

A
DIVINE
PARDON

RICK HUGHES

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A DIVINE PARDON



If you are reading this book, you may be incarcerated for a crime you committed. The old cliché ‘doing the time, if you do the crime’ is overused; but if you have broken the law, you are held responsible.

Yet as long as you are alive and breathing, God has a reason for you to be on this earth. I want you to realize that regardless of your faults and failures, God has a plan for your life.

In the Bible, Luke records the amazing Divine Pardon issued by Jesus Christ to one of the two criminals crucified beside Him. The first criminal made fun of the Lord saying, “If you are the Christ, save yourself and us.” The second man corrected his friend, “We receive the due rewards of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” He then turned to Jesus Christ and said, “Lord, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” With these words he expressed his belief in the true identity of the Savior.

Jesus Christ’s reply was astounding, “Assuredly I say unto you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Our Lord had just granted this criminal a Divine Pardon.

Christ offers you the same Divine Pardon.

By receiving this Divine Pardon, you are guaranteed eternal life by personal faith alone in the Lord Jesus Christ. What’s in the past, stays in the past. The moment you accept Christ as your Savior, you become a new person. *“If any man be in Christ, he is a new creation; old things are passed away; behold all things are become new” (2 Corinthians 5:15).*

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BIBLE HEROES “WITH A PAST”



Some of the most famous men in the Bible committed serious crimes, but went on to become the greatest Christians in history. Let me tell you about them.

Paul, the Pardoned Apostle

Paul the Apostle eventually became the writer of many New Testament books. He had a rough start, however. His real name was Saul of Tarsus. We first meet him in Acts 7:58, where he witnessed the murder of Stephen, who was one of the great men of faith in the early days of the church, and the first Christian martyr. Saul had started a campaign to persecute Christians whom he believed were speaking against the laws of Moses. He was on his way to Damascus to capture or kill Christians when Jesus Christ appeared to him.

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?” Saul replied, “Who art thou?” The Lord replied, “I am Jesus, whom thou persecutes.” (Acts 9:3-5)

What Saul heard changed his life forever. Saul had been blinded by the sight of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the next three days, he neither ate nor drank anything. He spent his time praying for the restoration of his vision. God answered Saul’s request, and sent Ananias, a disciple who lived nearby,

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to go to Saul, explain what had happened and pray with him. The Lord then returned Saul’s sight (Acts 9:10-19). Instead of being eliminated by God for what he had done to Christians, Saul was granted a full pardon. Now the tables were turned. Because Saul accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and was now a Christian, a contract was put out on his head, lest he convert others to this new way of living (Acts 9:23-29). Get this, Saul, now known as Paul, went on to do just that. Paul became the greatest of all teachers of the Bible. He later penned this fantastic verse found in Ephesians 2:8-9, *“For by grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God lest any man should boast.”*

Moses

Numbers 12:3 tells us, *“Moses was a very humble man; humbler than anyone else on the earth.”* Yet this is the same Moses who committed murder. Moses was of Jewish ancestry, and lived in Egypt as a free man, although his people were enslaved in Egypt. One day he watched as some Jewish slaves were mistreated by their Egyptian captors.

When Moses was grown, he went out unto his brethren, looked upon their burdens, and observed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brethren. He looked this way and that way; and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand. (Exodus 2:11)

These verses show that Moses made the decision to kill an Egyptian slave master. This was clearly an act of premeditated murder. Once Moses’ crime was discovered, he had no choice but to flee from Egypt. He headed for the land of Midian (Numbers 2:15), roughly 700 miles from Egypt. Moses did not take a train! He walked or rode a mule the entire distance. It was here where he lived in exile, doing the job of a shepherd.

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One day while Moses was tending his sheep, God spoke to him. The Lord appeared to him in the form of a burning bush, and told him to return to Egypt in order to lead his people, the Jews, out of slavery (Exodus 3:1-14). At that point in Moses' life, he had spent forty years living in fear and guilt in a foreign land. Perhaps Moses thought he was about to be punished for what he had done many years earlier. Who knows what went through his mind; but I can guarantee you, he was scared!

The Lord said, “I have seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt; and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters, for I know their sorrow... Therefore, come now, and I will send you to Pharaoh, so that you may bring My people, the sons of Israel, out of Egypt.” (Exodus 3:7,10)

I assure you, Moses was not excited about going back to Egypt where he had committed his crime; but God comforted him, assuring him the arrest warrant would not be served if he returned. *“The Lord said unto Moses, go, return to Egypt, for all the men are dead who sought your life”* (Exodus 4:19).

Moses did go back as instructed, but he faced opposition when he requested the release of the slaves. You may remember the incident recorded in the Scripture about the ten plagues God put upon the Pharaoh because he would not free the Jewish slaves. Eventually, the plagues got the Pharaoh's attention, and he freed them. But as they were leaving, he changed his mind, and pursued them to the Red Sea, where he and his entire army drowned as Moses and the Jews crossed in safety. During the escape across the Red Sea, the fleeing Jews thought they would die, but Moses made an astounding proclamation that is still quoted by people today when they face overwhelming odds: *“Fear not, stand still, and see the deliverance of the Lord which He will show you today”* (Exodus 14:13).

David

Have you ever heard of David, the killer of the Philistine giant named Goliath? The Israelites were at war with the Philistines, and were very afraid of fighting Goliath. David became a hero at a young age when he did what no one else had the courage to do. He faced the giant Goliath on the battlefield, and destroyed him with a simple slingshot. *“So David triumphed over the Philistine with a sling and a stone; without a sword in his hand he struck down the Philistine, and killed him” (1 Samuel 17:50).*

This very same David eventually became King of Israel. As king, he made some very bad decisions. He allowed his emotions and lust for a beautiful woman to override his thinking, and he committed a grievous mistake. He arrogantly assumed he could have his way with another man’s wife. One of Israel’s greatest kings broke the rules, impregnated another man’s wife, and then had her husband killed in order to cover up his deed.

Then it happened in the spring, at the time when kings go out to battle, that David sent Joab and his servants with him and all Israel, and they destroyed the sons of Ammon and besieged Rabbah. But David stayed at Jerusalem. Now when evening came David arose from his bed, and walked around on the roof of the king’s house; and from the roof he saw a woman bathing, and the woman was very beautiful in appearance. So, David sent and inquired about the woman. And one said, “Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?” David sent messengers, and took her, and when she came to him, he lay with her; and when she had purified herself from her uncleanness, she returned to her

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house. The woman conceived; and she sent and told David, “I am pregnant.” (2 Samuel 11:1-5)

Now in the morning David wrote a letter to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah. He had written in the letter saying, “Place Uriah in the front line of the fiercest battle, and withdraw from him, so that he may be struck down and die.” (2 Samuel 11:14)

As you can see, David gave the command for one of his best warriors to be killed so he could cover up his sin. However, he did not get away with it. God saw it all, and disciplined him for his crime. Even so, David was forgiven for these terrible sins, though he faced years of discipline as a result of what he had done.

THE PARDON



Every day we make decisions, and these decisions have consequences -- both good and bad. **Bad decisions limit future options.** The worst decision anyone can make is to ignore the divine pardon offered through Jesus Christ. This pardon was made available to us because of perfect God's unfailing love. Do you remember John 3:16? "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*" Why would God send His Son to be a substitute for our punishment? Because He wants to offer each of us a relationship with Him. He wants each of us to spend eternity with Him in heaven. In our sinful state, we cannot have a relationship with perfect God. Since we have no means of ridding ourselves of our imperfections, God devised a plan so He could separate us from our sins, and allow us to enjoy a relationship with Him. Let me explain.

The Debt We Cannot Pay

In Biblical times, when a man could not pay what he owed, he was thrown into debtors prison. Yet as a prisoner, he had no means of working off his own debt, and therefore, had no way of freeing himself. Instead, he was forced to rely on a close friend or family member to work in his place, and earn back the money he owed. Only in this way would the debt be forgiven, and the debtor released from prison.

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Jesus Christ Paid Our Debt for Us

What Jesus Christ did for us is very similar to what a close family member might have done for an imprisoned debtor. Through Christ's sacrifice, we are not only freed from eternal separation from God (pardoned), but our sins (debts) are forgiven forever. As sinners, we are unable to free ourselves. We are similarly unable to repay the cost of our own sinfulness. This is because we all fall short of God's perfection (called His righteousness). Even the best of us is totally imperfect, because we have all sinned.

