

What's in it for me?

teens talking to other teens about the Bible, life and God with the help of one 30 year old

main text by:

Dan Tarrant

witnesses by:

teens from numerous ministries and high schools and colleges

teen editors:

Brie Carroll

Maureen Plover

Jackie Poulton

other teen helpers:

Portia Corsino

Kelly Franklin

Laura Marlin

Phil Marlin

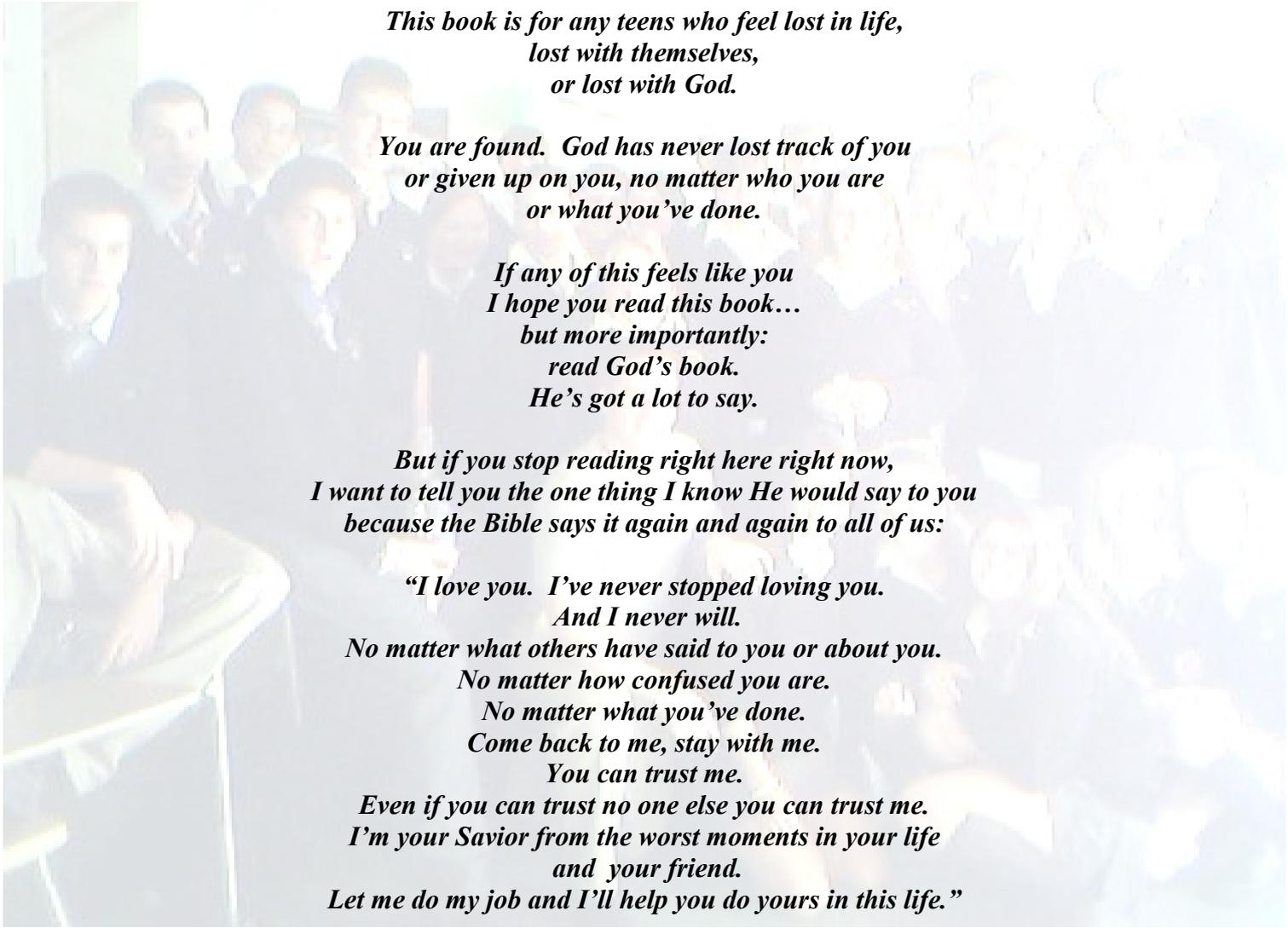
Andrew Reape

Kelly Swope

Lauren Westhoff

Anne Walters





*This book is for any teens who feel lost in life,
lost with themselves,
or lost with God.*

*You are found. God has never lost track of you
or given up on you, no matter who you are
or what you've done.*

*If any of this feels like you
I hope you read this book...
but more importantly:
read God's book.
He's got a lot to say.*

*But if you stop reading right here right now,
I want to tell you the one thing I know He would say to you
because the Bible says it again and again to all of us:*

*"I love you. I've never stopped loving you.
And I never will.*

*No matter what others have said to you or about you.
No matter how confused you are.
No matter what you've done.
Come back to me, stay with me.
You can trust me.*

*Even if you can trust no one else you can trust me.
I'm your Savior from the worst moments in your life
and your friend.
Let me do my job and I'll help you do yours in this life."*



Table of Contents

1) *What's in it for me?* ...11

2) *Being who God made me to be.* ...33

3) *God, do you have a plan?* ...59

4) *God, where do I fit?* ...77

5) *God, I can't hear you.* ...95

6) *God promises.* ...113

7) *Jesus, show me!* ...131

8) *So what do you have to say, Jesus?* ...159

9) *God, you want to know me personally?* ...183

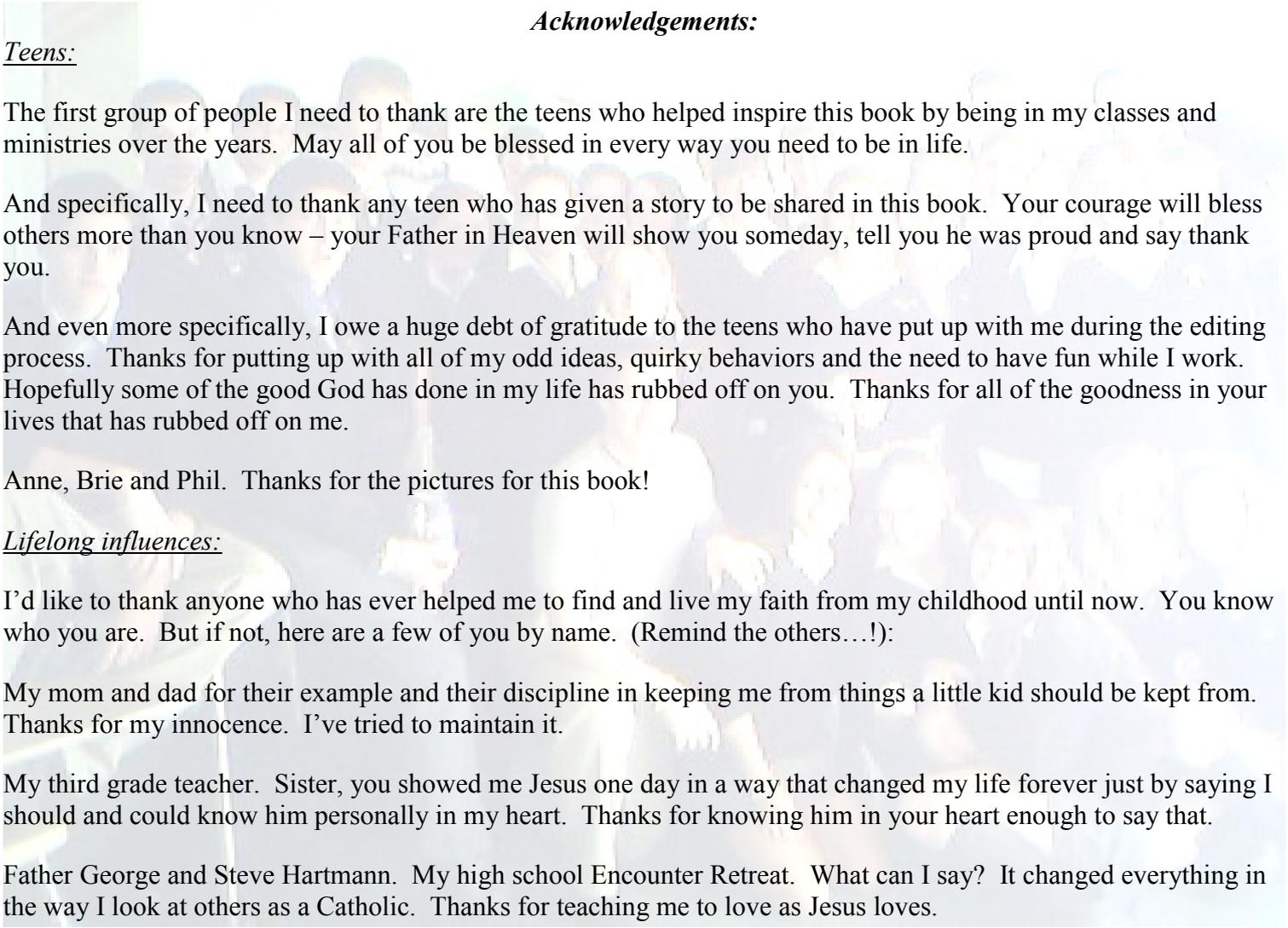
10) *Reading someone else's journal.* ...205

11) *What's a Catholic to do?* ...233

12) *God, can I really do this?* ...267







Acknowledgements:

Teens:

The first group of people I need to thank are the teens who helped inspire this book by being in my classes and ministries over the years. May all of you be blessed in every way you need to be in life.

And specifically, I need to thank any teen who has given a story to be shared in this book. Your courage will bless others more than you know – your Father in Heaven will show you someday, tell you he was proud and say thank you.

And even more specifically, I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the teens who have put up with me during the editing process. Thanks for putting up with all of my odd ideas, quirky behaviors and the need to have fun while I work. Hopefully some of the good God has done in my life has rubbed off on you. Thanks for all of the goodness in your lives that has rubbed off on me.

Anne, Brie and Phil. Thanks for the pictures for this book!

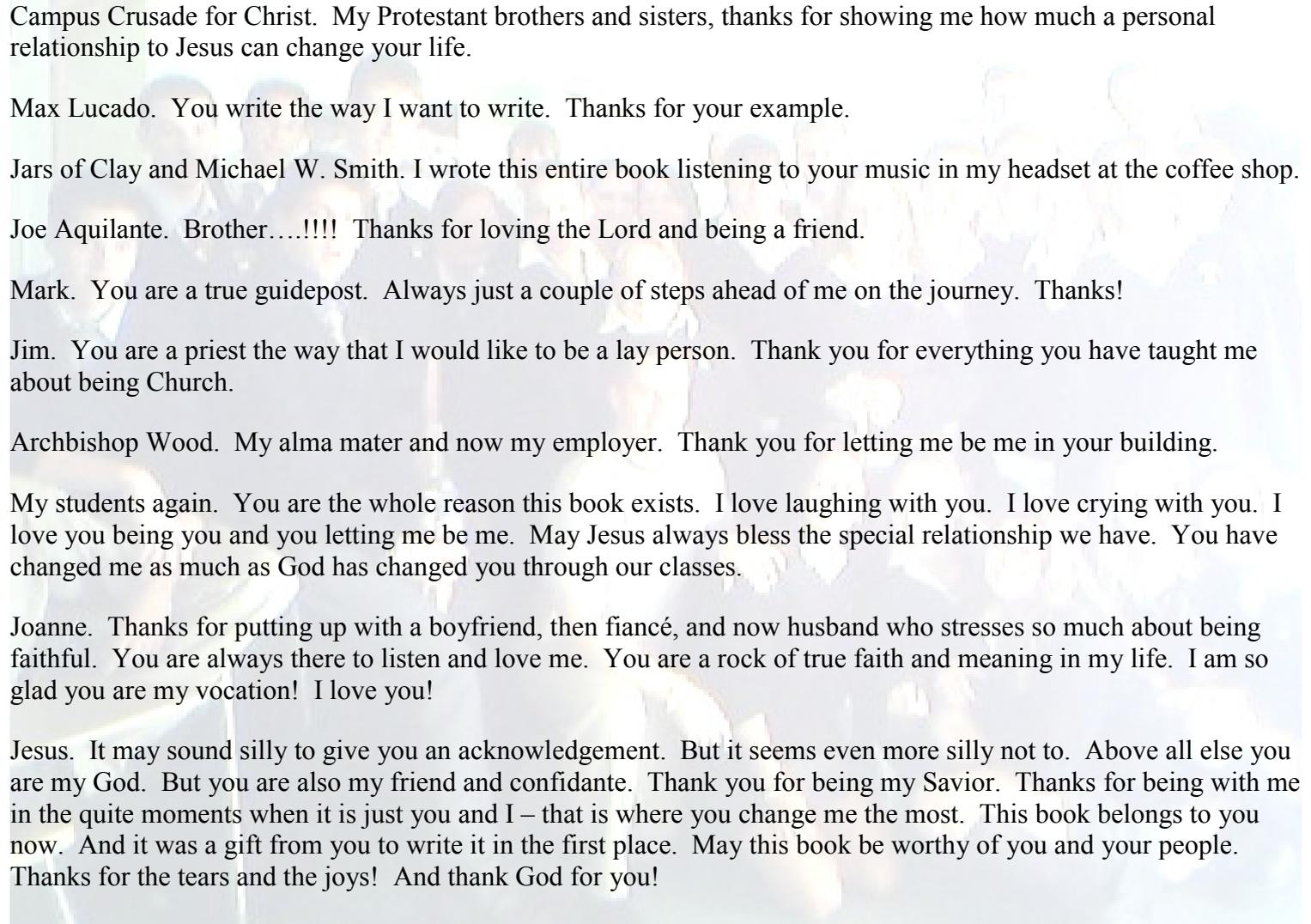
Lifelong influences:

I'd like to thank anyone who has ever helped me to find and live my faith from my childhood until now. You know who you are. But if not, here are a few of you by name. (Remind the others...!):

My mom and dad for their example and their discipline in keeping me from things a little kid should be kept from. Thanks for my innocence. I've tried to maintain it.

My third grade teacher. Sister, you showed me Jesus one day in a way that changed my life forever just by saying I should and could know him personally in my heart. Thanks for knowing him in your heart enough to say that.

Father George and Steve Hartmann. My high school Encounter Retreat. What can I say? It changed everything in the way I look at others as a Catholic. Thanks for teaching me to love as Jesus loves.



Campus Crusade for Christ. My Protestant brothers and sisters, thanks for showing me how much a personal relationship to Jesus can change your life.

Max Lucado. You write the way I want to write. Thanks for your example.

Jars of Clay and Michael W. Smith. I wrote this entire book listening to your music in my headset at the coffee shop.

Joe Aquilante. Brother....!!!! Thanks for loving the Lord and being a friend.

Mark. You are a true guidepost. Always just a couple of steps ahead of me on the journey. Thanks!

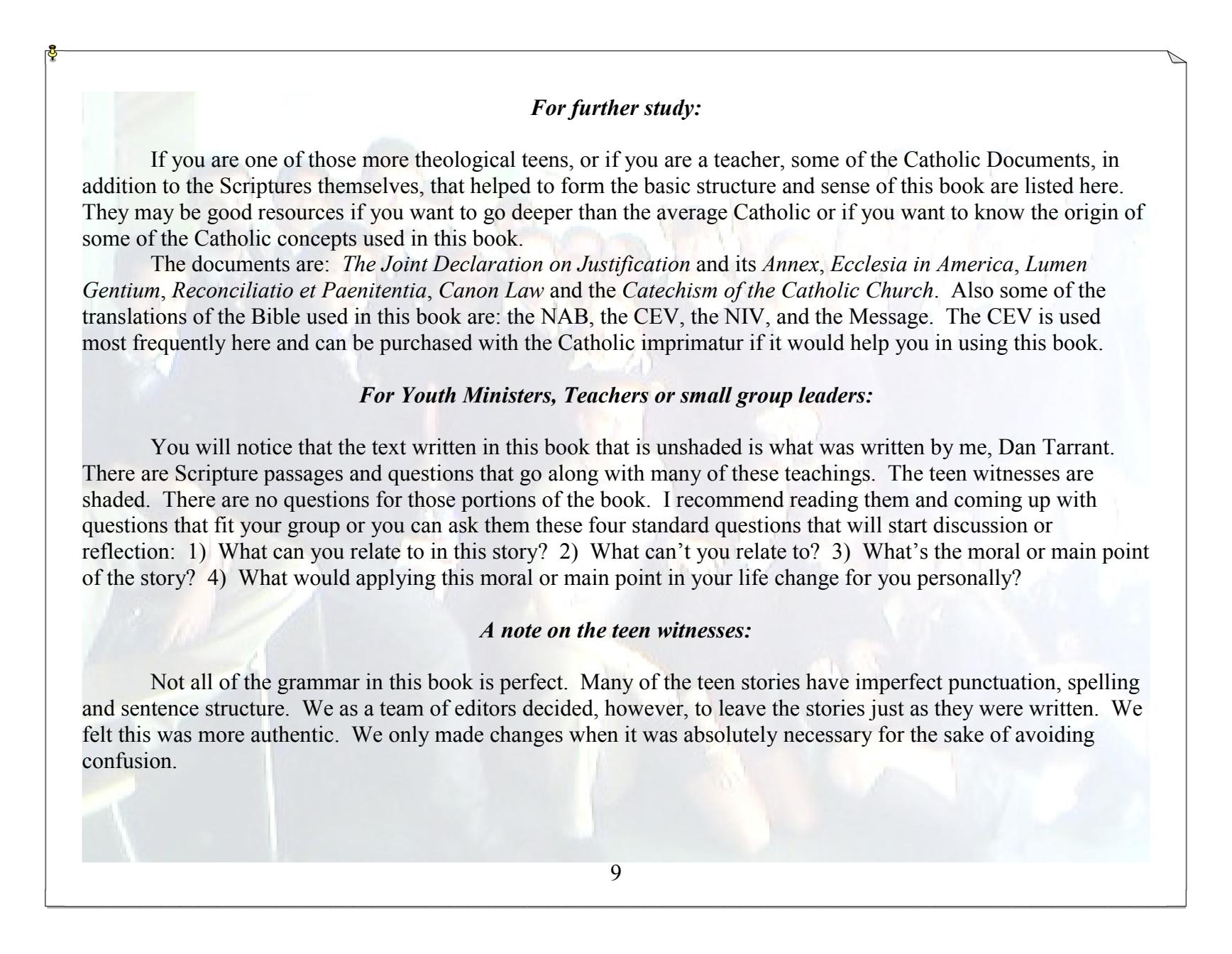
Jim. You are a priest the way that I would like to be a lay person. Thank you for everything you have taught me about being Church.

Archbishop Wood. My alma mater and now my employer. Thank you for letting me be me in your building.

My students again. You are the whole reason this book exists. I love laughing with you. I love crying with you. I love you being you and you letting me be me. May Jesus always bless the special relationship we have. You have changed me as much as God has changed you through our classes.

Joanne. Thanks for putting up with a boyfriend, then fiancé, and now husband who stresses so much about being faithful. You are always there to listen and love me. You are a rock of true faith and meaning in my life. I am so glad you are my vocation! I love you!

Jesus. It may sound silly to give you an acknowledgement. But it seems even more silly not to. Above all else you are my God. But you are also my friend and confidante. Thank you for being my Savior. Thanks for being with me in the quiet moments when it is just you and I – that is where you change me the most. This book belongs to you now. And it was a gift from you to write it in the first place. May this book be worthy of you and your people. Thanks for the tears and the joys! And thank God for you!



For further study:

If you are one of those more theological teens, or if you are a teacher, some of the Catholic Documents, in addition to the Scriptures themselves, that helped to form the basic structure and sense of this book are listed here. They may be good resources if you want to go deeper than the average Catholic or if you want to know the origin of some of the Catholic concepts used in this book.

The documents are: *The Joint Declaration on Justification* and its *Annex, Ecclesia in America, Lumen Gentium, Reconciliatio et Paenitentia, Canon Law* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Also some of the translations of the Bible used in this book are: the NAB, the CEV, the NIV, and the Message. The CEV is used most frequently here and can be purchased with the Catholic imprimatur if it would help you in using this book.

For Youth Ministers, Teachers or small group leaders:

You will notice that the text written in this book that is unshaded is what was written by me, Dan Tarrant. There are Scripture passages and questions that go along with many of these teachings. The teen witnesses are shaded. There are no questions for those portions of the book. I recommend reading them and coming up with questions that fit your group or you can ask them these four standard questions that will start discussion or reflection: 1) What can you relate to in this story? 2) What can't you relate to? 3) What's the moral or main point of the story? 4) What would applying this moral or main point in your life change for you personally?

A note on the teen witnesses:

Not all of the grammar in this book is perfect. Many of the teen stories have imperfect punctuation, spelling and sentence structure. We as a team of editors decided, however, to leave the stories just as they were written. We felt this was more authentic. We only made changes when it was absolutely necessary for the sake of avoiding confusion.



Chapter 1
What's in it for me?





Dear teen,

What if it were true that God said ‘I do not want to condemn you, or judge you, or punish you for your sins?’

What if it were true that God said ‘I want every person who has ever existed to be with me in Heaven?’

What if it were true that God saw that we didn’t know whether he loved us or not? And what if it were true that instead of leaving us in the dark and waiting for us to figure it out for ourselves, he came down and proved that he loved us in a way we could never doubt?

What if it were true that God saw that we didn’t have what it takes to get into Heaven? And what if instead of punishing *us*, went through what should be *our* punishment *for us*, so we could be there with him forever even though we don’t deserve it?

What if it were true that we didn’t have to fear God for every little (or big) mistake we have made because he had chosen to forgive us thousands of years before we were born and even made the mistake?

What if all of this were true? What if there was a God like this? Everyone in the world would want to follow him! Wouldn’t they?

‘This God is just in our dreams,’ you say? No, this God is not just in our dreams.

This is what God has said is true about himself in his letter to us. It is what he has said to us in the Bible. We just have to open it up and read it. And if you would like, that is what we are going to do in this book.

Hopefully like so many of the teens who are going to share their stories along with the people of the Bible sharing theirs, you will get to know this amazing God they have gotten to know. Hopefully you will get to trust him and his unconditional love to get you to Heaven instead of simply fearing him or ignoring him because you have doubts. And hopefully you will accept his place in your life and get to feel his hand guiding you every day.

I know for me it is the most amazing love I have ever felt and the most perfect peace I have ever known. Maybe through both these teens and the people of the Scriptures sharing their stories you will get to know this amazing love and peace too. I hope you do!

In Christ’s peace,
Daniel Tarrant

P.S. That’s what’s in the Bible for you and me!

I have always been taught that I should follow God

I have always been taught that I should follow God and that Jesus is my savior. Of course, when you're four or five, this means almost nothing. You know that God is there and he made the world. You're taught to pray and love others, but did we ever really know what it all meant? I know I never did. I went to Catholic school ever since I was old enough. I went to a Christian preschool, followed by a Catholic grade school. I was taught everything a follower of Christ should know: the basics like the resurrection all the way up to the history of the Church. I continued going to Catholic school for high school.

Teachers can explain absolutely every detail about Jesus, but it doesn't mean that you are close to Him. I never questioned God's existence, at first, but then I couldn't help it. I went through a troubled period in my life, which progressively got worse through middle school. I couldn't figure out why the Lord wasn't helping me. I knew I wasn't a perfect Christian, but why would he abandon me? I would pray when I was supposed to and go to Mass when they wanted me to, but I lost faith. When things got worse, I assumed God had lost faith in me, too, or maybe there just wasn't a god there.

If it hadn't been for a revelation in high school, I would probably still be like this. I heard one of the religion teachers clarify and couldn't doubt any further. He truly was "close" to Jesus, and it wasn't because he knew every detail of the Church. It was because he had faith and hope. That's something most of us can't say. I heard him talk about the Shine Retreat (a retreat in high school for freshmen and sophomores), and it sounded like a fun weekend to hang out with my friends. It couldn't hurt to learn something about my religion, and if I didn't learn anything, then I would still have a fun weekend.

I went on the Shine Retreat in December, and it changed my life. I no longer felt alone in my struggles as I listened to so many others who went through the same things and found God even through the struggle. I felt unworthy of God as I realized everything I had done to Him. I realized I didn't deserve to be in His presence after I doubted. I learned that God forgives, even if you don't know how to apologize. My faith and longing for the closeness of God sky-rocketed.

After I felt this familiarity with my Lord, I realized things I never had before. I remembered those times in my life, when things seemed hardest. I started to notice signs that I had missed before. At the times when I thought of suicide, we discussed it at school, even though it had nothing to do with what we were currently learning, and I dropped the idea. Other things had happened, too, where He was present, but I hadn't seen it before. Jesus doesn't

come down and talk to us like everyone else, but He does send us symbols and signs that guide us, even if we don't notice.

I have never felt closer to God. When I pray, I feel sincere, instead of feeling like it's all a hoax and I have to fool myself. I pray more often, and less conventionally. I talk to God now, instead of praying five rosaries like I would have before. Everyone has to find their own path to God, but mine was through the angels He sent me like that religion teacher and two of my very close friends, who I wouldn't have made it without. Finding my path wasn't easy, but it led me to the state of peace that I never want to leave.

-- high school freshman girl

I did not come to condemn the world but to save it...

At the very beginning of his ministry, before even choosing his Apostles, Jesus explained what he and the rest of his life were all about. He said it like this: "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17 NIV). Jesus did not come into the world to punish or condemn sinners and those who lost their way with God. He came to save them from their sins. He came to help them find themselves and find God.

Jesus explicitly said that his sole purpose was "to look for and to save people who are lost" (Luke 19:10 CEV). He did not come to look for and to punish people who are lost in life. And while he has every right to judge us because he is God and because he was sinless, Jesus said "I did not come to judge the world, but to save it" (John 12:47 NIV).

It is a pretty amazing story, this story of Jesus. It is a story of a God who could condemn the world but doesn't. It is the story of a God who could punish the world but doesn't. It is the story of a God who could hate sinners but doesn't. And in as much as it is a story of a God who doesn't condemn or punish or hate the world and sinners in general, it is a story of a God who doesn't condemn or punish or hate you. What you have to do is decide if you believe this story is true.

"Finding my path wasn't easy, but it led me to the state of peace I never want to leave."

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 19:1-10

- 1) Have you ever felt like Zaccheus? That is, have you ever felt *labeled* as a sinner in other people's eyes or in your own? When and why?
- 2) How does that feel? Do you think those are feelings God would want you or anyone to have?
- 3) Do you feel lost at all in life right now with regard to knowing yourself, others or God? If so why? If not when was a time that you did?
- 4) How do you think Jesus feels about people who are lost in life or lost in sin? What do you think he wants to do about it?

John 3:17

My eighth grade year was horrible. I had expected it to be the best. It was the worst. The only thing that got me through was trusting that everything would be better next year. I'd be at a new school with new people. That's the only thing I lived for. But that was so far away. It wasn't really going to come. When I started giving up on my only hope, I turned to God. He'd help me through it – He'd always been there in the past for little things. After I started believing that God was there with me, things got better. I opened up a little. Things weren't so dark. My friendships were getting better.

But now I had another problem. I was scared to really let God in my life. If I had a problem with "the color of my shirt might be a shade too light...what will people say?", how could I really live my faith? No one at school seemed to believe in Him, how could I let it show I did? What was my faith anyway? What did I believe? It couldn't be the same thing as my nit-picky Catholic teachers who were judgmental, complained a lot, and always found something to yell at somebody about. You had to be so unnecessarily perfect. But I had decided I was going to follow God...I needed to. That decision was so unbelievably hard to live up to. But I had made it, and I was going to stick to it.

At the end of the year I heard about the Youth Conference, Steubenville. I thought about going, then quickly decided not to. I thought that the people there would be so much worse and more strict than my teachers had been.

My eighth grade teacher professed to be Catholic and she shoved it in my face. To be running this thing out in Ohio that people all over the country as far as California came to, they had to be ten times worse. I was terrified that if I went they'd basically tell me God really wasn't as loving and forgiving as I thought He was, and tell me how evil I was and how I needed to change drastically and live perfectly to get to heaven.

But my best friend was going and I always did what she did. She made it sound better than I had thought of it. She was definitely going. I didn't want her to go without me and tell me how great it was. I didn't want to regret missing the opportunity to go. Maybe it really could be fun. So I went.

Steubenville was completely the opposite of what I had expected! I had envisioned a weekend long sermon. It was completely not that. It was so much fun. I made new friends there, some of whom are among my closest now. Hundreds of people were so happy to be there, just to be praising God – the same loving and forgiving God I believed in. I wasn't alone in trusting God, and I wasn't alone in believing the God I trusted was loving and forgiving.

That one weekend gave me all the strength and courage I needed to keep with my faith through the next year. Then I signed up to go to World Youth Day. Beforehand, there was a retreat weekend at the Our Lady of Czestochowa Shrine, where I would meet the people I'd be spending eleven days in July with. As soon as we drove onto the grounds I felt I was in a holy place. That weekend was so much fun. Every minute of it has this aura around it. That weekend we did so many things, but there is one that has the most meaning for me.

“My heart was filled with so much peace and happiness at the same time”

I went to where Adoration was being held – this little room, which was somehow large and open at the same time. The room was bright, but no lights were on and I just figured it was the sun coming in a large window, but now I'm not sure. I walked in and I was a little nervous – I didn't really know what I was doing and a priest was in there praying and I didn't want to disturb him or the one other person in there. So I sat down because that's what they were doing and decided to pray. Then I was quiet. My heart was filled with so much peace and happiness at the same time. Then everything in the room became brilliant with yellow and white light radiating out from the Eucharist – so bright I was blind to everything else. Then Jesus spoke to me. Not in audible words, or even English. It was a language in my heart. I understood it there. My brain translated it into, “Follow me, just follow, me, it will be all right.” But that's really only a translation and I could never say everything I understood in that moment. I stayed there until more people came and broke the stillness. I left after I'd made sure I'd captured every moment in my heart.

Since then I've tried to do just that. I have stumbled many times, but God continues to love me and pull me up. When I turn away, He calls me back. When I become too tough on myself and think He will condemn me too, He doesn't. He loves me just the way I am.

-- a high school junior girl

Jesus came to save sinners

The Apostle Paul had some amazing insights into who Jesus was. He had numerous visions of Jesus where Jesus explained many things to him about God, Heaven and Hell.

