



RESISTANCE

DAILY DEVOTIONAL

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING SATAN'S SCHEMES

During this two-part series, we'll look at the subject of spiritual warfare. God is doing work in your life, your family and our church, but you'll face resistance from the enemy. As we explore this, my heart is to help you see with fresh eyes the invisible battle we face each day. Whether you realize it or not, every believer is a soldier in God's army, called to stand firm against the forces that seek to derail our faith, disrupt our peace, and distort God's truth.

We'll unpack the Scriptures that speak directly to the struggle between light and darkness. You'll encounter stories of victory and defeat, of human weakness and divine strength. You'll be reminded that while our battles are not against flesh and blood, they are very real and often come in forms we don't expect—temptation, fear, confusion or even discouragement. But the good news is this: We do not fight alone. We've been given every tool we need to stand firm. With the armor of God, the power of prayer, and the strength of the Holy Spirit, we can overcome.

This journey is about more than just surviving—it's about thriving in the face of resistance, knowing that every struggle is an opportunity for victory in Christ. Let's dive in together, armed with faith and ready to take our stand. The battle belongs to the Lord.

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, stylized 'B' followed by a horizontal line and a cursive 'J'.

Bryan Jones
Senior Pastor

DAILY PRAYER AND REFLECTION QUESTIONS

"... Our Father in heaven..."

Matthew 6:9b (NLT)

- **What do You want to say to me today as my Father?**

"... may Your name be kept holy."

Matthew 6:9c (NLT)

- **What do You want to reveal to me about Your power today?**

"May Your Kingdom come soon."

Matthew 6:10a (NLT)

- **Help me make Your priorities my priorities today.**

"Give us today the food we need,"

Matthew 6:11 (NLT)

- **Is there anything specific You want me to do with my time or the people I'm around today?**

"and forgive us our sins, as we have forgiven those who sin against us"

Matthew 6:12 (NLT)

- **Reveal to me anyone I need to forgive or ask for forgiveness.**

"And don't let us yield to temptation..."

Matthew 6:13a (NLT)

- **Is there anywhere I'm vulnerable to temptation?**

BREAKING TIES

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. **Galatians 6:14 (NIV)**

“As the Father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Now remain in My love.”

John 15:9 (NIV)

The Bible speaks of what is often referred to today as *soul ties*. It doesn't use the phrase *soul ties*, but it teaches of them when it talks about souls being knit together, becoming one flesh, or in the making of vows and oaths. In its simplest form, these connections bond people together in the spiritual realm. Just look around and you'll see there are healthy and unhealthy ways we bond with each other and the things around us. You may have said or heard people describe relationships as life-giving, while others draining and often co-dependent.

Thankfully, Jesus' work on the cross has the power to break unhealthy ties. In today's passage from Galatians, Paul describes our being crucified to the things of this world. It's a breaking of ties with anything that separates us from God's love. Without realizing it, we can easily become entangled in our relationships, intertwined with the things of the world and preoccupied by the responsibilities of life. In one way or another, it's time for the breaking of ties that have gotten in the way of our union with God.

APPLICATION: What are you connected with the most? Do you have any ties that need to be broken? Take some time today and consider the level of intimacy you have with God. How are you *remaining in His love*? Are there relationships that need to be sorted out? Are there strongholds that need to be broken? Seek the power of God's Spirit to break you free from anything that gets in the way of deeper union with Him.

PRAYER: I bring the cross of my Lord Jesus Christ between me and [name this person, habit or thing that has become an idol or unhealthy connection]. I have been crucified to this [name them] and they have been crucified to me. So by the cross of Jesus Christ, I break every soul tie and every unholy bond with [name them]. I seek full union with You, God, so that my relationship with everyone and everything would be put in its place, so that I may be filled and refreshed with Your life and Your love. Amen.

PRAYING UNTIL YOU PRAY

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful.

Colossians 4:2 (NIV)

I wait for the LORD, my whole being waits, and in His word I put my hope.

Psalms 130:5 (NIV)

There are countless prayers recorded in the Bible. Hundreds upon hundreds of books have been written on the subject of prayer. But in its essence, prayer is simply this: *communication between us and God*. It's two-way. It's us relating with Him, and Him relating with us. Sometimes we initiate the conversation. Sometimes He initiates the conversation. It's really not that complicated.

Communicating with God is, however, not always as fulfilling or as enriching as we'd like it to be. If we're honest, sometimes it feels like God is a million miles away, as if maybe He's too busy, not listening or doesn't even care. Most of us believe these things aren't true, yet there remains an ache, a longing that lingers inside us.

Today's Scriptures speak to this longing, and thankfully there's more. In fact, maybe the longing for more is just what we need. Maybe this longing is what drives us closer to God. I have days when I'll admit I honestly don't know what to say to God. Sometimes I've said the same words so many times I wonder if I'm just talking to myself. Thankfully, God is showing me that it's often in these quiet moments that being silent, listening for God - beyond answers and direction - is what I need most. Staying in the conversation, even when there are no words, is what seems to be renewing my strength. So let's not give up. Let's move beyond religion and rituals and pray until we pray. Let's remain present until we sense His presence. Let's pray long enough and honestly enough to get past the feeling of formalism. Let's pray until we pray so that eventually we enter into His delight and rest in His love.

All humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone.

Blaise Pascal

APPLICATION: Stay with God a bit longer today. Pray until sin loses its appeal. Pray until the burden is lifted. Pray until God's presence becomes real. Pray until prayer becomes more than words. Pray until gratitude rushes in. Pray until you have clarity. Pray until you're eager to love. Pray until you're resolved to do His will. Pray until you experience the peace that surpasses all understanding.

PRAYER: God, I long for more of You. I wait for You with my whole being and my hope is in Your Word. Amen.

HUNGERING FOR MORE

Some wandered in desert wastelands, finding no way to a city where they could settle. They were hungry and thirsty, and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle... for He satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things. **Psalm 107:4-7, 9 (NIV)**

When I'm hungry, I eat. I usually don't wait long. I have food in my office, often have snacks in my car, and there's a well-worn path from the garage door to the pantry. When I'm hungry, I eat.

Beyond physical hunger, there's a spiritual hunger deep inside all of us. It's a hunger given to us by the Creator. Adam and Eve didn't know this hunger at first, because they lived in complete union with God. He filled them up. They were full. Their souls were continually satisfied. Until they weren't. Rather than staying intimately connected with God (remaining in, abiding deeply), they looked to something else to fill them. We all know what happened next. Shame. Disconnection. Death. Ever since then, humanity has experienced a deep longing to return home. It's a hungering for more. It's been said that *our address is Eden, and we are all homesick.*

Thankfully, God never changes. He has been, is now, and forevermore will be the source of life. He alone is the one who can fill our deepest cravings and endless search for life. As Jesus taught the first disciples: *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* **Matthew 5:6 (NIV).**

Discipline imposed from the outside eventually defeats when it is not matched by desire from within. **Dawson Trotman**

APPLICATION: Meditate on today's Scripture and highlight any words that seem significant to you. How do you relate to the words of this passage? What is it you need from God today? Allow your hunger for more to lead you to the fullness of God.

PRAYER: God, I confess to You that I often look to other things, rather than You, to fill the void inside me. I realize nothing compares to the life You have for me. You are my Savior and the true source of life. I'm fixing my gaze on You today so I can more fully walk in Your love. Amen.

SEEKING DIRECTION

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Acts 13:2 (NIV)

While many people try to make life work on their own, there are many others who look to God for direction and purpose. What do you want me to do? What decision should I make in this or that situation? Those sorts of questions, when directed toward God, are really good. Who else knows what's ahead or which way is best? But many of us, if we're honest, have asked God questions like this and felt like our prayers have gone no further than the ceiling. God, are You out there? Do You care? I'm trying to follow You, but I'm not getting any answers!

Today's Scripture offers us a picture of what it looks like to walk patiently with God. Rather than grasping or demanding a particular response from God, the people of the newly formed church in Antioch simply built into their lives the regular practices of worship and fasting. In fact, if you read the entire passage, it's as if they trusted that God would lead them. In His way. According to His timing.

Worship and fasting have been central to the life of God's people for thousands of years. These were part of the rhythms of life for the Israelites, and are meant to be normal practices for followers of Christ. What I appreciate about today's Scripture is that while the people were going about their regular daily/weekly spiritual practices, they received direction from God. Worship and fasting are ways to align ourselves with the heart and mind of God. By moving out of our normal, daily routines, these practices, as awkward and unnatural as they may seem, open our hearts to God in a unique way.

APPLICATION: As you make yourself available to God today, may you hear the voice of the Holy Spirit in ways you may not know you even need. He may surprise you as you turn your eyes toward Him and allow Him space to speak.

PRAYER: God, I pause and surrender my life to You. I say yes to all You have for me and give You room to speak. [Sit for a few minutes to quiet your heart and mind]. I am here to receive so that I might experience You breaking through the noise and responsibilities of life. Show me things I've not yet seen. Take me to places I can only go if You go there with me. Amen.

THE NEED FOR A “ME FAST”

He prayed, “O LORD, God of our ancestors, You alone are the God who is in heaven. You are ruler of all the kingdoms of the earth. You are powerful and mighty; no one can stand against You!” **2 Chronicles 20:6 (NLT)**

This is the beginning of a prayer Jehoshaphat led the people of God through as an impossibly strong army marched toward them. But rather than launching into their need for direction or deliverance, he magnifies the name of God and honors the character of God! In that prayer, he not only glorifies God’s name but praises His unwavering promises. Why? Because God’s faithfulness and promise to an undeserving people are testaments to His love, mercy and power. Celebrating God’s promises as we pray, even before they’re fulfilled, shows our trust in His Word and our relationship with Him.

