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FOREWORD

I first met Jim Berg in the early 1970s when we were undergraduate students at Bob Jones University. Now three decades later our offices are next to each other as we serve in administrative capacities. His love and enthusiasm for God and His Word and His work were as evident then as they are now, although his own maturation in the Faith has deepened and refined his life and thought. If you have ever heard him speak in person, that same infectious enthusiasm and desire to communicate sound forth from every page of this book.

Using Paul's "rich" letter to the Ephesians as his base, Jim wants believers to know the "wealth" that is theirs as a member of God's family. Not only is the Christian being *Changed into His Image* but he has also been *Created for His Glory*! And when a believer comes to grips with these "heavenly realities," his attitudes and actions will radically change.

Jim is a well-equipped guide to lead us from the humdrum, defeated wastelands where most Christians dwell to the fresh and invigorating air of walking in "the heavenlies." For years he has taught classes at the university level on leadership and counseling; he regularly conducts weekend seminars in churches all across America on these issues; and his daily responsibility is to administer discipline to college-age youth. So from all of this personal interaction he knows that what God says in His Word "works"!

With a combination of sound exposition and personal illustrations, Jim gets to the heart of each matter and lays bare our usual superficial thinking. There are no simplistic formulas for success here—only the "simpleness" of choosing to follow God's way. Jim's only desire is for us to realize God's "marvelous redemptive work on our behalf through Jesus Christ, and how those truths must filter down into our daily lives." The book is enhanced by the concluding application questions for each chapter, where the reader comes face to face with how he will put this material to use.

Good books point the reader beyond their pages to a higher plane. As you read *Created for His Glory*, you will decrease and Jesus Christ will increase. Perhaps you will even find yourself on your knees with tears

of confession and joy and thanksgiving as you understand a little more clearly all that God has done for you. And perhaps even this side of heaven you will find yourself “lost in wonder, love, and praise” as you contemplate God’s purpose for redeeming your life. I hope that many in our day will hear that child’s voice of old, “Take up and read, take up and read”—and if you obey, you will be the better for it!

Dr. Royce Short

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PREFACE

Vibrant Christianity

The burden for this book has grown out of the opportunities God has given Patty and me to minister in couples retreats and family conferences in hundreds of churches over the past twenty years.

We have been encouraged as we have met numbers of God's people who testify of the satisfaction and delight they have found in their walk with God. We are saddened, however, to have come upon countless others whose driven lives are filled with guilt, failure, heartache, and trouble. Just as pitiful are others whose lives are filled with restlessness, joylessness, and energy-draining activities. The experience of most believers in the church today is a far cry from the abundant life Jesus promised in John 10:10. This is no new phenomenon, however. Tozer observed in the last generation,

Among the many who profess the Christian faith *scarcely one in a thousand*¹ reveals any passionate thirst for God.²

While pondering this sad condition and while preparing a series of messages on the family for a summer conference in my own church, I turned once again to Ephesians 5 to consider what God says to husbands and wives. I was struck afresh with the fact that this teaching about the home does not come until midway through the *fifth* chapter of the book. Before it are four and a half chapters of instruction about something else! Not until Paul finishes with that "something else" does he even begin to say anything about Christian families.

A serious reflection upon the opening chapters of the book reveals that God is intending for Christian families to be built upon a foundation

¹Throughout this book all italics are mine unless specifically noted. Anytime words are [bracketed] in a Scripture text, it means I have added some words to further explain the meaning of the verse.

²A. W. Tozer, *The Root of the Righteous* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1955), 56. Please note that citing an author in this book does not imply endorsement of the positions he has taken theologically and ecclesiastically in other matters. There is much that is correct theologically, and thus helpful, in the works cited; but like any book, including this one you are reading, they must be read with an open Bible before you.

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of vibrant Christianity! When we jump into Ephesians 5 and ignore the truths of the first four chapters, we are like builders trying to construct a house without a solid foundation. *Strong Christian homes cannot be built out of weak Christians.* The condition of every Christian home is an exact reflection of its understanding and practice of Christian doctrine—the bedrock of vibrant Christian living.

This book is not primarily about building strong Christian homes, however, though the emphasis of this study is the foundation of any solid believing family. This study is, rather, a look at those basic truths of the Faith that built the solid, joyful Christianity of the first century—the kinds of truths that Paul covered in the opening chapters of Ephesians.

Neither is this book a study in the Epistle of Ephesians, per se. It is, however, a study of its major themes. Ephesians has been called the crowning Epistle of the New Testament. In it are contained all of the essential doctrines of the Faith in their most basic, yet their most majestic, presentation. Meditation upon its themes will give us the sense of transcendence—the ability to see the things that stand above our physical existence—which we so desperately need if we are to have an impact for God in “this present evil world.”³

While *Changed into His Image: God’s Plan for Transforming Your Life*, my previous book, dealt with the essential elements of biblical change in a believer’s life, this volume deals with the Christian life in even broader strokes. *Created for His Glory: God’s Purpose for Redeeming Your Life* takes up God’s ultimate plans for us, His marvelous redemptive work on our behalf through Jesus Christ and how those truths must filter down into our daily lives.⁴ My desire is that God will open your eyes to the beauty and wonder of your salvation.