In his letter to his friend Timothy, Paul said this: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." This saying is true, and it can be trusted. I was the worst sinner of all! But since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus. He did this so that others would put their faith in Christ and have eternal life... God wants everyone to be saved..." (1 Timothy 1:15-16, 2:4 CEV).

Paul was amazed by this because when it came to Jesus he said: "I used to say terrible and insulting things about him, and I was cruel" (1 Timothy 1:13 CEV). God made it clear to Paul that he wanted Paul to be saved, that is that he wanted Paul to be in Heaven. In fact, God made it clear to Paul that he wants everyone in Heaven! He also made it clear to Paul how this could be done with a world full of imperfect people, a world full of sinners like you and me.



What's in the Bible for me? 1 Timothy 1:12-20 + 2:1-6

- 1) Have you ever ridiculed Christians or the Church like Paul did? When and why?
- 2) Have you ever felt like Paul? That is have you ever felt like "the worst sinner of all?" When and why?
- 3) Does it make sense to you that God wants everyone in heaven? Why or why not?
- 4) Do you think people can still turn away from God in their free will and go to hell even if God wants them with him?

All of us have sinned... but God treats us better than we deserve

In his letter to the people living in Rome, Paul explains what God showed him about how we get to Heaven. Paul says that it is not by being perfect or sinless that we go to heaven. Paul instead says that it is simply by accepting God's love for us that we are made acceptable to God. Sounds strange but it's true. What God really wants is a just a friendship. *A friendship where he accepts us as we are and we accept him as he is.* That's it according to Paul.

Paul calls our acceptance of God's love in our lives, or our part of this friendship, our "faith." What God wants from us really is just for us to have faith in him or just to simply trust him. Jesus said to St. Faustina that to simply pray "Jesus, I trust in you" is the greatest prayer we could ever pray. Sometimes it is also one of the most difficult. But the most basic point that God wants us to get from the Bible is that we can trust him. That's the first step. We call this trust "faith." Faith is our part to play in our friendship or relationship with God. Faith is simply *us* accepting *God* into our lives as a friend.

What God really wants is just a friendship... where he accepts us as we are and we accept him as he is.

God's part to play in this friendship or relationship is called "grace." Grace is just *God* accepting *us* into his life. Grace is really just unconditional love or God's desire to accept us no matter what we've done. God shows this to us again and again in the Bible.

But he showed it most clearly on the cross when *he* died for the mistakes that *we* make.

Instead of punishing us for our sins God let himself be punished. Now that's unconditional love. More on that later.

When God gives out his grace or love (which he does all of the time unconditionally to all people – remember he wants all people to be in Heaven) and when we choose to accept it, we call this being "saved" or "justified." Those are just spiritual words for being right with God and therefore going toward Heaven.

So we are made right with God, not by doing anything to impress God, but by simply accepting him and his love into our lives. His job is to give "grace" or love unconditionally. Our job is to accept it. We can't earn it and we don't have to. It's free. That's part of what the word grace means: free or unearned. So God's love is free, we just have to accept it and trust it when it is easy and hard. Doing this is having a friendship or a relationship with God. That's all he wants. That's what a Catholic Christian does. More on grace and unconditional love in a little bit.

I have gone to Catholic school for the past 13 years of my life

I have gone to Catholic school for the past 13 years of my life, and I can honestly say that the bible was really nothing more than just a book to me until I was well into my sophomore year in high school. I had learned the names of all of the apostles and I'd read pretty much all of the gospels and letters and a good portion of the old testament but it was all just like homework to me. I thought of the bible as one of my textbooks rather than the word of God. I never really tried to relate the parables to my life, or empathize with some of the things Jesus went through. They were just stories that I was told to memorize and believe. After I attended a retreat in my sophomore year, I decided that I needed to give the Bible another chance, and I haven't put it down since.

Have you ever felt rejected by the people you love? Have you ever been lonely? Have you ever.....(you name it, its in the book). Whenever I am feeling upset about anything, I pray. Whenever I'm really happy about anything, I pray. Whenever I am feeling lonely, I pray. Basically, I am praying all the time. But my point is, sometimes, its hard for me to feel like God is speaking back to me. So I read the Bible and I always find just what it is that he wants to tell me. And I am always amazed at how I always end up flipping to the exact thing that I needed to hear. Sometimes it completely relates to what I had been praying about and sometimes it is something totally different but still just what I needed to hear.

Over the last 5 years, the Bible has seriously become my best friend. And I know that sounds kind of funny but its true. My bible is covered with pictures and filled with letters and prayer cards and completely marked up with highlighter and it's my #1 favorite possession. I wouldn't trade it for a million dollars. It is the foundation of everything that I believe in and it is something that has touched my heart in a way that I had never before imagined. Whenever I need advice, I can always find what I am looking for in the scriptures and it gives me so much peace and comfort to know that I am not the only person who has ever felt this way. It is such a powerful thing.

Christ went through more pain and suffering than anyone can imagine and to think that He did all of that for me and you is pretty amazing. I can't even begin to write any of my favorite Bible verses because I would end up quoting the entire Bible. There is something in there for every emotion that I have and every need that I have. It has gotten me through some really difficult times and it has been a source of praise for me when I am feeling unworthy and overwhelmed with love. In order to be open to the Bible, you need to be open to God's love for you, Joe Shmoe, and know that everything written in this book is to express God's love for YOU. Looking at is that way makes it so much more personal and intimate. Give it a shot!

-- college freshman girl

We all make mistakes

Is there anything that you have done in your life that you feel guilty about? Are there any things that you have done that you wouldn't want certain people around you to know about? Have you done things that you regret? Anything you would change about your past? Well, you don't have to share any of those things here. But I just want you to know that you are not alone. *All of us*, every human being – even your mom and dad and your religion teacher – have done things that they regret. There are no exceptions. If you can't figure it out by just looking around, then look into the Bible because that's what God says is true – and he'd know, he's God!

God says that at some point “all have turned away” from him (Romans 3:12 NIV). So you aren't alone. That's the first bit of Good News. The second bit of Good News is that God knew you would make mistakes and he made plans ahead of time to adjust for this. God had known since before time began that he would need to die for the sins of the world to love the world unconditionally. And then he did it 2000 years before you were born! Talk about thinking ahead. He died for you and I and all of our mistakes before we were even born!

Paul says it perfectly:

“All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and set us free from our sins... God sent Christ to be our sacrifice so that by faith in him we could come to God.”(Romans 3:23-26 CEV).

There's that word “free” again. God's grace and love are “free.” That means at no cost to us. Unconditional. No matter what you've done. God's already made a plan and done what's necessary to forgive you.

Paul says that God showed him that our being loved by God has nothing to do with our actions, whether they are sinful or holy. Remember God, as Jesus said, is no longer looking to judge us. He loves us unconditionally. Instead, our being loved by God is affected only by our willingness to let God love us or our willingness to accept his friendship.

In this friendship where he accepts us as we are and we accept him as he is, we need to remember a couple of things that are true about ourselves and him. In this friendship we need to accept ourselves as we really are, as people who do make mistakes or sin. We need to stop pretending that we are perfect. And we need to stop

“All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. But God treats us better than we deserve...he freely accepts us...”

pretending that some of the things we have done are not sins. But the Good News is that the Bible takes into account that we make mistakes. God knew this ahead of time.

When it comes to God we need to remember that he is perfect and he sets the bar pretty high with regard to what is right and wrong, but he also always accepts us. No matter what we have done. God is love. And God will not go back in time and “undie” for your sins. We need to know that God accepts us as we are, mistakes and all. And we need to let him.

We have all sinned. We all fall short of God’s plan for our lives sometimes. But we all can be saved by God’s love if we want it. The question to ask ourselves is: do we want it? Do we really want this kind of saving friendship in our lives? Do we want the change in our lives that God’s forgiveness would make?

What’s in the Bible for me? Romans 3:23-31 + 4:1-12

- 1) Do you think all people are imperfect and fall short of God’s perfect glory?
- 2) Would God’s love and grace be unconditional if you could do something to earn it? Which way would you rather it: conditional or unconditional love?
- 3) Abraham had faith before he was circumcised. His outward act represented his internal faith. Do you think that this internal faith is important? Or is going through the Sacraments and rituals of the Church without faith good enough? Why or why not?
- 4) How much internal faith do you feel you have on a scale of 1-10?

Perhaps the Bible could have some insight for me

The Bible has meant many different things to me over the years, first and foremost it was a source of hope for me. I remember sitting as a kid and reading the old testament and thinking, “How can these people be faithful? How can they keep going? How have they not lost all hope?” Being raised catholic the simple answer to this was because God loved them, but that was the type of answer that a parent, or teacher, just throws at a 10 or 12 year old kid to shut them up, so I thought. Several years later in my life I lost hope. This was a huge blow to my belief because all my life I was told that we could do anything and that somebody who believes in God will never be without hope and love. I found myself at the age of 15 without these things, I was outcast by my friends, I felt like I was at war when I walked home, and I despised all of my days involving school and school activities. I tried to be

faithful and follow God, but I was incapable of doing anything I was paralyzed in a spiral of drugs, sex, and alcohol that no matter how hard I struggled I just fell into deeper and deeper. I didn't know where to turn to anymore, I tried turning to God and my parents but neither of them did any good. My parents just denied anything was wrong whatsoever to not tarnish our perfect family, while God just wasn't there. I decided on a whim that perhaps the Bible could hold some insight for me. I didn't know how this could happen because how can a book that old relate to my life in any way shape or form. I randomly opened up to 1 Corinthians 4:1-5:

“Think of us as servants of Christ who have been given the work of explaining God’s mysterious ways. And since our first duty is to be faithful to the one we work for, it doesn’t matter to me if I am judged by you or even by a court of law. In fact, I don’t judge myself. I don’t know of anything against me, but that doesn’t prove I am right. The Lord is my judge. So don’t judge anyone until the Lord returns. He will show what is hidden in the dark and what is in everyone’s heart. Then God will be the one who praises each of us.”

This Bible verse touched me in a very special way, because it told me exactly what I was doing wrong, I was judging everyone, including myself and God. This little excerpt from the bible taught me so much about myself in my time of need that although it didn't fix everything instantaneously (which would be nice but never happens) it started me back up the path up the mountain I had been falling down for quite sometime, so that now I am able to sit here and tell you that although we all lose hope and sometimes we all feel like we are alone, if you do not think that God is listening to you, open up the Bible and just randomly pick a page and a verse, because that could be what puts you back in your place as a follower of Christ.

-- college junior guy

What does it mean that Jesus died for my sins?

Paul says this unconditional love from God is possible because Jesus died for our sins. Paul says to remember that “God gave Jesus to die for our sins... so that we would be made acceptable to God” (Romans 5:25 CEV). We deserve to be punished for our sins, but Jesus chose to let himself be punished for us. Jesus took our place with regard to punishment so that we could join him in his place with regard to where he came from: Heaven. The Apostle Peter explains it best: “Christ died once for our sins. An innocent person died for those who are guilty. Christ did this to bring you to God... You were rescued by the blood of Christ, that spotless and innocent lamb” (1 Peter 3:18, 1:19 CEV).

So in the end we are saved because Jesus loved us unconditionally and died for our sins. We are loved not by somehow earning God's love. Paul says "You cannot make God accept you because of something you do" (Romans 4:5 CEV). We are loved and accepted by God because of what *Christ did*. All we have to do is accept Christ's act of love for us and let it matter to us. We must accept Christ as our savior from our sins.

This is a great and awesome gift from God! The cross shows that we don't have to earn his love. He has already committed himself to giving it to us unconditionally two thousand years ago when Jesus died for us! We can never lose it. We can't stop God from loving us. He is love. And so we don't have to be perfect! We just have to sincerely accept the One who was perfect into our lives! Now that is unconditional love from God!

The only thing that we can do to mess up God's love in our lives is to not accept it, that is to not accept God as he is. Which means either not believing we are loved no matter what we've done. Or not being willing to admit our mistakes actually are mistakes so that they can be forgiven. The forgiveness and the love and the acceptance from God is out there. We just have to decide to accept it.

Paul says this about Jesus' love for us and his plan to get us into heaven: "So it all depends not upon a person's will or exertion, but upon God, who shows mercy" (Romans 9:16 NAB). It doesn't depend on us being perfect. It all depends on God who died for us. Paul says we are saved from hell and accepted by God despite the mistakes we may have made. God loves us even "while we are still sinners" (Romans 5:8 NAB)! We just have to accept that we are sinners and then also accept that we are loved anyway. That is what a Christian does. That is the Good News of the Bible or what we call the Gospel (Gospel means "Good News")! That is what is in it, in the Bible, for you and me! And it is Good News indeed!

"You can not make God accept you because of something you do..." We are accepted by God because of what Christ did.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Peter 3:13-18

- 1) The Bible says that Jesus traded places with you when he died for your sins. Why do you think Jesus did this? What does it mean for you?
- 2) Do you think there is anything you can do to mess up this love from him? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you find it hard to believe that God loves you like this? Why or why not?
- 4) Does the Good News sound good to you? Why or why not? Where are you at with God right now?



Real Faith

If faith is a friendship with God *where we accept God as he is and he accepts us as we are*, than a lot of things in our lives will change if we really have this faith relationship with God.

First as we said earlier, if we really have faith, we will accept that we are loved unconditionally just as we are by God. We are accepted by him, because of what *Jesus* did on the cross. Not because of what we have done. So we need to let go of our past and allow God to give us the forgiveness he died to give to us. We need to accept ourselves on the most basic level just as God does. We need to accept ourselves with our mistakes, sins, regrets and all. And then we need to love ourselves as God does – unconditionally. This is the first change that has to happen to us. We have to fundamentally accept ourselves the way we are accepted by God. That is the first part of being a Christian.

Second, we also need to remember that faith is a friendship with God where we accept him *as he is*. We can't imagine him to be someone he is not. He accepts us as sinners who sometimes walk away from him and don't understand him and make mistakes. We need to accept him as someone who has a plan for our lives, a plan that includes avoiding sin to the best of our ability. If we accept him as he is, we have to accept what he says is right and wrong and make our best effort to follow it or else we aren't really following or accepting the real him in our lives.

We too have to show that our faith is "real" by being willing to change...

In the Bible, St. James says that Abraham "proved that his faith was real by what he did" (James 2:22 CEV). We too have to show that our faith is "real" by being willing to change our lives as much as we can. We don't have to be perfect – remember Jesus died so God could accept us even though we are sinners. But we do have to be "real." We do have to genuinely try to obey God as best as we can or else our faith isn't real. In fact according to James if we don't try at all our faith is "dead" (James 2:26 CEV). This is the second change that happens in us which makes us a real Christian.

A Christian is just someone who knows that they are forgiven by Christ's death on the cross and who then genuinely tries in return to follow Christ to the best of his or her ability. We will always be sinners. Christians aren't people who are perfect. Christians are people who let God accept them despite the fact that they are imperfect. But Christians are also people who accept God *as he is* into their lives. This means accepting his ways as their own and living up to them to the best of their ability.

We may fail. But we have to give our best or our faith is a lie and not “real” at all. The Good News from God is that we can always start again with a clean slate when we feel like our faith really has been a lie. Jesus died so that we can do this. We can always have a second chance at living the lives God dreams we would.

The Good News is that God will be patient as we try to change. Even if we make mistakes along the way. The question is: do we want to change?

What's in the Bible for me? James 2:20-26

- 1) Have you ever met someone who claimed to have a strong faith but wasn't really living his or her faith? What was that person like?
- 2) Do you think you are ever like that person? When? Why?
- 3) If God really does love us unconditionally what do you really think he wants in return from us? Do you feel like you give that?
- 4) What does “real faith” look like? Who is someone who you think really has it?

Starting Over

Life without Jesus? Thinking about my life before Jesus, I have no idea how I got through each day. All my life I've always felt confused about my faith. Religion was something for holy people, and it was just easier not to worry about sin and God. The way teachers forced religion into our lives day after day made it boring and pointless. It wasn't until sophomore year, that I began to realize the significance of Jesus Christ in my life. I had always known that He was there; I just didn't want to be bothered. My sophomore year, a new teacher had come to our school, and for the first time in my life I wanted to pay attention in religion class. The year dragged on, and each day I anticipated that one class where I could learn about this God who loved me so much. In February, I went on a retreat that changed my life around. At the end of the weekend, I knew I wanted to start over and this time Jesus would be in my life.

Back at school, my friends soon saw a change in me they didn't like. I was tired of the usual name-calling and gossip and wanted to be more spiritual. I was told constantly that I was “brain-washed” from all the “Jesus

worshipping” at the retreat. Each day grew too hard to deal with everyone’s “Jesus freak” comments, and I gave into everyone’s demands. I didn’t want to be a holy person anymore. I hated everyone and excluded myself from friends and even my family. I was completely lost and felt empty inside. Who was this person? I couldn’t stand the fact that I wanted to be accepted and liked by everyone, but I couldn’t be my real self. Someone, unknowingly, opened my eyes when they told me: “It’s better to be hated for who you are than loved for whom you’re not.”

“When I finally accepted Jesus in my life, everything made sense.”

Suddenly, I realized how stupid and naïve I was to chose the opinion of people over God. After all, He created us and no matter how we act, look, or how many times we sin, He loves us.

Everyday I struggle to follow Jesus, and although it’s hard, I’ve never been happier. Whenever I lose focus on God I remember a sign I once saw that read: “Is what you’re living for, worth dying for?” If you spend your life trying to please everyone and never find your true self through Christ, you’ll never be happy. He’s all that matters in this world. Keep Jesus in your heart and no matter how difficult things get, or how confused you may be, eventually God’s plan will come together, and you will find all the love you could ever imagine.

When I finally accepted Jesus in my life, everything made sense. I wanted to learn more about God and why I was placed on this Earth. Now I understand that nothing makes sense without Jesus. If it wasn’t for His unconditional love for us, and his sacrifice on the cross, our existence would be completely meaningless. Following Christ has put a whole new perspective in my life and has filled that emptiness I felt for so long. I couldn’t imagine living any other way than with Jesus. That feeling of joy and kindness pouring out of you is a feeling I never want to lose.

God has a plan for each and every one of us and I want to be a part of the plan that God has for me. In the end, I want to be embraced in the arms of Jesus and to be loved for all my faults, and spend eternity in paradise with Him.

-- high school junior girl

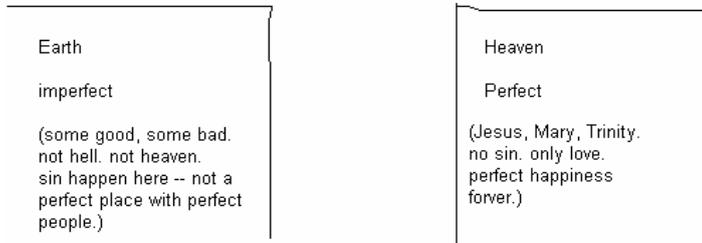
Maybe this chapter was confusing...

I heard a lot about Christianity and Catholicism growing up, but it wasn’t until I saw the diagram on the next page that it really clicked for me. Someone scribbled it out for me and it really helped. I’ll just scribble it for you!

Salvation Diagram (the scribbled version!)

1

Heaven is a perfect place. We all want to go there when we die. Earth isn't hell, but it isn't perfect either. On earth there is sin. In Heaven there is no sin.



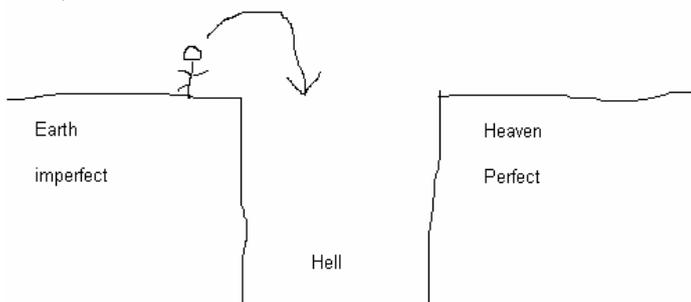
3

"But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. God sent Christ to be our sacrifice... so that by faith in him we could come to God" (Romans 3:24-26 CEV). In other words JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS to take them away so we can go to Heaven even though we are imperfect. He took away our imperfections so we can belong in Heaven too!



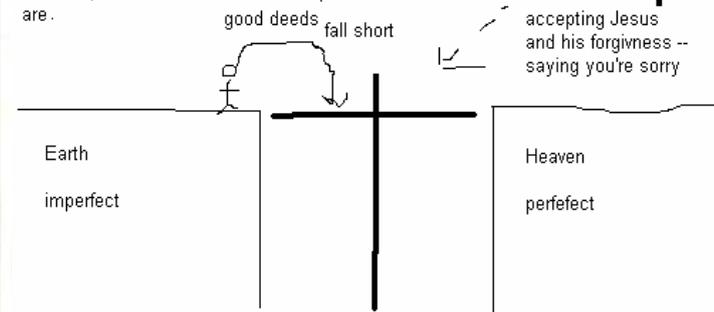
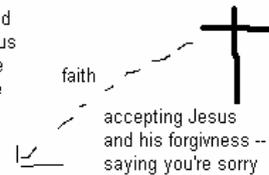
2

We are all imperfect. We're not evil, but we do sin. "All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory" (Romans 3:23 CEV). We try, but our good deeds that we try to do to get to Heaven aren't perfect deeds, so we don't technically deserve to be in Heaven when we die. We are good. But we aren't sinless and perfect. We need a Savior, someone to catch us when we fall into sin.



4

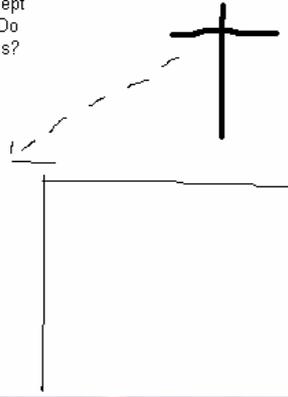
We need to accept Jesus and his forgiveness -- which is called having faith, so that when our good deeds aren't perfect Jesus can catch us or save us from our sins. This is a friendship with God where we accept him as he is and he accepts us as we are.



5

So we have to ask ourselves. Do we really accept Jesus into our lives? Do we really have faith? Do we tell him we are sorry? Do we let him save us?

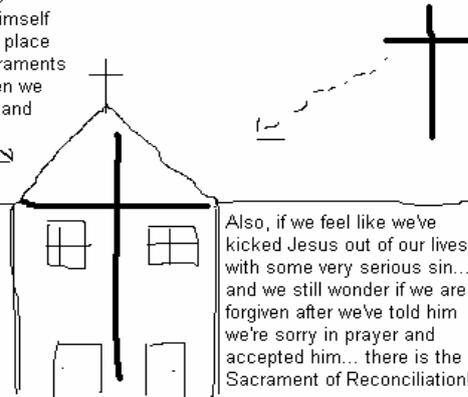
Or do we just ignore him and his love and his plan?



7

The Church is kind of like the building Jesus built around himself so that we could have a safe place to accept him. And the Sacraments at Church are moments when we can receive him and his love and forgiveness.

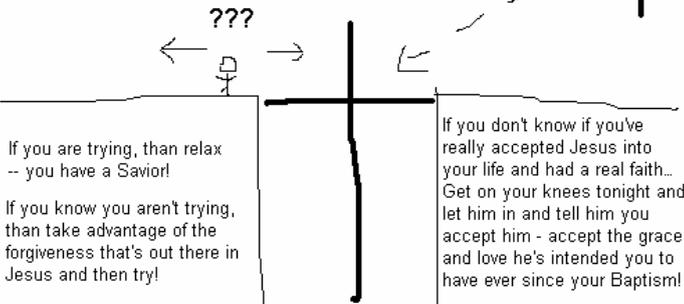
For example, the Eucharist is a time when we literally accept Jesus into our lives if we go to Mass and really let him in our hearts when we receive. It is a great way to start a personal relationship with God!



Also, if we feel like we've kicked Jesus out of our lives with some very serious sin... and we still wonder if we are forgiven after we've told him we're sorry in prayer and accepted him... there is the Sacrament of Reconciliation!

6

We also have to ask ourselves. If we do believe in Jesus and do ask him to forgive us which way are we walking? Have we decided to try to follow God? Are we really trying? Or have we never yet taken following God seriously?



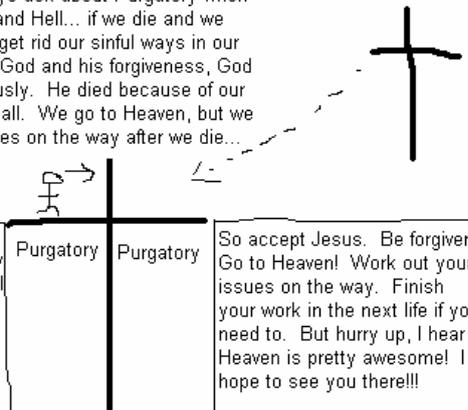
If you are trying, than relax -- you have a Savior!
If you know you aren't trying, than take advantage of the forgiveness that's out there in Jesus and then try!

If you don't know if you've really accepted Jesus into your life and had a real faith... Get on your knees tonight and let him in and tell him you accept him - accept the grace and love he's intended you to have ever since your Baptism!

8

Finally, because people always ask about Purgatory when Catholics talk about Heaven and Hell... if we die and we still have a long way to go to get rid our sinful ways in our hearts but we have accepted God and his forgiveness, God doesn't send us to Hell obviously. He died because of our sinful ways and forgave them all. We go to Heaven, but we just keep working on our issues on the way after we die...

We aren't punished for our sins -- Jesus was. We simply take a little time to let go of all that is imperfect in us so that we can enjoy Heaven without any of the hang-ups that make life hard for us here on earth.



So accept Jesus. Be forgiven! Go to Heaven! Work out your issues on the way. Finish your work in the next life if you need to. But hurry up, I hear Heaven is pretty awesome! I hope to see you there!!!

So you don't need to be perfect! Jesus was perfect for you! You don't need to be sinless. Jesus died for your sins! Just ask for forgiveness, accept Jesus and do your best. That's enough! Jesus took care of the rest!

To Conclude:

Contrary to what we might expect, we truly have a God who loves us unconditionally. He accepted us two thousand years ago by dying for our sins and he is just waiting for us to return the favor by accepting him. He is just waiting to see if we want to accept him and all of the good things he wants to give us like forgiveness, unconditional love, and changed lives.

These are the important things that God wants to tell you: First he wants to tell you that you are loved unconditionally. Really and truly unconditionally. No matter what you have done. You are loved no matter how much you sin because Jesus died for your sins.

But second, God also wants to tell you that you have to accept that love which will always be there (which is called having faith) or else while it will always exist in general it won't get to exist in your life personally and save you. In other words you have to make a decision about accepting this love.

And third, God wants to tell you that while he knows it's hard, he needs your acceptance of him to be real. He doesn't need you to be sinless or perfect. But he does need you to be real with him. He doesn't want you to be someone who says you are a Christian with your lips and then just does whatever you want with your actions. He wants you to try to be like him so that you can live without guilt and so that your acceptance of him is honest. The Good News is that he *always* will accept you when you fail because of what Jesus did for you, but he wants your acceptance of him to be just as real so that you don't end up being a hypocrite.

You have to
make a decision
about accepting
this love.

The only thing that can stop you from being loved by God is you. God has chosen to give you his love unconditionally two thousand years ago when Jesus died for you. He cannot and will not take that love back. You and I simply have to decide whether we are going to accept him and his love into our lives for real.

So ask yourself: Where am I at with believing in God? Where am I at with believing that God really loves me even though I am a sinner? Where am I at with listening to the message of the Bible and taking it to heart? Is that hard or easy to do? Hopefully believing these things will become easier over time if they are hard to accept right now.

If the message of this first chapter is something you want to take to heart and live out, then maybe say this prayer or one like it in a quiet place where you can really listen to God and speak to him from your heart. If it isn't, keep reading and hopefully you'll change your mind.

Dear Lord, give me everything I need to truly know you as you are. Give me all the help I need to know and trust that you love me no matter what I've done. And give me all the help I need to know what sin is in the future and avoid it.

I accept that you died for my sins. Thank you. I accept that your death on the cross is enough to make up for any mistake I have ever made. I invite you to live inside my heart so that I never forget that you love me regardless of what I do. And I invite you to live inside my heart so that I may live more and more as you intend me to and have a faith that is real. I love you. Amen.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“As sinners our new life is solely due to the forgiving and renewing mercy that God imparts as a gift and we receive in faith and can never merit in any way.” Joint Declaration on Justification 17

“Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ... With regard to God there is no strict right to any merit on the part of man. Between God and us there is an immeasurable inequality.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992 and 2007

“While Catholic teaching emphasizes the renewal of life by justifying grace, this renewal of faith, hope and love is always dependent on God’s unfathomable grace and contributes nothing to justification about which one could boast before God.” Joint Declaration on Justification 27

“Sinners are justified by faith... such a faith is active in love and thus the Christian cannot and should not remain without works. But whatever in the justified precedes or follows the free gift of faith is the neither the basis of justification nor merits it.” Joint Declaration on Justification 25

“I did not come to punish aching mankind. I came to heal it pressing in to my merciful heart...As often as you want to make me happy, tell the world of my great and unfathomable mercy.” Jesus speaking to St. Faustina, written in her Diary, Introduction and 164.



Chapter 2
Being who God made me to be





God's first message to us in the Bible: you are good just the way you are because I made you that way

The very first thing God says about us in the Bible is that we are “good” (Genesis 1:31). God says again and again that he likes what he made. Because God is good and doesn't make mistakes, we are considered good in his eyes. That is the message of Genesis Chapter 1. When God looks at us the first thing he sees is that we were made by him and that we were made “like him” (Genesis 1:27 CEV). We call this state of goodness “original justice”

God liked what he made when he made each of us, so...we are going to... have to learn to like what God has made.

(CCC 376). And because we were made like God, or in his “image and likeness” (Genesis 1:27 NAB) we are considered to have an unchangeable “dignity of the human person” (CCC 357).

What does this mean for us in real terms? What it means is that God liked what he made when he made each of us, so if we are going to be Christians we have to learn to like what God has made. We have to learn to like ourselves as God does. If we are going to accept the message of the Bible, we are going to have to accept that we are “good” and that we have an unchanging dignity. No one and nothing can take these things away from us because we cannot undo the fact that we were made by God and made like God.