Every prayer we utter, especially when we’re in trouble or need guidance, should be more focused on who God is than the actual problem. Praying God’s greatness back to Him not only honors God, it helps us avoid becoming self-focused.

Before God brought me to a life of ministry in South Carolina and Latvia, I went through a period of preparation that was not pleasant. I was pretty much in the same whiny, entitled place the Israelites were, the desert. I didn’t know why God wasn’t coming through with His promise (in my timeline). So, I pushed, and I complained, and then I pushed some more. But God made it clear He wasn’t going to open the path to fulfilling His promise for me until having the promise was less important to me than having Him. God loves to fulfill His promises, but He may withhold what He’s promised you if you want the outcome more than you want Him.

So, in my self-focused ranting, I felt God leading me to what I now call a *ME Fast*. I had to fast from my selfishness. For 40 days, I didn’t pray anything for myself. I only prayed back to God who He was. His attributes, His character, His great deeds, His promises. It completely changed my perspective. And shortly after those 40 days, I was called to Brookwood Church.

Some of us need a ME fast now, because we’re so focused on what we want from God that we’ve forgotten who He is.

APPLICATION: Our breakthroughs can be hampered by what we want from God when what we really need is to be comforted by the character of God. Are we willing to step outside our desire for advancement, direction or rescue long enough to be truly present with God, reflecting on His glory, love and might?

PRAYER: Lord of eternity, Your name is glorious, and Your might in righteousness humbles the stars You created. You see the beginning from the end. You are the author of my life. Reveal Your glory so I might see and reflect on You, melting my own concerns in the warmth of Your light. Amen.

WEEK ONE • FRIDAY

A PRAYER FOR WHEN WE CAN'T PRAY

And the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. For example, we don't know what God wants us to pray for. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words. And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will... Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and He is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Romans 8:26-27, 34b (NLT)

When life circumstances so overwhelm your heart that it can no longer convey its anguish in words; it can seem impossible to come before God in prayer. How do we pray when we don't know *what* to pray? How do we speak to God when grief and fear hold our words captive? The greatest breakthrough prayers don't have to be eloquent or even verbal when our soul feels lost. Remember, *The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*" (Psalm 34:18 NIV). In fact, we can defer our prayer to the Holy Spirit and Christ, who approach the Father on our behalf. So, when our own words won't come, perhaps our hearts can rely on the promise of His words, praying silently from the depth of our sorrow:

Father God, You are good and You are worthy of praise. I don't know what to do. I don't know what to say. Show me how the Spirit is praying for me because I don't know how to pray for myself.

Show me how He's pleading for me because You promised the Holy Spirit will help me in my weakness. I don't know how You want me to pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for me with groanings that can't be expressed in words. You are my Father, who knows all hearts and the Spirit pleads for me in harmony with Your own will.

I can't sense the Spirit's movement right now, so help me know He's here, even as He prays for me. I feel so weak, Father. Remind me of Christ's victory and that He, too, intercedes in prayer on my behalf.

The Messiah died for me and was raised to life for my healing. He is sitting in the place of honor at Your right hand, pleading for me. I can't pray, Lord. So, comfort me with the hope of how You are interceding for me without end.

AMEN

APPLICATION: Sometimes, the greatest prayers of breakthrough will not contain words, but come from a surrendered heart of trust.

PRAYER: Lord of Compassion, on the days I cannot find words to pray, draw me into a silent closeness with You, revealing Your heart for me. Amen.

HIDE AND SEEK

When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the LORD God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the LORD God among the trees. Then the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

Genesis 3:8-9 (NLT)

When you were little, do you remember playing the game of hide-and-seek? I used to love playing that game, even though, let's be honest, kids aren't always the best at it. My kids wanted to play the other day. Selah was hiding behind a curtain, and her feet were sticking out. I spotted her in the first few seconds of looking but pretended I couldn't find her. Do you realize that hide-and-seek isn't a game you outgrow, spiritually speaking? When we sin, most of us try to hide from God, or we think *let's give it some time*. We almost try to downplay our sins by not seeking or drawing near to God, or we distance ourselves from Him. But here's the real problem: we're bad at hide-and-seek. When God calls out to Adam, "*Where are you?*" He knew exactly where he was. God doesn't miss anything. He sees all, and He knows all. He can't grow or learn, which means we can't slip things past Him. Yet, like children, we still try to hide even though He clearly sees us hiding behind busyness, distractions, distance and guilt. Those things were never meant to cover God's love and grace!

Do you remember what Adam and Eve tried to do after they sinned? They grabbed some fig leaves and tried to cover and hide themselves. The problem is that fig leaves weren't a good solution. So, the Bible says God, in His kindness, clothed Adam and Eve. Salvation is what theologians call *the great exchange*. We bring our sin and give it to Jesus, while He gives us His righteousness and takes our sin. The first sin was lying and hiding. It still happens all the time today. But today is the day to step into the light. God sees you, and He forgives you. Don't try to cover up your shame. Let God meet you and clothe you with His love. He is faithful to do it.

APPLICATION: Don't run and hide from God. Instead, let Him clothe you with His mercy today.

PRAYER: Thank God that we don't have to hide. Whatever you're holding onto, cast it to Him and trust Him! He is faithful. Ask for His help!

JESUS IS PRAYING FOR YOU

My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous.

1 John 2:1 (NLT)

Most religions point to a god who is somewhere up there waiting to be found. We have a God who hasn't just come to find us; He prays for us. This is an overwhelming and amazing thought. In fact, when you read this, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus is advocating for you. People will often think no one understands or sees them. However, right now, what a stirring thought that Jesus, the Son of God, has you on His mind.

Jesus spent time alone with His Father. Most of the time, we aren't clear on what He prayed for; however, there are a few places in the Bible where Jesus gives us insight into what was on His heart. In Luke 22:32, He tells us that He prayed for Peter's faith to remain strong. And in John 17, Jesus' High Priestly Prayer, He prayed for His followers and "*for those who will believe in Me through their message*" (verse 20). That's us! Now that Jesus has ascended back into heaven, He still prays for us. His ministry on our behalf continues (Hebrews 7:25).

We read in the verse above that when you sin, Jesus advocates for you. The Bible is clear that Satan accuses. He tries to get you to think that God won't forgive you or that a level of shame will keep you stuck in the same sins. What matters is who is more powerful. Remember, God created Satan, so you build your life on what God says since God's power is greater. Right now, Jesus is praying for you—praying for you to receive grace and mercy, and not wrath and lies. Satan will accuse us night and day. Most of us understand this. We've become familiar with those voices in our heads that try to pull us away from the love of God. The next time you hear those thoughts, sit in this verse. Remind yourself what Jesus has done for you. Remind yourself that you have a God who knows and sees everything you've done, and you're being prayed for right now. Let that encourage you to keep drawing near to God.

APPLICATION: Satan accuses, but Jesus advocates for you. Listen to your advocate today.

PRAYER: Ask God to remind you who you are in Him. Spend time thanking God for what Jesus has done for you and thanking God that Jesus is your advocate!

SATAN IS AN ACCUSER

Then I heard a loud voice shouting across the heavens, "It has come at last –salvation and power and the Kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Christ. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters has been thrown down to earth –the one who accuses them before our God day and night."

Revelation 12:10 (NLT)

Have you ever been accused or had your sin held over your head? Many of us know what it's like to have some of our worst moments hung over our heads. Years ago, I lied about several things going on in the ministry. Most of it was just because I was insecure and wanted to be viewed in a positive light. The hardest part for me was that I was accused of things I never did, but because I was dishonest before, I couldn't advocate for anything. To this day, the enemy can try to create crippling shame from those interactions. I owned my mistakes, and there should have been consequences, but I wasn't prepared for the shame and false accusations that were put over me by a few people and, most importantly, Satan.

We all make mistakes. The challenge is not to dismiss them or let them define you. Both are dangerous. There are three ways we can approach our shame:

Minimize—This is usually what our flesh does. We tend to want to minimize what we've done to self-protect and justify our actions.

Maximize—This is usually what Satan does. He tries to get you to feel a paralyzing shame that keeps you stuck or causes you to sabotage yourself.

Right-size—this is what the Spirit does. He brings your attention to what you did and draws out the reasons you did it. The Spirit brings it up to heal and transform you.

This has been transformative for me in so many places. We are all prone at times to minimize what we've done. The problem with minimizing is that we don't own our mistakes and grow from them. We all have times when we can listen to the voice of Satan or others and maximize our mistakes so much that we feel no hope or future moving forward. This isn't the way of Jesus. Let Jesus speak to you and reveal what He wants to reveal to you. I remember sitting at that moment, and God whispered to me, *Bryan, you made a mistake. Own it, but remember you aren't a mistake. I still have good plans for you.* Let God speak to you when Satan accuses you.

APPLICATION: Let the Spirit right-size what you've said and done.

PRAYER: Ask God to free you from what the enemy or others accuse you of. Your identity is a child of God. Lean into that and trust it.