Join me as we survey the things God has done for us “in the heavens.” If your life is filled with doubt, restlessness, despair, failure, or

³Galatians 1:4.

⁴Though the book you hold in your hands can be read and studied without an understanding of the truths presented in *Changed into His Image* (Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University Press, 1999), you will profit more from this study if you have read and studied the previous work.

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boredom—or if you are helping other believers whose lives are described by those terms—this study is for you.

Some readers may find this study somewhat challenging because it deals with topics unfamiliar to many modern believers. Those who have studied *Changed into His Image* will find it just another step toward a fuller understanding of spiritual things. We must all keep in mind as we go through this study together that the epistles of the New Testament were not written as apostolic literary exercises or merely dry collections of theological data. They were written with pastoral intent to congregations largely composed of first-century “blue-collar workers.” They are inspired accounts of how Spirit-filled members of the church can live to the glory of God in a sin-cursed world.

They were intended to be thoroughly understood by *common* people and rigorously practiced in the power of God’s Spirit to the glory of Jesus Christ. Therefore, what we are going to study together is not optional window-dressing for those who wish to become some kind of super-saint. They are essential elements to be understood and lived in the milieu of daily life in order to satisfy our thirsty souls and to demonstrate to a lost world that all of us were *Created for His Glory*.

CHAPTER ONE

SEEING THE INVISIBLE

WHAT YOU DON'T SEE CAN HURT YOU

Things you cannot see often make a big difference in your life. A skateboard left on the stairway you are descending—invisible in the middle of the night—can have a big impact upon your life. Invisible bacteria in your chicken salad sandwich at lunch can rearrange your whole afternoon. An undetected computer virus can set you back hours or days when it attacks your home computer or office network. A buildup of cholesterol or plaque in your arteries or a growing mass of cancerous tissue can dictate significant changes in your life in the days to come.

These scenarios are familiar to us, and responsible people take adequate measures to shield themselves from these unseen menaces in the physical world. Far more crucial, however, are the issues of the unseen spiritual dimension since choices in the spiritual realm can be eternally consequential. In addition, living in light of the unseen spiritual realm can add joy and peace to everything that happens in the physical realm—both good and calamitous.

Take for example the apostle Paul's experiences in jail. In Philippi he was arrested for "disturbing the peace" when he exorcised a demon from a fortune-telling girl and thereby enraged her profit-making masters. Though beaten bloody by scourging and thrust into pain-racking stocks, Paul and his companion, Silas, saw beyond the physical realm and "prayed, and sang praises unto God."¹ The happy result was that later that evening their jailer fell to his knees—instead of falling on his

¹Acts 16:25.

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sword—and begged them to show him the way of salvation. Though pain normally galvanizes a man’s attention toward his physical circumstances, *the apostles’ attention was centered in an unseen realm*. It made all the difference in the world—especially for a certain jailer and his family.

An event in the prophet Elisha’s life also shows us the difference that “seeing the invisible” makes. The Syrian king had tried to make repeated guerrilla raids upon Israel. God, however, continually revealed the Syrian plans to Elisha, who in turn relayed them to the king of Israel. Of course, after several foiled raids the king of Syria was understandably frustrated and thought he had a traitor in the camp. Finally, word reached him that Elisha was the problem. The Syrian king set off immediately to Dothan to stop Elisha’s interference. During the night, he surrounded Elisha’s hometown. The Scriptures pick up the narrative in II Kings 6:15-17.

And when the servant of the man of God was risen early, and gone forth, behold, [the Syrian army] compassed the city both with horses and chariots. And his servant said unto [Elisha], Alas, my master! [what] shall we do? And [Elisha] answered, Fear not: for they that be with us are more than they that be with them. And Elisha prayed, and said, Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see. And the Lord opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

What a comfort those *invisible* hosts must have been to Elisha’s servant at that time! Of course, God does not in this dispensation of time open physical eyes to see the spiritual realm as He did for Elisha’s servant. Instead, He has given us something better! He has permanently revealed everything He wants us to know about the spiritual realm in His inspired Word.² His revelation of the unseen world through the Word is an immense blessing to us, His creatures, because *blindness in either realm is a serious handicap*. Let’s look at why blindness is so serious.

²II Peter 1:3.

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LIFE IS MORE DANGEROUS WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE

Through the years we have had several students at Bob Jones University who were legally blind. As a whole they have been a great blessing to the student body. Instead of the stubborn, self-reliant determination so characteristic of unbelievers with serious limitations, these wonderful young people possessed a quiet confidence in God's sufficiency for them. As a result, their testimonies inspired others with lesser limitations to endure by "seeing him who is invisible."³

Though their spiritual lives evidence God's power, physical life is more dangerous for them than it is for sighted students. They must move slowly to avoid obstacles and must concentrate on their surroundings to maintain their bearings. A blind student on campus cannot see a careless cyclist coming down the street. He cannot see the book bag left unattended on the hallway floor. He cannot read "Slippery When Wet" or "Watch Your Step" signs. There are many hidden dangers for him.