It means that we have to love ourselves in body, mind and soul. For us today it is often most difficult to love ourselves with regard to our bodies. We think it is so important to be skinny or muscular or good-looking in some other way. And we frequently base our “goodness” or “dignity” on whether we achieve this physical appearance. God, however, says that we are good whether we are having a good hair day or a bad hair day. He says we are good if we are skinny or not. We are good not because of any of these things. We are good because he made us and he said so. Can you say so about yourself regardless of these things? Can you love yourself unconditionally putting aside human appearance for a little while? God wants you to be able to. It's part of his plan for your life. He says it on the first page of the Bible.

What's in the Bible for me? Genesis 1

- 1) Do you find it hard to think of yourself as good in body, mind and soul? Why or why not?
- 2) Which do you think is harder to accept as good your mind, body or soul? Why?

- 3) What things in your life right now made it hard for you to think you are good or have a good self-esteem?
4) Do you think that hearing in the Bible that you are good just the way you are in body, mind and soul can help you with any of this? Why or why not?

Self Image

In the world today, for us to be accepted by society we need to look a certain way. How we are judged by other people is not by who we are inside, but how we look on the outside. I don't think we realize how brutal other people can be. I never really understood it until about 8th grade or so.

I was always teased because of the way I looked. By kids at school and kids who lived on my street and I thought that was bad. Sometime near the end of 8th grade I was in the car with my dad driving to a family friend's house when he told me that I need to lose weight because I was too big for my age. I think that's when my relationship with my dad went sour. Things changed between us. I went from idolizing him to never wanting to be around him.

My relationship with myself changed too. I started to hate who I was. I'd look in the mirror and beat myself up in my head. With people at school and my dad things just kept getting worse. I began yelling at myself for being so ugly. I never hung out with people outside of school so I would tell myself that I wasn't pretty enough to hang out with people. I would always end up crying myself to sleep.

I don't know exactly when it started, but I remember one Sunday night I was staring up at my ceiling and I remembering thinking, what if I just stop eating. I had it all planed out: stop eating; make my dad happy; get friends; have a life. I could never go through with it though. It was like God was telling me I wasn't supposed to be doing this to myself. And then December of my sophomore yeah I went on the Shine Retreat. Something triggered in my mind that my life could be a whole lot worse. I realized that if I had just opened my eyes I could see that God loves me no matter what I look like and that made me smile.

Unfortunately, I still struggle with me. I don't like what I look like, and I don't know when I'll honestly be able to say the opposite, I think it's just a growing process. I do know that even though I'm still trying to get through this that God is always on my side, and knowing that makes it a little easier to get through.

--high school junior girl

Original Sin: while we were created “good,” sometimes we choose the bad

In Chapters two and three of the Bible God shows us something else that is true about us. God shows us that while we are good and that he loves us just the way we are, we also have a tendency to choose to *act* in ways that aren't good. We have a tendency to commit sin and a free will to act upon this tendency.

This is what God is telling us through the story of Adam and Eve. He is saying that while we were made in his “image and likeness,” we don't always act as if this were true. Often times at the heart of these unholy actions is self-doubt – or doubting that we are truly good as God said in chapter one of Genesis. It is often because we don't think we are good enough as we are that we choose to “upgrade” ourselves in some way. Sometimes it comes in the form of putting another person down so as to subconsciously make us feel a little more secure in ourselves. Sometimes we do things that we know are wrong but will gain us the acceptance of others.

Because of their own insecurity with who they were, Adam and Eve also chose an “upgrade” of sorts. God wanted them to keep their innocence and so he asked them not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil. They didn't need this “upgrade.” They were good just the way they were. But they didn't believe this. They thought they were missing out and so they ate from the tree. The rest is history.

Sometimes we also eat from the trees of the knowledge of good and evil in our own lives. One of those trees in our lives may be losing our virginity before marriage. One may be getting drunk. Another may be getting high. We want an upgrade or we think we are missing out. And for some reason we all at different times and in different ways become ok with losing our innocence to get what we don't have. The problem is that innocence is harder to come by than sin and in the long haul innocence is more valuable.

We are made like God and are good in body, mind and soul, but we don't always act perfectly like God. We don't always act in ways that reflect permanent goodness God put inside of us. The message of Adam and Eve is that we may be good in general and may have good intentions, but we don't always act on our “goodness” or the “dignity” that is permanently in us because we were made by God. Adam and Eve chose not to act on their goodness when they disobeyed God in the garden. And we, like Adam and Eve, often do the same thing and share with them the reality of ignoring this goodness or living with the reality of what we call Original Sin.

“I have come to know that God loves me no matter what, and that even when I screw up he will be there.”

What is meant by Original Sin is that we “all fall short of the glory of God” as St. Paul said in Romans. It’s not that we aren’t good. It’s just that we aren’t perfect all of the time – we aren’t as perfect as God in his true glory. This creates a dilemma for us and for God. We will talk about this dilemma in the next section.

What’s in the Bible for me? Romans 5:16-19

- 1) Paul says that: “Adam’s sin... led to punishment. But God’s gift (of Jesus on the cross) made it possible for us to be acceptable to him, even though we have sinned many times” (Romans 5:16). So according to the Bible we deserved punishment, but God chose not to punish us. Is there anything in your life that you just know is wrong or sinful and would deserve anger from God? How does this make you feel?
- 2) How does it make you feel to know that God took that punishment away because of Jesus? Do you believe it is really true that he did?
- 3) If God is just and hated sin enough to let Jesus die because of it and if God is love and loved us enough to let Jesus die, what do you think our attitude toward sin should be?
- 4) There is both bad and good in us but God let Jesus die so that in the end the good in us would be all that matters. How does this affect the way that you look at yourself? How does this affect the way you look at Jesus?

Constant Battle in my head...

For years, there was a constant battle in my head. It was like there were two people within me. One of those people was the one that had always been the real me. I think that person was from God. Then this new person tried to take me over who I think was a symbol of the Devil.

I could hear the war between them within me as it slowly tore me apart. I became severely depressed, and I couldn’t figure out why. All I knew was that something dark inside of me was trying to make me do things I would have never thought about before. This voice in my head eventually directed me to the path of drugs, drinking, and suicide. It also led to a new sense of paranoia that I had never felt before. This paranoia led to the belief that I was alone and nobody cared. I was led to believe that if I broke down, no one would be there to help, so I didn’t tell anyone of my struggles.

This other side of me came out gradually though. Just once or twice at first, and then all the time. The first time that I felt the emptiness that it gave to me, I couldn't explain it and so just dismissed it as regular preteen uneasiness. Then, as it came more often, I found that I couldn't ignore its advice. My friends didn't know what was wrong with me, but they could tell that I was mad and upset more often. Slowly, it captured me, until I couldn't fight anymore. I went through a roller coaster of ups and downs that could never be predicted. I could never guess how I would wake up. Most nights, I cried myself to sleep, but some nights I had the cheerful dreams of most girls' choice.

One summer, I tried drugs with my older and much more experienced cousin. She told me of the wonders of drugs and how they could fix my problems. I tried weed, but soon realized how easy I could get caught through a narrow escape. Later, I tried drinking and antidepressants with a friend that felt miserable like me. It wasn't just drugs. I also started thoughts of suicide. New images and ideas entered my head on how I could end these influences. I wrote the notes and thought up the ways, but something always stopped me.

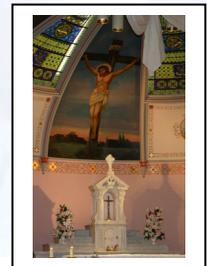
However there was always this first part of me that loved life and wanted to override these demons. Before I would get too far deep, something would always pull me out. I would drink, but always stop before I was drunk. I stopped doing weed before I got hooked. Dreams of suicide filled my head, but would always subside before I actually attempted anything dangerous. Someone was always there inside of me to defeat the sin that controlled me. God is there to end my fight before I suffer.

I still get these feelings now and then, but something always lets me know that I will be fine. They come less often now, and I have more faith that they will go away. Everyone receives the sin that gets carried down from Adam and Eve. Some may receive the consequences worse than others, but God will always triumph over them. He loves you eternally, and He would not give you something that He didn't think you could handle. Don't let the devil take you away from God's will. Don't let the snake in the garden get you to eat the forbidden apple.

-- high school freshman girl

The dilemma

As we said in the last section both God and ourselves have a dilemma because of sin. Our dilemma is that we are good and therefore want God around to some extent in our lives, but we aren't perfect and don't always want God to be a part of our entire lives. We have our original "dignity" given to us because we were made by God. It can't be taken away, so we will always



want good to some extent. But we also have the same issue Adam and Eve had. This issue is that because of free will we have the possibility and tendency (which we all act on at some point in our lives) to be unable to see, accept and act upon our God given goodness or dignity. It creates a tension in us between good and evil which can make it hard for us to accept God sometimes and at other times hard for us to accept ourselves when we reject God. In a sense we are “lost.” We are caught in a torturous tension between our original dignity and our original sin.

The dilemma for God is that he likes what he made when he made us, but the people he made don’t always act the way they we made to act. We are made good but we don’t always *act* that way. We have a permanent dignity which won’t ever go away but we don’t always remember that. This dilemma becomes a real issue when we realize that heaven is a place that is perfect, a place where only goodness exists. God wants us to be there because

In a sense we are “lost.”
We are caught in a torturous tension between our original dignity and our original sin.

he loves us and he made us good, but the reality is that we don’t deserve to be there because God gave us a free will and we often use it to choose to disobey him with it or sin. We have “fallen short of God’s glory.” So Heaven is a perfect place, but because of our choices we aren’t perfect. God wants us there but he knows we don’t deserve it. And God is love but he is also just.

God’s solution was to “treat us much better than we deserve” (Romans 3:24 CEV). He chose to be “just” by keeping to the punishment that goes along with our sins. And he chose to be loving by letting Christ undergo the punishment for our sins instead of us. This is what makes his love unconditional. Jesus’ death on the cross also allows him to remain just and fair. Because of Jesus’ love for you, you have been saved. “Because of Christ Jesus, God freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins” (Romans 3:24 CEV). Wow! What a gift.

How is *our* dilemma of this tension between the good and the bad in us solved? The same way God’s was – by accepting the sacrifice Jesus made for our sins. God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus and “has peace with us... even though we were sinful” Romans 5:11+6 CEV). Now we have to accept the sacrifice of Jesus and have peace with God and ourselves in the midst of this battle between our “goodness” and our sinfulness inside of us.

What’s in the Bible for me? Romans 5:8-11

- 1) God has chosen to send Christ to “make peace with us” but what makes it hard for us to have peace with ourselves when we sin?
- 2) God so desperately wants us to have peace with ourselves that he sent Christ to die for our sins. What are some things we can do to grow in this peace and return to a state of comfort with ourselves?

- 3) If you could have more peace with yourself with regard to living with God and with regard to having more peace from God about yourself how would your life change?
- 4) God so desperately wants us to have peace with ourselves with regard to sin that not only did Jesus die to assure you forgiveness but after rising from the dead he gave the Apostles the authority to forgive sins in the name of God (John 20:22-23) so we would have no doubts whatsoever – so guilt and any lack of peace could be removed. Would you ever think of going to confession (and accept the right given to the Apostles and passed on to the priests of today) to help you regain this peace? What makes confession hard? What makes it good?

The reality of the battle between good and evil inside of you... the reality of Original Sin and God's grace at work in us.

The battle of good and evil is something that has been around for as long as time has existed. This battle originated and manifested itself at the beginning of the Bible with the story of Adam and Eve. It has reoccurred many times throughout history on large and small scales alike. A large scale example of this would be World War II with the allied forces being good and the Nazi forces being evil, while a small scale example of this would be a person sitting in a supermarket deciding whether or not he/she should steal a candy bar. However the battle of good and evil is not just about doing what is right and wrong in the eyes of society but is also about what is right and wrong in the eyes of God.

Throughout my life I have been faced with many decisions, and have made many choices, as everyone has. And I have not always made the correct choices, there have been many times in my life when I have been offered drugs, alcohol, sex, even money, and made the wrong decision. The good news is that everybody does, the bad news is that we are accountable for our actions. This does not mean we are condemned to hell, it simply means that we must work to choose wisely in the face of adversity as God has taught, and shown us through the death of his son, Jesus Christ. I am not one to tell you what to do, for that would be hypocrisy on my behalf since I as everyone sin and continue to sin on a regular basis.

So now you are probably thinking, so I am held accountable for my sins and must weather the burden on my own, this guy must be nuts. Well, this is untrue because through the years as my faith has grown I have been able to rely on God to give the strength, patience, and courage to step above my shortcomings, if only a little bit. Do I still

sin? Yes. Do I still make bad decisions? Yes. Do I regret them when I know they are wrong? Yes. Have I let some of the bad things in my life I used to rely on go? Yes. Do I make bad decisions as frequently as I used to? No.

What I am trying to say through all of this is that I know that it is easy to sin and that sometimes it is very difficult not to, and if you sin it is ok, because Jesus died on the cross for us. However difficult as it may be not to sin relying on God and overcoming adversity is extremely rewarding. It is easy to say yes to drugs, alcohol, sex; and these things are temporarily rewarding, but to have the ability to say no and use it is something that is more precious than anything else because you will have made the Lord proud of you.

The grace of God is alive in all of us. God made it that way, which totally rocks. So quite simply although it may be difficult to rely on it at times, if one starts relying on the grace of God it will begin to be easier and easier to rely on God to take care of everything, even sins, in which lies true happiness in life. If the grace of God is taking care of everything then we have nothing to worry about, and with nothing to worry about there is nothing but happiness.

-- college sophomore guy

Do we need to go to the Sacrament of Confession to be forgiven by God?

No. But also, yes. That's the short answer. Here's the long answer:

Many teens (and adults) ask this question. And this may be on your mind since we are talking about how God loves you unconditionally and wants to forgive you. We'll answer this question in more detail later but this may help you out for now.

First, you should know that we don't need to do something to get God to love us. Remember God did everything that he needed for him to love us two thousand years ago on the cross. We don't need to do anything to earn God's love or to convince God to forgive us. God already loves us and always will. He already decided 2000 years ago that he wants to forgive you. Nothing you can do can change this. Nothing good nor bad. Not even going to Confession changes this. So God is not up in Heaven debating if he will love you. God ended that debate for good two thousand years ago. And God is not waiting for you to do something so he can love you again or else his love would be conditional. So you don't need to go to Confession to get God to love you.

"If one starts relying on the grace of God it will begin to be easier and easier to rely on God to take care of everything, even sins..."

Next you should know that the Church is very clear that God can work in your life without the Sacrament of confession or any Sacrament for that matter (Reconciliatio et Paenitentia 31). Pope John Paul II said: “Certainly the Savior... (is) not so bound to a sacramental sign as to be unable... to work outside and above the sacraments” (Reconciliatio et Paenitentia 31). So God’s grace or love is available twenty four hours a day wherever you are, in every and any moment. So yes, you can be forgiven in any moment. You are always forgiven the moment you are truly sorry. The Church calls this forgiveness from God that comes with your true sorrow Perfect Contrition (CCC 1452).

Perfect Contrition means being truly sorry and accepting God’s plan again in your life because you really want to love him the right way and want to follow him again. The moment you do this you are forgiven. If you are sorry now and accept God’s plan for your life again now, you are forgiven now! Now that’s amazing grace! And that’s Catholic.

Because God has done his part of the deal of forgiving us so well, he not only loves you unconditionally and accepts you permanently no matter what you do, he also wants to make it easy for you to know for sure that you are forgiven. God’s love is always “accessible” or available 24/7 (CCC 25). That is why the Church teaches the very Biblical concept of Perfect Contrition where you can speak to God one on one and be forgiven one on one no matter what your sin is. But that is also why Jesus passed on to the Apostles the right to forgive sins.

Sometimes we have a hard time believing we are forgiven. And we just need to hear the words out loud. Or we just need to get to say what we have done out loud to someone else who is not involved in the situation so as to get it off our chest without getting yelled at. God knows this. That is why he gave us other people, brothers and sisters in Christ who we can talk to and pray with for forgiveness.

Just know you are forgiven now if you are sorry now.

But God went even a step further. After Jesus rose from the dead he said to his Apostles: “I am sending you out as the Father has sent me... if you forgive anyone’s sins they will be forgiven” (John 20:21-23 CEV). Jesus told the Apostles that they could have his power to extend God’s love and forgiveness directly to anyone who needed it. The Apostles passed this on down to the priests that live today. So there are people just walking this earth right now with the right from God to tell you for certain that your sins are forgiven. It’s pretty powerful if you think about it.

So if you are nervous about whether you are forgiven or not, God has put these people with the right to give you God's forgiveness there for you to talk to. And if you have done something that is a very serious sin where you totally cut God out of your life, it is important to check in with them because they can help you start over.

We will explain all of this in detail later. Just know you are forgiven now if you are sorry now. If you are unsure of the fact that you are forgiven or just need to talk to someone about it, God gave you the Sacrament to let you do this and know for sure. And if you have done something that has totally cut God out of your life all together, know you are forgiven now if you are sorry now, but also check in with a priest who has the ability to put you back on track beyond any shadow of a doubt (CCC 1452). And if you have committed this kind of sin where you feel you totally cut God out of your life, check in with a priest as soon as you are ready, but be sure you do not receive the Eucharist until after you are ready and have gone to Confession, out of respect for God and the Church – even though God does forgive you one on one (Canon 917).

It's the worst feeling in the world to wonder if you are forgiven. Don't wonder. Know. That's God's plan for you: to *know* that you are forgiven. Whatever it takes to know it, just do it. You won't regret it. And trust me, from experience I can tell you it's worth anything to have peace with God. But that peace is up to each of us to decide if we want to take it. It's there for all of us. Want it?

If you are unsure of the fact that you are forgiven or just need to talk to someone about it... or if you have done something that has totally cut God out of your life all together, know you are forgiven now if you are sorry now, but also check in with a priest.

What's in the Bible for me? John 20:19-23

- 1) Why do you think Jesus told the Apostles that they could forgive sins in God's name?
- 2) If you had this gift from God as a priest, how would you use it? What would confession be like with you?
- 3) Have you ever had a good experience with Confession where it really helped you? What was that like? Why?
- 4) Have you ever had a bad experience with Confession? What was that like? Why? Who's fault do you think that was? What would you do to be sure you don't have a bad experience with Confession again?

Forgive me, God.

Have you ever done something you knew was completely wrong at the time you did it but by that point it was too late and beyond your control by then? Afterward, did you have so much guilt and this gut-wrenching feeling in which you wish you could just be forgiven for what you did and have everyone forget it ever happened? Well, in a more serious situation, I have had these exact feelings happen to me. I did something so completely wrong, so totally out of God's hands where it came to a point where I could have died. I was lost and torn away from God and all his grace. But the main point was that I didn't want his grace. For a short time I enjoyed my life without Jesus. I guess, in other words, you could say I enjoyed the pain and torture I went through without Jesus. I was doing my own thing and at the same time I had nothing. There came a point in my life where I found no joy or acceptance in my friends, my family, or myself; a point where I realized that without God I was nothing. One night I did something out of depression that was probably the biggest "No" I could have yelled at Jesus. Finding only fright and sadness as I tried to end my life, God stuck by me in the most visible way possible. As I laid in bed, completely dead from the world, Jesus guided my hand to the bible on the nightstand. I opened it up to Psalm 51 and Jesus guided my eyes as I read my true forgiveness. At that moment I had this life jolting experience where I knew I was alive and that God had completely forgiven me for every time I had said "No" to him in the past. Knowing that all I had to do was have a true apology in my heart for God and then he would completely forgive me was probably the only feeling that day that saved my life. From that point on, I made a pact with myself to live in the path of Jesus. It is such a free feeling that I can't even begin to explain. It is a feeling like I can conquer the world. And, yes, at times it is so hard to avoid temptation or to stand up to those who don't believe in God, but in the end it only makes me happier and stronger. When I find myself in a troubling situation, I find my heart saying more and more, "What Would Jesus Do?" Jesus was always there in my heart I just never saw it. Don't let it come to a life or death situation for you to find Jesus. Open up your heart to him. Ask him for forgiveness. If you ask, you shall receive. It is the best feeling in the world. It is only a feeling you will find with God. Don't you want to share in this worldwide forgiveness? Give yourself to God and make a true difference in yourself and the world. Jesus loves you with all his heart – love him back.

-- high school sophomore girl

Hiding from God

One of the most interesting things about the story of Adam and Eve is not that they sinned – they were human and we know that is part of being human from experience ourselves. What is important is what they did after they sinned. They hid from God. Perhaps that doesn't surprise us either because we all know what it is like to not want to hear from God when we are sinning. But it must have surprised God because in the end there really is no hiding from him. So why try?

Perhaps the bigger mistake for Adam and Eve wasn't eating the fruit from the tree, because we know that God can forgive anything, but instead deciding to try to hide from God. We do it ourselves all the time. Don't we? When we're mad at someone we don't really want to hear 'what would Jesus do?' Or when we feel guilt and shame because of one of our mistakes it is rare that we want to think about God, let alone do something crazy like go to Confession or read the Bible! It seems easier to us to just casually slink away from God as if he won't notice and as if it won't affect our lives at all.

The reality is, however, that there is nothing more foolish that we can do. God knows this but we rarely do. God knows that he loves us unconditionally and died to forgive us. But we often forget this at the very moment we need it most. In Luke's Gospel Jesus told three parables right in a row to try to make this point hit home. In each of the parables something was lost and the owner looked for it until he found it. When the owner found it he or she was so joyful the owner threw a party. Jesus then said that this is how God would react whenever a sinner came to him saying he or she was sorry. Let me say it again. What does God want to do when you repent? He wants to throw a party! He doesn't want to ask you why you did it. He already knows; he's God. He doesn't want to interrogate you. He wants to gather together all the people who love him and throw a party in your name!

So don't hide. Come to the party instead. You're more able to be forgiven than you could ever know. So come find out and leave your hiding place from God. You know he can see you anyway.

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 15:1-7

- 1) The Pharisees are upset with Jesus because he is as they call him "a friend of sinners." Does that seem like an oxymoron to you that God could be "a friend of sinners?" Or does it make sense you? Why?
- 2) What do you think makes it so hard to let Jesus be your friend when you know you have committed serious sins?

- 3) When Jesus finds the lost sheep (which symbolizes us when we sin) he doesn't yell at it or punish it but instead puts it on his shoulder, carries it home and says 'let's celebrate.' Is it hard for you to imagine that this is really God's response when someone is sorry for their sins?
- 4) If this is how Jesus looks at people who have fallen into sin what does it say about how we should look at others when they commit sins?

Finding it hard to follow God

We are all tempted at certain times in our lives. When I felt miserable, it was hard to believe that God was still watching me. I couldn't understand His purpose for me, and I started to believe that I didn't have one. Without purpose, my life seemed meaningless and I felt as if my foundation of faith were going to crack and break underneath my feet. I didn't know how to listen to God anymore. I was left only with my burning questions of doubt. Without His guidance, I went down a dark road of sin and corruption.

I started to feel as if I was losing myself without faith. Without faith, I was wandering around with a blindfold on. God sent me a miracle in the form of Shine. When I started going to my new high school, I realized how lucky I was to have a cool religion teacher as my homeroom teacher. There was never a dull moment in that homeroom, and it led me to Shine. It sounded great, because I could spend a whole weekend with my friends and tell my parents it was religious. I got my permission slip in the next day, just to be sure that I got in. None of my friends handed the form in on time, but this was a blessing in disguise. It's a lot easier for me to let my emotions out in front of people I don't see everyday.

I found my faith again on Shine, and I realized how much I was failing as a follower of Christ. I think I cried more that weekend, because I realized that I didn't deserve to be forgiven. All I did was hurt God, and he forgave me every time. How many times would you forgive a hurtful friend? I was also reminded of all the hurt that I had been put through, but Shine helped me to realize how I can fight my struggles with God's help. The question was whether I deserved God's help.

I found that even if we haven't earned God's forgiveness and help, he still gives it to us. He is waiting to forgive us, because He doesn't want to see us suffer. We may fail in our faith, but we are forgiven once we are sorry.

I am sorry for ever hurting Him, but our human nature leads us to do things we later regret. We can't help our sinful ways, and God realizes that and understands our weakness. You are forgiven, because God loves you.

-- high school freshman girl

God's Esteem Becoming Self-Esteem

The other interesting thing to note in the story of Adam and Eve is what they did while they were hiding from God. Because God was no longer there to lead them and because they no longer had confidence in his love and acceptance of them, they had to look elsewhere for acceptance. The only other place to look for it was from each other. Their self-esteem used to come from being close to God but now it had to come from impressing each other. It was at that moment that they noticed they were naked. It was at that moment that how the other person saw them became the most important thing in their lives. It was at that moment they lost their innocence, but more importantly they lost a true sense of themselves.

This is the greatest loss for us when we hide from God like Adam and Eve. God doesn't stop loving us (as shown in the story of the lost sheep). We simply stop accepting his love. And when we stop accepting his love we have to start reaching for love from other places. When we lose touch with our acceptance from God we begin to crave it more and more through other things. This is when things get messy for us.

Here's the reality. If we know that we are accepted unconditionally by the Creator of the universe whether we have a good hair day or bad hair day, whether we are skinny or not, even whether we sin or not, it is much easier for us to accept ourselves as we are and be our true selves with others. When we lose this connection to God all we have left is our relationships to others.

Now it obviously isn't bad to have relationships with other people (in fact, as we will see later it is part of God's plan for our lives), but it can be a problem if those are the only relationships we have to the exclusion of God. The reason this is so is because none of us here on earth are sinless or perfect and can love the people around us unconditionally all the time. Sometimes we aren't loved by even the most loving people and I don't know about you but I am not always surrounded by the most loving people.

There is one person in the universe, however, who cannot make a mistake in loving you. There is one person who can't stop loving you because He is love itself. There is one who simply doesn't have it in Him to reject you

for any reason because He has already chosen to permanently accept you two thousand years ago. That man, of course, is Jesus. If you accept Him into your life He will teach you how to accept yourself as He does unconditionally. If you learn to do this you'll never lack the courage to be the real you. If you don't, the people around you may accept you sometimes and boost your self-esteem, but they may also reject you at other times and lower it. That isn't God's plan for your life. His plan is for you to accept you, to like you and to be you. Remember He's the one who made you with all your quirks and mannerisms. So let God's esteem, or way of looking at you, become your self-esteem. It's hard to do sometimes. But I promise you that if you do it, you'll like both you and Him a lot more. And you'll also find it easier to be the real you with the people you love and want to be loved by.

His plan is for you to accept you, to like you and to be you.

What's in the Bible for me? Genesis 3:1-13

- 1) Why do you think it is so natural for us to worry about what other people think? Why do you think so many people worry like this?
- 2) God doesn't want us to live our lives constantly worrying about the opinions of other people. Why do you think it is hard to let His opinion matter the most to us?
- 3) What do you think would happen in your life and the lives of the people around you if everyone worried most about God's opinion of them and each other instead of each other's opinions?
- 4) Do you find it hard to let people see the real you or is it easy for you? Do you think God can help you with this if you were to trust Him more?

My Best Friend

It hurts so much to see others struggle. One of my best friends is really struggling with an eating disorder. I can tell just by looking at her that she is really having a tough time but she is just so stubborn to admit it to anyone. I'm guessing she puts this fake face on just because she does not want anyone to worry about her. But she can't fool me, I can see right through her.

I'm sharing this information with everyone because I want this to have a positive effect towards people and have them realize what they are in for, and change their minds. Also I would like to help everyone out there, to try and avoid this wrong path in life, because it is not worth what she is going through. I also want to help the people who are there to show them the right steps to take on next.

Most people do not realize the terrible problems that happen to a person with an eating disorder. The most effective to me is not being able to have kids! Besides love that is one of the best gifts God has given us today, and you won't be able to use it. And now the scary one would be dying, eating disorders can really damage your insides, slowing your heart beat down, leaving you with no energy and having acid eat away at your insides. You lose calcium, leaving your teeth to chip and turn into a totally new person who is irritated and not happy most of the time. Your hair and nails do not grow and your hair also gets thinner. Losing iron, and becoming cold all the time, and also the risk of osteoporosis. Another terrible effect is becoming mentally ill, where all you can think about is food and are unable to concentrate on anything else, especially school work which is why grades drop drastically. Your life turns into living in a dream world where you are living life but don't feel like you are physically in it. With knowing all that, I can not see why someone would want to put themselves through this unless they had no idea what was going on and was not educated about the disorder, like my best friend.

A lot of what an eating disorder has to do with is self esteem, and as a person you really need to be able to believe in yourself. If God does so, why can't you? Another thing to learn about this disorder, which is very hard and may take a while to figure out is what really causes you to feel the way you do. If you are getting so absorbed into the disorder, try to take a step back and think what is the true reason to why you are really upset? In reality it is not because of the food/weight, it is something else and you just have to have patience and trust me, God will help you. All day and night God is just waiting for you to ask Him for help.

I am very proud of her because she has told me, with all the therapy she has gone through, praying to God has been the best cure for her pain and suffering. She says God helps her to forget about the weight loss and says how she feels a lot more secure especially because she doesn't feel judged by anyone and especially not judged by herself when with God. She also states how if you speak to God He will be there to listen to you and remind you that He has created us to the best of His ability and that we are good as people, not as an eating disorder, or any other distraction the devil has made for us in life.

If it hurts so much to see our loved ones to go through pain; just imagine the way God must feel everyday when He has to deal with this.

-- high school sophomore girl



Loneliness is not God's plan for you

In the last section we said that being someone other than the real you is not God's plan for you. In the same story about Adam and Eve God reveals that loneliness is not His plan for you either. After God made Adam He said, "It isn't good for the man to be alone. I need to make a suitable partner for him" (Genesis 2:18). God loved Adam enough to see that Adam needed other people in order to be happy. God loves you and me no less than He loved Adam. God knows we need other people too! And it is His plan to put those "suitable" people in our lives.

If we listen to the message that God wants us to value His opinion and help us to be the real person each of us is, we also have to listen to this message about not being made to be alone. In each of us there is a need to know God. There is also a need to be our true selves. But all of this comes full circle when we accept our need to know God *with others* who know God and be our true selves *with others* who can accept us as God does. God promises they are out there. He doesn't love you less than He loved Adam. So He has made "suitable" people for you to be with as well. Ask Him to show you who they are. Ask Him to put them in your life. God doesn't plan for you to be lonely. He plans for you to be known by Him, by yourself, *and by others*. There are people who will understand you. God promises. Just start being the person you really are, whatever that is, and ask God for the people who can accept it. And don't get down on yourself because of the people who reject it. They just aren't God's suitable peers for you. Keep looking and praying. They'll show up. He promises. He loves you no less than Adam.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

- 1) Paul says that he doesn't worry about judging others because he only lets God judge him. Do you think this is hard to do? Why?
- 2) Do you think it would be better to live this way? Why or why not?

