

WALKING IN THE NEW REALITY



DOING GREATER THINGS THAN JESUS DID

One day while jogging on a treadmill, I read some Scripture that perplexed me. Jesus was preparing His disciples before His crucifixion and ascension to the Father. Jesus told them that they would do greater things than He did because He would be returning to heaven. Then Jesus told them that whatever they ask in His name will be done.

**From driving out demons
to healing to other miracles,
Jesus gave His followers authority
to accomplish the purposes of the Father.
If this is really true,
why do many modern churches treat such
miracles as Christian folklore?**

Some consider such manifestations of God's power as something that happened a long time ago but does not occur today. Do I really believe in the power of Jesus' name?

Now, there are some conditions to Jesus' promise. Whatever I ask must be in His name. The request must be in keeping with Jesus' Spirit. It would have to be a request He

would have made to the Father while He walked the earth. I must believe in the power and authority of Jesus. The request must bring glory to the Father. God must receive the credit not man.

Jesus did not make this claim about the power of prayer only once. He continued to repeat His desire for His people to be powerful prayer warriors.

Dear Lord, please forgive me for doubting Your power. I seldom call on Your name. I try to do it myself. May I lean on Your strength and call on Your name more. May my prayers follow Your Spirit and bring glory to the Father. Teach me how to pray and how to tap into Your power to accomplish Your perfect purpose.

NEW CREATION

According to the Word, those who are in Christ are a new creation; the old has gone away, the new has come. I have been struggling with trying to figure out the differences between the pre-Christ and post-Christ versions of me. Has Christ really made a difference?

Here is a BEFORE and AFTER picture of what Christ can do.

<u>Old</u>	<u>New</u>
Death.....	Life
Selfishness	Christ Focus
Hate.....	Love
Bondage	Freedom
Condemnation.....	Grace
Led By Sinful Nature.....	Led By Spirit
Corrupt.....	Holy
Fear	Hope

WOW! What a DIFFERENCE CHRIST can make. I do not always walk according to the new reality of Christ's work in me. Every day I fall prey to the sinful nature. But I am no longer defined by sin; God sees me through Christ's work on the cross. According to Romans 12:2, believers should not conform to the pattern of this world. Instead, God's people must be transformed by the renewing of our minds. The pattern of this world is described above under the old column. What a horrible list!

Thank you Jesus for setting me free from the law of sin and death. Our mind are renewed by the work of Christ in our lives. As we spend time with the Lord, he takes the old and deposits the new inside us. Christ's sacrifice has revived and quickened my spirit. I can commune with the Lord in a new and living way. While in sin, my spirit was dead. But by Christ's blood my spirit lives, and the Spirit of God lives inside of me. The Creator of the universe could have picked any place to live, and He chose the hearts of His people.

DON'T WASTE TIME TRYING NOT TO SIN, INSTEAD FOCUS ON CHRIST!

After years of being a professional backslider, a spiritual mentor recently gave me sound advice on how to deal with habitual sin. He outlined the root of the problem. And it was not what I expected to hear. It had nothing to do with my lack of discipline or my surroundings. I could not blame my sin on past trauma or generational curses. My sin problem resulted from a Jesus deficit. I was trying to be holy on my own so that I could be close to Christ. But only at the foot of the cross, abiding in the sweet presence of the Lord, can I be set free. Despite all of my religious head knowledge, grace must have been the furthest thing from my mind.

As I start to spend more time with Christ, he renews my mind and kills my flesh. It all comes down to a classic

showdown. On one side the flesh stands against God; it desires to sin and seek pleasure. Flesh cannot be tamed. It must be killed. Unfortunately, it keeps on coming back to life. The Lord must put flesh to death every day. On the other side of the battle is the Holy Spirit. This is God's Spirit living inside the believer, and it desires to please God and transform the believer. The evidence of the Spirit winning the battle is the development of Christ-like qualities called the Fruit of the Spirit.

When temptation comes, sometimes the only remedy is to flee from the devil and run to Christ. Then the Lord can wash me and renew my mind through the power of the Holy Spirit. Christians must not let sin separate them from God. Instead, repent and turn to God. The enemy wants to use sin to keep Christians from communion with God. The devil will try to convince us that God does not love us because of our sin. He will try to deceive us into believing that we are the 'flesh' man. But in reality, we are a new creation. We are a spirit man, and we are no longer identified by our sin. We are sons of God by Christ's blood.

