



I'm Normal.

I AM

Jeffrey C. Myers

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This Book is a Gift

To

From

May God Bless You.

I'm normal. **I Am** Ministries
<http://www.imnormal.com>

Dedication

To Jesus Christ, my LORD and Savior

“I Am *the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”*

John 14:6

“Salvation is found in no One else, for there is no other name under Heaven by which we must be saved.”

Acts 4:12

“For there is One Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ.”

1 Timothy 2:5

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Preface

Ask yourself a simple question: “What’s normal in my life?” Did your answer consider items such as your physical appearance? Your family? Your clothes? Your musical tastes? Your job? Your diet? Your vehicle? Your pets? Your beliefs? A combination of factors? If these are the types of items you evaluated, you’re typical. We’ve all gone through the exercise of questioning whether we fit society’s standards at some point. The problem is that most people do not have a firm understanding of how to determine what, precisely, is normal.

Our instinct is to look to the world around us. We look routinely to and are influenced by the culture as we examine whether we’re normal. Family, friends, television, movies, and music contribute to and encourage our thinking and self-evaluation. For example, the popular song “Teach Your Children” stipulates that we must “have a code that we can live by” that will help us be normal. The obvious question is, “What code?” Your answer to this question is crucial to determining if you’re normal.

For most of our country’s history, the Bible represented the moral code of society. Biblical principals guided our founding fathers as they drafted the documents that established our government. Before that, the Pilgrims came to America with the express intent to practice Christianity. Our Christian heritage was an unquestioned and integral part of our society for generations. Today, however, people are challenging openly the authority of the Bible and rejecting the principles contained in it.

One reason the Bible has fallen out of favor is that many people are offended by the Bible’s teachings, which tell us we are sinners. To admit to sin is distasteful because it degrades one’s self image. Thus, there is a strong movement to redefine sin as anything that is an impediment to our happiness, lifestyle, ego, reputation, or personal comfort. The concept of “situational ethics” is promoted as the code in vogue, allowing each person to decide what is right and avoid the

shame of sin. This can only lead to chaos, as what is right and moral for one person is unacceptable to another.

Offensive or not, the only eternal, Truthful, and “normal” moral code is contained in the Bible, God’s Holy Word. God’s normal ways, which He reveals in His sacred book, have always been and will always be the only code we need by which to live. God’s gift of free will affords you the right to accept or reject this code. But whatever your decision, you are ultimately subject to it. We all face an eternity once our life on Earth is over, and understanding God’s ways can assure that your eternity will be joyous and peaceful. Following His ways is the only way to be normal. His standards *never* change, unlike those of the culture around us.

It is not an accident that you are reading this book. God has brought this book across your path for a reason – to learn what is normal. This collection of daily devotionals emphasizes and describes the Way to a normal life. They are intended to (1) encourage those already following God’s ways; and, (2) to reveal why God’s ways are normal to those who are nonbelievers. Each of us falls into one of these two categories – which one are you in?

It is my hope and prayer that by reading this book you will develop a firm understanding of what is and isn’t normal in your life. After all, almost everyone wants to be normal. What’s not to like?

Jeff Myers

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I extend a special thank you to my family for their daily love, support and encouragement, including special appreciation to my wife Deborah for her skilled reviewing and editing contributions.

Ultimately, all praise, honor, and glory go to God the Father, Jesus Christ the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Without them, none of this would have been possible.

Introduction

Insanity or Normalcy?

My wife thought I was on the verge of mental illness. I was counting incessantly – tiny pasta grains and colored beads, which I claimed would result in hands-on physical models for teaching environmental sampling. On weekends, I counted sand-sized Acini di Pepe pasta, dyed them various colors, and scoured the racks of our local Hobby Lobby store to search out the most suitable bead shapes and sizes along with the greatest variety of hues possible. Then, I would recount the pasta and beads as I assembled the components into models that I called, ironically and with tongue in cheek, “I’m normal”. This alluded to the normal, bell-shaped curve of statistics, but contained a not-so-vague reference to me. It seemed I was anything but normal.

The physical models performed as designed, but hidden cleverly was a powerful spiritual component that was yet to be unleashed. Unbeknownst to me, the phrase “I’m normal” would make an even bigger and more positive impact on my life than the teaching aids. When I named the models, it was God talking to me, an agnostic. I just didn’t realize it. He was speaking, but I didn’t even know how to listen. However, God is tenacious beyond measure when He wants to get your attention because He has a definite purpose for your life. The “I’m normal” models were God’s early revelation of His purpose for me.

When I first created the “I’m normal” models, neither my wife nor I had accepted Jesus Christ as LORD and Savior. In 1999, however, my wife started a weekly Bible study called Bible Study Fellowship International (BSF), a 32-week blessing that runs concurrently with the school year. During that time, I saw a beautiful transformation in my wife as she read the Bible, studied the Bible, read books about the Bible, listened to Christian radio, and started searching for a church home. In less than one year, I watched her find peace and purpose that I never dreamed possible. Still a skeptic at the time, I began

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nonetheless to suspect that I had witnessed a Divine intervention in her life.

During this time, my wife contacted a local Christian radio station to inquire about a pastor's show that spoke to her. They referred her to Dr. Rick Ferguson of Riverside Baptist Church in Denver, Colorado. A true shepherd who was gifted with an amazing ability to speak my language of science, he counseled part of our family on several occasions about the peace and joy that accompanies a life committed to Jesus Christ. Once again, God was talking to me. This time, however, He was getting some of my attention.

More divine intervention came to my life in September 2000, when I reluctantly agreed to try BSF at my wife's persistent urging. The first week's assignment was to read the entire book of Matthew, which was followed by a progressive study of each consecutive chapter. Week by week, the power of God's Word worked aggressively to soften the resistance in my heart until the barriers were breached. On October 9, 2000, I prayed in the church parking lot before leaving BSF to accept Jesus Christ as my LORD and Savior. I now recognize this as the most important decision of my life.

Despite achieving salvation, I discovered quickly that God was not about to allow the question of my sanity to disappear. In fact, He was just beginning to promote being normal as a multi-dimensional theme in my life. During my study of Matthew, Jesus revealed continually what is normal in God's eyes – loving others more than yourself, turning the other cheek instead of retaliating, forgiving your enemies, being meek, even losing your life so you can find it. None of this seems like normal behavior in today's world, where we are taught to put yourself first at all costs, "Don't get mad, get even", to look out for number one, and to take control of your life.

After I accepted Jesus Christ as the LORD of my life, my wife's concern about my mental state lessened dramatically. Now it was my turn to ponder the state of my spiritual being.

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The Emergence of *I'm normal. I Am* Ministries

As I attempted to put God's normal ways into practice, they felt uncomfortable, as His ways are often counter to the ways of the world. Others, including some family members, found my actions strange and unusual. Was I normal? I asked this question over and over. Soon, with God's assistance, I began telling myself "*I'm normal*" when I followed His normal ways. The title of the teaching models was now teaching me how to begin a new life as a follower of Jesus Christ and allowing me to maintain my sanity in a culture committed to establishing "freedom from religion".

My sanity checks were soon ratcheted up a notch. The LORD guided me to append "**I Am**" to the phrase as a way of emphasizing that I was normal when I obeyed Him. Then, He revealed a deeper Truth. The assurance of "*I'm normal*" was confirmed with His own name – **I Am** (Exodus 3:14). "*I'm normal. I Am*". It finally crystallized in my mind: this was God talking to me! I reasoned that if I could be encouraged by this phrase, so could others. With this revelation, the door to a new ministry had been opened. Soon, *I'm normal. I Am Ministries* was a reality.

I have no formal ministerial qualifications, but LORD willing, I plan to pursue seminary training in the future. For now, I just have the obligation of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). I simply write devotionals and maintain a website (<http://www.imnormal.com>) to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. I try to let God do the rest.

*Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority under Heaven and on Earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely **I Am** with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Matthew 28:16-20

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The Normal Challenge

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

Proverbs 16:25

The ways of the world are very different from God’s ways. Our culture promotes and glorifies promiscuity, adultery, homosexuality, divorce, drunkenness, gambling, abortion, pornography, cloning, atheism, and other sinful behaviors as normal when, in fact, they are not. Only God’s ways, eternal and just, are normal. However, since a large proportion of the last couple of generations is largely unchurched, many are not even aware of who God is and what He calls us to do. Without His guidance, people have no way to determine what is normal. I speak from experience.

The battle against unGodly ways is fierce. Influential media moguls mock God openly. One kingpin has said that Christianity is “for losers”. Another well-known personality stated that he thinks religion is a “neurological disorder”. Hollywood issues a continual stream of movies and television shows that glorify unGodly behaviors and lifestyles. The media and Internet publish every kind of sinful behavior imaginable without remorse. In contrast, prayer is gone from our schools and public displays of anything Christian are challenged in court. The pressure to conform to the world’s ways is unavoidable and relentless.

The Normal Direction

Lacking God’s moral compass, one is certain to remain lost. If you don’t know where true north is, it’s impossible to navigate. As a person who was lost most of my life, I can testify to the destruction the world’s ways inflict. I committed the sins of adultery and divorce and the damage done continues to have negative impacts on my family.

It is important to emphasize that those particular sins were committed when I hadn’t accepted Christ. That was the old me, and the old me

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is dead, for in Christ I have become a new person: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Corinthians 5:17). This does not imply that I don’t sin, no matter how hard I try to avoid it. And to God, sin is sin and a little white lie separates you from His Holiness just as much as adultery or murder. But praise God, through the blood of Jesus Christ, there is hope for me and hope for you too. Jesus Christ is true north and will always lead you in the right direction.

The Normal Mission

I'm normal. I Am Ministries is devoted to pushing back against the culture and to promoting God’s normal ways. This book contains a few of the daily devotionals sent out via Internet each day by the ministry (<http://www.imnormal.com>). Their purpose is two-fold: (1) to help Christians in their daily walk with the LORD; and, (2) to witness to unsaved persons in hopes of bringing them to salvation. We are all sinners (Romans 3:23), but God loves us anyway. Because of His incredible love (John 3:16), He wants none of us to perish (2 Peter 3:9) and is willing to forgive our sins if we confess and repent (Romans 10:10). This should give us all great hope.

The world considers Christians foolish to follow God’s ways. God recognizes this, but sends us encouragement through the epistles of the Apostle Paul. “For the message of the Cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:18). I encourage you to be bold, be normal, and be aware that many will consider these devotionals foolishness. Finally, be prepared for others not to understand your normal, Godly beliefs. Just keep reminding yourself:

“*I'm normal. I Am*”
It’s God Talking To You.

The Normal Devotionals

Creating the devotionals follows a predictable routine. Each morning, I rise early, pray, and study God’s Word. Then, I write about whatever the Holy Spirit puts on my heart that day. The devotionals address a

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wide variety of issues and topics – what’s going on in my life, current events, cultural trends, and seasonal issues. All devotionals endeavor to relate God’s Biblical Truths.

The devotionals illuminate the right and normal ways of God in comparison to the sinful ways of man. They are not meant to be an exhaustive treatise on any particular subject. They are simply short vignettes intended to bring light, hope, inspiration, and encouragement to those trying to stay in fellowship with God or to find Him. I hope and pray they will be a blessing to you.

The I AM God

Many people and many faiths speak of God. In order to be crystal clear, the God I refer to is the “**I Am**” God, the God of the Bible, the God of the Old and the New Testament, the One and only Living God (Exodus 3:14). The God of whom I speak is the Ancient of Days (Daniel 7:9, 13), the Father of Jesus Christ (John 5:22-23, 6:24, 57, 8:18, 14:24). He is the triune God – the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He is the God of the Jewish people as well, His chosen people (Deuteronomy 7:6), although most Jews do not recognize and accept His Son Jesus Christ as the Messiah. All other faiths and cults worship gods different from the **I Am** God of the Bible.

God’s Plan of Salvation

God loves all people because they are all His creations. Nevertheless, He grants admission into Heaven only to those who commit to His Son Jesus Christ. This came as a shock to me the first time I heard it, but I’ve since come to believe with all my heart that it’s the Truth.

A lot of people don’t like God’s plan because it’s so exclusive. A lot of people don’t like the plan because it requires work and commitment after you accept it (James 2:26). A lot of people dislike the Christians who share God’s plan with others because the Gospel reveals that we are flawed. Like it or not, it’s God’s plan of salvation, not man’s. We have no right to change it, nor is it negotiable (Matthew 5:18). It was conceived in Heaven, brought to Earth by His Son, and recorded in the Bible, God’s Holy Word. In the end, His plan is totally inclusive, but each person must make a choice. It’s up to each of us to decide if

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we will accept His plan. The Good News is that the plan is available to everyone and it's 100 percent guaranteed to gain you entrance into Heaven.

The plan is very basic, with only two choices: (1) accept Jesus; or, (2) reject Him. They're simple choices, designed so even children can understand the options. The default choice is #2, so if you don't bother to make a choice, you've automatically rejected Christ. I believe with all my heart that you'll regret this choice if you make it.

Option #1 takes you to Heaven. Option #2 sentences you to eternal damnation. Once again, this is God's plan, not mine. My duty is to share with you the serious, eternal consequences of making the wrong choice. Please understand that I receive no joy from telling someone they are headed to Hell if they don't accept Jesus Christ. I'm simply stating the facts of God's own plan and sending a warning out of love and concern for their soul. Analogous to a doctor who's obligated to inform you of the deadly, but curable, disease you've contracted, it is my obligation to disclose that you need to take action if you haven't accepted Jesus Christ as LORD. Your fatal spiritual disease condemns you to option #2 unless you choose otherwise.

I will be praying that you make the right choice. If you select option #1, you can declare your heartfelt intentions by praying the Sinner's Prayer at the end of the book.

It is also important to understand that once you've been saved, all of life's problems do not magically disappear. God tests Christians and non-Christians alike with trials and tribulations. Similarly, you do not become a perfect person just because you have accepted Jesus Christ. Even as a Christian and despite your best efforts, you will sin and you will stumble because you are still flawed. You remain weak and need His guidance along with His strength to carry on. Being a Christian is not about being holier than thou, it is about being forgiven for sins of both your past and future even though you don't deserve it. Christians are not necessarily better people, they are just better off.

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A Normal Future

Words and phrases often change over time, frequently taking on additional meanings. For example, “cool” used to mean *chilly* and “far out” meant *distant*. Now we use these phrases in expanded ways. However, whereas some word transformations are rather innocuous, others reflect a disturbing decline in morality. For example, when I was young, the word “gay” meant happy. Now, this word has a very different and unGodly connotation (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13).

In a similar manner we now call lying “disinformation”, fornication “safe sex”, prostitutes “sex workers”, homosexual relationships “alternative lifestyles”, and murder “the right to choose”. We’ve taken to using clever euphemisms to cover up the reality of our sin. In collective denial, we deceive ourselves into thinking that by giving sin a pretty name we can hide our shame. Unfortunately, sin remains sin no matter how we package it or try to disguise it.

On the bright side, word transformation can be positive as well as negative. It is my hope and prayer that the word “normal” can take on an additional meaning, one that implies Godliness and Christian values. This world would be a better place if every time the word “normal” were spoken, it testified to God. This book represents a step in that direction. It’s time for Christians to claim the word “normal” for their own and to send subtle, loving messages of God’s goodness in our “normal”, everyday lives. With His help, we can make it so. Amen.

The Devotionals

What's Normal?

“What's Normal?” This headline blared a provocative question across the “xtreme stuff for teens” section of the Augusta (Georgia) Chronicle in early 2005. The “xtreme” section is a weekly feature devoted to young people and their interests. The article was subtitled “New perspectives change the way people are defined” and featured quotes from local youth. Keenly attuned to the subject of normalcy, my interest was more than just passing.

Hoping for the best, the definitions of “normal” from various teenagers followed typical expectations:

“Someone who is friendly, uncritical, and nonjudgmental.” – High school sophomore, age 16

“There isn't a ‘normal’ to me. It's hard to explain, but ‘normal’ is just being yourself.” – College sophomore, age 19

“Normal is the extreme nowadays.” – High school sophomore, age 15

“To me, normal is a person who is very well-rounded and has all types of friends.” – College sophomore, age 19

Finally, from a high school sophomore, age 15, a self-described musically-inclined, Christian athlete,

“With so many perceptions of normal....there is no way to obtain a true sense of the word.”

I anticipated the usual answers from non-Christian teenagers. The disheartening aspect was that even the Christian teenager failed to connect “the true sense of the word” with the true sense of God's Word. But, it's not all the student's fault. As we see from the comments of her peers, she's surrounded by a culture teaching her that normal doesn't exist or that normal is whatever you decide it is. Almost predictably, the first quote conveyed the message of “tolerance”, a concept our increasingly secular society has exalted almost to the point of a religious belief.

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People are questioning publicly “What is right?”, “What is acceptable?”, and “What is normal?” It’s obvious that many are lost because they have no grounding in firm Truths. This uncertainty is passed along to our children, many of whom are spiritually lost because they do not have Godly parents to guide them in basic principles and to teach them God’s Truths (Proverbs 22:6). They are fed a diet of tolerance and diversity, a theology that any god will do, situational ethics, a belief that misdeeds are OK if you don’t get caught, and that there is no absolute Truth.

When our country was founded, one primary purpose and intention of the local schoolhouse was to teach children to read so they could study the Bible. Today, our academic institutions are hog-tied and all but forbidden from teaching Christianity in the classroom, with most of the teachers and professors espousing that the anything “spiritual” gets you into Heaven. But who’s to say what’s “spiritual” any more than what’s “normal”? In addition, others are advocating that every type of sin imaginable is “normal” if it works for you. It’s no wonder our kids have trouble connecting the dots.

Despite large-scale advocacy to the contrary, God’s ways are the Truth. God’s Son Jesus Christ is the Truth. God’s ways are normal, as are the ways of His Son. In fact, these are the only normal things on this Earth. Other ways just don’t stack up as normal no matter how comfortable, practical, applicable, or liberating they seem. It doesn’t matter if something is

Accepted	General	Regular
Acknowledged	Habitual	Repeated
Anticipated	Likely	Routine
Archetypical	Memorable	Run-of-the-mill
Average	Model	Scheduled
Characteristic	Mundane	Sophisticated
Classic	Natural	Standard
Commonplace	Ordinary	Stock
Conventional	Par for the course	Time-honored
Customary	Practical	Traditional
Established	Predictable	Typical

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Estimated	Probable	Universal
Everyday	Projected	Usual
Expected	Proverbial	Well-known
Familiar	Recognizable	Widespread, or
Frequent	Recurrent	Worldly.

If it isn't Godly, it isn't normal!

God gave us His Holy Word so we can learn to distinguish what is normal in His eyes from those things which are not. Our sinful nature leads us to conclusions that are outside of God's will (Proverbs 14:12). We want to direct our own lives, whereas He wants us to look to Him for guidance. We try to do things in our own power; He wants us to rely on Him. Sometimes His ways contradict typical thinking, such as turning the other cheek, forgiving instead of getting even, or entering Heaven through a narrow gate instead of an "any broad path will do" approach. But eternal Truths remain normal in His eyes even if the world endeavors to convince us otherwise.

We are all living in the modern culture, but we do not have to accept the notion that sin is tolerable. In fact, Christians have a responsibility to define and refine the existing culture as much as possible to conform to God's normal Truths. This is accomplished by speaking out for Him and by living Godly lives for others to see. It is important for Christians to tell others about Jesus Christ, but we can be effective witnesses as well, simply by leading Godly lives. When people see us observing God's rules even though we are inconvenienced, it sends a powerful message. We will often be viewed as "xtreme".

The question "*What's normal?*" is now making headlines. I suspect this question will be debated more and more in the future. Christians need to be prepared to respond appropriately when this question arises (1 Peter 3:15). Begin your preparation today. Have your answers ready when someone asks "What's normal?" You are normal if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, so be ready and willing to share your testimony and faith with others. It's a kindness you shouldn't withhold. The eternal destiny of millions of souls depends on your

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willingness to speak out, so be a spokesperson for the Truth. That's what is truly normal.

Entrance Exam

There are a lot of questions that God will not ask you when you die. For example, He won't ask you what kind of car you drove, how many square feet were in your house, or what your job title was. He gave you your talents and gifts, so He is prepared for the answers you will give. Still, even with Him knowing all the details of your life, I think there will be one special question that He will want you to stand before Him and answer. That question is, "What have you done with my Son, Jesus Christ?" The correct answer is, "I claimed Him as my LORD and Savior."

The magnitude of our eternal rewards in Heaven depends on how well we showed love to others, if we loved God with all our hearts, if we kept His commandments, and if we dedicated our lives to advancing His Kingdom on Earth. Jesus tells us that some will receive greater rewards in Heaven than others (Matthew 11:11). We all want to maximize our Heavenly rewards, but there's an important first step. Before we can obtain any type of reward, we must first gain the right to enter God's Heavenly Kingdom. Entering His Kingdom can only come by passing the entrance exam. That entrance exam may consist of a single question from God: "What did you do with my Son, Jesus Christ?"

God will not want to hear that you were a scholar who studied the life of His Son. God will not want to hear that you always thought Jesus was a good person, perhaps even a prophet, but not the Messiah. God will not want to hear that your parents were devout followers of Jesus Christ, but that you had never made the same commitment. The only thing God wants to hear in order to give you a passing grade on His entrance exam is that you accepted Jesus Christ as your Savior and that you made Him the LORD of your life. Any other response will be unacceptable and you will fail the entrance exam.

Unlike tests to gain entrance into colleges or other institutions, you can only take the entrance exam to Heaven one time. You only get

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one shot at this test, so you'd better pass it the first time or your eternity will be mighty bleak.

Be aware that the question to the entrance exam is not posed until you leave this Earth and have no chance to change any aspect of your life. This means that if you don't accept Jesus Christ as LORD and Savior before you die and confess Him with your mouth during your life here on Earth (Romans 10:10), you will definitely fail the entrance exam.