- 3) Paul says he doesn't even judge himself. He says he listens only to God's perspective on his life! How do you think your life would change if you could do this?
- 4) Finally, Paul says not to judge others because that job belongs to God. What do you think the world would be like if no one judged anyone as the Bible says it should be?
- 5) How willing do you think you are to living this way? What keeps you from doing this?

Loneliness

When we are little kids our parents make plans for us with friends that they know, but as we get older and enter high school things begin to change. We are on our own to make choices regarding friends and basically everyday things. I wouldn't have described myself as a lonely person 7 or 8 years ago. But as I finished up my junior year, things have changed.

If you look the word loneliness up in the dictionary it will say "Without companions" and that is exactly how I'm feeling. Looking back on it, ever since my parents packed my brother's and I up and moved from the only place I could call home, I've been pretty alone. Moving is hard enough, but when your 11 years old and your starting a new school, it gets harder. By the end of 5th grade, when we moved, everyone had their own clichés and trying to fit into them was rather hard. I never ended up fitting in. I was pretty much an outcast with no friends. Around Christmas of freshman year the people who claimed to be my friends for the last 3 years completely blew me off, and I was all alone with no where to turn.

Sophomore year I transferred schools and I made friends but nothing seemed to change. I think it was that year I became addicted to my computer. I was on it constantly trying to find ways to fit in with people. I was so addicted I never went out. I spent weekend after weekend alone in my basement. But after I changed schools, something changed. Something I never really put much thought into came into the picture, my religion. I went on Shine in December and the way I looked at my life changed. For awhile I was content with the way things were, but like any teenager, your feelings change, and fast. Summer came around and I sat on the computer doing nothing. Everyone would be out enjoying their summer and I was just sitting there.

Junior year started out great. I went on Encounter, and just like Shine things had changed, for the better. I wanted to be the person God wanted me to be. I wanted to help other people find God. It was like I was on this

retreat high, and nothing could bring me down, but I was wrong. By the spring I was fighting with a close friend of mine. Most days I would come home and cry. There were times when I found myself yelling at God for doing this to me. I couldn't figure out why I was so alone. Why I was never good enough to hang out with.

At the end of junior year, I decided to go to Atlanta for a youth conference, and I got some pretty weird looks from my friends and my family. But I looked past those looks. I've known since the moment I walked into the Shine Retreat that my faith was something I wanted to look into, and that's what I'm doing.

With summer in full swing, I still feel totally alone sometimes. I love being around people who are as much into their faith as I am, but at the same time, I would do anything to fit in with other people. As much as I feel alone, I know I'm not truly alone. I know that God is always there whether I can see Him or not. Loneliness is something we all struggle with, but I know eventually I'll find the people I'm supposed to be around because I have faith in God that they are out there somewhere.

--high school junior girl

The Glory of God in creation

Have you ever looked at a sunset, or watched the waves of the ocean hit the beach, or looked out from a mountaintop and just known there was a God? Have you ever looked at everything around you in amazement and known it wasn't just an accident that it all exists but that there is a greater purpose to it all? Have you ever walked through a forest and felt the Presence of Something Greater? David, the author of the Psalms obviously did.

In Psalm 19:1-5 he wrote this:

“The heavens declare the glory of God;
the sky proclaims its builder's craft.
One day to the next conveys that message;
one night to the next imparts that knowledge.



There is no word or sound; no voice is heard;
Yet their report goes forth through all the earth,
their message to the ends of the world” (NAB).

Just look around and you will see countless reasons to believe in God. Watch a sunset and ask Him if He exists. The voice of God can be heard without “word or sound” but in your heart if you take a look at His world and ask Him. His Spirit is everywhere. So sit down anywhere, look around and ask. He will respond, because He is there. David says in Psalm 139:

“Where can I flee from your presence?
If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths you are there.
If I rise on the wings of the dawn and settle on the far side of the sea,
even there your hand will guide me...” (Psalm 139:7-10 NIV).

St. Catherine of Sienna said that God is as present to us in creation as water is to a fish. She said the water is all around the fish and the water is also in the fish. The same is true for us in our relationship to God. He is all around us. We would see it if we would only take a minute to notice. He is also within us. And we would hear Him speaking if we only took a minute to listen.

According to the Bible, God didn't just create the world and then take off, leaving us to figure everything out. No, God is as present as the trees and the sunset. We just have to take a moment to listen.

What's in the Bible for me? Psalm 8

- 1) David says that when he considers all the God has made and therefore how truly powerful God must be He has to ask God, “what is man that you are mindful of Him... that you care for Him?” Our God is powerful and present in all of creation yet He wants to have a personal relationship with you. Have you ever taken a look at creation and just known there must be a God? When and what was that like?
- 2) Is it frightening or wonderful that this powerful God wants to have a personal relationship to you? Why?
- 3) Do you think you spend enough time really listening for God in your life?

- 4) If you were to sit down and listen to God what do you think He would say to you?
- 5) What would you want to say back?

Finding God in Creation

The world is a magical place to me, especially when it comes to nature and creation. I often look up to the night sky and wonder if there is something more out there than stars, planets, and space. It seems like a mystery that we may never uncover, but I just know there's got to be something with deeper meaning than what we see. Even though some of these ideas are abstract and strange at times, you may find yourself doing the same thing.

The sky is not the only thing that amazes me. I often find that I am at peace with myself and the world when I am outside and enjoying what God has given us. Whether it is going for a bike ride, working out in the garden, or just taking a walk, there is a peaceful presence that overcomes me and gives me strength. Sometimes the sound of a flowing stream on a hot summer day helps me to relax and let go of my problems. Other times it is the energy in wind or a strong storm that gives me the courage to face a difficult situation. Even a rainbow or bright colorful flowers can be refreshing and brighten up my day.

Creation also helps me to remember that sometimes it is best to "Let go and let God." In nature, every object or living being has its own role to play in the world. We often see that when nature is tampered with, things can go wrong. It is the same way in accepting God's plan for you. That is why it is important to remember that we were created in order to love and be loved by God, and creation is one way in which God lets us love and be loved. Hopefully you take advantage of all it has to offer and it may be of some strength to you in your journey to meet Jesus.

-- high school senior guy

Putting it all together:

God made you and has said that you are good. It doesn't matter to Him if you are the most beautiful person or not. It only matters to Him that He made you. You are good. As a Christian you need to try to accept this even though it may be the very opposite of what our culture says about you.

God also says that while we are good we have to accept that with our free will we sometimes make mistakes. We are good but we aren't God. The Good News is that this is ok because He still loves us just the way we are and died for our sins. So we are good, not perfect. But even though we are not perfect, we are still loved unconditionally. So you are good because God made you and it is ok to make mistakes because God died for you and loves you.

Because of this love it is silly to hide from God especially when we need it the most – that is especially when we sin. Jesus is a “friend of sinners” not an enemy of sinners. So don't be afraid.

Because God loves you unconditionally, you should love yourself unconditionally. Because God accepts you, you should accept you and be the real you. Let this love from God be the most important opinion in your life, not the opinions of others. If you do it will be easier to be the real you with them and it will bless them as well as you.

If the people around you don't accept you then maybe they aren't your “suitable” partners. But don't worry God promises to give those “suitable” partners to you. You just have to ask for them and keep your eyes open they could be as close as the person sitting next to you right now.

And don't forget God isn't far away. There is nowhere you can go that you won't find Him. You're swimming in Him like a fish in the ocean. Just take a look around at all He has made and you will see that it is true.

If you want to bring this to prayer and let God know that you believe these things to be true and ask God to be a part of your life in these ways pray this prayer or something like it alone in a quiet place:

Dear Lord, it is often so hard for me to believe that I am good just the way I am when I live in a world that so often says the opposite. I invite your Spirit to come inside my heart and remind me of Your message and Your love.

I also know that I am a sinner and that I needed You to die for my sins. But I also know that You chose to die for my sins because You love me. Help me to remember this.

And please help me to be the real me, the me that You made and the me I want to be. I need Your help to be that person. Help me to love myself unconditionally the way You love me and send me friends who can do the same. Jesus, I love You.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“When it arises from a love by which God is loved above all else, contrition is called perfect... Such contrition remits venial sins; it also obtains forgiveness of mortal sins... Catechism of the Catholic Church 1453

“A person who is conscious of grave sin is not to... receive the body of the Lord without previous sacramental confession unless there is a grave reason and there is no opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition which includes the resolution of confessing as soon as possible.” Canon Law 916

“Certainly the Savior and his salvific action are not so bound to a sacramental sign as to be unable in any period or area of the history of salvation to work outside and above the sacraments.” *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* 31

“Where is the foolish person who would think it in his power to commit more sin than God could forgive?”
St. Francis de Sales from *Consoling Thoughts of St. Francis de Sales* and *The Treasury of Religious and Spiritual Quotations*

“All of creation is a song of praise to God.” Hildegard of Bingen in *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen* and *The Treasury of...Quotations*



Chapter 3
God do you have a plan?





A God who warrants fear and awe but also friendship and trust

The author of Hebrews said “let us... worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our ‘God is a consuming fire’” (Hebrews 12:29 NIV). The Apostle Paul said “to work out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12 NIV). These two writers knew that God was love and loved them unconditionally but they also knew that God was powerful. We as Christians are in a relationship with a God who is gentle and loving but who is also power itself and deserves awe and reverence.

Abraham quickly learned both of these qualities of God, that is both God’s love and power. Soon after Abraham was promised that he would be able to have children (and in fact, descendants as numerous as the stars) Abraham entered into an intense covenant with God that later came to reveal both God’s power as well as his unconditional love.

In Genesis 15 Abraham is asked to enter into a covenant with God where he is to cut a number of animals in half and then walk between them with God who was appearing to him in the form of a flame. What this ritual symbolized was that both people involved in the covenant would have the right to cut the other in half (like the animals were cut in half) if the other broke the covenant. So if Abraham broke this covenant, God would have the right to cut him in two. If God broke the covenant, Abraham would have the right to cut God in two. When God enters into a relationship with someone he is surely very serious about it.

St. Paul says in Galatians that we are the descendants of Abraham and live in relationship to the same God! This can be a terrifying thing if we don’t know how the story ends, because who is more likely to break a covenant we, who are sinful, or God, who is perfect? You guessed it. We are! And God is clearly very serious about his rules and the repercussions of breaking them if he enters into a covenant with Abraham like this.

But this is where the amazing story of the Gospel or the Good News comes in. Whereas we deserve a punishment like being cut in two when we disobey God, God had his perfect Son, Jesus, cut in two on our behalf when he was crucified for our sins. And just as God did this for us he also showed the same patience toward Abraham when Abraham disobeyed him as you will see. So the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are the same God. He hates sin and is serious about his covenants but he also loves unconditionally as shown by allowing Jesus to accept the punishment for sin for us.

If you want to know how much God hates sin, look at the crucifix. And if you want to know how much God loves you, look at the crucifix.

God is clearly not messing around when it comes to sin. Sin is sin, and it is a serious thing to God for us to commit sin as this covenant reveals. But God is obviously equally as serious about forgiving and loving us unconditionally because Jesus also died for us. So whereas you and I might not always understand how serious a thing sin is or how committed God is to loving us despite sin, the Bible reveals that God has always known exactly where he stands on the subject. He is committed to both hating sin and loving us (even if we do neither ourselves).



If you want to know how much God hates sin, look at the crucifix. And if you want to know how much God loves you, look at the crucifix. The same God who warrants fear and trembling also warrants our trust and friendship. The same God who warrants reverence has also done everything possible to earn our love (to the point of dying) so we can be assured that we don't have to earn his. He's a God whose rules we should respect, but he's also a God who is completely committed to loving us when we do fall short of obeying his rules. He is a God we should be in awe of but he's also a God we can trust for his love and forgiveness. Now that is an awesome God! So don't live in fear of God because he died so you can trust him and so you can be assured that you are loved and forgiven. But don't abuse this love by ignoring how serious God's rules are to God.

The end result is that you are trusting a God who is power itself so you are as safe as can be because of his power. But he also, because of that same power, warrants our best obedience with regard to his commands.

What's in the Bible for me? Genesis 15

- 1) Why do you think God is so serious about his rules and enters into such a serious covenant with Abraham?
- 2) Do you personally think of God as someone who is serious about his commands to be holy? Why or why not?
- 3) Why do you think God was just as serious about loving us to the point of dying for us? Couldn't he have just ignored the rules himself? Why do you think he didn't?
- 4) Is it hard to imagine God as someone who is loving in addition to being so serious about his commands? Why or why not?

Even if you don't feel it God is still with you

Your faith should always be an important part of your life. Unfortunately, in school praying or being active in your religion is so “un cool” But why, I have no idea. Faith is everywhere, even if you don't realize it. I believe that there are angels everywhere sending us signs, but we are either too selfish, or hardheaded to pay close attention to them. We might think hey, that's cool, or Whoa! That is so weird! But really, my advice to everyone is to look for a deeper meaning. If you feel a special presence hold on to it tight and don't let it go. Do not brush it off, because feeling God is sometimes the only way to deal with the problems we have to deal with on earth. This is how I feel now, but that is probably not what I would have said a year, or even a couple of months ago...

*I always went to church with my family, I was physically there, but not emotionally **at all**. I wouldn't pay attention, sing along, or even listen to the readings. I thought, “Yea, I am religious”, but now I know I was wrong. I didn't know anything about my religion, except what we learned in Religion class, which was like, “God Loves us...Let's honor the Commandments!” Which is true but, that is not a deep or spiritual meaning of being Catholic at all. I know we need to learn the basic building blocks of our religion, but I wish we would have been taught more on a spiritual level. I think if everyone had an experience like my Shine Retreat, where you become so close to God, or if they had a teacher...or rather, a friend like my retreat leader, who was my homeroom teacher this year, they could really know what it means to be a Catholic.*

*I feel truly blessed that I was able to be a part of Shine and to meet all of these wonderful people. I believe that God has a plan for everyone and that everything works out in the end. If I hadn't gone to Archbishop Wood, none of this would have happened. I wouldn't have went through all of the important, incredible, and faith building experiences .If none of this happened I don't know where I'd be...I'd be so different. I could see myself stop believing in God , being meaner, and a more sinful person. I could see me becoming someone I would **never** want to be. I owe all of these great changes in my life to God, because he allowed all of this to happen!*

So many great things have happened in my life since I have become closer to God. My Aunt got married, my other Aunt had her third healthy, beautiful baby...and I am the godmother! My dad was laid off from his job a week before Christmas; but, the day after I came back from Shine he started a great new job that he loves. But not everything has been perfect. A very dear friend of the family died... My close friend's parents got a divorce, and I don't know what to say to her. I have no idea on how she is really feeling, because I am afraid to talk about it , at the risk of hurting her ... I have people who I care about struggling with problems that are very hard for them ... And

I myself am struggling with a few things. Nothing too serious, just the basic “high school drama”. Like fitting in, fighting with parents, and most of all, self- appearance. I have had my share of good and bad things, just as everyone does, but I think I have had a gift from God.

God gave me the strength to be brave and to turn to something good when I am upset. Instead of confiding in cutting, drugs, drinking, or anything like that, I have something that relieves me of pain. I write in my journal.

“God is always sending signals. Whether they are important or just a little something to cheer up your day...”

Besides my daily ramblings and doodles it holds my deepest thoughts, prayers, laughs, and tears. I am glad that when ever I am upset I can go in my room and just let it all out, instead of bottling it up. The funny thing though, is that I have tried to keep a diary so many times before but, this is the only one I have ever kept up with, and this journal happens to be the one I received on my first shine retreat!

*God is always sending signals. Whether they are important or just a little something to cheer up your day. I have to admit, I had one of these little signs that helped me **a lot**. A few weeks ago I was having a terrible day, I had a huge fight with my friend, my spirits were low, I felt so lonely, and I was just really sad. I was riding the late bus home thinking how am I going to solve this, how can I feel better. All of the sudden I started praying; I figured I would ask God for help, so I wouldn't do anything I would regret. The radio was playing on the bus and the next song that came on made tears come to my eyes. The refrain went “You are not alone...I am here with you...”, it was a song by Michael Jackson. It truly, told me that everything would be ok. It was amazing!*

So, I hope, you get just at least one thing out of my story. If it is: even if you don't feel it at all, God is still with you, or that you should always pay attention if you feel God in your life, or any other thing you may have gotten from my story. I have learned the only way to be happy for your whole life is to include God in with you. Sing in church...sing out loud and proud! Don't care what people think, be happy with yourself. I have become close to God and it has been great, so I hope a lot more young people can be lucky enough to have the same spiritual experience as I had.

*As in a lot of things I would like to end my story in a quote. I read some where that “**Love doesn't become love until we give it away**”. This may not mean a lot to people, but it does to me. This is what I believe with all of my heart. God is always loving us, but until we fully love him back, we really can't feel how wonder and special it is to feel a connection and relationship with God!*

-- high school freshman girl

Doing things my way instead of God's way

God promised Abraham in Genesis 15 that Abraham would have a son. The problem was that Sarah was infertile. To Abraham it seemed impossible that God would give him his promised son through his wife, so Abraham decided to sleep with his slave in order to have a child. Ever done something like that? Maybe you haven't slept with someone other than your spouse to have a child. But maybe you've assumed that something in your life is God's will, and maybe it is, but you chose to pursue it in a way that isn't godly. That was Abraham's mistake and frequently it can be our own as well.

Perhaps you've thought that someone would be a good girlfriend or boyfriend for you, and maybe they would be, but you pursue that relationship in ways that aren't right. Or perhaps you love your girlfriend or boyfriend and believe that he or she is the one for you from God but you do some things that aren't godly to keep the relationship going. Sometimes we cut corners when it comes to following God. We may know we are going in the right direction in general but we forget God when it comes to the details.

For Abraham this caused quite a problem. His relationship with his slave, Hagar, caused quite a rift in his relationship to his wife who, though she suggested it, ended up being jealous in the end instead. Sarah says to Abraham, "It's all your fault" (Genesis 16:5 CEV). So Abraham gives Sarah permission to treat Hagar terribly. Then Hagar runs away with the child in her womb. This is clearly not the way the Lord must have envisioned things. Bad things can happen even when we are following God in the general direction of our lives but ignoring him in the specifics.

The amazing event of this story is not Abraham's foolishness. Such foolishness is all too common to humanity. We see it everyday. Perhaps in our own lives in fact. No, the amazing event, or the Good News, of the story is what God does. One would think God would abandon Abraham for doing something so foolish (remember how serious he is about covenants). One would think God would disregard Hagar and her child in her womb because they weren't part of his original plan. But God does just the opposite. He takes the situation, Abraham's terrible attempt to follow God's plan, and makes a new plan out of Abraham's mistake. And the Good News is that he can do the same for us.

God sends his angel to stop Hagar and to tell her that he has a plan even for this situation. God tells her to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears" so that she would know that God heard her cries. And the Lord reveals that he has a plan to bless Ishmael in addition to his plan to bless Abraham's future legitimate son, Isaac.

We have a God who is serious about his rules and his covenant. But we also have a God who never gives up on us no matter how much of a mess we have made of his plan for our lives or his covenant. That's the Good News or the message of the Gospel in this passage. God will not give up on you even if you want to give up on yourself. All you have to do is return to him and ask him for a new set of directions to head toward him from where you are now. Even if you've wandered miles away from his path – he's always willing to forge a path back to him. That's the message of the cross and the message of Abraham's relationship to God.

What's in the Bible for me? Genesis 16

- 1) Have you ever cut corners in your relationship to God and paid the price for it?
- 2) Have you ever made a mistake and known that you had wandered far from God's plan for your life? When? How?
- 3) Is it hard to believe that God can make new plans from the situations that we create by our disobedience? Why or why not?
- 4) Have you ever experienced God making things work out in the end even though you had disobeyed him? When? How?

My attempt at holiness

I will be the first to tell you that striving to be holy can sometimes feel like an impossible task. I know that in my life, I often hear God's voice telling me things like, "C'mon sweetie, you know better than that" and "Why don't you just trust me?". And I'm not sure exactly why, but I sometimes ignore that voice. It can be really challenging to put everything in God's hands and trust that it will all work out in the end, but I have grown to learn that He will do a heck of a better job than I will trying to take care of myself without Him. Throughout this year, there have been a number of ups and downs (more downs than ups) and I have had a hard time letting God heal some of my wounds. In attempting to shut people out of my life, I also shut God out for a little while, which was a huge mistake. I sort of slammed the door in his face and locked it so that he didn't have any way of coming back into my life. And by doing

this, I kept myself from seeing all of the blessings that he has been showering me with throughout all of the sucky things that have gone on.

Everything was going pretty well for me at the beginning of the fall semester. I was starting at a new school and just trying to get comfortable with the new environment. I was dating a guy I really liked and things seemed to be going really well for me. I made the decision to go on a road trip with this guy. He was my best friend and I really thought that I could trust him. I was warned about going but I ignored any advice from anyone. I wanted to prove to everyone that I had the maturity to go on a trip on my own. And since I had a feeling that God disapproved of this trip, I decided that I would just turn a deaf ear to him for a few days until I got back. Well it turns out this guy must have turned a deaf ear to God too, but on a whole other level. It turns out he wasn't the great guy that I thought he was and I shouldn't have trusted him as much as I did. He took away one of the most valuable things in my life. I knew deep down that what had happened wasn't my fault but I also know that if I had never turned that deaf ear to God, I would have made the right choice and I would have listened to God telling me that this was a BAD BAD idea. A couple of months after all of this happened I discovered that I may have been pregnant. Because of this and some other issues that I had been faced with, I realized that I needed to drop out of school. I felt completely alone. I didn't want to tell anyone or talk to anyone. I secluded myself from everyone I knew. When I talked to some close friends of mine, I pretended that everything was great and I didn't have a care in the world. The last thing I needed was for this to become the latest gossip.

I decided for myself that the best thing for me to do would be forget all of my problems. My friend thought that to help me unwind, she'd invite me out to party with her. Being really vulnerable and sensitive, I thought that this would be just what I needed to unwind a disappear for a little while. After only a few nights of drinking and partying, I couldn't ignore God's voice anymore. I knew that what I was doing was not good for my heart and wasn't making me feel any better in the long run. I had become too angry to care about anything. I came home from a party one night, frustrated and tired of everything and I fell to my knees, sobbing. I cried out to God asking Him where he had gone and why he left me. Then I realized that it was me who locked Him out in the first place and it was up to me to let Him back in. So I decided to unlock that door that I had slammed in God's face and opened it up to see Him standing there with open arms and tears in His eyes, waiting for me to embrace Him.

That wasn't the first time that I surrendered myself to God. And that party wasn't the last time that I had committed a sin of ignored God. And I know that it will happen again and again and again. As much as I wish I could stop myself from being a sinner, I know that I can't and I know that I need to surrender my life to Jesus every

single day. And that isn't an easy thing to do, but there will be so much more joy and happiness in my life if I choose to follow Him with all my heart than if I try to do it all on my own. Holiness isn't just about going to church and confession and praying rosaries all day. Its about being so in awe of God's love and feeling so deeply touched by his grace that you want nothing more than to love, serve and follow Him and live in that love. And even though you know you will stumble, you trust that with God's mercy and grace, you will be picked right up and start all over again...and again...and again.

-- college freshman girl

Life and death trust

Eventually God gives Abraham a son, Isaac, through his wife Sarah. In Genesis 22 God asks Abraham to give Isaac back, in other words to literally sacrifice Isaac's life on an altar to God. Surely Abraham remembers the covenant God made with him earlier. And after his first act of cutting corners with obedience to God, Abraham must have decided never to do that again. So as ridiculous as it sounded, Abraham took his son, Isaac, to a mountain where he would sacrifice Isaac to God on an altar he would construct!

In the end we realize that God had no intention of making Abraham sacrifice his son's life (even though Abraham was in a life and death covenant relationship with God and had gone against God's plan by sleeping with Hagar). God simply wanted to see if Abraham was willing to let God keep his promises of having children according to God's plan not Abraham's.

Abraham could have said 'no.' Abraham could have argued. He did neither. He simply obeyed even though it made no logical sense. He wasn't going to make the same mistake of doing things his own way twice!

It probably didn't seem unfair to Abraham that he would have to lose his son because Abraham must have remembered the mistake he made in trying to conceive the son God promised. Perhaps Abraham even thought to himself, 'it should be me on that alter, not Isaac.' But Abraham was no longer going to fail on his end of his relationship with God if he could help it. Obedience was now the highest priority for Abraham.

"Holiness isn't just about going to church and confession... Its about being so in awe of God's love and feeling so deeply touched by his grace that you want nothing more than to love, serve and follow Him and live in that love."

You probably know how the story ends. The Lord sends down an angel to stop Abraham at the moment he was going to give up his son on the alter. The angel then said to Abraham, “Now I know that you truly obey God, because you were willing to offer him your only son” (Genesis 22:12 CEV). God didn’t want to take away Abraham’s son, he just wanted Abraham’s obedience. He wanted Abraham to follow him not just in general but also in all the details of his life. It probably would have been fair for God to take Isaac away because Abraham had ignored God’s plan within a life and death covenant relationship with God.

But again the Good News is that God chooses not to be fair. He chooses instead to “treat us much better than we deserve” as Paul says (Romans 3:24). Abraham is asked to offer his “only son.” As we learn however, in the end he didn’t have to do that.

Who is the only person in the Bible who ever has to sacrifice his only son in order to keep a covenant between God and man? That’s right, the one person who never broke any part of any covenant, God. When God gave up Jesus to create a new covenant, he did what he never asked anyone else to do. When he gave up Jesus he truly did “treat us much better than we deserve,” because we deserved that punishment. And when he stopped Abraham from offering his son Isaac, he treated Abraham “much better” than he deserved. In the end the one who pays the ultimate price for our breaking of the covenant isn’t us. It is God!

So when you make a mistake don’t hide from God. He will make a new plan and he isn’t looking to punish you as he shows again and again. He just wants you to really trust him. He wants you to trust him not just with your life in general, but with all the details as well.

What’s in the Bible for me? 1 John 1:5-10 + 2:1-2

- 1) John says that if we say we have not sinned that we are fooling ourselves. We all ignore God on the details of his plan sometimes, if not the whole plan all together. How have you recently ignored God with regard to his plan?
- 2) But John also says that if we “confess our sins to God, he can always be trusted to forgive us and take our sins away” (1 John 1:9 CEV). While we may deserve punishment, God will always forgive if we are truly sorry. He showed this on his cross. What makes it hard to believe this when you feel like you have messed up God’s plan for you? Why?
- 3) John says “I am writing this so that you don’t sin...” (1 John 2:1 CEV). Why do you think it is so important to follow God in the details of our lives? Why do you think obedience is so important to God in general?

4) John also says, “But if you do sin... Christ is the sacrifice that takes away our sins and the sins of all the world’s people” (1 John 2:1-2). Why do you think it is so important to remember this as well? Which do you think is more important knowing to be obedient to God or knowing he forgives you? Or are they equal in your mind? Why?

Your best friend is waiting to hear from you

When sign-ups for the December Shine Retreat came, they were filled so fast, but I ended up going on the February Retreat. I thought, “Yea, we will talk about God but it’s not like I’m going to get anything out of this.” I heard it was really fun so I figured I would go. Well yea, it was fun, but if anything I found not only God but myself. One night, these two girls, Jen, Gina and I decided to stay and pray after the communion service. The chapel looked so pretty and all the candles were lit, there was also gospel music playing. All of a sudden, I started to cry. It was really random, but I looked over and Jen was crying too. Jen and I had been friends before but never really that close. At this point, my crying had become pretty bad, so I wanted to get tissues. So I went to the bathroom, Jen followed me in. In there I asked her what she was thinking about, “My grandpa and uncle,” she replied. I started to cry even more because I was also thinking about my Pop Pop.

He had been sick for awhile and was on my mind the entire night. When we went back into the room I felt calm, I was still crying but I felt much calmer. I remember giving Jen and Gina a hug, and wanting instead to give my Pop Pop a hug. When my Pop got sick I chose not to see him because everyone said that I should remember him in a happy way. But that night at Shine, all I wanted was to see him. As the night went on, Mr. Tarrant, the leader of the retreat, blew out the candles and the lights went out. I kept on praying. I had never really been in deep prayer or ever really prayed with out reason, but that night it changed. Right before I fell asleep I felt that God was saying that everything would be okay-and he was always going to be there if I needed him. That night I became best friends with God. It was time to leave and I was so upset.

My mom picked me up from school, and the first thing I asked was, “How’s pop?”

“Fine, he’s doing well,” she replied. I figured then that tomorrow I would go up to see him since we had off. Well, it was too late. My mom dropped me off and headed for my Pop Pop’s house to go visit for a bit. Not an hour later my dad came in and told me my Pop had passed away. I was devastated. I didn’t believe it at first. The only thing I wanted, which was to see him, was now taken away. I was home by myself and I cried for a bit, but I needed

to talk to someone. I called Jen, and I remember her being so calm and supportive, but it didn't change the fact that I didn't get to say good-bye. At first I didn't get why God did this right after I became so in love with Him. I felt so changed because of his death. At first it made me a weaker person, but I remembered what Shine was all about and it made me fight the temptations that lay ahead of me. In the midst of all that was happening, I pushed my three best friends away. I didn't want them to know what I had been feeling and I didn't want them to think of me differently. I thought they wouldn't understand everything I was going through. I wanted everything to go back to normal, but it didn't look like it was going to happen.

So many people have helped me through my grieving, but mostly God. He has been my main support and who I tell everything to. He is the one person who no matter what you do, will always forgive and listen to you. I believe God does everything for a reason. I think he had a good reason to take my Pop with him to heaven that day. He wanted to wait until my relationship with him was its strongest, so that he would be able to help me through it. I'm glad everything happened when it did because now I know God is truly watching out for me.

I hope out of this you come to believe that through God anything is possible. If you keep your faith in him alive, then all things will prosper. Through Shine I've learned the times you think God isn't there, He is the closest to you. You need to remember that if you think you are alone, you're not. Your best friend is waiting to hear from you! Jesus loves you!

