

DOES GOD GRADE ON A CURVE?

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Daniel Webster once said, "The most important thought I ever had was that of my individual responsibility to God." Over 150 years later, 8 out of 10 Americans say they believe they will someday give account of themselves to God.

Another survey noted that 76 percent of those who believe in an afterlife think they have a good chance of going to heaven. But on what basis do so many of us assume we will be welcomed into God's presence? Is it because we are confident that there are a lot of people worse than ourselves?

Whether or not God grades on a curve is an important question that RBC research editor Dennis Fisher takes a look at in the following pages.

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GRADING ON A CURVE

I can see it as if it happened yesterday. The teacher gets up from her desk with a handful of marked papers. She walks to the blackboard, picks up a piece of white chalk, and begins to show the breakdown of test results.

The class knows she grades on a curve. The top 10 percent will earn A's, the next highest 20 percent B's, and the 40 percent in the middle will earn C's. It will be bad news for those who score D's with the next lowest 20 percent, followed by the 10 percent at the bottom who fail.

This has been a tough test. Everyone is sweating. We're all hoping that we scored comparatively well with the rest of the class.

The uneasy experience of being evaluated by how we compare and measure up

to those around us is a part of life that many of us never forget.

THE UPS AND DOWNS OF A CURVE

As students, we may have had a love-hate relationship with the curve. The upside was that this method of grading allowed room for error, especially if the test was so hard that no one scored high. The downside was that the curve automatically put us in competition with our peers.

We also soon learned that being compared with those around us is an unavoidable fact of life. Whether we interview for a job or audition for a part in the community play, we are judged by how we measure up to others.

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What happens after death is a sobering thought. Many of us feel uneasy about standing before our Creator and giving an account of how we have lived our lives. Even if we have laughed among our friends at the idea of hell, we secretly hope that there is no such place. And if there is a heaven, we hope to make it through those “pearly gates”—even if by the skin of our teeth. Our

confidence may be: “I’m not as bad as a lot of people. Even though I’ve made my mistakes, I’m pretty sure that I’m well within ‘the class average.’”

Implied in this kind of reasoning is a relative goodness that is based on how we compare with one another. We take heart in knowing that there are always others far worse than ourselves.

Furthermore, many of us resist the notion that there is something about our own human nature that would keep us out of heaven. I know a lot of “good” people. And you might be one of them. They are kind to their family members. They work hard to pay their bills on time. They’re not perfect, but much of the time they try to do the right thing. They are the sort of people I would want to have as neighbors. And they have earned the

approval of their friends, colleagues, and community.

THE HIDDEN DARK SIDE

There is, however, another side to human nature that also deserves our attention.

Sigmund Freud, the pioneer of modern psychology and an avowed atheist, was surprised by what he discovered about the people he observed. Many of his patients exhibited virtues in their public life. But as he probed deeper, he found hidden drives of anger, lust, and envy. Freud said it was as though he had lifted a flat stone off the top of a grassy knoll near a pond and found underneath the rock a dark world of centipedes, sow bugs, worms, and other creatures fleeing from the light.

What Freud found in his counseling practice is something most of us would

rather not think about. Yet he had stumbled on a great biblical truth about human nature. The gospel of John quotes Jesus as saying something similar:

This is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed (John 3:19-20).

Both the observation of human behavior and the teachings of Christ point to dark shadows within the human heart.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the Nobel Prize winning author, describes the universal reality of this evil when he writes:

Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states,

nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart And even in the best of all hearts, there remains . . . an un-uprooted small corner of evil (*The Gulag Archipelago*, Vol. 2, p.597).

THE EXCUSES WE COME UP WITH

The extent of this faultline within us is something that most of us find difficult to think about. Because we feel uneasy facing our own wrongs, we become adept at coming up with excuses and rationalizations for our mistakes and failures.

C. S. Lewis describes how easily we look past our own faults so we can focus on the failings of others:

This year, or this month, or more likely, this very day, we have failed to [practice] ourselves the kind of behavior we expect from other people.