SATAN IS A LIAR

For you are the children of your father the devil, and you love to do the evil things he does. He was a murderer from the beginning. He has always hated the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, it is consistent with his character; for he is a liar and the father of lies.

John 8:44 (NLT)

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, Sauron, the evil villain in the book, deceives a master ringmaker to forge rings. Why would this ring maker make such a weapon of destruction? He was deceived. Sauron told him it would be a tool to fight evil, not create evil. The ringmaker struggles with this decision, but the persistence and lies of the evil character Sauron eventually win him over. Why do so many people fall prey to the evil in this world? It's because our enemy, Satan, takes things and twists them. He promises life, pleasure and joy, but all his plans lead to a future of emptiness, death and pain. He never wants you to see that, so he deceives you. He lies to you, and he's the best in the world at doing it. That's why you can't negotiate with evil. You'll always lose. Satan will take your logic or your thoughts and twist them. Your job is to trust God and where He is leading you! Notice what it says in the verse above: he hates the truth, and he will do anything he can to keep you from the truth. Jesus says that He is the way, the truth and the life. So, Satan hates Him, and if you follow Jesus, Satan hates you too.

You cannot win an argument with Satan. Remember that. Adam and Eve lost. Satan took what God had said and twisted it. It is important to remember that the best lies are the ones closest to the truth. Satan won't come in with blatant attacks on God; he will try to get you to distrust God's plans or His goodness when you experience problems. You must set in your heart right now that you won't turn away. You must commit on the good days that you'll stay anchored on the bad days because Satan will show up with all sorts of lies. To be the father of lies means he is the original liar, and it's his craft and creation. So please don't listen to him. Decide to follow God's plans for your life wholeheartedly, even if it doesn't make sense! He's good!

APPLICATION: Jesus is the way, the truth and the life!

PRAYER: Thank Jesus that He is the way, the truth and the life. Ask the Spirit to help you follow and obey God no matter the situation. Ask God to give you discernment in places where you might be listening to Satan's lies. Ask the Spirit to replace it with His truth!

GOD PROVIDES A WAY OUT!

The temptations in your life are no different from what others experience. And God is faithful. He will not allow the temptation to be more than you can stand. When you are tempted, He will show you a way out so that you can endure.

1 Corinthians 10:13 (NLT)

We have physical alarm clocks, but did you know this verse shows us that we have spiritual alarm clocks? Alarm clocks help you wake up from sleep. Spiritual alarm clocks help you wake up from the temptation and attacks of the enemy. This verse makes it clear that God will be faithful to provide a way out. This is such an important truth. People say *I couldn't help myself or control myself*. The truth is that God provided a way out, and you didn't take it. Think of it like a train stop. The train stops, and its door opens, it's a clear opportunity for you to get off the train. If you don't, the train will keep moving at full speed to its destination. God does the same. He stops the train of temptation and sin and gives you opportunities to get off. You have to make the choice. If you don't, the opportunity will close, and you'll move at full speed towards sin and destruction. There will be a point where the train of temptation won't stop, and you'll be trapped. That's why it's so important to listen to the voice of God now as He's speaking. God will often give a sermon, a friend, a warning, a reminder of what sin will cost, and we have a moment where we see clearly, but if you don't respond, that can be deadly in your faith.

God will always be faithful, but you have to take the opportunities He lays before you. You have to be willing to follow Jesus wherever He calls you. If you're struggling with sin or temptation, look today for the little moments or ways Jesus provides to step off that train. Trust Him and choose to let Him guide you, and you'll find victory you haven't seen before. God is with you in the struggle. As a child of His, He wants you to find victory, and if you stay faithful, then He promises you'll find it.

APPLICATION: Trust God today and look for the ways He provides to escape the temptations and sin before you.

PRAYER: Thank God for the ways of escape He provides. Thank Him for the victory He gives. Ask Him for strength to follow Him where He is leading you today!

YOU WON'T DIE

"You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."
Genesis 3:4-5 (NLT)

Perhaps the most compelling tactic of Satan is to make us think that sin doesn't affect us. Notice what he says: *you won't die*. What Satan doesn't want you to know is that although it's pleasurable in the moment, sin kills your heart and soul. Think about it: people wouldn't engage in sin if it weren't enjoyable. However, Satan doesn't want you to know that it will kill your heart for God. Your purity is where your power comes from.

I used to think I needed to be good so God would love me. The truth is that God loves you no matter what you do, but His power can only be experienced by those pure in heart. Those who are committed to chasing after Him, not perfectly, but wholeheartedly! This changed the way I viewed sin and pleasure. Sure, it offers something enticing, but like a diet filled with junk food, it leaves you miserable. The truth is that God already told them not to eat from the tree. They didn't need to experience it. God isn't trying to keep you from the greater thing. He is the greater thing. Don't settle for the blessings of God. Let your heart feast upon the blesser.

Satan will always get you things—saying the *worldly stuff* is way better than the *Jesus stuff*, but deep down, you know that's not true. So next time Satan comes and draws you towards something you know isn't from God, don't get caught up in feelings; remember the truth to understand these things bring death. It might feel good in the moment, but it'll leave you empty and spiritually dead. If you have Jesus, you have a joy and life that nothing in this world can compete with, but Satan wants you to think there's still more. This is a lie to kill you spiritually. Don't let Him! Trust God!

APPLICATION: Sin looks fun, but it's a miserable companion.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you see the big picture of sin instead of the near-sighted things. Ask God to help you let go of feelings and emotions and trust Him! He is good!

CHOICE

The LORD God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and watch over it. But the LORD God warned him, "You may freely eat the fruit of every tree in the garden— except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat its fruit, you are sure to die."

Genesis 2:15-17 (NLT)

When God created the first man named Adam, He placed him in a beautiful garden. Through this garden, God provided for several of the man's needs.

God met Adam's need for a purpose by trusting the man to be responsible for caring for the garden. Likely, Adam felt gratitude for the trust God placed in him. Maybe Adam felt appreciated for being trusted with this task. If I had been Adam, I might have felt some inadequacy and may have asked God if He was sure about picking me for this job because I might mess something up!

God demonstrated that He would provide for Adam's physical needs by allowing him to freely eat the fruit of many different trees in the garden. There was an overwhelming abundance of items available for Adam's physical life. Fruit that would produce and continue to reproduce so that Adam would have an unlimited source of nourishment for his survival and variety for his enjoyment.

God also accommodated man's need to choose by placing one tree in the garden that would not benefit Adam. God was clear with His instructions and the consequences of disobeying His guidance. This allowed Adam to choose whether to obey or disobey God. It allowed Adam the option to trust the Creator as Lord or trust himself as lord.

I appreciate partaking in a good buffet of food. I like tasting the variety of choices and enjoying the satisfaction of good food. However, my digestive system sometimes has difficulty with dairy products. Imagine if I sat down to a feast of meats, fruits and vegetables but had one dish of cheese available. I could enjoy almost the entire selection of foods with no harmful consequences, but if I ate that one plate of cheese, I'd be miserable. It seems like an easy choice, but I love the taste of cheese!

God provided Adam with a wide variety of choices for his nourishment, but there was only one choice that would be a bad one. God's love provides what's best for us, but God's love also allows us not to trust Him. Though we have the opportunity to disregard and disobey God, the assortment of good things God provides when we trust Him is vastly greater than we can even understand.

APPLICATION: Focus on the good things God has done for you. Ask God to remind you of something He has provided for you.

PRAYER: Thank God for His provision for you.

WEEK THREE • MONDAY

DECEPTION

The serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild animals the LORD God had made. One day he asked the woman, "Did God really say you must not eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden?" "Of course we may eat fruit from the trees in the garden," the woman replied. "It's only the fruit from the tree in the middle of the garden that we are not allowed to eat. God said, 'You must not eat it or even touch it; if you do, you will die.'" "You won't die!" the serpent replied to the woman. "God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil."
Genesis 3:1-5 (NLT)

From the time when people have been on this earth, they have had the option to not trust God, and there has also been a being trying to influence people not to trust God.

The serpent in this passage represents Satan, as noted in Revelation 12:9 and 20:2. One of Satan's greatest weapons is deception. He takes an element of truth and twists it to lead us down a path away from God. God originally said that the people could eat the fruit from any of the trees in the garden, but Satan tried to plant the thought that God said they couldn't eat from any of the trees in the garden. Eve answered correctly regarding what God actually said (except she added a little extra), then Satan outright tried to refute what God said. When Satan said, *You won't die*, he gave a deceptive sliver of truth without sharing the whole truth. Partial truth is not real truth. The people didn't immediately die physically, but they immediately died spiritually. Their spirit was immediately unable to relate with God in the way they had before. And their physical body began the death process. And it's true that the people's eyes were opened, but it was not true that they would become like God. Likely this is the root of Satan's deceptive temptation, causing people to yearn to be their own god, the ruler of themselves. This is expressed in phrases like, *I'm living my own truth, I know what's best for me, it's my right to do what I want*.

Satan likes to tease us with an appearance of truth while hiding the whole truth. This evil being has been around for centuries and is quite skilled at suggesting things that appear to be from God when they aren't.

How can we combat this deception? It's been said that the best way to recognize a counterfeit dollar bill is to be intimately acquainted with what a genuine dollar bill looks like. When you know the real deal, you'll be able to spot a fake. Seek to know what God truly says in His Word and go back to God when you're unsure of what He said. The Bible is an excellent source of God's truth.