Life is certainly more dangerous for the physically blind, but it is hazardous for the spiritually blind as well. Proverbs 22:3, 5 address this issue.

A prudent man forseeth [sees] the evil, and hideth himself: but the simple [the spiritually imperceptive] pass on, and are punished. . . . Thorns and snares are in the way of the froward.

The above verses teach that a man with spiritual perception can see the difficulties ahead and prudently avoid them, but the path of the spiritually blind will be filled with hidden traps. What seem to them like momentary indulgences in innocent pleasures become life-dominating habits that hold them in ever-constricting traps. Sadly, they never see the calamity coming, and many do not even recognize the entrapment, even while held in its cords.

The Scriptures are full of warnings to the spiritually blind. Proverbs 14:12 says, "There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death." The simple, or unwary, man in Proverbs 7, who is naive about the consequences of following the

³Hebrews 11:27.

harlot's advances, "goeth after her straightway, as an ox goeth to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks; till a dart strike through his liver; as a bird hasteth to the snare, and knoweth not that it is for his life."⁴ The fact that he "knoweth not"—that he is spiritually insensible—has devastating results for him.

Lessons from a Medicine Cabinet

Spiritual blindness in many believers is most evident in how easily they are influenced by this world. Worldliness—taking our cues from the world as to what is important in life—is of serious concern to God. Too many Christians "play" with the world as unruly children play in the forbidden medicine cabinet in the bathroom of their home. These unsuspecting and disobedient youngsters may pop pills and smear ointments on each other with no knowledge of the danger involved. They just know they are having fun, and that is all that matters to them.

Spiritually insensible believers "pop" this or that movie or concert or "smear on" this or that mind-numbing experience with no thought of its toxicity or potency. Too many believers merely ask themselves, "Is the drug in the medicine cabinet *legal*?" They want to know only if the Bible directly forbids a certain activity. If not, they assume they can indulge in it and claim it as their Christian liberty.

Think with me about this approach with your doctor. Suppose you ask your physician, "Doc, is it *legal* for me to take ibuprofen⁵ for my headache?" Or, "Is it within my *liberties* to consume this drug?" He would think your question to be quite strange since the important issues are more involved than just whether ibuprofen is a legal drug. *The fact that the law does not forbid a drug's use does not mean that one should take it.*

Your doctor has many questions to ask before he can give you a helpful answer. "How much are you planning to take?" "How often are you planning to take it?" "What other medications are you taking?" "What might be causing your pain for which the ibuprofen will only alleviate the symptoms?" "How long have you had the headaches?" "How long

⁴Proverbs 7:22-23.

⁵Ibuprofen is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID) used to reduce inflammation, relieve minor pains, and reduce fever. Its most common brand names are Advil and Motrin.

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were you planning to take the medication?” “What is your general physical condition?” “What other problems are you having besides the one for which you wish to take this medication?” And the list could go on and on.

He knows that a headache from a sinus infection may need an antibiotic to deal with the infection rather than a painkiller to alleviate the discomfort. A headache from muscular tension may show a need for exercise instead of something to dull the pain. The pain may be a signal that something else is drastically wrong and needs attention.

The same is true for involvement in the worldly culture around us. Asking if the *content* of the song, movie, sporting event, vacation excursion, or computer game is spiritually “legal” is only a small fraction of the issue. Even if something is not directly forbidden in the Word by command or principle, the believer must ask himself many more questions before he decides whether he should partake.

He must consider, “How much of this kind of thing am I already filling my life with?” “What is being neglected in my life while I partake?” “What other kinds of entertainment and recreation am I already involved with?” “Why am I indulging in the first place? Is my soul restless for entertainment because I am so spiritually empty?” “Should I be handling the restlessness, loneliness, or emptiness another way?” “If I am merely trying to unwind, is this the primary way God teaches me to handle stress?” “Would this activity be all right if I, indeed, handled pressure God’s way?” “Whom will I be affecting—and in what way—by my example?” The list of questions goes on and on.

Just as a physician needs to know physiology and pharmacology to answer the question about ibuprofen, a Christian needs to know his Bible well before he can determine whether he should partake of some element in our culture. The truth to be learned about making right choices is this:

You cannot make the right choices in the visible world unless you are spending much time in the invisible world.

A believer dare not indulge by default in what the world has to offer! If he is spiritually insensible to the effects of the world, his spiritual life will be in danger. He must know his Bible, and he must be viewing it

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through illuminated eyes. His ignorance of spiritual issues will be disastrous to his heart.

LIFE IS MORE DISCOURAGING WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE

It is also important to note that life can be far more *discouraging* for the blind. As the difficulties and dangers increase, so do the temptations to be discouraged. The blind student must often expend more energy to accomplish the same things a sighted student does. He may feel left out and isolated from others. Because he doesn't see everything everyone else sees, he misses the humor in many situations. Sighted people don't fully understand him, and life can become very discouraging.