There may be all sorts of excuses for us. That time you were so unfair to the children was when you were tired. That slightly shady business about the

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money—the one you have almost forgotten—came when you were hard up. . . . The truth is, we believe in decency so much—we feel the Rule of Law pressing on us so—that we cannot bear to face the fact that

we are breaking it, and consequently, we try to shift the responsibility (*Mere Christianity*, pp.7-8).

It's easy for us to find extenuating circumstances for things we have done wrong. And we are not

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alone. All around the world today, people will appeal to a moral standard of conduct that they themselves don't live up to. The reality is that

all of us fall far short of our own standards, let alone the standards of a loving and holy God (Romans 3:23; 6:23).

THE GRANDFATHER GOD

None of us is perfect—not in our own eyes nor in the eyes of a loving God. This might lead us to think that all that matters is “the curve.” A lot of people would say, “If there’s one thing I know, it’s that God doesn’t expect me to be perfect. I may not be a saint, but I’m certainly not a devil. I care about people and try to do the right thing most of the time. If God looks for redeeming qualities in me, I’m sure He will see more good than I can.”

Such thinking sets people up to think of God as a great grandfather in the sky. Grandfathers are

loving, tenderhearted, and patient. Sometimes they even smile at the mischief of their grandchildren.

With a knowing smile, they remind their own sons and daughters that they too were once little handfuls.

When you combine this grandfather view of God with what we know about human behavior, it becomes even easier to assume that if God grades on a curve we will be safe in a crowd of very imperfect people.

The mix of vices and virtues in those around us reassures us that if God wants sinners in heaven, He's going to have to cut most of us a lot of slack. He is going to have to be at least as tolerant and open-minded as we are. What's more, in the competitive world of the curve, the majority of the class always passes the course. Could a loving "Grandfather God" do any less?

WHY GOD DOESN'T GRADE ON A CURVE

Despite the widespread belief that we are safe as long as we "stay with the crowd," the Bible gives us a very different way of looking at our imperfection and how it affects our relationship with a loving and holy God. And to understand this perspective, it's important to look at the early history of our first parents' relationship with God.

THE MISTAKE WAS FATAL

Our first parents, at the dawn of human history, are pictured in the Bible as walking in a garden paradise with their Creator. In the cool of the day, God would visit the planet to share time and conversation with His first human beings.

According to the book of Genesis, God gave only one rule to the new couple. While encouraging them to enjoy themselves in the new home He had given them, the Creator said:

Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die (2:16-17).

Genesis goes on, however, to say that even though Adam and Eve had only one rule to keep, they soon found themselves tempted to break it.

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate. She also gave to her husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they

were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings (3:6-8).

In their act of disobedience, our first parents did something that would forever change not only their own lives but also the lives of all their children.

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“This happened just from eating a piece of fruit?” you ask. “How in the world could such a moral disaster spring from such a small infraction?”

The answer lies in what the act represented—not the act itself. Human beings were created to have a relationship with God and to remain in loving dependence on Him. By one act of distrust and independence they discovered the meaning of evil. By expressing self-reliance, pride, and distrust, they had placed themselves at the center of their own universe.

Over the years it would become apparent that something profound had changed—not only in the character of the human race but also in their shared relationship to the Creator Himself.

THE DEATH WAS SPIRITUAL

Although shaken by feelings of shame and fear, the first couple seemed to survive their disobedience. The sun rose on a new day and

Adam and Eve remained very much alive. But what about the warning of Genesis 2:16-17? God had said, “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”

The explanation lies in the biblical meaning of *death*. The root meaning of this word in the Bible is “separation.” When a person dies physically, his soul separates from his body. But when a person dies spiritually, the spirit is separated from God, the source of spiritual life. When distrust came between our first parents and God, they immediately experienced a separation from Him they had never known before. As a symptom that something had died within them, they also began to die physically.

THE RESULT WAS EVIL

Our first parents broke the one rule their Creator gave them and found themselves expelled from a perfect garden home.