Jesus said, If you continue in My word, then you are truly My disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. John 8:31-32 (NASB)

APPLICATION: Consider how you'll receive God's truth each day. A possible plan is to read a chapter from the Bible each day and write down or text a verse to yourself to remember it throughout the day.

PRAYER: Father, give me understanding of your Word so that I may live according to your truth.

ALLURE AND CONSEQUENCES

The woman was convinced. She saw that the tree was beautiful and its fruit looked delicious, and she wanted the wisdom it would give her. So she took some of the fruit and ate it. Then she gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it, too. At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. And the LORD God made clothing from animal skins for Adam and his wife.

Genesis 3:6-7, 21 (NLT)

We have an enemy who wants to lure us away from God and what's best for us. We're enticed by the same things that were attractive to Eve.

Eve saw that the tree was beautiful. It looked good and was pleasing to the eye. People are attracted to and seduced by things and other people that are attractive to the eye but do not fulfill the soul. But the Word of God says:

People judge by outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.

1 Samuel 16:7 (NLT)

Eve was attracted to the fruit that looked delicious. We are susceptible to trying to soothe the struggles of this life with food or other substances and we like to fill our stomachs with things that taste good. We put a high premium on trying to satisfy our physical needs. But Jesus said:

People do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Matthew 4:4 (NLT)

Eve wanted the wisdom and knowledge that would be attained by eating the forbidden fruit. We tend to want a shortcut to knowing what's best, and the internet temporarily feeds our desire to know more. But the Bible tells us that true wisdom comes from God.

If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and He will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking.

James 1:5 (NLT)

As we see with Adam and Eve, and as we've experienced in our own lives, there are consequences to seeking fulfillment in the things of this world rather than in the love of God. Adam and Eve felt shame and tried to cover themselves and their sins with leaves that were inadequate and temporary. But God sacrificed an animal to provide a covering that was enduring and sufficient. Thank God that He's provided a worthy sacrifice in Jesus, sufficient to cover our sin, and give us enduring, eternal life!

APPLICATION: Ask God where you might be susceptible to seeking fulfillment in things of this world. Confess to God the thoughts that come to mind.

PRAYER: In your own words, pray something like this verse to God:

Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything in me that offends You, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.

Psalms 139:23-24 (NLT)

CORRUPTED

But I fear that somehow your pure and undivided devotion to Christ will be corrupted, just as Eve was deceived by the cunning ways of the serpent.

2 Corinthians 11:3 (NLT)

Not long ago, I tried to open a document on my computer, and a message popped up saying the file was corrupted. I had to search for what that meant, and I discovered that it indicated something got into that file and changed the information so it could no longer be used.

I remember a time when I felt like I had drifted so far from God I thought He could no longer use me. It didn't happen quickly or intentionally. It started when I chose to participate in a sports league with games on Sundays, preventing me from attending church with fellow believers. Then, I began to miss days reading my Bible and gradually stopped reading it. Soon, I found myself engaging in sinful activities I thought I would never do. I remember waking up one morning asking God, *How did I get here? What can I do to get out of this mess?*

I sensed God leading me back to my home church, and I began to seek Him through His Word. I felt that God had forgiven me, but I felt I was corrupted, no longer able to be used. The truth is, I WAS corrupted. I had been deceived by Satan and followed the allure of the things of this world. But to say God could no longer use me was another one of the devil's lies. God told me and showed me that He could still use me and that His power works best in my weakness. God soon allowed me to serve Him and nudged me to deny the lie that He could no longer use me. Though I still had moments of guilt and shame, the Spirit of God continued to transform me by renewing my mind through His Word and the love of other believers.

Satan is a cunning adversary who will seek to deceive and corrupt our hearts. But the good news is that the blood of Jesus can clean up the corruption and give us victory.

So now there is no condemnation for those who belong to Christ Jesus. And because you belong to him, the power of the life-giving Spirit has freed you from the power of sin that leads to death.

Romans 8:1-2 (NLT)

APPLICATION: Identify an area in your life where you might be vulnerable to the cunning ways of the devil.

PRAYER: Confess your vulnerability to God and ask Him to show you any steps you can take.

CONTRAST

For the sin of this one man, Adam, caused death to rule over many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and His gift of righteousness, for all who receive it will live in triumph over sin and death through this one man, Jesus Christ. Yes, Adam's one sin brings condemnation for everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness brings a right relationship with God and new life for everyone. Because one person disobeyed God, many became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many will be made righteous.

Romans 5:17-19 (NLT)

I inherited many characteristics from my parents because I have their DNA. DNA is the material that carries all the information about how a living thing will look and function. Since I inherited my parents' DNA, I have blue eyes like they did. Some characteristics may show immediately, and some may take a while to be displayed. My Dad enjoyed running for exercise, and eventually, I also took up running. When we have a characteristic like our parents or behave in a way that's like our parents, people often say *we come by that honestly*. In other words, we inherited that trait from our parents.

However, I received some things from my wife's parents simply because I entered a marriage relationship with my wife. I could go to my in-laws' house and watch their big-screen TV, eat food from their refrigerator, and use their tools as if they were my own. I didn't inherit these things by birth, but I received them because I had a relationship with their daughter.

We all have inherited the sin gene from the first man, Adam. We were born with the tendency to sin, and we've all acted on that tendency by sinning. As Jesus pointed out in Matthew 5, even having a sinful thought can be a sin. The Bible explains in Romans 6:23 that the result of our sin is death. As we've seen throughout history, all people die, and the Bible tells us that this sentence of death is a result of our sin. We die because of our own sin, but we're also acting out of what we've inherited from the first man, Adam. You could say that we come by it honestly.

Though we've all inherited sin and death through Adam, we all have the opportunity to receive eternal life through a relationship with the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ. Adam sinned, but Jesus lived a perfect, sinless life and was worthy to sacrifice His own life to take the punishment for our sins. Because of Jesus' obedience to God and His death for us, we can receive His righteousness as a gift and thus can receive eternal life.

APPLICATION: Name something you've received because of Jesus and thank God for it.

PRAYER: Thank you, Father, for sending your Son Jesus to die for me so I may enjoy eternal life.

WARNING

Be careful then, dear brothers and sisters. Make sure that your own hearts are not evil and unbelieving, turning you away from the living God. You must warn each other every day, while it is still "today," so that none of you will be deceived by sin and hardened against God. For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ.

Hebrews 3:12-14 (NLT)

A few years ago, we moved into a new house with dim light bulbs in the bathroom, which caused a problem for me one morning. As I was getting ready for church, I looked in the mirror in the bathroom, and everything appeared to be fine. After arriving at church, I went into the bathroom, where there was good lighting. As I was washing my hands, I looked in the mirror and noticed a long hair growing out of my nose. Thankfully, I could pluck out the nose hair before I walked around the church and embarrassed myself. I wondered afterward if anyone would have noticed. And if they noticed, would anyone have said anything? I asked myself if I would have said anything if I saw that in someone else and realized I probably wouldn't have noticed!

It's beneficial to shine the light of God's Word into our lives to help us see if there's anything turning us away from our relationship with Jesus. It's also helpful to have other people in our lives who can notice what we can't see and who we can trust to lovingly tell us the truth.

When I drive up to an intersection, I appreciate it if my passenger warns me that a car is approaching. It's also helpful if I have a brother or sister in Christ to let me know if something in my life is drawing me away from growing my relationship with God.

How can I make sure that I'm not turning away from God? Ask God to use the reading of His Word to shine His light into the hidden areas of your life. Ask God to show you some trusted friends who can warn you when they see you being deceived by Satan or the interests of this world. Trust the Holy Spirit to guide you and speak to you.

Jesus said, "The Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

John 14:26 (NIV)

APPLICATION: Ask God to show you a trusted friend who can pray for you today.

PRAYER: Father, guide me to someone I can pray with. Show me someone I can pray for who will pray for me as well.

MADE RIGHT

We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Yet God, in His grace, freely makes us right in His sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when He freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed His life, shedding His blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when He held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for He was looking ahead and including them in what He would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate His righteousness, for He Himself is fair and just, and He makes sinners right in His sight when they believe in Jesus.

Romans 3:22-26 (NLT)

I remember the feeling I had when I heard a pastor explain that there is a God who loves us and created us. I believed that statement and felt in my heart that it was true. Then he said that God is perfect, and He cannot be in relationship with someone who has sinned against Him or disobeyed Him. Sinning against God is like saying, *I'd rather do things my way instead of Your way because I think I know better.* The pastor said that everyone has sinned, and that included me. He began to explain that sin brings consequences and must be punished. The punishment for sin is death. In fact, the punishment we all deserve is like the punishment Jesus received when He died on the cross. It's a terrible punishment to be separated from the God who loves us and is the source of life. I remember feeling guilt and shame for my sin, and a feeling of dread came over me as I recognized that I deserved the punishment that Jesus endured on the cross.

Then the pastor said that Jesus lived a perfect life and that He never sinned. When Jesus died on the cross, He didn't deserve it, but He placed Himself on that cross willingly to die in my place. God sent His only Son, Jesus, to take the punishment I deserved, and He did it because He loves me. I was overwhelmed by the fact that someone would die such a horrible death in my place. I was moved by this love and believed that when Jesus died on the cross, He was doing it for me. I believed that God raised Jesus from the dead to show His power over death and to assure me that I could now enjoy eternal life. I trusted that Jesus' death was for me, and I surrendered the ownership of my life to Jesus.