-- high school freshman girl

Trusting dating to God

By Genesis 24 Isaac is now looking for a wife to love and have a family with (I wonder if he ever asked his dad for some pointers!). Abraham sends one of his servants back to the land Abraham was born in to find a wife for Isaac. The servant isn't quite sure how to choose a wife for Isaac or how he will convince her to come back with him to meet Isaac. So Abraham says in reply to the servant's questions, "... the Lord will send his angel ahead of you to help you find a wife..." (Genesis 24:7). In Abraham's mind, life is no longer a matter of figuring out what is best for oneself. Now Abraham sees life is really a matter of figuring out what God thinks it best for oneself, because what God thinks is best really is best. That is true faith.



The risks are high in dating. The question is: are you willing to take this risk without God?

So the servant goes back to the land Abraham was born in and instead of evaluating all of the women in the area he prays that God may lead him to the one for Isaac. In prayer he asks God to guide him by having the wife for Isaac come up to him and offer him and his camels water. Sure enough before he has finished praying Rebekah is standing before him offering him water. Then she offers water

for his camels. Then she reveals who her family is and it turns out they are from the land the servant was sent to in order to find a wife. The servant takes all of this as a sign and eventually Rebekah goes back with him. While they are riding toward the home of Abraham they pass a young man who catches Rebekah's eye. Rebekah is so taken by him she has to ask, "who is that man?" (Genesis 24:64). It's Isaac! It turns out that God had a plan for their lives and all they had to do was be willing to let God lead them to it.

Now there are no arranged marriages today, and you are probably grateful for that. But while society has changed, God has not. God still has a plan for our lives, even the details – especially the detail of dating and marriage. The question is are we going to listen to it? Are we going to do things our own way as Abraham did early in his life and have terrible results? Or are we going to trust God with all of the details, even the details of dating? As you may already know from experience, the risks are high in dating. People get hurt. People lose touch with who they really are. People do things they regret later. But people also can fall in love, discover who they really are and have a life together that leaves no regrets. The question is: are you willing to take this risk without God? Abraham wasn't.

What's in the Bible for me? Jeremiah 29:11-14

- 1) The Lord says to Jeremiah that his plans for him are "plans to prosper you and not to harm you" (Jeremiah 29:11 NIV). God's plans for us are always good for us in the end. Why do you think it is hard to believe this sometimes?
- 2) The Lord also says to Jeremiah that when we turn back to God we will "ask for help" and he will answer our "prayers" (Jeremiah 29:12 CEV). Do you think that we have to be turned back to God for God to answer our prayers? In other words, do you think we have to be willing to obey God and do things his way if we are going to receive something from him?
- 3) Jeremiah seems to think this is true. What are God's ways with regard to dating? What do you think he expects of us if we are going to ask for a girlfriend or boyfriend from him?

4) Do you really believe that God knows best for your life or do you struggle with this? If you struggle with this, do you think it is because you don't know what he wants or do you think it is because you know and don't want to obey it?

I will change you

Have no doubts about it, being a Christian means being willing to be changed by God. It's going to mean changing the way you look at your life. It's going to mean changing some of your behaviors. It's going to mean changing some of your priorities. It's also going to mean changing into someone who loves himself or herself unconditionally. And it's going to mean trying to give that unconditional love of God to others, even the people you don't like.

If you have been reading along in your Bible you may have noticed that early on in Genesis Abraham is really called Abram and Sarah is really called Sarai. That's because God changed their names. Abraham means "the father of many nations" and Sarah means "princess." So certainly when God changed them he blessed them. In a similar way when he sets out to change us, his changes are blessings even though we might not see it at the time.

We might not think that some of our priorities need to change. We might not think that changing some of our behaviors will be good for us. But God does. And the question is do we trust God? Do we really have faith? If we believe that there is a God out there who loves us through Jesus but don't believe in the changes he says are necessary then we don't really believe in that God.

Being a Christian is easy in one sense because it means accepting you are loved just the way you are, sin and all. But being a Christian is hard also because God will want to change you out of that life of sin. If you don't at least accept his desire to change you, then you may not be really accepting him. The Gospel is a wonderful message, but it is also a hard message because it means we have to allow room in our lives for God to change us. Are you willing?

This is where the rubber meets the road. This is where most people walk away from Christianity. They like the message of love but they don't like the message of change that goes with that love.

The reality is that none of us are completely open to the changes God wants to make in us. It is so often a struggle for all of us. But we have to be open to the struggle. We have to be open to the change even if we know

we are going to flounder and fail at it sometimes. God has more than enough love to love us through our failures. But we have to learn to believe God's plan is the best for us the way Abraham learned to believe it. Being a Christian means trusting in God's love and forgiveness for salvation, but it also means trusting in his plan for the details of our lives. It's hard and it's scary. It was for Abraham and it will be for us. But trust me it's worth it! Try it out, you'll see.

To Conclude:

We are following a God who is power itself so we should know that we are safe in his arms. But because of that same power we should respect his commands and give them our best obedience. He loves us enough to die for us and enough to continue to rewrite his plan for our lives and not give up on us. But we should also remember that we aren't supposed to take advantage of that love. Remember he is God.

Sometimes we make mistakes or all hope seems lost but remember with the God of the Bible it isn't. God forgives. God rewrites the plan for our lives. God makes new plans and doesn't lose track of the old ones. If it is his plan that you marry, you will. If it is his plan that you date, you will. You and I just have to stay attentive to what he is doing in our lives and things will work out.

Also a Christian is someone who can accept change. Especially change on the inside. God wants to change you. He doesn't want to make you someone you're not – remember he made you in the first place. He just wants to make you the best you that you can be. As a Christian who counts on him you have to trust him and let him.

So if being a Christian who is open to change and to God's plan in your life is important to you take this prayer or a prayer like it to heart and offer it to God. I promise you he'll make it worth your while. The change God wants to make in your life is the best thing you could ever have happen to you.

Dear Lord, I know that having faith in you means being open to the changes you want to make in my life. I know that this is real faith. Help me to have a real faith.

Some of these changes are going to be hard and some are going to be scary. And I know that I am going to fail sometimes. But I invite you to change my life because I am trusting you that it is for the best. Holiness is hard for me, so please, when I fail remind me that you love me no matter what.

I know I can't do this on my own. In fact, I know that I don't even always want to change, so be inside my heart and mind and guide me with your Spirit. Be inside me to remind me that you love me when I fail. And be inside of me to remind me to be open to you, your plan and your changes. Be patient with me. I love you. Help me to trust you like Abraham did.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“For almighty God..., because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works if he were not so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil in itself.” Catechism of Catholic Church 311

“From the greatest moral evil ever committed – the rejection and murder of God’s only Son, caused by the sins of all men – God, by his grace that “abounded all the more” brought the greatest of goods: the glorification of Christ and our redemption.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 312

“On one occasion the good Lord said, ‘Everything is going to be all right.’ On another, “you will see for yourself that every sort of thing will be right.’ We see deeds done that are so evil, and injuries inflicted that are so great, that it seems to us quite impossible that any good can come from them. As we consider these sorrowfully and mournfully, we cannot relax in the blessed contemplation of God as we ought... (But) we are unable to know all of the works that God still has to do... he will make everything turn out well...” Julian of Norwich 32

“We firmly believe that God is master of the world and of its history. But the ways of his providence are often unknown to us. Only at the end when... we see God “face to face,” will we fully know... God has guided his creation.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 314

The most powerful prayer we can pray is: “Jesus I trust in you.” Jesus to St. Faustina in her Diary 327



***Chapter 4
God, where do I fit?***





Misfits and rejects

Have you ever felt like an outsider, a misfit or a reject in the world? Have you ever felt like you were selected for some reason by the people around you to be an outcast? Have you ever felt like there was no way to earn acceptance from the people around you and then that whatever you did made it worse? If you know the feeling the Israelites and Moses had in Egypt.

Having been forced to Egypt because of famine and then while in Egypt having been forced into slavery, the Israelites spent their whole existence in Egypt as outsiders whose fate went from bad to worse. Moses, according to a new Egyptian law, should have been killed because he was a Israelite male, but his mother saved him by floating him down a river in a basket made of reeds. Clearly, Moses and the Israelites were not accepted by the world around them. On top of that there was no way out of it for them except for a miracle – a miracle that God eventually did bring.

The God of the Bible is a God who is not only “a friend of sinners” but he is also a friend of outcasts and misfits. He is not afraid to befriend those who society rejects. In fact, he not only accepts them, he rescues them. The story of what God did for the Israelites through Moses is a story that all of us can relate to. It is a story for anyone who has experienced rejection.

The Good News is that you will never be rejected by God – not for your sins and not for anything the world rejects you for. Even if you are in the wrong God will not reject you. After accepting you he may want to change you in some ways, but he will never reject you. One of the central messages of the Bible is that none of us deserve rejection. God died to see that this message hit home. And God rescued the Israelites to remind us that none of us, no matter how difficult and painful our situation is, are outside of his grasp.

The God of the Bible is a God who is not only “a friend of sinners” but he is also a friend of outcasts and misfits. He is not afraid to befriend those who society rejects.

What's in the Bible for me? Exodus 1 + 2:1-10

1) Have you ever felt like an outsider the way that Moses and the Israelites must have felt like outsiders? When? What was it like?

- 2) What could have changed the situation for you? Could other people have changed the way they were acting? Could you have changed something in yourself?
- 3) Moses' name sounds like the Hebrew word for "pull out." He was given this name because he was pulled out of the river. Have you ever felt like God or someone else pulled you out of a bad situation like the one you just described? What was that like? What happened?
- 4) God still wants to rescue people from bad situations today. Sometimes he sends someone like Moses to do it. Who are some people you know who are like Moses, always helping people out of trouble?

Feeling like a misfit

Feeling like an outcast is something I think everyone struggles with because even though it seems someone is the "coolest" person in school everyone is self-conscious. My worst experience with being an outcast was when I was in 6th grade. Around this time girls tend to think it's "cool" to be mean and hurtful to others. I was best friends with Rachel and Stacey and I guess you could say we were part of the "popular group." Well one day they decided that for no apparent reason they were going to be mad at me and not talk to me anymore. I was so confused at why they were doing this, but they would ignore me and just walk away from me when I would come up to them. I tried to confront them, but they just didn't want to hear it. All of a sudden it went from 2 people being mad at me to the whole grade being mad at me. I was a nice person and I just didn't understand why this was happening to me. For a while no one would even talk to me in school. Rachel and Stacey even got my boyfriend to break up with me just because it was a mean thing to do to me. I would cry my eyes out while I walked home from school. I didn't understand what was going on; one day I was so called "cool" the next I was the loser that no one wanted to be friends with. I knew I didn't deserve this I was never mean to anyone else why was everyone being mean to me? I didn't really talk to anyone in school. I felt like everyone was always talking about me and making fun of me. Rachel and Stacey use to whisper to each other and then laugh at something one of them said about me. This was the most horrible time of my life. It seemed like this was going on forever, but it really was only a few weeks. But that's all the time it takes to make someone feel like they shouldn't go on living. I would often think about how the girls would feel if I committed suicide. Would it teach them a lesson? Would they see what could happen when they are so mean to someone? Would they even care? These thoughts always went through my mind, as I would walk

home from school. I'd think; should I commit suicide? Each day I would come up with an excuse why not to do it; like well my moms cooking my favorite meal tonight or well tomorrow I have a basketball tournament. I realized that I really didn't want to kill myself I just wanted to have friends. Then I realized even if the girls are going to be mean to me in school I can still have other friends. I have my older sister who is 18 and my 4 girl cousins who have been like sisters to me since I was little. They are 13, 14, 15, and 17 years old. I also realized I have my basketball friends. I played AAU basketball when I was in the 6th and 7th grade and our team was really close. I went on with my life and after some time, Rachel decided that it was time to straighten things out. Rachel and I sat down and talked about what went on and we finally became friends again. She apologized to me and said that she felt really bad for all the things she had done to me. I forgave her and we became good friends again. Everyone started to talk to me again and everything seemed to be getting better. I thank God every day that I didn't go through with killing myself because if I did I would have never gotten to experience life. Even though life has its ups and downs you always have to believe that things will get better. I think going through that has made me a better person. It taught me to never be mean to anyone because even if one person would have been nice to me in school then it would have made my life that much better.

-- high school sophomore girl

God is a strange God

“This is strange!” (Exodus 3:3 CEV). That is Moses’ response to his first experience with God. For Moses it wasn’t normal, it wasn’t common and it wasn’t easy to comprehend. It was strange. Perhaps some of your first experiences of God or of other people following God left you shaking your head saying just what Moses said. Whenever we experience something new our first response is often to think that it is strange. This can be especially true with God.

When we experience God in a new way or see God acting in a new way we have two choices. We can either walk away and ignore it as strange or we can be excited because we are seeing something we don’t see every day and investigate it. Imagine how the fate of the Israelites would have changed if Moses saw the burning bush, said it was “strange” and then walked away from it because it was strange. But Moses was curious about this strange event and so he checked it out and everything else is history.



Perhaps you have seen kids worshipping God or praying to God in a way that is different from what you would expect from a high school student.

Sometimes the greatest act of faith is just having curiosity. Sometimes we just have to be open enough to be curious about God and to begin to see God acting in our lives. God will take any act of faith and make great things out of it. And if the greatest act of faith you have in you is just to be curious, then be curious and God will bless you for that.

Perhaps there is a retreat coming up that you know little about except that it is curious that teenagers would want to go away for a weekend to think about God. Perhaps you have heard someone say something about the faith that doesn't make sense to you and you are wondering if they are right. Perhaps you have seen kids worshipping God or praying to God in a way that is different from what you would expect from a high school student. Perhaps there is a Bible study teens go to without being forced. All of these things can be "strange" events, indeed, to you. Well, we have a choice when we see God acting in a strange way. We can ignore it and maybe miss out on something great that God wants to show us. Or we can act on our curiosity and maybe find God in a whole new way in our lives. Sometimes acting on our curiosity is the most faithful thing we can do. I know the Israelites were glad Moses acted on his curiosity. Who knows what God can do if you act on yours!

What's in the Bible for me? Acts 17:16-34

- 1) The Athenians say to Paul "You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean" (Acts 17:20 NIV). Have you ever heard someone say something about God or relate to God in a way that was "strange" to you but seemed right? When? What happened?
- 2) What are the strangest or most curious things about Catholic Christianity to you?
- 3) That day in Acts 17 a man named Dionysius became a believer. He later went on to become an important leader in the Church, all because he was curious. Do you know anyone who likes to ask a lot of questions about God or think about God a lot? What are their biggest ideas and questions? Do you think God will use him or her in a powerful way someday?
- 4) Have you ever felt like God answered any of your questions? Have you ever been curious enough to try something new in the Church and as a result found God in a new way in your life? What happened?

Experiencing God in a new way

I never planned on going on a retreat. That wasn't the kind of person I was. I believed in God and I knew He loved me, but I wasn't a "Jesus freak". I saw what people were like after retreats, and I thought the whole thing was weird. It was weird that four days could turn so many people towards God and make them all become best friends. However, they were all happy, and it couldn't hurt me to spend a weekend with Jesus. So, reluctantly, I signed up to go on Encounter.

As the weekend came closer, I started having second thoughts. Did I really want to do this? Some of my friends were telling me not to go. They didn't want me to find new best friends and become a Jesus freak. So when the day came to leave, I was scared out of my mind. I didn't know what was going to happen, or even where we were going. The bus ride there seemed much longer than it really was, and at one point we even got lost. As we were at the gas station getting directions, I thought, maybe this is God telling me I shouldn't go. But there was no turning back.

As we were on the bus, I looked around at everyone else. What am I doing here, I thought. I am not like these people. They aren't going to like me and I have to spend a whole weekend with them! So we got there, and everything started right away. As soon as I walked in the door, Encounter just hit me. I was still very skeptic the first night, but the spirit of the weekend eventually came over me.

Over those four days, I learned more than I had in my entire life. I learned that everyone has a story and everyone carries his or her own crosses. I learned that some crosses are much larger than others, but none is more important than another. But most importantly, I learned that loving Jesus and realizing how much He loves me is amazing! And it really is the cool thing to do. Before I went on Encounter I had judged anyone who went on retreats, and now I realize why they never really cared. Because Jesus loves them! So it really doesn't matter what anyone else thinks. And now I am a Jesus freak, and I love it.

-- high school senior girl



Who am I to serve you, Lord?

“Who am I to go to the king and lead your people out of Egypt?” says Moses to the Lord in Exodus 3:11 CEV. I often ask a similar question of God in my own life. “Who am I that should go and serve your people, God?” I often say in prayer. And I feel like God says to me what he said to St. Faustina, “I know you are unworthy, but don’t let that stop you from receiving the graces I want to give you.”

God knows we are all unworthy of serving him. We are all sinners. We all break our covenant with God like Abraham. No matter how much we do or don’t have our lives together none of us can be worthy by ourselves of serving God or delivering his message of love to others. But the Good News of the situation is that we don’t have to be worthy. Like God said to St. Faustina, he knows we are unworthy, but that doesn’t stop him from loving us or wanting to give us his grace. His love isn’t based on our worthiness but on Christ’s. Remember Christ died for your unworthiness, so as God commands Moses, get over it and be a part of the plan anyway.

God tells Moses that he will be with Moses and that will be enough. We don’t need any credentials except having God in our lives. The only thing that can hamper our service of him is our unwillingness to let him lead us or our unwillingness to let him into our lives. But if we let him in it doesn’t matter what our past was. It doesn’t matter if we have a degree in theology. It doesn’t matter if we are popular or well spoken or intelligent. It just doesn’t matter because in the end the only thing that is going to matter in serving God is having God in one’s life.

In Moses’ past he committed murder. He was rejected by his people. He was rejected by the Egyptians. He was saved from death by luck. And he was a terrible speaker with a stuttering problem. This was the man God chose to free the Israelites. He didn’t choose a charismatic popular person to lead the Israelites. He didn’t choose a great speaker to speak to the pharaoh or king of Egypt. He didn’t choose a sinless person to reveal the truth about God’s love. He chose someone with no less of a past and no better credentials than you or I have. And you see what God did with that misfit!

So the point is that, yes, we are not worthy of serving God. But if we wait until we are worthy we will wait until we die. The Good News is that God already made provisions for our unworthiness two thousand years ago on that cross. So now the choice is ours. Are we going to live out what we believe and share our faith with others or are we going to hide behind our unworthiness? But just remember God sees through your unworthiness as he saw through Moses’ and he has a plan for you anyway. Do you want it in your life?

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 5:27-31

- 1) People often think that God is only for the “good” people, the people for whom we think being good comes naturally. Well, I’ll let you in on a secret. Being good doesn’t come naturally for anyone even though it may appear that way. But Jesus says in Luke’s Gospel that he didn’t come for the people who are already good. He came to invite sinners to know God. Does this seem to be different than what you would expect? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you think most people in the Church today show as much love to sinners as Jesus did? Why or why not?
- 3) Have you ever felt like God must just not be for you because being holy just doesn’t come naturally?
- 4) Do you think God is only for people who seem to find it easy to be holy?

They were too discouraged to believe him

God eventually sends Moses to the Israelites and to the pharaoh. When the pharaoh hears Moses’ request to allow the Israelites to worship the Lord, the pharaoh denied Moses’ request and doubled the amount of work the Israelites had to do as slaves. The Israelites were so discouraged that they no longer believed that God was working through Moses.

It is a story that is common to us all. At different points in our lives things happen and we find it hard to believe that there is a God out there. The world beats us up so much that we just lose hope. That is where the Israelites were spiritually. They lost so much hope that they lost faith in the idea that God cared for them.

The Good News is that while we may give up, God never does; and while we may forget about God, God never forgets about us. God did not want the Egyptians to abuse the Israelites any more than the Israelites did. God doesn’t like suffering any more than we do. But there are two things that separate us from God with regard to understanding suffering. The first is free will and the second is that we have a finite perspective while God has an eternal perspective.

The first problem is that God has given all of us a free will to choose sin or love. You may have noticed that we don’t always choose love. Well, there are ramifications to that. The primary ramification is that we make the lives of those we sin against very difficult. I think God must hope that we will eventually open our eyes to the pain we are causing and change without him needing to intervene in a miraculous way. But as was the case with the

pharaoh, we don't always change. Sometimes we, like the pharaoh, "harden our hearts" towards God's message the way the pharaoh "hardened his heart and would not listen to Moses" (Exodus 8:15 NIV).

The second problem is that we don't always see things through God's eyes. Things such as death, for example, seem so painful for us but from God's perspective death is a wonderful thing because on the other side of it is Heaven and the blessings that come after our struggles here on earth. For God it is like crossing the finish line. For us sometimes we just think of it as the end. We see only the here and now while God sees forever, which includes the here and now but is also so much more.

Between the two of these things, free will and our finite perspective, so much of our hope in God can be drained. When bad things happen (sometimes because others have chosen to sin against us and sometimes not) and when we can't understand why (because we can't see from God's perspective) we can be so tempted to give up on our Christianity and lose faith. And sometimes we succumb to that temptation and do lose our faith.

The trick in all of this at this point is to give up. Yes, the trick is to give up! You heard me right. God doesn't want us to waste our energy trying to hold it all together. If we have been broken down, God wants us to be broken down. 'You're nuts' you might be saying, but it is true. God wants us to be real with him. If we're falling apart we're falling apart.

God does want us to give up but then he also wants us to give it over to him to fix. He's big enough to handle it. It is ok to give up hope sometimes. Just when you do give up hope, be sure you give it all up to God to restore it. Put your hopeless self in his hands. He will save you. And you can't do anything about it one way or another. You just have to let go and let him be in control. You see, faith isn't about holding it all together. It's about letting it all fall apart, but letting it all fall apart in his hands. Trust me, I know from experience, they are big enough to hold it all. If they can hold all of my issues, they can hold all of yours. And if they can hold all of the Israelites' issues, they can hold the issues of hopelessness for the whole world. If we let them.

You see, faith isn't about holding it all together. It's about letting it all fall apart, but letting it all fall apart in his hands.

What's in the Bible for me? 2 Corinthians 4:6-12, 5:1-6, 6:4-7

1) St. Paul says that this treasure of Jesus is hidden inside of Christians the way something is kept inside of a jar made of clay. A jar made of clay only has to be dropped on the ground to be broken, just like one of your parent's

coffee mugs (don't try this at home). Paul was saying that we as Christians can be so vulnerable, so easily beaten up and abused. Do you ever feel vulnerable or easily damaged by something or someone? What is it? Why does it have this impact?

2) Paul says that this is ok though, because "the real power comes from God and not from us" (2 Corinthians 4:7 CEV). Faith isn't a matter of holding it all together and being strong. It is a matter of being ok with letting all fall apart and letting God put it back together. What are some things in your life that you feel only God can put back together right now? Why?

3) Paul says the Apostles were physically beaten and put in jail in addition to often having nowhere to sleep and no food. Yet somehow he stays cheerful. He says it is because "the Holy Spirit has been with us, and our love has been real" (2 Corinthians 6:6). It seems like all Paul has going for him is feeling close to God and having real friends. Do you think that this is enough sometimes? Why or why not?

4) Do you think you would have the courage to keep preaching the Gospel after being beaten and put in jail like Paul did? Have you ever felt like you have been hurt by others because you were following God? When? How?

Falling apart and letting God pick up the pieces

I needed someone to be with me and put back together the pieces to the puzzle that I had become. I felt like I couldn't exist anymore. Something had taken over my body and left me as an empty, lifeless shell. If I was still there, I considered myself too far gone to find. I was doing things I didn't even think about before. Total depression left me with nothing but pain and broken fragments of my former self.

I prayed, but only when I needed something. God was still there, and He would listen even if I wasn't. Whenever I felt distressed, I would turn to the only person that I knew would listen. Even when we lose faith, we always seem to pray as if it were a last resort. I would complain and tell him what was wrong, and He was listening. Many of us wouldn't be able to have this patience, but God is always there.

When I fell apart, I would consult Him. He led to my recoveries and was there when I fell again. Jesus fell three times, but His passion for us picked him up and made him keep going. Shouldn't we have that same passion for Him? When we fall apart, we should keep going in God's teachings, because we know He loves us and will always be there. Far too many people pray only when they are asked to or at times when they need something. It shouldn't

be something we do in desperation or to please others. Everyone should pray, because you love God and you want to talk to him like you would a best friend.

If it weren't for God, many people would lose all hope, just as I would have. I can honestly say that I wouldn't be here if not for God's everlasting patience. When you feel like you're falling apart, turn to God. He will be there to put you back together and put you back on the path to Heaven. God picks up the pieces and forgets that you ever did him wrong.

-- high school freshman girl

I will pass over you

After the pharaoh refused Moses' numerous requests to free the Israelites and after the Lord warned the pharaoh of the plagues that would come if he continued to keep the Israelites as slaves, the Lord finally allowed ten plagues to occur in Egypt. Before and after each one the pharaoh had a chance to let the Israelites go free. But as the Bible said "he hardened his heart" toward God.

Before the tenth and final plague the Lord commanded Moses to celebrate a meal which has come to be known as the Passover Meal and which is still celebrated by Jewish people today. As a part of the Passover Meal the Israelites were asked to take the blood from the Passover lamb and put some of it on the doorposts of their homes. The Lord promised that when he saw the blood on the doorposts his angel would "pass over" that house because the people in that house had faith in the Lord.

The Bible says that "our Passover Lamb is Christ" (1 Corinthians 5:7 CEV). In other words just as God "passed over" the Israelites because of their faith in him so too will God "pass over" our sins if we accept the blood of Jesus in our lives by faith in him. Jesus is God's perfect sacrifice to make up for the sins of the whole world as John the Baptist says: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29 NAB).

Perhaps you are familiar with those words and what is often said after them: "Happy are we who are called to this supper. Lord, we are not worthy to receive you, but only say the word and we shall be healed." Yes, that's what we say during the Mass. At the Mass we accept Jesus into our lives by accepting him in the Eucharist. We are literally accepting the body and blood of Jesus. When we do this with real faith we are accepting Jesus, the Passover Lamb. We are accepting that we are loved by God and we are accepting his plan to "pass over" our sins!

"If it weren't for God, many people would lose all hope, just as I would have. I can honestly say that I wouldn't be here if not for God's everlasting patience."

If you accept Jesus into your life by faith, God will “pass over” your sins. And if you accept the Eucharist by faith you are literally accepting the Passover Lamb over the doorposts of your heart and soul. It is quite a powerful experience if we understand what’s going on at the Mass. The very act of your salvation is taking place. Yes, Christ died only once for our sins, but we accept it again and again every time we take the Eucharist into our bodies. It’s the free gift of salvation and heaven. It’s no small gift! You don’t want to miss it!

What’s in the Bible for me? 1 Corinthians 10:15-17

- 1) St. Paul says that when we “eat the bread and drink the wine in a way that is not worthy of the Lord, you sin against the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 11:27). Whatever we do to that bread and wine we do to the body and blood of Jesus. If we accept it into our hearts in faith the blood of the Passover Lamb is in us forgiving us of our sins because of our faith. Have you ever received the Eucharist or gone to Mass and just experienced a deep sense of peace when you left? Have you ever left Mass and just felt closer to God and Jesus? When? What was that like?
- 2) Why do you think you felt that? Or why do you think you haven’t felt anything at Mass before?
- 3) To receive the Eucharist means to believe that Jesus loves you and died for your sins – to believe that he is your Passover Lamb. Do you believe that this is true? That he really did die for you and was your Passover sacrifice to God?
- 4) What makes it hard to focus on what is happening at the Mass when you are there? Do you think everybody gets it? Do you think you get it?

Moses took the bones of Joseph

As Moses was leaving Egypt he did an interesting thing. He honored the request of one the Israelites’ holiest people by taking his bones with him to the promised land. Early on in the Bible we see a respect for the holy people of the past when Moses took these bones of Joseph with him. It was done at Joseph’s request because Joseph knew that God was going to free his people someday after he died.

Later in the Bible, in 2 Kings 13:20-21, a man is brought back to life when he touches the bones of another holy man, Elisha. The Church today does a similar thing when it keeps what are called relics of the Saints. A relic

can be anything from a piece of clothing a Saint wore or touched to their actual bodies themselves. There have been countless healings of people through relics, similar to the story in 2 Kings. One of the most recent is that of a little girl from Doylestown, a suburb in the Philadelphia area where I live, who was cured of permanent deafness. The healing was reported on in great detail in the Philadelphia Inquirer and was documented by the University of Pennsylvania's Children's Hospital in Philadelphia. The Healing was done through a simple relic of Mother Katherine Drexel. It was the third documented miracle attributed to her and was the cause for her being canonized as a Saint.

The meaning behind this for us as Catholics is that, yes, God can operate in "strange" ways as we said earlier. And sometimes we read the Bible and think to ourselves, 'that is very strange, why don't things like that happen today?' The answer is that they do happen today. Now maybe praying with a relic isn't your thing and that's fine. But the point is God still works in the same ways he worked in the Bible, even the ways in the Bible that don't make a lot of sense to us.

Jesus at the doorposts of our lives

When we accept Jesus into our lives as our Passover Lamb, as the one who paid the penalty for our sins, we are accepting him not just as a Savior but we are also accepting him as Lord. Christ was chosen to stand in the doorway of your life and protect you before the world was created. His blood on the doorposts to your heart protects you from God's justice, taking it's punishment himself instead. That is what makes him our Savior.

But he intends to be more than just a Savior to us. He also intends to be the Lord of our lives. He stands in that doorway for another purpose as well. He's like the ultimate spiritual bouncer. He doesn't intend on letting anything in that will harm you. If he's willing to die to save you from your bad qualities, he is certainly willing to protect your good qualities like your self-esteem or your innocence.

While God doesn't always stop people from sinning against you because of the gift of free will (as the Israelites knew all too well), God, as your Lord, does intend to protect you and heal you from those sins committed against you. But in order for him to do this you have to let him be your Lord. You have to let him stand in the doorway of your life not just with regard to your own sins in relationship to God; you also have to let him stand in the doorway of your life with relationship to the world.



The innocence that you have retained growing up and the innocence you have been given back by Jesus' death on the cross is something God wants to guard. He doesn't want things coming into your life and taking that innocence (or that hard-earned gift of a clean slate with God through forgiveness through the cross) away again. He also doesn't want negative influences on your self-esteem to come in. In a way he's the biggest big brother we'll ever have.

A friend of mine says that she'll never go anywhere or do anything that she can't do with Jesus. If she can't bring him along, she doesn't go. Jesus is her filter for what is right and wrong in her life. He's her Lord. He protects her innocence.