In a similar fashion, spiritual blindness in believers can be very discouraging. The apostle Peter addresses this when challenging believers to be diligent about growing in their spiritual lives. He says, "But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins."⁶ A spiritually stunted believer can't "see" well and may even have serious doubts about whether he has even been saved. There is not a trail of illuminated truth that marks his spiritual progress. He cannot point to repeated times when God Himself has intersected His life through the Word and has spoken through it to him. The relationship with God is so distant, he wonders if it even exists. The discouragement sets in, and he spirals downward to despair.

Because of its growing prevalence in our society today, I want to extend our discussion of this second aspect of spiritual blindness—"life is more discouraging when you cannot see"—and look more closely at the phenomenon we call despair.

Darkness and Despair

Despair is always the inevitable result of *life without light*. There are times when some Christians have come into what the Puritans called "the dark night of the soul." God seems to hide His face though the believer has been seriously seeking God.

Job experienced it while suffering many other afflictions. He knew God was present, but Job was "kept in the dark" for several months. Job

⁶II Peter 1:9.

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began his time of suffering with triumphant declarations of God's purposes and faithfulness, but as the suffering and darkness wore on, Job began to lose heart. Nothing seemed to help. All he could do was cry out for God to show Himself. In due time, God answered Job and intervened with a revelation about Himself that breathed fresh light into Job's weary heart. This kind of darkness falls when God "withdraws himself in order to make us appreciate him more so that we diligently seek for him as we would seek for a lost precious treasure."⁷

It is not my purpose at this point to deal with the specifics of this particular kind of "darkness." The focus of our study will be directed more at those who experience despair when the light of God is shut off *because of their own spiritual neglect*.

More and more believers are tasting the same despair the world lives in because they have chosen to "walk . . . as other Gentiles walk, in the [emptiness] of their mind."⁸ I believe as the days draw closer to the coming of the Lord, and as individuals and societies increasingly ignore and defy God, we are going to see an unprecedented rise in despair.

The bottom line truth is that *life is not supposed to work without God at the center*.⁹ Those who try to do so—even Christians—can maintain only an artificial facade of hope and satisfaction. The grim reality is that the emptiness of life without God at the center pushes itself to the consciousness once again when the music stops, the drugs wear off, the eroticism fails, the fashions grow old, the relationships disappoint, the accomplishments fade, and the thrills subside. They are left to themselves, and the emptiness for most people is too much. Instead of crying out to God for light, however, they dive back into their activities,

⁷John Owen, *The Glory of Christ* (Carlisle, Pa.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 109-10.

⁸Ephesians 4:17.

⁹By "God at the center" I mean that He is acknowledged, served, and worshiped as the central passion of a man's life. It is the attitude embodied in such Old Testament passages as Deuteronomy 6:5, "And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." It is having "no other gods before [Him]" (Exodus 20:3). It is to "know therefore this day, and consider it in thine heart, that the Lord he is God in heaven above, and upon the earth beneath: there is none else" (Deuteronomy 4:39). The New Testament takes this further and introduces Jesus Christ as the central focus of the believer's attention as we shall see in the chapters ahead.

mainlining the anesthesia of their endless pursuits to dull the pain of their empty souls. Such is the picture of man without God at the center—even believing man who isn't seeing God in new and fresh illuminated truths through the Spirit of God.

Reflection – Illumination = Despair

When I deal with a despairing individual—Christian or non-Christian—I know that I am dealing with a person who has spent some time in recent days *reflecting*. He has allowed himself to *think* much about the way his life has not turned out the way he expected. He is thinking about how pointless things are. He has *reflection minus illumination*. By the phrase “minus illumination” I mean that he has not been “seeing the invisible.” There has been little or no illuminated truth penetrating his soul. God is not the biggest concern of his life. He has been existing with little or no personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

But spiritually insensible people don't “see” this. They think other things are the problem. When they despair, rather than acknowledging the poverty of their relationship with Jesus Christ, they seek to medicate the “down” feelings¹⁰ or distract themselves with activity. We have seen this phenomenon in several ways during our modern times but have “misdiagnosed” the cause. I want to look at some of these circumstances.

Midlife Crisis—One of the more common manifestations of modern despair is the cluster of behaviors and attitudes our culture calls “midlife crisis.” I certainly don't want to legitimize a psychological view of this phenomenon. Rather, by addressing it here, I want us to see that if we understood our Bibles better, nothing in this “crisis” would surprise us.

Here is a man, usually in his mid- to late-forties, who in disturbing moments of *reflection* begins to realize that he has not “left his footprints on the sands of time” as he had envisioned he would when he was in his twenties. He hasn't advanced in his work as he had hoped. His marriage hasn't yielded the satisfaction he had anticipated. His children have deeply disappointed him, and so forth. Perhaps a physical limitation—heart surgery, hip replacement, back injury, endocrine malfunction

¹⁰Low spirits are not, in themselves, unspiritual. I am speaking here only of those feelings that are *caused* by the hopelessness of the despairing individual who is reflecting on a life that has been lived only half-heartedly for God.

