

This book is about simplifying the confusion about salvation that has been distorted and confusing Christians. The book looks at true salvation from the view and writings of the apostle John.

A PLEA FOR SPIRITUAL HONESTY

By Rev. Thomas Vent

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A PLEA FOR SPIRITUAL HONESTY

THE APOSTLE JOHN
ANSWERS LIFE'S MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION:
"HOW CAN I KNOW IF I HAVE ETERNAL LIFE?"



Rev. Thomas Vent

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Table of Contents

Preface	v
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Be Honest About Your Belief.....	7
Chapter 2: Be Honest About Your Concerns	25
Chapter 3: Be Honest About Your Insight	45
Chapter 4: Be Honest About Your Condition.....	61
Chapter 5: Be Honest About Your Obedience	79
Chapter 6: Be Honest About Your Affection	97
Chapter 7: Be Honest About Your Passions.....	117
Chapter 8: Be Honest About Your Development	137
Chapter 9: Be Honest About Your Substitutions.....	147
Chapter 10: Be Honest About Your Faith	167
Chapter 11: Be Honest About Your Future	185
Chapter 12: A Final Plea for Honesty.....	199

“I believe in Christianity as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else.” - C.S. Lewis

Chapter 1: Be Honest About Your Belief

“Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.”¹²

In writing this book, I realized not only the importance of the task I took on but also the conflicts that would surface with writing on this topic. Let me explain. The importance, to me, is obvious. John was led by the Spirit to write a letter, an epistle, to believers with the sole intention of helping them *understand* salvation. Helping them navigate a tricky road with bumps and detours that will hopefully lead them to an *assurance* of their salvation - *or* - push them to open their eyes and see that they have been *deceived* about what salvation really looks like. Now, the conflict, as with any attempt to explain *true salvation*, is that there is going to be some *controversy* in this area. There will be some religious *landmines* to sidestep. There will be some whose hope of salvation will be shown to be false or at best, misleading. This will probably tempt someone to shut the book and stop reading. I hope this will not be the case with you. Having served as a pastor for over twenty-five years, I wish I could go back and redo some of the sermons, lessons, and careless witnessing encounters in which I shared the gospel with people. It wasn't that I lied to anyone or misrepresented truth, I simply took too much for granted and *assumed too much* about the sincerity of people's salvation. I want to undo this in this book.

In the eighth chapter of his Gospel, John tells us about a woman taken in adultery who was brought to Jesus for condemnation but instead she received forgiveness. In doing that, Jesus was actually pointing out that none of these *religious* accusers were really any better than this

¹² Jo. 14:1

adulterous woman. A lesson difficult for most people clinging to religion for salvation. John then recorded the words of Jesus as he taught the crowd of people following him about *truth*. The passage reveals some very edgy statements from Jesus as he spoke to these Jews and declared that he was the “light of the world” and about “pleasing the Father,” and John wrote, “*As he was saying these things, many believed in him.*” Did you catch that? He said that “many *believed* in him.” Obviously, Jesus, being God, was totally aware of their true commitment level and the *kind* of belief in him they actually had because the story goes on to say:

*“So Jesus said to the Jews who had **believed** him, “If you **abide** in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”*

Here’s something to remember - *Jesus was never fooled by people who began to follow him and merely said they believed in him simply showing some level of initial enthusiasm.* Instead, he further clarified what *sincere* discipleship looked like by adding, “If you **abide** in my word” you are *true* disciples. That is literally, “If you **continue** in my word, it reveals you are a true disciple.” As he continued teaching, he became even more pointed and said to them...

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. **So, if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.**”*

He was letting these “believers” know that *true* disciples have something remarkable in common; they have *all* been set free from being slaves to sin and *that freedom* would last *forever*. Now catch this, the Jewish people who had just expressed “belief” in him, now begin to question him about his reference to coming from the Father and being with him even *before* Abraham and Jesus responded...

*“Why do you not understand what I say? It is because **you cannot bear to hear my word.** You are of your father the devil, and your will*

*is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and **does not stand in the truth**, because there is no truth in him. When he **lies**, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a **liar** and the **father of lies**."*

These same Jews who proclaimed belief in Jesus a short time earlier, now become so frustrated at Jesus' teaching of the *truth* that it says,

*"they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself."*¹³

Unbelievable! The lesson of this story for us in the twenty-first century is this:

*There are many people who claim to believe in Jesus and made an **initial** decision to follow him, but in reality, were not interested in the **truth** because they were still listening to the lies of their real father, the devil.*

According to John's first epistle, the devil has such a widespread influence in this world that...

*"..the whole world lies in the power of the evil one. And we know that the Son of God has come and has **given us understanding**, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life."*¹⁴

John wants those who call themselves believers to have *understanding* when it comes to knowing Jesus and having eternal life. The devil on the other hand wants to confuse and deceive even the very "elect."¹⁵ of God. The Jews in the passage above went from believing him to hating him in the same sermon. For many people it lasts a little longer, maybe months or even years before abandoning Jesus, *but it's the same thing*. This is what makes this book important to me. But before proceeding

¹³ Jo. 8:32, 36, 44

¹⁴ 1 Jo. 5:19-20

¹⁵ Mat. 24:25

with my analysis of the truth about salvation and eternal security in John's epistle, I am going to share my perspective on the pendulum of theology that exists in the churches today.

Salvation and Works

I think that partial responsibility for the *confusion experienced* by some people as to whether they are really saved, lies with the *confusing expectations* that come out of many mainline, denominational churches. They tend to lean heavily towards the part outward activities have in obtaining salvation. The simple answer is *none*. Yet, it seems to many people that the New Testament contradicts itself about salvation. We may even call it a paradox. It's clear by reading the New Testament that people are saved only *by faith* and never by works.

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.”

“yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified.”

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”¹⁶

The principle seems to be unmistakable. *Salvation is by grace alone*. It is the clear teaching of the New Testament. It is declared in most every creed held by protestant denominations and became the kindle that sparked the fire of the reformation of the church in the 1500's. No one can ever just *“get saved.”* It's not an act of the will or the flesh. It's solely an act of God in *response* to a person's repentant heart and desire to be forgiven as they turn in faith to Jesus and call upon him. Yet we

¹⁶ Ro. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-9

must admit, that on the other hand, James made a statement in his letter that seems to declare that we are not just saved by faith.

“You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

What are we to do with this apparent conflict? This verse has caused many people to increase their outward activities, their good works, as a means of ensuring their salvation, which has led many to misfocus and misplace their understanding of *how* a person becomes a Christian. This misdirected understanding of James’ statement has given many people a false *security* about their salvation. So, which truth are we to believe? We are to believe both. James attempted to clarify what he meant when he said:

“What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled,” without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

*But someone will say, “You have faith and I have works.” Show me your faith apart from your works, and **I will show you my faith by my works.**”¹⁷*

James was hitching together faith and works as two sides of the same coin. He was not attempting to contradict the other apostles; he was emphasizing that when a person is born again their new nature produces practical changes in their behaviors. He is stating that a person must have both *genuine faith on the inside* and *genuine godly works on the outside*. And we can do both if we understand that *good works* are the *evidence of faith* and *the Spirit* doing his sanctifying work inside the believer. As I heard it said many times, “We are justified by faith alone, but faith that justifies is never alone.” So, one thing that is clear from the teachings of the New Testament is that:

¹⁷ Ja. 2:14-24

God's grace expects a response of faith that will be expressed by the good works that God prepared for us to do.

Therefore, on the last day, the day of judgement, we will be judged not simply because we have *professed* faith in Jesus, but whether we have genuinely and fully *responded* to Jesus with a quality of faith that *transformed* us into his image.

Salvation with Warnings

Over twenty-five years in ministry in the local church, I did quite a bit of marriage counseling. Some sessions were rather easy when the couples were just not in sync, but it was evident that they were aware that they were out of sync and cared enough that they wanted to get back on track. Couples who professed to know the Lord and were open and willing to reflect on the scriptures to find redirection were usually successful at reclaiming their marriage. But I also spent many hours with couples that were not as moldable. I often felt more like a referee than a pastor and realized that they were hoping for some magic words that would clear up their conflict without much effort. This never turned out well. Often, I opened the Bible to share principles only to find resistance from one or the other. I remember sitting in front of a couple who came to me, not so much for help, but to let me know they were done with their marriage. I was trying to slow down their decision and get them to analyze the problems so I could possibly offer biblical solutions, when they eventually just wound up telling me that there was nothing, I could say to change their minds. They *both* told me that they realized within months of being married and repeating their vows, that they had made a mistake and no longer wanted to stay with each other. They realized that after living with each other that they were not in love each other and had no desire to stay in this relationship and fake it any longer. You see, this is like many people who initially say they *believe* in Jesus but over some period of time decide that it was a mistake and without necessarily saying the words, they just move on living their lives without considering him or his will.