THE FAST & THE FURIOUS

Having just finished watching the movie *The Fast & The Furious*, I am still on an adrenaline rush. Or maybe I'm feeling adrenaline envy because I have never driven a car 120 mph. Regardless, when I look at my life compared to those of the characters in the movie, I live a dull existence. To quote a line from a different movie, "All men die; some men never truly live!" Too often this statement describes my life and the lives of millions on the planet.

A big reason why so many people love movies is because they can detach from their real-life problems and live in a make-believe world for two hours.

**Most people in modern America
live artificial,
pre-packaged lives.
Entertainment, food, and shopping
are the opiate of the masses.**

Unfortunately, Christians are almost indistinguishable from the world when it comes to materialism and seeking constant entertainment. We like to veg out as much as the next couch potato.

Most people today, including many Christians, don't know what it means to truly live. We have the wrong standards and seek fulfillment in the wrong places. We live ordinary lives because that is what everyone else does. So what does it mean to be alive? If I had one last breath, what would I want to be doing before I die? I could be racing a suped-up car on the streets of Los Angeles. Or I could be climbing Mount Everest. I could win the lottery or hit a game-winning home run.

But none of these will last. I know... my problem is that Christians are supposed to live a boring life. If a person is having too much fun, he must be sinning and will endanger his soul. Wait a minute — it's just that I am not seeing clearly.

**The life of a Christian
can be the most
on-edge existence around
if we plug into the right power source.**

Take Paul for example. His preaching caused riots in many cities and crowds tried to kill him on more than one occasion. In one encounter, a crowd stoned him to the point of death. Yet, he lived. A short while later, he went back to the same

city where the crowd had stoned him to see how the church was doing. That's one tough dude. Paul prayed for people, and God responded through miracles and healing the sick. Paul drove out demons by the power of God.

Or consider Elisha in the Old Testament. A battalion of angels on flaming chariots helped him defeat the Arameans when God struck them blind. Daniel sat in a lions' den without being harmed. Jonah caught a ride in a big fish. Samson brought the house down on the Philistines. Peter escaped from jail just before being executed. By comparison, life today is just plain boring, especially in the industrialized, free world. Is God not willing or capable of showing up in a big way today? I don't get it. Today is the time that the patriarchs and prophets of old dreamed about seeing fulfilled in their lifetime.

Jesus said that with faith the size of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. If I ask for anything in His name, He will do it. I guess that maybe all that I need is a different perspective on my situation. The Spirit of God lives inside of me. I can commune directly with the Creator of the universe. When I make requests, He actually listens and responds. The Creator has given me special gifts to complete His purpose for my life. God's Spirit has imparted to me a spiritual language to draw close to Him. Unlike all those fair-weather friends, God has promised never to leave my side. He has my back and has left me with a guardian angel just to keep watch. I will one day live in heaven with a glorified body at the biggest party in the history of history. And the best part... it's all free.

Wow, I feel a lot better about my situation now. All I have to do is daily walk in the new reality created by God. Then, I can experience real life — the kind that movie stars tend to search for but cannot find on this earth.

THE QUEST FOR THE HOLY GRAIL

One of most frequent statements that I hear from other young Christians is, 'I just wish that I knew God's plan for my life.' Discovering one's call has become the Holy Grail of Christian life. People tend to think that everything else will be fine once they hear God's master plan.

To answer the cry of the confused masses, some churches have embraced 'knowing your spiritual gifts' teaching based on personality tests. It all starts with the idea that God uniquely designs our personalities, gives us talents and abilities, and creates us for a unique purpose. This all makes good sense and lines up with Scripture. Unfortunately, some have taken the gifting theology too far by shifting the focus from God to pop psychology.

**According to this gift-focused theology,
most Christians
flounder around
in a miserable state
because they have never
discovered their gifting
and thus live fruitless lives.**

If we really spend quality time with the Father and desire to please Him, will He let us miss the destiny planned for us? I believe the real reason that many young Christians live unfulfilled lives is that they never realize the joy of a deep relationship with God. Instead, their 'faith' consists of dead religion, works, programs and rituals. They don't recognize the voice of God or obey when the Spirit directs them.

Do our natural abilities limit God's use for us? As I look at heroes in the Bible, many of them stand out as odd choices. Why did God use a man with a speech impediment to lead

the nation of Israel against Pharaoh? Why would Jesus invite a rag-tag bunch of men including fishermen, a tax collector and a political zealot to be the founding fathers of the early Christian Church? They lacked the training and the skill to be ideal candidates. Why did God pick the youngest of Jesse's sons to succeed Saul as king of Israel? Why was the Messiah born to a lowly carpenter and a young, obscure woman? Why did God use a persecutor and murderer of Christians to write volumes of the New Testament?