Diligent students always study and prepare before they take an exam. Mercifully, God has created the perfect book for us to study before we take our entrance exam into Heaven. God spent over a thousand years, using many of His faithful servants to create the Bible, His Holy Word, His ultimate reference source, just so we could study and prepare for our entrance exam. The Bible makes it clear that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and that we must accept Him in order to gain entrance into Heaven (John 14:6). God's merciful provision of all answers to the test in advance means He will not accept any alternative answers.

God has put eternity in our hearts. We will all have an eternity. The decision only you can make relates to where you will spend it. During our time in this life, that bit of eternity in our hearts creates an emptiness that we struggle to fill. God has revealed that only He and His Son Jesus Christ can fill that empty void space inside of us. Without Him, we are incomplete here on Earth. Without His Son, we are incomplete for all eternity.

God wants none of us to perish (2 Peter 3:9), but many will (Matthew 7:13-14). Those who fail the entrance exam will be judged according to what they have done and not done (Revelation 20:12). Those who do not pass the entrance exam will be thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15). Those who pass the entrance exam will enjoy eternal fellowship and peace with the LORD God (John 3:16).

It is normal to prepare for any examination. It is especially normal to prepare for the one entrance exam that will determine your fate for all eternity. The entrance exam to God's Kingdom is short and easy –

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and He's given us the answer. Don't risk failing God's entrance exam by failing to accept His Son Jesus Christ as your LORD and Savior. If you haven't made Jesus your LORD and Savior yet, make sure you do so today. You can commit to Him by praying the sinner's prayer at the end of the book. With Jesus in your heart, you'll have everything you need to pass your most important entrance exam ever.

Blame Game

You've heard the crazy stories – a thief falls through a kitchen skylight and successfully sues the homeowner when he cuts himself on the cooking knives; a man has too much to drink at the bar and sues the bartender for the accident he (the drunk) has on the way home; a woman who spills hot coffee on herself and wins a high-dollar lawsuit against McDonalds despite her own carelessness. Where do these people get the audacity to blame their own misdeeds on others?

Playing the blame game is one of the oldest tricks in the book and it all started with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. When God caught them hiding from their sin, He gave them the chance to confess. But did they do it? Did they show their repentant hearts by penitent confession? Of course not – the first thing they did was to try to put the blame on others.

Adam led the way as contestant number one in the blame game. His strategy was to put the blame on his wife. Instead of admitting his own sin as well as denying that he had not taught her well enough that God's commands are to be obeyed, he frivolously blames Eve (Genesis 3:12). By doing so, he tacitly admits that he is ruled more by his wife and her actions than he is by the commands of God. He might sneak that idea through a sympathetic jury or a liberal judge, but Adam was dealing with the highest judge in the Universe who is not about to fall for such a lame excuse.

Worse yet, he implies, and not so subtly, that God Himself shares a part of the blame – not a good career move. He tells God, “The woman you put here with me – she gave me some of the fruit from the tree and I ate it.” (Genesis 3:12). He actually accuses the LORD

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God of being an accomplice to sin. His logic – God gave him the gift of the woman, the woman gave him the fruit, so, by extension, God is an accomplice. Again, this logic may pass here on Earth, but will never succeed with our Heavenly Father.

Not to be outdone, contestant number two, Eve, tries her hand at the blame game. Perhaps learning from Adam's mistake, she did not attempt to blame her spouse. Using a new tactic, she attempts to lay the blame on the serpent, saying "The serpent deceived me, and I ate." (Genesis 3:13). Her approach had no more success than Adam's.

No one wants to own sin. It is an embarrassment and a sign of our own disobedience that we wish we could hide. We are often willing to take part in the pleasure of sin, yet when confronted with it, we do everything we can to shift the blame to others. Often we don't even realize how we make excuses for our own shortcomings – the disclaimer comes barreling out of our mouth before we even have a chance to understand what we are doing. *Mea culpa*.

Satan's draws us subtly into sin, but in no way does his influence justify our actions. He is indeed the tempter, but we are the sinners. We are reminded that "When tempted, no one should say 'God is tempting me.' For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He tempt anyone; but each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed." (James 1:13-14). We are comforted by God's provision, however. "And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." (1 Corinthians 10:13).

Pleading "not guilty" to sin before God is pointless and only testifies further to our own fallen state. We benefit more by pleading "no contest", realizing that it is only through the blood of Jesus Christ that our sins can be covered and we can achieve victory. However, our usual reaction is to play the blame game and to try to pass our own sin on to others.

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A more normal approach in God's eyes is to recognize that we have been swindled by a known cheat and deceiver (John 8:44, 10:10). The normal reaction is to become indignant that we fell prey to such a sworn enemy and commit to following God's ways ever more closely. Playing the blame game didn't work for Adam and Eve, and it won't work for us either, because it just isn't normal. Make a commitment today to eliminate the blame game from your normal list of activities.

Who Are You?

When God looks at you, what does He see? Does He see your face or your body, or does He view you in some other way that we as humans can't relate to? No one knows the mind of God, but we can speculate about one way that God might view us.

Jesus told us that God knows the number of hairs on our heads (Matthew 10:30). He is also able to know our hearts (1 Samuel 16:7). Given that He created us, He must also know the size of our hands and feet, the lengths of our arms and legs, and the dimensions, shapes, and the details of every part of our bodies. He even knows our own individual fingerprints, which are completely unique from anyone alive or dead. He obviously enjoys uniqueness and variety, but how does He accomplish this diversity?

One way He does this is through our DNA. DNA is a huge molecule in our bodies that is exclusively our own. Unless you're an identical twin, no one else has ever had your DNA, nor will anyone future have your DNA. From the instant of conception, your unique genetic code is established for all eternity. It doesn't change and duplicating it by cloning or other methods is not normal.

The number of possible different people according to the way DNA is structured is the number four followed by one billion zeros. This is a staggeringly large number that only the living God could relate to. But with all His possible choices, God decided to choose you and your particular, one-of-a-kind DNA pattern because He deemed that combination perfect for you. In other words, He loves you just the way you are. You are a normal, unique creation in His eyes.

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Once the genetic components from the mother and the father unite, the DNA is recognizable and distinct. God, with His ability to operate on both the vastly large and infinitesimally small levels, can recognize each of us instantly by our DNA. He knows us when we are a visible human, as well as when we are a microscopic, one-celled embryo. Even at this cellular stage, you are inimitably you and God recognizes you as His own. Even with only one cell, God has determined who you are – the number of hairs on your head, the color of your hair, the size of your feet. All this information is locked up efficiently in the DNA structure.

Even before you become you, it is normal for God to begin loving you. He knew who you were at the foundation of the Universe, before you were created. Once physically present, He loves that unique DNA package as an embryo, as a fetus, as a baby, as a toddler, as a teenager, as an adult, and as an elder. He never stops loving us and He never waits to start loving us. He loves us from the instant we are created because He is the one who created us (Jeremiah 1:5).

One of God's attributes is that He loves us even when we don't love Him back. He is patient with us when we reject Him and always takes us back if we call upon His name (1 John 1:9). God wants desperately for us to accept the gift of His Son Jesus Christ as LORD and Savior, whom He sent to us to demonstrate His love for us (John 3:16). Just as He knows you intimately, He wants you to have an intimate relationship with His Son.

Our God is an unchanging God. That is normal for Him. His unchanging love and our unchanging DNA are ways He reveals parts of His unchanging nature to us so that we can recognize His hand in our lives. To miss this is to miss God Himself. Many will say that you are not you until you are born. That is not normal in God's eyes. You are who you are in His mind before your conception. Destroying DNA at any point is destroying a person and represents killing in God's eyes. You are you no matter what your size or stage of life. Don't be fooled by those who will lie. They know not themselves, much less you or the Living God.

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Cable Guy

In October of 2004, our family television died. It was about ten years old and had served us well, but there was no question that we needed to replace it. We'd used it fairly hard, mostly watching video tapes and educational TV since we had never signed up for cable TV. It turns out this made us quite naïve as far as the home entertainment arena is concerned.

Not being an aficionado on modern electronics, I figured that we'd just go out and buy a new television, come home, plug it in and watch it. So naturally, that's what we did. I'm sure many of you are out there howling with laughter at my ignorance. Even one of my friends asked if I lived in a cave or if I went out much in the daytime!

Needless to say, the TV didn't work, at least not the way we expected. So my wife and I made the decision to try cable for a while. The next day, the cable company sent out a representative and, quick as a flash, we had both TV and cable. I had suddenly become another cable guy.

Before we got the cable, my wife and I agreed that we would monitor closely the shows that everyone watched. We were quite faithful to this commitment. As any cable subscriber can tell you, there are scenes and words coming from the box that are not fit for young eyes and ears. We hoped that this restriction would lessen the blow of this new intruder in our household and, no doubt, it improved the experience greatly.

Very quickly, however, an unexpected change came over our household. Suddenly, everyone was interested in what was on TV. Before cable, watching the tube was limited to brief evening viewing of the news and occasional sports shows on weekends. Now, my son was becoming obsessed with keeping cartoons in front of his eyes since they are available 24 hours a day. One of my daughters, in her first semester in college at the time, admitted that at times she was watching TV when she should have been studying. My wife and I found ourselves slacking off on our evening and weekend chores at times in order to view the new offerings we had.

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The number and variety of new selections also created stress. At any one time, each one of us had the desire to watch a different show. At other times, despite the enormous number of channels available, there was nothing to watch and disappointment set in. Bottom line, the television was beginning to control us instead of the other way around. It was becoming a type of god in our lives, a god that was enticing us to devote our lives to the screen instead of to the real, Living God and to the other members of our family.

So, after about three months, I called the cable company and asked them to disconnect us from their service. We retreated to “the old days” where the TV is good for the news and an occasional educational show. We all miss the History channel, my son misses the cartoons, and my wife and I miss the cooking shows that we enjoyed together. But my son and I are playing more chess, guitar, and street hockey, and my wife is spending more time on her Bible study. I’ve decided I like not being a cable guy.

My message is not to denounce the evils of cable TV. My son and I spent many hours learning about history together and I shared many ideas with my wife as we learned about cooking. The point is that anything can become a god in your life if you let it. One of the problems is that often the god creeps in without you even knowing. We were well aware that cable TV would change our lives in some way and we made efforts to prepare. Yet even with advance warning and preparation, it became more than we could manage.

Other gods are not so hard to remove or control. Workaholics point to the shortfalls in the family budget or claim they’ll be fired for non-performance. Addictions start as innocent “trial puffs” on a cigarette, social drinks, or “experiments” with drugs. Legitimate hobbies can consume inordinate amounts of time and isolate one from the family. Even excessive Bible study or constant church involvement can become a problem.

God wants us to enjoy the abundant variety of entertainment options He provides for us. But He also expects us to discipline ourselves so that they do not detract from the effort He expects us to do for Him, our church, and our families. I encourage you to take some time today

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to evaluate your life and to see if any priorities need to be adjusted or changed. I'm trying to focus on being more of a normal guy than a cable guy. I'll be praying that you'll find the normal priorities in your life as well.

House Arrest

Barring any further parole violations, Martha Stewart is scheduled to finish her sentence of house arrest tomorrow. Ms. Stewart has been under house arrest for the past five months as a fulfillment of her sentence for stock trading violations, which caused her five-month incarceration in a federal prison at taxpayer's expense. Ms. Stewart is monitored 24 hours a day by means of an electronic ankle bracelet to make sure that she does not violate the terms of her agreement.

Ms. Stewart has been a model of unrepentance during her ordeal. She has chaffed at each portion of the trial and sentencing. She has viewed her house arrest as a major injustice, not satisfied with the 48 hours per week that she is able to work outside the house. She has violated her confinement conditions twice, although the exact nature of these violations remains undisclosed.

It is interesting to compare the Apostle Paul's house arrest to Martha Stewart's. Paul, an innocent man, spent two entire years in confinement. This is much longer than Ms. Stewart had to endure, even though she was found guilty by jury, whereas Paul had not been convicted of anything. Paul did not have the luxury of an electronic surveillance device on his ankle. Instead, he had a live Roman soldier chained to his body as a full-time monitor. Adding insult to injury, Paul was required to pay for rent on the house in which he lived during his ordeal. There were no taxpayers willing or obligated to foot the bill of this prisoner during any of his incarcerations.

Paul showed us a completely different attitude during his house arrest than Martha Stewart did. As he told the Philippians, "For I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." (Philippians 4:11). In fact, Paul may have viewed his house arrest as an outright luxury in many respects, unlike Ms. Stewart. Prior to his arrest, he had lived most of his days working for Christ as an itinerant,

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wandering from place to place. He had been constantly on the move, seldom staying long in one place, and often not knowing what, if any, accommodations would be available each night. Now he was able to spend two years in a comfortable and predictable environment.

Paul did not have the attention of the world. He did not have the media frenzy of the Martha Stewart trial, incarceration, and house arrest, where the media reported on every twist and turn. Instead, Paul was ignored. Yet despite his obscurity, Paul eventually got the attention of the world and has kept it for hundreds of years. It was during his two years of house arrest that he wrote his epistles to the Galatians, his second epistle to Timothy, his epistles to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and to Philemon. His witness to the Roman guards was legendary and served to spread the Gospel in surprising and unexpected ways.

Martha Stewart has not considered her house arrest as a normal life, whereas Paul considered his situation – suffering for Jesus – quite normal. Ms. Stewart has used her time to salvage her personal and business interests, Paul used his time to further the interests of Jesus Christ and to bring salvation to untold numbers. It was Paul's humble and submissive nature that allowed him to find joy during his two years of house arrest.

Only God can assess the condition of Martha Stewart's heart. She has paid her legal debt and I will be praying that she can find peace. Her books will likely do well in the marketplace, though they will not have the eternal spiritual impact of those that Paul wrote during his house arrest almost 2000 years ago.

Each of us is confined in some way by our circumstances and experiences to a type of "house arrest". The key to freedom comes from our submission to Jesus Christ as Paul demonstrates to us. While he was chained physically, his heart was free of the burdens of his surroundings. Set your heart free today through your relationship with Jesus Christ!

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Half-Empty or Half-Full?

One of the classic questions psychologists ask is whether a person sees a partially-filled glass of water as half-empty or half-full. Those who see it as half-empty are labeled as pessimists whereas those who see it as half-full are deemed optimists. Others would argue that the glass is twice as big as it needs to be. Whatever your point of view, we recognize that different people often look at the same item or set of circumstances and come up with very different assessments.

God gives us a good example of this syndrome in the story of Cain and Abel. They were the very first people who were actually born on Earth. They were the sons of Adam and Eve, who themselves were made by God, but not born of woman (Genesis 4:1-2). Despite being brothers, however, Cain and Able each took a very different view of God's world and their circumstances.

Abel was a half-full kind of guy. He had found his calling in keeping flocks of sheep. Being a shepherd was a profession that Moses, David, and Jesus Christ would all share, and Abel seemed to be comfortable with his job. In contrast, Cain was called to work the land. This was the same profession given to his father, Adam, and, as the eldest, it was appropriate that he follow in his father's footsteps. Despite their different callings, both brothers had honest professions and appeared to be successful in their endeavors. This was to their mutual benefit so that they could trade their products and meet their various needs.

Abel must have been at peace in his heart. As only the fourth person to walk the Earth, he was heir apparent to the world, which should be plenty. God had given him a calling so that he would not be idle and so he could help others by means of his productivity. Abel showed his peace and contentment in the sacrifice that he made to God (Genesis 4:4). Still young, he was probably seeing the glass as half-full, but also anticipated that someday it would be filled to overflowing.

Cain, however, was viewing the world in a half-empty sort of way. He seemed to have an underlying resentment toward God that reflected some longstanding bitterness inside his heart. Perhaps he brooded as he labored over the cursed, thorny ground, contemplating how

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conditions were so much better before his father and mother had sinned. Perhaps he resented God's judgment for his parent's sin and felt unduly oppressed because of their errors.

Whatever his reasons, Cain let his half-empty view of the world come through in his sacrifice to the LORD. He did not bother to trade with his brother to obtain an offering that would please God. Instead, he brought up a second-rate offering to sacrifice and God rebuked him for it.

“Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge, but he who hates correction is stupid.” (Proverbs 12:1). God tells us that a wise man accepts correction as a gift from Him. One who accepts correction sees the opportunity for improvement, sees the mercy and grace being given by the LORD, and rejoices in the process. This is a half-full type of person. Cain on the other hand, a half-empty kind of guy, only became more angry and bitter when God rebuked him (Genesis 4:6-8). Cain reacted in his anger by killing his brother.

How do you react to God's gifts and rebukes? Are you a half-full or a half-empty type of person? Do you thank God for the job calling that He has provided you or are you resentful that others seem to enjoy better circumstances and opportunities? Are you thankful for the income He has made possible or are you resentful that you don't earn more money and chafe at the fact that you must be constrained by a budget? Do you gladly bring your first fruits as offerings to God or do you scheme to find excuses for holding back on your gifts and donations? Do you harbor anger and bitterness when others are congratulated for their actions while you are corrected for seemingly slight indiscretions?

The story of Cain and Abel demonstrates it is normal to be a half-full type of person. It is normal to thank God for all our circumstances, whatever they are and even if they are in some way a consequence for our sin or the sin of others. It is normal to thank God for our incomes and our jobs no matter how oppressed we may feel.

What is your assessment of God's gifts to you? Are you a Cain or an Abel? Do you view your world as half-filled by God or half-empty?

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Be thankful to God for what He has given you and enjoy the full, abundant, and normal life He wants for you.

Remember the Future

Stephen Hawking is one of the world's most famous and influential physicists. Popularized by his best-selling book, "A Brief History of Time", he has pioneered many areas of modern physics with his unique way of thinking and his unusual perspectives. God blessed Stephen Hawking with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS), better known as Lou Gehrig's disease, forcing Mr. Hawking to consider the world differently, simply due to his exceptional physical state.

Most of what Mr. Hawking writes about is over my head – astronomical physics, the theories of relativity, quantum mechanics, and the like. However, he posed a question that puzzled me for years. "Why is it," he asked, "that we can remember the past but we cannot remember the future?" This question seemed strange at first, but I rationalized it by remembering that physicists deal with a world that is so different from our everyday world that such questions often pop up and somehow seem logical. Thus, it probably didn't seem like a strange question for Mr. Hawking. I've since concluded that this is a very normal question.

As any child in kindergarten can tell you, we can't remember the future because it hasn't happened yet. This reality was a no-brainer until I came to faith in Jesus Christ. After accepting Jesus Christ as LORD, however, my perspective was altered in many ways and I changed my own thinking about Mr. Hawking's question. Through the study of God's Holy Word, I discovered that God has a great memory for the future. He has it planned in many ways and has remembered to make it happen the way He remembered it before it even takes place. The ability to know the future is called *prophecy*.

A quick survey of the Biblical prophets testifies to God's perfect memory. Certainly He did a great job remembering to send His Son, Jesus Christ. Remembering what He told us through the prophets, His Son was born of the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11:1, 10), born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). God also remembered

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to have John the Baptist announce Jesus' arrival (Isaiah 40:3), to have Jesus ride into Jerusalem on a donkey (Zechariah 9:9), to have His Son crucified as described in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53, to have His Son placed in a new grave where He would not decay (Psalm 16), and He remembered to resurrect His Son from the dead on the third day as prophesied (Matthew 12:40, 16:4, John 2:19). These are but a few of the many promises God has remembered to have fulfilled. What a memory!

In His normal way, God also remembers the future to come. In fact, He has allowed us to share in some of the knowledge regarding future happenings. We, too, can remember the future. In fact, we not only can, we must because we are called to do so. We must remember the end times and that Jesus Christ is coming again. When He is coming, we do not know, but God told us that He remembers that Jesus will come again and so He shall. When He says it, it will happen. Jesus will come, riding on a cloud with trumpets sounding (Luke 21:27). It's the surest thing you can remember about the future, yet it often slips our mind.

I don't know where Mr. Hawking is spiritually, but many great physicists and astronomers are atheists. They can deal with some of the Universe's most mind-boggling concepts and not blink an eye. For most, it's their lack of faith that prevents them from remembering the future, not their lack of knowledge. It is normal for the God of the Bible, who created all they study, to remember the future. It's also normal for His followers to remember the portions of the future revealed to us. Be sure to remember the future and to tell others that Jesus Christ is coming again. Be secure in knowing that He will remember to take you to His Heavenly home in the future (John 14:2-4), as we all, no doubt, remember.

Lose-Win Situations

For centuries, business and commerce operated on a win-lose model. The idea was that trading was a competition, with one person winning and the other losing. By its very nature, this business model tended to cause conflict, with one party victorious and the other at a loss or in a position of disgrace (Proverbs 20:14). More recently, the win-win

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model has come into vogue, where both parties strive to find mutually satisfying and beneficial aspects of a deal so that both are motivated to continue a positive relationship in future transactions.

In the Bible, God gives us a similar and more normal model for dealing with people. As is frequently the case, His model is not typical of man's ways. God's model is neither win-lose nor win-win, His model is lose-win. He shows us that in order to really win in His eyes and in His Kingdom, often we must lose or give up what we have in order to come out the winner.

After Abraham went up out of Egypt, he was very wealthy in livestock and precious metals (Genesis 13:1-2). But the land he was in could not support the herds of both Abraham and his nephew Lot, who was also blessed with good herds. Ironically, this mutual prosperity brought not peace and happiness, but conflict and dissension between the two men. However, instead of applying man's business model of win-lose, Abraham chose the model of lose-win by offering Lot the choicest land available. Tempted by the rich and well-watered land before him, Lot chose to claim the better land and came out the apparent winner.

Or did he? Abraham had a little secret that had been revealed to him by the LORD. Abraham knew that possession of Earthly wealth was a shallow measure of success. God had revealed to Abraham what real riches could be and Abraham was willing to lose Earthly treasures in order to gain eternal ones. Abraham saw beyond the pastoral scenes of well-watered grazing land. He saw a great future in what God could give him. In short, he realized it was not about what he had, it was about what he was going to receive.