The spiritual death and separation that came into their lives did not stop with them. In time, the couple had two sons. The older cultivated crops, while the other raised flocks. When the older brother felt that the Creator was showing more favor to his brother than to himself, he became angry. Driven by feelings of envy and revenge, the older son killed the younger. The first child of Adam and Eve committed the first murder.

The downward spiral happened quickly. Only two chapters later, Genesis says that “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the

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thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (6:5).

This growing malignancy shows up in wave after wave of war and violence. Those who have only heard about the Bible are sometimes surprised and even shocked by how unsanitized the Scriptures are. Incest, deception, theft, rape, and murder are just the beginning of the list of sins that punctuate and color the pages of both Old and New Testaments.

THE NEED WAS FOR MERCY

In the middle of this realistic record of human nature, we find a strikingly vivid picture of a loving God. Despite the terrible consequences of rebellion against Him, we find God mercifully taking the initiative to stay in relationship with those He created in His image. Time

after time, a holy God “rolls up His sleeves and gets His hands dirty” to stay in contact with a fallen race.

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God mercifully spoke, for example, to a man named Abraham—even though he was worshiping idols. God told him to leave his home in the city of Ur and promised him that He would multiply his offspring. God assured Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation and that

through him all the nations of the world would be blessed (Genesis 12:1-9).

In the generations that followed, Abraham’s offspring grew to be the great nation God had promised. Delivering His people out of slavery from the greatest political power of that day, the loving Creator led them to a land of promise they could call their own.

But the road to that destination was littered with spiritual rebellion. Grumbling and ungratefulness characterized the descendants of Abraham during their wilderness wanderings. In spite of this, God mercifully and supernaturally provided for their daily needs. He fed them daily with a food called manna. And when they thought they were going to die of thirst, He gave them water from a rock. At each step of the

way, God gave His people not what they deserved but patient love. This experience would later cause the whole nation to sing a song that repeated over and over, “His mercy endures forever” (Psalm 136).

THE PICTURE WAS OURS

The ancient people of the Bible passed from the scene a long time ago. Yet the picture and story of their humanity remains as fresh as the daily news.

From Adam to the nation of Israel, the people of this story stand together like our own family portrait. Again and again these people broke the law and rule of God. Yet what they discovered along the way was that in breaking the law, they were themselves broken. The Old Testament prophet repeated the principle of what God had told Adam, “The soul who

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sins shall die” (Ezekiel 18:20). This simple statement shows the enormity of the problem that threatened our fallen race—a problem that could only be solved by the God who loves those He created in His image.

Earlier in this booklet we talked about the common belief that God will grade all of us on a curve of personal merit and comparison with others. But grading on a curve misses the point of our predicament. Just as it would be wrong for a medical school to pass the top percentage of a class even though none of the students qualified to be a doctor, so God cannot be unfaithful to His own standards of justice.

Our problem is that by nature we are so morally flawed and broken that our only hope is for God to deal with us in mercy. To pit us

against one another in a great moral “competition of the curve” would not satisfy His scales of justice.

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The Bible teaches that all who are born into this world inherit the legacy and spiritual condition of our first parents. We are all born spiritually dead and alienated from a wonderfully loving and holy God.

This condition explains not only the problems of

human history in general, but also the relational and personal problems of our own lives. The Scriptures tell us that in our present state all of us have a natural inclination to avoid the truth. Even though we don’t always realize it, we are inclined to resist what we could know about God by suppressing the truth about Him. Rather than turning toward the spiritual light He has provided, we turn away and create God-substitutes in an effort to replace Him with something we can control. Over time, our hearts become hard as we repeatedly ignore His kindness (Romans 1:18-32). We continue along our own way as lost sheep without a shepherd (Isaiah 53:6).

If the severity of this rebellion is not addressed in this life, there can only be the certainty of judgment in the next (Hebrews 9:27). The problem is far too great

for God to simply grade us on a curve. Because we are spiritually dead, none of us, on our own, can pass the test of our accountability to God.

THE SOLUTION WAS GOD'S

If the Bible can be trusted, there are serious consequences to ignoring our spiritual condition and taking comfort in the fact that there are a lot of people worse than we are. Yet it is also in the Bible that we find God's solution for us.