Isaiah 64:6 tells us, "*[We] are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousness [morality] is like a filthy rag.*" Notice what the verse says. To perfect, holy, righteous God, our best deeds do not measure up. They are still filthy rags in His sight. However, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was born sinless. Even though He could have, He never sinned, not even once. Had He done so, He would not have been qualified to take our place.

Many people in history have died physically in place of another. However, no one other than Jesus Christ was qualified to bear our sins on His own body. Only Christ, in His perfection, was able to serve as a mediator between perfect God and imperfect, sinful man. Only He was able to suffer the consequences of our sins, which we are unable to do for ourselves. He, in effect, served as the bridge between imperfect man and perfect God.

He [God the Father] made Him [Jesus Christ] who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that we may be made the righteousness of God in Him.
(2 Corinthians 5:21)

It is through Christ's sacrifice that God opened the door for us to come to Him and have fellowship with Him. Life truly

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begins for each of us when we understand and accept this gift. Our past failures are no longer an issue.

I mention the sins of Paul, Moses and David so you see there is hope, even for those who murder. Do not ever think God does not love you because of the crimes you have committed. **God has offered all of us a pardon!** He does love you, and He demonstrated that love thousands of years ago when He sent His Son to be your substitute on the cross. He paid the ultimate price for your sins and mine. While it may be true that we have failed and committed big-time sins, it is also true that life is not over; there is a new life in Christ, even if you are incarcerated!

Accepting Christ's Gift

Life is always about your decisions and the road you are willing to take. You make millions of decisions in your lifetime, and all of them can have lasting impact. It does not matter if you are rich or poor, famous or infamous; you are a product of your decisions. The greatest decision you could ever make is to receive Christ as your Savior. If you choose for Jesus Christ, then you will spend eternity in heaven, regardless of what you have done on this earth. Otherwise, you face eternity separated from God, enveloped in the agony of the Lake of Fire. Take the pardon!

He that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not, is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. (John 3:18)

THE BIG LIE



Many people will tell you there are hoops to jump through if you want to go to Heaven, such as: don't drink; don't smoke; don't cuss; and so many more rules and regulations that no one can live up to them. This is simply not the case.

You can read more on this in the "Arrogance of Religion" section.

THE SIMPLE TRUTH



Here are the facts. Read them for yourself:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

For by grace you are saved through faith, not of yourselves; a gift from God, not as a result of works, so no one may boast. (Ephesians 2:8)

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1)

God sent His Son to pay for your sins. This is His grace gift. Grace is something you do not earn or deserve. All you need is faith. In other words, you believe in what Christ did for you. You can express that faith silently to God.

Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved (Acts 16:31)

This is a simple statement. God means it. It is a decision you can make anytime, anywhere, any day.

GOD'S ROYAL FAMILY



For the sake of illustration, let's say you are willing to do this today. You are ready to believe in Jesus Christ as your personal Savior. What happens then? The Bible says you are given the righteousness of Christ, and adopted into God's Royal Family. Race or gender are not an issue (and never were in God's eyes). This is an amazing thing about grace. Christ died for all members of the human race. God does not discriminate!

The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ. (Romans 8:16-17)

I know I have listed a lot of Bible verses to read, but here is the reason: God loves us! If the truth were known, many of us should already have been six feet under in a cemetery by now. Yet, we are still alive. This book is not a Bible, but it contains Bible truths, and the message for each of us is simple: God is not finished with us. Sure, we mess up and commit sin, maybe even crimes with tremendous consequences; but we are still here, and there is still time to believe in Christ and receive Him as Savior. I am *not* talking about becoming religious. I am talking about having a relationship with God's Son. He will come and live in us if we accept Him as our Savior. We can have a personal relationship with Him. Christianity is a relationship with God.

HOW TO RECEIVE YOUR PARDON



It's easy! You simply tell God silently that you believe Jesus Christ died in your place on the cross, paying the penalty for all your sins. At that moment, your sins are no longer an issue, in any way. You are now guaranteed life after death, and you will spend eternity with God. Our Lord makes this very clear:

I give unto them eternal life and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father who gave them to Me is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father's hand. (John 10:28-29)

But as many as receive Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name. (John 1:12)

The Lord Jesus Christ guarantees us two things when we believe in Him:

I will never leave you nor forsake you. (Hebrews 13:5)

Once you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior, you can never lose your salvation. You have eternal security.

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In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. For I go to prepare a place for you... I will come again and receive you to Myself, that where I am, there you may be also. (John 14:2-3)

God will return for all of us. We will live with Him forever in heaven.

There you have it. This is your choice, your decision to make. No one can make it for you. You can put it off and make excuses, but why gamble with your eternal destiny? The truth is in your hands. You have read it for yourself. Now it is time to do something about it. As the Apostle Paul told a Roman jailer, "*Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved*" (Acts 16:31).

NOW THAT I AM SAVED, WHAT COMES NEXT?



If you have made the decision to receive Christ as your Savior, the question is: What comes next?

Two verses are critical for your understanding of this question:

But grow in the grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. (2 Peter 3:18)

Study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needs not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth. (2 Timothy 2:15)

When I received Christ as my Savior, I was given a small New Testament Bible. No one told me that I had to study or grow spiritually, but I found I was fascinated with what I read. It seemed God knew everything about me, and what I was experiencing. The more I read, the better I understood why I did certain things. I found my understanding being broadened, and my intellect being challenged. In school, I hated class, but now I was actually looking forward to learning.

Newborn babies must have milk as nourishment. Without milk, they would die. New Christians must also have nourishment if they intend to grow up. Growing up spiritually is similar to growing up physically. Both require nourishment for growth. There are some things you need to know so you can effectively nourish your soul. One important thing is to realize that once saved, you can, and will, still commit sins, and you need to know how to handle them.

UNDERSTANDING SIN



Not long after I accepted Christ, I discovered I still had tendencies to commit sin. I was sure I had accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior, but did not understand why my temper was still so easily excited. All of my life, I had battled a bitter mental attitude. I figured I had gotten a raw deal in life, and I usually took out my frustration on those around me. I was not a bully, but I sure had a chip on my shoulder. There were other areas that tempted me as well, but temper flare-ups caused me the most grief. I wondered if I had really been saved. It took a year or so before I met a pastor who helped me sort things out. He showed me where the Bible teaches that we all sin, even Christians. *“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8)*. So how do we handle the fact we still sin after we are saved? Well, let’s take a look at why we sin, and then we’ll see what we can do about it.

Why We Sin

Have you ever felt like two different people? At times you do the right things, and at other times you invariably do the wrong things. There was a popular candy commercial with the lyrics, “sometimes you feel like a nut and sometimes you don’t.” Does that sound like you? It sounds like me! There are times I want to do the right things, and times I do what I know I should not. The reason for this is stated in the Bible. The sooner you understand why you may act like two different people, the sooner you can control your actions.

Let’s start with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. The Bible teaches us that Adam sinned of his own free will. He

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was not tricked or coerced like Eve, who fell for Satan's lie. Adam made a bad choice, which he was free to do because God did not make him a robot. Adam's choice resulted in sin entering the world. Until Adam sinned, he had enjoyed a great spiritual life with God; but after he sinned, he died spiritually, and was no longer able to enjoy a relationship with perfect God. This didn't end with Adam. Adam's temptation to commit sin was thereafter passed down to all of his children, including you and me.

A few verses from the book of Genesis will help you understand:

The Lord God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die." (Genesis 2:16-17) [This was a warning of spiritual death, separation from God, which eventually results in physical death.]

They were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (Genesis 2:25) [Notice they had no guilty conscience because they had no sin to hide; thus, they are often referred to as "innocent" at this time.]

Now here comes trouble:

The serpent [Satan] said unto the woman, "You shall not surely die; for God knows that in the day you eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, and you shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, pleasant to the eyes, and desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She gave also to her husband and he ate. (Genesis 3:4-6)

UNDERSTANDING SIN

This was an intentional decision made by Adam. He knew better, but he did it anyway. Eve, however, was deceived by Satan into thinking it would make her wise. The next verse explains what happened as a result of Adam's choice.

Then the eyes of both of them opened, and they knew that they were naked... (Genesis 3:7) [Once they had sinned, the guilt set in because they knew they had disobeyed God.]