Before venturing into this letter from John, I feel it is important for me to explain this confusing part of Christianity. A part that has become an area of controversy and disagreement, namely, the *warning* passages in the Scriptures. So, before I go any further let me make something clear, I believe in eternal security. Yes, I believe in “once saved, always saved” as the term is used in many evangelical churches. I was trained in traditional Baptist theology from the time I first became a believer. As a teenager I was given pamphlets to read from many classic Baptist preachers and theologians, many of which I still own. From there I went to a Baptist college where I studied traditional Baptist theology. Over the years since, I have studied the positions of Pentecostals, Methodists, Reformed churches, and others. But, regardless of the denominational beliefs, there is no disputing the fact that the New Testament and Jesus himself *clearly* establishes the truth of eternal security from the moment a person is redeemed. Look at the promises that were written just from John’s quill:

“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”

“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.”

“This is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day...Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life.”

“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”¹⁸

It’s hard to ignore the fact that “eternal life” is promised to anyone who will put their trust in Jesus for salvation. Now come the twists and turns and where I partially depart from some evangelical theologies. Yes, I believe in the *preservation of the saints*, and I also believe in the *perseverance of the saints*. These two concepts are biblically interwoven and inseparable truths about our salvation. They are sometimes beyond our understanding just like the concept of “Jesus in me and me in Jesus,” or the truth that the believer must “keep yourselves in the love of God” and are holding on to “him who is able to keep you from stumbling.”¹⁹ If when a person becomes a Christian, they obtain a new life that is eternal from the moment they believed, why are there so many warnings in the New Testament written to “believers?” So, before digging into John’s first epistle, the concept of warnings in the New Testament deserves some discussion. There are several interpretations and opinions about the warning passages to “believers” in the New Testament. Warnings that seem to indicate they could still wind up *lost*. In my research of this topic, I came across at least five different classifications that theologians and preachers use to explain these “warning” passages. I will not take the time in this book to explain all those opinions, but I will give you one later in this chapter – *mine*. But first let me review a series of warnings that are classically confusing to many Christians as they read the Bible. They are the warning scattered throughout the book of Hebrews, whose writer is unknown, but has been attributed to the apostle Paul.

The Slippery Slope of Hebrews

The book of Hebrews is an interesting and complex letter written about thirty years into the start of Christianity. As the title explains, it was written to a Jewish population possibly in Rome, but the location of these Jewish Christians is not important. Something that is important is

¹⁸ Jo. 3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:40,47; 10:28

¹⁹ Jude 21, 24

a principle that every reader of the Bible needs to remember: *The Bible was not written to us, but it was written for us.* That means that whenever we study a book of the Bible, we must understand it in its cultural setting and to whom it was written. This is especially important in the letter to the Hebrews. During the first few decades of the church many Jewish people who spent their lives in the Old Covenant sacrificial system were beginning to *believe* that Jesus was the long awaited, promised Messiah and were converting to Christianity. This decision often came with a price. Not only were these Jewish converts facing persecution from their Jewish peers, but they were also under control of Rome who also hated Christianity. It was a trying time to be a Christian. Because of this, many were having “second thoughts” about their decision and out of fear and doubt were slowly moving away from the various assemblies and more importantly, Jesus. The writer of Hebrews addresses the reality and sincerity of their faith throughout the letter.

Do you think that Jesus was sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven looking at the persecutions of his followers and wringing his hands thinking, “I never saw that happening!” No. How absurd. In fact, his teachings while here were geared to *prepare* his disciples for this very thing. Listen to his words:

“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

“Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved.”

“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life.”²⁰

Jesus never gave any of his followers the perception that becoming his disciple would be easy, glamorous, or even socially acceptable. On the contrary, he *warned his followers* that their journey would, at times, be harsh and perilous and would challenge their *sincerity*. The apostles understood this and passed this sentiment on in their writings. When did this change? Because we live with “religious freedom” does that make our call to follow him closely and faithfully less serious? Not at all. So, the writer of Hebrews was aware of the same thing the apostle John was, namely...

He was writing to people who called themselves believers, but since he could not know their hearts, he just wrote to them in such a way as to help them make their own analysis of their salvation experience.

In fact, why would the writer of Hebrews *need* to spend so much time explaining and making a case for why Christ is *better* than the angels, *better* than Moses, *better* than Joshua, *better* than Aaron and in fact *better* than any other religious figure of the Old Testament, if these Jews were all *true believers* who had experienced the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offered and had a personal relationship with him? The fact is that the writer continually pointed out trouble spots in their spiritual lives as he wrote the letter because he, obviously, had gotten word concerning specific behaviors and statements many of these “converts” had been making. He proceeded to *warn* them in such a way that it should have made them, as it should us, take a serious look at their relationship with Jesus. Please read these warnings carefully, as if written for you, and notice that they seem to intensify as the letter progressed.

²⁰ Mat. 5:11; 10:22-23; 16:24; 19:29

Warning A) “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, **lest we drift away** from it. For since the message declared by angels proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we **neglect such a great salvation?**”

This is the stage of becoming neutral and slowly **drifting** back to our old life, gradually **neglecting** Jesus for other interests.

Warning B) “Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you **an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God**. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called “today,” that none of you may **be hardened** by the deceitfulness of sin... Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us fear lest any of you should seem to have **failed to reach it.**”

This is the stage of **excusing** our decisions and becoming **hardened** toward those encouraging us to repent and return to faithfully following Jesus.

Warning C) “For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then **have fallen away**, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.”

This is the stage that involves a former follower of Jesus **completely** walking away without any concern for consequences or a desire to repent.

Warning D) “For if we go on **sinning deliberately** after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful expectation of judgment, and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries.”

*This is the stage where a person refers to themselves as a **former** believer and is not into that anymore and is content to do what feels good to them.*

Warning E) *“See to it that no one **fails to obtain the grace of God**; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for **he found no chance to repent**, though he sought it with tears.”²¹*

*This is the stage that this former believer becomes **hardened** and so defiled that all thought of repentance has disappeared.*

But as he penned these warnings, the writer seemed to balance them off with *positive* pleas to consider how much better it is to stay faithful to Jesus. Match the above warnings with a challenge for *the **true believer*** to remember...

Reminder A) We live under the *watchful eye* of God who sees the *distresses* and *dynamics* of our life that tempt us to *pull away* from Christ.

*“What is man, that you are mindful of him,
or the son of man, that you care for him?
You made him for a little while lower than the angels;
you have crowned him with glory and honor,
putting everything in subjection under his feet.”*

Reminder B) We have the *Word of God* to reveal to us the truth about our inner *desires* and outward *decisions* in life.

²¹ Heb. 2:1-3; 3:12-13, 4:1; 6:4-6; 10:26-27; 12:15-17

*“Today, **if you hear his voice,**
do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion,
on the day of testing in the wilderness,
where your fathers put me to the test
and saw my works for forty years.”*

*“Let us therefore **strive** to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience. For **the word of God** is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the **thoughts** and **intentions** of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.”*

Reminder C) We have the working of God within us is to grow dedication and deeds out of our lives.

*“For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and **produces a crop useful** to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a **blessing** from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”*

Behaviors”

Reminder D) We experience the discipline of God in our lives to avoid defiling ourselves and dishonoring God.

“And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

*My son, **do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,**
nor be weary when reprov'd by him.*

*For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

Reminder E) We enjoy the reality of the plan of God for our lives to give us an unshakeable kingdom.

*“Therefore **let us be grateful** for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus **let us offer to God acceptable worship**, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.”²²*

The lessons we learn from these “warning” passages are this:

*The one who truly **possesses** saving faith will be one who **perseveres** through struggles, temptations, and failures with an **honest heart** with Christ, which is the **proof** that their salvation has been **preserved**.*

This means that there are many people who will give initial *outward* signs of devotion to Christ or the church but who are *inwardly* not true Christians at all. Jesus warned that some who claim to be Christian and were even enthusiastically involved in religious works, but will one day stand at the day of judgment expecting to inherit eternal life and will instead be cast into destruction.

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”²³

Interestingly, Jesus *did not* say, “I knew you once, but you failed to persevere and then fell away and lost your faith.” Instead, he said, “I never knew you,” meaning:

There is a level of believing in Jesus that will sometimes lead to a period of service to him, but without the inward reality of the “new birth,” and the real changes that the Holy Spirit brings, will mean nothing when we die.

²² Heb. 2:6-8; 3:7-9, 4:11-12; 6:7-8; 12:5-6, 28-29

²³ Mat. 7:21-23

Examination Time

Therefore, I again repeat my position:

*The Bible teaches that the true believer is eternally secure, and this new life can never be forfeited, lost, or taken away; and the Bible also contains many warnings for people to make sure that the belief they have in Jesus is truly an **honest saving faith**.*

The writer of Hebrews made a revealing contrast, as Jesus did with several of his parables that I will discuss in coming chapters, between two different kinds of hearers of the gospel.