The Lord uses the foolish things to confound the wise. God's ways are higher than man's ways. His thoughts and understanding far exceed our comprehension. God used fishermen instead of trained religious scholars because they were willing and their lack of credentials brought maximum glory to God. If a person is naturally talented in an area, the world would encourage him to exploit this ability as much as possible. But what happens when a person is so good at something that he does not need God to succeed? As Christians, we can put on a good show under our own power. But our efforts will lack the anointing of the Holy Spirit and will produce nothing of lasting importance without God. In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Our natural talents and abilities mean little if we act out of our own power and understanding.

When I first took a gift assessment test, I scored far different from my actual calling. I completely misread my own talents and gifting. I discovered that it can be very hard to know oneself, and God knows us better than we know ourselves. While a gift test can be a helpful tool, it should never take the place of the Holy Spirit. Gift tests are only a starting point for your prayer as you ask the Spirit to reveal God's call and gifting. The gift teaching does come with some potential pitfalls. It can lead immature believers down the path of dead works because they try to fulfill their God given purpose without God.

Never let the results of a psychological test or your socio/economic background restrict what you think God can do with your life. Sure, God gave you certain natural talents and personality traits. God wants you to use them for His glory. These skills and characteristics will fuel your primary ministry and calling in life. But that doesn't keep God from calling you to do something completely against your nature. As you mature in your Christian faith, expect for God to keep on pushing you to tackle new challenges and develop new giftings. Although these may not be your primary calling, God will use even your weaknesses in His timing if you will submit to His instruction.

Remember that God will always equip his people to do whatever He calls them to do. This equipping may not be natural talents or personality traits. Instead, the Lord may give you what you need at just the exact moment it is required to accomplish His purpose. As you mature, you may discover that you are good at something you originally had no idea even existed.

**Life is more complex than a personality test.
While some may be called
to primarily use obvious natural talents
to glorify God,
others may be
destined
for a life
far different than what they would expect.**

The journey starts with a heavy dose of prayer and listening to for the voice of the Lord. With God, all things are possible.

CAN YOU DO THAT IN FAITH?

One of the guys at work is a strong Christian. He also happens to be a Green Bay Packers fan. One day I proceeded to taunt him after a rather disappointing loss for the Packers. I made a few sharp comments just to razz him a bit. The co-worker looked up at me with a smile on his face and responded by saying, “Brother, as long as you speak that in faith go ahead.” He looked back down at his computer screen and resumed his work. My mouth dropped to the floor; I walked back to my office like a scolded puppy dog.

Later in the year, I came across this concept again while reading a book on faith. I asked the question, ‘What does faith have to do with my actions?’ And as I delved into the issue I found out that faith should be the basis for everything that I say and do. When dealing with the issue of eating ‘clean’ or ‘unclean’ food, Paul wrote, “But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14: 23).

This led me to ask the question, ‘What makes something a sin? Jesus said that is not what a man puts in his body but what comes out of his heart that makes him unclean. Sin can be anything done in rebellion against God. Sin goes beyond the obvious wrong actions such as theft, deceit, adulterly or disobedience. Sin can include ‘good’ works such as giving to the poor, helping a neighbor or saying a kind word to someone. If we have ulterior motives, even kind deeds can turn into big traps. Our motivation and faith makes the differences not the action.

Charles Finney, the famous preacher, once wrote, “Don’t expect to break away from any sin in your unbelief. You may break away from the outward act — you may substitute praying for swearing, reading your Bible for reading unwholesome material, sobriety for drunkenness, honesty for theft, industry for idleness, and anything you please. But

that is, after all, only exchanging one form of sin for another. It is only varying the mode of your warfare.

**“Remember that in unbelief,
whatever your conduct is,
you are in rebellion against God.
Faith would instantly
sanctify your heart,
sanctify all your actions,
and render them, in Christ Jesus,
acceptable to God.**

“Unbelief is your great, heinous, damning sin — against which the heaviest thunderbolts of Jehovah are hurled.”

Next time before you act, stop and ask yourself — Can I do this in faith?

SERVING A SOVEREIGN GOD BRINGS PEACE OF MIND

Mistakes and failures tend to haunt me even amidst a chorus of praise. One negative comment can trump 100 positive ones. Having just finished running a Christian camp, I have had to mentally wade through both positive and negative feedback. Some comments were brought in love. Others were not. Fully aware of my mistakes, I have experienced an emotional roller coaster over the last week. For a while, I soaked in the praise. Then, I focused on the negative feedback and criticism. The criticism kept playing back in my mind. Each time, it grew more severe until I reached a point of complete frustration. I felt like a failure, a big loser. I began to doubt my gifting and calling to minister. Even worse, other Christians helped to fuel this negative spiral by making wounding comments. The devil had a good time

making me feel completely worthless.