I was made right in God's sight because I trusted that Jesus' death on the cross was for me. There was nothing I had done to earn a relationship with God or to earn eternal life. I simply trusted that Jesus died for me and surrendered my life to Him as my Lord, my Master.

The Good News story of what God has done through Jesus to make people right with Him is available to everyone. But the story of how I received that righteousness became my story because it happened to me. I thank God for allowing me to experience being made right at such a young age.

APPLICATION: Write down the story of how you felt when you first heard the story of Jesus dying on the cross for you, even if today was the first time.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for sending Jesus to die for me. Give me the words to share the story of how I accepted Jesus doing that for me.

OUR EXPERIENCE

We proclaim to you the One who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw Him with our own eyes and touched Him with our own hands. He is the Word of life. This One who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen Him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that He is the One who is eternal life. He was with the Father, and then He was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy.

1 John 1:1-4 (NLT)

When I experience a good meal, a situation that brings a big laugh, or I go on a memorable trip, I want to tell others about that experience. I want to describe the details of what I tasted, what I heard, and what I saw so that my friends can get a taste of what I experienced. Ultimately, I'm sharing the experience because I'm hoping those who hear my story will get to enjoy a similar experience. It was impactful for me, and I want others to know the impact as well.

The writer of this passage was the apostle John, one of Jesus' 12 disciples when He walked on this earth. John explains how he saw Jesus with his own eyes and touched Him with his hands. John shares his personal experience of walking and talking with Jesus, saying that Jesus was the One who existed from the beginning of time and is the source of eternal life. John is sharing his personal account of his experience with Jesus, stating what he has seen with his own eyes and heard with his own ears so that those who hear this story can experience Jesus as well. John said he was sharing it so others could have fellowship with him, which means he wants them to experience this same eternal life that he found in Jesus. John wants to include us in the relationship he has with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. John said he was writing about his experience with Jesus so that everyone could share the same joy he has that comes from knowing Christ. John was given the opportunity by God to speak to others through his own story.

When I have personal time with God through reading the Bible or sensing thoughts He puts in my mind through prayer, then I'm having a personal experience with God. When I share that personal experience with someone else, I'm inviting them into that experience. Though I sometimes feel I'm putting myself in a vulnerable position when I express to others what I've experienced with God, I also realize that God sometimes speaks to others through the story of what He has spoken to me. A bond develops between people when we share what we've experienced with God because that bond includes the Spirit of God.

APPLICATION: Ask God to bring to your mind something He's revealed to you personally, either through the Bible, prayer or through someone else. Find someone to tell about that experience.

PRAYER: Father, help me sense what You want me to know from You today. Lead me to someone with whom I can share what I'm sensing from You.

SPEAK

Instead, we will speak the truth in love, growing in every way more and more like Christ, who is the head of His body, the church. He makes the whole body fit together perfectly. As each part does its own special work, it helps the other parts grow, so that the whole body is healthy and growing and full of love.

Ephesians 4:15-16 (NLT)

When I trusted my life to Jesus, I became a part of the body of Christ. Though it's not hard for me to accept that I'm a member of the body of Christ, it's sometimes challenging for me to see how important my role is.

This passage says that as we speak the truth in love, we'll grow more like Jesus. I believe speaking the truth includes sharing the truth of our experience with Christ. This involves sharing the initial story of how we came to place our faith in Jesus as well as the ongoing story of our daily interaction with Christ through the Bible and prayer. No one else is as intimately acquainted with my experience with Christ as I am, so I'm the one most qualified to share that story. Jesus said in John 14:6 that He is the truth, so including Him or His perspective in any situation helps me be assured of speaking the truth.

Hearing others speak the truth of their experience with Christ also helps me become more like Jesus. As I hear how God is working in others, I find encouragement that God can work in me, and I sense a bond with that person that is strengthened by the Spirit of God.

As each person, or part of the body, shares with others the truth of their experience with Christ, and as we serve one another, the Bible says we help the other parts of the body to be healthy, growing and full of love. I believe health is developed when we receive the nutrition of God's Word through the Bible, prayer and other believers. That health is evidenced by a servant attitude that is becoming more like Jesus. Growth is shown by the increasing evidence of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives - love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Ultimately, we see the benefits of growth as we see love demonstrated through us.

Speaking your truth is more than just sharing your opinion or experience. The way to find truth and speak truth is to include the Spirit of God in our experience.

APPLICATION: Read Ephesians 4:15-16 and ask God what He is saying. Share with a friend what you believe God is saying to you.

PRAYER: Father, give me Your perspective so I can know the truth. Give me the courage to share what You have shown me with someone else.

I CAN SEE

So for the second time they called in the man who had been blind and told him, "God should get the glory for this, because we know this man Jesus is a sinner."

"I don't know whether He is a sinner," the man replied. "But I know this: I was blind, and now I can see!"

John 9:24-25 (NLT)

The story in John 9 gives an account of a man born blind who was healed by Jesus. The religious leaders thought that Jesus was a sinner because He was healing someone on the Sabbath day, thus apparently disobeying the tradition of not working on the Sabbath. The formerly blind man wasn't sure whether Jesus was doing anything wrong. He could only speak concerning what he had just experienced.

We don't have to know everything about the Bible or be able to answer all the questions about God to share the story of what He's done in our lives. We just need to share what we've experienced with Him and the changes He's made in us. The healed man wasn't sure who Jesus was, or what was a sin, but he knew that he had been blind all his life, and after an experience with Jesus, now he could see.

Before I became a believer in Jesus, I was a self-centered and anxious child. I was nervous that I might say something that might cause my Mom to be upset with me. I would cry if my Mom was not at the curb to pick me up after school because I thought I might have made her so mad that she might not be coming, and I was scared to be alone. After I gave my life to Jesus, I had peace that He would take care of me in this life and that even if I died, I would have eternal life with Jesus forever. So, I told my Mom she no longer needed to pick me up after school. I began to ride the bus home and even started walking home because I trusted that Jesus would take care of me.

I didn't know much about the Bible at the time, but I believed that there was a God who loved me so much that He sent His only Son, Jesus, to die for me so I could have eternal life. I knew that my crippling anxiety was replaced with a peace that goes beyond understanding. I used to be anxious, but now I have peace.

What has Jesus done in your life?

APPLICATION: Ask God to remind you of an experience you've had with Him. If that's never happened to you, ask God what He wants you to know. Tell someone about your experience with Jesus.

PRAYER: Father, thank you for your work in this world and my life. Give me a sense of what You want me to know about You today.

EVEN THE WORST

This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of His great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in Him and receive eternal life.

1 Timothy 1:15-16 (NLT)

The apostle Paul wrote these words to his friend Timothy, alluding to Paul's attitudes and actions before his encounter with Jesus. Acts 8:1-3 gives a glimpse of how Paul (also known as Saul) was complicit in the death of Stephen, one of the leaders of the early movement of people spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ. It tells how Paul sought out the members of the early church, persecuting them and putting them in prison. Paul didn't hide his background because he wanted people to see the depths of God's mercy, and he was glad to be an example of God's love for even the worst of sinners. Paul wanted everyone to have hope that if Jesus would accept Paul and change his life, then Jesus could accept anyone and give them new life.

Many years ago, I began meeting with a few other men to share what was going on in our lives and seek God together. As we started, we agreed to share things from our life stories, both good and bad, and confess sinful thoughts we wanted to bring to the light so that God could transform our hearts. As I shared my past and confessed my thoughts, I was concerned that I might lose the respect of the other men and might even lose my job as a pastor. However, my transparency was met with compassion, understanding and prayer. Then another man shared his past and confessed his struggles, and I thought, *Wow, this guy is carrying some heavy stuff. I don't feel so bad after all.*

I'm sorry for all that my friend had been through and was currently dealing with. His story of where he had been and how he still needed God to work in him greatly encouraged me. It was a reminder of God's mercy to him and to me and another sign that God's power really does work best in our weakness. If God could bring my friend and me from where we had been to where we are today, then certainly He can work in anybody.

God can use your story to encourage others to find hope in Jesus and help them realize that if He can have mercy on you, He can have mercy on anybody. God can also use someone else's story to help you find some hope that He can truly forgive you.

APPLICATION: Tell someone the story of your life before you met Jesus, whether that was a long time ago or even today. Then, share what's different since you've met Jesus. Or ask someone else to tell you the story of their life before meeting Jesus and how they're different today.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for the mercy You have shown me. Help me to sense how much You love me today.

THE WORD OF THEIR TESTIMONY

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of His Messiah. For the accuser of our brothers and sisters, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They triumphed over him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death."

Revelation 12:10-11 (NIV)

Have you ever been accused of something you didn't do? Or have you had something held against you when people only knew a slice of the story without having the whole truth? It's quite frustrating, demeaning and discouraging to be looked down upon by others in that situation.

In grade school, I remember acting in self-defense against another student. In his anger, the other student told the teacher on me, but he only shared his perspective without telling the whole truth of what happened. The teacher told me I had to see the principal later that afternoon. I feared what the principal might do to me, was ashamed of what my teacher and friends thought of me, and was frustrated thinking no one but my accuser and I knew the whole truth of what happened. However, by the time we met with the principal, someone who witnessed the incident shared his perspective with my teacher and my accuser. The principal invited the witness and me to share our versions of the story, which caused my accuser to back down and admit that I had acted in self-defense. Based on my testimony and the account of the witness, the principal decided to inflict no punishment.