“For land that has drunk the rain that often falls on it, and produces a crop useful to those for whose sake it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God. But if it bears thorns and thistles, it is worthless and near to being cursed, and its end is to be burned.”

He refers to the first group as “ripe ground,” that receives the *gospel seed* into its soil and produces the fruit of salvation. The other group, presumably part of the same field (or church), hears the exact same message yet *in them* produces worthless thistles and thorns that are destined to be burned. Therefore, we understand that the passages that are warning “believers” about falling away, are directed to all of us to force us to look at the *quality* of faith that we possess.

A word of warning as you read the Bible, don’t be thrown off by the use of the word “believer” in the New Testament because it was simply a word used to respond to people who had given themselves that *label*. It was used to address anyone who at one time or another *claimed* to be following Jesus and his teachings and attended the assemblies. The New Testament writers were not using the term as an absolute confirmation of the recipients of the letter being genuine believers. This seems to throw many people off and influences their theology.

Remember that James wrote, “*You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!*”²⁴ This habit of people calling themselves “believers” without evidence is also the reason that Paul wrote to the church and said...

*“Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”*²⁵

And Peter stated:

*“Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to **confirm** your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall.”*²⁶

That brings me to the apostle John, who stated...

*“I write **these things** to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”*

John dedicated an entire letter, his first epistle, to the “things” that show genuine, saving faith. The topic of understanding the traits of *true* believers. He was also clearly concerned that the people calling themselves believers be assured of their salvation by examining themselves, looking at their lives and peering deep inside themselves for the *evidence* of a genuine salvation experience. Let’s look at this letter, 1 John, together and see if we can test our own faith and *honestly* say we have eternal life.

Let’s Get Honest

*“Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy*

²⁴ Ja. 2:19

²⁵ 2 Cor 13:5

²⁶ 2 Pet 1:10

*blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin!”²⁷*

My personal application: I confess that sometimes it’s just easier to not think about whether someone we know or love, who says they’re a Christian, is *truly* saved. Often, I’m too distracted to even think about the sincerity of my own faith and where I stand with Christ. I’m thankful for the brutal honesty of the New Testament writers to focus people on the reality of their salvation experience. Even though it’s hard to consider the possibility that even I could be a fraud, it is good that I seek the truth and *fight* for my soul. It’s difficult to stand as a judge of someone else’s salvation, but many times even more difficult to judge ourselves. Through this book, I will use this section to follow my own advice and take a close look at my own heart and the evidence of my own salvation. Join me.

An honest look inside: Can you *honestly* say in your heart that you are at times confused or concerned about your salvation? When you consider your own eternal destination, what assurances do you have? If you are having a hard time answering this question, then does the quality of your spiritual life make you concerned about eternity? Be honest.

“Father, salvation is often just a term we use around the church. It often carries no more meaning than hundreds of other phrases we say every day. May the writing and reading of this book create a hunger to know you as Savior. To fill us with confidence that our soul has been redeemed. To keep us aware of our fast approaching to eternity and a desire to be in your presence after we die. Lead us into all truth. I pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen”

²⁷ Psa. 51:1-2

“What does love look like? It has the hands to help others. It has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. It has eyes to see misery and want. It has the ears to hear the sighs and sorrows of men. That is what love looks like.” - Saint Augustine

Chapter 2: Be Honest About Your Concerns

It had been a bad summer for a new Christian. I had been saved for less than a year and was just beginning to read the Bible and develop some degree of spiritual awareness. I also began praying regularly and attending church services as often as I could. In fact, I was really enjoying my new life as a Jesus follower. I had been getting increasingly involved in the youth program at my church and learning a whole new way of life opposed to the rough “street kid” mentality that I had growing up in a broken home. Then I hit a wall. My girlfriend, who brought me to church in the first place, decided to break up with me. As a young believer, this was difficult for me. Seventeen, feeling in love, and now alone. My small world was rattled. I was emotionally distraught and trying to get over my heartbreak. I decided that I couldn’t return to the church because she was still attending there with her family. Weeks went by and slowly it began to get easier being without her, but also easier to not go to church. I was also reading the Bible and praying less. After about a month, I came home after school, and my grandmother told me that the youth minister at the church had called to talk to me. I didn’t care. I figured he just wanted another person in his class. Another week went by, and I again returned home from somewhere and my grandmother told me that this time Mr. Williams stopped by to talk to me. He again asked if I would call him when I returned. I still didn’t care. This went on for a few more weeks, and I dodged him several more times.

One Saturday morning, around 9 a.m., there was a knock on our apartment door and having just gotten up I curiously went to the door wondering who would be knocking this early? (early for a teen on a Saturday morning!) I opened the door and there stood Mr. Williams,

Bro. Jeff as he preferred to be called. I knew I was caught. I couldn't dodge him this time. He asked me how I was doing, and if I could go for a ride with him. I agreed and we left and drove around the town awhile and then stopped down the street so we could just talk. One thing I'll never forget, was when this young, mild mannered youth minister looked at me with a broken heart and a tear in his eye and told me how burdened he had been for me. I'm not sure I remember everything he said, or even anything he said, but I'll never forget the *care* that was in his voice. We talked for over an hour, and I knew I had reacted wrongly to my teen relationship drama. I knew in my heart that my relationship with Christ was bigger than my emotions and my disappointment. Bro. Jeff cared enough for me to not give up on me. He came to me and asked the hard questions. The questions that made me think about the *sincerity* of my decision to follow Christ. Would I have eventually gotten my head and my heart straightened out? Yes, I know I would have. But there was no way that Jeff could have known that for sure. There was no way he could have known the *sincerity* of my decision for Christ. So, this caring man probably saved me from sliding further away and made me think *honestly* about the reality of my trust in Christ. I did return to church and as it turned out, my girlfriend and I eventually got back together. God blessed me in that decision and that girl has been my wife for forty-two years now. I can't help but think that it may not have happened if a man named Jeff hadn't acted on a burden he had for me and his efforts to *refocus* me on Christ. I really felt that he loved and *cared* for me.

What makes a person feel that much concern and care for another person's spiritual health? It's the very love of Christ that saved them. And what if this concern has never been a part of my life? Can I have a relationship with Jesus? This is how we meet John in his first epistle. He wrote to Christians because *he* was burdened for them as he saw them becoming *confused* and *struggling* with spiritual truth about salvation. There was a mix of spurious theologies developing in the first century designed to *twist* the truth about Christ and the salvation process. People were being led to believe that true salvation was evidenced by various types of *outward activities* as defined by the

growing popularity of pseudo-preachers and completely neglecting the *internal* evidence of salvation. John had spent almost his entire ministry battling for the *true* Gospel that brought *true* new birth experiences and now he is led by God to write this epistle to clarify the truth, for every generation, for all time. There were several important factors that made him so confident about the *origin* of his salvation, and he wanted his readers to take inventory to see if they had them too.

Heart Experience vs. Head Knowledge

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have **heard**, which we have **seen** with our eyes, which we looked upon and have **touched** with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us”²⁸*

John began his letter by sharing his own *personal* testimony of his relationship with Jesus. He knew it was one thing to know about theology, discuss religious trivia with people, or even attend Bible studies, but it was another thing to speak from a *personal experience* with Jesus. John doesn't want his words to simply be *hearsay* or some *passed-down tradition* as was common with Jewish religious leaders. He wanted his readers to understand that his words and his burden for people came from his *personal knowledge* of the subject and the Savior. I think it's kind of like the difference between listening to a sermon *about* salvation and speaking *personally* with someone who has *experienced* salvation. For us to better understand the basis for his statements in this epistle, we need to remember that he was writing this letter *years* after having learned about salvation *personally from Jesus*. Like Peter, he went from a *fisherman* to a *fisher of men*. And after spending years pointing people to Jesus for salvation and years of watching new believers grow in their walk with Christ, John was, unfortunately, also seeing many *imposters* coming into the churches,

²⁸ 1 Jo 1:1-3

interacting with the assembly, and *claiming* to know Jesus but were obviously *not* Christian. So, John felt the nudging of the Holy Spirit to write this letter and bring some clarity to people who were becoming confused by false teachers who were intentionally *distorting* salvation. He wanted to explain the truth to those who were feeling *confused* and were genuinely *concerned* about their salvation and whether they really possessed eternal life.