Sin uncovers you, and exposes you to the elements. *“Therefore, just as through one man, sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned” (Romans 5:12).* This verse shows us that Adam committed the first sin as a result of a volitional decision (free will choice) to disobey God. As soon as he sinned, his tendency to sin became part of the cell structure of his body. Adam's sin was thereafter passed down to all of his descendants, including you and me. With Adam's sin came spiritual death, which is separation from God. Consequently, because of the choice Adam made, we are now born physically alive, but spiritually dead. Thus, even as tiny babies, we are spiritually dead, and separated from God.

Before we can have a relationship with God, we need to be 'born again,' not physically, but spiritually. This spiritual birth is accomplished by means of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, as I explained in "The Simple Truth" section earlier in the book. While being born again allows us to have a relationship with God, being born again does not remove the sin nature we inherited from Adam, nor does it remove our volition, the choice-maker that got Adam into trouble. This is why we Christians sometimes feel like two different people. When our sin nature is controlling us, we commit sin, and feel guilt and shame; when the Holy Spirit is controlling us, we do not sin, and we feel peace and joy.

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The Apostle Paul mentions his sin nature in the book of Romans:

I know that nothing good lives in me... although I have the desire to do what is right, I do not do it. I don't do the good I want to do. Instead, I do the evil that I don't want to do. Now when I do what I don't want to do... sin that lives in me is doing it. (Romans 7:18-20)

Paul had a sin nature; you have one, and I have one. Take a look around, and understand that each person you see has a sin nature. This may help you understand why some people are cruel and unkind. It is that sin nature, if allowed to dominate, that can cause us to self-destruct. So how do we control our sin nature? We control it by using our volition to make good choices.

Your Volition -- Free Will

All people have something called "volition" -- free will. Your volition gives you the freedom to make choices. Volition is the part of you that makes decisions on a daily basis. Even under conditions of incarceration, you still have the freedom to think, and to make decisions. You choose to obey the rules, or you choose to break the rules. You can choose to hate, or you can choose to forgive. If incarcerated, you have lost some of your freedom, but your volition is still very much there.

Your volition is what makes you decide to think or do things. When your volition chooses to follow the temptations sent up from the sin nature, you, like Adam, disobey God. But you don't have to. You always have a choice, and life depends on those choices. As I've said before, bad decisions limit future options. Let me help you learn how to recognize, control and contain the sin nature monster within. You can then begin to make good decisions.

UNDERSTANDING SIN

Recognizing Sin

When we commit a sin, it is in one of these three areas: we **think** (mental attitude sin), **say** (sin of the tongue) or **do** (action sin). These sins do not cause us to lose our salvation, because Christ paid the sin debt for us; but our sins do cause a break in fellowship with God.

Mental attitude sins include worry, hatred, envy, jealousy, bitterness or fear.

Sins of the tongue include lying, slander, gossip, criticism and other things associated with what we say.

Overt sins (action sins) include stealing, murder, assault, violence, trafficking, adultery, and other sins mentioned in the Bible.

Christians may not make it a habit of doing these things, but we certainly are capable of committing any, and all, of them.

USING YOUR VOLITION: SIN NATURE vs. HOLY SPIRIT



Every Christian is indwelt by God the Holy Spirit at the moment he (or she) accepts Jesus Christ as his Savior. The Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity. His role in the Christian's life is to help, or walk with, the Christian during his time on earth.

In whom you also trusted after you heard the Word of Truth, the gospel of your salvation, in whom also after you believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit. (Ephesians 1:13)

The fact God gave us the Holy Spirit is His guarantee we have eternal life. Not only does the Holy Spirit indwell us, but we are mandated to let Him control our lives. The Bible clearly identifies the battle we have within us -- the sin nature versus the Holy Spirit. Either one or the other is in control.

Walk in the [Holy] Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh. For the flesh wars against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary the one to the other, so you cannot do the things you would. (Galatians 5:16-17)

The big question for you to answer is this: Who is going to run the show now that you are a Christian? If you allow the sin nature to run things, you will constantly commit sin; but if you will allow the Holy Spirit to remain in control, you can keep that sin nature suppressed.

USING YOUR VOLITION

When you sin, you are using your volition to make a decision that puts the sin nature in control. 1 Thessalonians 5:19 says, “*Quench not the Spirit of God.*” This means you can shut off the power of the Holy Spirit, just as if you took a water hose and folded it in half while the water was still on. The flow ceases. It is clear the Holy Spirit does not appreciate it when you throw Him under the bus, and allow the sin nature to take control of your life. The Bible warns us against doing this in Romans 6:12, “*Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lust.*”

But as we discussed above, the Bible makes it clear that even though we have been saved, we all sin from time to time, and put the sin nature in control of our lives. So, what do we do about this? Are we doomed to be without the Holy Spirit from then on? No. There is a procedure provided in the Bible found in 1 John 1:9. My pastor calls it **rebound**, and here’s how I found out about it.

Using Rebound to put the Holy Spirit Back in Control

Even though I had accepted Christ as my Savior, I was still messing up from time to time. (Does this sound like you?) My religious, self-righteous friends would see my failures, and say that I must not have really been saved because they were not tempted to sin in the same areas I was. Their sins were always subtler; mine were quite obvious. What I needed was to learn how to recover from my failures, and keep moving forward in my spiritual life. Luckily, my pastor taught me a verse that unlocked the secret to recovering from my failures:

If we confess [name] our sins [to God, silently], He is faithful and just to forgive our [known] sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness [known and forgotten sins]. (1 John 1:9)

USING YOUR VOLITION

My pastor friend called this rebound because I was like a ball bouncing in and out of bounds. My sins would cause me to bounce out of fellowship with God. Then, when I named them silently to God, I would bounce back into fellowship. Often, I had to use this verse several times a day, and you may also. My habit was to name my sins as soon as I committed them, and not wait until I went to bed at night. Sometimes, I would confess the same type of sin many times in one day; but eventually I began to grow in my new life as a Christian, and began to understand why I was doing some of these things.

I learned that rebounding was the secret to keeping the Holy Spirit in control of my life, and maintaining fellowship with God. When the Holy Spirit was in control, it meant I had certain privileges: not only could I avoid sinning, but I could pray effectively, receive help as I studied God's Word, and could produce divine good. All of these things will be discussed later on.

Even King David used the Old Testament equivalent of rebound. In Psalm 32:5 he said, *"I acknowledge my sin unto You, and my iniquity [wickedness] I did not hide; I said, 'I will confess my transgressions to the Lord', and You forgave the iniquity of my sin."*

So how does rebound work? Once you go to God and name your sin(s), the Holy Spirit is no longer grieved or quenched. Do not worry if you cannot remember every sin you commit. No one can! Just remember God said *He will forgive your sins, and cleanse you from all unrighteousness*. That includes the screw-ups you don't remember.

KEEPING THE SIN NATURE IN CHECK



Divine Intervention

Failure to admit your sins by rebound leads to further action taken by your Heavenly Father. As previously mentioned, there are earthly consequences to sins. Once you have believed in Jesus Christ, you are no longer liable for your sins in eternity because of the divine pardon. However, these sins continue to have earthly consequences resulting in divine discipline. As the Bible says, “*The evil deeds of a wicked man ensnare him; the cords of his sin hold him fast*” (Proverbs 5:22).

When God disciplines you, He does so to get your attention. He does this in many different ways, but the purpose is always to get you to wake up, name your sins to Him in silent prayer, and get back into His perfect plan for your life. Once you have rebounded, the punishment may continue, but the purpose then becomes blessing rather than discipline.

For no one is cast off by the Lord forever. Though He brings grief, He will show compassion. So great is His unfailing love. For He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to anyone.
(Lamentations 3:31)

As Christians, when we break fellowship with God by means of personal sin, and do not recover through rebound, we subject ourselves to divine discipline. Hebrews 12:6 says, “*For whom the Lord loves He chastens and scourges every son whom He receives.*” Let me try to make this more modern

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sounding: because the Lord loves you, He has to discipline you. If you read Hebrews 12:7 you will find these words, *“Endure your discipline. God corrects you, as a father corrects his children.”*

God does not discipline us because He is angry at us, but because we are on the road to destruction. Unless He steps in, we will self-destruct. I suggest you read the story of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15:11-32. Here you will find a young man who deserted his father, believing he could do better on his own. He set off down the My Way Highway and just about lost everything. Because of intense suffering from hunger and deprivation, he finally admitted his sin, and went home to his father, expecting to be demoted to the rank of a slave. Much to his surprise, he was reinstated to the rank of a privileged son. We are very similar to the Prodigal Son when we break fellowship with God through our rebellion and sin. Our discipline (primarily the misery we put upon ourselves) is intense, and designed to bring us to humility and confession. Once this occurs, we can resume our spiritual lives.