For centuries, God provided the wisdom of the Old Testament to show His people how to live and how to offer sacrifices to atone for their wrongs. These writings were revered as the Word of God and passed on within a religious community from one generation to the next. At the heart of this spiritual faith was the teaching that

God would one day send a Messiah who would deliver His people. These predictions contained mysterious descriptions of how the Servant of the Lord would die like a sacrificial lamb to bear the sins of His people (Isaiah 53).

Eventually, according to the New Testament Gospels, the Messiah did appear. In fulfillment of many predictions, He came as "the light of the world" (John 8:12).

But the light Christ brought made Him a controversial figure. One of the most offensive parts of His teaching was that even the most religious people weren't good enough to enter into the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20). The candor of Jesus was taken as an insult by the religious leaders of Israel. They considered themselves teachers of righteousness and believed that their

knowledge of the law put them above the crowd.

Yet despite their unique spiritual heritage, Jesus declared that those who rejected Him—though they be “sons of the kingdom”—would be rejected from God’s presence in the world to come:

The sons of the kingdom will be cast out into outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 8:12).

According to Jesus, those who refused to admit their condition before God were risking eternal spiritual banishment from the presence of the God they thought they knew. He repeatedly warned that unless they had a change of heart they would be turned away into a darkness of everlasting regret and loss.

So how can we pass life’s final exam and escape eternal separation from God?

PASSING BY THE GRACE OF GOD

What makes the words of Christ so important is that Jesus did more than tell us that our best efforts aren’t enough to bring us to God. He also said He had come to do for us what we could not do for ourselves.

What Christ did for us turned bad news into good news. As we have seen up to this point, without His intervention we would all be lost. According to the Bible, if Christ had not left heaven to come to our rescue, the thought of standing before Him on the curve of personal merit and comparison would be a burden at best. The assurance of our personal comparison with others would require constant rationalization to hope that we have been “good enough.”

According to the Bible, our Creator has provided His own way of delivering us from our hopeless spiritual comparisons and competition. God intervened on our behalf, and offered a solution to restore to us the relationship with Him that our first parents had lost. The solution is more than “a passing grade.” It also includes a new life, a changed heart, and a future that will eventually return us to a paradise that was lost.

THE COST OF GOD'S GRACE

In the New Testament letter to people in Rome, the apostle Paul eloquently expressed how costly it was for God to solve our dilemma. He wrote:

When we were utterly helpless with no way of escape, Christ came at just the right time and died for us sinners who

had no use for Him. Even if we were good, we really wouldn't expect anyone to die for us, though, of course, that might be barely possible. But God showed His great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners (Romans 5:6-8 LB).

The Price That Only God Could Pay. We are all moved by stories of self-sacrifice. Yet there is one act of sacrificial love in human history that stands alone—Jesus Christ's death on the cross.

Have you ever thought about what He endured on our behalf? Imagine the agony as soldiers held Him down and hammered huge spikes through His hands and then His feet.

But the physical agony was not the worst part of His suffering. As He hung suspended between heaven and earth, a great darkness

came over the whole earth. In that darkness, He experienced on our behalf a judgment and separation that caused Him to cry out, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46). His anguished words give us a brief hint of the eternal and infinite price He paid to settle our legal debt.

Never before in all eternity had the Son of God been separated from His Father. Never before had He borne the weight of guilt. Yet in that moment of human history, Christ died for our sin.

The innocent Lamb of God paid the penalty for the guilty. He wanted so much to have us with Him in eternity that He was willing to take the punishment we deserved.

Jesus, . . . for the joy that was set before Him [eternal fellowship with us] endured the cross,

despising the shame (Hebrews 12:2).

But why was Christ's death the only way we could be reconciled to a holy God?

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The cross allowed God to be both just and loving in dealing with our sin. No one else had given us the life and freedom we had misused. No one else, therefore, could step forward and bear the price for our wrongs. Only by the infinite sacrifice of our own Creator could the demands of eternal justice be satisfied (Isaiah 53:4,10). Because of His own sacrifice, He was

then free to forgive and acquit all who trust Him for salvation (1 Peter 2:24).