How difficult it must have been for those early Christians who had a *personal relationship* with Jesus to distinguish the false twisting that some were doing to the doctrine of salvation. Men claiming to understand the gospel and preaching it to others, often with ulterior motives and trying to make names for themselves. Some trying to profit from the gospel others trying to gain attention and popularity from people searching for truth. This same phenomenon is still alive today. In fact, I have occasionally been amused by how some religious leaders are captivated by their own importance to Christianity. I have often looked at book titles that seem interesting and looked at the author's name and behind his name is a host of academic credentials only to find that many of those same books are misleading people with false teaching while claiming to be biblical. Bookstores are full of books from many academically trained *false* teachers. Now, I would never dismiss honest academic work in biblical theology because it is obviously very important to effective spread of the gospel, but it's certainly possible that a person can be *academically competent* but *spiritually compromised*. The truth is you just can't believe everyone who has academic letters behind their name or for that matter, everyone who has a TV ministry. But there is always something different about meeting someone or even reading the writing of someone who *genuinely* knows Christ and has a desire to share gospel truth. This is how we meet John as he opens this letter.

John begins this letter by sharing his most important credential: *His relationship with Jesus*. He wrote from a perspective that absolutely *no one who ever lived* could write from. If we could ask anyone in history, besides Jesus, "How can I know for sure if I'm a Christian," there

would be *no one* who could answer this question for us with the same perspective that John had. None of the other apostles, including Paul, had the viewpoint of John because it came from the *personal relationship with Jesus* that he formed over years of staying *physically* close to him as he personally interacted with and ministered to people everywhere he went. Read his words again:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— that which we have seen and heard we proclaim”

Heavy on John’s heart was the problem and confusion in the growing first century church, as there is today, as to *how* or even *if* a person can know for sure they are saved. Can anyone really know whether they possess *eternal life*? Since this confusion was damaging to Christianity and confusing people, John shares the truth as he learned it from Jesus. He consistently stayed closer to Jesus than the other disciples during his earthly ministry learning from his teaching, preaching, healing, miracles, parables, persecution, suffering, dying, and rising again. Then, decades later, he used his knowledge and wrote a whole gospel about his experiences with Jesus. So, John had an amazing perspective on spiritual truth because he had amazing *personal experiences* with Jesus. He tells us that he had the privilege to *hear, see and touch* the God-man, Jesus Christ. He was reaching back to memories of when he was able to lean against the breast of God, hear his heartbeat, listen to his voice of compassion and commands. He saw *“the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ,”*²⁹ the one who was with the Father for all eternity and stepped out of “forever” onto the shores of time and walked among us. John knew him *intimately*. This is what is referred to as a *heart* relationship. Something available to everyone who will *truly* believe.

²⁹ 2 Cor. 4:6

When I was just a sixteen-year-old boy living in a small mid-west town, I was confronted with the concept of Jesus being the Savior of man and I was initially skeptical and even resistant. I had been a boy intrigued by the sciences and had assumed that science was not compatible with religion. When I first heard the gospel message, from my girlfriend's mother (who later came to be my mother-in-law), I was very skeptical. But there was something about the thought that "Jesus loved me and died for me," that I couldn't get out of my mind. I began my own mission to read and discover who this Jesus really was. I searched for answers for months, reading everything that I could find about Jesus and even researching at the public library. Little did I know then that this is exactly what Jesus *wanted* me to do. When I finally came to the realization that Jesus was a real person and there was exhaustive historical evidence about him and the things he did, I took a step closer to becoming a believer. *The Spirit of God was drawing me to Jesus.* This is vital to a person being saved. John quoted Jesus in his Gospel as saying, "*No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*"³⁰ God has many ways to draw people to Jesus with his Spirit. In fact, I'm trusting that God will even use this book to do that very thing. It wasn't until I attended a special preaching service that the Spirit of God would again be *drawing* me to Christ by the almost audible words in my heart, "*Tom you know you're lost, but Jesus loves you and wants to save you!*" That evening, abstract facts about the man, Jesus Christ, turned into a *personal relationship with the Savior, Jesus Christ.*

I realize that my change of heart came about differently than many other people. It came about over time and solely because of my *changed view of Jesus Christ.* Not being raised with Christianity, I had very few opinions about religion. Many times, people raised around Christianity get just enough of it that it's like an *immunization* that keeps them from getting the real thing. That wasn't me. I knew nothing about the Bible. I had no ideas about the Christian life. I just met Christ and believed he was the Savior, felt my sinfulness and knew I wanted

³⁰ Jo. 6:44

to be saved by him. That night I began a journey with Jesus that has taken me forty-six years closer to meeting him face to face. Many theologians believe that John was first a disciple of John the Baptist, the prophet who was raised up to “prepare the way for the Lord,” and he would have heard many sermons from *“The Baptist”* that pointed people to Jesus. When he wrote his gospel, he recalled the conviction in John’s answer when people asked him who he really was.

“He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said. He said, ‘I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’ as the prophet Isaiah said.’ The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”³¹

Fisherman John had plenty of time to consider, reflect, discuss the Messiah that John the Baptist was preparing the way for. He had months to learn about the signs and significant facts about the coming Messiah and how John the Baptist was told by God how to identify him:

“And John bore witness: ‘I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.”³²

When Jesus called out to young fisherman John that day while he was on his boat and bid him to *“come and follow me,”* he had no idea what Jesus had in store for him. He could not have known the depth of *love* and the wealth of *knowledge* he would personally come to experience from his surrender to follow the call of Jesus. He could only respond by *faith*. I understand that neither I nor anyone since Jesus walked the

³¹ Jo. 1:23, 29

³² Jo. 1:32-34

Earth, can have the *exact same* experience that John had - *but we each must have our own personal experience with Jesus*. John tells us that Jesus spoke to his followers after his resurrection and said, “*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.*”³³ That would be me! Peter wrote his version of that statement this way:

*“That the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom **having not seen you love**. Though now **you do not see Him, yet believing**, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.”³⁴*

I cannot stress this truth enough. There are many, many people who are claiming to be “Christians” without really hearing this call to a *personal relationship* with Jesus. They simply identify with Christianity for various reasons, some of which involve religion, and some involve other people. So, how can we know for sure? Keep reading.

Experiencing Real Relationships

Another important reason John wrote this letter to believers was his sincere desire to have true “*fellowship*” with other believers. John responded first to the call to *salvation* and then he answered the call to *service* as an apostle. His life was then consumed by five decades of living for Christ and sharing the Gospel with everyone he could. He was one of the pillars of the first century church and entered his later years, as some of the other apostles had done, namely, taking on the laborious task of putting his thoughts into writing for the world to read. Three times he stated, “*I proclaim to you.*” John had a specific goal in mind, and he told us what it was and why he was writing this special letter to believers. What was his goal? He said...

³³ Jo. 20:29

³⁴ 1 Pet. 1:7-9

“That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”³⁵

Shouldn't a true believer have some degree of concern for others to also come to know Jesus too? As a Christian father and grandfather, it is saddening and sobering for me to think about the reality that some of my children or grandchildren may *choose* to reject Christ's offer of salvation and being *reconciled* with God. Amid the distractions of life and the pleasures of the world, it's rare for a person to wrap their mind around their own mortality and accept the fact that they are going to die at some point. It's an even rarer thing for people to seriously contemplate their *eternal destiny*. Most “nonbelievers” tend to avoid spending time thinking about the existence of an afterlife. They sometimes convince themselves that it doesn't exist and there is nothing after death or that it is impossible for anyone to know if there really is an afterlife. Some may even believe that if there is an afterlife everyone automatically goes to the same place. But to become a Christian, merely believing in an afterlife is not enough. A person must become aware of their sinfulness and understand, as a consequence, they *deserve* God's wrath in the afterlife. Then, not wanting to die separated from God, if they turn to Jesus for *eternal life* through repentance and faith in his payment for their sin, he will save them. This being the true reality, I've learned not to assume those I love and care for are true believers until they can offer a proper testimony on their own.

John is writing this letter to people he also loves and cares for, many of whom he had ministered to for years. Some were *professing* to be Christian, but their hearts and actions were unfortunately saying something different. Then, there were some who were trying to follow the teachings of Jesus but still worried that they were missing something and may not be truly saved. With this letter, John offers help

³⁵ 1 Jo. 1:3

and direction for his readers to, if appropriate, resolve their doubts because he wants them to be able to “*have fellowship with us.*” I realize that the term “*fellowship*” is a very “churchy” term. I don’t think it is used too much outside of the church context. In fact, when I was a new teenaged Christian, I thought that “fellowship” was just going downstairs in the church basement and having snacks with each other after a worship service. The term is only used ten times in the New Testament and John used the word five of those times in his epistles. The word used when they wrote with the Greek language is *koinonia*, which was a word used to imply that these people would be “sharing together” because they all had something very important “in common.” It meant they were a people who had a new *special connection* with each other and would share beliefs, goals, values and love the same things. John loved people so much he wanted everyone to be able to join together in this *fellowship* with no one excluded. There was only one thing that would enable this special type of relationship between people - *having fellowship with Jesus first.*

According to John, the concept of fellowship is vertical *and* horizontal. He explained that to enjoy fellowship with each other (horizontal) we must first have fellowship with Jesus (vertical). He said, “*indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*” He will continue to speak of *fellowship* as defined by our relationship with Jesus in the next few verses...