Types of Divine Discipline

Divine discipline comes in these three stages: Warning Discipline; Intensive Discipline; and Dying Discipline.

Warning Discipline. This usually comes in the form of a visual or verbal warning. In other words, the Holy Spirit will use something said or written to get your attention. If that does not get your attention and cause you to rebound (1 John 1:9), God initiates the next stage.

Intensive Discipline. At this stage, the Lord has to apply some pain to get your attention. This is like a father taking his son to the woodshed for a little one-on-one. When I was in high school, we had a boys' counselor who was a retired pro baseball player. His swing with a shaved-off baseball bat was enough to correct anyone's errant ways. His words were, "Now, can you get back to class and behave?" Mine were,

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“Yes sir.” If the ‘woodshed’ approach doesn’t work, the final stage kicks in.

Dying Discipline. Notice Proverbs 15:10, *“Harsh discipline is for him who forsakes the way, and he who hates correction shall die.”* When God steps in, and puts us under divine discipline, we can react or respond. The person with arrogance will always react, and blame it on someone else. He will play the victim card, and may even blame God himself.

The person with humility will respond, and admit his sin and failure. You see, we can shorten our own lives by continuing down the My Way Highway, making one bad decision after the next, failing to confess our sins and get back on track. At some point, the Lord has no choice but to remove us from this life, and bring us home before we destroy ourselves and/or others. He does this, as He does all things, for our own good.

Volitional Responsibility (Consequences of Free Will)

While it is true the Lord must discipline us at times in order to get our attention, it is also true that many of the hardships we face in life simply result from our own bad decisions. Under the law of volitional responsibility, we cause much of our own misery and suffering. It is easy to blame parents, circumstances or environment for our difficulties in life. This is simply wrong thinking. Getting a raw deal in life does not justify bitterness or blame. Every human being must take full responsibility for his own decisions and actions in life. We are problem-manufacturing machines! See what the Bible says about it:

Be not deceived; God cannot be mocked.
Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.
(Galatians 6:7)

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They sow the wind and reap the whirlwind.
(Hosea 8:7)

Anyone who does wrong will be repaid for their wrongs, and there is no favoritism. (Colossians 3:25)

God has established some guidelines to help us keep our volition in check. He has provided laws, as well as a system of authority, to enforce those laws. Read on.

The Principle of Authority

The Bible teaches the concept of authority in the book of Romans:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God and those who resist will bring judgment upon themselves. (Romans 13:1-2)

God Himself gave us laws in order to protect our freedom and privacy. All authority comes from God and must therefore be obeyed. We are also told in this passage that if we resist authority, we are resisting the laws of God. Those in authority include all branches of the judicial system in our country: policemen, State Troopers, U.S. Marshals, immigration officers, judges and even institutional guards. Each of these individuals has the power to arrest or to convict anyone who breaks the laws of the land. Here is a simple example.

You are driving down the freeway. Up ahead is a trooper with radar, waiting to catch you if you are speeding. If you obey the law and drive the speed limit, there is no need to

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worry about the officer. But if you are speeding and get caught, then you must pay the fine. You may drive off, cursing the trooper who enforced the law, because you feel you were treated unfairly. Such a reaction usually indicates arrogance. An arrogant person cannot handle authority. Arrogance starts at home, by rejecting the authority of parents, then teachers, and then eventually it rejects the authority of the police officer. Such a person is maladjusted to society. On the other hand, a person with humility may not like the idea of paying a big fine for speeding, but he respects the officer, and swallows his medicine without complaining. He might even thank the officer for reminding him to slow down.

ARROGANCE vs. HUMILITY



I will now describe the opposing attitudes of arrogance and humility for you, and will use Bible passages to help you understand the difference. A dictionary definition of arrogance is “a feeling of superiority shown in an overbearing manner.” Humility, in contrast, is defined as “the quality or state of being humble.” This distinction is very important in the Christian life. Whereas the attitude of Jesus Christ was always one of humility, the attitude of the sin nature, even when it tries to be ‘good,’ is one based on arrogance. I hope you will soon understand what I mean.

ARROGANCE

Arrogance (false pride) is a sin that motivates us to commit many additional sins. This mental attitude sin is the corrupter of all you do and say -- a sure sign your sin nature is controlling you. Uncontrolled arrogance can distract you from your Christian life, divorce you from reality and destroy any capacity you may have had for love and happiness. Arrogance rejects authority, and motivates emotional sins such as hatred, anger, self-pity, jealousy, violence and even murder. I realize there are occasionally reasons for justified anger that are not related to an arrogant attitude. However, when a person is infected with unrestrained anger, he is unable to think, and often harms himself or others.

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Cain Murders Abel

Eve conceived, and bore Cain, and said, I have acquired a man from the Lord. Then she bore his brother, Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. It came to pass that Cain brought an offering of the fruit of the ground to the Lord [and he was very proud of his offering]. Abel [who was very humble] also brought of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat portions. The Lord respected Abel and his offering, but He did not respect Cain and his offering. Cain was very angry. The Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? And why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin lies at the door. Its desire is for you, but you should rule over it.” Now Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” He said, “I do not know. Am I my brother’s keeper?” And God said, “What have you done? The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:1-10)

You have read for yourself how Cain murdered his brother Abel because he was jealous of the attention God showed him. Cain reacted to God’s rejection of his offering, and took out his bitterness and jealousy on his brother.

Arrogance must be controlled before it motivates revenge. If this sin has caused you to do dumb things, remember what the Scripture says about it:

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There are six things that the Lord hates, even seven that are disgusting to him: arrogant eyes; a lying tongue; hands that kill innocent people; a mind devising wicked plans; feet that are quick to do wrong; a dishonest witness spitting out lies; and a person who spreads conflict among relatives. (Proverbs 6:16-19)

Arrogance comes, then comes shame; but wisdom remains with humble people. Integrity guides decent people; but hypocrisy leads treacherous people to ruin. (Proverbs 11:2-3)

A stubborn fool considers his own way the right one; but a person who listens to advice is wise. When a stubborn fool is irritated, he shows it immediately; but a sensible person hides the insult. (Proverbs 12:15-16)

The Three Stages of Arrogance

Arrogant people like to believe they are justified in everything they do. They overlook their own failures, and have the idea that rules are only for others. In self-justification, they make excuses for themselves, often blaming their situation on others. This is the first stage of arrogance. It leads quickly to the second stage, called self-deception, which keeps them from seeing life with any objectivity. Finally, arrogant people get into total self-absorption, the third stage. At this point they lose all standards, and are willing to do anything to ease their own unhappiness. They have complete disregard for anyone beyond themselves.

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The Arrogance of Religion

Arrogant people usually have a very unrealistic self-image. They do not see themselves as others see them, particularly not as God sees them. There is no bigger turn-off than the arrogant person who is also ‘religious.’ He never sees his own flaws and failures, but he sure is good at seeing yours. For example, the religious man may think he is gaining God’s favor by not drinking or smoking, while ‘looking down his nose’ at those who do. In public, he presents a squeaky-clean image. He doesn’t fool God, though. Proverbs 23:7 tells us, *“For as a man thinks in his heart, so is he.”*

This is a subject seldom discussed in churches, and for good reason. The concept of organized religion is a very arrogant one. Unlike Christianity, which is a personal relationship between God and man through man’s faith in the saving work of Jesus Christ, religion is man’s attempt to seek God’s approval. It is the height of arrogance to think you can earn your way into heaven by being good, or by following some religious code.

God is not impressed by church membership, a self-inflated attitude or an offering in the collection plate. Salvation does not come through false goodness, or even through obedience to the golden rule. These qualify as works, and totally contradict the grace principle I previously explained to you. I told you we are all sinners, and there is nothing we can do to gain God’s approval on our own. We do not earn or deserve an eternal relationship with God. God, in His gracious attitude toward us, provides everything we need. All we have to do is accept it. Anything we add to that neutralizes our faith.

This is something the religious leaders of the Old Testament, known as the Pharisees, did not understand. These arrogant men saw Jesus Christ as an irreverent lawbreaker because He socialized with prostitutes and tax collectors (both hated in Biblical times). When Christ made it clear He was the

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Son of God, the Pharisees became indignant, ‘went ballistic’ and began plotting His death. Surely the true Son of God would not associate with such unrighteous sinners, they thought.