Throughout the week friends tried to encourage me and to help me see beyond my current funk. One friend pointed me to II Corinthians 12: 9-10 (KJV). “And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ’s sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.” This passage helped me to once again fall back on grace. God takes the weak things of man and makes them strong to glorify Himself. Another friend put it this way, “God is stronger than my failures.”

While I prayed, the Lord brought to my mind the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1-17. Despite the devil’s best efforts, he was unable to disturb the line of the Messiah. Through times of rebellion, exile in foreign lands, and war, God secured the line of Christ. The Lord kept His promises despite the best efforts of man to mess it up. The Spirit helped me to see how God used imperfect people to play a role in the line of the Messiah. I need not fear making a mistake because I can’t stop God’s plan if I try. Many people skip over the genealogies when reading the Bible. But these records show God’s faithfulness from generation to generation. We can see God’s grand design through the ages and rest in His sovereign arms.

**As I prayed about the line of Christ,
I thought how I fit into the grand scheme.
Down through the ages
God looked to this very point
in time and saw me.**

When Christ hung on the cross, He suffered for me. The genealogy of Christ continues to this very day as more people are added to the family.

In Christ's saving arms, I am free from worry. Should I judge my ministry efforts? Paul said that he does not judge himself. No, I should pray and seek God's correction. If a brother brings a comment in love, then I should listen and seek God's direction. If another person, even a Christian, makes a comment in jest or out of anger, I should dismiss it. The Holy Spirit will guide me and let me know where I need to change. Too much self evaluation leads to negative thoughts and the dungeon of self condemnation.

Consider the following insight that Watchman Nee wrote in *The Spiritual Man* :

“If in God's light we see light, we shall know ourselves without losing our freedom in the Lord. But if all day long, we analyze ourselves, dissecting our thoughts and feelings, it will hinder us from losing ourselves in Christ.”

By God's grace I am free to live, love and serve.

YOU'RE NOT AS SMART AS YOU THINK YOU ARE!

Have you ever noticed how God does some seemingly strange things to display His power and get our attention? Just take a look at some of the stories in the Bible.

God caused a donkey to speak. God made the earth stop rotating on its axis for a day. God asked the prophet Hosea to marry a woman who would end up sleeping around to illustrate Israel's unfaithfulness. A big fish swallowed Jonah and helped him see God's point of view. Jesus healed the multitudes and fed more than 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. Peter walked on water. A poisonous viper bit Paul, and he did not die. The disciples prayed for people, and they were healed. Believers spoke in foreign tongues and prophesied as the Spirit came upon them. None of these things can be explained by science. They

are beyond comprehension. Weird manifestations and miracles still happen today. Yet many Christians are quick to suppress the Spirit saying, “I don’t see that as one of the miracles or Spiritual manifestations mentioned in the Bible.”

Some Christians, especially the more conservative thinkers, try to put the Holy Spirit in a box. But who do we think we are to limit God? What if these skeptical scholars were around when Elijah performed some of his amazing miracles? They might have told Elijah, ‘You’re being silly. You can’t feed yourself and two other people through a famine with only a one bowl of flour and one jar of oil.’ Although the miracle may have been a first, Elijah trusted in the power of God. Led by the Spirit, he proceeded in faith. This miracle defies explanation (See 1 Kings 17:9-16). Some might say, ‘Well, that’s in the Old Testament. God no longer works through divine miracles or manifestations any more.’ Oh yeah, who says? The new covenant does not eliminate the need for the supernatural. Many have doubted supernatural experiences because it has never happened to them. Smart, seminary-trained scholars cannot explain it. If something cannot be explained by brilliant men, it must be counterfeit. Right? Consider the words of the apostle:

“For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. Brothers, think of what you were when you were called; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him” (I Corinthians 1:25-29).

**The Bible makes it quite clear
that much of what God does
is foolishness to man.
We are kidding ourselves
if we think that we can
completely figure out God.**

He allows us to discover the essentials in the beginning. Then, we learn more day by day as we spend time with the Lord. But we will always remain God's children.