*“If we say we have **fellowship** with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have **fellowship** with one another.”*

There’s probably nothing in this life I enjoy more than spending time with my family. I love it when my kids stop over and spend time with their mother and me. It gets even better when they bring my grandchildren over to play or spend the night. We always have a good time talking about life and sharing meals together. We have a *family bond* that brings us together. John makes it clear that we cannot truly have a sharing, uniting experience with *believers* unless we have

sincerely entered into a relationship with Jesus ourselves. *He is the common bond.* True *fellowship* breaks down boundaries. Whether friends, foes, or family, having Jesus as Savior unites people who would normally be divided. There are many “Christian” families that have been broken and divided because Jesus was never really the center of the home or the primary concern of each person in the family. Saying you have a Christian home is not the same as cultivating a living relationship with Jesus in each family members life. John saw something tragic happening in the early churches:

“They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”³⁶

I will unpack this verse later in the book, but understand this about what he just said, fellowship with God and Jesus Christ is something that should never be taken lightly. Just let your mind reflect on what this really means. The very God who created the universe, dwells in timelessness, is always the “I Am,” and who walked with Adam in the garden, spoke to Moses on the mountain and became a friend to Abraham *desires fellowship with us!* What an amazing thought! And Jesus who raised the dead, made the lame to walk, the one who spoke and calmed stormy seas and had fish obey his thoughts and swim into nets, and carried his cross to his own crucifixion only to rise from the dead victorious over death *also wants to fellowship with us!* John was comparing what he was able to do in his *physical relationship* with Jesus to what we can experience in our *spiritual relationship* with Him. He’s not a distant God. He’s not an absent Savior. He is the God who “so loved the world!” It is he who...

“became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”³⁷

³⁶ 1 Jo. 2:19

³⁷ Jo. 1:14

John intended for this short letter to help people understand what makes a person “one of us,” namely, *having a genuine salvation experience*.

Seeking a Joyful Life vs. a Happy Life

John also refers to another reason for writing this letter; he desired to have *fullness of joy!*

*“And we are writing these things **so that our joy may be complete.**”*

He wanted to have *the joy* of knowing that those he cared for, worked with, or anyone who would listen to the truth of the Gospel, could find fellowship with Christ, and *enjoy* fellowship with each other. This concept of having *joy*, was one he learned from Jesus during his time with him. John quoted Jesus when he said to his disciples...

*“If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and **that your joy may be full.**”³⁸*

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, whatever you ask of the Father in my name, he will give it to you. Until now you have asked nothing in my name. Ask, and you will receive, **that your joy may be full.**”³⁹*

In today's world, *joy* is an elusive and misunderstood quality, but it is an important *distinguishing* trait of God's people. Most people in this world are merely in search of happiness, but when Jesus promised his followers a *fulfilling joy*, he was referring to more than mere “happiness.” We need to remember that happiness is an emotion that can quickly turn to “unhappiness” based on our circumstances. For example, I can be happy with my job, my home, my car, my weight, and my bank account *today*, but be *unhappy* with any of them tomorrow and have good reason. But *joy* is rooted deep in our spirit and comes

³⁸ Jo. 15:10-11

³⁹ Jo. 16:23-24

from our Lord, who said “his joy” would be *in us*. Most people find that possessions, promotions, entertainment, and relationships can, for at least a short time, bring some degree of happiness, but not always joy. Happiness is a *feeling* that fluctuates, but joy is a *contentment* deep in our soul. Joy can be present when our circumstances are less than pleasing or even painful. This reality can be seen in the many tragedies of celebrities, entertainers, and sports stars who, despite their wealth, possessions, and outward *happiness*, found that their lives still had painful holes inside of them and attempt suicide with many succeeding.

Here’s an identifier of a true believer that is rarely seriously considered; the person without Christ can never hope for true joy but only the fleeting happiness that external things and situations can bring. But when a person knows Christ, there’s a deep satisfying joy inside that never goes away and that’s why there has never been a Christian that ever became “*un-joyed*” with their salvation, their Savior, or their Christian life. John wanted this joy to be spilled over onto all those new believers welcomed into the family and the spreading local assemblies. This inner presence of *true joy* may also help a believer find happiness in their circumstances even when they are not what they want, but a person only seeking happiness in life *may never experience true joy*.

Enjoying a Never-Ending Life

John also understood something that every religion and every religious person needs to know; that having a genuine relationship with Jesus is the only way to take *possession of eternal life*.

*“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— **the life** was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you **the eternal life**, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us”⁴⁰*

⁴⁰ 1 Jo 1:1-3

John used the word “eternal” six times in this short letter, and he used the word “know” thirty-four times. This is the primary theme of his letter. He wanted his readers to understand and to really “*know*” the certainty of their “*eternal*” destination after the few years of this physical life are over. He explains that salvation is not something vague or evasive, but rather something that we can have “*confidence*” (used 4x) in knowing. There have been many things involving the Christian life and bible doctrine that I have been uncertain of through the years, but my salvation has fortunately never been one of them. Of course, like most believers, I have had moments of doubt, not of Jesus’ love for me, but of the sincerity of my love for him, usually after I had sinned and failed him in some way. But the Lord has always given me an *inner confidence* of being his child after I turn to him with genuine brokenness and repentance. Once again, the concept of *eternal life* for the believer, was not something that John invented. He heard it promised directly from the lips of Jesus. Read these words of Jesus that John recorded for us:

*“And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that **whoever believes in him may have eternal life**. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that **whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.**”*

*“**Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life**; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”*
*“Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but **whoever drinks of the water that I will give him** will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to **eternal life.**”*

*“Truly, truly, I say to you, **whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life**. He does not come into judgment but has passed from death to life.”*

*“For this is the will of my Father, that **everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life**, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

“My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”

*“All that the Father gives me will come to me, and **whoever comes to me I will never cast out.**”⁴¹*

Jesus promised that those who believe and abide in him “*have*” eternal life. That is, never ending life from the moment one truly believes and places their faith in Jesus. John wanted every believer to be confident of this truth. Unfortunately, John was no doubt witnessing the entrance into the first churches those who *said* they believe but weren’t saved. This has always been a problem within the Christian church. The presence of people who do not understand that there is a difference between just saying the words “I believe” and truly experiencing salvation. Let’s look at the verse I referred to earlier.

*“They went out from us, but **they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us.** But they went out, that it might become plain that **they all are not of us.**”*

In the churches I pastored, there were members who had made public professions of faith, transferred memberships, and were attending the church services regularly. Some eventually showed interest in serving in various areas of ministry and leadership. They used their talents in various ways such as singing, teaching, bus driving and visitation among some of the ways they stayed active. As time passed, these particular people gradually stopped attending the church for one reason or another. Some had personal conflicts, some had family conflicts and some just had disagreements with me as the pastor. Either way, after having conversations with them, none of them were returning to *this* church after they left. The troubling thing is that, as far as I know, some of them never even *continued in the faith*. Now this is a bad sign. There is a unique word used only by John in his Gospel, the word “abide.” He uses it ten times in quoting Jesus’ teachings to the disciples.

⁴¹ Jo. 3:15-16, 36; 4:14; 5:24; 6:37, 40; 10:27

“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”⁴²

“Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. **If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”**⁴³

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. **If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.”**⁴⁴

This is an important reason John felt compelled to write this letter. It is *crucial* that everyone understand what Jesus was saying. There are many people who *believe* in Jesus and agree with the facts and events in Jesus’ life, but are still *not* saved. They may keep looking back at a prayer they said in their past, or a baptism, or even a church membership, but they still are *not* saved. Jesus saw this a lot in the crowds of people that would follow and throng him as he moved from town to town. As I discussed in chapter one, this problem was exposed in Jesus’ sermon to a crowd of Jewish people. Read part of this account again:

“So, Jesus said to them, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him.” As he was saying these things, **many believed in him... So Jesus said to the Jews **who had believed him, “If you abide****

⁴² Jo. 8:31

⁴³ Jo. 15:4-7

⁴⁴ Jo. 15:10

*in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth,
and the truth will set you free”*

Later in this exchange, Jesus says:

*“If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? **It is because you cannot bear to hear my word... Whoever is of God hears the words of God.** The reason why you do not hear them is that you are not of God... So they picked up stones to throw at him, but Jesus hid himself and went out of the temple.”⁴⁵*