But Jesus also wants to stand at the doorway of your thoughts as well as your actions. Ask yourself when someone tears you down, 'would Jesus agree?' If not, dismiss those thoughts. They aren't God's and God doesn't want them to be yours. Let Jesus, instead of others, be your Lord and protect your sense of self-worth.

If we don't let Jesus stand at the doorway of our lives in relationship to the world, what's the point in letting him stand at the doorway between you and God the Father? Jesus didn't just die for you. While he is our Savior, he isn't just a Savior. He rose from that death and lives for you and with you. He is also our Lord. We should treat him as such and treat ourselves to a much better relationship not only to God, but also to the world around us.

To wrap it all up:

Jesus isn't just the friend of holy people. God doesn't just rescue the people who fit in. No, God looks for the people who are misfits and who are lost in the world and wants to be their savior. We have a God who doesn't just care about our souls. We have a God who also cares about our earthly lives as well.

Sometimes we can get so discouraged by the way things are going in our lives that we just want to give up all hope. God's message, surprisingly, is to do just that – to give it all up and give it to him.

He's a God who doesn't follow the conventions of the day and can seem pretty "strange" as Moses put it. But he is a God who rewards our curiosity and our willingness to take risks to know him better.

Jesus is our Savior and he passes over our sins, but he is also our Lord who wants to keep us safe from future sins and bad relationships.

In the end he isn't just concerned about the state of your soul with regard to heaven and hell, he also desires to be involved in your life here on earth. He wants to be a part of your life when you feel like you are a misfit or

unworthy or discouraged and doubting. He isn't going to leave you on your own to figure it all out for yourself. He wants to be there with you in it all and let you know that his presence is enough if you can accept that is true.

If you want to bring these things into your prayer life with God, say these words or words like them in a quiet place sometime:

Dear Lord, I know now that you are not only the friend of sinners but you are also the friend of misfits and outcasts. Sometimes I feel like all three. Please let me know that you are with me during the times I feel this way. Please change the way that I look at myself when I am struggling with these situations. Help me to accept you not just as my Savior but also as my Lord and protector in my life. I trust you and I am crying out to you like the Israelites in Egypt. Hear my prayer. Thank you. I love you.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“Jesus’ call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before hi, does not aim first at outward works, ‘sackcloth and ashes,’ fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false...” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1430

“If clothes, the handkerchiefs, and even the very shadows of Saints, while yet on earth, banished disease and restored health, who will have the hardihood to deny that God can still work the same wonders by the holy ashes, the bones and other relics of the Saints?” Roman Catechism, 1st Commandment

“You too should not back away and say that you are not worthy of receiving greater graces when I give them to you. I know you are unworthy, but rejoice all the more... (and) encourage the souls with whom you come in contact to trust in my infinite mercy...” Jesus to St. Faustina in her Diary 294

“By despair, man ceases to hope for his personal salvation from God, for help in attaining it or for the forgiveness of his sins. Despair is contrary to God’s goodness, to his justice – for the Lord is faithful to his promises – and to his mercy.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 2091

“Therefore when... we are all brought up to heaven, we shall see clearly in God secrets that are now hidden from us. None of us will want to say then, ‘Lord, if only it had happened in this way or that, it would have been perfectly all right.’ Rather we will exclaim with one voice, ‘Lord, you are blessed indeed! So it is, and it is good! Now we can truly see that everything has been done as it was ordained before creation.’ Julian of Norwich 85





Chapter 5
God, I can't hear you.





Listening to God

In 1 Kings 19:9-14 the prophet Elijah is desperate to hear from God. Elijah says: “Lord God All-Powerful, I’ve always done my best to obey you. But your people have broken their solemn promise to you. They have torn down your alters and killed your prophets, except me. And now they are even trying to kill me!” (1 Kings 19:10 CEV).

Have you ever been so desperate to hear from God that you felt your very life was on the line like Elijah did? Has it ever seemed as if God did not intervene immediately that everything was going to fall apart and it would be impossible to keep on living? I know that I have felt that way. And it is obvious that Elijah feels this way in this passage.

God then tells Elijah, “Go out and stand on the mountain... I want you to see me when I pass by” (1 Kings 19:11 CEV). Then an intense wind came shaking the mountain and sending rocks shattering. Then an earthquake came. Then a fire. But Elijah says the Lord was not present in any of these things. Finally a “gentle breeze” or “a soft whisper” came and Elijah knew it was the Lord making himself present.

In life there are so many earthquakes and fires that shake us up and confuse us. There are so many difficult things that happen. But can we hear that “soft whisper” in the midst of it all? He may not seem in those moments as powerful as the earthquakes and fires that are happening in our lives, but in those moments remember that this “soft whisper” is the God of the universe. And as difficult as it may seem at the time to rely on this, know that these terrible happenings are drops in the bucket compared to his power.

Try to take a leap of faith. In the midst of all the things that shake up your life and send things shattering, try to take a moment alone in a place where you can have peace and sit quietly with God. Call a time out from it all for just a couple of minutes and listen for his “soft whisper.” He will comfort you if you listen. I know from experience. But you and I have to listen. It’s hard in the midst of the earthquakes and fires in life – I know that from experience too. But it’s also the only way to have true peace; the peace God intends you to have. So listen for his voice and ignore the earthquakes for a while. He’ll show you how to deal with them later if you listen to him now.

So listen for his voice and ignore the earthquakes for a while. He’ll show you how to deal with them later if you listen to him now.

What's in the Bible for me? Psalm 46

- 1) Have you ever felt that so many terrible things were happening in your life that it was impossible to pay any attention to God? When? Why? What happened?
- 2) Why do you think it is hard at these times to “Be still” and know that God is in charge?
- 3) Sometimes the reason we don’t hear God is because we don’t take time to “be still” or “calm down” (Psalm 46:10 NIV and CEV). What are some things you to be still and calm down? Where are some places you might go to do this?
- 4) Have you ever felt God in a moment of being still or calming down in the midst of a difficult time? If so, what was that like?

Big Pop was safe in God's hands

There was a very hard time in my life that started when I was twelve years old. My Grandfather was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. It was a very sad time for my family. I especially took it hard. He was my mentor. The man who helped in teaching me how to throw a ball, how to read and write was going to die. I had never experienced a loved one dying. The doctors gave him an expectancy time of two years. I knew in my heart that would never be enough time. So my family made the best of it. We started going up to visit more often. At least once a week, usually Fridays, we would go to their house and make dinner and spend a lovely evening with them. Sometimes we would go and see them three times a week, just to keep my grandfathers morale up. At first, there were no noticeable signs or symptoms of the cancer. So after a couple weeks, I began to forget he even had the cancer. But slowly I began to realize what was actually taking place. My grandfather was a big man. He was even affectionately known as “Big Pop.” He began to lose weight at a rapid pace. The first month I noticed, five pounds. The second month he lost eight or so pounds. It just kept getting worse. As he lost weight, we could see the tumor bulging out from his chest. It was a rude awakening to me. My Grandfather did have cancer, and he was going to die. Those Friday night dinners became more of a mission of putting weight on my grandfather rather than keeping morale up. It was a difficult time for me, but I had never really seriously had prayed or talked to God about it. After a year, my Grandparents celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. We had a huge celebration with many

“The funeral was hard. But God was there with my family to make us feel better. To this day, I still have that deep relationship with God.”

friends and family. We also took a family portrait that day, which as we all knew but never said, would be the last full family picture including my Grandfather. A few more months past, and his condition became worse and worse. As he became worse, I started thinking about God a lot more. Every time I heard he had a bad night, or that he hadn't eaten in a few days, I prayed more. The night before my Grandfathers death, my sister and I went to visit with my grandmother. We picked up a pizza and ate with her. None of that night's conversation talked about the state of my grandfather, which at the time was very poor. He had to wear a diaper because he had no strength to walk five feet to the bathroom. He was probably in the area of 100 lbs. And that was the most noticeable. I didn't know it, but that was the last time I saw my “Big Pop” breathe. My grandfather passed away early in the morning on October 9th, 2001. Ironically enough, that is also my Birthday. My mother came in to my room to wake me for school. She came in and said, “Happy Birthday Son!” I knew with her tone of voice something was wrong. I looked at the clock at it was much later than the normal time that I get up. I looked at her and she told me that Big Pop had passed away. We both sat there and cried for about ten minutes. I got out of bed and dressed. We went up to my Grandmothers to comfort her, and the adults went to make the final arrangements with the funeral director. I put on a new face. I put on this gigantic smile. I don't know if any of my family noticed. But it was probably the fakest smile I have ever put on. That was the first day I honestly and sincerely fully talked to God. When I got home, I sat in my room for an hour and prayed. It was the hardest I have ever prayed in my life. But that praying gave me a feeling of extreme peace. It also gave me a reassurance that Big Pop was safe in Gods hands. I knew he had been watching down on me throughout the whole day.

My Grandfathers death was the “Intense, earth shaking wind...fire... [And] earthquake” (as mentioned in 1 Kings 19:11 CEV.) But that feeling of peace I had that evening was the “Soft whisper.” From that night on, I had a relationship with God that I had never had before. It was amazing how I felt. The funeral was hard. But God was there with my family to make us feel better. To this day, I still have that deep relationship with God, and it is still growing today.

We love and miss you Big Pop...

-- high school junior guy

Listening to God when he says things we don't want to hear



Sometimes I think we don't hear God speaking to us because we don't want to hear what he has to say.

Sometimes we know in our hearts exactly what God would want us to do but we ignore that "gentle whisper" because we don't want to obey it. And other times I think we shut him out because we are afraid of what we assume he will say to us, when in reality our expectations of what he will say might not be at all what he is looking to communicate.

In 1 Samuel 3 God called out to Samuel three times. Samuel didn't know it was the Lord until he finally talked about it with another man of God, Eli. Sometimes we experience the same thing. God could be encouraging us to do something in prayer, but we have a hard time believing it until another Christian we trust affirms what we are hearing. That is what Eli had to do for Samuel, affirm that it was the Lord communicating to him. I think it is a common experience for us to doubt what God is saying to us because it seems impossible or because we seem like the most unlikely of candidates for the job he's giving us. That is when we need to rely on the people like Eli in our lives who we can trust know God's voice as well and can affirm or challenge what we think God is asking us to do.

But in the end Samuel had to hear a message he probably didn't want to hear. He had to hear a message about how the priests who he lived with in his community were failing God. None of us likes to hear from God that we are falling short of his dream for our lives. Yet because we are sinners, all of us are going to experience that from time to time. It's just part of being Christian. What keeps us on the right path with God is how we respond. We can turn and walk away from God and our Christianity. Or we can trust that he loves us and is calling us to change because it is for the best for us.

Eli chose to take the second option. He chose to trust that whatever God said was for the best and to obey it to the best of his ability. When God spoke to Samuel in the vision, God had some sharp criticism for Eli, one of the holiest of God's prophets. Eli's response to God's criticism wasn't anger. It didn't cause him to run away. Instead he simply said, "He is the Lord, and he will do what is right" (1 Samuel 3:18 CEV).

Sometimes we don't hear God, not because God isn't speaking but because we aren't willing to listen to what he might be saying. All of us experience this because none of us is sinless and perfectly obedient to God. But the question is what are we going to do when we find ourselves in this situation. Will we respond like Eli and trust that the Lord loves us and knows what's best or will continue down the same path of pushing the Lord's voice out of

our hearts and minds? One is the path toward Christ. And one is the path toward eventually turning off all of our ability to hear God at all and then eventually wondering if he is even out there at all. The choice is yours and mine.

Seeing as God sees

Samuel is eventually called by God to select the second king of Israel. Samuel probably assumed that God would call him to select a person who was well respected, powerful, popular, good-looking and well, kingly. God, however, ended up teaching Samuel that he doesn't look at people the way the world does. God told Samuel that he wasn't looking for someone who was "tall and handsome" (1 Samuel 16:7) to be king. These things didn't matter to God and they certainly weren't the criteria that God would use to choose a new leader for Israel.

For us as Christians it can be so hard to know what direction to go in life. One voice we hear again and again is the world's. It says 'be beautiful, be good looking, be skinny, be muscular, be intelligent, be popular.' In the world's eyes this is success. However God's voice says something radically different. He says as he said to Samuel, "People judge others by what they look like, but I judge people by what is in their hearts" (1 Samuel 16:7 CEV).

At some point we are going to have to decide what we are going to treasure in this life above all else. Are we going to treasure physical beauty and the external appearances of ourselves and others? Or are we going to treasure the heart? We have to decide what our treasure is when we decide what criteria we are going to use to choose our friends. And we have to decide what our treasure really is when we decide what criteria we are going to use to decide if we are going to love ourselves. On top of that we can't avoid the choice of what our treasure is going to be because we are always deciding whether we will love ourselves or not and we are always deciding who to spend time with.

So we need to ask ourselves are we going to judge as people often do, based on appearances? Or are we going to judge as God does, by the heart? One path will lead to peace with yourself and the people around you. The other path will lead to constantly trying to look a certain way and constantly being self-conscious. And it will lead to friendships that only go skin deep. The danger of the second option is that while we may end up doing a good job of caring for the surface, our hearts will be left uncared for. And in the end that is why we try so hard to look perfect and fit in, we just want the love and acceptance our hearts cry out for. We try to look beautiful and act cool

At some point we are going to have to decide what we are going to treasure in this life above all else.

thinking that will lead to love and acceptance in our hearts, when the reality is just loving and accepting the hearts of ourselves and others, as God does, leads to this. It's a whole lot easier God's way. But will we let our guard down and choose it is the question?

So what criteria are you going to use to judge what's important in life? Will it be the criteria of superficial appearances or will it be God's criteria, what is in the heart? It's hard, but choose God's criteria. It will lead to peace with yourself and it will help others choose better criteria with which to judge themselves as well. But it's up to you and it's up to me to make this choice. God won't force us.

An imperfect heart

Perhaps the fact that God judges us by our hearts is a scary thing at times because we know that some of the desires of our hearts are not always the desire of God's heart. We have an imperfect will and it doesn't always submit to God. And we may have acted upon that imperfect will and pursued things in life we shouldn't have gone after or done things in life we know were not God's will for us. What do we do then?

The Israelites were in a similar situation. They had begged for a king. God told the prophets that it was not his will for them to have a king because he was their king. God said their desire for a king was a rejection of him. This is where it becomes evident that we live in a relationship with a God who is always willing to meet us right where we are at. In the end God gives the Israelites a king because he accepts them and their need. God warns them of the dangers and potential pitfalls but eventually anoints for them a king.

Eventually the Israelites realized that they were being blind to God in many ways and recognized that "they have sinned many times in the past and... were very wrong to ask for a king" (1 Samuel 12:19). What were they to do then? And what would God do now?

Perhaps it would seem fair for God to punish them or to take away their king, but he didn't. In fact the message from the prophet Samuel was very different. He said, "Even though what you did was wrong, you don't need to be afraid. But you must always follow the Lord and worship him with all your heart... and remember the great things he has done for you" (1 Samuel 12:20+24). God didn't condemn or punish them. God accepted them, accepted them in their need for a king and chose to follow through with the blessing of king. When Saul, the first king, abandoned the Lord, God anointed David as the next king. And then who in the end is the last "king" that God

anoints for his people that so often go astray? This is the “messiah” or “king” (messiah means king) Jesus who made up for all of humanity’s misguided actions once and for all.

So if you feel that you need more than you think God plans to give you, or if you know that you have messed up God’s plan for your life, don’t give up hope. First of all none of us are perfectly obedient to God. Second, God knows that and instead of punishing you for the situation you are in he will chose to bless you through the situation you are in even if it is very far from his perfect plan. He took the Israelite’s need for a king and eventually blessed the world with the messiah who died for all of our sins. Certainly, whatever situation you are in God can turn it into a blessing. But only if you let him and return to him “with all your heart” instead of just part of it.

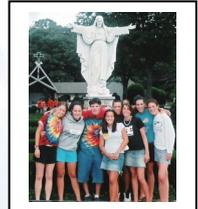
What’s in the Bible for me? 1 Samuel 12

- 1) Have you ever felt like you needed more from God than he could or would give? What happened? What was that like?
- 2) Looking back do you think it was true that you needed more than he could give? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you think God can still make an amazing plan for your life even if you have really messed it up at this point? Why?
- 4) What advice would you give someone who has made mistakes and feel like God has given up on them?

At war with our Goliaths

Have you ever had a problem that was just too big for you to deal with? Have you ever been in a situation where it seemed there was just nowhere to turn and on your own you just couldn’t survive it? Have you ever been in a situation where you thought to yourself that if you were only a different or better person you could handle it? Or have you ever gone with great courage into a situation that you knew was difficult only to find out you went way in over your head and now you have no way out? This must have been exactly what David felt when, as a person your age with no soldiering experience, he went into battle against Goliath, a soldier twice his age and size with twice as much experience killing.

Logically speaking David had no chance of survival, which might be how you have felt with the situation you are in or have been in. Even though David was just a boy Goliath was certainly not going to show David any



mercy, which he revealed when he said: “Come on. When I’m finished with you I’ll feed you to the birds and wild animals” (1 Samuel 17:44 CEV). Perhaps there has been no mercy coming to you from the situation you are in.

Despite the fact that his very life was on the line David did what so very few of us do when we are facing our Goliaths. While we run, David stood his ground. And while we put our faith in ourselves alone and then realize we are outmatched, David realized he was outmatched and put his faith in God. David wasn’t delusional. He didn’t imagine he could handle the situation by himself. He was a believer. He knew God could handle it if he let God handle it. David shouted back to Goliath: “You’ve come out to fight me with a sword and a spear and a dagger. But I’ve come out to fight you in the name of the Lord All-Powerful” (1 Samuel 17:45 CEV). David knew God had a plan for him. David knew it was no accident that he was in the overwhelming situation he was in. He knew he couldn’t handle it alone but because he knew God was with him he wasn’t going to run.

This story of David and Goliath shows that believing in God does not mean completely abandoning faith in yourself. In fact, believing in God means believing in yourself knowing that God made you as you are and that he will make up for what is lacking.

David however, also did more than just put his faith in God. After trusting that God would protect him, David also kept faith in himself. He knew that on his own he had no chance but he also knew that believing in God meant also believing in himself with all his limitations, knowing God would make up the difference. This becomes evident when after David tries on the king’s armor he realizes it is too heavy for him. At this point he has to make a decision. Does he go into battle pretending he’s something he is not, pretending he can handle wearing all that armor when he can’t? Or does he take it off, be himself and fight on his own terms? What does he do? He takes it off saying, “I can’t move with all this stuff on” (1 Samuel 17:39 CEV). David chose to be himself.

David then picked up his shepherd’s stick, his slingshot and a few small rocks and went straight for Goliath. See, David was a shepherd and knew how to use a slingshot to scare the sheep back into the flock. He did not know how to use armor or a sword. So he didn’t try. He stayed true to himself, trusted God and killed Goliath with his shepherd’s slingshot, hitting Goliath once in the forehead. “He killed him without using a sword” (1 Samuel 17:50 CEV).

This story of David and Goliath shows that believing in God does not mean completely abandoning faith in yourself. In fact, believing in God means believing in yourself knowing that God made you as you are and that he will make up for what is lacking. David knew who he was, a shepherd, and stayed faithful to that while also staying

faithful to God. It isn't an "either/or" situation. Faith in God is a "both/and" situation. Faith in God means also having faith in yourself as you are, imperfections and all. It means facing your Goliaths without "a sword or spear or dagger" but with "the Lord All-Powerful" and with your true self whatever that is. So don't defend yourself with the weapons of the world or by trying to be someone you are not. Let God guide and protect you. And when he calls you into "battle" to face your issues remember to be the real you. It's all he needs. It's all he made isn't it? God shows in the story of David that this is true. Why wouldn't it be true for you?

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Samuel 17

- 1) Are you or anyone you know struggling with anything that just seems to big to deal with? Describe.
- 2) What do you think you or this other person should do? Who can help? What's God's plan do you think?
- 3) What are your "five smooth stones" or your natural gift that God as given you? Do you rely on them when life get hard? How or how not?
- 4) Do you think God can always guide you to a solution to the problems in your life? Why or why not.

How prayer and trust helped me get through my troubles

I always knew God was there. All my life, teachers and my parents and priests have been telling me God loved me, and he will always be there for me. I never truly understood this, however, sure I'd go to church and study my faith, but I was always too young and didn't even grasp the half of it. In my younger years, having plenty of ups and downs, I became unsure of how to handle any situation. Being a quiet, held-back person, I always looked for a logical explanation to everything and was never really upset or even too happy about anything. My relationship was always very good with God, considering I never had any truly life-altering experiences at the age of 10. If only it could be that simple. My grandfather was diagnosed with cancer when I was in 3rd grade. Having little information and just simply being my naive 10 year old self, I knew everything was going to be okay and he was going to be alright. My grandfather struggled with cancer for four long years, before it finally got the best of him. I remember everything that happened that day; I was asleep when the phone rang. It was my mom, crying, but holding back the tears for me. "Is everything okay," I asked. "Pop Pop passed away last night."

Staring deep into nothing, I stood, holding the phone for what seemed like an eternity. A while later, after some of the crying had passed, then came the blame. Yelling at God, then yelling at myself. I remembered that the night before, while saying my prayers, and asking for my grandpa to be okay, I told the Lord I wanted him to die. He was in so much pain and I just couldn't stand seeing him like that. I asked the Lord, if it was his time to please take him. Looking back, I don't know why I did that. I loved my grandfather, and I miss him so much. Without him, now our family isn't the same at all, and we need him. I often wonder that if I didn't ask the Lord to take him, what might have happened. I was about 12 at the time, and still didn't understand more than half of what had happened, but all I knew was my grandfather was gone, and it was all my fault.

The night of his funeral, I was somewhat more stable then before, but seeing him lying in the bed, his hair nicely combed and suit tight, his smile reached from ear to ear, just like I remembered. He looked happy and amazing, and I missed him. My confusion was then uplifted by the end of the night. My grandfather was a fantastic, amazing person who everyone loved, and he loved everyone. The church was filled, as was the parking lot. Filled with family and friends, wanting to see Gerry one last time and say goodbye, for a short while. The amount of people and the love that everyone had for my grandfather made me upset, extremely upset, but also at ease, with myself and with God. Now, if I ever need my grandfather, he's always there. I still remember the homily the priest gave. He told us that Gerry will always be here, in our hearts, and in everything we do. He always had been everything he had taught me and my family was always here, it never left. Now, I'm no longer confused. The Lord gave me an even greater relationship with my grandfather then I had when he was sick. Everything turned out just fine, praying and listening to the priest, and all of his friends talked beautifully and hopeful about him. I now understand that everything happens for a reason, and a good one at that.

I learned to trust God. Ever since my grandfathers death, the Lord has helped me through everything, little or big. It has lifted a humongous weight off my shoulders, to constantly be pressured and simply turn to the Lord for help. Whether it be studying for a test, or making the basketball team, praying has enabled me to feel completely at ease and welcome to any challenge presented to me. This year, basketball was my big worry. I love to play and I absolutely adore the girls on the team. If I didn't make it, I don't know what I would have done. I worked hard all summer, having nightmares of tryouts up until the first practice. The sleepless nights were full of the Lord and I talking about it. He helped me, even though it was just me talking, and he might not have said anything back, but I heard him loud and clear. I struggled with self-assurance, but simply talking to him, he gave me the confidence and drive I needed to successfully achieve my goal. I remember when the time came for softball tryouts. I was always

pretty good, and I just became accustomed to playing since I had played all my life. I prayed to God the night before tryouts, asking him if it was the right thing to do. I was still unsure if I even liked it or not, and I knew I wanted to play basketball, so I was afraid softball might interfere. Tryouts came, and not doing half bad, I didn't make the team. Sure I was upset, but I knew God had a plan for me, and softball obviously wasn't included in that plan.

After I made the team, I soon encountered many more problems. I wasn't playing up to my potential, and I felt as if the coaches were straying from me and playing games with my head. Not playing me, and then the next game keeping me in the entire time. I was so confused; working hard everyday I knew it was unfair. I turned to God once again, and he got me on the team. He can help me figure this out, I felt. I knew I wasn't going to quit, so praying and crying for more than half the season helped me grow so much stronger than I ever thought I could be. God answered my prayers. My coach situation was finally resolved, allowing me to finally relax and for the last couple of games, finally show everyone what I could do.

Playing basketball was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. Despite some setbacks and frustrating times, it changed my life. I became a new person, and I feel like making the team was God's plan for me. He has a plan for everyone, we just need to listen and follow it. Everything happens for a reason, and I'm going to continue to adjust to everything that gets thrown at me, knowing God will always be there. I know none of my situations are that extreme, but to me they were, and God knew they were. He was with me, and still continues to be with me to this day. For my future, I don't know what may come; only God does. I will continue to work at basketball and try to excel in finding my true self, bringing God along with me.

-- high school sophomore girl

Solomon praying for wisdom

Imagine if the Lord appeared to you and said, "Ask for anything you want, and I will give it to you." What would you ask for? Money? A new car? A girlfriend or boyfriend? A spot on the football team? Or maybe you would ask for things that are perhaps a little more important like your parents getting back together again. Or that someone you love would be alive again. Or that your family could afford to pay a mortgage they can't seem to afford.

Well the Lord did pose this question to Solomon, David's son and Israel's next king. And we should pay attention to Solomon's answer because it pleased God and ended up bringing Solomon more than he could ever ask for. So what did Solomon ask for when given this amazing once in a lifetime opportunity? Did he ask for money or an end to his problems? No. Instead of these things he asked for wisdom. He didn't ask for his enemies to stop attacking his country. He didn't even ask for the difficult things in his personal life to stop. He asked God, "Please make me wise and teach me the difference between right and wrong" (1Kings 3:9 CEV). He asked for just a little understanding into why things happened the way they did, where God was in it all and how he could be obedient to God. Would we be so daring as to ask for such a simple gift when we could be given anything?

It takes real faith to be able to pray such a simple prayer. It takes believing that God somehow has a plan for everything that is happening in our lives and that praying to understand that plan is more important than praying for things to change. If we pray for understanding before we pray for change we trust that God hasn't fallen asleep on the job – and sometimes that takes a lot of faith given many of the things we go through in this life.

And this is key to it all. It isn't that God doesn't ever want us to pray that things change. Later in 1 Kings Solomon certainly asks God for more than just wisdom. But what God wants is for our prayers to begin with trust. He wants our prayers to actually be acts of faith. He wants us to begin trusting that he has a plan for everything, as difficult as that may be to believe sometimes. Then from that place of trust we need to ask him why things are the way they are and how *he* plans to deal with it and then how we can go along with his plans.

It is safe to assume that God does not want his people to suffer. He didn't want his Son to suffer either. But sometimes we do suffer just as Jesus did. And we suffer in ways we don't deserve just as Jesus did. But before we ask God to change things we need to ask him why he let them be the way they are. Yes, he let Jesus live and die at the hands of sinners. And sometimes we too are hurt at the hands of sinners. Yes, he let Jesus live in a body that was only temporary. And he lets us live in the exact same mortal bodies. But in the death of Jesus he revealed his unconditional love and the forgiveness of sins for all of us. And through the temporary body of Jesus God revealed during his lifetime what is eternally important, things such as love and forgiveness and grace.

These things were the Good News of God revealed in Jesus' life. And before we ask for God to give us our changes or our resurrections we need to ask him what Good News he intends to reveal through the process. Without the Good News in our lives all of our suffering is pointless. But with the Good News any suffering no matter how terrible or inhuman can be made worthwhile.

It's true for this victim of an unfair crucifixion. And if it's true for him it's also true for the undeserving victims of depression, divorced parents, low self-esteem, abuse, anorexia, rape, addiction and the death of loved ones. God wants to do more than just change our lives he wants us to understand them. Solomon asked for this understanding and the Lord said, "I am glad you asked for this. You could have asked to live a long time or to be rich. Or you could have asked for your enemies to be destroyed. Instead you asked for wisdom... So I'll make you wiser than anyone... I'll also give you what you didn't ask for. You'll be rich and respected as long as you live, and you'll be greater than any other king" (1 Kings 3:10-13).

Yes, ask for God to change your life, to take away the suffering and bring you true joy. But also don't be afraid to ask him for the Good News he intends to reveal through your suffering. He surely intends to reveal it. All you have to do is pray for the wisdom to let him.

God doesn't intend to waste what you've gone through. He intends to use it like he used the suffering of his Son to reveal the Good News. So ask his Son to show you how he did it. He will. It's a part of his plan for your life. You just have to have the wisdom to let it happen.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Kings 3

- 1) What do you think is the greatest gift God can give someone?
- 2) Do you feel sometimes like all of the suffering in your life just doesn't make sense sometimes? Describe.
- 3) Who do you admire as someone who seems to find God's plan for them in the midst of all of the things they go through? Why?
- 4) How can you be more like that person?

Praying for wisdom and guidance

I always prayed when I was supposed to, but never really thought of it as helpful. I always prayed because I was told to, or maybe because I wanted something. There was never another reason to pray, even if there was a lot going on at the time. I prayed to the Lord to help me through my times of depression and self hate, but I received

what I believed to be no answer. Really you always receive an answer from God, but it may not be the answer you expect.

While praying, I expected God to just clean everything up. God helped me to realize some of my own strengths to get through my depression. He also gave me new strength and His own grace to get me through those times where I just couldn't keep going. There was never a point where He gave up on me, even when I gave up on myself. When God knows you need help, He sends reinforcements. This can be in many forms: people that love you, new experiences, or signs that show us the way.

God gave me all three. I received new people in my life through Wood and I met Mr. Tarrant, who helped me on the path to God through the Shine Retreat. The Shine Retreat was the most influential and amazing experience of my life. Without it, I don't think I could have become so close to God or even gotten through the times that damaged my beliefs. Lastly, I have recently recognized signs that I didn't notice in the past. Certain things seemed to happen to me in my times of desperation.

I recently learned that I shouldn't pray for God to just help me; I should ask God to open my eyes to the things I need to help myself. He is always there to help, but He also needs you to work with Him. I believe that He has a plan for my life. He will reveal it to me eventually, but for now I must have faith that He will get me through the times where I am blinded from my path. I trust that He will lead me on the path to His Kingdom, and I hope that you will learn to believe in him, even if you don't get the answer you expect. Learn from the answers that you don't expect, because they come more often.