Abraham gained many blessings by using God's lose-win model of passing up the choice land. Abraham received the entire land of Canaan (Genesis 13:15) to possess for his lifetime and the lifetimes of his offspring forever. In contrast, Lot suffered great spiritual losses in the wicked land of Sodom and Gomorrah that he chose, eventually being driven out and losing his wife. Lot's gain was only temporary whereas Abraham's gain was eternal.

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God promised Abraham he would receive ancestors as numerous as the stars in the Heavens (Genesis 15:5). This must not have seemed normal since Abraham was already old and Sarah was well beyond child-bearing years. But Abraham had faith. Eventually, Abraham received the rich blessing of his son Isaac and became the father of many nations. All this for using a lose-win model instead of a win-lose approach.

Jesus told us the lose-win model was part of God's normal plan. "Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39). Today, God's promise to us is the Kingdom of Heaven with its incomparable riches along with the unsearchable riches of Christ. But in order to gain eternally, we are commanded to lose in this life.

What does Earthly "stuff" mean to you? Is it more important to you than the eternal rewards you've been promised? Have you ever enjoyed the blessing of sacrifice in order to gain eternal blessings from God? Are your life's goals structured so that you are more concerned about what you can have right now instead of what you are going to get in Heaven? If not, what changes will you make in your life today?

The Bible tells us repeatedly that we must lose in order to win. Take time today to assess what you are gaining here on Earth at the eternal expense of your Heavenly reward. You just might find the lose-win model a lot more normal.

Instant Messaging

How quickly things change! Just a short time ago, email revolutionized the world of communication by allowing messages to be sent from one computer to another at the speed of light. The U.S. Postal System and even overnight courier services were dubbed as "snail mail", as we no longer could bear the wait of a few hours for documents to be delivered.

Now, according to the Pew Internet & American Life Project, email is considered snail mail by most teenagers. They still think it's tolerable for broadcasting to a large group of people, but for one-on-one

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communication, they are sold on the technology of instant messaging. After all, who wants to wait hours or days to get a response? Instant messaging is just that – instant. Teenagers don't want the longer, more involved form of communication by email; they want a form that allows them to be more conversational. And when they want to communicate, they want to communicate NOW.

Instant messaging is not a new development to Christians. Ever since Jesus Christ died on the Cross for our sins, we have been able to send instant messages to God by going to Him in prayer. Through this privilege that He granted us, we no longer have to use the spiritual “snail mail” of going through an intermediary the way Moses and the Israelites had to go through the Levitical priests. We can go to God directly and send Him instant messages any time we want and we are assured that they are heard instantly.

Fortunately, God doesn't have an “in-box” to bottleneck the messages of those who communicate with Him. Our prayerful messages do not sit around waiting to be opened at the convenience of the Father, He hears them instantly. Better still, He already knows what's on our minds and in our hearts and is orchestrating the events in our lives before He hears our prayers. But even though He receives the messages instantly, He does not always grant our wishes immediately, or sometimes at all. He does allow us instant contact with Him, however.

God's instant messaging system works in reverse with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is always there to guide and counsel us in any situation. When we're confronted with a situation, often there are choices to be made very quickly, too quickly for us to take the time to go to the LORD in prayer. These are the times when it is critical that we listen for that instant message from the Holy Spirit telling us the normal, Godly choice we should make. There's no waiting, just obedient listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit.

Instant messaging through modern electronic technology can provide amazingly fast communication at high speed. But the most effective and rewarding form of instant messaging occurs in the spiritual realm where our God is always at work, normally before we begin to

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communicate with Him. Christians have made instant messaging a normal part of their lives for years. If you've never tried it, send a few instant messages to God today. He always enjoys hearing from you. It's normal to want to talk to Him and to communicate with the One who created the Heavens and the Earth. He allows us this privilege 24/7 and His in-box is never full. What better form of communication could we ask for?

Spring Cleaning

It was spring, and the time of the annual Passover feast was at hand. This was the time of year when Jewish women cleaned their homes thoroughly. The object was to remove every last crumb of leavened bread in order to eliminate any lingering yeast before celebrating the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exodus 12:8, 15). Jewish people still follow this process and celebrate this festival today. The book of John records Jesus' first Passover after His baptism in Chapter 2, where Jesus shows us that He had some spring cleaning of His own to do.

Jesus had observed the Passover in Jerusalem every year since He was twelve years old, honoring the lasting ordinance commanded by His Father to Moses (Exodus 12:14). Whereas Christ is now our Passover, having sacrificed Himself as the perfect Lamb and eliminating our need to sacrifice an animal, at that time it was still in God's will to sacrifice an animal as part of the Passover observance. Christ honored His Father with strict diligence, which teaches us that we, too, should carefully observe God's divine institutions.

Jesus used the occasion of His first Passover in public ministry to do something more than He had ever done before – He purged the temple in Jerusalem in an act of spring cleaning. Not surprisingly, the first place Jesus visited upon arriving in Jerusalem was the temple. He did no shopping for the meal, He did not partake in the sights and sounds of the holiday celebration with other revelers, nor did He even take time to perform any public ministry. His first priority was to get to His House in order to purify it.

Jesus' presence and preaching was meant to send the message that the glory of the latter House, His new Church and the New Covenant,

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was to exceed the glory of the former House under the Law (Haggai 2:9). His spring cleaning trip was prophesied in Malachi 3:1, “‘See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the LORD you are seeking will come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come’ says the LORD.”

Until Jesus began His ministry, John the Baptist was the reigning superstar of faith. However, John the Baptist never preached in the temple. It was after Jesus’ baptism by John that Jesus came to His temple suddenly, as predicted. His time had come, and His first work was to set out to purify the temple, not just as a ritual cleaning for the Passover, but to prepare the former House to be replaced by the reformation He would bring for all eternity.

Jesus started His spring cleaning and purification by fulfilling more prophecy. “He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.” (Malachi 3:3). He had to purge the leaven from the temple, leaven being the sinful acts of the chief priests, descendants of Levi, who had allowed the temple to be corrupted by becoming a place of commerce. He drove out the money changers, most of whom used dishonest scales (Proverbs 11:1). Finally, He drove out the sacrificial livestock and had the doves removed. As others were purifying themselves and staying ritually clean for the Passover (John 18:28), Jesus was purifying the physical temple in Jerusalem in anticipation of the New Covenant and His Church, the latter House, whose glory exceeds that of the former.

Jesus taught us that it was normal for Him to want to purify His Church and His followers. He purified the temple in His day on Earth, and He stands willing to purify our hearts today if we only call on Him. “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9).

Jesus is our Passover and we do not have to wait until spring for Him to cleanse our hearts and minds. Jesus stands ready today to perform His spring cleaning on you if you will only turn to Him. Will you let Him do His work inside you today?

When the Levee Breaks

When Hurricane Katrina first hit the Gulf Coast in August of 2005, observers were thankful initially that the eye of the hurricane did not pass directly over New Orleans, thus inflicting the maximum amount of damage. New Orleans, a city built largely below sea level, protects itself by means of levees that keep the water out and by pumping out any water that manages to seep in. The great fear was that the full force of Katrina would breach these barriers and flood the city. We now know that those worst fears were realized.

Even though New Orleans was spared being hit directly, little was spared in terms of devastation. The levees that protected the city for years were breached and the city was flooded beyond imagination. The earthen system of levees that people had trusted to prevent a catastrophic flood failed, and few things survived the onslaught of the waters. Our prayers continue to go out to all those who have been affected and to those who continue the cleanup and rebuilding effort. May God's peace and strength be with them.

On a spiritual level, many people put up barriers or levees in order to keep out the Truth of God and Jesus Christ. Just as with the levee barriers in New Orleans, our spiritual barriers are subject to destruction and the results can be even more catastrophic. Jesus told us, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash." (Matthew 7:24-27).

As one who relied on spiritual levees for years to keep out the Living Water of Jesus Christ (John 4:10), I can attest to the fact that there was a great crash when the Truth of God broke through, allowing the Living Water of Jesus Christ to cleanse me. All the illusions and deceptions I had used for years to block out the Truth vanished and

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exposed my state of spiritual bankruptcy. By God's mercy and grace, He kept me alive long enough to realize the errors of my ways and to embrace Him along with my LORD and Savior Jesus Christ. Praise God that He broke the levees of my heart!

There are many alive today who continue to live with spiritual levees inside. If we don't help them break down the levees, they will suffer even worse consequences than we saw in New Orleans. As long as we are alive, we can accept the Truth of God and His Son Jesus Christ who came to save us. Once we die, the levee breaks for good and the destruction is complete. If we do not accept Jesus as our Savior while we are alive we will be eternally separated from God.

The levee always breaks. It is a normal part of God's plan for us. The question is whether it will happen while you are still alive or whether you will wait until it is too late. If the levee breaks while you are still alive, God has offered a way to escape permanent spiritual death. If you don't let God break it now, He will break it after you die, "it will fall with a great crash" (Matthew 7:27), and the destruction will be complete.

The timing of when the levee breaks in your heart is the most important event in your life. It is normal for this to happen while you are living on Earth. Make sure you let God breach the walls of your heart while you are still alive so you can make the decision and commitment to live with Him for eternity. Otherwise, the flood of misery will never cease.

Practice What We Preach

Jesus came to Earth to introduce the New Covenant and, with it, a number of new and different perspectives on living. He shocked the Pharisees by healing on the Sabbath (John 5:10), surprised the righteous by associating with sinners (Matthew 9:12) such as the tax collectors and prostitutes, and called us to forgive the transgressions of others (Matthew 5:39). In short, He showed us the normal way to live.

Jesus was able to demonstrate these principles because He was God and He was able to lead a sinless life. However, these concepts were

I'm normal. I Am

somewhat shocking and difficult to the common man. At this time in history, the customary thinking was more along the lines of “an eye for an eye” and “a tooth for a tooth” (Matthew 5:38), rather than forgiving your fellow man up to seventy seven times (Matthew 18:21). Yet God’s Holy Word provides examples of how ordinary men were able to show forgiveness.

When Paul and Silas were in Philippi, they were seized and dragged to the marketplace. There they faced the authorities for having driven the evil spirit from a slave girl. They were presented as Jews who were advocating customs unlawful to acceptable Roman practices. Paul and Silas were stripped and beaten, then thrown in prison. Miraculously, they were freed from prison when God sent an earthquake that opened the prison doors (Acts 16:26).

When Paul faced the magistrates again, he reported how he and Silas had been beaten in public without a trial, despite the fact that they were Roman citizens. This meant that the magistrates were clearly guilty of false imprisonment and left them open to serious civil and criminal charges from Paul and Silas. When asked to leave Philippi quietly, Paul responds “No!” He appears to be preparing for the battle.

Unbeknownst to his persecutors, the battle had already been won. Jesus won the battle over sin and conquered death by His sacrifice and resurrection. Paul was acutely aware of this and provides us with a shining example of normal, Godly living. Even though he has every legal right to press charges and make a public spectacle of the magistrates and officials, he chooses not to do so. Instead, he decides to be an example of the light that Jesus Christ calls us all to be (Matthew 5:14). Paul decides to forgive these transgressors, to forgive the ones who accused him, embarrassed him, beat him, and imprisoned him. He even took the opportunity to bring the jailor and his whole family to salvation Acts 16:27-32). What a work for God!

Not one of us could possibly forgive such grievous offenses on our own. Fortunately, we are not on our own if we are with Jesus Christ. He has given us the Holy Spirit to strengthen us. It is only through His strength that we could ever manage the courage and strength

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to forgive. Jesus forgives us, time and again, when we disobey and sin, as long as we repent and return to Him. It's His normal Way of operating.

Pray today that you can forgive someone in your life that has falsely accused you, cheated you, abused you, embarrassed you, or sinned against you in other ways. Call on the power of Jesus to do it, for it is through Him that all things are possible (Matthew 19:26, Mark 9:23). Without Him, nothing is possible. It is only through Him that we are given the strength to practice what we preach.

Master Craftsman

My wife's wedding ring has an unusual design. The stone appears to hang unsupported between two portions of the ring. We had purchased it from a local artist in the Denver area while we were living there. Her creativity, craftsmanship, and reputation were known by many. After choosing one of her designs, she was able to craft a custom ring using the particular stone we wished to have mounted.

A couple of years ago, my wife noticed that the stone began to wobble. Concerned about losing the diamond, we took the ring to several local jewelers here in Aiken. No one was able to fix the ring due to its unique design. Shortly thereafter, God blessed us by providing me with a business trip to Denver, where I was able to make contact with the jeweler. In a couple of days, the ring was good as new. She was able to fix it without any trouble because she was the one who designed it and crafted it. She knew everything about that ring and knew just how to repair it, whereas others had no clue.

There are a lot of things in our lives that can break down and require fixing. Over half of the marriages in this country break down and end in divorce. At least periodically, each of us gets sick or comes down with some type of an illness. Most of us have a relationship with a family member, friend, co-worker, boss, child, neighbor, or other acquaintance that needs fixing. Or maybe it's something more worldly, such as bad credit, a leaky roof, an old car, or a beloved wedding ring.

I'm normal. I Am

Jesus is the Way to meeting those needs and to bring healing into your life. Jesus showed His power by driving out demons, by healing crippled men, by making a blind man see, by raising Lazarus from the dead. Jesus is the Master Craftsman for all eternity. He was there with God when the Heavens and Earth were created. Through Him all things were made, without Him nothing was made that has been made (John 1:3). He is the craftsman that knows you, every part of you, inside and out. He knows the parts of you that you know nothing about. He knows you are a unique design because He created you to be different from everyone else on the planet. And because of all this, He can fix any part of you.

Jesus knows you better than any Earthly craftsman can know his or her handiwork. He also has the power to fix what is broken in your life. Whether you have a broken marriage, a broken relationship, a terminal illness, or even a broken relationship with Him, He has the ability to make it whole. He has not only the power, but He has the express desire to mend and repair whatever is broken in your life. To the Master Craftsman, fixing you is the most rewarding part of His normal job.

As I write this today, my life has much more than just a wobbly piece of crystal that needs repairing. I have major issues and I suspect that your life is not much different. I will be in prayer to the Master Craftsman for healing to occur in your life as well as mine. I will pray that past sins against others can be forgiven by all parties so that emotional healing can begin. I will pray for physical restoration as there are so many in physical distress. I will pray that each of us will reach out and strengthen that spiritual bond that we have with Jesus Christ Himself. We all fall short of maintaining that relationship, but He is ready to take us back if we go to Him and ask. Only He, the Master Craftsman, can make our lives normal again.

On Bread Alone

When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon made his first siege of Jerusalem, he seized the best of what was available. He took not only gold from the LORD's temple, but the best of the inhabitants as well. Among these were Daniel and his companions Hananiah, Mishael,

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and Azariah. These young men were of the house of Judah, David's royal line, and were chosen on the basis of their exemplary physical and mental prowess.

Captives of a conquering king are typically subjected to prison, torture, or death. But this was not Nebuchadnezzar's intent for Daniel and his friends. Wisely, the king recognized the potential of these young men and wished to further his kingdom by employing them to his advantage. Instead of starving the youths as most prisoners suffer, the king made available the best foods of the kingdom in order to prosper his investment in them. They were afforded the daily provision of the king's meat, the wine that he drank, and all other choice foods available to him.

What more could a prisoner want? The best foods, the best education, the best living accommodations were theirs to enjoy. But instead of taking advantage of the luxurious circumstances, Daniel and the others refused to partake of the bounty that was proffered. It would have been easy to enjoy the choice foods that Nebuchadnezzar tempted them with, but Daniel was motivated by a higher calling. He had no heart to drink the king's wine or feast on the choice meats; instead he had a heart for things that brought him closer to God.

Daniel refused to defile himself with things that were corrupt and wicked according to the Law. This included the pork, shellfish, and other meats that the king made available, some of which had been sacrificed to idols. Daniel knew that it was much greater to avoid polluting himself with forbidden foods than to enjoy them and lose his fellowship with God. He shows us that we, too, should be more afraid of losing our righteous standing before God than cashing in on the fleeting, worldly pleasures that come our way.

"Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD." (Deuteronomy 8:3). Daniel had taken this passage of scripture to heart and refused to eat anything but vegetables and water. Despite the fears of his captors, Daniel and his friends were healthier and more nourished after the ten-day trial period than the other captives who had enjoyed the full measure of Nebuchadnezzar's bounty.

I'm normal. I Am

This result did not seem normal to the Babylonians. People have trouble believing that a restrictive diet actually contributes to the health and well-being of the body. Yet Daniel's deprivation brought not only a physical increase, but a spiritual benefit as well. These attributes are a natural consequence of temperance, a special blessing from God. Through Daniel, God shows us that He has the power to make a little go a great way. It is normal for Him to make what appear to be deficits and disadvantages transform themselves into glorious abundances.

Daniel chose to live on bread and vegetables alone in obedience to God's commands. God shows us that He rewards those who follow His normal ways, even when others consider us foolish. We all have the choice today to follow His ways and receive great blessing or to follow the ways of the world and receive less. Jesus Christ is our Bread of life. Are you ready to be fully fed by the Bread of Life alone?

Cruising To Damnation

A new movie starring Tom Cruise is coming out, "War of the Worlds", which is based on Orson Wells' famous story of the same name. Ironically, the movie deals with the invasion of Earth by aliens, which is the foundation of the cult to which Mr. Cruise belongs. It also points to the spiritual war between the worlds of God, satan, and man.

As part of the marketing, Tom Cruise has been making many personal appearances and giving interviews to promote the film. He has taken many of the opportunities to promote his beliefs in the cult of Scientology. Even though Scientology has official legal status as a religion, it is nothing but a cult. It is based on the writings of the late science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard (1911 – 1986), who in the early 1950's wrote a book about aliens invading Earth and our own bodies, which he claims now need to be purged.

Under Scientology, man is viewed as an immortal being, called a Thetan, descending from a race of omnipotent gods. Salvation is achieved through a process called "auditing," where engrams,

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memories of past pain and unconsciousness that create energy blockage, are removed. Scientologists believe that until all engrams are removed, man is continually undergoing reincarnation. This cult tolerates no upsetting concepts such as sin that might drive away people looking for an easy way to spiritual fulfillment.

Another key aspect of Scientology is that one can achieve whatever state of godliness you like. Your status depends on how much money you are willing to invest. Scientology thus markets itself to the well-heeled in Hollywood. People such as Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Priscilla Presley, Kirstie Alley and others have the resources to invest heavily. These high rollers are also treated like royalty by the leaders of Scientology. Ordinary folks receive more meager benefits.

As with any cult, Scientology is based on lies. Tom Cruise and other Scientologists are cruising on a ship that will only take them away from the true God and abandon them to eternal damnation. To put it bluntly, they are destined to go to Hell unless they repent and commit themselves to Jesus Christ. They have bought into the lies of Satan, who is working through the late L. Ron Hubbard. They can believe whatever they like, but it won't get them into Heaven.

Tom Cruise's popularity and visibility make him an ideal spokesperson for the Scientology cult. Unfortunately, many people will be taken in by this false religion and will become members. This is, however, a wonderful opportunity to engage others in conversations about how misguided this and other cults are in their beliefs. People are generally receptive to talking about Tom Cruise and other Hollywood stars. This gives Christians the opportunity to share the real Truth of God and the Good News of salvation through Jesus Christ.

Scientology is notorious for many reasons, but in the end it is exactly like every other cult – it won't get you into Heaven (John 14:6). That's the bottom line. We need to pray for those who believe the lies of Scientology and other cults and ask God to change their hearts to allow them to hear and accept the only true plan of salvation. Every cruise has a destination. This includes the cruise of life as well as the soul of Tom Cruise and other Scientologists. My prayer today

*I'm normal. **I Am***

is that they will change the course they are on and make their final destination Heaven, not damnation.

The publicity and promotion accompanying Tom Cruise's new movie will no doubt lead some souls astray. But the "buzz" provides a chance to fight back against the culture and let them know what is normal and good. The attention being given here can be used to shed light on the Light of the World, Jesus Christ. Pray today for the salvation of all cult members and try to use this opportunity to spread the Good News of the Gospel. It's the only normal thing to do.

Recognized Value

Ruth's situation must have looked pretty desperate. Not only had her husband died, but the husband of her mother-in-law Naomi and her brother-in-law had died as well. This left three widows in an age when only a flimsy safety net existed for widowed women. Still, Ruth was about to make the best of a bad situation, thanks to God's help.

Ruth had two primary options. First, she could return to her people in Moab, where she presumably had family to take her in. She could return to the familiarity of her youth, her relatives, even the pagan god of Chemosh that the Moabites worshipped. The alternative was to remain with her mother-in-law, which her mother-in-law begged her not to do for Ruth's own good. Ruth's sister-in-law, Orpah, chose what would have been considered at that time the obvious option, showing love for Naomi, but still cherishing her native country more.

Ruth's choice to stay with Naomi did not seem normal to Naomi or others. Naomi begged Ruth to return to her people, but this only strengthened Ruth's resolve. Whereas most people were looking at the situation from a worldly perspective, Ruth was feeling a spiritual calling from God. She was in love with God, the **I Am** God, more than she was in love with herself or others. Naomi was not rich or beautiful, not powerful or talented, but Ruth recognized the infinite value in Naomi's virtue, wisdom, peace, and grace. Ruth had concluded that these could only come from Naomi's God and Ruth placed a high value on these qualities.

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Based on Naomi's character, Ruth determined that the Jewish nation was full of wisdom and understanding and that these were gifts from their God. Ruth wanted to be a part of this, having no regrets for abandoning her false and vain gods in Moab. She wanted to join Naomi in her religion and worship Naomi's God. Her desire was to adore the God of Israel and to trust in Him, obey Him, and serve Him.

In our turbulent times today, each of us must choose whom we will follow. There are false gods of other religions and cults that we can choose, and there are worldly gods such as money, power, fame, comfort, pleasure, and others. Each of us chooses whom or what we will serve based on the value we see in pursuing our choice. What are you pursuing with earnestness? Is it God, or is it something of the world? Will you choose today to reject any false god that you may be serving or pursuing and commit your life to the Living God?