Satan is the accuser who constantly reminds us of our sin and seeks to heap guilt and shame on us for what we have done in our past. But only when we include Jesus can we see the whole truth. The whole truth consists of the fact that Jesus, the Son of God, lived a perfect life so that He's worthy of taking the punishment for my sins, and He died in my place so that I could be free of the condemnation of my sin. God raised Jesus from the dead to prove that Jesus is indeed the Son of God and has the authority and power to free us from the penalty of death. Jesus has won the victory over our accuser, Satan, but sometimes Satan still tries to put the guilt trip on us. We can still be hindered and discouraged by the shame of our past. Sometimes, we need to be reminded of what God has already done.

The blood of the Lamb has given us the victory, but the word of our testimony, the story of what He has done, reminds us that we have the victory. The whole truth of what God has done in our personal lives also helps others realize that there's someone who's been through something similar and encourages them that they can have victory as well. We have victory by the blood of the Lamb and the word of our testimony.

APPLICATION: Write the story of how God has worked in you. Include a couple of sentences for each of these points: My life before trusting Jesus, how and why I trusted Jesus, and the difference Jesus made in me.

PRAYER: Father, thank You for what You've done for me. Give me Your perspective to see opportunities to share the story of how You've worked in me and help me see Your work in my life each day.

OVERCOMING THROUGH PRAYER

Jesus replied, "This kind can be cast out only by prayer." **Mark 9:29 (NLT)**

Years ago, I was walking through a difficult season. I was doing everything I could to fix it. One day, someone said something that stuck with me. They said, *Bryan, this isn't something to fix. This is something to surrender. You need God's power and strength, not your own.* The truth is a lot of people aren't opposed to hard work in faith, but you don't overcome difficult seasons with willpower. You overcome it with prayer and surrender.

This has been transformative in my faith. As Dallas Willard once said, *God isn't opposed to effort. He is opposed to earning.* We need to be people who take our faith seriously, and you can't take faith seriously without effort. You aren't committed to your faith if you never pick up your Bible, go to church, or gather with people who stir your faith. At the same time, we must understand going to church, gathering with people, and reading the Bible will only change us if we're surrendered to God! The point is you need effort, but you need the right heart and motivation.

A friend of mine recently talked about getting in shape, and he shared that he was doing it to look good for a person he was trying to impress. My wife wisely said that motivation won't last. You must do it for yourself. You must be committed to God, growing and walking with him daily, or you won't be a spiritual overcomer. You must also be surrendered, understanding that you can't overcome anything on your own but instead through the Spirit of God. This will keep you humble and committed to life in the spirit daily. Prayer is where we overcome and draw spiritual power. That's why many of us get so distracted in prayer. The enemy fears you when you draw near to God in prayer. He fears you being plugged into the power source. A blender is no good without power, and a Christian is of no good without power, and prayer is where you plug into the power of God. So, draw near and let God fill you with His love and power!

APPLICATION: Draw near to God and commit to your daily prayer life.

PRAYER: Spend time asking God to fill you with a deep dependence on Him. Thank Him that you are an overcomer! Thank Him for His power flowing through you.

BREAKING STRONGHOLDS

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. **2 Corinthians 10:4 (NIV)**

God forgives all sin, and His mercy is greater than your sin. This is important for us to understand. We must also understand there is a spiritual realm, and if you keep sinning long enough, you can give the enemy a foothold, and a foothold can lead to a stronghold. What is a stronghold?

A stronghold is a false belief that becomes a pattern of thinking fueled by the enemy.

People with a stronghold believe they can never truly break free or don't desire to let go of a particular sin because the enemy has sabotaged their thinking. If you're still struggling with the same sin for 15 years, it's no longer a struggle. It's a stronghold. This might seem harsh, and some don't like this reality, but you can fight cancer if you know you have it, and you can fight a stronghold if you know you have it. The worst thing for a Christian is to be blind to what's happening in the spiritual realm.

I grew up with no teaching on spiritual warfare and the demonic realm. As a result, I was aware of God's grace but not of the spiritual attacks of Satan. This proved deadly in my faith for years. The only way to break down strongholds is the power of God, or as the verse above says, divine power, which again refers to the Spirit of God. The way to break a stronghold is to realize you are powerless to overcome it. Motivation is what you can do for a moment, but transformation is what the Spirit does in you for a lifetime. The way to tear down strongholds is to be transformed in the Spirit and let Him fight and renew your mind. Pray every day and lay the stronghold at the feet of Jesus. Fast and ask God to fill you with the Spirit's power, then watch what He does! He is faithful and more powerful than the forces of darkness attacking you. Remember, there are demonic forces that watch you. They know most people better than they know themselves. There is a reason you always seem to be tempted at the right time and place. You face an enemy who is watching and ready to destroy you spiritually, but take heart. God is stronger, and He has given you the ability not just to overcome, but as it says in the verse above, He has given us the ability to demolish strongholds. God can tear them down so they don't repeatedly come back. He is faithful. Draw near to Him today!

APPLICATION: Today, let God's truth tear down any lies that arise in your mind or heart.

PRAYER: Ask God if there is any place you haven't found victory. Ask God to show you where you believe lies that have become strongholds. Ask the Spirit to transform you and thank Him for His power today.

CLAIMING YOUR AUTHORITY IN CHRIST

"I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you." **Luke 10:19 (NIV)**

It's one thing to have power, and it's another thing to have authority to use it. When I lived in Chicago, I bought a lot of fireworks for a neighborhood 4th of July party. I picked up fireworks on a visit to Indiana. Fireworks were illegal in Chicago, but everyone shot them, and I mean everyone. As I started shooting a few of them, suddenly, a cop pulled up and told me to stop. Fireworks were going off all over the place, but I was shut down. I learned I wouldn't win the argument, so we agreed to stop shooting. There was all sorts of power in my garage, but I had no authority to use it.

This is a picture of Christianity for many people. They have power, but someone, or Satan, has told them they have no authority to use it. They believe lies that they aren't good enough, qualified enough, or knowledgeable enough. It's one thing to be saved and know there is spiritual power for you. It's another thing to operate in your authority as a child of God.

The blood of Jesus, not your performance, gives you authority. When walking with Jesus, you have the power and authority to drive out the darkness around you. You must know who God is first, but you also must know who you are! What lies are you believing that keep you from using the power of God given to each of us? You have the power and authority in Jesus' name to break strongholds, overcome anger and jealousy, be content, heal the sick, be bold in your faith, and find joy and peace. You must know this is yours because Christ is yours, and you're His. Don't settle for wading in the shallow end of faith. An ocean is waiting to be explored, and you have the rights, permits and permission to be out there. Remember that today!

APPLICATION: Remember the blood of Jesus, not your performance, gives you authority today!

PRAYER: Consider how the Spirit wants you to use your spiritual authority. What truth do you need to confidently claim today? Ask the Spirit to reveal that, then hang on to that truth today!

FIGHTING FROM VICTORY, NOT FOR VICTORY

And having disarmed the powers and authorities, He made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross. **Colossians 2:15 (NIV)**

One of the key truths I want to ingrain in our church is that *you don't fight for victory, you fight from it*. Jesus is your King, and He has already won. Your job is to claim new ground. Your job is to stand in the victory that Jesus won. This is why so many Christians lose the spiritual battle—they think it's up to them. They fail to see that the victory is theirs in Jesus.

In 1863, Lincoln announced the Emancipation Proclamation, which stated that all slaves were free. The problem was in Texas, where the news had to travel further. It took quite a bit longer for the people there to know the victory had been won, and as a result, they weren't living as freed men and women. It's one thing to be freed. It's another to know that and live that way. So, if the Bible says it, then it's true. If Jesus says it, then it's true. Why? Because Jesus is the one who fought and waged war on your behalf. In the entire book of Revelation, you'll never see Jesus fighting. His army is fighting, but He isn't. When He shows up, He operates as a victorious king. He cast down His enemy, but they don't fight Him. He's already won. When He returns, He comes back as a victorious king, not a fighting king!

As long as you're under His will, you're in His blessing. God doesn't have favorites. He simply has those who are available and follow Him and those who don't. When you're under His blessings, you're in His victory. You're covered and standing in His goodness, mercy, love and power. God doesn't need you to fight for Him. He needs you to walk with Him. The battle has already been won. But to receive the victory, you have to abide in Jesus.

APPLICATION: The battles have been won. Your job is to draw near to Jesus.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you see Him as He is—a victorious King. Ask the Spirit to help you live in the victory that you have in Him.

WORSHIP IS A WEAPON

As they began to sing and praise, the LORD set ambushes against the men of Ammon and Moab and Mount Seir who were invading Judah, and they were defeated.
2 Chronicles 20:22 (NIV)

Sometimes, people say *I'm not much of a worship person. I like the sermons, but I don't really sing.* However, if they fully understood the potency and purpose of worship, they wouldn't say that. Worship is a weapon. It is powerful in good seasons but a wrecking ball in difficult seasons. I have had times in my life when I couldn't really do anything but sing, and those were some of the most powerful moments in my life as I proclaimed the truths of God.

Worship defeats the enemy, as we see above. We must remember that we worship before seeing the victory in our lives. Praise precedes the provisions of God. Too many people think when the circumstances are right, then I'll worship. You can spend a lifetime waiting for things to be perfect. Worship defeats the enemy, and it stirs our spirit. In the verse above, we see God works in unique ways when people begin to worship.