In reality, He not only befriended these people, He guaranteed their eternal life. He did so for all of us. Such an act of grace on the part of Jesus Christ flew in the face of the religious leaders, who believed they could work their way into heaven. Here’s what the Bible says:

For by grace are you saved through faith; and not as a result of works, it is the gift of God, lest any man should boast. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Yet the Pharisees and other religious leaders were so stuck in their own self-righteousness that they were offended by this principle of grace. It upset them that their works were not good enough to measure up to God’s absolute perfection and righteousness. They therefore called for the death of Jesus Christ, an innocent man. *“Then from that day forth they took counsel together to put him to death” (John 11:53).*

Things are really no different today when it comes to organized religion, which also emphasizes works, rather than faith. Even now, many religious people, in their arrogance, cannot accept the fact that God’s gift of salvation is available to all people, regardless of what sins they have committed. It still angers many people that their works neither please God, nor buy them a ticket to heaven. They cannot stand it that God is impartial, that we are imperfect, and that our eternal life is 100% provided by God because of whom and what He is, not because of whom and what we are. People reject Jesus Christ for this very reason, thereby losing their opportunity to be delivered from the Lake of Fire in eternity. This is the worst mistake anyone can make!

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HUMILITY

The Ultimate Example

In sharp contrast to the self-inflated attitude of the religious leaders, is the great humility of our Lord Jesus Christ. We see this in the way He handled the unfair treatment He received during His time on earth. The Bible says this:

[Jesus Christ] made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. (Philippians 2:7-8)

What is humility? Does it mean you walk around all day with your shoulders slumped over, and your eyes on the ground? Does it mean you are to act like a wimp, and never hurt a fly? The answer is No. Humility refers to respect for authority, fair or unfair. When someone in charge of you makes decisions you deem unfair, and you do not like it, you have two choices: react or respond. Arrogant people cannot handle unfair treatment. They get angry, ‘blow up’ and run their mouths, making all sorts of threats. People with humility know they are getting a bad deal, but they keep their mouths shut, and handle the situation with forgiveness. You and I can only manage to do this when we learn to think like Christ thought, which we achieve through the **renovation of our thinking**. I will explain more about this later. First, let me tell you about what happened to Jesus Christ.

Humility in Action

When our Lord was arrested the night before He was crucified, He was subjected to six different trials. All were

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illegal. He was even beaten prior to His trial, although Pontius Pilate, the judge who handled His case, actually found Him innocent.

The Soldiers Mock Jesus Christ

Pilate took Jesus and scourged Him. The soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on His head, and they put on Him a purple robe. Then they said, "Hail, King of the Jews!" They struck Him with their hands. Pilate then went out again, and said to them, "Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him." (John 19:1-4)

Jesus Christ was pronounced **not guilty**, but He was still given the death penalty! Political pressure on Pilate caused him to give in to the demands of the Pharisees. The Apostle John writes:

From then on Pilate sought to release Him, but the Jews cried out, saying, "If you let this man go, you are not Caesar's friend. Whoever makes himself a king speaks against Caesar." When Pilate therefore heard that saying, he brought Jesus out and sat down in the judgment seat in a place that is called The Pavement, but in Hebrew, Gabbatha. Now it was the Preparation Day of the Passover, and about the sixth hour, he said to the Jews, "Behold your King!" But they cried out, "Away with Him, away with Him! Crucify Him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." (John 19:12-15)

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If you were in this situation, how would you have handled it? Would they have dragged you out of the courtroom kicking and screaming about how unfairly you were being treated? Notice how Jesus Christ responded to Pilate's authority to put Him to death. Remember, I told you that all authority comes from God. Jesus Christ, on earth as a man, submitted to that authority, realizing His Heavenly Father ordained it.

Then Pilate said to Him, "Are You not speaking to me? Do You not know that I have power to crucify You, and power to release You?" Jesus answered, "You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above." (John 19:10-11)

Our Lord Jesus Christ knew His mission was to die on the cross on our behalf. There was never a question about that. He came to this earth with that purpose in mind. In His humility, He allowed Pilate to order His crucifixion.

Behold we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again. (Matthew 20:18-19)

Christ Fulfilled His Mission

Pilate did not have a clue about the significance of his ruling. As far as he was concerned, he was simply putting to death a man who was causing a disturbance. However, this was much more than a routine Roman execution. This was a guarantee of our salvation! It was prophesied:

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He is despised and rejected by men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. We hid, as it were, our faces from Him. He was despised, and we did not esteem Him. He has borne our grief and carried out our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. (Isaiah 53:3-5)

Matthew describes the event as follows:

Likewise, the chief priests also, mocking with the scribes and elders, said, “He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him. He trusted in God; let God deliver Him now if He will have Him; for He said, ‘I am the Son of God.’” Even one of the robbers crucified alongside Christ insulted Him with the same words. (Matthew 27:41-44)

Of course, Jesus Christ could have gotten down from that cross. He is God! However, had He done so, we would have been condemned in our spiritual death for eternity. Our Lord’s mindset was of humility and submission to authority, even though it was unfair. “*For He [God the Father] made Him [God the Son] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him*” (2 Corinthians 5:21). We are challenged to have this same mindset in the New Testament Scripture.

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Jesus Christ Pardons a Criminal

Two other men were being executed simultaneously with Christ. Their crosses were on either side of His. The Bible records the crucifixion of Jesus Christ in the four gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Only Luke records the amazing mention of a divine pardon issued to the second of the two criminals. While one blasphemed Christ, “If you are Christ, save yourself and us;” the other corrected his friend, “We received the due rewards of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.” *“Then he turned to Jesus and said, ‘Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom’”* (Luke 23:42). The man acknowledged his acceptance of the true identity of the Savior. The answer Jesus Christ gave him is astounding: *“Assuredly I say unto you, today you will be with me in Paradise”* (Luke 23:43).

Our Lord had just granted a divine pardon, guaranteeing the believing criminal eternal life in heaven. *“Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ [our Savior] is born of God”* (1 John 5:1). You see, what Christ did for us was pre-determined in eternity past, and promised by God. His death on the cross was the plan of God by which our salvation was made possible. Without His sacrificial death, we could not be saved.

THOUGHT VS. EMOTION



Our lives consist of thoughts and actions. Most of the time, we think and then we do. Problems arise when we do not think, but rather act only upon emotions. Let me explain.

Each of us has a soul. It is the invisible, immortal part of us. Deuteronomy 6:5 says, “*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.*” Our soul contains certain characteristics. It can think (mentality). It can choose (volition). It has awareness (conscience) and awareness of self; we can pick ourselves out of a picture (self-consciousness). We also possess emotions. Emotions were designed as a way for us to appreciate life. However, we were never designed by God to be controlled by our emotions. Emotions can be wonderful, but they can be dangerous. If they interact with our volition, and begin to run the show, then we make decisions based on what we feel, not what we think.

Emotions can fuel your thoughts and cause you to daydream. How many times have you imagined yourself somewhere else? Emotions can make you sad, and cause you to shed a tear. They can also make you very happy. These are normal emotional responses.

However, volition coupled with emotion can go wild when not restrained by the conscience. Your conscience is the part of your soul that contains your standards regarding right and wrong. You learned most of these standards at an early age. A few examples include hygiene, privacy, respect for human life and obedience to rules. When you use your volition to override your conscience by acting on emotion, you are likely to make some very bad decisions.

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Drugs and alcohol bring out emotions, and cloud the conscience. When you get high, you stop thinking. Everything you do is based on feelings. At this point, the boundaries imposed by your conscience are no longer in place. You may even justify committing a crime in order to sustain a habit that is slowly destroying your life. I am neither a lawyer nor a judge, but I know trouble when I see it brewing.

Emotionalism is not the Christian Way of Life

Contrary to what you may have been told, Christianity has nothing to do with emotion. It is not about getting worked up at a church service, weeping tears at the altar, telling your neighbor you love them or feeling spiritual. It is not even about singing, reciting prayers or parroting-back phrases from a worship manual. These things have no lasting impact. In doing them, you are going through the motions, but these will not carry you past Sunday lunch. Only Biblical knowledge in your soul will sustain you through life's ups and downs.