Ruth chose a normal life serving the Living God instead of an easier life with her people. She did this because she recognized the value in God and the love that He sends to us. Later, she was rewarded for her decision with a fine husband and life, as well as being one of only two women in the Bible to have a book about her. But even these gifts pale when we see that she was rewarded by becoming part of the lineage of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:5), an honor of inestimable value.

None of us can become part of the Earthly lineage of Jesus Christ, but spiritually we can be born again through Him. Our salvation is a gift of infinite value that God offers to each and every one of us. We are heirs to the Kingdom and become part of His family when we accept Him as LORD of our life and become His servants. God gave gifts of eternal value to Ruth, but He is a great God and is not done giving because He loves us all. His gift of salvation through His Son Jesus Christ has infinite value. A normal person will be like Ruth and recognize the value in God and Jesus Christ. Can you say that you're normal and that you've recognized His value?

Profit and Loss

Once upon a time, there was a promiscuous young woman who got pregnant out of wedlock and had a child. Next, she became involved with a married man and assisted in breaking up his marriage. She later chose to become involved with another married man, who ended up killing his pregnant wife. After that, she became involved with still another married man and had his baby out of wedlock. Surely Jesus must be weeping at the sin in this woman's life.

This lifestyle of repeated promiscuity and damage to families sounds like a recipe for disaster. Yet sadly, in our culture today, this can be the recipe for fame and fortune. We have witnessed women such as Monica Lewinsky, Sydney Biddle Barrows, Paris Hilton, Pamela Anderson, and others receive national attention and opportunities for financial advancement based on their lurid sexual exploits. Our culture is fascinated with sin and has turned to glorifying it instead of rebuking it.

It will not be a surprise to many of you that the woman I described above is Amber Frey, former girlfriend of Scott Peterson, the man convicted of murdering his pregnant wife and child. Amber became a national sensation, heralded as a hero and a role model. She wrote a book that brought her significant financial rewards. She appeared on the most prominent news programs and talk shows and was called a role model for young women.

Our society today views Amber's lifestyle as normal and acceptable. How sad. Jesus does not consider her actions normal or acceptable. When He addressed the Samaritan woman at the well, He made her acutely aware of her sin (John 4:18). She was already the veteran of five husbands and was living out of wedlock with a sixth man. Jesus exposed the woman's guilt and called for her to repent, which is the proper response to sin. The question is, "Why aren't people today thinking these same thoughts?"

To her credit, Amber Frey contributed important evidence to the Scott Peterson trial. That, however, was nothing more than a basic civic responsibility. Amber Frey is not a hero or a role model. She

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claims to read the Bible, go to Bible study, and attend church. I pray that all this is true. Yet somehow, she is not getting the message that her actions are sinful and create negative consequences to others. She destroyed marriages and families. The God we serve does not condone this behavior. His plan was for sex to occur only inside the boundary of a marriage between one man and one woman.

Amber is not the only guilty party. We are all guilty when we fail to speak out against sin. Our culture exalts tolerance so that we do not have to face the darkness of our sins. We are afraid that speaking out will hurt the feelings of others and cause us to lose friendships. Even some pastors and churches these days are afraid to speak out against such sinful behaviors for fear of losing members. Our culture did not call Ms. Frey on her sin. Instead, it offered her fame and fortune.

When Jesus counseled the adulterous woman (John 8:1-11), He did not offer her a book deal so she could recount how she had beaten the Pharisees at their own game. No! He told her “Go now and leave your life of sin!” When Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well, He rebuked her for her five marriages and for living with a man to whom she was not married. Jesus corrected these women out of love, not spite, so that they could escape the bondage of their sin.

Our defiance of God’s perfect plan always brings consequences. In Amber Frey’s case, it is ruined marriages, murder, and adultery, just to name a few. Sin always radiates to those around us. But in this modern age, we have become accepting and tolerant of other people’s sin. What’s worse is that we condone and glorify it when there’s money and fame in it. In fact, many yearn for the chance to cash in on society’s appetite for scandalous behavior.

Satan, father of lies, tells us that as long as you profit financially from your sin, you won’t have to worry (1 Timothy 6:10). This is nothing more than making the god of money more important than the God in Heaven. God’s recommendations for financial success do not include performing the most outrageous sins you can think of so that you can write a book and reap millions of dollars in profit. His plan states just the opposite.

I'm normal. I Am

“What good will it be for a man if he gains the world, yet loses his soul?” (Matthew 16:26). Jesus asked this question of His disciples, but it applies to us today. Unfortunately, forfeiting one’s soul is how even some of today’s purportedly “Christian” celebrities appear to be running their lives.

Are you ready for the battle? The Bible tells us that we should rebuke lovingly those who engage in sin. It also reminds us that we should do this gently and out of concern for the souls of others. This in itself is difficult enough, as our emotions, especially our anger, often get in the way. But we are living in a time where we are denounced for pointing out sin, so our speaking out will create resistance. Only you can decide if you will take the normal, Biblical approach or follow the lead of the culture.

I recommend that before you rebuke anyone, however, that you go to the LORD in prayer. Get your own heart right first. Jesus reminds us of an important issue – casting the first stone (John 8:7). As one whose past sins include adultery, I understand that speaking to others about sins you have committed must be done with a pure heart.

I realize that most of us will not have the chance to address the topic of sin with Amber Frey or any other celebrity, but we should pray for them nonetheless. God is willing to forgive their sins and restore their fractured lives, but they must first repent and turn to Him. He is the only chance for salvation. Imagine the impact a celebrity could have if he or she would use their national exposure for God’s purposes instead of their own.

Many in today’s world will consider this viewpoint strange and radical. The case of Amber Frey and Scott Peterson is just one example of how far away from the normal path we have strayed in our day-to-day thinking. Our only hope comes through turning back to Him and His ways. He knows what is best for our lives, even if His ways don’t seem normal to the world.

Prophet and Loss

God made each of us in His image (Genesis 1:27), with our bodies shaped and designed just the way He wanted them (Jeremiah 1:5,

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Psalms 139:13). He constructed our physical beings just the way He planned them and they are perfect in His sight. We are all the perfect height, have the right nose, mouth, teeth, ears, hands, feet, hair, and other body parts for the person God wants each of us to be. In short, everyone's body was created to be normal, according to His will.

The problem is that the world does not always agree. Certain attributes are revered more than others. Those who have not been blessed with attributes desirable by man are often subject to ridicule or mocking because they are viewed as being substandard. None of us is exempt from the taunts of the world, but we should take comfort in the fact that God is aware of our suffering and will ultimately punish those who come against us.

God warns us not to make fun of those we perceive as different or substandard. "He who mocks the poor shows contempt for their Maker." (Proverbs 17:5). Just as God chooses to bless some with wealth, but not others, He blesses some with desirable physical features, but not others. If we mock His decision, whether it pertain to our economic blessings or our body's appearance, we mock Him at our peril. Paul reminds us, "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows." (Galatians 6:7).

God gives us a preview of how He treats mockers in 2 Kings Chapter 2. Elisha the prophet is headed toward Bethel where there was a school of prophets. He was walking along the road, minding his own business, when some youths came out of town to jeer at him. These teenagers were very full of themselves and were proud of their young, more perfect bodies. They mocked the fact that the elder Elisha had lost much of his hair, jeering him repeatedly, calling out "You baldhead!" over and over (2 Kings 2:23).

No doubt these youths considered themselves better looking than the bald prophet. They most likely all had full heads of hair. But instead of being grateful for their position, a temporary blessing, they hoped to inflict pain on the prophet by mocking his loss of hair. They reasoned falsely that they would appear to be superior if they could point out the faults of others. They assumed that their status would somehow be exalted if someone else's infirmities were

I'm normal. I Am

exposed. What they didn't realize was that the biggest loss was about to be theirs.

In an instant, Elisha turned around and called a curse on them in the name of the LORD. God must have agreed that Elisha was justified, for if the curse had come from any bad principle, God would never have allowed it. Our God must be glorified as a righteous God, One who hates sin, and who will demand that each person account for his actions, sometimes presently and sometimes in the future. In this case, two bears came immediately out of the woods and mauled the youths. The loss of life totaled forty-two of the disobedient young people (2 Kings 2:24).

God tells us in this story that it is a wicked thing to embarrass people for their natural infirmities or deformities. God made each of us exactly according to His will and to mock His work is to mock Him. If we have a bald head, it is normal. If we are short or tall, we are normal according to His plan. It is our loss if we belittle anything that God has done. His handiwork is perfect and we mock it at our peril. We must refrain from mocking the sick, the old, the lame, or, as He shows here, His prophets, for we shall surely suffer loss if we do.

Perilously Viable

Medical science is advancing at a mind-boggling pace. New discoveries occur so fast that they are outpacing our ability to keep up with the moral and legal implications. Witness the lawsuits where divorced couples battle in court over fertilized eggs that they created as a couple and then froze for later use. From a legal perspective, many questions arise that remain unresolved. Who owns these embryos? Can they be bought or sold? Who has the right to terminate or dispose of them? Should we create them in the first place? Questions such as these are just beginning to be addressed.

Others are racing against their colleagues to find a way to use human embryos to create "spare body parts" through embryonic stem cell research. Their ultimate goal is to be able to grow a human being from a fertilized egg outside the womb so that we may "harvest" body parts for others. Courts are far from being able to address the

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legal implications of such activities. Ultimately, issues such as these should be settled out of the courts and in the spiritual and moral realms.

Many “pro-choice” advocates are ardent supporters of the research being done in stem cells, cloning, and “test tube” babies. They await the day with eager anticipation when science will be able to produce a human being with just the donated genetic code from a man and a woman. In their minds, such ability will be a great victory of scientific wisdom and technology. I shudder to think how someone like Hitler would have applied cloning technology.

Just when we think we are so smart and so advanced as a culture, God warns us that we should step back a moment and think about what we are doing. “For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’, and again, ‘The LORD knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile.’” (1 Corinthians 3:19-20). It is time to start evaluating our wisdom from a more normal, Godly perspective.

It is ironic to me that one of the key arguments proffered by “pro-choice” advocates is that before a human fetus reaches a certain stage of development, it is not deemed “viable”. This implies that the fetus could not survive outside the womb of the mother. However, the number of gestational weeks before a fetus is declared viable keeps dropping as advances take place in medical science. Premature babies now survive at younger and younger ages. Praise God!

But, an interesting collision of ideologies and science appears to be on the way. What happens when the goal of creating a human being “from scratch”, that is without a mother’s womb, becomes a scientific reality? Suddenly the argument of viability used to justify abortion becomes null and void because every fertilized egg becomes viable. What it demonstrates is something that God and many Christians have known all along – that viability is simply a matter of medical technology.

Once we strip away the façade of the viability argument, we are forced to look at every embryo as it truly is – a precious, human life.

I'm normal. I Am

Thus, using viability as an argument is certifiably foolish. Ironically, researchers are rushing feverishly down a path that will destroy their own arguments for killing unborn life.

God loves human life. He created us in His own image and He loves each and every one of us. He loves us when we're elderly, when we're middle aged, when we're teenagers, as infants, and He loves us before we are born. He knows each of us as a unique individual, if by no other method than through our DNA, which is distinctly ours and is complete and unchanging from the moment of conception.

Nothing regarding our genetic code changes once we leave the womb. Thus, once our DNA is formed at conception, we are a unique and identifiable human being. If medical science advances to the point where a fertilized egg can be incubated outside the womb until a "viable" baby is produced, the only obstacle to having all the currently-frozen fertilized eggs become children is a lack of whatever machinery it takes to incubate them. If these frozen embryos could speak, I suspect they would ask us not to destroy them. I believe God is already sending us that very same message.

The foolishness of our reliance on human "wisdom" comes out in another way. The Truth is that we are never really viable. Viability is an illusion of man's wishful thinking. Even outside the womb, our hearts don't beat and our breaths can't be drawn unless He allows it. If He chooses not to allow it, our life is over at that moment. God is the only One who deserves to have the choice as to when our lives will end. As our Creator, only He holds that right. Normally, He chooses to allow our hearts to beat and our lungs to draw breaths until He decides otherwise. At that point in time, our lack of viability becomes crystal clear.

One of our greatest threats here on Earth is for someone to declare us "not viable". But in the end, God is ultimately in control of our viability. He decides the length of our lives. We think foolishly that we are independent because we are outside the womb or because we are adults, when in fact, our viability could end at any moment (James 4:14, Proverbs 27:1).

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It is not normal to create life outside the womb and then freeze it. It is not normal to destroy the life of frozen embryos just because they become legal, moral, or financial burdens. Frozen embryos today are perilously viable due to the fickleness of the people who produced them. God is trying to show us the foolishness in our thinking, both in the production of embryos and in our definition of viability.

We are all perilously viable. Whether we're a fertilized egg or a functioning human, God loves each of us at every stage of our existence. Viability is just an illusion that masks the glory of God. Not one of us is truly viable. Only God has the authority to give and take life. Let's not continue to demonstrate our foolishness by claiming to have the wisdom to discern who or what is viable. We're only viable if we're viable in His eyes.

Pop Quiz

One of the things I liked least when I was in school was when the teacher of a class announced suddenly that there would be a pop quiz that day. Teachers have a nasty habit of doing this to see if you are keeping up with your studies and to measure your progress between major tests. The constant threat of a pop quiz helped to ensure that you weren't getting behind in your work for the class.

As a Teacher Himself, Jesus knew the value of a pop quiz. In Matthew 21:28-32, Jesus gives His disciples a pop quiz regarding the performance of two sons. A father of two sons told each of them, "Son, go and work in the vineyard." The first son refused to go, but later changed his mind and went. The second son agreed to work, but then failed to follow through. Jesus asked His disciples which son did what his father wanted and they correctly answered the first son.

Jesus hoped to teach a number of lessons to His disciples and to us through this parable. One thing He demonstrated was that there are two sorts of persons, some that prove better than they promise and some who promise better than they prove. The first son proved better than his promise by later doing the bidding of his father, whereas the second son proved to be a disappointment by promising more than he would deliver. This is both an encouragement and a warning to

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parents as their own children may exhibit these same traits. Jesus also sends a message to parents that they should not raise their children in idleness. Children would much rather spend their time playing or acting foolishly. It is the parents' job to correct them and to teach them the Godly work they need to perform.

As usual, Jesus' message was not restrained to Earthly meanings. The two children in the story had the same father, a common father. This signifies that God is a common Father to all mankind, that is, He is Father to each of us. We all receive blessing from Him and we all have obligations to Him. God also calls us to work in His vineyard and to advance His Kingdom. Because of Adam's sin, we must work to provide for our Earthly, physical needs. Through Christ's mercy and grace, however, we are called to work in the vineyard of spiritual endeavors.

Jesus shows us in this parable that we are not to be idle in our efforts on His behalf or on behalf of the Father. And so, the time has come for your pop quiz: Which son are you? Are you a son or daughter who refused to work in your Father's vineyard but have repented and gone to work on His behalf, or are you a son or daughter who has promised your Father that you will do His bidding but have not yet done a thing? Have you given bad answers to God but followed through with good works, or have you given the correct answer but have become hard-hearted and impudent in your actions?

Jesus tells us here that it is normal to be at work for the Father. Excuses are bad, denials worse, yet repentance is valued by both the Father and the Son. If you have promised to work in your Father's vineyard but have somehow just not been able to find the time and the strength, make it your mission today to repent and go into the field. Jesus said in Matthew, "The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few." (Matthew 9:37). Don't be a second son. Don't learn to love your life of ease. Go to the field and the vineyard and produce a harvest of fruit for the Father and for Christ. This is a pop quiz you don't want to fail.

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One Plus One

There's an old joke about a businessman who needs to hire an accountant. The businessman interviews three accountants for the position and asks each of them the same question, "What is one plus one?" The first interviewee answered the question in the traditional way, stating "Two". The second, more creative accountant answered "Eleven." The third accountant gave a rather disturbing answer, "What do you want it to be?"

In a world of Enrons, WorldComs, and Tycos, we are no longer amused at the disaster that comes from creative accounting. Creative accounting can get us into trouble. But, it is not just in the business world where creativity is being applied in an inappropriate manner. The answer to "What is a marriage" also gathers a variety of creative, but non-normal answers.

In a bit of creative accounting of His own, God stated that "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh." (Genesis 2:24). Do the math, it's pretty creative – one plus one equals one, with one man and one woman creating one marriage, not two or eleven or whatever we want it to be. This creative twist on marriage is normal because God, and God alone, has the right to be creative. He is the Creator, and if He says one plus one equals one, then so it shall be, forever.

God's creative definition of marriage has satisfied man and provided a good system for several millennia. However, recently there is increasing pressure on governments to change the definition of marriage. Many groups wish to make same-sex marriage legal, that is, marriages between two men or two women. But, the concept of a same-sex marriage is a contradiction in terms. As stated not only in Genesis, but reiterated in Mark 10:8, 1 Corinthians 6:16, and Ephesians 5:31, the definition of marriage is still one man plus one woman. Legal contracts between same-sex partners do not constitute a marriage, nor do they honor God and His perfect plan for the family.

I'm normal. I Am

God's way of marital union is perfect and right. No other alternative can make that claim. In another demonstration of God's creative accounting, one man plus one woman produces one baby usually, at least at the cellular level. In the realm of procreation, He demonstrates again that His creative accounting is normal – one plus one equals one, unless He decides to push His creativity into overdrive and allow the zygote to split into identical twins.

Two people of the same sex cannot reproduce. This in itself should be a gigantic clue that same-sex partnerships are outside God's intended plan. Whereas it is possible for two people of the same sex to adopt and raise a child, only God's normal way produces a valid marriage and children. He wants us and other forms of life to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:28), increasing in number through the ordained male-female process (Genesis 1:22). No species in the animal kingdom forms a same-sex partnership for raising children and God does not appreciate man trying to rewrite His plan (Leviticus 18:22, 20:13)

Some argue that since marriage is just a contract between two parties, why can't the definition be changed? Aside from the obvious moral issues, let's look at some practical implications. The first question is "To what will we change it?" Is it now between two men or two women? This arrangement is what many want and some countries have already put into law.

But why stop there? It could be whatever people wanted it to be. A contract can be between multiple parties, not just two. Why not allow polygamy? Why not allow two men and one woman or two women and one man or multiple men and multiple women to enter into a marriage contract? Why not dozens or hundreds or thousands of each? According to contract law, these would be perfectly valid contracts amongst consensual parties. And if multi-party marriages are allowed, what allowances must be made when one or more parties wish to dissolve the partnership through divorce? The possibilities are endless and fraught with problems. Marriage between one man and one woman is complicated enough as it is.

God gave us a perfect plan for marriage – one man and one woman. No other way works. Even though no marriage is perfect because of

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the sin of the participants, it is God's normal plan and He wants us to make it work. We can't improve on the marriage plan God has given us, we can only complicate and confound it (Romans 1:24-27). One plus one is still two in math class and one man plus one woman is still the proper way for marriages to be formed, with any deviation creating major problems. Let's leave the creative accounting up to God and stick with the normal plan for marriage that He ordained as good.

Willingness vs. Willfulness

Many times people say things unintentionally that do not come out quite the way they wanted. We've all seen how this may offend the person being spoken to. Our assessment is often that it wasn't what was said, but how it was said. The same thing applies to our questions as to our statements – they should be constructed carefully in order to show respect to those we petition. This is especially true when we ask things of God.

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus calls us to “ask, seek, and knock” (Matthew 7:7-8). But how do we know what words to use in our petitions so that we are not offensive in our requests? A good example is given in Matthew Chapter 14 when Peter poses a question to Jesus as He approaches the disciple's boat, walking on the water.

“LORD, if it's you, tell me to come to you on the water.” (Matthew 14:28). Peter showed great courage and affection for his Master by asking Jesus to bid him to come to Him. Boldness was Peter's most prominent grace, yet here he also exhibited his love by calling out to Jesus. There was likely also a bit of impatience and urgency, desiring Christ's help after spending a frightening time on the rough water in a very fragile craft.

But to Peter's credit, he phrased his question with respect. He did not ask Jesus to “tell me to walk on the water”, thereby implying he wished a miracle for a miracle's sake. Instead, he asks Jesus to tell him to come to Him. Peter wanted Jesus to ask him to come only if Jesus desired it to be so. Peter was willing to go to Jesus, no matter

I'm normal. I Am

how, but his first concern was that he would remain in Christ's will.

How ironic! Bold Peter actually demonstrates a bit of caution as he requests to do something quite dangerous in an already frightening situation. Peter, despite his fear and distress in the situation, observed the will of Jesus Christ and would not go to Him unless he were called. This teaches us that even the boldest spirits must wait for Christ's call to hazardous activities and we must not jump the gun by engaging in such situations rashly and presumptuously. Peter, as we recall, violates this rule egregiously in the Garden of Gethsemane by slicing off the ear of a Roman soldier (John 18:10).

Peter's reward was Jesus' call. Jesus told him "Come", and Peter obeyed, becoming the only other human to walk on water besides Jesus our LORD. Jesus rewarded the one who had faith and asked the question in the proper way. None of the other disciples was so rewarded. When the Pharisees asked for a sign (Matthew 12:38-40, 16:1-4), Jesus refused them as well, since their requests to Jesus were the results of impure motives.

Christ's answers to our requests are subject to will on both sides. First, they are subject to being in Christ's will. It is normal for us to express our desire to Him that whatever He would grant would be in His will, not ours. Second, it is normal for us to be willing to do whatever Jesus calls us to do. Jesus called Peter to come and Peter obeyed, despite an obvious and present danger. We must always be normal and respond with obedience when Christ calls us. Finally, we must not put our own will above that of our LORD and strike out on our own if He does not call us to "Come".

Peter gives us a wonderful demonstration of how we should structure our requests and petitions to God. Part of God's answer will be in how we ask rather than in what we ask for. Part of God's response will be whether we are asking out of selfish desires for our own will versus faithful desires for His will. If we succeed in honoring these two normal aspects, God may grant us what we ask for if it is in His will and perfect timing.