The apostle Paul said it all when he wrote:

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

The Price That Only Love Could Pay. We will never understand the extent of what Christ endured on our behalf. But the principle of His sacrifice is illustrated in a story from American history. In a tribe of Native Americans, someone was stealing chickens. The chief declared that, if caught, the offender would receive 10 lashes. When the stealing continued, the chief raised it to 20 lashes. Still the chickens disappeared. In anger the chief raised the sentence to 100 lashes—a sure sentence of death.

Finally the person stealing the chickens was caught. But the chief was faced with a terrible dilemma. The thief was his own mother!

When the day of penalty came, the whole tribe gathered. Would the chief's love override his justice? The crowd gasped when he ordered his mother to be tied to the whipping post. The chief removed his shirt, revealing his powerful stature, and took the whip in hand. But instead of raising it to strike the first blow, he handed it to a strong, young brave at his side.

Slowly the chief walked over to his mother and wrapped his massive arms around her in an engulfing embrace. Then he ordered the brave to give him the 100 lashes.

That's just a small glimpse of what Jesus did for us. In love, He became

our substitute and died in our place. He overcame our inability to save ourselves by paying the price for our sins. In the illustration, a mother's life was extended by the substitute of her loving son. For us, everlasting life was bought through the priceless death of the Son of God.

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There is no other solution. All our best efforts to do good are ruined by the greater problem of our spiritual death and separation from God. We are like someone

floundering in deep water miles from shore and without hope of surviving on our own. Our best efforts, though sincere, still fall short of God's perfect standard.

God satisfied the death penalty for sin through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross. In this way, He was completely just in judging sin, but at the same time He showed amazing and immeasurable love for us. God used grace to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.

THE GIFT OF GOD'S GRACE

According to the good news of the gospel, God does not want anyone to perish (2 Peter 3:9). Out of the wellspring of His love for us, God has provided the free gift of everlasting life and of relationship with Him (Ephesians 2:8-9; Titus 3:4-5).

The Reputation Of “Free Gifts.” I don’t know about you, but I’m skeptical about any offers of a “free gift.” Why? Because I’m bombarded by them. I hear them on the radio as I drive home from work. When I flip through my mail, I’m led to believe that I’ve won all sorts of free sweepstakes. When I turn on the TV, I often hear offers of something free if I call within the next 30 minutes. Telemarketers interrupt my dinner to tell me I’ve won free tickets to some popular vacation spot. And when I use my computer to surf the Web, annoying pop-up ads appear telling me that I’m a lucky winner and that all I have to do is “click here” to get my free gift. Yet I’ve discovered along the way that there is almost always a catch to these free gifts. They are bait for the unsuspecting. The motive

behind them is usually not one of generosity but of “tease, tempt, and trap.”

It’s no wonder that people may be skeptical of the New Testament when it describes forgiveness of sin, everlasting life, and heaven as free gifts.

The One Gift That Is Authentic. God’s gift of salvation is different. It is a genuine offer because it has already been paid for, because we could never pay for it ourselves, and because it comes from the heart and love of God.

When gifts are given in love, all that is called for is a willingness to receive them with a grateful heart. If we offer to pay back the givers to keep from being obligated to them, we insult not only the spirit of the gifts but the people who bought them for us.

According to the Bible, God offers us the gift of eternal life out of His great

love for us. If we attempt to pay for it by working our way to heaven and by being better than the next guy, we insult God's grace. In fact, we may actually be rejecting the gift of God without even realizing it.

When gifts are given in love, all that is called for is a willingness to receive them with a grateful heart.

The curve of personal merit doesn't work. Outwardly we may maintain the appearance of being an upstanding individual, but inside there is no way to overcome the fact that what we need is not justice, but rather the gift of God's love,

grace, and mercy (Romans 7:21-25).