Yeah, some of what I have seen has caused me to feel uncomfortable. I have never been knocked over by the power of the Spirit. I have never experienced 'holy' laughter. I have never heard the audible voice of God. I have never seen a cripple restored to full health right in front of my eyes. But does that mean these things cannot happen to others? Are there some frauds out there trying to raise tons of money and make a name for themselves? Sure, there are those sowing bad seed. Conversely, there are many doing the work of the Lord with the supernatural taking place in their ministries.

By observing God move in bazaar ways, He has shown me that I have a lot to learn. I am no way near as smart as I think I am. But if I have the faith of a child, God can do a lot with me.

DISCIPLESHIP 101

Jesus gave us explicit instructions — “Go and make disciples of all nations.” Oddly, making disciples tends to be one activity that modern Christians and churches have a difficult time doing. Sure, there are plenty of programs and good teaching. But discipleship requires more commitment than many people can muster.

**Discipleship does not fit well
into the modern world of
pre-planned programs and
jam-packed schedules.**

If pastors provided an honest assessment, they would admit that most churches, especially larger ones, struggle to effectively disciple and care for the flock. People can come and go without anybody knowing they are gone. As the Lord has led me to disciple and encourage some younger Christians, I have struggled with the call to make disciples. I have so many questions. And the only answer that I can come up with is to simply love others as Jesus did.

But Jesus lived with His disciples; they were almost always by His side. This is not possible in today's society. Ok, maybe, looking at Paul's relationship with Timothy is more appropriate. Although they spent time together, they lived in different cities most of the time. Paul wrote personal letters encouraging Timothy to strive in areas of weakness. Paul consistently prayed for Timothy and longed to see him. Paul genuinely cared for Timothy. He spoke the truth in love.

Paul never let their relationship focus on either one of them. The focus remained Christ. Paul understood that he was not making a disciple for himself. Timothy was Christ's disciple. Paul simply showed Timothy how to connect with the Lord. Paul modeled through his lifestyle and teaching how to grow in intimacy with Jesus and serve the Church. Don't read this and try to go out and make a disciple on your own. The solo approach never works. The Spirit will do the heavy lifting.

The modern 'Christian' approach to discipleship is to set up a program, class or Bible study. Discipleship is not any of these although discipleship can occur in such settings. Pre-packaged, planned discipleship typically does not work.

Simply being assigned someone to mentor by pulling a name out of a hat lacks a true connection. People must be drawn to each other. In the real world, they have to want to be in relationship with each other. At its core, discipleship revolves around relationships. Younger believers are attracted to a deep, beautiful deposit of Christ in another person. The Lord places a desire to care for and encourage another in the heart of a mature Christian. The Holy Spirit makes a connection. As the two spend time together, the Spirit guides the relationship. Both parties learn from each other.

Do you want to carry out Christ's commission to make disciples? Set your agenda aside. Other Christians should not be treated as a project or a task to check off your list.

**People simply want to be loved
and encouraged.
It all starts with being available.
Pray and ask for the Lord
to bring about opportunities
to disciple others.**

Listen for the voice of God and keep your spiritual eyes open. Then when someone comes along, simply hang out and share your life (in Christ) with them.

STRUGGLING TO FIND A TANGIBLE GOD

Having just returned from an excursion to the Olympic Mountains, I should be flying high. Picturesque scenery surrounded me. From lush rainforests to the tranquil sunset on the banks of the Pacific Ocean, nature shouted God's presence and the genius of His master design.

But, today, I feel more like singing, 'I ain't got no satisfaction.' Maybe, I'm in a spiritual funk. Or maybe I'm

just coming off a mountain top experience (pun intended). Quite simply, I feel like a stepchild accidentally left at the mall parking lot with no way to get home.

My flesh wants to be fed by something tangible. God seems distant and intangible. According to the Bible, man cannot please God without faith.

**The apparent intangible nature of God
seems to be a key reason
why many reject Him.**

**We want something physical,
something we can see and touch.**

By definition faith is being sure of what we cannot see. I can relate with the children of Israel when they made the golden calf in Exodus 32.

The people became impatient waiting for Moses to return. Enticed by their flesh, they pushed Aaron to cast a golden calf. Then, they worshipped the image and engaged in a wide variety of drunken revelry and godless behavior. Why did they even bother making a god? Well, they recognized the need for God. According to Scripture, they wanted “gods to go before them.” The Israelites forgot God’s visible hand and His miracles. Right then, they demand something tangible and settled for a golden calf. The false god provided security and gave silent approval to their sinful behavior. What are the golden calves in my life?

Oh, how I long to see God face to face so this ping pong game of faith and doubt can be over. Yet, I know the receiving of God’s promises comes by faith. The development of faith cannot be side stepped. Abraham received forgiveness for his sin because he believed God, and his faith was credited to him as righteousness. According to Romans, “The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him (Abraham)

alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (Romans 4:23-24).