Thinking, not Emoting,
is the Key to Maturing as a Christian

Living the Christian life is all about thinking. Any emotional response comes merely through appreciation for all God has provided. You have been given eternal life. You have been given the Mind of Christ recorded in the Bible. And although you may not have found him yet, you have been given a pastor who can tell you just what the Scripture means. As you learn, you begin to understand Christ's thinking, and have the opportunity to make His thoughts your own thoughts. Philippians 2:5 says, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*" You must renovate or rebuild the way you think. Instead of seeing life through human eyes (human viewpoint), you can look at it through God's eyes (divine viewpoint).

THOUGHT VS. EMOTION

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2)

As you grow spiritually, you break old patterns and habits, and learn a new way of life. Your mindset begins to change. Arrogance is broken, and you start to respond to unfair situations with forgiveness, rather than reacting with bitterness and revenge. In essence, you begin to think like Christ thought during His time on this planet. You become spiritually mature.

In order to be a spiritually mature Christian, you need a maximum amount of the Scriptures circulating around in your mind. The more you learn about the Bible, the Word of God, the more mature you become. **That is your objective.** You are able **to glorify God at all times** by making good decisions each day based on what the Word of God says.

BECOMING A MATURE CHRISTIAN



Your Unique Opportunity

Your current environment gives you time to study, and lots of opportunity to apply what you learn. Let's face the facts. You can sit there and be angry and plot revenge, or you can admit your sin and failure, and make sure it does not happen again. Don't dwell on the past; move ahead in the spiritual life. Use your situation to your advantage! Remember David, Paul and Moses.

Your Helper

It is plain from Scripture that God offers us a second chance; but the truth is He gives us third, and fourth and many more chances once we believe in Christ. As we noted above, that second chance starts with the "new birth," when you are born again. *"In Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:22).*

As a new spiritually-alive person, you have some instructions. John 4:24 says, *"God is a Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and Truth."* Our Lord Jesus Christ told the disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to assist them once He had gone to be with His Father in heaven. Christ said in John 14:16, *"I will pray to the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever."* This demonstrates His commitment to you. Will you be committed to Him?

As discussed previously, staying in fellowship with God moment by moment through rebound is critical if you wish the

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Holy Spirit, rather than your sin nature, to maintain control over you. This fellowship with God through the Holy Spirit is essential in order to become a mature Christian. There is only one way you can accomplish this goal, and it is not by sheer determination alone.

I remind you of what I said earlier in this book. As a Christian and member of the Royal Family of God, you have been indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and mandated to be filled with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18). The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to reveal God's plan to you, as well as to enable you to live His plan.

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 things that I said to you. (John 14:26)

Galatians 5:16 tells us, *"I say then, walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh [sin nature control of your soul]."* Unless you understand this simple truth, you will frustrate yourself, because it is not possible to live the Christian life without the filling of the Holy Spirit.

Let me state once again, to be filled with the Holy Spirit, use rebound (1 John 1:9). *"If we confess our sins, the Lord is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."* When we sin by an act of our volition, we quench (switch off) the Holy Spirit. When we confess the sin, we resume the filling of the Holy Spirit. It's like letting the sin nature out of the box, and putting the Holy Spirit in the box. Your volition chooses.

This very moment, as you read these words, you are either filled with the Holy Spirit, or under the control of your sin nature (called being carnal). There is no in-between. Either you are spiritual, or you are carnal. Spirituality is a term for someone who is filled with the Holy Spirit. Carnality is a term for someone who is out of fellowship with God, and under sin

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nature control, having quenched the Holy Spirit by committing personal sin. The filling of the Spirit is not only necessary for fellowship with God, it is necessary for effective prayer, and for learning the Word of God. Not even our good deeds count if we are carnal (out of fellowship) when we perform them.

Gaining Momentum

In Luke 11:28, our Lord Jesus Christ tells us, *“Blessed are they that hear the Word of God and keep it.”* The word *blessed* in this passage means happy or happiness. Our Lord made it clear that true happiness in life comes from hearing the Word of God and keeping it.

Likewise, all spiritual momentum consists of two things: hearing, and keeping, God’s Word. You and I cannot grow up spiritually, nor can we replicate the life of Christ, if we do not hear the teaching of God’s Word and apply what we hear. *“Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God”* (Romans 10:17). The more you hear, the greater opportunity you have for growth, as long as you are listening to a qualified pastor-teacher. Here is an easy-to-remember saying that describes your goals as a Christian:

LAG – Learn, Apply and Glorify

If we want to glorify God, we must learn and apply His Word in our lives. Remember the passages we read in the section entitled, “Now That I’m Saved, What Comes Next?” 2 Peter 3:18 and 2 Timothy 2:15 both mandate us to grow spiritually.

Doing the Right Thing in the Right Way

If you wish to become a mature Christian and glorify God to the max, even in an extreme environment such as where you

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may be now, the next few pages of information are very important. There is a word I want you to be familiar with; it is **protocol**. Simply put, you follow protocol by doing a right thing in a right way. Doing a right thing in a wrong way makes it wrong. For example, it is always right to pray. However, you can pray the wrong way if you pray when you are out of fellowship. Psalm 66:18 tells us, *“If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear.”* Prayer is never wrong; but a prayer prayed in the wrong way will not be heard.

A Christian out of fellowship with unconfessed sin in his life can still do all the right things, and even look very holy while doing them. A right thing done in the wrong way is wrong. This is called human good, as opposed to divine good (a right thing done in a right way). Failure to stay filled with the Holy Spirit, even while doing all the things Christians are supposed to do, does not add up to a right in God’s eyes.

Paul compares human good, done in our own energy, to flammable wood, hay and stubble. Human good will not stand the test of fire in heaven. However divine good, produced through the power of the Holy Spirit, is likened to gold, silver and precious stones. It has value, durability and meaning to the Lord.

For God has already placed Jesus Christ as the only foundation, and no other foundation can be laid. Some will use gold or silver or precious stones in building on the foundation; others will use wood or grass or straw. The quality of each person’s work will be seen when the Day of Christ exposes it. For on that day, fire will reveal everyone’s work; the fire will test it and show its real quality. If what was built on the foundation survives the fire, the builder will receive a reward. But if your work is burnt up, then you will lose it; but you yourself will be saved, as if you had escaped through the fire. (1 Corinthians 3:11-15)

BECOMING A MATURE CHRISTIAN

In heaven, there will be a time when the Lord Jesus Christ, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, will examine each Christian. He will compare the time we spend in fellowship, with the time we spend out of fellowship. The good deeds we produce while under the filling of the Holy Spirit will endure the test of fire. The things we do in carnality, under sin nature control, will burn up and not be rewarded.

There is no doubt God provides eternal rewards for those who perform divine good and advance to spiritual maturity. Revelation 2:10 teaches us to: *“Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.”* **Rewards for Christians who learn and apply God’s Word are tremendous, because they do the right things in the right way.**

For those who do not, the loss is great. Yes, they will be in heaven, which is fantastic, but they will be there minus rewards, and have reason to regret not having finished the course. Here is the principle: All your good deeds will be rejected at the end of time if they are right things done in a wrong way. The flesh can produce religious actions. Even lost men can go to church and give money, but they are not earning equity with God by doing such things. Coming to church on Sunday as a ‘nod to God’ while failing to live the Christian way of life does not add up to divine good.

Remember to stay filled with the Holy Spirit moment by moment. Sin grieves and quenches the Holy Spirit, and thus anything we do for God, or in the name of God, while unconfessed sin remains in our souls will be trashed. At the same time, those same deeds done under the filling of the Holy Spirit will be rewarded for all eternity. Don’t be suckered into performing rituals or deeds that have no value to God.

EXCUSE MAKER OR RISK TAKER

WILL YOU FOLLOW CHRIST'S COMMAND TO "FOLLOW ME?"



In Matthew 8:18-27 we learn about excuse makers and risk takers:

And when Jesus saw great multitudes about Him, He gave a command to depart to the other side [of the Sea of Galilee]. Then a certain scribe came and said to Him, "Teacher, I will follow You wherever You go." (Matthew 8:18-19)

At first glance, this appears to be a willing disciple (student), but closer inspection will show you why the Lord Jesus Christ scolded him.

Excuse Makers

The New Testament was written in the Greek language. If you look at Matthew 8:19 in the Greek, you will see the scribe actually said, "I will follow you if, in fact, you really do go." He was suggesting that Jesus Christ would not leave the crowd, since His security was found there. People who loved Him, and supported Him, would feed and care for Him.