"I recently learned that I shouldn't pray for God to just help me; I should ask God to open my eyes to the things I need to help myself. He is always there to help, but He also needs you to work with Him."

-- high school freshman girl

To wrap it all up:

God has a plan for your life. And yes, sometimes it is hard to figure out or understand. But it is a good one. You can trust him.

Even if you feel like you have ruined his original plan, God can make a new one. All you have to do is ask him. And then listen.

Sometimes God shows us things about ourselves that we don't want to see. Sometimes he says things we don't want to hear. But we need to trust him. We need to listen. There is no reason to be afraid. If he can deal with the Jewish people making all kinds of mistakes and asking for a king, God can deal with you wherever you are at in life. Trust him. He trusted you enough to put you here.

If this chapter is something you want to take to heart and live in your life say this prayer or a prayer like it in a quiet place:

Dear Jesus, I know I need to trust you. I know that you love me. And I know that what you have to say to me is important. Help me to hear you more clearly. Help me to obey you just a little more than I do today. Help me just to take a little risk on you in my life and see what happens.

I love you. Help me to live the life you have planned for me.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“It is possible to offer fervent prayer even while walking in public or strolling alone, or seated at your shop,... while buying or selling,... or even while cooking... Nothing is equal to prayer; for what is impossible it makes possible, what is difficult, easy...” Catechism of the Catholic Church 2743 and 2744

“Our Lord is greatly cheered by our prayer. He looks for it, and he wants it... So he says, ‘Pray inwardly, even if you do not enjoy it. It does good, though you feel nothing, see nothing. Yes, even though you think you are doing nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick, or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to me though you find little enough to enjoy it. This is true of all believing prayer.’ Julian of Norwich 41

“I have not the courage to search through books for beautiful prayers... -- I just say what I want to say to God, quite simply, and he never fails to understand.” St. Therese of Lisieux in her *Autobiography* and *Treasury of...*

Quotations

“Prayer is nothing else... but being on terms of friendship with God, frequently conversing in secret with Him.” St. Teresa of Avila, *Life of St. Teresa* and *Treasury of... Quotations*



Chapter 6
God Promises





God promises

Has God promised you anything lately? Has he said to you, ‘I plan to do exactly this for you before your life is over’? Or has he said ‘I plan to give you exactly that when it is over’? You may be thinking to yourself, ‘no way, not me; he doesn’t talk to me like that.’ Or you may be thinking ‘God doesn’t really make promises, does he?’ You may be thinking that God prefers mysteries over promises and therefore doesn’t ever make them. Let alone promises to you and me personally and individually.

Well, the truth is God has made many promises to you and to me. It is just a matter of whether we want to find out what they are and take him up on them. The truth is God loves to make promises. And it seems the only thing he likes more than making a promise is fulfilling his promise at the absolutely perfect time in the absolutely perfect way so as to blow us away with his love like receiving a perfect surprise Christmas gift.

In the Book of Jeremiah God promises the Israelites a king from the family of David who will be honest and just. He promises that when this king comes they will have safety and peace and that his kingship will last forever (Jeremiah 33:14-18). This king or “messiah” that God promised was Jesus. The author of Hebrews in the New Testament explains that Jesus fulfills this promise for an eternal kingship and priesthood.

So what’s the big deal? So God made a promise to give the people an eternal king and he did it. How does that affect us? It affects us because what God promised to give the Israelites by giving them Jesus, God is also a promise to us when we accept Jesus. So has God made any promises to you and I lately? Absolutely! Every promise God made about what a messiah would be and do for the Israelites in Old Testament applies to us in a personal way too! And that’s just the promises of the Old Testament! Maybe we should take a look at what God is putting on the table for us.

In this passage from Jeremiah God promises the Israelites “peace” when they accept Jesus. God therefore promises us the same thing. God promises the Israelites “safety” when they accept Jesus. He promises us the same thing. God also promises a messiah who will never stop being a priest for us who gets forgiveness of our sins. He promises this unending unconditional love in our lives if we accept Jesus.

So has God promised you anything lately? Yes, he’s promising more than you can ever know right now in his Word, the Bible. you... The only question is are we taking him up on it?

So has God promised you anything lately? Yes, he's promising more than you can ever know right now in his Word, the Bible. And every time you read it he's making the promise again to you. The only question is are we taking him up on it?

What's in the Bible for me? Jeremiah 33:14-18

- 1) Do you think you need more "peace" and "safety" in your life? How so? Why?
- 2) Do you think God can give you peace and safety in the midst of everything that happens? Do you think he wants to? Why?
- 3) What would it take for you to get it?
- 4) What are some things that you could do to help bring this peace and safety into the lives of the people around you? Are you willing to do it? Do you think God wants you too?

It could never happen to me

Hearing things that happen on TV and on the radio about car crashes and other incidents, you always think it could never happen to me. You don't wake up and realize it until it does. I went to school with one of my best friends, Mike, all through grade school. Moving up here, I didn't get to see him once we graduated. We kept in touch and always talked online, but we never got to see each other. One day, while out with friends, I found out that Mike and his brother were on their way home from their aunt's when a drunken driver hit his car. Rushed to the hospital, Mike was in a coma and his brother was in bad shape. Mike's brother, Steve, died that night; he could not handle all of the damage that was done. By this time Mike still did not know what had happened. All I could do was cry; I heard Steve had died and I was afraid that the same would happen to Mike. Turning to God was the best thing I have ever done. I went to church that Sunday and prayed all day in mass. I always go to church, but I never really sat there and talked with God. While talking to him I just had a feeling that God was taking care of him. The hospital that Mike was taken to my aunt works at. She got me that number and I called to see how he was. When I called it felt so good to hear his voice. Everything inside of me tingled. Knowing that his bruises and scrapes would go away and he would live the rest of his life, I can't even explain the feeling. It was all my prayers answered, leaning on God was my choice, and the right choice. While on the phone he seemed so down and depressed, I felt so

bad. He seemed fine about his brother, but I knew the truth. I later found out that he had wished that he would have been with his brother. He came home from the hospital but still was not allowed out. This experience really made me think about lost time. I thought I had lost Mike. Knowing that I have not been able to see him and then he would have passed away I would have felt so lonely. God is someone that I have always had in my life and will always keep in my life. He has been by me through so many hard and trivial times. Always seeing me through this is just another example of how God works many miracles and answers many questions.

— high school sophomore girl

Peace, safety, forgiveness? Yeah Right!

You may be saying to yourself, ‘peace, safety, forgiveness?! You must not know my life!’ And maybe I don’t. But I do know God’s promises for you and me if we want them. Maybe you feel like peace, safety and forgiveness have never been a part of your life and never could be. But just know that no matter how difficult it has been so far in your life, to refuse that this peace, safety and forgiveness is possible is to look God right in the eyes and tell him he is wrong. I’m not willing to do that again. And trust me I’ve done it in the past only to find out that the only thing between myself and this promise of peace, safety and forgiveness from God was me.

Even though we may feel like our lives are falling apart, and even though they maybe are, God promises us a peace, safety and forgiveness in the midst of it all if we accept this king God has sent. It’s a promise I know from experience. It’s also a promise Jeremiah knew from experience.

At the time Jeremiah received this vision and this promise, the world around him was falling apart. Jeremiah saw the holy king of his people be killed. He saw Jerusalem, the capital of his country, be destroyed. He saw those around him abandon their faith. He saw another king of his country taken away by the enemy. He lived among false prophets who spoke confusing lies about God and his will for his people. And he was rejected by the people who were closest to him because of what he believed in his heart was true. His heart was utterly broken by all that had happened to him. His world was desolate: no safety at home, no friends, no one offering him any kind of reason to hope in God and total spiritual confusion all around him. But still he trusted that God had promised peace in the midst of it all. He saw in his visions that:

“Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord,
whose hope is the Lord.
He is like a tree planted beside the waters
that stretches out its roots to the stream:
it fears not the heat when it comes,
its leaves stay green;
in the year of drought it shows no distress,
but still bears fruit” (Jeremiah 17:7-8 NAB)



Jeremiah knew that God promised peace, safety and forgiveness in the midst of it all. He accepted God's promised messiah in his life even though he never saw him and he knew peace, safety and forgiveness in his heart. He learned that the world could be falling apart around him but that he could have a refuge with God in his heart. He learned that no one no matter what they did could take away his relationship to God. And he learned that this relationship would bring him peace as God promised. In Jesus God promises the same thing to us. But we have to take him up on it. He didn't promise it would be easy in this world. And trust me, I know it certainly isn't. But God did promise there would be peace in our hearts if we accept his Son in our hearts. The question is do we want to take a risk and accept it even though it is so difficult to believe in sometimes? Do we want to take a risk in a messiah we cannot see yet, the way Jeremiah did, and accept a peace we cannot explain? Or do we just want more of the same in this world. The choice is yours. And the choice is mine. No one can make it for us but us. And no one can take it away from us but us.

What's in the Bible for me? Jeremiah 17:7-8

- 1) Do you think you have laid your roots in life down close to God? Why or why not?
- 2) What do you think is the result of laying your roots close to God or not laying them close to God?
- 3) Has anything bad ever happened to you because your roots weren't close to God? Describe.
- 4) Has anything good ever happened because you were close to God?
- 5) Where do you want your roots to be?

Am I the God type?

Have you ever felt like you just weren't the God type? Have you ever felt that, really, Christianity is just for those other people who have never done anything wrong, who don't have any problems and who seem to find it easy being a Christian? Have you ever felt like you just weren't the kind of person who could ever really follow God? If so this promise is for you.

In the Paul's letter to the Romans in the New Testament, Paul quotes Hosea in the Old Testament where it says "Those who were not my people I will call my people and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved'" (Romans 9:25 NAB). Paul quoted this passage to remind people that God is all about accepting the people who don't seem like they would naturally fit with him. Paul explains again and again that this was the message behind Jesus dying for our sins.

See the Jewish people looked and in many ways acted like the kind of people God would approve of. They had plenty of religious ceremonies and holidays. They attended synagogue regularly. And well, they looked holy. They clearly felt like they belonged with God. They were your typical "God type" (if that really even exists). But God showed Paul that he loved the people who didn't seem to be the God type, the people who weren't Jewish who are also called Gentiles. In fact, Paul makes this point again just before quoting this promise from Hosea in verse 24 when he says that God has not only called people "from the Jews but also from the Gentiles."

It may also be important to know the story of Hosea. Hosea had a wife who cheated on him. She probably didn't seem the wife type or the mom type at the time. But it is interesting to see how God responds to this. God commands Hosea to be a faithful husband to her anyway. God says he will "speak to her heart" and have her come back to Hosea (Hosea 2:9-16 NAB). God doesn't command Hosea to abandon her!

God then explains in his visions to Hosea that all of Israel, that is all of the Jewish people, are like Hosea's wife in one way or another. He explains that they have all been unfaithful to him. And yet the Lord says that he will stay faithful to them anyway, which is Good News for us because what God does in the Bible is what God wants to do in his relationship to us. Even when we don't seem to be the God type, just like Hosea's wife didn't seem to be the wife type, God will still be faithful to us.

And remember these are the Jewish people God is describing, the ones who seem to be the “God type!” So the truth is that no matter how much we may think that some people just seem to be the kind of people who are made to be close to God, God certainly doesn’t think that way. To God no one is the “God type” because no one is perfect. But also to God in a certain sense everyone can be the “God type” because no matter how flawed or confused anyone is, God still promises he wants to accept them. He promises it in Hosea. He fulfills that promise by having Jesus die for our sins. And now we just have to decide if we want to take him up on it whether we’re the “God type” or not.

Everyone can be the “God type” because no matter how flawed or confused anyone is, God still promises he wants to accept them.

God has a special plan for everyone. You just have to be open to it.

Right after my mom got remarried, summer rolled around, and since we were in the process of moving, I couldn’t just stay home all day. So, my parents signed me up to be a CIT at a Christian day camp. I had always known about God. I’d heard all the Bible stories in Sunday school, but I had never really understood what all this God business was about. Starting off that summer as a CIT, I had a lot of fun.

I had trouble with all of the rules. As a first year CIT, I was privileged to be helping out w/ a group of older kids. Since I was misbehaving, I was moved to work with 6 year olds. The counselor I was helping out was awesome. He was so cool. And he talked to me like I was a young adult, not like I needed a bottle still. The kids, on the other hand, were another story. Six year olds all day long are a huge challenge. Man, they were obnoxious. I hated it, but one day, I was walking the group up to the games pavilion, and they were being so bad, as usual, but one little girl ran up to me and took me by the hand. It was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen. I learned to enjoy my work with the little kids; they were sweet once they got over their apprehensions about me. I was sitting in the Bible lesson with one boy in my lap and two other kids by my side, and the Bible teacher asked that we say prayer before we leave. She told the campers that this was an opportunity to let Jesus into their hearts. She read an adapted Bible passage to them about God helping you out with your problems. I later looked it up in a real Bible and read it for myself, but that day I decided to try, and I made a promise to myself to keep up this faith thing, at least for a little while, just to see how it goes. It did help me, a lot! I became absolutely obsessed with my job. I loved every second of it. The 6

“God has a special plan for everyone. You just have to be open to it.”

year olds taught me patience, and they showed me how beautiful people really are. That summer was such a growing experience for me. I fell in love with nature, the simplicity and intense peace of the woods at camp amazed me. I loved to be alone in the woods and just be able to pray and have time for myself. God has helped me come to grips with a lot of my problems with my family. When I needed help, I wasn't alone. God can help everyone as long as they are willing to listen to his call. Now, as a junior in high school, I'm faced with decisions about the future. I feel called to work with children, and I really hope to go into the Peace Corps after college. After some prayer and thought, I feel that God has that plan for me. God has a special plan for everyone. You just have to be open to it. God loves you unconditionally. Peace and love.

-- high school junior girl

What does God look like to you?

When you think of God and your relationship to him, how do you think of him? Is he someone far off, who isn't really paying attention to you? Is he someone who only pays attention at all of the wrong times – that is when we sin – like a police officer? Or is he someone whose attention you can only get by knowing the right words to say at the right time in prayer as if a relationship to God was more like magic than a friendship? Is his attention only available if you cut him a really good deal or if you can avoid sin flawlessly? Is he someone who doesn't really know you and someone whom you can never really know either in a personal way on a human level because he is just too big and distant? If your relationship to God sometimes looks like this then think about taking God up on his promise of a new covenant made in Jeremiah 31:33-34.

In Jeremiah God promises he will someday make a new covenant with his people. God promises that he doesn't want to be far off and mysterious to us. He wants to be known by us in a very personal relationship to him. When describing the relationship he wants to have with the people who will enter this new covenant with him God says, “I will place my law within them and write it upon their hearts.” (Jeremiah 31:33 NAB). God promises that in his new covenant a relationship to him will happen in our hearts and the deepest places of our soul. He promises to have a personal relationship to us that we can store away deep within us. He doesn't want to be far off. He doesn't want to be confusing. He instead wants to put the truth about him inside of us if we let him. And in addition to

having such an intimate relationship to us he also promises that for those who want to enter this new covenant relationship with him he wants to “forgive their evildoing and remember their sins no more” (Jeremiah 31:34 NAB).

Do you feel like you are at a point where you need a new covenant with God? A covenant where you can know him in a human and personal way in your heart? And a covenant where it is ok if he is that close to you because he will “remember your sins no more” instead of keeping track of them and holding them over your head? Would it be nice to have a relationship to God where your sins are literally forgotten and he could be as close to you as your heart? If so take him up on his promise of a new covenant which he promised in Jeremiah and delivered on with Jesus. Start over with him and let him have the relationship with you he wants to have through Jesus. When the author of Hebrews in the New Testament wrote about this same passage from Jeremiah that we are looking at, he urged us to let Jesus give us this “better covenant” given with much “better promises” (Hebrew 8:6).

What God wants us to do is let go of the parts of our relationship to him that keep him far off and unforgiving. And cling to a relationship with Jesus which you can have in the privacy of your heart and in which you can have God forgive you of any evildoing and forget all of your sins. It’s the reason he sent Jesus into the world. It’s what the authors of Hebrews in the New Testament and Jeremiah in the Old Testament knew was the “better” way to live. It’s the way God wants you to know him. The only question is whether it is the way we want to know him. This kind of a relationship with God is what he promised we could have if we accepted Jesus. It’s what God dreams our lives would look like. We just have to take God up on his promise!

Do you feel like you are at a point where you need a new covenant with God? ...a covenant where it is ok if he is that close to you because he will “remember your sins no more?”

What’s in the Bible for me? Jeremiah 31: 33-34

- 1) Do you have any sins you wish God would forgive and forget?
- 2) Have you asked him to? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you think that God can forgive and forget anything?
- 4) What’s the worst thing you have ever done? Do you think God has forgotten it?

Another kind of promise

Another kind of promise is made to us in Isaiah Chapter 6. It is a promise we, not privately but as a community, take the Lord up on every time we celebrate Mass. In Isaiah 6:1-8 the Lord appeared to Isaiah in a vision that is both terrifying and wonderful. The Lord appears in such a powerful way that in the vision the doorposts of the Temple shook while smoke and various kinds of angels filled the room. Isaiah was so frightened in God's presence that he cried out "I am doomed! Everything I say is sinful, and so are the words of everyone around me" (Isaiah 6:5 CEV). Have you ever felt like you were standing before God while stuck in so much sin that you felt everything you're doing is filled with sin? It can be a scary thing sometimes.

But God doesn't let the story end there of course. One of the angels flies toward Isaiah holding a burning coal with tongs, which must have seemed even more frightening! The angel then takes the coal and touches it to Isaiah's lips! But Isaiah's lips don't burn. And this act wasn't meant as a punishment for Isaiah. Instead the angel says to Isaiah, "This has touched your lips. Your sins are forgiven, and you are no longer guilty" (Isaiah 6:7 CEV).

God appeared in such a powerful way to Isaiah that it caused him to feel great fear. Isaiah recognized that he was a sinner, which was true, but Isaiah fell into despair and lost all hope. God needed to show him in a physical and miraculous way that there was no need for Isaiah to lose hope because God, while very powerful, loved him.

Does this remind you of any moment in the Mass? I'll give you a hint. Just as this is happening in the vision the angel-like creatures are all singing "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord... all the earth is filled with his glory" (Isaiah 6:3-4). In the Mass we say the same phrase although it is translated a little differently. We say "Holy, holy, holy are you Lord God Almighty. Heaven and earth are full of your glory!" We say it just before we receive the Eucharist because we realize that we are about to experience God in a powerful way similar to the way Isaiah experienced him. And, yes, it is frightening and powerful. But it is so much more than that! It is also a moment when we can truly experience God's love for us. It is a moment where we can recognize that we are sinners. But it is more than that. It is also a moment where we can recognize that we are forgiven sinners!

So what is the promise we are taking God up on? We are taking God up on his promise that although we experience him directly in the Eucharist in a way that should make us tremble like Isaiah because we are sinners, God is not looking to punish us. He is looking to forgive and accept us as he forgave and accepted Isaiah even



though our sins can cause us great fear and doubt. The Eucharist is a gift from God that reminds us of how holy he is but also how forgiving he is.

God promised and acted on this kind of relationship with Isaiah thousands of years ago. And if God related to his people that way in the Bible, he still wants to act that way toward us today. God promised this kind of relationship again when he sent Jesus. And even more than that, he promises it again and again in every Mass ever celebrated. We just have to take him up on it. We just have to take the Eucharist to heart. In the presence of Jesus we have to be honest with the fact that we are sinners, but we also have to recognize that he doesn't come into our lives in the Eucharist or in any other way to punish us. He comes to forgive. Do you want this relationship with God that he is promising to us? Well just go to Mass and receive it. He offers it again and again, over and over, every time Mass is celebrated. We just have to take him up on it!

I thought I would never do anything wrong

When I was younger, I had always thought that I would never do anything wrong, so I could become the first Saint Kelly. Quickly, I learned that I sinned more than I thought. I was convinced becoming a saint was out of the question, because I screwed up too much for God to even consider me as a saint.

Then, I became addicted to drugs, and other things I never thought I'd do. I really thought I was a hopeless cause. I went on retreats and learned I wasn't. I just needed strength to get through then.... But strength from who?

I started praying in the chapel, at school. Then, I started to receive communion at a communion service before my lunch with some of my friends. It gave me strength to get through the rest of the school day. The communion service was a ritual, so it just became something else I did at school. I, then, had a conversation with one of my friends about how I felt. She talked about different parts that I had overlooked, so I started really listening, but not with my ears, but with my heart. I finally realized God wanted me to quit doing my bad habits. I thought about it, but I didn't think I had the strength in me to stop. I went to the communion services and prayed a few days to God, saying, "How? How can I.... I don't have it in me to ask for help?" The third day I prayed about it, I got this urge to tell my friend, who is a teacher. He helped me realize that Jesus, who is in the Eucharist that I received everyday, didn't want me to do it.

I struggled with getting help, but somehow, I had the strength to give it all up. It was so hard, but God gave me the strength through the Eucharist. I still go to receive the Eucharist everyday. That way I can stay clean, because

with God, if it is his will, we can accomplish anything. God gave me the strength to quit my addictions, and He is still giving me the strength to stay clean, which as of 4/29/04, I am 325 days clean! I thank God for this strength. A year will be on 6/8/04!

-- high school junior girl

Just a 'yes' or 'no' to God

Perhaps there is much in the first half of this book that has made sense to you. Perhaps this has been the first time you've looked at the Scriptures this closely and seen that God's promises and Word can apply to you. Perhaps this is the first time you've thought of taking the Scriptures to heart in a way that really could affect your life. Or perhaps you feel you have had a good relationship to God for a while but still wish that somehow you took your faith even more to heart than you do. If you feel this way at all don't think that you are alone. We all wish we could somehow let God in more. We all wish we could have a greater confidence in him and more of his peace in our lives. And we all wish we could have just a little more help from God to make life a little more clear, a little more full of peaceful grace and a little more full of a genuine level of real communication with God. This brings us to the final promise God makes to us and to all who look to Jesus for help.

God says to the prophet Zechariah that he will "pour out... on the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and petition" (Zechariah 12:10 NAB). He says that we will "look upon him whom we have thrust through" (which is Jesus who was crucified) and want to change our lives (Zechariah 12:10 NAB). God says that he promises to give us the Holy Spirit to bring us grace or love in our hearts no matter how hardened through pain and sin our hearts have become. And God also says that he will give us the Holy Spirit to teach us how to pray, that is to ask or "petition" God for what we really need. God is not going to make these promises to us and leave us without the ability to focus and take him up on them. He promises us his Holy Spirit to fill us with grace and the power to really pray.

He says that "on that day there shall be open... a fountain to purify from sin and uncleanness" (Zechariah 13:1). In other words he will fill us with the ability to pray and accept grace and he will also extend grace and forgiveness to us. John in his Gospel said this happened, as God promised to Zechariah, when Jesus died for us (John 19:37). Jesus at his death created a fountain of grace to purify us from sin for all of time. And he also left us

with the Holy Spirit to live in our hearts to remind us at all times that this is true and to teach us how to really accept grace (God's unconditional love) and pray in a way that really is a true conversation with God.

God has put all of this out there for us. All of the power that we will ever need to avoid sin, to pray, to be forgiven and to just know God is there for us. This power is in the Holy Spirit. But he can only empower us as much as we genuinely let him into our hearts. It is a process. And all of us will always need a little bit more help to be the people we know we can be. But that little bit of help is there if we can only really sit down, quiet our hearts and let the Holy Spirit in. If we do he will teach us all there is to know about grace and how to have a real conversation with God. If we don't, unfortunately we'll be left in the dark with countless promises having been made to us that we never let come to be true in our lives. The choice is ours. It's a simple 'yes' or 'no' to Jesus. Catholic Christianity is no more complicated than that. But the choice is ours not God's. And no one can make it for us, not even our Creator.

What's in the Bible for me? Zechariah 12:10-13:1

- 1) Have you ever felt deep sorrow for your sins? Describe.
- 2) Have you ever felt like God has poured out a spirit of grace in your life? In other words have you ever felt deep sorrow for your sins combined with a deep sense of love from God?
- 3) Have you ever felt like God has poured out a spirit of petition in your life? In other words have you ever felt like you have prayed with your whole heart and every bit of passion inside of you?
- 4) Have you ever felt like God had purified you of your sins? When? How? Why?

Have you ever made a big mistake in life?

Have you ever made a very, very big mistake in life? I'm sure your answer to that is a definite yes. Because nobody is perfect right? The answer to that is also yes. Well as you may have figured out, I am no exception to the rule. Let me ask you another question about mistakes: Have you ever been truly sorry for this mistake you have made but your peers and other critics just won't let it go? I don't know about you but for me the answer is "yes"

again. Don't you think those who are truly sorry for their mistakes or sins should be forgiven? If you live you live by Jesus' example you should say "yes". O.K. that's enough with the questions, let's continue.

As I have stated above I made a very big mistake. The repercussions for this mistake were a lot greater than what I ever thought they could be. I'm not going to give you many details about my mistake, but let's just say it happened this past year. I was entrusted with important information. But I was tested by the devil with a little thing called temptation. Well guess what? I failed the test miserably, ruining something very special in the process. That's just about all the details you will be getting.

Now let's get to the real reason I am writing this: My experiences with facing extensive consequences, asking for forgiveness, being forgiven/not forgiven, and being able to find hope in Jesus.

After this mistake I was hit with a barrage of consequences. I paid for my mistake in every way imaginable and deservedly so. There were so many things that changed in my life and I was really at a low. I was ridiculed by my peers and several others. I knew what I did was wrong and I tried to make amends for what I had done. But very few would forgive me and move on. Most people would just judge me for what I had done and look down upon me. I was upset and didn't know what to do, until one day in religion class this year. My teacher explained that if you are sorry for your sins, that's all that matters. It doesn't matter AT ALL what other people think about you and how they judge you. They are humans too and also imperfect. They are sinners just like you. My teacher taught me to ignore the naysayers and look to Jesus. Because no matter what the situation is you can always turn to Jesus and He will be there waiting to forgive you. You just have to want forgiveness and be truly sorry for your sins. So my lesson to anyone who reads this story is this: When you are being judged by others for something that you are truly sorry for just turn to Jesus and look for forgiveness because you know He will listen to your sorrow and grant you forgiveness.

-- high school junior

"It doesn't matter AT ALL what other people think about you and how they judge you. They are humans too and also imperfect."

To wrap it all up

God wants to know us. He wants to know us personally and deeply. He promises we can have this relationship to him where he can be as close to us as our hearts and forget our sins forever. But we have to let him.

He will never abandon us even if we don't feel like the God type because there really is no God type. There is just imperfect people and a God with a perfect love. So don't be intimidated or confused by the fact that you sometimes feel that you just don't fit with God. You do.

We can accept God's promises in the quiet of our hearts but we can also accept God's promises in community at Mass. And God wants us to do both. He puts himself in our hearts so that we are never alone and never too sinful to be loved by him. And he makes himself present in the Eucharist to confirm that in a physical way.

And finally, he will give us his Spirit, a Spirit of unconditional love and true prayer to fill us with the strength and energy to do what is right. But we have to let it in. If we don't let God in, his promises stay on the outside of our lives just like he is forced to.

If you feel like you want to take this chapter's message to heart simply pray this prayer or a prayer like it in a quiet place where you can really listen to God and speak to him.

Lord, you know what I need. And you know what you have promised me in your Scriptures better than I do. Help me to trust you and discover what it is you want to give me in life.

Help me to know you personally. To really listen to you with my heart. And to really speak to you with my heart. You are God and your promises are awesome. Sometimes I just miss out on them because I am not paying attention to your Word or your Spirit. Renew my relationship with you. Help me to create a new covenant with you. One where I can trust you to forgive me. And one where I can truly be honest with you.

You are the Lord of the universe. Please be the Lord of my life. I love you. Help me not to miss out on what you have promised me.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“All men desire peace, but few desire the things that make for peace.” Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*

“Be patient with everyone, but above all with thyself... do not be disheartened by your imperfections.” St. Francis de Sales.

“People are often unreasonable, illogical, and self-centered; forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives; be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some false friends and some true enemies; succeed anyway. If you are honest and frank, people may cheat you; be honest and frank anyway. What you spend years building, someone could destroy overnight. Build anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, they may be jealous; be happy anyway. The good you do today, people will often forget tomorrow; do good anyway. Give the world the best you have, and it may never be enough; give the world the best you've got anyway. You see, in the final analysis, it is between you and God; it was never between you and them anyway.”

Mother Teresa.

“God never draws anyone to himself by force and violence. He wishes all men to be saved, but forces no one.” St. John Chrysostom in his *Sermon and Treasury of... Quotations*

“The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God... Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for...” Catechism of the Catholic Church 27





Chapter 7
Jesus, show me!





Actions speak louder than words

Have you ever been around the kind of person who loves to tell you who they are instead of showing you who they are? You know the kind of person I am talking about. They go on and on about their accomplishments and successes so as to be quite sure that you are aware of each one. They seem to need to make a point of it every time they buy the latest thing or get a date with that gorgeous guy or girl. You tend to hear more about their greatness than see.

Well, Jesus seems to have been just the opposite way. Instead of declaring to the world that he was God and the Christ, he often told people not to tell others who he was until after he rose from the dead. He asked them to wait until after he had done all that he, God in the flesh, was supposed to do – including pay the ultimate price to love us unconditionally. Jesus does this numerous times. He tells a man he healed to go and show himself to the Pharisees and just tell them that God had healed him without mentioning who healed him. He even tells the demons he is expelling from a person to be quiet and stop announcing who he is. After the transfiguration, when Jesus was changed before the eyes of Peter, James and John and made to shine with a bright white light that cause them with him to fall to the ground, Jesus commands Peter, James and John not to tell anyone what they saw until after the resurrection. The Apostles' response to this was 'what is the resurrection?' And Jesus must have thought to himself, 'oh you will see!'"

You see, Jesus' chose to let people know who he was by using his actions not his words. He wanted people to really meet him. He wanted them to know who he was first hand, personally. He didn't want them just to hear about who he was, he wanted them to experience him and understand who he was from their experience. And he was content taking the extra time it would take to wait and show people instead of just having his identity proclaimed before the resurrection – before he showed once and for all who he was with his actions. The Good News is that what Jesus did in the Scriptures is what he wants to do in your life. He's not content with you merely reading about him or hearing about him from others. He wants you to know him for yourself. He is o.k. with the fact that it may take time because our God is a patient God. In fact take all the time you need getting to know him. It's worth it to him. It's worth it to him to know you personally. And it will be worth it to you too! Trust me.