Dare I ask, ‘Is God an absentee father?’ To the world, God appears to have abandoned His children. In our flesh, we may feel the same way. Yet, the Bible proves otherwise. Nature declares God’s provision and care. God works behind the scenes using other people and circumstances to nurture His children. Sometimes, God does outpour His Spirit in a ‘tangible’ way through miracles and spiritual gifts. We can lose ourselves in worship and really feel the love of God. But be warned — feelings can be very deceptive. Truth remains truth despite what we may feel.

The Word as guided by the Spirit stands as the foundation for Christian truth. When you ‘feel’ alone, dive into the Word and see what God has to say about you. Quiet the doubts in your mind, praise God and believe. Remember the words of Jesus to Thomas, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29). The blessings of God await those who overcome this world through faith in Christ.

PROXIMITY BLINDNESS

Have you ever noticed how we can be blind to God’s active work in our lives? Good friends pick up on it. Our dog even notices before we do sometimes. Overwhelmed by life’s cares, we are too close to our situation to realize the truth. One example in my own life illustrates this point. I went over to friend’s apartment to hang out, pray and watch a little Monday Night Football. My friend helped me see past the moment to the big picture. Struggling through a test of faith, I was complaining like a little child. I told my friend, “I’m struggling to receive something tangible from God — sometimes I feel like God is so far away. Where is God when we really need him?”

My friend listened and started to smile. I could tell he was holding back laughter. He saw something humorous in my situation, but I did not really feel like laughing. Less than a minute passed by, then he just let go and started to laugh. I begged him to let me in on the joke.

Once he regained his composure, he said, “You want something tangible. God has been revealing Himself to you for over a year by inspiring you to write a book about Him. And you want something tangible?” In an instant, I saw what my friend saw. The entire time, I had taken God’s revelation for granted. I couldn’t help but laugh at myself. Wow — I sure can be blind to my own reality.

You are now holding and reading part of my relationship with God. If you have never sat down and let the Lord reveal Himself to you through writing, take a chance. The Holy Spirit may open your eyes to truths about yourself and your walk with God that you never knew existed.

FORBIDDEN LOVE

King Solomon knew a thing or two about relationships. He had 700 wives and 300 concubines. Through his life, Solomon experienced the pain caused by ungodly relationships. Just like his father, women were his weakness and led to his downfall.

As a single, young Christian male, I understand the power of sexual lust and the enticements of the flesh. I can relate to the Apostle Paul when he wrote, “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:15,24). Every day I wage war to walk in the spirit and not after the flesh.

**From media to spam e-mail messages
to billboards on the
side of the road,
the enemy constantly
bombards God's
people with lies
about what true love looks like.**

For 27 years, I have endured the battlefield of the mind and the soul. I wish I could say that I have lived every moment as unto the Lord. But like David I have sinned and found myself crying out, "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me" (Psalm 51:10-11 - KJV).

Through it all, God has proven faithful. I would not trade any of what I have had to endure because my trials and failures have provided the Lord opportunities to mold and shape me in His image.

Doing things my way only caused pain. The Lord has been showing me just how much he requires of His people — God requires everything. I am reminded of the words of Jim Elliot, a missionary who died at the hands of the Auca Indians. Elliot said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose." Even if Christ called him to die, Elliot realized that he got the better end of the deal.

When we scratch and claw to get things on our own, we end up causing pain. Our actions reflect a lack of faith. Just consider how the sins of Abraham and Sarah has caused problems for generations. Had Abraham not slept with Hagar, the war and strife between the Arabs and the Israelis would have never happened. I don't expect my mistakes to lead to massive wars. But my sin will leave a trail of tears behind me.

Pressed on all sides by others' expectations, finding a wife has become somewhat a sore subject for me. The Christian community expects that young believers need to get married to be happy. Those who don't marry get attached with an unspoken stigma. Sometimes, I think of single Christians as the modern day lepers in the Church. Well-intentioned Christians try to set you up on dates. Friends and families press by asking, 'Are you married yet?' I am starting to reply, 'Yes, I'm married to Jesus.' This response causes some to roll their eyes and walk away.