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tions, or other malady—may jolt him into the reality that he isn't getting any younger and that his stamina is gone. Though he would like to start life over again, he knows that even if he had the opportunity, he doesn't have the strength or the time. Perhaps he has even been a Christian all of his adult years. He may even have graduated from a Bible college. But he must confess that he has little thirst for God.

As a whole, nothing is turning out the way he planned. All the things he thought would have to be in place to make life worthwhile have evaporated with little hope of a second chance at any of them. He looks back at all the years, and everything seems so pointless. The more he *reflects*, the more he despairs. He may even grow angry with God or look around and blame his "insensitive" wife or his "ungrateful" children or his "stingy" employer for his failures. He may start telling himself that no one deserves to live like this. Hasn't he sacrificed for others—even God—all these years and isn't he entitled to a little enjoyment out of the whole thing? His heart now begins to fill with bitterness, and the temptations of the world around him grow stronger.

Indulgence in an affair or pornography may give him a temporary eroticized high. He may turn to gambling or extreme sports, or he may leave his wife and home entirely to "find" himself. His doctor, noting his depression during an annual checkup, may offer him a prescription to help neutralize his low times.¹¹

Though at times he has asked God to help him and may have tried not to disobey God too much, God has not been his first concern. He has not pursued God with all his heart, soul, and strength.¹² God has made it clear, however, that *mediocre Christianity is not supposed to work*.

¹¹Of course, I am not speaking here of medications to correct a known endocrine or organic malfunction such as hypothyroidism, and so forth. I am speaking here entirely of psychotropic drugs that are given not to treat a truly organic etiology but to treat an affective symptom of discomfort. The discomfort certainly is real, but the cause *in this case* is in the person's handling of life as described in this chapter, not some organic disorder. Furthermore, it is crucial to understand that though some physical illness may cause us to feel down at times and *tempt* us to think thoughts of hopelessness and self-pity, no physical malady *causes* us to say hopeless and self-pitying words and statements—thoughts—to ourselves. Every thought we have comes from our heart and reveals the heart. The enemy of our soul is never a "low spirit" in itself. The enemy is "unbelief"—handling life without God as our central Hope.

¹²Luke 10:27.

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The words of David, though pleasant sounding at times to our man in crisis, have never been the consistent reality of his life: “As the [deer] panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.”¹³

He cannot say that Paul’s testimony has ever been his experience either. The apostle recounted, “I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.”¹⁴

In contrast, our man in crisis has always stopped some distance away from such drastic pursuit of spiritual things. He has done enough to get by—enough to maintain some degree of calmness in his conscience and some degree of testimony before other Christians. He would have to confess, however, that he hasn’t taken seriously the teaching of our Lord that the “corn of wheat [must] fall into the ground and die, [or] it abideth alone.”¹⁵ He has settled for a “respectable” Christian life. From the biblical viewpoint, however, he is “lukewarm,”¹⁶ “double minded,”¹⁷ and a man trying to “serve two masters.”¹⁸

He never wanted to do anything too radical with his spiritual life or think too long about what God might want out of him. Instead he danced around the edges of total abandonment to God, concerned only about his immediate happiness and his public image. He avoided the hard thoughts about what God might ask of him.

So our society calls this a “midlife crisis,” and by giving it a psychological name, it effectively masks again the real dilemma—man without God at the center, man in despair.

As a Christian community we have failed to see that this believer, like the unbelieving world around him, is walking “in the vanity of [his] mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated [i.e., dis-

¹³Psalm 42:1-2.

¹⁴Philippians 3:8.

¹⁵John 12:24.

¹⁶Revelation 3:15-20.

¹⁷James 1:8.

¹⁸Matthew 6:24.

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tant] from the life of God through the ignorance that is in [him], because of the blindness of [his] heart.”¹⁹ What a tragedy that it should take place, for the Scriptures are full of warnings against mediocre Christianity. But this isn’t the first time we have misdiagnosed the despair of people around us. We missed it in the sixties with the hippies, as well.

Flower Children—The last time our society saw wholesale despair was in the 1960s when many college students of the day started *reflecting*. They thought upon the condition of their world. They asked the painful questions about life and concluded, “What’s the point?” Their conclusion was valid—there was no point. There was no point in the Vietnam War. It didn’t seem to have a righteous beginning or a noble end. They saw no point in higher education. It had not kept its promises of a better world. There seemed to be no point in pursuing a career. Why should they work for forty years like their fathers, who retired only to do nothing? They concluded they could do nothing now and avoid the forty years of agony. So they did.

Some tried to deaden the emptiness with free sex and mind-numbing drugs. Others sought meaning by throwing their lives into causes of injustice, while still others isolated themselves into communes trying to find peace and trying to “find” themselves. Each group sang songs advertising the psychedelic trips, protesting the injustice, or testifying of the despair and “pointlessness.”