Our Lord saw through this man's phoniness. "*And Jesus said to him, 'Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head'*" (Matthew 8:20). [In other words, I have no tour bus and no hotel reservations, and because you are accustomed to comfort and

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luxury, you have no intentions of following me.] This guy was an excuse maker!

In the next verse, we see the same thing. *“Then another of His disciples said to Him, Lord, let me first go and bury my father” (Matthew 8:21)*. This seems to be a legitimate request. This man’s father had passed away, and he wanted the Lord to hang out there for a day or two before leaving so he could attend the funeral. Notice what our Lord says to this man, *“Follow Me, and let the dead bury their own dead” (Matthew 8:22)*. What our Lord meant was, “Let the spiritually dead bury the physically dead, but you follow Me.” The disciple would not follow Christ, and used the funeral as an excuse to walk away. Another excuse maker.

I was an excuse maker, too. I grew up in a dysfunctional home without a father, and I seldom saw my mother. I do not say this to accuse her of not loving me. She was a single parent working a job and trying to watch over her son. I was farmed out to different guardians who would keep me on a weekly basis. Finally, at twelve, I ran home, not away from home. I insisted my mother allow me to stay with her. The opportunity for trouble was around every corner. Athletics salvaged me. A football coach took an interest in me, and encouraged me to achieve my full potential. As a result, I made the High School All American Football Team, and received a full scholarship to the University of Alabama.

Despite these advantages, I was still an excuse maker. My grades were not good; I was not dumb, just stupid. My work ethic was not good because of laziness. I walked away from that scholarship in a ‘frantic search for happiness.’ Meaning I had the vain hope of finding my happiness out in the world. That search led me down the My Way Highway. As a result, I wasted years. At night, I would lie in my bed and see all the bad decisions I had made, but I did not know how to make them go away. I never really thought about God, but I always knew He was there. Making excuses was a way of life for me.

RISK TAKER OR EXCUSE MAKER

All that changed for me one day when I attended church with a young lady because I wanted a date with her. At church, I heard the truth for the very first time. What began as a date with a beautiful girl, became a lifetime relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. It was time for me to “get into the boat.”

Risk Takers

Many new Christians find the challenge of following the Lord to be too demanding. It interferes with their personal plans and ambitions. What about you? Do you have what it takes to be a risk taker now that you have received your pardon and been granted eternal life? Notice what happened to those who actually had the courage to follow Christ on that late summer evening.

Now when He got into a boat, His disciples followed Him. And suddenly a great tempest arose on the sea, so that the boat was covered with the waves. But He was asleep. Then His disciples came to Him, and awoke Him saying, “Lord, save us! We are perishing.” (Matthew 8:23-25)

At night, in a tremendous storm, they felt sure the boat would sink, and they would all drown. Our Lord was not in a panic. He was fast asleep. He would never have brought them out onto the lake for the purpose of letting them drown, but they did not yet understand this. Yes, He could heal the sick and cast out demons, but could He calm the storm? *“He said to them, ‘Why are you fearful, O you of little faith?’ Then He arose and rebuked the winds and the sea, and there was a great calm”* (Matthew 8:26).

RISK TAKER OR EXCUSE MAKER

Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who fear [respect] Him, on those who hope in His mercy to deliver their soul from death, and to keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield. For our heart shall rejoice in Him because we have trusted in His Holy Name. (Psalm 33:18-21)

The issue for these men in the boat was faith. Our Lord said they were men of *little faith*. They focused on the problem of the storm, instead of on the solution. The solution was Jesus Christ! He was right there, onboard with them. When the men awakened Him, they did not immediately realize the scope of His power over nature. The men marveled, saying, “*Who can this be, that even the winds and the sea obey Him?*” (Matthew 8:27). The disciples were in the safest place they could be, in the boat with the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Peter: From Excuse Maker to Risk Taker

The Apostle Peter is a beautiful final example of what it means to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior. Let us take encouragement from his example. Peter was one of our Lord’s first disciples. He had followed Jesus Christ since first hearing of Him through his brother, Andrew. Andrew had come to Peter immediately to tell him he had met the Messiah (John 1:41-42). Peter quickly became one of our Lord’s most trusted disciples.

But shortly before our Lord’s crucifixion, when things had really heated up, Peter got scared, and actually denied his relationship with Christ. This was not a surprise to our Lord, since He had warned Peter that Satan wanted to test him (Luke 22:31-34). The night our Lord was arrested, Peter followed Him to see where He was being taken. Once the group arrived at the high priest’s house, someone recognized Peter as a follower of Christ; however, Peter, being afraid, vigorously

RISK TAKER OR EXCUSE MAKER

denied it. He did so on three different occasions in one night (Luke 22:54-62). The third time, Jesus Christ was actually present, and caught Peter's eye.

At this point, Peter wept bitterly and fled. You might think this would have been the end of Peter. Not only had he failed three times to admit he was a Christian and a disciple of the Messiah, but he knew our Lord had actually watched him do so (Luke 22:61). Like you and like me, Peter was simply frightened when put to the test. He recovered, however, and not only became a great apostle and writer of New Testament Scripture, but he eventually became known for his strong, unswerving faith and loyalty to our Lord Jesus Christ. The lessons learned from Peter, Paul, Moses and David apply today.

GOD IS LOOKING FOR INVISIBLE HEROES



The invisible hero is a mature Christian who reaches his full potential with God. He isn't a hero because he impresses people with the amazing things he does. He is a hero because he relies upon invisible God, and uses invisible assets such as the peace and strength that come from knowing and trusting God and His Word.

No one around you can see inside your soul. No one knows what you are thinking unless you tell them. Thus, your thoughts are invisible to them. With God, this is not true. He can read your thoughts. As a matter of fact, He knew you would be reading this book millions of years ago. God is *omniscient*. This means He is all-knowing.

The Lord's eyes scan the whole world to find those whose hearts are committed to Him, and to strengthen them. (2 Chronicles 16:9)

For the ways of a man are before the eyes of the Lord, and He watches all his paths. (Proverbs 5:21)

If you have received your divine pardon, and wish to honor God as a result of His grace gift to you, then you need to become the person He intended for you to be. Although He has known your thoughts and intentions since eternity past, the choice is yours. **Only you can make the decision to move forward.**

GOD IS LOOKING FOR INVISIBLE HEROES

WHAT IT TAKES TO BE AN INVISIBLE HERO

God rewards integrity. Once our thoughts honor Him through divine viewpoint thinking, we become invisible heroes. God calls us to a life of virtue and honor, no matter where we are located. The Bible orders Christians to do many things. Using an analogy, Christ told His disciples to *get into the boat*. (He actually gave the command to depart to the other side, as we read earlier in Matthew 8:18). These direct orders in Scripture are called “mandates.”

If you have what it takes to be a risk taker, and *are willing to get into the boat* (follow Christ), then here is what it will take. As Christians, these are your mandates:

Study God’s Word

We are mandated to study God’s Word. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, “*Be diligent [study] to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of Truth.*” The mandate is to study God’s Word so we do not get mixed up and do something dumb. *Rightly dividing* means doing it correctly. It is so easy to get lured into doing right things in the wrong way, which are useless to God.

Pray Effectively

1 Thessalonians 5:17 says, “*Pray without ceasing.*” A second important mandate from God is to pray. Remember, use rebound first. “*If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear*” (Psalm 66:18). We can recite the most beautiful public prayers, and we can utter the sincerest private prayers, but if a prayer is offered with sin present in our lives, it will go unheard.

Another reason why prayers go unanswered is that God is a God of order. You cannot make up your own rules when it

GOD IS LOOKING FOR INVISIBLE HEROES

comes to worshipping Him. You must not pray to the wrong member of the Trinity. Prayers are to be addressed to the Father (Dear Heavenly Father), through the power of the Holy Spirit (by using rebound, 1 John 1:9), and in the name of the Son (in Jesus Christ's name, Amen). You can bet if you hear someone praying to Jesus, they are doing a right thing, but in a wrong way.

We pray as a means of expressing adoration or thanksgiving for God and all He has done on our behalf. I often thank the Father for saving me, and giving me a life worth living, even after a hard day. *"Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus"* (1 Thessalonians 5:18).