John was aware from his time with Jesus that there were many people following him for one reason or another *but* were not saved. They may have *believed* in his miracles, or *believed* in his deity, or *believed* in those that believe in him, either way, John knew that there were people following Jesus who only had a *superficial* belief in him. They were *not* grounded in a true personal commitment to him with a selfless trust in him as their Savior. Jesus has never been impressed by *crowds* gathering together in his name, in fact, when he was walking the pathways of Israel and teaching people, he often tried to thin the crowds and challenge those following him in a way that would cause the *heartless* to leave. Jesus knowing the hearts of men, *knew* when his word was not in them. So, in the same way John firmly understood that the true Christian has “eternal life” to enjoy, he also understood that many people *claiming to believe* were not truly saved. Remember that Jesus said, “*My sheep hear my voice and I know them, and they follow me.*” He didn’t say they had to learn to hear my voice to be my sheep, rather, when one becomes a “sheep” *they will hear his voice and follow him.*

Let me repeat myself. I absolutely believe the Bible teaches that *from the moment a person truly becomes a Christian they have eternal life*

⁴⁵ Jo. 8:28-32, 42-43, 59

and will never perish – But I don't believe that everyone who claims it has it. Neither did John. Neither did the other apostles. That is why the New Testament writers issued *warnings* to those claiming to be believers so they would closely inspect their faith and behaviors lest they be deceived because they are actually lost. The true believer understands the pull of the flesh toward spiritual complacency and sin and will recognize it and fight it. The *false* believer may continue on a path leading further and further away from Jesus as *evidence* of their unchanged heart. The warning passages of the New Testament that I reviewed in chapter one, serve as spiritual *checkpoints* for everyone to decide what kind of faith we really possess. Therefore, tactfully but directly, with grace and truth, John writes to people, *claiming* to be believers, and points out the crucial *internal* changes that must be present in their lives to prove their salvation is genuine. His words were designed to help the readers take a closer look at their own lives and honestly contemplate if there is *internal* evidence of salvation. Therefore, he made this clear statement in his letter,

“I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”⁴⁶

So, do you know for sure where you stand with Jesus? In the subsequent pages of his letter, John narrows down the identifiers that should give *assurance* to a sincere believer that they are saved. How do we know that we're really in God's family? Do we actually have eternal life? Can we know for sure? In the chapters to follow, I will be reviewing these areas that John points out as the *necessary indicators* of a truly redeemed person. It is crucial that we understand these areas and then perform necessary self-checks on our hearts.

Let's Get Honest

*“Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God,
O God of my salvation,*

⁴⁶ 1 Jo. 5:13

*and my tongue will sing aloud of your righteousness.
O Lord, open my lips,
and my mouth will declare your praise.*"⁴⁷

My personal application: I would like to think that as a believer I am *always* burdened and concerned for others. It would also be great as a believer to live with *fullness of joy*. It would be great if I lived totally devoted to Christ and never had doubts about my salvation. But it just isn't the case for any of the above. As believers, we *all* fall to temptations and distractions more than any of us would like to admit. The Christian life truly is a battle ground and most of the time the biggest battles are *within us* and the war is fueled by the world, the flesh and the devil. John wrote this letter because he had a spiritual burden for fellow believers involved in this battle. My burdens for others seem to come and go in my life and even becomes cloudier when I sit in judgement as to who deserves my witness and my prayers. It's a true struggle at times to stay consistently burdened and faithful with my witness, not generically to everyone, but to specific individuals that I know are *searching* or *struggling* with spiritual truth. John took the time to be obedient to the Holy Spirit to write this letter and help *everyone* who reads it find peace and assurance in their quest for eternal life. I pray that I can be more consistent as I connect with people in this broken world to sense a similar burden and faithfully pray and share Jesus with them.

An honest look inside: Can you *honestly* say in your heart that you have a real relationship with Jesus? When you think about your spiritual condition, can you say that there is a *joy* and a feeling of *fulfillment* inside that is assuring you that you belong to Jesus? If you answered yes, then does the reality of your salvation ever make you *burdened* for anyone else? Be honest.

"Father, I confess my own struggles with consistently being concerned for others. I find myself to often concerned for my own status, schedule

⁴⁷ Psa. 51:14-15

A Plea For Spiritual Honesty

and comforts to be bothered by the struggles of other people. Forgive me for the shallowness of my own heart and for not living and growing eternal values more than I have. Lord, create in me a clean heart and restore to me the joy that comes with having salvation and help me be more willing to share this wonderful Jesus with others. Help me, Lord, to have at least some of the burden John had for others. Let it motivate me to share truth more often with others. I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen”

“We can easily forgive a child who is afraid of the dark; the real tragedy of life is when men are afraid of the light.” - Plato

Chapter 3: Be Honest About Your Insight

“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”⁴⁸

In the early 1800's a young boy was sent to his small local one room schoolhouse and struggled to maintain attention to the teacher and his assignments because his mind was working too fast on the things that interested him. His teacher became so frustrated by his obvious disinterest in school, that she told his mother, “He’s too stupid to learn anything!” His days at the schoolhouse was over and his mother brought him home to finish his schooling there. She proceeded to feed his interests and allow him to learn at his rate, which turned out to be a very rapid rate. She gave him education in the basics of grammar, writing and arithmetic and allowed him to pursue other studies on his own. He began self-studying many areas of science and chemistry and set up his first lab in his parent’s basement when he was ten years old. He obtained a chemistry book and performed every experiment in the book in that basement. This young boy, Thomas Alva Edison, went on to own over a thousand inventions in his life, but none was bigger than the incandescent light bulb.

Although Thomas Edison was not the first person to come up with the idea of an electric bulb, he worked through over a thousand elements until he found one that would make the electric bulb affordable and

⁴⁸ 1 Jo. 1:5-7

longer lasting. The impact his electric light bulb made on the world cannot be underestimated. Before the invention of the light bulb, people mainly used candles and gas lanterns for light when it was dark. Although people had this form of light, it was incredibly dim, so they had to have candles everywhere. Because there were so many candles being used, houses often would catch on fire and burn down. Before the light bulb, life was much more dangerous because of the many fires and deaths of people who would be trapped in them as it was much harder to put out fires back then. Besides increasing safety, the light bulb also affected the world's economy by creating longer hours for the working class. Before the light bulb, work always stopped before the sun went down. After the light bulb was introduced, work could last much longer into the evening. From these extra hours, more products could be produced giving the economy a large boost. It was amazing how having more *light* could change the whole world. But, as brilliant as our inventors and scientists have become, the greatest scientific minds in our history have never been able to explain many important areas of our universe...

- *The Infinite nature of space*
- *The power holding atoms together*
- *The origin of the universe and matter*
- *The conscience of human beings*
- *The migration of birds and insects*
- *The existence of gravity*
- *What keeps the stars burning?*
- *The origin and nature of light*

When I took physics (many years ago), one of the fascinating facts I learned was that light has a dual nature that scientists have never been able to fully explain. As it turns out, light is a *particle* called a photon and it is a *wave spectrum at the same time*. But no one has ever explained how it can have *two* different natures at the same time in the *same* energy form. The light that gives life, warmth and energy to the Earth comes from our sun, one of many billions of stars that we know exist in our universe. Stars that burn constantly radiating light and

energy without being consumed are also a mystery to scientists. If our sun were to be altered or lose even the tiniest amount of its energy, life on our planet would be destroyed. Thomas Edison is credited with the invention of the light *bulb* that brought the world into the industrial age, but this is nothing compared to the one who created light! There is probably no phenomenon as misunderstood or as taken for granted as *light*. Fortunately, people of faith have been given a unique glimpse into the significance of light.

“Let There be Light!”

When we first meet God in the Bible, in the first chapter of Genesis, he is bringing the first light to his newly created Earth.

*“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters. And God said, **“Let there be light,”** and there was light. And God saw that **the light was good.** And God separated the light from the darkness.” (Gen 1)*

There you have it! According to Moses, the author of Genesis, “Light” originated with God himself, even *before* he spoke the sun and the stars into place and empowered them to emit this life sustaining form of energy. In a more descriptive way, light has been defined simply as “the absence of darkness.” According to these verses, that statement is accurate, God “separated” the light from darkness. About fifty years before John began writing his gospel and his epistles, he was privileged to sit next to Jesus and listen to him use very *specific* language as he boldly declared his identity. Here is one of the descriptions Jesus used of himself:

*“And this is the judgment: the **light** has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the **light** because their works were evil.”*

*“I am the **light** of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the **light of life.**”*

*“We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, **I am the light of the world.**”*

*“The **light** is among you for a little while longer. Walk while you have the **light**, lest darkness overtake you. The one who walks in the darkness does not know where he is going. While you have the **light**, believe in the light, that you may become sons of light.”*

*“I have come into the world as **light**, so that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.”⁴⁹*

As John rehearsed these words that were indelibly printed in his memory and no doubt shared these words with others for over five decades, he decided to begin both his Gospel and this small letter with this very description that Jesus used. He tells the readers in the first verses of his Gospel:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and **the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it...The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world.**”*

He now opens this epistle with a similar description of Jesus:

*“This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that **God is light**, and in him is no darkness at all.”*

Understanding the significance of this light is of immeasurable importance to believers and their understanding of salvation. Satan and the world system he controls have done everything imaginable, and

⁴⁹ Jo. 3:19; 8:12; 9:4; 12:35, 46

many things we don't even realize are him, to extinguish this light and to maintain and trap man in the *darkness*. John uses the word *darkness* several times as a contrast to spiritual sight or better *spiritual insight*. We understand that Jesus and John were using the word "light" as a metaphor for having an *insight* into spiritual truth and the lack of this *insight* is spiritual *darkness*. He said...