The same mood of the flower children is fostered today through a post-modern philosophy that says, “Objective truth doesn’t exist. It is created by groups of people and is valid only for them in their own culture.” This worldview puts each individual squarely in the center of his own world, leaving others on the fringes and leaving God out entirely. This self-absorbed thinking will lead to even greater emptiness, moral destruction, and social decline than was ever produced in the hippie movement of the sixties. Despair will be epidemic in the days ahead.

Extreme Everything—As despair becomes more prevalent, we can also expect all of the possible anesthetics for the pain of emptiness to increase as well. We will see a rise in extreme drug therapies. Television

¹⁹Ephesians 4:17-18.

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and movie content will feature increasingly extreme programming in the name of “reality shows.” We will see extreme sports and adventures rise to unprecedented heights as people rebel against the limitations placed upon them by their own bodies and by nature itself and as they seek some new means to experience a rush. Increasingly kinky sexual exploits both inside and outside of marriage will hold out a promise of extreme pleasure for deadened souls but will leave the participants only more deeply mired in their despair.

I saw an example of this during the summer of 2000 while I was writing this opening chapter. I was on vacation during the Republican National Convention and occasionally turned on the television to see how the events were unfolding. One afternoon when I tuned in, expecting to see convention highlights, I saw instead an interview with a man named Ted—not his real name. Unlike the man we saw in midlife crisis who had not achieved his goals, Ted *had* accomplished everything he set out to do. He was a star teacher in a large public high school. He was fired when he announced to his students that he had felt all of his life that he was born the wrong gender and that now he was going to go through a sex change operation and live as a woman. In the interview, Ted, now renamed Trisha—not his real assumed name either—told his story.²⁰

He said that throughout his growing-up years he had raced motorcycles, climbed mountains, and rafted whitewater. He said, however—and this is important—that adventure had a “hollow ring” to it. He had been at the point of suicide many times. He said, “I buried myself in trying to be a success . . . but it just wasn’t enough.” He was depressed and knew something was wrong but couldn’t put his finger on it. He tried cross-dressing and finally came to the conclusion through therapy that he was born the wrong gender.

²⁰I refer to Ted as “he” even though in the interview he was addressing the audience as a woman. No surgical sex change can undo the fact that God made him a man—despite his feelings to the contrary. It is also unloving to refer to Ted as “it” as if there were some confusion about whether Ted is a man or a woman. Though calling him “it” may produce a few laughs among the brethren, it is uncharitable and insensitive. God is not confused about what gender Ted is, and neither should we be confused about his identity. He is, furthermore, a soul for whom Christ died, and he desperately needs the gospel just like the rest of the world. We must not in any way be a stumbling block to the gospel to the Teds of this world.

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He was quite excited about his “solution” and was riding on the crest of a wave of public recognition as a trailblazer for his cause of gender-transition. The real danger for Ted was that this time he *really* thought he had isolated his problem and had solved it. When the despair sets in again, he has nothing left to try—except suicide.

Indeed, many like Ted have come to this point and have ended their lives. Some have left a note saying that even though they were finally “true to themselves,” life was not worth living because others still rejected them. And society will be blamed for being homophobic or unloving.

The sad reality is that the “Teds” of our day have missed the real reason for the emptiness of life. It is not due to rejection by the heterosexual world—although we must admit that many “straights,” while rightly speaking against sinful “alternative” lifestyles, are certainly unloving. The real problem is the emptiness of a soul estranged from its thirst-quenching Creator—a soul that is not “seeing the unseen.”

Ted Isn't the Only One with a Problem

Sadder still is that many *believers* do not have much more hope or peace or joy than Ted. These brethren will go to their grave defending their salvation, but they have little enjoyment of it in this life. They have very little light from God in their souls, and they have no idea why their life is so empty. Inwardly, they feel cheated and betrayed by a Christianity that hasn't delivered.

A. W. Tozer put his finger on the problem when he said, “The difference between a great Christian life and any other kind lies in the quality of our religious concepts.”²¹ Our “religious concepts”—our knowledge of God and His ways—are too shallow today. We aren't spending much time “in the heavenlies,” as Paul describes in Ephesians 1. Even those believers who are familiar with at least some of the major responsibilities outlined in Ephesians 4-6 are not at home in chapters 1-3. Think with me for a few moments about the letter to the Ephesians.

²¹A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of Man* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1950), 3.

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Chapters 1-3 of Ephesians have often been called “The Wealth of the Believer.” These three chapters do not contain a single command! They are packed, however, with propositional statements about the person and work of Jesus Christ—the one who *is* at the center of the universe! It is ignorance of these doctrines that has led to the failure of most believers today to fulfill the sixty-five commands of chapters 4-6, often called “The Walk and Warfare of the Believer.”