Quite naturally, many people think in their heads, 'I wonder what he does for sex?' Well, I'm a 27-year-old virgin who has had to deal with a wide variety of sexual temptations. I have not always been pure in my thoughts or actions. But I stand today as a victor against sin through Christ. I know that man's flesh can be brought under submission to the spirit. One day I heard a radio preacher teach that if you are not married you need to find a good Christian singles group and start looking. He basically taught that the sins of the flesh are too great for most Christians. While I agree it takes a special call from God to remain single forever, looking at relationships the way the world does makes little spiritual sense. It all starts with prayer and keeping your eyes open for God's plan.

Through the blood of Christ, you are more than a conqueror. This includes sexual temptation and lust. These temptations don't just go away because you get married. In some cases, weaknesses carried over from your life as a single person can intensify once you get married.

**Learning how to submit
your life to Christ
and die to the sinful nature
can only come from God not marriage.
Too many people seek
in earthly relationships,
things they can only get from God.**

The radio preacher was right about the power of the flesh. We are no match for the flesh. Only Christ can kill the flesh. This truth points to the centrality of Christ as the cornerstone for every successful relationship. We are incapable of the purity, love and wisdom needed in life apart from God. I'm continually amazed when people ask, 'Aren't you tired of being alone?' This question shows their lack of spiritual understanding. When you are in Christ, you are never alone. The Spirit of the Lord lives in His people — the hope of glory. Is my flesh tired of being alone? Sure! But Christians do not live after the flesh. Believers should live to fulfill the desires of the spirit.

The apostle Paul devoted an entire chapter in his letter to the Corinthians on the subject of marriage. Paul encouraged the believers to follow God's individual call and gifting for their lives. He warned that married life carries with it certain troubles and limitations. Paul also wrote, "Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I am. But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion" (I Corinthians 7:8&9). Scripture never indicates that the unmarried life is inferior to being married. Instead, the Word recognizes the viability and importance of both. For God established the family as the base of earthly society, and marriage to Christ as the foundation of His heavenly kingdom.

Your earthly marriage is just a trial run for your marriage to Christ at the end of the age.

If you struggle with being single, confess any sin and cry out to God. Take heart! All perfect and good things come from God. The Lord knows what you need. Remember the words of Christ, “Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matthew 6:33-34).

THE ULTIMATE CINDERELLA STORY

What does true love really look like? Does the prince ever run off with the fair maiden and live happily ever after? Various influences in my life have recently spurred me to study the marriage metaphor used in the Bible to describe Christ’s relationship with the Church. If you have never stopped to meditate on what this means, you are missing out on the very heart of God. One of the most complete pictures of the bride and groom concept is painted in the Song of Songs.

Described as the greatest of many songs written by King Solomon, this book of the Bible tells the story of an intimate love relationship between a Shulammitite maiden and a king. There are those that discredit this book as a portrait of God’s love for man due to the sensual language used by the author, but I find this hard to believe given that underneath the surface it clearly describes true wedded love.

**Although a man’s love
for a woman pales
in comparison to
God’s holy love for man,
it is the closest point
of reference for mankind.**

The story starts with the Shulammitte maiden expressing her longing to be with her lover the king. She describes his love as more delightful than wine. His name is like perfume poured out. Just the mention of his name arouses delight in the heart of the maiden. She expresses her desire to be taken away with him in private. She longs to be near her lover. Paul writes about this same kind of longing when he said, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body” (Philippians 1:23&24).

The maiden goes on to describe her imperfections. Unlike the beauties raised in the shade of the palace, the beloved has spent years tending the fields of others, which has tanned her skin. Having made it through a rough life, she bares the scars of her trials. Her justification shows her feeling of inadequacy compared to the greatness of her lover. The king quickly dispels the beloved’s apprehension. He describes her as a mare — the picture of grace, beauty and strength. A mare would stand out as the best among a team of horses. In the terminology of the day, this would be considered a great compliment even though today most women would never want to be compared to a horse.

The king uses the term “darling” to describe his affection for the maiden. The lover sees his beloved not for what she was but what she has become due to his work on her behalf. He provides her ornaments and jewels that bring out her inner beauty. In the same way, Jesus looks past the sin and sees a glorious, radiant bride. Adorned in white, covered by Jesus’ blood, the Lord looks at us through the completion of his work in us. We focus on the ‘work in progress.’ He sees the end and smiles with delight. Just like the beloved, who has been caught up in her own ugliness, we fear rejection for our sin and shame.

Her lover is a pouch of myrrh (fine perfume) laying on her heart. Thus, the king’s love captures her heart even when he is not with her in the flesh. Even though we do not see

God face to face today, His love should hold our hearts and remind us of what we have to look forward to when the Lord returns for His bride.

