls - -they are all profitable for reproof and correction, *but in these last days He has spoken to us in His Son.* (Hebrews 1:1-2)

Prophets will point the way; Christ is the way. Teachers will expound the truth; Jesus is the truth. Apostles will proclaim the life; Jesus is the life. Yes, all speak the word, but the Son of God is the Word.

The teachings of Jesus Christ are not to be blended into the Scriptures as though He were one of many equally important voices used by God. He is, in truth, the living revelation of God Himself, the sole expression of His invisible glory. When Christ speaks, we are listening to God unfiltered, unbiased, and unveiled.

So I ask again, would you see God? Would you pursue the glory of the Lord? Study Jesus. Ponder His words and deeds. To steadfastly gaze upon Jesus is to behold *the glory of God in the face of Christ*. (2 Cor. 4:6)

Father, I want to see Your glory and to dwell in Your presence. Make Your Word come alive to me, and let it transform my soul. Renew my mind that I might live in union with You.

God Bless Glenn

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