God understands this weakness far better than we do. That's why the Bible says to those who have accepted Christ as their personal Savior:

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

With this brief statement the apostle Paul defined the terms and basis of God's offer. We can't earn the gift of God. We can only receive it by accepting what He has already done for us. Someone has developed a memory device for the meaning of the word *grace*: **God's Riches At Christ's Expense.**

We must also remember that according to Ephesians 2:8 we are "saved through faith." A decision and act of

faith is the one requirement of grace that we must keep in mind.

THE REQUIREMENT OF GOD'S GRACE

Responding to God's gift of salvation requires a genuine willingness to receive what God is authentically willing to give.

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The Heart Of The Receiver. Receiving Christ as Savior and Lord requires an honest decision of trust. It is not a theoretical and

mental assent to facts about Christ. Nor is it some impulsive emotional reaction that does not include the will. If our decision to receive the gift of God is genuine, it is likely to parallel what often happens in courtship and marriage. A man and a woman are initially attracted to each other. They find time to get to know each other through relaxed conversations. Over time, they discuss their interests and life goals. Then emotion and intellect unite in a conviction that they are meant for each other. In front of a minister, the man and the woman take vows of lasting commitment.

A similar process often happens as people move toward the gift of God's offer in Christ. Many are drawn to Him initially either out of their own sense of need or because

of their curiosity about His wisdom and miracles. Thoughtful people may think through some of their questions and doubts, and take a closer look at the Bible's claim that Jesus not only died for our sins but rose from the dead to prove it. Eventually a decision must be made about whether to accept or reject the offer of God.

The Decision That Must Be Made. Those who receive the free gift of forgiveness and eternal life through Christ must first abandon all excuses for their wrongs. They must be willing to admit that their own goodness will not earn them a place in heaven. They must admit to themselves and to God that they are sinners and cannot save themselves. If they are convinced that Jesus is the Son of God, all that remains is for them to believe the good news that

God has provided in Him a sacrifice for their sin.

This is the wonderful news of the Bible. Jesus Christ was as sinless as we are sinful. Yet in our place He died on a Roman cross of execution to pay the penalty for our sins. He was buried and then rose from the dead 3 days later to show that His claims were true (1 Corinthians 15:1-5).

Coming to this saving relationship with Christ requires a change of heart that is often misunderstood. When the Bible calls for "repentance," it isn't asking us to make a personal resolution to clean up our lives. To repent doesn't mean we have to first change our ways. It means having a change of heart that allows God to bring us into a new dependence on Him.

The actual process of trusting Christ occurs simply by believing. It is

an act of personal faith. Yet many have found it helpful to gather their thoughts and pray something like this:

Lord Jesus, I want to receive You as my Savior. Thank You for dying on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin. I believe You rose from the dead to offer me Your everlasting life. Please come into my life and begin to make me the kind of person You want me to be. Thank You for giving me the gift of Your forgiveness and new life.

If these words express what is in your heart, you have made the most important discovery of your life. With your trust in Christ comes His assurance of forgiveness and eternal life.

LIVING BEYOND THE CURVE

Once we realize that it is hopeless to work our way to heaven, we can leave behind the curve of comparisons. Now we stand not in our own merits but in the grace and love of God. We have begun an adventure of life and discovery that will never end.

ADOPTION INTO GOD'S FAMILY

Healthy families generate a warm and positive atmosphere. A number of years ago, I became friends with a loving family. It was fun to hang out at their home. I was friends with the oldest daughter of the household. Her younger brother was an adolescent with an easygoing temperament. He enjoyed a special place in his

family's heart. Both in physical appearance and mannerisms he was clearly a chip off the old block.

One day I commented to the dad how much the boy looked like his sisters. The father responded, "A lot of people make that comment. It's interesting, however, that our two girls are our biological children, but our son is adopted."

I tried to hide my startled reaction, because he looked and acted so much like the other family members. The dad continued, "Our son has really blended into our family. We got him as an infant and he has grown up his entire life with his two sisters. It's fun to watch his mannerisms. They are so characteristic of our family." The proud father grinned widely as he spoke.

The apostle Paul said that receiving the gift of spiritual life involves being

adopted into a family: "You received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father'" (Romans 8:15).