*"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in **darkness**, we lie and do not practice the truth."*

*"because the **darkness** is passing away and the true light is already shining."*

*"Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in **darkness**."*

*"But whoever hates his brother is in the **darkness** and walks in the **darkness**, and does not know where he is going, because the **darkness** has blinded his eyes."⁵⁰*

Through the years, the enemies of Christ and his message have used corrupted religion, politics, entertainment, education, and wickedness in every society to keep mankind in the dark. Yet, despite the relentless attacks of the enemies for the past two thousand years, there have been millions of people all around the world who have believed in the "Light," and whose lives have been radically transformed because of it. Not only have individual men and women been transformed, but whole societies and cultures. Great educational institutions have been established in his name, as well as hospitals and charities of all kinds, not to mention multiplied thousands of churches bearing his name and creating many helpful ministries. Nations have been established to serve him and even the worldwide evil of slavery has been almost completely abolished. Most of the founding fathers of science were sincere followers of Jesus, as well as the greatest medical researchers of the past. Even though Jesus was so despised by his contemporaries that he was executed in a uniquely cruel manner by them, he has indeed been "the Light of the world," not only *spiritually*, but also

⁵⁰ 1 Jo. 1:6; 2:8, 9, 11

intellectually and *morally*. Those who choose to follow Jesus no longer walk in darkness but gladly testify that they have found “*the light of life*,” just as he promised. So, how does this description of Jesus, help us with our confusion about *eternal life*? Let’s consider the important role it plays in the salvation experience.

“I Once was Blind but Now I See”

During his journeys with Jesus, John had the privilege of witnessing many amazing things he did. He witnessed miracles, conversions, heard powerful sermons and saw many demons cast out of people at Jesus’ command. One of the most amazing events that he was privileged to witness was recorded by him in the ninth chapter of his Gospel. John tells us about the time that he was crossing the countryside with Jesus and the other disciples when they passed by a man, who had been born blind, sitting and begging. The disciples took the opportunity to ask Jesus a theological question. “*Who did sin, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?*” Jesus answered, “*Neither, but that the Glory of God would be revealed in him he was born blind.*” Jesus then bent over and spit in the dirt and mixed it into mud and rubbed in over the man’s eyes and instructed him to go wash it off in the pool of Siloam. The man obeyed and immediately returned *with his sight*. Jesus then made this remarkable statement to everyone listening, “*As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world!*” This miracle caused a ruckus among the leaders of the Jewish Temple called Pharisees, who immediately began investigating this beggar in an attempt to prove that Jesus was a fraud. They interviewed his parents and those who witnessed the miracle and even tried to trick the man healed into saying something that they could declare as *blasphemy* and use to punish him. In my opinion, the most amazing line in this whole story is when the man, out of exasperation from being questioned so intensely, made this statement...

“So for the second time they called the man who had been blind and said to him, “Give glory to God. We know that this man is a sinner.”

*He answered, “Whether he is a sinner I do not know. **One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.**”⁵¹*

Jesus performed this miracle to deliberately connect himself to receiving *spiritual vision* or *insight*. There is no better or simpler way to explain the effect on a person’s life after receiving “*The Light of the World*,” Jesus Christ as personal Savior. He takes a person who is blind spiritually, intellectually, and morally and gives them the ability to finally *see* life like God sees it.

I was raised in a broken home that suffered from the ravages of alcohol, anger, violence, and poverty. My mother left my alcoholic father when I was only three years old and abandoned her children to escape her life and begin another one far away. I grew into a teenager without much exposure to religion or spirituality of any kind. In my youth, lying, swearing, stealing and immorality were all just normal ways of life. I had very little chance at changing the trajectory of my life. I was a young man *broken* by the ravages of a sin nature within and a corrupt society without. Oh, I understand that the flames of my sin were fanned and fueled to some degree by my environment but, left to my own, I would *never* have been able to change. As I wrote earlier, after I met Cindy as a teenager and began going to church with her, and after much struggling and investigation, I eventually received *insight into my broken condition* and gave in to the drawing of the Spirit, turned to Jesus in repentance, *accepted* his payment for my sin and in faith sought him as my Lord and Savior.

This really was a new birth for me, as I began to interpret my whole world differently from that moment on. I remember a specific incident, not too long after being saved, when I realized things were different in my life. I was standing in the hallway of my High School talking and joking with some of my friends, when one of them made a statement with the usual off-color, vulgar language and I joined in making a statement of my own using my usual expletives. I remember feeling

⁵¹ Jo. 9:24-25

instantaneously that what I just said was improper. It's hard to explain, but I remember feeling flushed like maybe I was blushing and thinking to myself that I was wrong for using *that* language. It felt like someone else was saying it instead of me. I didn't understand it all at the time, but it was just the beginning of me *seeing* my world differently. I was receiving *spiritual insight* into the darkness and brokenness of my old life and behaviors. The Apostle Paul referred to this phenomenon this way:

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, **the new has come.**”*

*“Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, **all things are become new.**” (KJV)⁵²*

I want to take John's statements and a few others in the New Testament and break down just exactly why having “the light” or a new *spiritual insight*, is vital to salvation and why John knew that this was the place to start in his discussion of “traits” that describe true believers. The importance of the light entering a person's life, cannot be overemphasized. According to the Bible, the “light” revealed to this world is seen in two different ways.

It's Light that Draws People

Jesus taught his disciples about a special “light” that was coming to shine in this world very soon - the Holy Spirit. Here's what John wrote in his Gospel...

*“These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and **bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.**”*

⁵² 2 Cor. 5:17

*“When the **Spirit of truth** comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.”*

*“Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will **convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment**: concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no longer; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged.”*

*“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me **draws him**.”⁵³*

I mentioned that when I was a teenager and was first exposed to who Jesus Christ was, I initially *resisted* believing that he was really God, but I didn't *close off myself* to listening about him. The very process of leaving my mind open and listening to truth about Jesus kept me thinking until eventually I found myself searching to learn more about who this Jesus really was. I did not know it at the time, but from the moment I first heard the name of Jesus, the Spirit of God was “lighting” my way and “drawing” me to him. The more I searched and listened, the stronger the Spirit “drew” me to Jesus and the more I became “convicted” of *who* Jesus was and *what* I was - a sinner. I am so thankful and have nothing but heartfelt gratitude that God saw a young boy from a broken home, with an alcoholic father, abandoned by his mother, in a tiny mid-west town and “drew” me to Jesus so I could be saved.

The words of Jesus on this subject stuck with John who no doubt shared them in sermons and discipleship for over five decades until the time was right to write them in his gospel. He recorded those words for the whole world to read for all time and so we, in the twenty-first century, would be reminded of the fact that God will provide “light” to those who will listen and open their minds and hearts to even the *possibility*

⁵³ Jo. 14:26; 16:7, 16; 6:44

of Jesus as Savior. The Spirit of God will light a person's way to Jesus if they *listen* and *think* about the Gospel. In fact, without the light of the Spirit *illuminating* the Scriptures, no one could ever understand the Bible in a way that would lead them to salvation. Many people read the Bible and know what it teaches but never *believe* its message and put their faith in Christ. It's not that they aren't intelligent enough, it's because they haven't, *by faith*, allowed the Spirit to "light" the truth of their need of a Savior.

*"And Moses summoned all Israel and said to them: "You have seen all that the LORD did before your eyes in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his servants and to all his land, the great trials that your eyes saw, the signs, and those great wonders. But to this day the LORD has not given you a heart to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear."*⁵⁴

God giving us "eyes to see" is what Jesus was referring to when he spoke of "the light," which found its fulfillment in the arrival of the Holy Spirit with a special mission to convict and draw all people to Jesus to be redeemed. So, how important was this new operation of God to John as he began his letter? He had a desire for everyone to understand that genuine salvation *always* begins with "the light" shining in our hearts and opening our minds to the truth of our own sinfulness and lost condition *and* that Jesus is the Savior of the world. No one can be saved who hasn't first *seen* their sinfulness and lost condition by *the shining light* of the Gospel and the *drawing* of the Holy Spirit.