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Ask, seek, and knock. Be bold in your requests and your expressions of faith. But be normal and be respectful of God's will. His answer is always normal and good and He smiles on those who come to Him in honor and respect of His majesty.

The God of Light

In Genesis 1:3, God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. In Genesis 1:4, God saw that the light was good and separated the light from the darkness. In John 8:12, Jesus revealed, "**I Am** the light of the world." Throughout the Bible, God's goodness is always represented by light whereas evil is characterized by darkness. Blessings abound by exploring a few of the aspects of light that make it so distinguished from the darkness.

Light has a number of unique and fascinating features. For instance, light is the only substance we know that cannot be corrupted, contaminated or defiled. We can change its color or direction, but we cannot alter its usefulness. Other substances we use, such as water, can easily be polluted by the addition of bacteria or chemicals. Something that cannot be corrupted, contaminated, or defiled must have a super purity, reviling and conquering any attempts to ruin it. It must be almost, well, Holy – just like our God! It's not a coincidence that God should associate Himself with light.

Physicists tell us that light moves at a constant speed. Light is also the fastest moving thing in the Universe and there is no way to exceed its velocity. A beam of light moves in one direction and travels at 186,000 miles per second. But there's an incredible and eternal property that accompanies the speed of light, which points to our Creator.

Imagine for a moment you were on that beam of light. If another beam of light were coming straight at you, the apparent speed would still be 186,000 miles per second. Light speed doesn't work the same way as if you were in a car. Two cars coming toward each other at 60 miles per hour have an apparent velocity of 120 miles per hour. This additive phenomenon doesn't happen at the speed of light, however. Observers on two light beams headed toward each other see themselves approaching at the speed of light, not twice the speed.

I'm normal. I Am

Light speed is immutable, that is, unchanging, just like our God. The speed of light is also unexceedable, just like our God.

Another interesting property associated with light is that when you reach the speed of light, time virtually stops. If you are light, like our God, you are traveling at the speed of light and time almost stands still. This means that each second becomes almost an eternity. It's not a coincidence that our God is eternal, and He views time in a much different way than we do. Just another reason God decided to be light.

Throughout the Bible, the number seven is used many times to indicate completeness. God used this first when He worked for six days and then created a day of rest, making a complete seven-day week (Genesis 2:2). Or, maybe the week wasn't the first thing He made with seven individual components. In Genesis 1:3, He created light. If you take a triangular glass prism and hold it up to the light, you can create a rainbow of colors. How many colors? You guessed it, seven colors, known as ROY G. BIV by physicists for red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Only when we combine all seven colors do we get pure, white light.

Combining seven colors to produce one is another example of how God often uses several items to make one unified entity. This combinatorial approach reflects the compound unity that is fundamental to our God. God is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. He is a three-in-one, triune God. They are all together, perfectly combined, just as all the colors of light must be together to create pure, white light. Our God is also pure and Holy, clothed in spotless white garments.

Albert Einstein revolutionized the world of physics by discovering the relationship between matter and light. He expressed this in his equation stating that energy (e) equals the mass (m) times the speed of light (c) squared. For the first time in history, man had demonstrated equivalence between matter and light. The world was amazed. God, however, was just giving us another glimpse of His incredible nature.

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The first Law of Thermodynamics in physics says that matter can never be created nor destroyed. Suddenly, however, Einstein showed how one relates to another. I'm no physicist, but what this says to me is that if mass and light have equivalence, one can be made from or converted into the other. Man has used Einstein's equation to unleash the power of the atom, producing energy and light. But only God can reverse the process by taking light and converting it into matter. Perhaps this is the way He created the matter that makes up this Universe. What man can neither create nor destroy, God created by commanding it to be so out of sheer fiat.

It is normal for Him to be a giving God. Imagine Him taking part of Himself, some of His light, and giving it up so it could be used to create the matter in the Heavens and the Earth for us to enjoy. This is the same God that would later give up His only Son, the Light of the World (John 8:12), for our eternal salvation. You just can't out-give God.

Science can't prove that the God of light actually gave up part of Himself to create matter. That leap has to come by faith. To me, all the evidence points in that direction or one similar. Our God is a giving God and it would be just like Him to give up part of Himself for us. However He did it, we can see that He is light in many, many ways. We can see that light displays many of His core attributes: Holiness, immutability, completeness, a triune nature, eternal in nature, and a proclivity to give, which is one aspect of love, and we know that He is love (1 John 4:8, 4:16).

God tells us that He is light and that He is love. He reveals these characteristics in many ways. But in the end, each of us has to believe His revelations by faith, "Being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we cannot see." (Hebrews 11:1). It is normal for God not to reveal all to us, but we can see the light. Light is just one gift He gives to help us justify and strengthen our faith. Praise God today for the light He is to the world!

Intended Use

Some time ago, my Bible study worksheet asked us to define the word “sanctification”. This appeared to be one of those “gimme” questions and I quickly wrote down something such as “set apart for sacred use”, the definition I had heard so many times from others. In a bit of a hurry that evening, I was poised to continue with the remainder of the study when the Holy Spirit gave me a nudge. The next thing I knew I had a dictionary in hand and was looking up the word sanctification.

I don't remember what dictionary I used and, curiously, I have been unable to find either the dictionary or this definition since. What was listed, however, was quite different from what I had expected. I thought my own version would be echoed in pretty much the same words. The definition I read was very different, however. It said “The proper state of functioning or intended use”. It also mentioned that a pen was sanctified when one wrote with it, and a piece of paper was sanctified when you wrote on it.

The whole “proper state of functioning” thing was a bit too obscure for me at first, but I understood the concept about using a pen or writing on paper. After pondering this for a few minutes, I realized that there was a message after all and perhaps a way to reconcile my ignorance. I needed to turn the definition around on myself and ask it as a question. So I asked myself, “What is MY proper state of functioning? What is MY intended use?”

I realized that I had stumbled on the age-old question of “What is the meaning of life?” that philosophers had been struggling with for centuries. In God's perfect timing, I had just finished reading Rick Warren's book “The Purpose Driven Life” and had a ready answer. My intended use was to serve God. I was made by Him, for Him, and intended for use by Him. He knows every detail about me because He designed every aspect of my being, but as a complete person, my proper state of functioning is to be in service to Him.

Our world today emphasizes self over just about anything else. “Look out for number one”, “I did it my way”, “A self-made man”, “If you

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can think it, you can do it” and many more slogans point to the individual as the end-all. But that’s not really the case. God is the end-all, the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last. He is the One whom we should want to be with for all eternity.

There’s nothing wrong with being a strong, self-reliant person as long as our heart belongs to God. The Bible is full of confident yet humble men who served the LORD well. David and Moses spring to mind. They were supremely successful, but both of them kept a close eye on how their every action would be to the glory of God.

Today is a great day to examine your own life and consider whether you are achieving your proper state of functioning. Are you doing the work God has called you to do? Ask Him in prayer today how you can improve your efforts for Him. Ask Him what the proper, intended, and normal use is for you.

Is Marijuana Harmless?

The debate as to whether marijuana is harmless has gone on for years. Many claim that smoking pot is harmless. From both the Christian and non-Christian perspective, it is clear to me that smoking marijuana is not harmless. Recent events in my town offer compelling evidence of marijuana’s destructiveness.

We should first examine the motivation for using marijuana. The reason that virtually all of the people who smoke marijuana do it in order to get high. I am aware that marijuana is used by some terminally ill cancer patients, but this is very rare. The overwhelming reason to smoke pot is to alter your mental and physical feelings so you feel high. This is not normal, nor is it behavior God intended us for our minds and bodies. To many who smoke pot, it becomes a type of god or idol in their lives. This is clearly against God’s wishes (Exodus 20:3-4).

Any type of smoking is damaging to the body. Pot is no different. When a person smokes pot, they are polluting the temple God gave us to house the Holy Spirit. This is a corruption of His plan for us. When a person alters his or her mind by getting high, the mind does not work as well as it usually does and bad decisions are often made.

*I'm normal. **I Am***

It also diverts one from focusing on God, shifting the focus to the drug-induced high going on in their brain. Any time we are diverted from God unnaturally we are committing a sin.

As it stands currently, growing, buying, holding, smoking, or doing almost anything else with marijuana is illegal. By engaging in any of these activities, sin is committed. God wants us to follow not only His rules and laws, but the rules and laws of our government. When we violate those rules, we sin and we are apart from God. We should always keep in mind that the God we serve rewards obedience (Leviticus 26:1-13), but punishes disobedience (Leviticus 26:14-46), which is sin. This includes smoking marijuana.

God gave us free will to choose our actions. Many choose to smoke marijuana, arguing that it doesn't harm anyone but themselves. They point to the fact that other people sin by getting drunk or smoking cigarettes by themselves without hurting others. Their conclusion is that smoking pot is harmless to anyone except themselves. Their contention is supported by the National Organization for the Reformation of Marijuana Laws (NORML). I can assure you that smoking marijuana is not normal.

This argument is fostered by satan himself, who is a liar and the father of all lies (John 8:44). He would desperately like to have you believe that you can sin in a vacuum without consequences to others. But sin always has a ripple effect and touches the lives of others in some way. Sometimes these ripples are small, but other times they have an enormous impact. To Deborah Dorch's family, the impact felt like a tsunami.

In the early morning hours of August 27, 2005, novice newspaper carrier Debra Dorch was learning her route for the Aiken Standard (Aiken, South Carolina) along with a circulation department assistant. As she pulled up to a box and backed up, local marijuana dealers mistook her truck for that of rival drug dealers that were there to rip them off. The dealers chased the truck Debra Dorch was driving and over the next few minutes, riddling it with bullets. Her companion was shot, but survived. Debra Dorch was killed. So much for the notion that marijuana is harmless.

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People who use marijuana need to either buy it or grow it. Those who deal or grow marijuana are often dangerous people and are willing to kill to protect their interests, even if innocent people are killed. Obviously, killing is not normal. Debra Dorch lost her life because of the greed and envy of those willing to sin in a “harmless” way. Try convincing Debra or her family that marijuana is harmless. It certainly isn’t normal.

The sin of using marijuana, like any other sin, radiates to others, often in unpredictable ways. Our Heavenly Father tells us that sin leads to death (Romans 6:23) and He is right. Sin always leads to spiritual death, which can only be overcome through the blood of Jesus Christ. If you are engaged in any sinful activity, remember that it will have serious and unintended consequences. Be bold today in speaking out against all sin and in support of God’s normal ways. And the next time someone tells you that marijuana is harmless, just remember Debra Dorch.

Wilderness Experience

When John the Baptist first began to preach, he chose to do it in the wilderness (Matthew 3:1). This seems at first like a strange career move, trying to get people to come to a desert when it would be much easier and more comfortable for him to go to the city and give his message. But as He often does, God juxtaposes man’s logic with His logic for His glory. We can also see that God makes frequent use of the wilderness, whereas we tend to avoid it.

Although classified as desert territory, the area where John preached was not totally uninhabited. Six cities and their villages existed there, including Hebron where John the Baptist was born. This part of the country was not as densely populated as other regions and did not have the bountiful production of the good fields and vineyards that existed in other parts of Israel. Yet God decided that John should start his business of preaching in this desert land in Judea.

John preached the Word of the LORD, which had reached him despite his physical remoteness. God provides us the lesson that no place is so far removed as to isolate us from His message and power. If

I'm normal. I Am

God wishes to bring us His Word, He will find us whether we are surrounded by others or isolated in the wilderness.

In fact, wilderness locations are often the ideal place to find God. It was not unusual for God's children to enjoy some of their most pleasant encounters and communion with God while they were withdrawn from the hustle and bustle of the world. It was in this same wilderness of Judea that David wrote the 63rd Psalm, which extols his precious communion with God. Even today, many of us find it easier to connect with God when we are in an isolated natural setting in the wilderness.

Our Christian heritage had important beginnings in the wilderness. The Law was given to Moses in the desert wilderness, one of the defining moments of the Old Testament. The message is that God considered it normal to give Moses the Ten Commandments in the middle of the desert. Here, with John, we see the New Testament was first found in a desert land. Even as he preached the Word of the LORD, the Word of the LORD in the flesh, Jesus Christ Himself (John 1:1), came to him.

With the arrival of Jesus, we again see how God often reverses man's logic. John was a priest descended from Aaron and the Levites, yet we see him preaching in the wilderness. We never read of him preaching in the temple as his fathers did. Jesus, who was not descended from the line of Aaron and the Levite priests, was often found in the temple preaching with full authority, just as it was foretold (Malachi 3:1). God's clear message was that Christ's eternal priesthood was to replace that of Aaron and send the obsolete priesthood into a spiritual wilderness.

When we think of a desert wilderness, our first thoughts often jump to how the isolation could not be productive since there does not seem to be much out there. It doesn't seem normal to link empty wilderness and the propagation of God's Holy Word. Yet God uses the wilderness to show us His infinite power. It is normal for Him to take just a little and to multiply it many-fold. The vast emptiness of a wilderness is not an obstacle for the power of God as it would be for us.

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If God has you in a wilderness experience in your life, know that He has the power to bring about His will despite the apparent barrenness and emptiness. In fact, He may be closer at hand than you ever imagined. He is ready to use you if you will turn to Him and seek Him. Are you ready to experience the power of a wilderness experience with God? The wilderness you feel inside may be a sign that He is about to display His awesome power.

Purifications

Early in my career as a mining engineer, I was privileged to be able to witness several gold pours at working gold mines. The process is fascinating. A huge crucible of ore material is super-heated in a fire until the contents are molten. The crucible is then rescued from the fire and the contents poured into a smaller, cone-shaped container where it cools. This small receptacle is then inverted and lifted slowly. At first, only the ugly, black slag can be seen until, suddenly, the tip of the cone is exposed. At that point, a pure, shiny “bullet” of purified gold is revealed, capping the ugly, black, waste rock. The purified bullets I witnessed had market values of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Before we are able to stand before God, we must first go through a purification process as part of God’s normal plan of salvation. First, someone or some group of people must tell us about the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Next, we have to believe, becoming born again as a new person in Christ (John 3:3). Our sins are scrubbed clean by the blood He shed on the Cross. When we die, we rely on Jesus for that “special set of clothes” we need in order to be able to stand in God’s presence. We are clothed in His robe of righteousness with our darkest sins covered from God’s view.

Jude calls his dear friends to “Be merciful to those who doubt; snatch others from the fire and save them; to others, show mercy mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” (Jude 23-24). Looking back on my life, others have done that for me. I was a doubter, but someone cared enough to witness to me. I have been snatched from the fire and saved. Many of you have had similar experiences, as all of us needed someone to tell us the Good News.

I'm normal. I Am

Part of that Good News is the normal change of clothing we will get when we arrive in Heaven.

Gold is ugly, broken rock before it enters the crucible. We, too, are broken, dirty, and ugly in our sin, living wasted lives apart from Christ. The fiery refining process for gold yields a beautiful and valuable purified object, separated and apart from the blackness. We, too, are refined by the blood of Jesus so that our sins are covered and separated from God.

The robe of righteousness we will wear in Heaven has infinite value and is worth far more than gold or rubies. It cannot be purchased, nor can it be borrowed from a relative or a religious leader. It can only be obtained through your personal commitment of faith to the LORD Jesus Christ. It is a gift to you, at no cost, purchased by Jesus Christ, with His precious blood on the hill at Calvary, so that we may live again (Revelation 5:9, Romans 5:9, Hebrews 9:14).

It was a stunning sight when I first saw a bullet of pure gold emerge from the blackness of the dross. But I know it will pale to the sight in Heaven of my sins being covered and forever cast away by the robe of righteousness I will wear thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It's hard to imagine how wonderful that scene will be. This is the promise of Christ: we will be cleansed and purified, and will wear perfectly clean, snow-white garments, because gold just isn't pure enough.

The Doxology from Jude 24-25 gives us hope. "To Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before His glorious presence without fault and with great joy – to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our LORD, before all ages, now and forevermore. Amen." May your purification come through the grace, mercy, and sacrifice of our LORD Jesus Christ.

Anger Management

As beings of the flesh, anger is a typical response to being insulted or harmed and the Bible records many instances of retribution. However, the Bible counsels us that revenge is unGodly and declares our need to temper anger with love. But how do we do that when our emotions are clamoring for us to strike back? As always, Jesus is our model

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for dealing with others and with our feelings. In John Chapter 2, we see how Jesus managed His own anger when He cleared the temple in Jerusalem.

The term management implies a multi-step process. Management requires a series of steps, a process which begins by recognizing a problem, developing a plan, and then implementing that plan in an effective way. Our LORD Jesus took all these steps and more as part of His anger management seminar in the temple.

Jesus was insulted by the money changers and vendors who occupied His Father's house. He recognized the problem instantly. Ultimately, it was man's love of money (1 Timothy 6:10, Matthew 6:24) that motivated them, not their faith. Vendors were selling oxen, sheep, and doves in the temple. These animals were not just for common use, they were to be used as sacrifices. The chief priests had allowed all these animals to be admitted to the temple so that fees and profit could result. We see what great corruptions can arise in the church when men love money more than God (Timothy 6:5)!

In His majesty, Jesus was able to form a perfect plan of action. First, He drove out the sheep and the oxen along with those who sold them. This was a bit of a change in His demeanor. Before He had started His public ministry, Jesus had seen these things in the temple many times. In His previous, private life, He had never taken any action to drive them out. Now, in one of the first public displays of His authority, Jesus makes known to us His feelings about using God's house of worship for commerce and He drove out the beasts.

There is a subtle lesson to be learned from Jesus driving out the animals and the vendors. We see that Jesus never used force to drive anyone into the temple, only to drive out that which profaned it. We, also, must not use our anger to try to force others into Christ's Church, only to drive out trespassers. It is only through His love that the lost can be drawn into the temple and saved.

In the next part of His plan, Jesus poured out the money changer's currency. In this act, He showed His contempt of it by throwing it on the ground. Next, by overturning the tables, Jesus showed His

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displeasure for those that make religion a matter of worldly gain. He threw out not only their money and tables, He rid the temple of their occupation.

Jesus demonstrates the necessity of love, concern, and restraint in His next phase of the anger management seminar. To those who sold doves, He said “Get these out of here!” (John 2:16). Note that He treated doves differently under His plan than He did the four-footed livestock. This is a demonstration of His prudence and restraint in His anger, a lesson that we should also learn.

His restraint was intentional, not just a passing whim or a decrease in His resolve. When the sheep and oxen were driven out, the owners were able to follow the animals and recover them. If Jesus had simply loosed the doves, they would have flown away, perhaps never to be retrieved. Jesus was not interested in causing the dove vendors loss when He had caused no loss to the other merchants. Instead, He shows us that discretion and even-handedness must always guide us and govern our anger so that we ourselves do nothing unbecoming ourselves or become mischievous to others.

Finally, Jesus took the time to educate them as to why He acted the way He did. He gave them a good reason for His actions and told them that His Father’s house is not a house of merchandise. Whereas commerce is a good thing by itself, it is a sacrilege in the Church, which is dedicated to the honor of God.

Jesus shows us that righteous anger is normal and appropriate in certain situations. However, He also demonstrates that our anger must be managed and controlled to conform to the will of God. We must defend God’s name and institutions publicly, but in our anger we must also be careful not to sin, lest we lower ourselves in the process. Jesus’ lesson in anger management serves as a guide to all of us for living a life that is normal and pleasing to Him.

In Jesus’ Name

I started my first Bible study while living in the Denver, Colorado area, my long-time home. Each week, after studying certain Bible passages and answering questions, we would get together as a group

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and share our answers and insights. Following this, we listened to a lecture on the meaning of the passages that we had studied.

My first teaching leader was a wonderful Christian man named Monk Hall. He was a self-admitted cowboy from the eastern plains of Colorado. He had grown up on a ranch and was intimately involved with the operations from a young age. He often used experiences from his youth and adult life to communicate Godly messages. This message is derived from his experience and wisdom.

Monk shared with us that by the time he was a young teen, he was often tasked with going into town on his own to obtain supplies for the ranch. He would visit the grocery store, the hardware store, the feed store, and other vendors in order to purchase what was needed. At each of the merchants' establishments, he was able to sign in his father's name since everyone knew his father and knew that the elder would make good on the debt.

Signature authority was a significant responsibility for a young teenager, something that could have been abused. Yet both his father and the merchants trusted Monk with it. Monk admitted, however, that at times he had speculated as to how far he could push his authority. He thought he may have been able to go so far as to visit the local car dealer and to purchase a new pickup truck for the ranch by signing in his father's name. After all, trucks wear out and are a vital necessity for the continued operation of a working ranch.

Monk knew his authority had its limits, however. Monk recognized that he may have been able to buy a pickup truck, but he would not have been able to buy a new sports car by signing in his father's name. This would have been outside of his father's will.

In John 14:13-14, Jesus tells us "And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Son may bring glory to the Father. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it." Based on this counsel, we typically conclude our prayers by saying something to the effect of "And we ask this in Jesus' name". The question arises as to whether what we are asking for is really in the name of either

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Jesus or the Father. Are we really asking for something in His will rather than ours?

If we examine our prayers, we may find that on occasion, we are praying for sports cars rather than pickup trucks. We may be praying outside the will of our LORD. Perhaps we are asking that we be glorified rather than others, or glorified rather than giving the glory to God. Perhaps we are asking to win the lottery, a promotion at work, or a chance to get even with someone who has wronged us. Perhaps we are requesting benefits for ourselves that go against His needs or the needs of His Church. We are warned to refrain from praying outside's God's will: "When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures." (James 4:3).

I feel confident that most of our prayers are heart-felt expressions and honest requests for God's grace and the intercession for others. Today I ask you to examine what you are praying for. Try to be sure that you are praying normally, that is, within His will, not your own. God will bless you if you repent from any sin. Repentance from inappropriateness in prayer will be rewarded as well. As you continue to develop and expand your prayer life, keep this concept in mind. Make sure you are praying in His name and His will. It is more normal to be praying for pickup trucks than sports cars. Make sure your motives are normal and pure so that you are truly praying in Jesus' name.