When we become children of God, spiritual life springs up within. Where there was once a barrier between us and God, there is now a new channel and opportunity for conversation with Him.

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Before developing a personal relationship with Christ, we may have even

wondered if anyone was listening when we prayed. But when Christ enters our lives, He brings a new spiritual presence into our hearts. A spiritual connection can now occur that is like a young child saying “Daddy” to his loving father.

And along with this new vertical relationship with our heavenly Father comes new horizontal relationships with other believers. New believers are full-fledged members of an eternal family, and as they grow in understanding and gratitude it isn’t long before they begin to act like it.

ASSURANCE OF A NEW RELATIONSHIP

Once we’re in the family of God, we begin an up-and-down journey of learning to trust our heavenly Father in every

season and circumstance of life. It isn’t always easy to rely on Him. Yet slowly, and sometimes haltingly, we discover that He can be trusted with everything that is important to us. Gradually, we also grow in our appreciation for what the apostle John meant when he wrote:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

Notice that the verse doesn’t say that we might “hope” or “guess” that we have eternal life. Instead, John made it clear that we can “know” that we have an everlasting relationship with Christ.

In John 5:24, Jesus gave His own words of assurance to those who trust Him.

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes

in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life.

In this verse, the Lord gave us His assurance that being adopted into God's family gives us the confidence that we have begun an adventure that will never end.

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This new spiritual life needs nurture and care. Just as a newborn baby needs

food, love, and affection to grow and mature, so we need to let the Spirit of God develop our appetite for spiritual insight and understanding.

Before we have spiritual life, the Bible is a closed book. Its meaning is obscure at best. But with new life in Christ, the indwelling Spirit makes it possible for the Bible to come alive. Then, as the apostle Peter wrote, we will "as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the Word, that [we] may grow thereby" (1 Peter 2:2).

FOUR KEY AREAS OF COMMUNICATION

Growing in Christ means pursuing a relationship with Him. Jesus is called the "Good Shepherd" because He leads and watches over those who follow Him. He said:

My sheep hear My voice,

and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand (John 10:27-28).

Genuine members of the flock will follow their shepherd. But how do we actually hear His voice? Our sensitivity to His voice depends on new communication in four important areas.

God Talks To Us. As we read the Word of God, He speaks to us through His own words and self-revelation (2 Timothy 3:16).

We Talk To God. As we receive understanding from Him, we respond to Him with the affections and needs of our hearts (John 15:7).

We Talk With Our New Family. As we connect with others who share our faith in Christ, we experience mutual

encouragement and motivation to love as we ourselves have been loved (Hebrews 10:24-25).

We Talk With Those Who Have Not Yet Trusted Christ. As we follow Christ, we need to remember His desire for us to be His representatives to those who have not yet believed (Matthew 4:19). One of the best ways to do this is to show our honest interest and concern for others. If they first see our changed life and then know that we are genuinely interested in them, they are more likely to be curious about the difference they see in us.

Growing in these areas of communication will show our love for Christ. He in turn will enable us, by His Spirit, to do anything and say anything that He wants us to do or say (Ephesians 5:18-19). Jesus said:

He who has My

commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him (John 14:21).

The word *manifest* means “to make an appearance, to disclose or declare.” Our Lord has chosen to reveal Himself to each of us individually. No two believers have an

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identical relationship with the Savior, so a cookie-cutter formula won't work. But a genuine believer will have a desire to listen to God, to respond to Him, to fellowship with other

believers, and to witness to those who do not yet know Christ.

A UNIQUE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

In the adventure of following Christ, each person takes a different path. My dad's spiritual journey has inspired me in my own walk with Christ. He didn't have any formal training in Bible study, prayer, fellowship, or witnessing, but he was nurtured in these areas by God from unexpected sources.

When I was in preschool, my mother felt compelled to raise my brother and me in a Bible-believing church. My dad initially opposed her decision because he was not a Christian at the time. After some initial marital conflict over this, my father decided to keep the peace by telling my mom that she

could take us to church but that he wasn't getting involved in any of it.