Part of the reason is God is drawn to faith. God doesn't need our worship. He delights in it, but He doesn't need it. Worship doesn't remind God who He is. He already knows. Worship reminds us who God is, which causes us to sing with faith and expectation, and that's when God meets us. When we praise, we actively fight against the spiritual forces of evil. The enemy cannot stand in the presence of true worship and will often flee when confronted with it.

In **Acts 16:25-26**, Paul and Silas were in prison, and instead of giving up or becoming hopeless, they began to worship. Worship was their weapon. As they praised, an earthquake shook the prison foundations, and their chains fell off. Worship has the power to release God's miraculous power and deliverance. Praise and worship are powerful weapons in spiritual warfare. When we focus on God's greatness, we invite His presence to fight on our behalf.

APPLICATION: Worship today before, not after, you see victories in your life.

PRAYER: Ask God to give you a heart for worship. Look up lyrics to a worship song you love and pray those back to God. Ask the Spirit to make you a person who worships in spirit and truth.

HIS MIGHTY POWER

A final word: Be strong in the Lord and in His mighty power. Put on all of God's armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil. For we are not fighting against flesh-and-blood enemies, but against evil rulers and authorities of the unseen world, against mighty powers in this dark world, and against evil spirits in the heavenly places. **Ephesians 6:10-12 (NLT)**

Jesus has ultimately won the victory over Satan through His death and resurrection, providing eternal life for all who trust in Jesus for salvation. But Satan continues to try to deceive us and influence us away from the life we can experience in our relationship with Jesus today. Thankfully, we don't fight this unseen enemy alone. The power of God's Spirit is available to us. He provides His armor to protect us and weapons to fight the strategies of Satan.

Therefore, put on every piece of God's armor so you will be able to resist the enemy in the time of evil. Then after the battle you will still be standing firm. Stand your ground, putting on the belt of truth and the body armor of God's righteousness. For shoes, put on the peace that comes from the Good News so that you will be fully prepared. In addition to all of these, hold up the shield of faith to stop the fiery arrows of the devil. Put on salvation as your helmet, and take the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Pray in the Spirit at all times and on every occasion. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all believers everywhere. **Ephesians 6:13-18 (NLT)**

GOD'S PROTECTION

Belt of Truth: The perspective of God's Word.

Breastplate of Righteousness: We're forgiven and made righteous by the blood of Jesus.

Good News Shoes: Equipped with the story of what Jesus has done for everyone and me personally.

Shield of Faith: Trusting Jesus and not myself.

Helmet of Salvation: Remembering that Jesus died for me and made me a child of God.

GOD'S WEAPONS

Sword of the Spirit: The Word of God given to us through the Bible.

Prayer: Constant access to God's Spirit, listening and speaking to me while praying for me.

APPLICATION: Write down what each of these elements of protection and each weapon means to you. Ask God to understand how you can use each of the parts of His armor in your life.

PRAYER: Thank God for each element of protection and each weapon He has provided.

GRATITUDE FOR VICTORY

Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. **1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NIV)**

I recently heard that anxiety and gratitude cannot coexist. Your brain can't process both at the same time. For years, I didn't value gratitude. It seemed a bit shallow with all this world's hardships, evil and pain. Recently, I noticed that the most spiritually mature people all had this in common—gratitude! Even in difficult times, they had gratitude. It's almost like they had lived so long in gratitude and the goodness of God that they never got derailed in hardships, and even in the difficulties, they still never quit praising God. I'm not very good at gratitude, yet I don't see it as optional. I see it as a growth area that will only deepen my faith. Anyone can complain. That's easy, and giving false thanks is superficial, but a spirit of gratitude is key to a deep faith.

One way to grow gratitude is to start thanking God for your victory in Jesus through the power of the Spirit. Think about it: Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego didn't praise God after the fire but in it. If you wait to praise God until circumstances are perfect, you'll wait a lifetime, but this is the day of gratitude right now! Nothing can separate you from God. Nothing, not even death, so what is there to fear?

Start praising God before you see the victory. Know it's there, not because of you but because of Jesus. This makes verses like the one above possible. We're to rejoice constantly because the victory's won. God isn't surprised by anything. Even when things don't go as planned, He's still working out good for us, so trust Him. Pray and draw near to Him. Give thanks for God's goodness and love even when you can't see or feel it. Remember, sometimes the victory won't happen until you live out gratitude. God is drawn to faith that sees His goodness even when circumstances aren't ideal. Trust Him today!

APPLICATION: Praise God before the victory, not after.

PRAYER: Ask God to help you walk with Him! Spend time thanking Him for the past, present and future victories. Thank Him for who He is and what He's done!

JESUS IS OUR MODEL OF FAITHFULNESS

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Hebrews 13:8 (NIV)

Years ago, I was at a church where the people said they wanted to bring change and reach more people. The problem is that when we started making changes, I learned a vital lesson. Even though people say they want change, most of us don't really like change unless we're the ones making the change. In a constantly changing world that's hard to understand, I take great comfort in the truth that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. We might not understand everything about God or even like some of His commands. However, we rest knowing that He won't change His mind tomorrow. God is stable. God is steady. He doesn't evolve because He's already perfect. He's full of wisdom and love, and that will never change. John Piper has this to say about Jesus being the same yesterday, today and forever:

Yesterday: *It is crucial that Jesus Christ be the same yesterday as He is today because yesterday is when Jesus Christ showed us what He is really like in history.*

Today: *It is crucial that Jesus Christ be the same today as He was yesterday because today is when we have fellowship with Him and relate to Him as the person we know.*

Tomorrow: *It is crucial that Jesus Christ be the same tomorrow as He was yesterday and today because all our hope for everlasting joy hangs ultimately on Him.*

Jesus is our model of faithfulness. If He were inconsistent or constantly prone to change, it would be difficult to follow Him and trust Him. The fact that He never changes helps us to surrender to Him fully and allows the Spirit to transform us. Everything Jesus is calling us to do, He has already done. His invitation is to live like Him. Faith is not about my faithfulness to God but His faithfulness to me. We've never been entirely faithful to God. If we base our faith on our performance, we'll become discouraged and give up. Instead, our faith is built on Jesus' faithfulness to us. This allows the Spirit of God to conform and grow me to be more faithful daily. It's not willpower or spiritual adrenaline; it's the Spirit of God making me more like Jesus each and every day. We thank Jesus that His faithfulness is what changes us. Rest in the comfort that Jesus is our model for faithfulness. He will always be the same yesterday, today and forever.

APPLICATION: Reflect today on God's faithfulness to you.

PRAYER: Thank God for His faithfulness to you. Reflect on how God has been faithful in your past and present. Pray that this will allow you to trust Him fully with whatever you're walking through in the future.

LOOK UP FOR VICTORY

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.

He will not let your foot slip—He who watches over you will not slumber; indeed, He who watches over Israel will neither slumber nor sleep.

Psalm 121:1-4 (NIV)

In ancient days, it was a huge military advantage to be positioned on a hill. Whoever had the high ground would likely be the victor. Notice what this verse says: *I lift my eyes to the mountains*, meaning God is my fortress, strength and high ground. God would often do things that didn't make sense, like telling Gideon to reduce the number of men he would take into battle. Why? Because God is our help. We don't help God because He needs no help. The way we honor Him is to depend on Him. Our weakness magnifies God's strength, and He is delighted to help His children. Think about this: we have a God who never sleeps or slumbers, and He longs to do good for us. Isn't that amazing?

Israel is a relatively small nation with countless enemies, yet it's continued to be a people, even when they were displaced from their land. Why? Because God watches out for them. It doesn't matter what you're facing. God has promised He will be your help and victory. He specializes in resurrections and miracles. Never forget this. If life doesn't go according to plan, He promises to walk with you.

The key to hope is to look up. If you look around at the wind and the waves, you will sink like Peter did. You must get your eyes locked on God. When you're driving in the rain, the wipers remove the obstacles keeping you from seeing clearly. Likewise, when we set our eyes on God and look up, all the obstacles get pushed out of the way, and we can see clearly. Don't depend on human solutions, strategy or wisdom; look up and look for supernatural wisdom and direction. God is always there to help, but we must slow down and look up. It's our job to look up to Him. If you don't, you'll be overwhelmed by the obstacles that paralyze you with fear and doubt. But when you look up, you'll see God has everything under control. Look up and rest in Him today.

APPLICATION: Fix your eyes on God today.

PRAYER: Write out the situations stressing you out, then get your eyes on God. Think about a couple of His attributes and characteristics and sit in those until the peace of Jesus washes over you. Ask God's Spirit to help you keep your eyes on Him.

SURRENDER VS. GIVING UP

In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.
Luke 14:33 (NIV)

One day when I was receiving physical therapy, they were trying to stretch my arm to loosen scar tissue that formed from an injury I had. My natural response was to try to protect myself from the pain, so I would pull back and try to resist the pain. The physical therapist told me to surrender and let go. I've often thought about the fact that he wasn't telling me to give up. He was telling me to surrender. To put my trust in him even when it causes pain and it doesn't make sense. I haven't quickly forgotten this because, to me, it's a picture of faith.