Fair Warning

One of the magnificent things about God is that He consistently gives mankind fair warning for the terrible events that may befall us. God is faithful to inform the people on Earth of the dangers that lie ahead, whether they have much control over them or not. But despite God's fair warning, man typically chooses not to heed the Words of the LORD.

It all started in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve that they could not eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil or they would certainly die. There was no mistaking the command, but satan

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brought confusion into the picture and, despite God's fair warning, Adam & Eve sinned, bringing death upon us all.

In only a short time, mankind went from being created sinless to a state where "every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time." (Genesis 6:5). God was so upset with man that He decided to wipe him from the face of the Earth along with the animals. But, He gave man fair warning, allowing 120 years to pass between His decision and the Great Flood that wiped out all but Noah and his family.

By faith, Noah dutifully spent the remaining years building the ark that God had commanded. Even though God had set the date for the Flood, He most likely did not reveal the exact time it would occur. Still, He gave Noah enough time to complete the ark that would save him and his family. They may not even have understood the concept of a flood or exactly what the ark was for, but Noah labored faithfully in obedience to God and was saved.

Noah's obedience probably made him a despised man during his time. As he preached of the coming demise, scoffers were abundant. He would not find favor in the eyes of men, for their hearts were consumed by evil. Thus, they hated Noah and persecuted him because, by both his life and his preaching, he condemned the world.

It was little different for our LORD Jesus. When He preached, He was denounced and condemned. When He gave us God's fair warning of the end of the world (Matthew 24), men hated Him, so much so that He was put to death for His ideas. However, He was faithful to God in giving us a fair warning of what is to come and how we might be saved through faith in Him.

Jesus has promised that He will return to Earth. Once again, much of mankind will perish (Matthew 24). Unlike in the days of Noah, God has revealed to us through His apostle John in the Book of Revelation what will happen and how the coming destruction will occur. Many mysteries remain regarding the exact implementation of the end times, but God has made it very clear they He will have His day of judgment.

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It is normal for God to give us fair warning of coming events that will cause our demise. History demonstrates that it is also typical for most to fail to heed the warnings of God. The Bible predicts the disbelief of man. “First of all, you must understand that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and following their own evil desires. They will say, ‘Where is this “coming” He promised? Ever since our fathers died, everything goes on as it has since the beginning of creation.’ But they deliberately forget that long ago by God’s Word the Heavens existed and the Earth was formed out of water and by water. By these waters also the world of that time was deluged and destroyed. By the same Word the present Heavens and Earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the Day of Judgment and destruction of ungodly men.” (2 Peter 3:3-7).

The scoffers are abundant today, just as in the days of Noah and Jesus. Those who proclaim the Truth are belittled and persecuted. God, however, has given us fair warning of the coming destruction. “Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your LORD will come.” (Matthew 24:42). His sure promise will be revealed at the proper time. Make sure you are ready by putting your faith in Jesus Christ. You won’t like the eternal consequences of rejecting Him, and God will surely remind you that He gave you fair warning.

False Hope & Self-Rescue

The world watched in anguish as the story of 13 trapped miners in Tallmansville, West Virginia unfolded. Trapped by a methane gas explosion, rescuers battled furiously to gain access to the mine in an attempt to save the stranded men while town residents waited and hoped for good news. At one point, reports came that all but one man had been found alive. Church bells rang out and joy spread through a town exhausted by a 24-hour a day vigil. But the joy was shattered when the initial reports turned out to be false – all but one of the miners had perished in the underground. Family and friends were completely devastated. The false news had caused them to celebrate under the impression of false hope.

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Rescuers have since relayed more detailed information about the fate of these unfortunate men. As trained, they had huddled behind a curtain they created to keep out the dangerous gases that accumulate in an underground coal mine. Each man had been using a special device called a self-rescuer to try to save himself. A self-rescuer takes the air a person breathes out and generates fresh oxygen. The chemicals in the breath react with chemicals in the self-rescuer to provide about an hour's worth of air. It also helps keep the harmful gases from overcoming the victim. Despite diligent use of these devices, only one man survived the ordeal.

The events that unfolded in this small, coal mining town seem to be a reflection of the spiritual state of many people in our country. People are rejoicing at the false hope spread by false prophets regarding how one can rescue one's self and get into Heaven simply by our works. They claim we do not need a Savior. People are rejecting the message of Christianity in droves because it's too much work and commitment.

People today refuse to believe that a loving God would allow senseless tragedy in the world. Many refuse to believe that God would sacrifice His own Son. Instead, they believe that anyone who is "spiritual" will be granted access to the Heavenly Kingdom. They believe that living a good life, helping others, not murdering anyone, and following the Golden Rule will be sufficient to gain access to God's Kingdom. In short, they believe that their works can rescue them from their sin.

The false hope in Tallmansville was the result of highly unfortunate and unexpected communication errors. In contrast, the false hope regarding our spiritual fate is predictable. Jesus warned us that false prophets would come and issue false reports (Matthew 24:24). He warned against the yeast of the Pharisees, their false teachings, and their attempts to save themselves under the Law (Matthew 16:6, 12). If Jesus were here on Earth today, He would warn us not to believe those who preach that "any way or any god" will get you into Heaven.

Every miner is given a self-rescuer and told how to use it to save his life in an emergency. God has offered each of us a spiritual self-

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rescuer, the LORD Jesus Christ. We are given instructions through God's Holy Word, the Bible, as to how we use our self-rescuer and Savior in order that we do not perish into everlasting death. Self-rescue attempts in Tallmansville saved only one man out of thirteen and we now know that Randall McCloy's survival was actually a miracle from God. In contrast, self-rescue through Jesus Christ is 100 percent effective and 100 percent guaranteed. No one who becomes a follower of Christ will perish (John 3:16).

A local woman told a television correspondent, "We are a Christian community." This gives me hope that all who were in the mine were believers. I pray that each man had committed himself to Jesus Christ before the accident or had time to accept Him as their Savior before his self-rescuer failed. I pray that none had listened to the merchants of false hope who proclaim that a person can be his or her own self-rescuer spiritually. We need to be in fervent prayer to lift up the surviving family members of this tragedy so that God will give them the physical, emotional, and spiritual strength they need to get through this terrible time in their lives.

We are all trapped in a life that ends in certain death. Because of our sin, we are all under a death sentence that leads to eternal separation from God (Romans 6:23). The prophets of false hope will tell us that we can save ourselves. They are wrong. Self-rescue from eternal darkness can only come through the blood shed on our behalf by the LORD Jesus Christ. He is the only self-rescuer we will ever have or ever need. His sacrifice is sufficient for all sin for all time.

It is normal to want to rescue yourself from death. It is normal to wish that life will continue. The people of Tallmansville had their emotions shattered by the false hope of false news. As a Christian community, they have the assurance that the death befalling believers is only physical. Many people today will die physically only to find that they are sentenced to an eternal death (Revelation 20:14). Once they die, it will be too late. They will discover that their self-rescue attempts were in vain and they will be devastated for all eternity. The believers in Tallmansville will only suffer during their few short years on Earth. Unbelievers will suffer eternal, unending death.

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Life is short (James 4:14). It's not normal to try to rescue your soul on your own. We have been given a sure way into Heaven. Don't cling to any false hope that the world may try to give you. Hope comes only through one man, The Man, Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). He is not false hope. He is the only self-rescuer you will ever need.

Jars of Clay

As a young boy, I enjoyed picking fossils out of the shale beds that lined 18-mile Creek near Lake Erie. I was fascinated by the exotic and abundant life forms that had been preserved in the shales, a rock formed from clay. Years later, in Earth science and geology classes, I accepted blindly the professors' explanations of evolution and Darwin's theories and their relationship to the fossils I had collected.

Not being grounded well spiritually back then, I never questioned the disparity between the Biblical version of Creation and the scientific view. I swallowed the lie – hook, line, and sinker. I believed the story that somehow, over millions or billions of years, primitive chemicals combined to form ever more complex molecules, which eventually managed to create the building blocks of life. Then, magically, these chemicals combined somehow and came to life in a single cell that is far more complex than a computer. How gullible I was!

It crossed my mind on occasion that there seemed to be a disparity between the story of Adam & Eve and the story of evolution. Not wanting to invest spiritual emotion or energy, I presumed there was an explanation somewhere, but I had simply failed to hear of it. What astounds me now is that I never put two and two together.

Yet there I was, collecting the remains of complicated creatures from the shale and no red warning flags went up in my mind. Clays are among the most common rock-forming materials on Earth and have been present since the Earth began. If you believe that the Earth formed billions of years ago, that means clays have been around for billions of years before the complicated life forms that became fossils. An obvious question eluded me for years: if complicated and abundant carbon-based life forms can magically spring out of some

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postulated primordial soup, why aren't simple, uncomplicated things made of clay found at all?

In the history of paleontology, no one has ever found even one jar of clay in the fossil record, nor have any broken jars or pieces of jars been found in lithified strata. This contradicts the entire concept of life springing up spontaneously along with the subsequent evolutionary development of advanced life forms. Why would remnants of amazingly complex, living creatures be plentiful in the clay shales, yet simple inanimate items never, ever appear? It's just not normal.

The reason complex life forms appear in the fossil record is because they were created. They didn't just happen by random chance, just as life did not occur by random chance. A creation, of course, presumes the existence of a Creator who has the ability, imagination, and motivation to carry out the task. Thus, theological questions arise.

Some may argue that believing in a Creator is an expression of faith. This is correct. What they fail to understand is that believing that life was able to begin spontaneously out of a so-called primordial soup is also a matter of faith. Both world-views are simply beliefs and neither can be proven by science. No one saw life created in the Garden of Eden. Neither has anyone seen life start spontaneously or evolve the way Darwin claimed. Thus, they are both theories and ultimately you must choose to believe one or the other based solely on faith. Your faith will lead you to believe in either a Creator or in pond scum.

Needless to say, I no longer believe in life evolving from a so-called primordial soup. That is not normal. Looking at the evidence, I can't conclude that randomness and evolution were able to create complex life forms but couldn't even create a simple jar of clay. How can randomness bring forth a multitude of complicated entities but fail to manifest simple ones? The answer is that it can't happen and there's no evidence to the contrary. Only a potter, a Creator, can make a jar of clay. Only God, our Creator, can bring life into the world.

The next time someone tries to convince you that evolution exists by pointing to the fossil record, ask them to show you all the fossilized

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jars of clay. I've searched the fossil record myself, and I can testify that they don't exist.

The Right Connection

Growing closer to God and connecting with Him is a never-ending process. It involves developing an intimacy with Him, finding fulfillment and the fullness of joy, and being able to live victoriously in all circumstances. This close, personal connection is often hard to make, and once made, is easily broken by the frenzy of the world around us. Complicating matters, people around the world put their faith in gods of many types. How, then, do we know when we have made the right connection and how can we remain firmly connected?

First, it is important to understand what we are connected to. Begin by asking yourself these basic questions: What occupies most of my attention? What consumes most of my thought? What is it that really "rings my bell"? What is it that I dream of and fantasize of the most? What is really god in my life? If the answer is anything other than Jesus Christ, you've established a bad connection.

"I Am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. (John 15:1). Remain in me and I will remain in you (v.4). **I Am** the vine. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing." (v.5). These passages reveal the Truth regarding the only way we can connect to a vine that supplies life, both physical and spiritual.

In verse 1, Jesus declares that He is the true vine – there is no other. He really is the true vine, who alone can supply you with life, and life more abundant (John 10:10). If you are connected to anyone or anything else for your life other than the man Jesus Christ, you have not made the right connection. You are connected to something from which you will draw life, rather than something that drains you. Jesus is the true vine who supplies life. All other vines sap life from you, some slowly, some quickly.

Notice that when Jesus was speaking about being the true vine, He was speaking to Jews who were connected to Israel. In the Old

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Testament, Israel was often referred to as “the vine”. But Jesus is saying clearly that Israel is not the vine; rather, He is the true vine. The Old Testament tells us over and over how Israel connected with pagan gods. Each time Israel strayed, their strength as a nation was sapped quickly. Although Israel is called the vine, God was telling them that there is a stronger, more permanent vine to which we should all attach firmly.

The message is clear – Jesus Christ is the true vine. He is the only vine that can really supply life. In John 10:10, Jesus said, “The thief comes only to steal, and to kill and destroy; I have come that they might have life, that they might have it more abundantly.” The secret to true fulfillment, joy, strength, and spirituality is to be abiding in and connected to Jesus Christ. No other connection is normal.

If you are connected to anything other than Jesus, you’re connected to the wrong vine. If you haven’t connected with Jesus, you haven’t made the right connection and your life will never be normal or abundant. Jesus is the true vine, who supplies continual life to His branches. No branch will ever exhaust the life of Jesus. Take time today to make sure you have made the right connection to the true vine that God has given us.

Risky Business

Each year, worker safety organizations publish a list of the most dangerous jobs in America. This list reports the occupations where someone is most likely to die on the job along with the reasons for the inherent danger. Year after year, the job of being a fisherman ranks near the very top of the list.

The life of a fisherman is hard. Fishermen must accustom themselves to the many difficulties and hazards associated with their occupation. It calls for hard labor in the best of times and often requires great exertion after long periods without rest. They are often wet, cold, hungry, fatigued, and under siege by storms, but still they must toil. CNN reports that about one fisherman in 1,400 died on the job during the 1990’s.

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It is little different for the fishers of men. When Jesus called brothers Peter and Andrew along with James and John to be fishers of men (Matthew 4:18-21), He called them from one form of fishing to another. Little did they know that they were moving from one dangerous occupation to an even more risky business – that of preaching His Gospel.

The disciples Jesus called, except for Judas but including Paul, were all martyred except for John, who was exiled. God's first apostles had an almost certain chance of being killed on the job – only one of the twelve loyal apostles escaped martyrdom. Yet the disciples went gladly when Jesus called them.

It wasn't long after Jesus' own death that Stephen was stoned. Shortly thereafter, James was beheaded leaving only ten disciples out of the twelve. Yet despite the losses in their ranks and their impending martyrdom, they were not disillusioned or afraid. Instead, with God's help, they were able to manage the duties of this risky business in order to establish the foundations of Christ's church.

You'll be comforted to know that today the odds are much better. Statistics I came across recently stated that missionaries have only a one in 50 chance of being killed. The risk of a fisher of men being killed today is far less than it was for the early apostles and the odds of surviving are vastly improved. Anyone interested? Job applications are being taken and accepted at this moment by God if you find it in your heart.

Jesus told us that "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:25). How often Jesus spoke with double meanings – thirst for water vs. thirst for living water, hunger for bread vs. hunger for the bread of life. With discipleship, losing our life applies to both our occupation and literal death. When He calls us to lose our life for Him, He means not only our ambitions and desires, but quite possibly our physical life.

Being a fisherman of any type is risky business. Being a fisherman for Jesus Christ is perhaps the most perilous occupation you can choose in terms of losing your mortal life. But, being a fisher of

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men is what every normal person should choose because it always advances our spiritual life. We don't all need to be missionaries, but we should all be teaching His normal ways to others. The greatest risk a person has in this mortal life is not finding Jesus, which leads to eternal death. Are you being a normal witness to others?

God doesn't guarantee safety for His fishers of men, in fact, quite the opposite. But He provides a guarantee that our eternity will be safe and secure. Pray today for those who are doing His risky business. Pray also for those who are in the most risky business of all – rejecting Jesus Christ as their LORD. A follower of Christ can only be killed. Those who choose not to believe will suffer an eternal death. That's a risky business that God would like to eliminate completely.

Christ in the Passover

Tonight at sundown, Jewish people around the world will celebrate the Passover in honor of God's deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt. The celebration includes eating a Passover meal. The Jewish people have done this every year since the deliverance, according to God's instructions in Exodus 12:24, which say "Obey these instructions as a lasting ordinance ("forever" in some translations) for you and your descendants."

Jesus Himself celebrated the Passover every year of His life. It was the last social function that He performed before He was put to death. It was also His last meal. The Passover meal, called the Seder (meaning "Order"), contains many symbols to remind us of the Exodus, but it also contains many symbolic references to the first coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

In their haste to leave Egypt and escape the Pharaoh, the Israelites had no time to let the dough for their bread rise. Their only provision was matzoh, which is made from wheat, but is not allowed to ferment or rise. It is unleavened bread, made without yeast, which often symbolizes sin in Scripture. Jesus cautions how yeast works its way throughout the dough (Matthew 13:33), and then later equates yeast and sin directly (Matthew 16:6, 11-12).

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The matzoh is a thin, flat square, much like a large cracker. When you hold it up to the light, you will see that it has stripes on it and small holes pricked through it. This is done for the baking process, but points us to the words of Zechariah who says “they will look on me the one they have pierced.” (12:10), reminding us that Christ was pierced on the Cross (John 19:34). The stripes remind us that Jesus Christ was flogged before His crucifixion, “and by His stripes we are healed” (Isaiah 53:5). Passover was also the last meal of the Israelites before they left Egypt, just as it was Jesus’ last meal on Earth, His Last Supper, where He revealed the matzoh bread to be His body and the wine to be His blood, thus giving us communion.

During the Seder dinner, three pieces of matzoh are placed in a special cloth container called a “matzoh tosh”. The matzoh tosh has three compartments. According to Jewish tradition, two interpretations are given. The first says that the three compartments represent the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The second says that they symbolize the priests, the Levites, and the nation of Israel. But to Christians, this three-in-one container symbolizes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our triune God.

During the meal, the middle matzoh is broken, just as Christ, the middle member of the Trinity, was broken for our sins. After breaking the middle matzoh, one half is “buried” by placing it in a separate cloth container, called the afikomen, and then hidden somewhere in the room. Later the afikomen will be found and symbolically “resurrected”. This part of the ceremony clearly points to Jesus Christ’s burial and resurrection as well as the unity of the Holy Trinity.

The main course of the first Passover meal was lamb, although many Jewish people today eat chicken. God commanded to Moses that the lamb must be unblemished (Exodus 12:5), just like our unblemished and sinless Lamb Jesus Christ. No bones were broken, just as with our LORD Jesus Christ on the Cross (John 19:33), our perfect sacrifice.

Just before the first Passover and the Exodus, the blood of the sacrificial lamb was made to cover the top and sides of the doorframe in the homes of the Israelites. Symbolically, one can see the Cross

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being traced in the air as the Israelite men lifted the hyssop from the bowl, reached up to put the blood first on the top of the doorframe, then to one side of the frame, then the other. This first Passover blood covered and protected the Israelites, causing the LORD to pass over their homes and spare the firstborn from death (Exodus 12:12-13). Now the Blood of the Lamb of God shed on the Cross covers our sins so that we may appear sinless before God and be saved from eternal death.

God included many symbolic references to His Son Jesus Christ into the Passover celebration. This is not an accident. His wish is that all men see the relationship between the Passover meal and His Son so that all will come to faith in Him (2 Peter 3:9). He showed us that it was normal for Jesus to celebrate the Passover. He showed us the piercing, the striping, the unbroken bones, the resurrection, the last meal, and bread without yeast all point to His Son.

The Passover meal provides unmistakable evidence of our LORD's suffering, sacrifice, and Messiahship. The Passover meal is just one more way that God gave us to see His Son and the salvation He brings. Praise Him today as you worship for the many ways in which He shows His love and pray that all will come to salvation through the blood of our Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ.

Prayer Life

How's your prayer life? If I asked you to assign a grade to your prayer life on a scale of one to ten, where do you think you would fall? These are questions that all Christians struggle with and lately I've been convicted that I'm not as close to ten as I'd like to be. But before we all grade ourselves, let's look at some of the questions we should be asking in order to determine the answer.

Are you consistent and regular in your praying? Do you have a daily time alone with God, or are you haphazard in your praying, finding yourself drifting into prayerlessness unless a problem or crisis comes up? Are you growing in your prayer life, or do you feel you've slipped into a spiritual rut in your ability to approach God in prayer? When you pray, do you find that your mind tends to wander?

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Is praying boring to you, simply an obligation, or do you view it as an opportunity for fellowship with God? Do you frequently find yourself running out of things to say as you pray? When was the last time you really felt the presence of God when you were praying?

If you're like most Christians, including me, these questions point out that our prayer lives are not always as wonderful as we would like them to be – or as wonderful as God would like them to be. In fact, it may appear as if we are wasting a lot of time praying. Much of what we call prayer may not be true prayer at all. Instead it may just be meaningless, mindless babble, rote, repetitious and ritualistic mutterings, and selfish, greedy, begging. We may have slipped into that rut where our prayers are dull, emotionless, mindless, thoughtless, powerless, routine, and mostly ineffective. So how do we climb out of the rut that we've slipped into?

As usual, God give us guidance in His Holy Word. Twice in the New Testament He advises us that it is normal to “pray in the Spirit”. This guidance points out the fact that there are only two ways to pray – in the flesh and in the Spirit. God tells us twice that if we want to grow closer to Him, it is imperative that we learn to pray in the Spirit, and by implication, not in the flesh. Here's what He says: “And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, keep on praying for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:18). “But you my friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit.” (Jude 20).

To pray in the Spirit, we need to pray in fellowship with God, praying under the control and direction of the Holy Spirit. To do this, we must pray in the Spirit's agenda, not our own. Instead of focusing on strictly our agenda and our needs, we need to pray over the items that He directs us to pray over. This means asking His guidance regarding His wishes, not our own. We need to listen to Him, submit our hearts to Him, and then pray in the direction of the burden He gives us in His mercy and grace.

God has a perfect plan and a will for every situation and circumstance. The Spirit will tell us what to pray about as well as how to pray over it. Our goal in prayer is to discern His will and to pray it into reality.

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The goal of praying is not to persuade God to come over to our side, to our point of view – He's already on our side. Our goal should be to change our own hearts and desires so that we are praying in accordance with His perfect will. When we pray in the Spirit, we also pray in His authority. Since He is the ultimate authority, God will answer our prayers the way they are prayed because they are in His will.

God tells us that it is normal to pray in the Spirit so that He can bless us richly. I hope that your prayer life is already so glorious that you have claimed victory in your prayer life and scored a “ten” on the test. I hope this devotional was unnecessary for you, meaning that you already have your prayer life in tip-top shape. For those of you, like me, who still need some work, remember His advice to pray in the Spirit. This is the only way to a normal and meaningful prayer life.