After we had attended the church for a while, my brother and I got involved in a Sunday school contest. We could win a colorful pen if we brought a visitor to church. Little boys can have a real influence on their dad, and our family was no exception. So we persuaded Dad to come with us just to please us and Mom—and we were delighted to receive our prized pens.

Once the ice was broken, Dad started attending church regularly. He heard the gospel many times but he didn't feel the need to respond to the message. About a year later, Mom went into labor with her third child. I remember being afraid because Mom was in severe pain as she left for the hospital. But I also remember being excited

about the prospect of getting a new baby brother or sister.

The following day I bounced out of bed and asked my dad, "Was it a boy or a girl?" He responded very seriously, "It was a little girl, but she was born dead."

I burst into tears, and then my older brother began to sob. My dad left the room and for the first time in his life (I later learned) he called on the name of the Lord Jesus. He could have become bitter and angry at God. But instead, my dad turned to Christ for help. He later told us that the power of God embraced him. He felt the love, joy, and comfort that only the Lord Jesus could give at such a time of heartbreak (John 14:27).

One could say that my father had a "crisis conversion." But its enduring reality was to be seen in the weeks and

months that followed. Like a small mustard seed that grows into a substantial tree, his faith in Christ began to grow. And his adventure of faith was helped along by God through life's different experiences.

I remember the time we got a phone call from someone at the church asking if Dad would be interested in teaching the Bible to a class of third-grade boys. Initially, Dad mocked the possibility of serving in this capacity. "Me? A Sunday school teacher?" he laughed as he told my mom. Eventually, however, he agreed. And Dad saw the Holy Spirit use him as he taught those young boys the Word of God.

In time he became an effective home Bible-study leader. My dad found a supernatural joy in using his gift of teaching. It was a great way of letting God speak to

him and others within the fellowship of faith.

Years later, my Dad was still going strong spiritually. Yet his walk with Christ had some hard times in store for him. He had agreed to enter into a business with relatives who were antagonistic to biblical Christianity. It was a small but professionally-run printing operation, and Dad was good at what he did. Eventually, he became burdened to witness to his family about the difference Christ had made in his life. So he crafted a letter that summarized his conversion and mailed a copy to each of his relatives. They didn't respond very well and a time of not-so-subtle persecution followed.

As pressure at work increased and put-downs for his faith escalated, Dad developed an early-morning routine to get him through. My older brother came into

the printing shop early one day and found that the small room in the back was locked. After a while, Dad emerged with a peaceful radiance on his face. "What were you doing in there, Dad?" my brother asked. Dad smiled, "I've been praying, Son. And God is at work in my life."

My brother said it reminded him of the story of Moses coming down from the mountain where he had communed with God and his face shone (Exodus 34:29-35).

Although my father had taken an unpopular stand for Christ, he received the spiritual support he needed by spending personal time alone with the Lord.

Dad is now in his early eighties and those times of opposition are behind him. But he is still moving forward in his Christian life. I know because it's evident in his life. Just listening to

him pray ushers me into the very presence of the heavenly Father and His Son Jesus Christ.

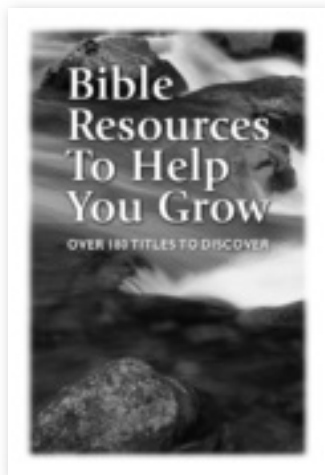
YOUR OWN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

As you begin your Christian journey, let God creatively guide your path. Get a readable translation of the Bible and set aside a regular time when you can reflect on God's Word and pray. Begin attending a Bible-believing church where Christ is honored and where His people honestly love one another.

As time goes on, don't forget to ask God for opportunities to share with others what Christ has done for you. Let them know that God does not grade on a curve, but that He has made it possible for them to be in His loving presence forever.

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