Those who have taken the time to meditate upon Ephesians have been richly rewarded. John Bunyan was inspired to write *The Pilgrim’s Progress* through his study of Ephesians. Another called it “God’s Handbook of the Universe.” While that may sound too lofty for us, we must remember that Ephesians was not written to seminarians or Bible college students. It was written to a church of first-generation Christians saved out of the pagan worship of the goddess Diana. Many of the number in that church were slaves. They took seriously Paul’s words, and in spite of their non-Christian backgrounds God molded them into a church commended by Jesus Christ Himself for their “works, and . . . labour, and . . . [endurance].”²² They had no time for false teachers and did not faint when the fires of persecution hit. All of that was possible because they spent time “in the heavenlies” as we shall do in this study together. *They proved that the quality of what you see “in the heavenlies” determines the quality of what others see in your life.* So you see, “what you don’t see *can* hurt you, but . . .”

WHAT YOU *COULD* SEE WILL AMAZE YOU

Let’s take a look at where we are headed in this book. Part One of this study will begin by looking at who God is. This is how Paul began his Ephesian letter. I call it “Rejoicing in the Grand Reality of God.” In the first chapter of Ephesians Paul looks at several important realities that he calls “spiritual blessings in heavenly places.” They are truths that were at the forefront of his mind while he was imprisoned and must be dominant parts of our worldview as well if we are to have the kind of rejoicing heart that Paul had in times of trouble. We must “see” them with spiritual illumination. Insensibility and blindness to them will be disastrous.

²²Revelation 2:2-3.

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Next, in Part Two, “Experiencing the Grand Reality of God,” we will discuss how those overarching truths about who God is are to be translated into various broad issues of our daily lives. We will see how these truths apply to the matters of personal joy and security in the Lord, our ability to resist temptation, and our ability to get along with other believers as we walk in the Spirit. God gave us Ephesians so that we can understand these issues, rejoice in their beauty, and “walk worthy” of the salvation He has given us.

Lastly, in Part Three we will see how what we have learned about God becomes the foundation for the “fear of the Lord.” We will also see how the fear of God is the energizing and guiding force behind the fulfillment of our daily living at home, at work, and in society in general.

My burden in this study is twofold. I wish for it to be *prescriptive*—attempting to solve problems that already exist within the Church. But I wish it to be *polemic* as well—attempting to lay a theocentric, or God-centered, foundation for Christian living that will withstand the coming storms that will pummel the believer’s faith in the twenty-first century. We will encounter in our study theological terms such as transcendence, supremacy, sufficiency, adoption, and atonement. These are not “highbrow” words to be avoided but rich truths to be understood and relished as we reflect upon the wonderful things our God has done for us!

Dangerous Days Are Here!

The freedoms to live and proclaim the faith of the Bible are under vicious attack today, and many within the church are not “ready always to give an answer . . . of the hope that is in [them].”²³ The exclusiveness of Christianity will not be tolerated much longer in our world. Inclusivism will finally become the dominant belief of our increasingly post-Christian, pluralistic culture, and the heat will be on.

Dangerous days—the “perilous times” of the “last days”²⁴—are upon us, and we must be clear about the essentials we must believe and be willing to die for. This is the time when Christians must “gird up the loins

²³I Peter 3:15.

²⁴II Timothy 3:1.

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of [their] mind”²⁵ and “continue . . . in the things which [they have] learned.”²⁶ It is the time to leave our “tourist mode” of Christianity—living on earth as if our sole purpose is to visit all the interesting sites and collect all the souvenirs—and put ourselves into “warfare mode”—living on the alert as soldiers on assignment in occupied territory.

As the situation darkens here, our vision of “the heavenlies” must become clearer. We must “see” some things we aren’t presently “seeing.” As we study together, ask God to open your eyes to the Grand Reality of Himself! Beg Him to allow you to “see the unseen.” It will make all the difference in the world for you and those whose lives you touch in the “dangerous days” ahead. What He will allow you to see with illuminated eyes will indeed amaze you!

TAKE TIME TO REFLECT²⁷

1. Since the Holy Spirit has revealed what God is like in the Bible, how regularly are you studying the Word and looking for God in the Scriptures?
2. Since only the “pure in heart” see God (Matthew 5:8), how diligent are you about staying in fellowship with God and not allowing sin to pollute your relationship with Him?
3. As you study, are you praying specifically for God to illuminate your own heart?
4. As you teach your children/disciples, are you praying specifically for God to illuminate their hearts?
5. When is the last time God truly illuminated your heart to something about Himself in the Word and you “relished” the truth because God opened your eyes? What life-changing truth did He illuminate in His Word?

²⁵I Peter 1:13.

²⁶II Timothy 3:14.

²⁷Each chapter will close with application questions like these. Take some time to reflect on them, asking God to make His truth operative in your life. Photocopy from Appendix A the study sheet entitled Five Significant Statements/Take Time to Reflect for each chapter, and write out your answers so that you can later review the things you have learned (Proverbs 10:14) and share them with others. For an extended discussion of ways to use this book, both in personal and in group study, see “How to Use This Book When Working with Others” in Appendix C.