Trick-or-Treat

Today is Halloween. At dusk tonight, children of all ages, including some adults, will don fanciful costumes. The children will go door-to-door in the annual ritual of “trick-or-treat”, pretending to be something else in hopes of gaining tasty morsels to eat. The Bible tells us that deceptive costumes and tasty foods are sometimes closely linked.

When Isaac became old, he wished to confer his blessing on his son Esau. Esau was the firstborn of Isaac's sons, a twin with Jacob. Previously, Esau had foolishly sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for a bowl of red stew (Genesis 25:30-34). But Isaac set out to control the events of the blessing according to his own will, not the will of God, which was to install Jacob as the heir.

In preparation, Isaac commanded Esau to prepare him some tasty food that resulted from his son's hunting (Genesis 27:3-4). After the meal, Isaac intended to confer the blessing on Esau. But Isaac's wife Rebekah overheard the conversation and immediately hatched a plan to deceive her husband so that God's will could be done. She might have gone to Isaac and reminded him that the birthright no longer belonged to Esau and that it was God's intention to bestow the

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blessing on Jacob. But instead, though her intentions to honor God's plan were good, her method was bad and could not be justified.

While Esau was hunting, Jacob brought Rebekah two young goats, which she made into a tasty stew for Isaac. She then began the process of creating Jacob's trick-or-treat costume. First, she dressed Jacob in Esau's borrowed clothing. This would provide an initial confirmation to Isaac that his eldest son was in his presence because Isaac knew well the usual costume his son Esau wore, even down to the smell of it (Genesis 27:27). Next, Rebekah covered Jacob's hands and neck with the goatskins to emulate his brother's hairy skin. With the bowl of stew seasoned to taste like venison, Jacob's trick-or-treat costume was complete.

With unsettling skill and ease, Jacob implemented the deceptive trick-or-treat plan without a hitch. He quickly and easily transformed himself into a liar and deceiver. Armed with a new, false identity, Jacob adroitly convinced his father that he was Esau. At first, Jacob's voice confused Isaac, but Jacob overcame his father's skepticism with the hairy skin of his costume and the tasty treat that it was Esau in his father's presence.

How quickly lying and deception are learned. The very first time Jacob dresses in costume, he is able to lie convincingly to his father, telling him without hesitation that he was his brother. Having initiated the lie, he presented his costume as further evidence. To top off the masquerade, Jacob provided a tasty treat for his father to enjoy.

On this night of costuming, hiding true identities, and begging for tasty treats, we should remember how quickly and easily sin can follow. Even if our intentions are good, God shows us through this story that the use of deception indicates we have gone astray – deceptive behavior is not normal or Godly. And as we see in Jacob's actions here, sin follows sin until we find ourselves caught us in a very tangled web.

Be in prayer today that children who are trick-or-treating tonight will be safe. Pray also that Christians will use this opportunity to witness to the children about the Gospel and Jesus Christ. This is the

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one night a year when we have the chance to share our faith with a captive audience – children who are waiting anxiously for their tasty treat before they leave.

While you have their full attention, be sure to tell them of the spiritual feast their Father is preparing for them in Heaven if they will put their faith in His Son Jesus Christ. Use this as an opportunity to reach children. My family has a custom of giving Bible tracts along with a piece of candy – one small step to redirect the satanic focus of Halloween toward God.

In Heaven, food is plentiful and abundant. No one will need to resort to a trick-or-treat routine and our costumes will be pure white robes of righteousness. God Himself will bless us with the greatest treat of all, eternal life in His Heavenly Kingdom.

Wake Up Calls

My first wake up call came as scheduled early Wednesday morning. I arose dutifully, prepared for the day, and got in the car to begin the drive from El Paso, Texas to Carlsbad, New Mexico for an early morning meeting. I drove in the dark across the west Texas desert, one of those barren 100-mile stretches with few gas stations or other amenities. But absent of any lights, it is a great place to look at the stunning array of stars in God's Heavens above.

The first hints of light began around 6:30 am, just as I was passing through Guadalupe National Park, the highest mountains in Texas. By the light of a full moon and the pre-dawn glow, the world around me began to appear. Still mostly precluded by a large, imposing ridge, I could see the spires of the mountain peaks acting like guardian sentinels to the Chihuahuan desert just beyond their heights. That's when my second wake up call began to unfold.

As I came over the pass, the eastern sky was now revealed in full. It was positively aglow with the reds, pinks, yellows and blues of a spectacular sunrise. What was hidden previously was presented proudly in all its glory. As I continued, the clouds in the western sky soon picked up a soft, pink glow, accented by the full moon just above the purple mesas.

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It was then that I realized that God had been treating me to a special, private show. It was a vibrant display of His majesty – the stars, the moon, the mountains, and the sunrise. To top it all off, I soon passed by Carlsbad Caverns, one of the wonders of the natural world. I couldn't take time to visit, but I relived with joy the time I had been able to tour the cathedral-like splendor hidden carefully beneath the Earth.

In just a few short minutes, I had witnessed a great suite of His wonders, from the Heavens above to those below the ground. He had given me a special gift that I had not anticipated when I got my first wake up call. In fact, I had been rather unenthusiastic about the 2 1/2 hour drive when I started, but I was rewarded with renewed enthusiasm by an awesome display of wonders. What a gift!

In a couple of days, I'll be back home to my usual commute. It's not as dramatic as the one I had yesterday, but I'm going to appreciate it more. On this trip, God has allowed me to witness some of His spectacular creations on a grand scale. But, He also reminds me that He creates spectacular items on a smaller scale. It won't be long before the plants and trees erupt into the bloom of spring flowers, no less miracles than the mountains or the caverns. It made me realize that He has surrounded us with glory if we are just willing to take the time to view it.

My message today is simple: take time each day to look around at the incredible creation that He has given us. It changes constantly, with changing seasons, cycling phases of the moon, constellations that come or go depending upon the season. We are so insulated from the world in our plush homes, cars, and offices that we generally forget that there's an ever-active creation to provide us with viewing pleasure. We lose the pleasure of it when we forget to look and we lose the opportunity to praise Him for the experience.

I recommend that you take a few moments to look at the stars the next chance you get. Orion is in the sky, but will disappear in the spring. Get up a few minute early to watch the sunrise or schedule your day to watch the sun set in the sky. Gaze at the moon and marvel how it orbits the Earth faithfully. Take a walk in the woods and look at the

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leaves on the ground and remember how the trees they came from will spring to life again soon.

I got my expected wake up call as usual and my body responded typically. My normal wakeup call came as a most welcome surprise, but moved not just my body but my spirit and soul as well. Indulge yourself to a wake up call to the beautiful world all around us. And while you're at it, give thanks to the Creator for the beautiful world He has given to us.

Desert Déjà Vu

That God of ours, how He's always at work! I didn't expect to make a travel log of this trip, but the LORD has been so active that I feel I must take the opportunity to share how God has the power to change His Earth as well as His people here on Earth.

It rained all night in Carlsbad, New Mexico, and it was still raining when I set out for El Paso this morning after breakfast. Shortly after I started my drive, the weather became rather foggy. When I arrived at the Texas border, I suddenly slowed down instead of accelerating to the higher speed that Texas law allows. The reason: intense fog, a rare commodity in the Chihuahuan desert.

As the fog broke a few miles later, I could see a transformation had occurred. The sagebrush and other desert plants, usually a dull and faded greenish-gray, had put on suddenly a new coat of intense green. Overnight, the rejuvenating moisture had changed the entire demeanor of the plants and the landscape around it. Perhaps this is too subtle for some to notice, but it seemed quite apparent to me.

The desert is a dry and thirsty land, constantly on the wait for water. I couldn't help making a spiritual comparison of the desert to our own land, the United States. In so many ways, this country has become a spiritual desert. Many have turned away from God, and many today have never been introduced to God by family, friends, or others. A huge proportion of the past two generations have not even gone to church. It's no wonder the morals of our society are degrading every day.

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Our LORD Jesus Christ offers us the spiritual, living water that is so vital to our existence. He offers living water every moment of the day and night. All we need to do is turn to Him. Unlike the desert, which must wait for God's grace to receive rain, Jesus will come to us at any hour on any day. In fact, He'd love us to be with Him every hour of every day, not just once in a while.

The storms of life can bring spiritual rain to our world. The events of September 11 brought a spiritual awakening of sorts to this country. Many people returned to Church and some even came to know Jesus Christ as their LORD and Savior. But like a desert rainstorm, this spiritual shower passed quickly and the water was quickly consumed. Now things have almost reverted to the previous state of spiritual emptiness.

A few miles outside of El Paso, God unleashed a final sign of His eternal presence. A beautiful rainbow appeared briefly, arching triumphantly over the barren, white, salt flats of the high desert plateau. The intensity of the rainbow colors was accentuated by the black storm clouds behind it, reminding me that even out of darkness and storms God can bring beauty and light.

This rainbow was the same sign God gave to Noah, so long ago, as a sign of His everlasting covenant not to flood the Earth again. God's promises are still just as good today as they were in the days of Noah, for God is an everlasting and unchanging God and a God who must keep His promise, lest He not be Holy. Thousands of years after Noah, I, too, was witness to the eternal promises of God, set beautifully in the clouds as an everlasting covenant (Genesis 9:12-16).

I didn't expect my journeys from El Paso to Carlsbad to be so normal. Shame on me! Perhaps I'm reading too much into the situations spiritually, but I hope not. I think we would all do better to try to maintain our spiritual connections throughout our day instead of hanging them up on Sunday afternoon or Monday morning after the spiritual glow of our worship has started to fade.

God showed me this week that He can rejuvenate the spirit as well as the land. He can revitalize the spirit of each of us as well as the

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spirit of our country. Nothing is beyond His great power. My prayer for you today is that He will rejuvenate your spirit and bring peace and joy to your life.

Noticeable by Absence

The disciples were still reeling from the events of Jesus' death. On the evening of the first day of the week, doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus appeared to them (John 20:19). They needed comfort desperately and Jesus had come to meet their needs. But one of them was missing – the disciple Thomas. The absence of Thomas was not an accident and has many implications, which provide important lessons we can learn.

Thomas was one of the remaining eleven disciples, loyal and true, unlike the betrayer Judas. Yet, on this evening, he was apart from the other disciples during one of their most frightening hours. They were assembled to comfort each other after their monumental loss and needed every man to share in the grief. By his failure to join them, Thomas was notable by his absence.

It is hard to imagine just what kept Thomas from being present at the gathering. After spending more than three years with his LORD, day and night, he had been cut off suddenly from Him due to His death. One would think that Thomas would be compelled to remain as close to his brothers in Christ as he could during this time of sadness and grief. And yet, we are told explicitly that he was not there (John 20:24).

His absence was unusual according to the cultural norms of the time. The death of the king in those days brought the country to a standstill, causing people to flock together to share their grief. How much more should this apply to Christ the King! Yet Thomas was nowhere to be found.

After the death of a family member, as Jesus certainly was, it is normal for other family members to put down any other business and attend to the more important matters at hand. One of these obligations is to assist others in dealing with the grief that all experience. Had Thomas been ill, we might expect mention of his malady along with

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the notation of others who attended him during this time. Perhaps it was his inability to deal with the overwhelming grief he felt that prompted him to remain in isolation.

Thomas' absence may have even been sin. If he were distracted by other business or by company that he preferred over this opportunity, he surely would have shown his preference for things of this world over the riches Christ had to offer. Or, perhaps he was afraid of the Jews who were out to get the disciples of Jesus Christ. If this is the case, he only showed cowardice and a lack of faith in his LORD, which would also be attributable to him as sin.

To be charitable, it may have been divine in its origin. Without him being missing, we may not have had the story of "Doubting Thomas", another example that we should elect not to emulate. But whatever the reason, it had consequences. Thomas missed the opportunity to see his Master at a time when he needed Him most. Surely the sight of Jesus would have brought comfort to him as it did to the other disciples. He missed out on sharing the joy and satisfaction of seeing his Master risen that the other disciples experienced.

Those who carelessly make themselves absent from Christian assemblies often know not what they lose. In Thomas' case, it was the return of his Master, although by Christ's mercy and grace, Thomas was given another chance to see Him. We, however, may not always be so fortunate and should take every opportunity to be part of Christian fellowship. Are you taking the opportunities God gives you to enjoy fellowship with others in Christ?

Jesus Christ reveals Himself to us in many ways and in many places. He is there when we attend church, when we visit the sick, when we donate sacrificially of our time and money, and any time we participate in Christian fellowship. We need not attend every opportunity, but we should consider carefully the consequences of the missed blessing if we cavalierly dismiss a chance to enjoy fellowship with other Christians. Participants will find you noticeable in your absence, but more importantly, Jesus will too.

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Thomas teaches us the lesson that it is not normal to be apart from Christ and other believers, especially in times of crisis. Don't diminish your joy in Him and the blessings and comfort that only He can bring by being noticeable in your absence.

The Offense of the Gospel

Why are the lost so angry at Christians? Why is it that people often get angry when you try to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with them? What is it that keeps them from accepting the Truth and conforming to God's will? The answer is that they are offended by the Gospel. Deep down, they know that something very important is missing in their lives, and they are offended and angry at the Gospel because it reflects their true spiritual condition.

Many who are living in rebellion to God are not even aware of their true spiritual condition. Paul warns us that the Gospel will be a stumbling block for many (Romans 9:33, 1 Corinthians 1:22-24). Even though the Gospel is Good News, it is not the kind of good news lost people are interested in hearing.

One reason the gospel is offensive to nonbelievers is that it challenges man's self image. Today's culture teaches us to place great value on our own self image. We take offense any time our image is jeopardized or tarnished. Thus, fallen man wants to believe somehow that he is just fine the way he is. Psychotherapists try to convince sinful men that the guilt they feel is not real or justified because they are just fine the way they are.

To compound the problem, we use humanist doctrines to try to explain eternal problems. The foundation of humanist doctrines is that man is basically good. The Gospel, from the very start, tells us what should be obvious all along – that man is basically sinful (Genesis 3:6). We are fallen creatures in the eyes of a Holy and Perfect God. So, in an attempt to bolster our own self-images apart from God, we systematically attempt to eliminate any category of sin. We play the ostrich-in-the-sand game, thinking that if we ignore sin or claim it doesn't exist, then everything will be OK. This game may be typical, but it is definitely not normal.

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Unfortunately, this game has become a cultural art form. We've convinced ourselves that sin is no longer that which violates the righteous and just standards of a Holy and Omnipotent God. We've declared that sin is whatever interrupts our happiness, contentment, and personal comfort. Trying to cover our sinful tracks, we have exalted the concept of tolerance as one of our most precious core values, hoping this will keep from hurting anyone's self-image by calling their lifestyle, behaviors, or beliefs "sinful".

Think about it. The Gospel is offensive because it requires man to face the reality that he is a sinner. The Gospel is offensive because it forces man to deal with his ugly, black, God-separating sin. We try to cover our sin by telling each other "I'm OK, you're OK", but the Bible tells us that we are not OK. In fact, the Bible tells us that we are sick from the top of our heads to the bottom of our feet (Isaiah 1:6).

Paul summarizes numerous verses in the Bible pointing to our fallen condition. "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalms 14:1-3, 53:1-3, Ecclesiastes 7:20). "Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit." (Psalm 5:9). "The poison of vipers is on their lips." (Psalm 140:3). "Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness." (Psalm 10:7). "Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know." (Isaiah 59:7-8). "There is no fear of God before their eyes." (Psalm 36:1).

These verses expose our dark, sinful nature and show that despite what we choose to believe, we are all sinners in God's eyes. It is not normal to deny sin, for it will not go away or be eliminated if we ignore it or declare it doesn't exist. The normal thing to do is to confess our sin to God, for He has promised to heal us if we do (James 5:16). The Gospel will continue to offend those who wish to deny its Truth because it forces them to look at their fallen condition. Pray today that the lost will accept the Truth and no longer take the Gospel as an offense.

The Right Attorney

A number of high-profile legal cases have been followed closely by the media and the public in recent years. Among these include the cases of Jon Benet Ramsey, O.J Simpson, and Michael Jackson. One of the common threads in these cases was a large amount of circumstantial evidence pointing toward the defendant, but the crimes lacked a “smoking gun” to identify the perpetrator clearly. Thus, only God knows the truth in these tragedies.

These public trials have taught America a valuable lesson regarding the legal system – it is very important to select the right attorney if you are accused of a serious crime. Your choice of an attorney may determine your future – whether you enjoy a life of freedom after the trial or whether you are put in jail for a long time. The objective is to have an attorney who can be influential in persuading the judge and the jury that you are worthy of your freedom.

Selecting an attorney to represent you before The Judge who decides your eternity is an even more important decision than choosing an attorney for an Earthly trial. Harsh punishments can be administered here on Earth, but being sentenced to live in eternal darkness away from the Father and Creator is the ultimate punishment. The torment of an Earthly punishment pales when compared to the eternal suffering that accompanies rejection from Heaven.

In your case and mine, the evidence is clear – we are guilty of sin (Romans 3:23, 1 John 1:8). This makes the verdict clear – we deserve death, even an eternal death without hope. There is no circumstantial evidence for our attorney to spin so that questions regarding our guilt arise. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, we deserve death (Romans 6:23). The only hope we have is to select an attorney who can influence The Judge in our favor.

That attorney is, of course, Jesus Christ. He is the one mediator between God and men (1 Timothy 2:5). He is the only One who can argue successfully that you deserve to be admitted into Heaven, despite your life of sin. He is the only one who can clothe you in

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garments of righteousness so that the stains and blackness of sin do not show through to the Father who is pure and Holy.

When a judge on Earth calls attorneys into his chambers for a consultation, attorneys for both sides attend. If you have not chosen Jesus Christ as your attorney, your current attorney, the devil, will be excluded from the meeting with God. Under these circumstances, a verdict of damnation is assured. If you choose Jesus Christ as your attorney, He will represent you by Himself to the ultimate Judge of your soul. Jesus has been given the power and authority to represent you and to win His case every time. He has a perfect record in getting souls into Heaven (John 10:28-29), as long as those souls committed to Him while they were here on Earth.

Have you committed to your Heavenly attorney? If not, He cannot represent you before The Judge. He is committed to you while you are on Earth, but will reject you if you fail to accept Him during your lifetime. He longs desperately for your commitment, but He has given you the free will of accepting His counsel or not. Failure to choose leaves you unrepresented before The Judge because the public defender assigned to you will be excluded from the hearing. Thus, the public defender's record is also perfect – he has never won a case nor will he ever do so.

Choosing the right attorney for the judgment of your soul is the most important decision you will ever make. I recommend highly that you make a normal decision. Let me reiterate that you have already been assigned a default attorney to handle your case before God. If you have not committed to Jesus Christ, you have committed to having the public defender represent you. If so, there is no doubt as to where you will spend your eternity, and it will be bleak.

It is normal to want to be in Heaven, but there is only one way to get there. Don't take any chances. Commit today to a relationship with the ultimate attorney in the Universe. He has never failed and cannot fail before The Judge, for He sits at His right hand.

Humbled In Humor

Have you ever experienced a great victory, only to have difficulty conveying your pride and joy to family and friends? After your moment of glory, have things ever seemed to become difficult and humbling quickly. If so, you're not alone. In Acts Chapter 12, Peter is miraculously released from prison by an angel of God, only to be humbled as he tries to share the victory with others. As the story unfolds after his release, we see God offering us messages through His use of humor and humility.

A free man once more, Peter was guided by the Holy Spirit to go to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark (author of the book of Mark), where his friends were gathered to pray for him. The recipient of a bona fide miracle, Peter must have felt somewhat elated and special after his release from what appeared to be certain death. He had an incredible story to tell people about how the LORD had performed a miracle just for him, sending an angel to release him and to calm the guards as he made his escape (Acts 12:7-10).

In addition, this was a miracle that God had not bestowed on James, brother of John, just days before, resulting in James' execution. Peter must have felt both survivor's remorse and a twinge of pride that God had selected him to survive instead of the other apostle (Acts 12:11). Peter's pride was about to be reigned in, however.

When Peter knocked on Mary's door, a servant girl named Rhoda responded to his pounding. Having heard Peter preach and pray, she recognized his voice instantly (Acts 12:14). Then, comically, she becomes so excited that she runs away from the door so she can tell others the exciting news. This could have been scene from the *I Love Lucy Show*, where Lucy would panic at the sight of a famous star, slam the door shut and lose her opportunity. Then we would all laugh at her predicament and embarrassment.

Poor Rhoda. In her ecstasy, she panicked and forgot to open the door. Because of her extreme gladness, she left Peter standing out in the cold. In fairness, we have probably all done something similar, where our heart is leaping for joy, but our actions transmit an unintended

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insult or a social gaffe. The reality of Peter's presence may not have even sunk in completely, as sometimes things for which we wish most earnestly are the most difficult to believe when they actually happen.

God, of course, was in control despite the chaos. I can't help but wonder if He were chuckling a bit at these events. God's purpose for Peter at that moment was for him to be humbled, not puffed up by the honors bestowed upon him by the angel or by his deliverance. Peter was forced to continue knocking and to experience the delay in his admittance, standing alone in the cold. All this difficulty was meant to be a sign to remind him that he was now just one of the gang again and he was no longer under divine protection. During his wait at the door, Peter had time to remember that he was just an ordinary man, subject to all the inconveniences and threats that befall us.

God often humbles his servants so that they may be less tempted by pride. This humbling process is normal. Each of us is in danger of being caught by the sin of pride when we do our work for the LORD. But God normally provides a corresponding way to humble us, which feels bad, but is ultimately for our good. Expect being called to humility when you work for Him, it's His normal way. Remember it's for your own benefit even if it feels uncomfortable. You might even find a bit of humor in it all.