It's Light that Teaches People

Becoming a Christian isn't the end of needing the light of the Spirit, it's merely the beginning. John was keenly aware that Christians who were growing and maturing in Christ, were doing it because of the *guidance* of the Spirit within them. As a Pastor, I spent many hours

⁵⁴ Deut. 29:4

over twenty-five years of ministry visiting neighborhood homes and talking to people about Jesus. I found that one of the toughest people to engage in a discussion about Jesus or the Gospel was any elderly Roman Catholic person. Most of time they refused to even discuss Jesus or the Gospel with me. I would try to find common ground, but it usually wouldn't matter. They had been taught that evangelicals and protestants were *predators* and were not to be entertained. Many times, their unchurched children would also refuse to discuss religion with me because they were “born” Catholic. It was sad to see the resistance and sometimes even fear of discussing the Gospel with me because they didn't want me causing confusion.

Now, consider what the first century Jewish person had to overcome to even entertain the *possibility* that Jesus was the Messiah. Jesus had been labeled a heretic by the priests and leaders of the Jewish Temple because he revealed the true *spirit* of the law, and it was contradicting their teachings and calling attention to their misplaced attention to purpose of the law and their fanaticism with religious rituals. As I mentioned earlier, becoming a Christian in the first generation would usually mean pain and conflict from friends and families and often the new believer would be shunned by everyone close to them. Therefore, it would not only take the Spirit's revealing “light” for a person to be able to see Jesus as the promised Savior, but once they made the decision to become a Christian, they were also going to need the Spirit's help in *becoming like Christ*. Remember, the New Testament hadn't been written yet. There weren't Christian churches in every city. The Apostles couldn't be everywhere at once, even their teachings would take time to spread from person to person by word of mouth and hand copying their writings. Also given the fact that most people, aside from the nobility and wealthy, were illiterate anyway, John knew exactly how they were going to continue growing to be like Christ and he reminded them...

“But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge...The anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his

***anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie—
just as it has taught you, abide in him.***⁵⁵

***“But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my
name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance
all that I have said to you.”***⁵⁶

This is another extremely important area of the Christian life. If a person, claiming to be a Christian, never begins revealing the characteristics of Jesus in their life, they can't argue *ignorance* because if the Holy Spirit is really within them, he would be working to *teach them and mature them into being like Christ*. When John wrote that “*you have no need that anyone should teach you*” he wasn't saying that there was no need for evangelists, preachers, or teachers because that would contradict other biblical instructions. What he was referring to is the fact that in the *absence of true Gospel teachers* a person can still grow to be like Christ because of the presence of the Spirit within. Think about why this truth is so crucial. Does it not separate those who merely *call* themselves Christians from genuinely saved people? The presence of the “light” within us is critical to our self-identification as true believers. What I mean is this:

A genuine believer cannot help but see themselves and the world around them in the same way that Christ does because of the Holy Spirit presence within them.

In the chapters to follow, I will show the simple, uncomplicated way John shows how the light, *if* it is truly inside a person, changes their view of themselves, their life, and their world.

⁵⁵ 1 Jo. 2:20, 27

⁵⁶ Jo. 14:26

By the Light We See Ourselves in His Word

When Jesus was teaching his disciples in John 15 and using the metaphor of a fruit bearing vine and pointed out that the branches can only bear fruit if they remain attached to the vine. He said,

*“Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he **prunes**, that it may bear more fruit.”*

Jesus then adds information that serves as spiritual advice to bearing fruit while attached to our vine, Jesus.

“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”

“The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life”⁵⁷

This image would have been understood by his followers as the *pruning* process a farmer would perform on his vines to keep them free of *dead* or *decaying* leaves and branches that hinder fruit growth. He wanted everyone to understand that his “word” does the needed pruning in a believer’s life. When a person is truly born again, it should be evidenced by a “new hunger” that Peter described this way:

*“Like newborn infants, **long for the pure spiritual milk**, that by it you may grow up into salvation— if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”⁵⁸*

Paul said that the very “words” of Jesus and the apostles are used by the Spirit to change a person because they are...

⁵⁷ Jo. 15:2-3; 6:63

⁵⁸ 1 Pet 2:2

“Living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”⁵⁹

And Jesus’ half-brother James stated it this way:

*“For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who **looks into the perfect law**, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, **he will be blessed in his doing.**”⁶⁰*

The unmistakable reality of these verses is this - A truly born-again person may be *slow* at developing the “skills” to understand the Bible⁶¹ but they will always have a *desire* to hear from God and receive new *insights* into *themselves*. The absence of this *desire* or the *ability* to understand his word and *sense* how it affects our lives and decisions is a sign a person may not really be saved. Paul put it this way:

*“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are **spiritually discerned.**”⁶²*

If you have the desire to hear from God, but find your skills lacking with the Bible, a good place to begin is reading the Gospels through and always start with a prayer like David offered to God in the Psalms:

“Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law.”

⁵⁹ Heb 4:12

⁶⁰ Ja 1:23-25

⁶¹ Heb. 5:13

⁶² 1 Cor. 2:13

Let's Get Honest Together

***“I know my transgressions,
and my sin is ever before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight,
so that you may be justified in your words
and blameless in your judgment.”***⁶³

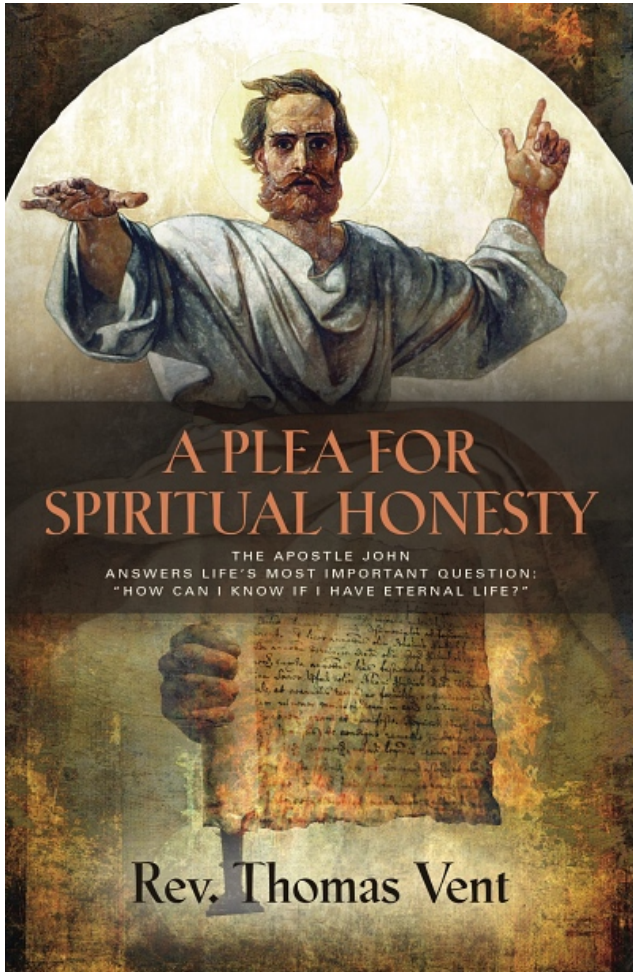
My personal application: David's eyes were opened so clearly that he not only *saw* his sinfulness, he was able to see that the real problem was not even about sex or adultery, but about *sinning against God*. He understood that God would be totally *justified* any way he chose to judge him for it. That takes an honest heart! As a believer who has looked at life through *new* eyes since I was sixteen years old, I wish I could say that I have no blind spots - *but I do*. Even as the Spirit of God tries to show me the world and people as Christ sees them, my carnal mind with my fleshly impulses constantly try to *distort* my spiritual vision. Too often I fall for it and find myself doing exactly what king David warned us not to let happen. *“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.”* The effect of these *wicked* influences in my life, whether from personal acquaintances, entertainers or authors distorts and dims the light that God is shining on my life so I don't see *truth* as clearly as I should. I wish it were not so, but it is true.

Take an honest look inside: Can you *honestly* say in your heart that there was a point in your life when the *light* came on? Did you go through that zone in your heart where you *saw* your own sinfulness and knew you were lost? If you answered yes, has the *light* been shining inside you to be able to see people and the world like Jesus does? Is there a *light* shining on the pages of the Bible as you read it helping you begin to understand it? Do you even desire to understand it? Be honest.

⁶³ Psa. 51:3-4

A Plea For Spiritual Honesty

“Father, forgive me for failing so often to look at life, circumstances, people and sin with the light of the Gospel and the spiritual vision you provide for me. Lord, I confess that I allow my flesh and my pride to blur my vision way too often. Please give me mercy for often choosing blindness instead of seeking clearer vision. Lord, help me to walk consistently in the light and refuse to put blinders on when I behold this fallen world and interact with fallen people. But Lord, let me respond in grace to those around me because I know that I am in desperate need of your grace in my own life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”



This book is about simplifying the confusion about salvation that has been distorted and confusing Christians. The book looks at true salvation from the view and writings of the apostle John.

A PLEA FOR SPIRITUAL HONESTY

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