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A WORD TO DISCIPLE-MAKERS

Sorrow vs. Despair

As you try to help those in our day who are despairing, please understand the difference between “sorrow” and “despair.” *Sorrow is the taste of death that permeates everything upon a fallen planet.* It is the emotion of loss—the awareness that something has gone bad and isn’t the way it was meant to be. It is the reminder that an essential of life is missing. It is the echo within our hearts that we were made for something better. It is what Paul is speaking of when he says,

For we know that the whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now. And not only [does the creation groan], but ourselves also, which have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting for the [final] adoption, [that is] the redemption of our body (Romans 8:22-23).

For we that are in this tabernacle [i.e., this temporary body] do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life (II Corinthians 5:4).

When we lose a loved one, when we lose a cherished possession or opportunity, or when we lose our physical well-being because of disease or a cycle of life, we sense that loss in an emotion called sorrow. It is a legitimate pain of the soul—a grief—that reminds us something is missing. It is a time not to numb the sorrow with medications, accomplishments, dependent relationships, or incessant activities; it is a reminder to look away from this temporal world and turn our face to God for help. Sorrow wells up when we *think* about the loss and can be legitimately alleviated only by embracing the eternally satisfying reality of fellowship with Jesus Christ.

This sorrow of which I am speaking is what Jesus experienced in the garden when He contemplated the coming loss of fellowship with His Father when He became the sacrificial lamb for the sins of the world.

And he took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be sorrowful and very heavy. Then saith he unto them, My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death: tarry ye here, and watch with me (Matthew 26:37-38).

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Jesus is not depressed here; He is not despairing. Depression and despair are accompanied by hopelessness, disinterest, and often self-pity. Jesus is experiencing sorrow—the emotion of loss that comes with our awareness that things aren't the way they were intended from the beginning. It is not a sinful emotion. On the contrary, it is a legitimate emotion for anyone who is truly reflecting about life on a fallen planet. This is why it is often the characteristic emotion of those who are more contemplative. Its heaviness grows as we *think* about the true nature of things in a fallen world. Those who never think seldom feel its weight. Indeed, this is exactly why many try not to think about life and its prospects—the weight of sorrow seems to them to be too heavy to bear.

Those who sorrow, however, must beware since sorrow turns to despair when there seems to be no end, purpose, or remedy to the sorrow. When sorrow is laced with self-pity—when the thoughts are turned inward in wound licking or are turned outward in finger pointing—sorrow becomes corrupted with the poison of the flesh, and despair is the result. *When a man does not seek God in his sorrow, God intends for him to despair.* God's plan is that the soul should sense its poverty and incompleteness and turn not to itself in self-pity or turn on others in accusation but turn to God in dependence.

That turn toward God in dependence is the secret of how a fallen creature can joyfully and peacefully live with himself and others on a fallen planet. That dependent turn is called faith—"the gaze of a soul upon a saving God."²⁸ It confesses its own incompleteness and neediness, and at the same time, affirms that God is the worthy Completer and only Fountain of joy and peace.

This is why turning to any part of the creation—which itself is tainted with death—rather than to the Creator Himself—who is the essence of life—is such folly. You cannot wash the taste of death out of your mouth by gargling with water also tainted by the same death.

A Taste of Death

It should be clear that people experiencing despair are tasting the results of living on a fallen planet without the life-giving satisfaction of the Thirst-Quencher Himself. When man fell, he distanced himself

²⁸A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God* (Camp Hill, Pa.: Christian Publications, 1982), 81.

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from his Source of satisfaction and delight, and he was immediately shrouded in the darkness of a soul cut off from its Light. The tendency now that man's communion with God had been severed was to find his enjoyment in the creation—not in the Creator.²⁹

Since man now had within him a treasonous bent against his Creator, which would result in his ultimate destruction, Adam's daily labor and Eve's childbearing were injected with "sorrow"—a taste of death—that tainted every part of their existence. The sorrow could be neutralized and overcome only by the creature's willful and continual submission again to his Creator.

The solution is to recognize what God is saying through the experiences of sorrow. They are a call to turn to Him in dependence. The result for the God-dependent child of God is a heart that deeply feels sorrow and at the same time experiences an abiding joy and peace. This is the testimony of Peter when he affirms that heaviness and rejoicing can exist in the same heart. After he speaks of the living hope of eternal fellowship with God, he says,

Wherein [speaking of the living hope of verse 3] ye greatly *rejoice*, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in *heaviness* through manifold [trials] (I Peter 1:6).

Paul testifies of the same experience when he says,

For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; *while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen*: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal (II Corinthians 4:17-18).

It is this view of "the things which are not seen" that is at the heart of our study. Paul in Ephesians compels us to scan the heavenlies with him and behold the glories that are ours from the God who made us. Here is a prison-bound saint whose spirit soars beyond the prison bars to show us the Milky Way of God's splendor. We want to join him in this study. We were created not to live in darkness to the boast of His enemy but to drink of His fullness and spread the word that He is sufficient.

²⁹Romans 1:25.