The king proclaims her beauty. He focuses on her eyes, the window to her soul. The eyes betray her innermost secrets. Her eyes are compared to doves, which indicate purity. Interestingly, the dove came down on Jesus after His baptism as a sign of God's favor and love. To me, the dove represents the Spirit of God resting on His people. The Holy Spirit offers enlightenment. It enables the bride to see beyond the here and now. Doves are known for having singular vision that focuses on only one object at a time. Just like a dove, our eyes should focus solely on the bridegroom. Yet many Christians live with double vision, trying to hold onto the things of this world and the world to come.

The beloved returns her lover's compliment by proclaiming his pleasant appearance. Their relationship is based on a reliable foundation. It is stable and secure just like the fate of all that trust in Jesus. Through the story, the king proclaims his complete infatuation with his beloved. Unique, she is like a rose among thorns.

Apart from each other, the king and his beloved declare their love. The Shulammitte princess searches for and finds him. The king says, "You have stolen my heart with one glance of your eyes" (Song of Solomon 4:9). Enraptured by her beauty, the king finds no flaw in his beloved. Likewise, God desires to intimately know man. Take a minute to consider that God ultimately wants to love you and me in the same way.

The king describes the Shulammitte princess as a garden locked up and a sealed fountain. She belonged to him and should not give herself to anyone else. God is just as much a jealous husband as the king in this story. He desires our devotion and love. Christians must have no person or thing above God.

Yet like the Shulammitte, we have a free will. Just as she rejects the king's knock at her door when she is sleeping, we

tend to reject God's call when it does not serve our needs. We offer up excuses just like the princess did. When we awaken, we come to our senses. We travel the streets looking for God as she did searching for her beloved. The watchmen (religious leaders) find us on the streets and abuse us because we are not where we are supposed to be.

Meanwhile, our lover, like the king, does not force his way on us. Instead, God shows his love through his patience. The king goes off to pick flowers, which reminds him of his beloved. In the same way, Christ returned to the Father and intercedes for us in prayer. Instead of chastising the Shulammitte, the king responds to her rejection by showering her with praises. Likewise, Jesus reaffirms us through His Word and Spirit.

The Shulammitte princess is not the only woman in the king's court. He loves and knows other women. There are other queens, concubines and virgins in the king's life. But the Shulammitte princess holds a special place in his heart and knows him better than the others. This illustrates the relationship between God and man. We are only limited in knowing God by our desire and love for him. He desires a Shulammitte princess but tends to get virgins and concubines.

**What makes the Shulammitte
unique is her hunger for
and delight in the king alone.
She loves him for his beauty
not his position or wealth.**

Would we love God if he withdrew his blessing, remained silent, refused to heal us or allowed a tragedy to harm us? Or are we motivated by a selfish love? God desires for us to reach a place where we love Him regardless of the fringe benefits. The Shulammitte princess expresses her desire to go away alone with the king. A heart sold out to God will desire

intimate privacy with Him.

The Song of Songs is just one of many wedding metaphors in the Bible. Others include Adam and Eve, Ruth and Boaz, and Esther and King Xerxes. The Bible starts and ends with a wedding. The greatest party in the history of the world awaits the bride of Christ at the marriage supper of the Lamb. Will you be there? What does your heart long for?

Paul used the wedding metaphor in Ephesians to describe Christ's relationship to the Church. Christ loves and died for the Church. As described in Genesis, the two become one. In the same way, we as individuals and collectively as the Church will be united with God, our lover, at the end of the age. As the king gave the Shulammite beautiful clothes and jewelry to wear, Christ provided his blood as our covering. In the end, we will see God face to face and be with Him forever.

The wedding metaphor describes a close relationship. Many of the most intimate moments in life are experienced in private between two lovers. Likewise, our personal walk with Christ should be the pinnacle of our spiritual lives, not a weekly church service. Although both private and group gatherings are critical to the development of our faith, our private walk determines our level of intimacy with God.

Probably my favorite aspect of the wedding example is the unconditional love offered by the king. The groom knows things about the bride that no one else does. He sees her completely exposed in her nakedness.

**The groom sees his darling
as she truly is
and loves her
regardless of her imperfections.**

God, the lover of my soul, sees me the exact same way. I cannot hide anything from Him, yet His love remains constant.

Truly, God's love is better than life.

Have you experienced the depth of God's love in your life? If you stop to let Him put the slipper on your foot, you will see that it fits. Indeed, Christ's love meets us where we are with unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. Grace remains the key to my Cinderella story. Open your heart today to receive even more of Christ's indescribable love. Just stop to consider that you are the recipient in the greatest love story ever told.