God often puts us in painful scenarios, and we frequently try to pull back and protect ourselves. The key is not to shut down or give up; instead, trust Him. Trust Him in the hard times and the good times. If pain is pointless, it makes sense to resist or protect yourself, but you have a Good Father who has good plans. Don't give up, but surrender to Him. You can't find victory in life if both you and God are trying to lead. You can resist Him, give up in frustration, or willingly surrender to God. When you surrender your life to God, you'll find a new spiritual power and joy that you didn't have before. You don't have to know the future if you know the one who holds the future. So let go and trust Him.

Christianity doesn't work with one foot in and one foot out. That's why Jesus is very clear on His terms of discipleship. It's complete surrender. It's willingly climbing on the altar every single day and giving Him your life. It's not complex, but it's not easy. Be leery of a gospel that says anything else. It's a gospel of surrender. It's a gospel of dying to yourself, but it's also a gospel of victory. If you aren't finding victory, go back to the basics. Ask yourself: *Am I surrendered to God, or is there someplace I'm trying to exert my will?* When you find the issue, willingly surrender it to God. You'll find peace and freedom even in the pain because you know there's someone working things out for your good. Trust Him today!

APPLICATION: Don't give up in frustration. Willingly surrender your life to God.

PRAYER: Think about what Jesus did on the cross. Let His willingness to surrender stir your heart. Ask Him to reveal what you are trying to control. Then, spend time in prayer, giving it back to Him!

THE GOD WHO SITS

Then as I looked, I saw a door standing open in heaven, and the same voice I had heard before spoke to me like a trumpet blast. The voice said, "Come up here, and I will show you what must happen after this." And instantly I was in the Spirit, and I saw a throne in heaven and someone sitting on it.

Revelation 4:1-2 (NLT)

After a hard day's work, one of the things I love doing is sitting in my recliner. Maybe I'm getting old, but it's one of my favorite things! I typically only sit in it at the end of the day because there's work to be done before then. Simply put, I only sit after the work for that day is done. One of the things that gives me so much confidence for the future is God's posture. He's not pacing frantically back and forth, wondering what will happen. He's already fought and won the battle over sin, death, Satan and hell. So now, after that hard day's work, what's He doing? He's sitting. He's at peace because He knows how the story ends.

Sometimes my friends will watch recordings of sports games after their favorite teams have already played. If you hadn't looked closely, you would've thought it was a present game. But it's not. It's a past victory. Knowing the outcome allows my friends to avoid nervousness, even during bad plays or seemingly hopeless situations. They know who's going to win in advance.

God knows the outcome of your life and your future, and it's one of victory if you surrender to Him. He knows the scoreboard in your life. Sin, death, Satan and hell might seem to be winning at times, but God knows the game ends in victory. Let this picture build confidence in you. Think about this: in the book of Revelation, Jesus is never seen fighting again. Only His angels are. Why? Because He's already won, and when He shows up, the enemy is reminded of that. If you know the final score, you don't have to fear the bad plays. Don't let the enemy get your eyes off God. Satan might seem bigger than you, but God towers over Him. You must know your enemy, but even more so, know your Savior. Jesus is a conquering King, and nothing can knock Him off the throne. Rest in that today, and let faith rise up in you.

APPLICATION: Remember that God has defeated sin, death, Satan and hell, so you have nothing to fear.

PRAYER: Ask God to remind you of His victory. Spend a moment thanking Him that sin, death, Satan and hell no longer hold power over you. Ask God to set you free if you feel their control in any area. Ask the Spirit to give you deep peace to live free in Him.

VICTORY COMES FROM FEARING THE RIGHT THING

The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom; all who follow His precepts have good understanding. To Him belongs eternal praise. Psalm 111:10 (NIV)

Today, I was struck by the thought that those who stay on the straight and narrow path have a healthy fear of the Lord. It's so easy to let selfishness, anger or even apathy distract us from who God really is. I'm convinced that one of the missing ingredients in 21st-century faith is a healthy fear of the Lord. We have so emphasized God as a picture of love (and He is love) that we have failed to paint a picture of God's tremendous power, which gives us a healthy fear of Him and keeps us in tune with Him.

Years ago, I visited a lion park on a mission trip in South Africa. The only things separating us from the lions were some little posts and flimsy barbed wire. The students I had taken on this trip thought it was awesome, but I was more hesitant. The lions were calm, but at the end of the day, they were still lions. Jesus is love, and He's full of peace, but He is also the lion from the tribe of Judah. He deserves our respect and awe.

The fear of the Lord is foundational to the life of a believer. The verse above reminds us that this fear leads to understanding. The more we fear God, the more we grow in wisdom. And this wisdom isn't just knowledge or intelligence; it's a divine understanding of how to live in step with God's Spirit. It means submitting our plans, desires and decisions to Him, trusting that His ways are better than ours. It's a posture of humility—acknowledging that we are finite and He is infinite.

Key Aspects of Fearing God:

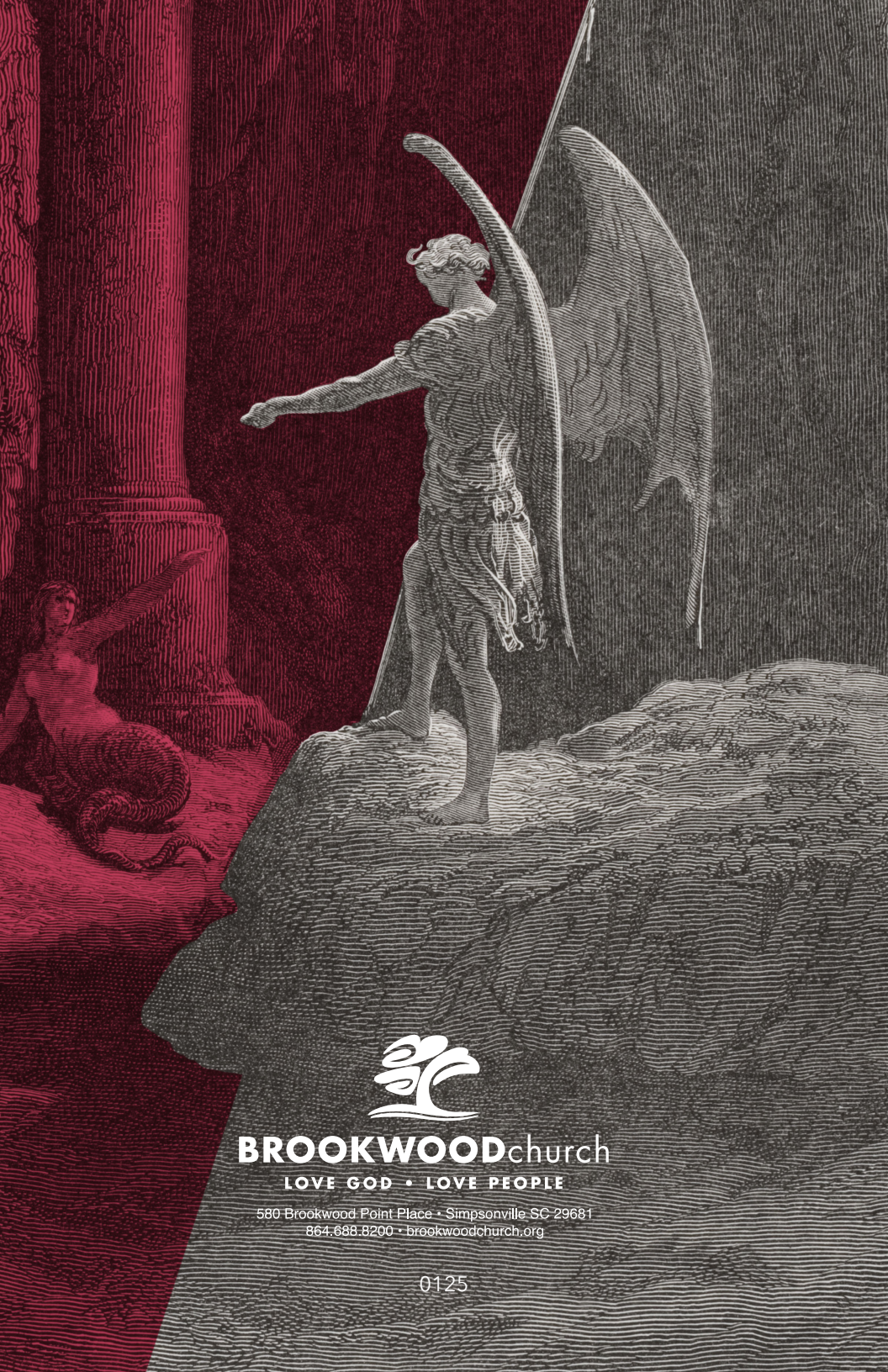
Reverence for His Holiness There's no one like God. He is other than. He can't grow or learn because He's already perfect. If you're ever around a gifted artist, athlete or professional, you're in awe of their work. When you get in the presence of God, remember who He is!

Obedience to His Word It's not enough to hear the Word. We need to obey it. If we just read it and do nothing with it, then we don't have a healthy fear of God.

Trusting in His Justice Things don't always make sense, but we must trust God. We don't need to try to take justice into our own hands. We need to learn to trust God!

APPLICATION: Let a healthy fear keep you in step with God today!

PRAYER: Ask Jesus to remind you how powerful He is. Spend time thanking Him for His holiness. Ask God's Spirit to give you a healthy fear for who He is!



BROOKWOODchurch

LOVE GOD • LOVE PEOPLE

580 Brookwood Point Place • Simpsonville, SC 29681
864.688.8200 • brookwoodchurch.org