A Charlie Brown Christmas

For the first time in many years, I happened to watch the cartoon special "A Charlie Brown Christmas". This annual presentation was being shown for the 40th time, having first appeared in 1965. Because I saw the initial broadcast, I was feeling a bit old. Nevertheless, I found the message as important and refreshing as always and not at all a dated relic from the '60s.

Life in the 1960's was simpler, although the pace of the American lifestyle was accelerating rapidly. Technological, political, and cultural upheavals were happening all around and America was losing much of its spiritual innocence. This is about the time when our culture first started asking if God were dead. The church was

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experiencing a mass exodus of members, many of whom have never returned.

Charles Schultz, the creator of Charlie Brown and the Peanuts gang, was a religious man who recognized the spiritual turmoil in our society. Schultz was able to impart to Charlie Brown, the perpetual loser, a sense of longing for something better than the culture was delivering. Charlie Brown was looking for the real meaning of Christmas while everyone around him, even his faithful dog Snoopy, was caught up in the commercialism and greed.

In 1965, the concepts of commercialism and greed during the Christmas season were not as developed or entrenched as they are today. Our society was looking back on a long history of faith-based living, yet moving swiftly into a more secular world. Today, the commercialism and greed of Christmas seems to be just a cliché. To many, it's just a convenient platitude to utter in order to sooth a guilty conscience brought on by "conspicuous consumption". Worse yet, others see the secular activities as "normal" and fail to make any spiritual connection at all, much less seeing Jesus as the "Reason for the Season".

God gave us a small but lasting gift through the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Charlie Brown is searching for the spiritual meaning of Christmas while the world around him focused its attention elsewhere. He comes off as the real loser, just as Christians today are ridiculed for seeking and obeying their spiritual callings. Christians are often viewed as blockheads, not unlike Charlie Brown. But God is faithful to those who seek, and He sends a messenger to Charlie Brown to comfort him spiritually and to remind him of the precious gift of His Son.

It is encouraging to me whom He sent. It wasn't the suave, popular, pushy, and worldly Lucy, always ready to take control of the situation in her own way. Instead, it was Linus, her brother, another social outcast, who was chosen to deliver the important message of Christ's birth, the real meaning of Christmas. Linus, the emotionally crippled, blanket-toting misfit was lifted up to bring light to those suffering in spiritual darkness. This is not unlike the shepherds, also social

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outcasts of the time, who were called to recognize and glorify the Baby Jesus as His first visitors.

Hearing Linus read the story of Jesus' birth from Luke 2 is a true gift from God. These passages have been with us for two millennia, yet they are rarely heard on television today. In Hollywood's eyes, it's just not cool to read His Word, especially on prime time, national broadcasts. Ironically, many people are too busy searching for their own glory and success to take the time to find out how to achieve success for all eternity.

Through Charles Schultz, God has given us a small gift of the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Like many Christians today, Charlie Brown and Linus, the spiritual ones, are not considered normal amongst their peers. Jesus warned us that the world would give us trouble. This is normal, especially if we're about His business, which is also normal, but not to the world.

Linus, a mere cartoon character, was bold for Him. You too, can be bold today for Him. Pray to Him for the opportunity to witness to others, pray that He will give you the wisdom to recognize the opportunity, and pray for the boldness to follow through with words that the Holy Spirit has promised to provide.

Outside the Box

One of the expressions heard commonly is that we should think "outside the box". This expression is meant to challenge us to step outside the confines of our usual thought patterns and view the problem in a completely different way so that we may synthesize a completely different and, hopefully, better solution. But before we try to step outside the box, we should ask ourselves, "What box confines us?"

One box confining us is the Universe in which we live. We are living in the confines of time and space, which provide a box that we cannot escape. We are locked up inside this box trying to figure out the origin of the space and time that constrain us. We are stuck inside the box trying to discover the origin of the box. How then, do we start thinking outside the box since there's no way to get out?

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Because we're stuck in the box, the details of what's outside are unclear. However, we do know that if we are on the inside of the box, there must be an outside. If the inside of the box is "Time and Space", then the outside is "Eternity and Infinity". Our dilemma reveals itself – in order to prove what the box is or who made the box, we must be able to step outside the box in order to observe it from the outside. Obviously, this is impossible.

Even though we can't get outside the box to observe it, we know that there is a dimension outside the box of our own observable reality of "Time and Space". That other dimension, the "Eternal and the Infinite" (1 Corinthians 2:9), is beyond our grasp and comprehension. It is the dimension God may reveal it to us when we join Him in Heaven, but for now we're pretty much limited to what He reveals in the Bible.

This dilemma brings us to a decision point where each of us has to make a choice. It's a simple one, with only two options, which means you have a 50/50 chance of getting it right. I believe that, if you analyze the evidence closely and objectively, you will arrive at the correct conclusion.

Before I tell you what the choices are, however, you must be aware that either decision is a matter of faith. There is no way that you'll be able to prove in this lifetime that either choice is correct. The Scientific Method won't provide an answer as to which decision is the right one. You must make this important decision solely on faith.

The choice is the answer to the "First Cause" question – where did this whole Universe, our box, come from, and what caused it to be created? Your choices are (1) Matter is eternal and the Universe organized itself by accident and random chance; or, (2) God is eternal and He created the Universe and organized it.

The Bible tells us that "In the beginning God" (Genesis 1:1). That means God is the One who has always been here. He is the eternal One. "In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth" (Genesis 1:1). That means He created the box we live in. He created

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Time and Space. Believing in Him is normal and takes us outside the box in our thinking.

The other option is to believe that the Universe and the matter in it have always existed and that it came inexplicably from nowhere. No one created it; it's just always been there because of some unknown, magical event that merely happened to take place spontaneously for some unknown reason. Time, the laws of physics, and other rules under which the Universe operates somehow came along with whatever event created the Universe with no warning or purpose. This type of thinking confines us firmly inside the box.

Believing this second option means the Earth as we know it just evolved on its own. Physicists tell us that after the "Big Bang", this ball of matter that sustains us employed an unknown, self-organizing process to form the waters, sky, and the land along with the laws of physics that govern them. The credo for this scenario is essentially "In the beginning *dirt*". Call me silly, but I have a hard time believing that this complicated and organized Universe just appeared due to some random fluctuation in the cosmos. Or maybe I'm just thinking outside the box.

Choosing to believe in Him or choosing not to believe in Him is an act of faith. Science cannot prove what is outside the box since science only works from inside the box. Consider carefully that, whichever choice you make, your answer is an answer of faith. A normal person will recognize the box we live in as well as the existence of a dimension outside the box. God gave you free will, so you can make either choice. I recommend that you be normal and choose to believe in God.

Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory

After His birth, few recognized the glory of the Christ Child. Even today, many fail to recognize Him as the promised One. But even when Christ humbles Himself, glory is brought to Him because there is no suppressing it. The story of Simeon (Luke 2) welcoming Joseph and Mary serves to illustrate that even though many stumble in their

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attempts to recognize Him, the Holy Spirit will reveal the glory that God has sent.

Simeon had already seen glorified people here on Earth. A devout and pious man, he had been born into a family that had been honored highly. Simeon was the son of Hillel, who had founded a college and become its president. His father became the first recipient of the title of Rabban, the most prestigious title that could be given to a doctor, an honor that was only ever bestowed upon seven men in all of history.

Simeon's son was also shrouded in glory. His son was Gamaliel, a noted Pharisee, a renowned doctor of Jewish law. Gamaliel instructed Saul of Tarsus, who eventually became the apostle Paul. Thus, Simeon was no stranger to high and exalted people, even within his own family. He was, in fact, so surrounded by human glory that he could have easily become jaded in his outlook towards others.

Simeon, however, was indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Luke 2:25). This gift gave him special insight into the true glory and status of others. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would see the Messiah in his lifetime, a promise, which like all of God's promises, came to be fulfilled.

Simeon, however, did not bask in the glory afforded to either his father or his son. This lack of prestige stemmed from Simeon's witness on behalf of the Messiah. Simeon garnered the resentment of the Jews by stating that the Kingdom of the Messiah was eternal and divine. This went against the common opinion of the Jews, whose Mishna, or book of traditions, pointed to a political king who would overthrow the Romans, bringing political salvation instead of spiritual salvation and eternal life. Simeon's testimony was not considered normal.

By virtue of the Holy Spirit, Simeon's testimony was honorable and true. This must have been of some consolation to Joseph and Mary, who had endured social scorn as a couple and who had been humiliated in the circumstances of Christ's birth in a stable. Simeon's normal testimony could have been a joyous introduction to the coming of the Messiah. His insight through the Holy Spirit could

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have provided the opportunity for the priests and Pharisees to make their acquaintance with our Savior, the Messiah, for whom they had long waited. But those watchmen were blind to the Truth.

When Joseph and Mary presented the baby Jesus to Simeon in the temple in Jerusalem, Simeon, eyes opened by the Holy Spirit, recognized instantly his long-awaited Savior. “Sovereign LORD, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32). Despite rampant blindness all around him, Simeon’s eyes had finally seen the glory of the coming of the LORD.

Have your eyes seen the glory? Have the eyes of your family and friends seen the glory of the LORD? It is normal for God to want to reveal the glory of His Son to all. God wants us to see the glory of the One He has sent to save us from our sin. Even those not indwelt with the Holy Spirit can recognize His work and be drawn to seek Him and the glory He brings. If your eyes have not seen the glory, I urge you to take another look. If your eyes have seen the glory, consider making a commitment to redouble your normal efforts in witnessing for the LORD. Help others see the true reason for the Christmas season and for all the seasons of our lives.

Super Sadness

On October 11, 2004, actor Christopher Reeve succumbed to his injuries from a tragic horse accident that left him a quadriplegic for nine years. Last week, on March 6, 2006, his wife, Dana Reeve, succumbed in her battle against lung cancer. Their stated spiritual beliefs cause me to conclude that these two souls are now together in Hell. I wish I were wrong, but the evidence appears overwhelming.

Both of these individuals were highly-talented and accomplished people. Gifted in acting, Christopher Reeve portrayed Superman in the movies, a character that battled relentlessly against evil. His wife, Dana, was renowned for her acting credits as well. She was also the recipient of the American Cancer Society’s Mother of the

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Year award. Now their battle in the flesh is over, but their spiritual destiny is bleak.

Before his death, Christopher Reeve spoke the following words in relation to his spiritual beliefs (“What Hollywood Believes” by Ray Comfort):

“I have become a Unitarian. And we embrace that because it’s all-inclusive and it’s about the goodness in people. That God, you know, loves us and that He assumes that we are good.”

These words lead me to believe that Christopher Reeve and his wife Dana do not rest with the LORD. Unitarians are not saved. Unitarians do not believe in or confess Jesus Christ as LORD. Despite their great talents and valiant struggles, God will reject the Reeves and other Unitarians if they did not commit themselves to His Son before they died in the flesh.

Reeve’s choice of words and the phrasing he used suggest strongly that Superman and his wife fell victim to the lies of the great deceiver. Nowhere in his statement did Christopher Reeve confess that he had accepted Jesus Christ as his LORD and Savior. This failure to confess is the one thing that condemns you in the eyes of God. But if you accept His Son, your salvation is secure.

“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 10:9). Lack of a confession of faith in Jesus Christ eliminates your chances of entering Heaven as “Salvation is found through no one else, for there is no other name under Heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Your talents, accomplishments, and good deeds will not gain you entry into God’s kingdom, only faith in His Son.

Another disturbing attribute of the quote is that it begins with a statement of denomination. You are not saved by the particular brand of Christianity that you practice, be it Unitarian, Catholic, Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal, or any other denomination or religion. You are not saved by the church. You are not saved by the priest or pastor praying over you at your bedside as

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you die. You are not saved by being baptized as a baby. You are not saved by the faith of your parents or your children. You are definitely not saved by your good works (Ephesians 2:8-9).

There is only one way to be saved and you are the one who has to take control. You must believe and confess that Jesus Christ is your Savior! Jesus told us plainly, in language even a child can understand, “**I Am** the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6). What is it about “No one” that some people fail to understand? When God says “No one”, He means “No one”, not even Superman.

It brings super sadness to think that well-intentioned and talented people are doomed to an eternity in Hell. Because the Reeves fell victims to satan’s lies, they will be separated from God for all eternity. Their talents are of no use now. While on Earth, they failed to realize that their talents were God-given, a gift from a loving Heavenly Father. As we read in John 3:27, “A man can receive only what is given him from Heaven.” God gave them their abilities. In Christopher’s case, He took some of his physical abilities away by allowing his paralysis. In the end, although gifted, God took back the life of both Christopher and Dana Reeve at a relatively young age.

God designed and implemented a plan of salvation that He wants each of us to accept. He has made it plain that He will not accept any alternative routes. There is only one route, which must go through the narrow gate, and that gate is Jesus Christ. Even Superman, fictional or real, must accept Jesus as LORD or he will not be with the LORD for eternity.

Superman cannot fly you, his wife Dana, Lois Lane, or anyone else into Heaven. The trip to Heaven is a normal, everyday occurrence for Christians who pass from this world, but the pilot is always Jesus Christ. Without Him, the Way, as our intercessor, there is no way our soul can land in Heaven.

Life in the Valley

During my long-time residence in Colorado, God allowed me the blessing of hiking to the summit of a number of the state’s 14,000-ft

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mountain peaks. I remember each one as a special moment, having expended great effort and determination to get there. Standing at the top of the world, breathing the thin air, brings an exhilaration I will treasure for a lifetime.

The journey of our life here on Earth brings other moments in our lives when we are on top of the world. Perhaps the occasion is our wedding day, the birth of a child, a new job, a major accomplishment, or some other special event that will transcend a lifetime in our memories. We treasure these good times and share them with others to show how God has blessed certain moments in our lives.

You don't have to live too long in this world before you realize that these peak moments come all too infrequently and are brief in duration. After these special events pass all too quickly we slip back into the routine of life. Often life forces us to experience times of difficulty where we are far from the peak. Instead of maintaining our peak position, we are thrust into a valley, struggling through low spots in our daily existence.

These days in the valley seem somehow to outnumber by far those spent on the peak. Why does God force us to spend so much time in the valley instead of in the glory at the peak? Psalm 1:3 speaks to one reason this is so: "He (a man) is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season." Through this verse, God imparts some of His wisdom as to why it is necessary and good to live so much of our lives in the valley instead of at the summit.

We all know that the strongest oaks grow in the valley, not at the top of a mountain. Likewise, the prettiest flowers are found in valley meadows and not on rarified summits. Similarly, fruit trees rarely inhabit areas of topographic elevation. These things all point to why God keeps us off the peaks.

The top of a mountain is typically rocky and barren, not at all suitable for nurturing life. Rainfall is unpredictable and often accompanied by violent storms. So close to the sun, the radiation literally fries many types of plant life before they have a chance to grow. I can also remember the buffeting winds that swirled atop many of Colorado's

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highest peaks. In addition, the thin air can cause dizziness and make us think that the top is our normal, natural place.

God plants us in the valleys so that we can take advantage of the rich soils that accompany the lowland areas. A tree has great difficulty taking root and sustaining itself on a rock, but anchors itself quickly in fertile valley soils. Tender, delicate roots can also find much needed moisture as the Psalm indicates, without which it would wither and die.

Whereas life in the valley is appropriate for the tree, it is still not easy. The tree is still susceptible to storms, floods, erosion, attacks by humans and other animals, drought, disease, insects, and a multitude of other problems. This applies to our own lives. We spend most of our time in the valleys where conditions for growth are more appropriate than at the peak. But life is seldom easy. We, too, endure storms, attacks, disease, and all manner of difficulties. Yet amazingly, this is where we grow best. This is the place where God builds us and strengthens us so that we can go forth and do His bidding the way He wishes.

Think about it: when was the last time you grew spiritually when you were at the top of the mountain? I know I can say that it has only been when I've been sequestered in the valley for long periods that I experienced spiritual growth. It's natural to want to experience the high points in life everyday because they make us happy. But success can make us prideful, so God tempers our lives by restricting us from the temptation of heights (1 Corinthians 10:13). He knows that it is normal for us to grow in the valleys even if life isn't easy or exciting.

I know many of you are going through valleys in your lives right now. Be comforted that God is with you and that He cares about you. He will give you the strength to make it through these difficulties. Whether He's preparing you to be a strong, tall oak or a beautiful flower, He has a purpose for your time in the valley. He will grow you, no doubt. One day, believers will be in the Heavenly heights that He has promised to us through our faith in Jesus Christ, and there

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will be no more life in the valley. Trust in Him. It's God's normal plan.

Filling the Tank

The world operates at a frantic pace these days. Operators stand by 24/7 to take our orders for merchandise or provide support for our computers and other machines. Internet stock traders monitor world market fluctuations 24 hours a day. We try to cram more work into our already busy schedules so we can get promotions and raises. We shuttle our children to more and more activities each week so they can enjoy life and fill up their resumes for college. Some even take debt-financed vacations, returning more tired than they left, which often compounds the stress of already burdensome financial obligations.

At some point we all need to slow down and just rest. Our bodies and our minds cannot continue to function properly if we are engaged with “getting ahead” every day of the week. That is why God gave us the Sabbath. He wants us to rest and rejuvenate our minds and our bodies. Not just once in a while, but every single week. We need this regular, weekly recharge so we may continue to function properly.

It is easy to look at our schedules and conclude that unless we work a half day on Sunday or if we don't get our background reading done for Monday's meeting that the world is going to fall apart. Outcomes may be different if you fail to prepare, but things rarely fall apart. In fact, my experience is that spending time in worship and prayer usually leads to a better state of preparation. Not only are you more rested, you've engaged the One who can remove the obstacles to your success. God can prepare the hearts of others so that your efforts go smoothly. Focusing on Him brings the rest and relaxation needed to obtain clarity and creativity to your life. He can also orchestrate events on your behalf that are far beyond your control or imagination.

Some say they have no time to recharge themselves and fill themselves with the peace and joy God put in this world. God's Sabbath is meant to show us that it's more important to fill our tanks spiritually and

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physically than to continue to drive ourselves to exhaustion. Think of it this way: have you ever been driving to an important event and realized the gas tank in your car was almost empty? Did you ever fail to stop in this situation and fill up the tank so you could keep going? I doubt it – failure to fill the tank only brings disaster and delays. Our spirits are like that as well. We have to let them be filled once a week for them to keep us going the way God wants.

Today is the Sabbath. Take time to worship Him. Take time to notice the world around you. Take time to visit with loved ones or write someone a letter. Take a walk. Turn off the television. Study God's Word. Help someone in need. Bake cookies for a neighbor or help an elderly person with their lawn. Pray. Pray long and hard. Then maybe pray again. He loves to talk to you.

The world will consume us if we don't set the proper boundaries. It is up to each of us to decide that we will take the time to worship and to recharge our spirits. I feel certain that your Monday mornings will be better for it. Be sure to remember next Sunday how big a difference your Sabbath rest made. Don't forget how important it is to keep filling up the tank every week. It's the sign of a normal, healthy relationship with God.

Sinner's Prayer

Try answering this question: "If I were to die tonight, I would be in H_____ tomorrow."

If you want to be absolutely, positively certain that you will go to Heaven, then you must accept Jesus Christ as your LORD and Savior. Confess your commitment to Him by praying the following:

"Lord Jesus, I need You because I am a sinner. Thank You for dying on the Cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be. Amen."

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life."

John 3:16

Epilogue

“**I Am** has sent me to you.” (Exodus 3:14). His implied message: “I’m normal. **I Am**”. It is my prayer that after you have read this book you have a clarified understanding regarding what is normal and what items in your life are normal. I hope that knowing what is normal and what is not brings you comfort and peace. I also pray that you will be bold in your witnessing to others that God’s ways are normal, not the ways of the world.

Jesus warned us that the world will reject us and persecute us for following Him (John 15:18-20). Have faith, for though we will have trouble in the world, He has overcome the world (John 16:33) and whoever follows Him will never walk in darkness (John 8:12). Just keep reminding yourself, “I’m normal. **I Am**.” It’s God talking to you.

I leave you with the Aaronic blessing, in hopes that you can establish a normal, Godly life.

*“May the LORD bless you and keep you;
May the LORD make His face shine upon you and be gracious
unto you;
May the LORD turn His face toward you and give you peace.”*
Numbers 6:24-26

About the Author

Jeff Myers is the founder of *I'm normal. I Am* Ministries, which is based in Aiken, South Carolina. He is a normal guy who enjoys sharing his love of Jesus Christ with others. He is married and has four children.

After accepting Christ as LORD at age 44, Jeff recognized how the secular culture had previously influenced the thinking and actions in his life in negative ways. Now he writes a daily devotional to assist Christians in their walk with the LORD and to share with nonbelievers the benefits of following God's ways. The ministry maintains a website devoted to sharing the Gospel at <http://www.imnormal.com>.

Jeff has a science and engineering background in his professional life. He received a B.S. in Geology from West Virginia University and an M.S. in Mining Engineering from the Colorado School of Mines. He works as an engineer designing statistical sampling plans for environmental applications. Jeff is the author of *Geostatistical Error Management: Quantifying Uncertainty for Environmental Sampling and Mapping*. But most importantly, he tries to be a servant of Jesus Christ.

Are you normal? What's normal about you? If your family, friends, neighbors, or coworkers were asked whether you were normal, how would they respond? What would be the basis of their response? If someone asked you if you were normal, what would you say? What criteria would you use to come up with your answer? What's the basis for being normal? Do you even want to be normal?

In this ever-changing, topsy-turvy world, what used to be normal often appears to be not so normal today. Similarly, certain thinking and behaviors formerly considered far from normal are gaining acceptance. How, then, do you decide what's normal when normalcy is a moving target? How do you detect when a previous norm is no longer valid? How do you discern when the once outrageous is now the norm or for how long it will remain normal? What's normal seems to be like shifting sand, with no sure way to decide.

I'm normal. I AM is spoken by the One who speaks the Truth and knows definitely what is normal. If you are struggling to determine what is normal and what is not in these turbulent times, be encouraged. You are about to discover eternal Truths set against the backdrop of our modern culture. From now on, you will have a clear understanding of what's normal and what's not.

"Be normal." – **I AM.**