Prayer also allows for intercession (praying on behalf of others). I routinely request prayer from others as I seek to present the Gospel. Likewise, I consider it a great honor to have the opportunity to pray for others. Philippians 1:3-4 summarizes, *"I thank God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making requests for you all with joy."*

Finally, we may pray for our own needs, called petition. *"Let us therefore draw near with boldness unto the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy, and may find grace to help us in time of need"* (Hebrews 4:16). We ask God to supply our needs, and trust Him to do so. I have discovered He is willing to pour out many blessings, even above and beyond my needs. James 4:3 tells us, *"We have not, because we ask not."* Do not be afraid to approach God's throne and request your needs; be faithful to trust Him, and wait until He supplies your request. *"All things you ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive"* (Matthew 21:22). We should also ask for His guidance. *"Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me, and know my anxieties; and see if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting"* (Psalm 139:23).

GOD IS LOOKING FOR INVISIBLE HEROES

Mature as a Christian

A third mandate we have noted already is found in 2 Peter 3:18, “*But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.*” Through the filling of the Holy Spirit, we are able to advance in our spiritual lives as we learn what the Bible says. The Holy Spirit provides for us a spiritual IQ which allows us to grasp the meaning of God’s Word. It is the job of the pastor to explain the actual words written in the pages of Scripture.

Find a Pastor and Grow

At the moment of our salvation, God gives each of us a spiritual gift. Some receive the gift of evangelism, and a few receive the gift of pastor. “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers*” (Ephesians 4:11). (The gifts of apostleship and prophecy no longer exist. Once the Bible was completed, the Lord discontinued them, as they were no longer necessary. More detail is beyond the scope of our discussion). Just realize that not everyone has the gift of pastor; not everyone is qualified to teach the Word of God.

There are many qualified pastors across this Nation. When I say qualified, I refer to men with the gift of pastor who have studied and prepared for a lifetime of service in the pulpit. These men understand the original languages, and teach in a methodical line-upon-line manner, leaving nothing to chance. Your job is to study under a man like this, and let him feed you the Word of God on a daily basis.

Be careful of hustlers who are out to make a buck off God. Notice what Paul wrote in one of his letters to the Corinthians: “*We are not like so many others, who handle God’s message as if it were cheap merchandise; but because God has sent us, we speak with sincerity in His presence, as servants of Christ*” (2 Corinthians 2:17). The Word of God is never to be sold!

GOD IS LOOKING FOR INVISIBLE HEROES

No money should ever be requested in exchange for Bible teaching.

The pastors I respect do not charge for anything. They will enthusiastically provide you with hundreds of hours of study material, if you simply request it. The big word is IF. Do you want to grow? Are you hungry for truth? Are you willing to take a few risks? Are you willing to follow our Lord's mandate to *get into the boat*? If so, I promise you an amazing life – a life beyond your dreams. It all starts with God's Word.

IN CONCLUSION



God has made certain wonderful provisions for Christians who seek His wisdom, and treasure His commands. Some of these provisions are in Proverbs 2:6-11:

For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth comes knowledge and understanding. He holds success in store for the upright. He is a shield to those whose walk is blameless. For He guards the course of the just, and protects the way of His faithful ones. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair -- every good path.

I call these **The Fantastic Four**:

Wisdom will enter your heart [thinking].

Knowledge will be pleasant in your soul [through learning].

Discretion will guard you [ability to make wise decisions].

Understanding will watch over you.

Be aware, these provisions don't just fall into the Christian's lap. There are conditions for receiving them, and these conditions depend upon you and your volition. They are reflected by the word *if* which introduces what we call a conditional clause. That means, maybe you will or maybe you won't make those choices to learn and treasure God's Word.

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My son [the Christian], *if* you accept My words and store up My commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding; *if* you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding; and *if* you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. (Proverbs 2:1-5)

Once again, your volition determines your future. Will you walk alone in this life, or will you walk with God's divine help?

The most important task for any Christian is to establish spiritual growth *momentum*, and maintain it. All momentum is related to hearing God's Word, and keeping what you hear. This is why accurate Bible teaching is so critical. While many people claim to teach the Bible; the truth is, more often than not, they are not qualified to do so.

Many people don't want to devote their time to learning about God. For example, I have a bike and some gym equipment in my home. They do me no good if I do not take the time to use them. It comes down to my desire to be fit. Am I willing to do what it takes, or am I just plain lazy and full of excuses? The same is true for spiritual growth. I can supply you with names of qualified pastors who do a tremendous job of studying and teaching God's Word, but if you don't use your volition to learn from them, then it's all for nothing.

Let me ask a few questions. Are you tired of being run over by circumstances in life? Are you tired of looking at yourself and regretting your decisions? If so, I can help you. If not, pass this book to someone else who may be interested. I might not be able to free your body from confinement, but **I can tell you how to free your mind**. I can also tell you how God's Word can make you optimistic and enthusiastic about each new day. I can even tell you how to live with extreme happiness amidst terrible circumstances. You must decide whether you are

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willing to take the daily steps necessary to learn how to think with divine viewpoint.

The Bible tells us Jesus Christ said, “*Blessed [happy] are those who hear the Word of God and keep it*” (Luke 11:28), and “*These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete*” (John 15:11). The happiness He is speaking of is a state of mind characterized by contentment and capacity to enjoy life. It is not an artificial happiness that depends on circumstances; it is a divine happiness that fills your soul with contentment even in the most distressing circumstances and environments. With God’s Word stored in your soul, you can ride out even the most difficult storms of your life, safely in the Lord’s care, where it is calm.

This is what God offers you in time. Yes, He offers you a divine pardon when you accept Christ as your Savior. He also offers you a life of hope and fulfillment as you follow His plan. This is why the conditional words of Proverbs Chapter 2 are so critical: *if* you treasure His commands, and *if* you reach for understanding.

The only way to do this is to start a diligent search of the Scripture so you will know His commands, and come to understand His plan for you. For this, you need a qualified pastor who will act as your tour guide through the Bible. He can explain passages that seem confusing, and enlighten and encourage you through his teaching. As you learn and grow, you will glorify God and realize what His plan is for you.

No one can do this for you. Either you make the effort, or you squander the opportunity. Don’t miss out on what He has for you. The divine pardon of salvation through faith alone in Christ alone is free and yours, regardless of what other decisions you may make after salvation. Why not *get into the boat* and see what else God has planned for you?!

As the Apostle Paul put it, “***If God be for us [and He is], who can be against us?***” (Romans 8:31).

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RICK HUGHES, founder and President of Rick Hughes Evangelistic Ministries, Inc., communicates clear and concise Biblical principles for hearers to choose to use in their lives. For over 50 years, Rick has presented the truth to thousands of students and spoken at hundreds of schools and churches. Rick has authored several books and hosts a weekly radio broadcast, *The FLOT Line*, all available, for free, on his website, rickhughesministries.org.

A native of Birmingham, Alabama, Rick was raised in a modest, single parent home. He distinguished himself through excellence in athletics being named to the High School All American football team and setting state records in shot put and discus. The University of Florida signed Rick to a full football scholarship, but his SAT scores were too low. Challenged by a coach to overcome this failure, Rick applied himself in the classroom as he had done on the field. He seized the challenge, got a second chance, entered the University of Alabama as a football player under the training of prestigious coach Paul "Bear" Bryant, and won a national championship that year. After just one successful year, however, Rick quit school, and drifted down the My Way Highway. Rick emphasizes bad decisions limit future options. Rick's personal experiences help to vividly teach this principle.

Rick's turning point came when he accepted the Lord Jesus Christ as his Savior, by faith alone in Christ alone. This is the most important decision in your life, also. Rick's decision opened a new path, not of football, but one personally designed for him by God. Through the ministry of Berachah Church in Houston, Texas, and its pastors, R. B. Thieme, Jr., and now R. B. Thieme III, Rick learned principles and promises of God's Word that directed him into a life of Christian ministry. Rick's life is proof that when you leave your own agenda behind and walk into God's plan, you can have amazing fulfillment, happiness and contentment. God's plan will overcome any adversity you face now, or in the future. "For with God, nothing will be impossible" (Luke 1:37).

A DIVINE PARDON

In the Bible, Luke records the amazing *Divine Pardon* issued by Jesus Christ to one of the two criminals crucified beside Him. The first criminal made fun of the Lord saying, "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us." The second man corrected his friend, "We receive the due rewards of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." He then turned to Jesus and said, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom." With these words he expressed his belief in the true identity of the Savior. Jesus Christ's reply was astounding, "Assuredly I say unto you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." Our Lord had just granted this criminal a *Divine Pardon*. You, too, can get a *Divine Pardon*! "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). "Whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16).



Rick Hughes
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