He's not content with you merely reading about him or hearing about him from others. He wants you to know him for yourself.

So Jesus seemed to prefer to show who he was with his actions and let people put the pieces together. So that is what we are going to do as we look at some of the things Jesus did. We'll try to put the pieces together and understand him for ourselves personally.

“God shows his great love for us in this way: Christ died for us while we were still sinners.” Romans 5:8

I never knew how much God loved me. I always believe in His unconditional love, but only because I was taught that way. It was just another lesson in school that's I had learned and had to memorize for a test. I just thought of it in a very mechanical way, not looking into the real meaning of His love, but ever since one night, that all changed.

One Wednesday morning (actually the Wed. that “The Passion of Christ” opened in theaters), my two best friends approached me in school and asked me about “The Passion of Christ” and when we would go about seeing it. We all decided to go see it that Friday night. The rest of the week I sat in anticipation of Friday, and with each passing hour, the more nervous I got about seeing the movie. I had heard all about how all the reactions that people had after seeing the movie; some bawling their eyes out, lives being completely turned around, while the rest all left the theater in silence. I was afraid that my life would dramatically change and that I might lose the friends and relationships I had. I know it sounds crazy, but that's what I thought.

Well, that fateful night came. My mom dropped me off at the theater and I met up with my friends. We all sat down (I sat between them so that I could comfort them during the movie and so they could have a shoulder to cry on or an arm to grad) and just talked about what we had heard about the movie and stories that we saw on TV or read in the paper. Once it came on, we became completely silent, as did everyone else in the theater. Not even ten minutes into the movie, I started to cry. Seeing Jesus being treated like that hurt me a lot. All throughout the movie, I was hysterically crying. My friends cried too, but they were much more composed than I was. The ironic thing was that they were comforting me. I had realized how much I had hurt Jesus through my sins, and how much He suffered for me. I felt unworthy. I asked myself why He would do that for me when I treated Him so badly.

When the credits started rolling, I was still crying. The movie had completely ended, and I couldn't stop. After awhile, I was able to calm myself down, but I was still a complete mess. My eyes were all red, face all puffing, and I could barely walk. My friends had to help me walk, and while going to the car, all eyes were on me. I was trembling real bad and didn't speak a single word. I said goodbye to my one friend, and my other friend took me

home. The whole car ride I was shaking and breathing hard. Once I got home, my friend helped me to the door. After she left, I went upstairs into my room (which took quite awhile to get upstairs being the state I was in). I closed the door, then looked straight up at the portrait I had of Jesus hanging on my wall. Instantly, I fell to the floor crying, asking God for forgiveness. I prayed really hard, telling God how sorry I was for all the sins I had committed against Him. All of the sudden, I stopped trembling. I felt burning inside of me; this intense warmth and I fell at complete peace. This wide smile came across my face. I felt this overwhelming love and I was filled with energy. I felt like I could fly, I could do anything because God was with me.

My eyes were opened to a new world, and my life had changed, for the better. I now have more of an urge to help out others for various reasons. One, it makes me feel really good. Also, I feel that much more closer to God, and I really want to be with Him fully right now (after what I had experienced, I wanted more). God has shown me that my purpose in life is to help out others. I am an Eagle Scout, so it's natural that the feelings I felt after the service was God smiling upon me. I know now that Christ has died for my sins, despite how I still continually turn away. Remember that, God for forgives you no matter what, if you are truly sorry, don't worry about it. God's love is unconditional meaning He will love you no matter what you do or say. Though I was reluctant to believe it at first, I do now. I hope you reading understand, or will come to understand this soon. Another point I realized, was the Jesus was in me all the time. Not just when I was in church, or at some religious event. Now I imagine Jesus physically walking around with me everywhere, not just being present in my heart. Anyway all of this wouldn't have been possibly if it had been for one man really introducing me to Jesus in a new like, junior religion teacher. He set me off on the right course, and still today he is my role model.

Regardless, what I felt was the best feeling I had ever felt, and still today I feel His presence constantly. The burning never ceased in my heart. Always will I be willing to serve others just to attain that good feeling and to feel closer to God. Though I shall fall and stumble in life, Jesus will be there to help me right back up, giving me a change to achieve everlasting love in heaven.

I pray for you, that you too can feel what I feel. I pray that you can find meaning or gain something from my experience.

Here is a quote that my friend gave me that I hold very close to me:

“Regardless, what I felt was the best feeling I had ever felt, and still today I feel His presence constantly. The burning never ceased in my heart... Though I shall fall and stumble in life, Jesus will be there to help me right back up

“If God brings you to it, He will bring you through it. Happy moments, praise God, Difficult moments, seek God. Quiet moments, worship God. Painful moments, trust God. Every moment, thank God.”

*Yours in Christ,
-- A high school senior*

A task for God alone

There are some tasks in this world that belong to God alone. Would you agree? Creation. That one is all God. Granting people access to Heaven. Definitely God again. Dealing with all of the sin in the world. Don't think I could handle that one either with a whole lot of patience, how about you? Listening to prayers. That one is all God as well. Well, the issue of forgiving people's sins when they ask for it apparently fits in the same category. It is a task that belongs to God alone. Who has the right to judge? Certainly not someone who is also a sinner! And who has the right to cancel out someone's sin in the eyes of God? God alone.

So when Jesus forgave the sins of a crippled man the Pharisees got quite upset. They said “Why would he say such a thing. He must think he is God! Only God can forgive sins” (Mark 2:7 CEV). But what Jesus did after that was even more amazing to the Pharisees. Jesus turned to the Pharisees and said “Is it easier for me to tell this crippled man his sins are forgiven or to tell him to pick up his mat and go home” (Mark 2:9 CEV)? But before the Pharisees could reply, Jesus said to the man, “Get up! Pick up your mat and go home” (Mark 2:11). And then an even more amazing thing happened. The crippled man did go home! He stood up for the first time perhaps in his whole life and went home.

He was crippled one minute and then the next he wasn't. And even more importantly, he had sins the one minute and the next he didn't. He was healed physically. But he was also healed spiritually. Not only was he healed, he also had a greater gift. He could know with certainty that he was right with God. And without saying a word about himself everyone in the room who had any faith at all must have known who this man Jesus really was. Not just a man but God himself.

That's just how Jesus works. Quietly. He doesn't need or want to argue. He's not going to tell you about himself with words. He's going to tell you about himself in your life with actions. He's going to do for you the tasks that belong to God alone. He will assure you in your heart that you are forgiven. He will listen to your prayers

and respond if you listen. And he will take the biggest issues and problems in your life and use them to bring you closer to God and assure you of his unconditional love.

He wants to forgive you. But he also wants to do more than that. He wants to be a part of dealing with your biggest pains in mysterious ways. He wants to declare to you personally that he is your God and savior. But he wants to do it by being a part of your life. He doesn't want to do it by standing on the outside of it all and just telling it to you like it is a fact to be memorized. He wants you to know him. He wants you to let him in and act in your heart and also act in your life – perhaps even in miraculous ways!

He wants you to know that you are loved and forgiven unconditionally. He wants you to know that through your suffering you are not alone, but instead you are very loved. And he wants to take that suffering and turn it around so that you can say two things with confidence: first, I am loved and forgiven; and second, clearly he is God! But he wants to do it in a personal way. Not just in the pages of the Bible, but also in the pages of your life. Let him in to write his story there too!

What's in the Bible for me? Mark 2:1-12

- 1) Has God ever done something in your life that only God can do? Describe.
- 2) Have you ever thought to yourself or been told by someone else, 'God can't do this.' What was going on? What was that like?
- 3) Why do you think some people have a hard time believing in Jesus or believing that Jesus is God? Have you ever struggled with this?
- 4) What do you think the Pharisees were thinking at the end of this passage in the Bible?

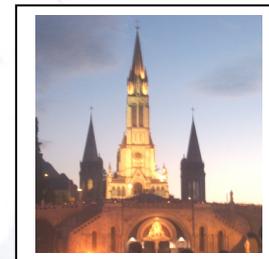
God is more powerful than evil

Have you ever played on a sports team or against a sports team with a player who was so good that it just seemed that whoever had that player on their team simply couldn't lose? It must be the way the Lakers used to feel with Shaq and Kobe Bryant or the way the Bulls used to feel with Michael Jordan or the Falcons with Michael Vick or the Postal Cycling team at the Tour de France with Lance Armstrong. It just seems that some people refuse to

lose, that they are ultimately in charge of the outcome of the race or game regardless of what anyone else does. Well, this is what it is supposed to feel like to be a Christian! Let me explain.

In the very beginning of Mark's Gospel Jesus casts an evil spirit out of a man. The spirit yelled out, "Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are..." (Mark 1:25 CEV). To the people witnessing this it must have been stunning to watch Jesus so easily cast out an evil spirit from a person.

And Jesus did this again and again during his time on earth, perhaps much to the awe of those looking on. And he did it with ease. But even more stunning is what the demon said to Jesus when coming up against him. The demon didn't fight. The demon didn't try to intimidate Jesus. It didn't argue. It knew who Jesus was and it knew it had no shot against him. "Have you come to destroy us?" the demons said to Jesus on behalf of the other demons. And the answer from Jesus was a definite 'yes!' The demon knew it was outmatched when dealing with Jesus because it was dealing with God himself.



So what is the message from God to us in this story? The message is that God the Father and his divine Son, Jesus, are more powerful than any evil in the world. It may not always seem that way to you but it is true. It may seem like evil has won so many times in your life and maybe it has. But this much is true: wherever Jesus is, evil cannot also be. There simply isn't room for both. And Jesus is more powerful than any evil in your life. So the question isn't whether Jesus can defeat the evil in your life. Just like there is no question that Lance Armstrong has the ability to win the Tour de France. The question is have you let Jesus into those parts of your life where the evil is? Have you let him in to defeat the evil?

If you are in an abusive situation or an addictive situation, have you let Jesus in to your life in the form of a counselor? If you are struggling with depression and issues like cutting are you willing to let Jesus in to your life by seeking help. If you are struggling with sin are you willing to let Jesus in through sincerely asking in prayer for Jesus to change you and asking other Christians to help you or through going to Confession or attending Mass and receiving the Eucharist regularly? None of these things are easy. Trust me I know personally. But Jesus never said it would be easy. He only said he would get evil out of your life if you let him. Have you let him? He's fully capable.

What's in the Bible for me? Mark 1:21-27

- 1) Do you think Jesus really is stronger than evil? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you think Jesus is really stronger than the evil in your own life right now?
- 3) What can stop Jesus from destroying the evil in our world?
- 4) Have you ever seen someone really let Jesus change them and get the evil out of their lives? What happened? Can you do the same?

Jesus, don't you care?

Have you ever felt like you were in the midst of something horrible and God fell asleep on the job? Have you ever felt like you have done all that you could possibly do to be a Christian and God simply wasn't doing *his* best? Have you ever felt like God has let things happen to you that should never have to happen to anyone? If so you are not alone. In fact you have a lot of company. Most people feel like this at least once in their lives. And the Apostles were no exception.

“Suddenly a windstorm struck the lake. Waves started splashing into the boat, and it was about to sink. Jesus was in the back of the boat with his head on a pillow, and he was asleep” (Mark 4:37-38 CEV). Talk about God literally being asleep on the job! Ever feel like this scene from the Bible can describe your life? Waves crashing on a sinking boat in the middle of a storm? I know that I often do. So much so that I used to have a picture of this scene hanging from my rearview mirror in my car. And what the disciples said next to Jesus is something I feel that I have said over and over again: “Teacher, don't you care...?” (Mark4:38 CEV).

So many times have I prayed this prayer and asked this question. And it turns out the answer is a definite ‘yes’ – he does care. He cares more than we could ever know.

He cares enough to give us a free will to choose or reject him without being forced. He cares enough to let us live in this temporary place where that free will reigns so that we can choose if we want him for eternity. He cares enough to intervene and die for our sins, our mistakes we make while trying to figure it all out. Unfortunately, what we do to each other here with the time and free will we have isn't always the best. Unfortunately, we often lose the big

Have you ever felt like you needed to say, “Jesus, don't you care?” It's ok to pray it you know.

picture and get hurt while trying to find strength in our own human ways and frailty instead of God's love. But even in the midst of all of this he loves us enough to have a plan.

So have you ever felt the need to pray that prayer? Have you ever felt like you needed to say, "Jesus, don't you care?" It's ok to pray it you know. Jesus listens to all of our prayers, not just the ones he likes. And you aren't going to get him angry with you, he's already died for your sins. And you aren't going to hurt his feelings; I don't think he has self-esteem problems.

'So how does the story end,' you may ask? The boat is about to sink, the Apostles are left wondering if Jesus really cares about their lives and everything seems to hinge on what God will do in the situation. 'This sounds like me so what could possibly be the Good News and how do I get it?' you may want to know. Well before I get to that let me share with you how the story of Jesus ends... or doesn't. For one moment in time it looked like Jesus' life ended with him crying out to God the Father, "My God my God, why have you deserted me" as he died on the cross (Mark 15:34). It truly looked like God had abandoned him. It looked like God the Father fell asleep on the job at the most crucial moment of Jesus' life. At the very moment our savior needed a savior himself. It looked like evil had won. But you know the story.

If it looks like evil has won in your life let God in and look again. If it looks like God was asleep on the job, let God in and look again. And if it seems like God can't understand what it is like to suffer something he doesn't deserve and feel totally crushed by evil, read the story of Jesus' life and look again. If the God of the Bible is real than your suffering will end. And if the God of the Bible is real and you have suffered in ways you don't deserve at the hands of people with free will, he knows how you feel. And if the God of the Bible is real and you have suffered the death of a loved one, that loved one's story isn't over yet – no more than Jesus' was.

The Good News is that the God of the Bible is real. Your suffering will end. There is a plan for your pain. Even the most horrible and undeserved pain. You will have joy again if you want it. Life doesn't end in death no matter how or when that death has come. And someday we will look back on our suffering, on our moments when it seemed like God was asleep on the job and had deserted us, and ask ourselves what Jesus asked the Apostles next after they woke him on that boat in that storm 2000 years ago: "Why were you afraid? Don't you have any faith?" (Mark 4:40 CEV).

You see, Jesus got out of that impossible situation called a grave that he was put in. And he will get you out of yours if you let him. And at the end of that story of the boat with the Apostles on it being tossed around in the sea by the storm, Jesus stood up in the boat and ordered the storm to stop. And it did! He will do the same for you. He can – he has power over those storms. You just have to let him. Have a little faith. Wake up your Savior in your heart with a prayer – even an angry one, it's ok. Then trust as best as you can just trust.

I am sure that Jesus' death didn't make God smile. But God had a plan from the beginning to change that horrible event in Jesus' life into something good. And I am sure that your suffering doesn't make him smile either. But I am sure that the story of your life isn't going to end in suffering – not if you let that guy who got out of the grave into your life to do a resurrection in you. And I do know that if you do this God will turn your suffering that you don't deserve into joy the way he turned Jesus' suffering that he didn't deserve into a resurrection. Remember this isn't just something he said he would do. It's something he has done and will do again if you let him.

What's in the Bible for me? Mark 4:35-41

- 1) Have you ever felt like Jesus didn't care? What happened?
- 2) Do you think Jesus really did care looking back on it all? Why?
- 3) Do you think God can make good come out of *any* bad thing in life? Explain.
- 4) Why do you think bad things sometimes happen in life?
- 5) Do you think God wants them to happen? Why or why not?

I thought I had the world...

When I was a kid...I thought I had the world....a wonderful mother, father, 2 sisters, and 3 brothers. Yea I know it seems like a lot, but there was never a dull moment in our lives—6 kids all under the age of 10 at one point—I don't know how my parents did it. There was always someone to play with, argue with, and tease but at the same time we were that family you would see at church every Sunday taking up a whole pew or at the park on the weekend running around playing games, riding bikes, fishing, you name it and for 6-7 weeks of the summer you could be sure to find us all on the beach in Florida spending time with my dad's side of the family and many friends

we have made throughout the years. Now that is what I considered the perfect life...and I had it. But as we all find out sometime in our life, nothing is perfect....

It was June 29th 1996 the end of my fourth grade year and my family and I were on the road traveling to Florida for our summer vacation. We were in southern Georgia when we stopped at a rest stop- that each and every one of us patiently awaited. We stocked up on candy and snacks for the rest of the night's driving so we could try and stay awake but not long after our stop all six of us kids were sound asleep in our 8-passenger van. Later in that night my father started to get tired of driving and thought it may be good to switch and let my mother drive for a few hours so he could get some rest without having to stop and stay the night somewhere.

“A few minutes later an ambulance arrived. The crew rushed out of the truck to make sure everyone else was ok. The paramedic laid me on a stretcher...”

So, here we are a few hours later on I 95 heading south not many miles outside of Florida...everyone asleep...except for my mother who was beginning to get extremely tired and could barely keep her eyes open any longer. The sun started coming up the next morning and with a blink of my mother's eyes all 8 of our lives were seen before us. With the 3 girls in the back seat, the 3 boys in the middle bench seat, the youngest in a car seat, my father laying on the floor with his head up against the sliding door...my mother lost control of the car and my older sister Danielle, who without her seatbelt on, was thrown through the back window and drug under the car before it flipped over and

completely bounced on top of her legs. After flipping for I think it was 3 times, everything was in shambles. I remember lying on the side of the highway seeing all of our belongings scattered everywhere, and hearing my mom screaming for help. I don't think I have ever been so scared, along with the rest of my family as we all scrambled to make sure everyone was all right. Not being able to find Danielle was the biggest scare—my older brother Don who was 15 at the time was looking for her when he saw her lying in pieces of glass under white sheets that were now bloodstained red. We thought she was dead...no movement...no words...the helicopter came and scraped her off the road to take her to the emergency room at Jacksonville Hospital.

A few minutes later an ambulance arrived. The crew rushed out of the truck to make sure everyone else was ok. The paramedic laid me on a stretcher with a neck brace around my neck because of the continuous bleeding coming from the top of my head and forehead. Within the next few minutes they slid me into the back of the ambulance with my mother, sister, and little brother who was only about 3 or 4 at the time. The ride to the hospital was not fun at all because it was approximately 30 minutes away and everyone was feeling very nauseous and dizzy from being jerked around inside the van. When we arrived at the hospital in Jacksonville Florida my little sister

Michelle and I were taken right to the emergency room to be taken care of. It turned out that she had broken her ankle and had pieces of glass inside the wounds on her ankle. I didn't have a concussion or anything but there was glass in my head, which resulted in an overnight at the hospital with my sister.

As we lay in our beds right next to each other for several hours...we kept asking everyone how Danielle was, and we sat there and complained about the food we got because it was so disgusting....Meanwhile my mom, dad and brothers went and rented a car for us to use just for a few days until we got situated somewhere for the time being. Since we were going to be around for quite some time we checked into the Ronald McDonald house which was a house primarily for families from far away with no place to stay while family or a loved one was in the hospital. The house was only a few blocks from the hospital, which was very convenient. My aunt and uncle who lived in Jacksonville offered their home to us for as long as we needed. Since no one wanted to be too far away from the hospital where Danielle would be for the next several weeks, no one stayed at my aunt's house after the first two nights.

Michelle and I were able to leave the hospital the next day, but before we left we asked if we could by any chance see Danielle...the nurses hesitated...and so did my mother...they had just brought her up from the intensive care unit to another room right down the hall from Michelle and I. My mother took our hands and showed us to Danielle's room. She took us in and started crying....I honestly thought I was in the wrong room...I looked at my mother with tears flowing down my face saying "this isn't Danielle." She then held me as I got closer to her....her face was unbelievably swollen and black and blue, the top half of her hair was shaved, every inch of her body was wrapped up.

She laid there with tubes in her nose, mouth, head, ears...I have never seen something so horrible, and for it to be my older sister was even worse. Michelle and I slowly walked out of the room in tears and couldn't believe what had happened. My family and I ended up staying in Jacksonville for the next few weeks, where we would make our daily walks to the hospital to see Danielle. My mom's two sisters and her mom came down to see us as soon as they could, and my dad's mom came up from Jensen Beach to help take care of the kids. It was mid July and my parents made arrangements for me, my two younger brothers, my little sister and my mom to fly home and get the house ready for when Danielle was able to come home. We flew home around the 3rd week of July and Danielle came home a week later with my dad. Our family room was set up with a hospital bed, and many get well balloons, cards, and banners....Dani needed all she could to keep her spirits high during her immobile days at home....I spent the whole rest of the summer along with many of my close family keeping Danielle company, helping her to regain

her strength and faith...she did it....that September she attended her first day of 7th grade in a wheel chair and crutches at hand for when she needed them. She is a true angel and my best friend. My family, already being as close as we were, became 10x closer --not only with each other, but also to God. No one ever could understand why God would put anyone through such a tragic experience, but I know there was a reason for it. Our friendships grew stronger and our outlook on life became more positive. That same year, my father was diagnosed with Bipolar disorder--that was extremely hard for my family because he sure played a big roll in keeping us all on the right track...he was the one who made us work hard in whatever we were doing ...taught us to keep going when times were hard and we felt like nothing was going right in our simple childhood lives.

As years progressed he saw several different doctors who all together helped him have control over his illness with the use of numerous amounts of drugs. Ever since the accident, and my father's illness my family started gathering every night before bed to say the rosary and pray for patience and whatever else it took for us to be happy. It was this time in my life when I realized what I as a daughter, and a sister, had to do to keep our family strong...There were too many times when we were so close to giving up on my dad and would hear he and my mom talk about getting a divorce and having my father live with his mother in Florida or something bizarre like that. I couldn't believe some of the things I had heard. Through all of this we became stronger as a family and I know I realized the importance of life and how lucky I was to live in such a positive environment. Each of us tried our best to let our light shine everyday even when we thought things would never be better.

Recently I have been having trouble with myself, and finding my place in life. I don't have the social life I had back in the beginning of high school. I feel depressed a lot and don't really understand why. I am always wondering where I will be years from now, and if I am going to be happy or not. But through my Encounter Retreat experience someone told me not to worry about my future because it is in the hands of God and with God ALL things are possible. It's hard, and the only person I turn to right now is God. I go to the chapel some nights and just sit there and think about what's going on in my life. On the way home from the shore one afternoon I heard a song that I thought most related to the way I live my life. The part that stuck out in my head the most was this → "It's not what you take when you leave this world behind you, it's what you leave behind you when you go." It's been over a year now that I heard that song for the first time and not a day goes by where I don't think of those words. Now whenever something isn't right, or whenever I feel like I am never getting anything in return for the things I do for other people--I just think about those lyrics and it almost puts me at peace, because I know what I am doing is right

and my reward in heaven will be greater because of it...Don't be afraid to turn to God, he loves you and is there to listen...he'll never let you down.

God is always going to accept us whether we were always wrong and in sorrow or always of great joy and perfection. Life is what YOU make of it so make it the BEST! Let your light shine!

-- high school senior girl

Free will: God won't force you

So Jesus has the ability to forgive sins. He has the ability to stop a storm. He has the power to tell evil to leave and it has to. He can heal people physically. And he doesn't just want people to hear about these things, he wants them to know it personally through experience in their lives. This miracle worker and this sin forgiver, who is God and who has the power over everything in creation from a storm to cripples as well as total power over evil itself, wants in this time of your free will on earth to get to know you personally. And here's the most powerful thing of all. This God will not overpower and force himself on you. He wants to know you personally but he has left the choice with you. He will not force you to know him personally or know him at all. He will honor the gift of free will that he gave you at your birth. He will honor it your whole life and never take it away!

So the choice is ours. Jesus showed the world who he was with his actions, not his words. He showed who he was by getting to know people and loving them. He wants to do the same with you and me... but only if we choose to let him. He is a powerful God but he is also a patient and loving God who will let you choose.

In Matthew's Gospel there was another story of a boat with the Apostles on it being tossed around on the water. This time Jesus wasn't with them. The Apostles were in trouble and this time they were on their own. And that's when Jesus came walking out on the water toward them. The Apostles didn't know what they were seeing at first. They couldn't make sense of it and they became terrified. Then Jesus said to them, "Don't worry! I am Jesus. Don't be afraid" (Matthew 14:27 CEV). Peter, still doubting but wanting to believe, said "Lord, if that is really you, tell me to come to you on the water" to which Jesus replied "Come on!" (Matthew 14:28-29 CEV). And Peter got out of the boat and the water was suddenly holding his feet up as if it were dry ground! All of this in the midst of a dangerous storm!

"Don't be afraid to turn to God, he loves you and is there to listen...he'll never let you down."

You see, Peter did exactly what Jesus wanted him to do. He took a risk on God. He took a leap of faith. He didn't just want to figure it out in his head if Jesus was for real. Peter wanted to know it personally. He wanted to know for sure. And Jesus gave him the opportunity. Jesus gives us that opportunity to us as well. Every second of our lives in fact. He won't force that opportunity on us but it is there. He's waiting for us to take him personally, to put our lives in his hands in the middle of the storms of this world.



Now the next thing that happened to Peter was that he looked around at the storm while he was on the water and took his eyes off Jesus. At that moment he began to sink and he cried out "Save me, Lord!" (Matthew 14:30). He began to fall back into his old doubts and ways and fears. And what Jesus did at this moment is so important for us to know because so many times after we begin to trust Jesus we do the same thing. We look at the storm again and ignore our savior from the storm. But Jesus grabbed him! Jesus grabbed Peter even though Peter didn't have the strength to trust Jesus fully. Jesus will do the same for you. Give Jesus all of the trust you can afford to give him right now. Take at least a couple of baby steps toward him. Whatever you can give him is enough for now, just be sure you give it. He'll reach out and grab you in your life. Just let him.

What's in the Bible for me? Matthew 14:22-32

- 1) Why do you think Peter wanted to walk out on the water?
- 2) Would you have wanted to walk out on the water?
- 3) Do you sometimes feel like you don't have the strength to trust Jesus fully? Describe why and what this is like? What holds you back?
- 4) Do you feel like you trust Jesus at all? When? How? With what?

God understood

The person in the mirror isn't always who we truly are inside. Some people may see me as a funny outgoing person who loves life. When in reality life is my biggest challenge. Growing up with an alcoholic father has been

hurtful and damaging. My entire life I have had to deal with the pain of living with an alcoholic. As I grew up I started to hate my father more and more each day, until I basically stopped talking to him in eighth grade. When I was a freshman I was diagnosed with severe situational depression. I was put on Prozac and sent to therapy, but it didn't work. The pain and anger I had bottled up inside me since I was a child continued to surface. My father, a successful business man, was never home because he worked constantly at his business, and after work would go to the bar. We never saw him, and when we did, he was nasty and abusive. He constantly told me that I was a disappointment and that he wished he never had children. My mother assured us that he loved us, and that it was only the alcohol talking. However, I didn't believe it because his actions spoke louder than his words. My father and I have never had a good relationship and by this point it was almost non-existent. It hurt me that he would never come to any of my activities or events, he just didn't care. I wasn't good enough for him, and he clearly never had the time for me.

*My depression got worse and worse and I started to hate life. It was a chore for me to get out of bed and put on my happy, funny, sarcastic mask and go to school each day. School was also a place I hated. I was new, and I knew no one, and everyone at Wood seemed so clique and snobby. Kids were nasty and would tease me or talk about me behind my back. "Fat a**, fatty, loser, weirdo, freak," and a slew of other nasty words or expressions that made my day a living hell. This all made my depression worse. I continued to see my therapist, but I couldn't understand why I felt this way. I wondered if I was normal, was I freak? Why can't I be happy like everyone else? Why can't people like me for who I am? My therapist increased my dosage and tried other medications, but nothing seemed to work, life was awful, and I hated every day. I would come home from school and fall right asleep and only wake up to eat dinner and do my homework. I hated my family, I felt like they didn't understand or love me.*

When sophomore year started, my parents separated. It was bitter sweet. I was thankful that my mother had finally put an end to the ridiculous abuse that we were all subjected to from my alcoholic father. It was tough though, my dad, the ass that he is, refused to move out, so my mom and my sister and I moved in with my grandparents. I was so angry. What kind of man forces his wife and children to move out because he has a problem? I hated him more and more. We all started going to family therapy. I also hated this. I felt like we accomplished nothing and that all we did was fight in front of someone new. My parents went to marriage counseling and

attempted to work out their differences. Things were going well for them, but not for me. I wanted nothing more than for my mom to leave his ass once and for all so we could all move on and have a normal, happy life.

During Easter break, I went to Spain to sing with the boys' choir I was in at the time. It was great, it got me away from the mess of a life I had back at home; but it was only temporary. When I returned home sh** hit the fan for me. My parents had decided to get back together and I was crushed. We all moved back home, to my personal hell. I became more and more depressed and hated every minute I was awake. Nothing could help, not my depression medicine, sleeping pills, or even pain killers.. All I did was sleep. I would come home from school, take a pill and fall asleep. It was the only way I knew how to deal with what was going on, my only way to escape the pain that I was feeling inside. I felt like I had no one who loved me enough to care about what was going on in my life, so I told no one. I refused to work through my problems at therapy, because it was easier to take a sleeping pill or pain killer and temporarily escape my problems. It was less painful for me to sleep than to be awake and think about how much I hated living. My friends had no idea I was hurting so much. They had no idea I had become dependent on sleeping pills and pain killers.

Shortly after we all moved home I concluded that life was too painful for me and that I would rather die. Suicidal thoughts haunted my every thought and I started to think of ways to kill myself. One day, when I came home from school, I attempted to overdose on Sonata, a prescription sleeping drug, and Excedrin. I felt nothing, I simply fell asleep. When I woke up, I was in the hospital and my stomach had been pumped. My sister had come home from school and found me passed out in my bed. I was a complete failure, I couldn't even kill myself. My sister, the one person in the entire world that always understood me and loved me for who I was had found me passed out in an attempt to end my life. How could I be so selfish and put her through all that pain? She wanted to know why I hated life so much and why I would want to kill myself and leave her and my mother alone. I was crushed. I had let my baby sister down. The person who meant more to me than anything else in the world, someone I would die for now thought I didn't love her or care about her. This, above all else has been the hardest thing for me to over come. Me and my sister are best friends and she means the world to me. When I left the hospital, my parents kept a strict watch on every move I made. I was forced to go to therapy every week and underwent several tests.

The doctors concluded that I was severely depressed and emotionally unstable. I would have violent mood swings and uncontrollable anxiety attacks. No one knew what was going on though; my parents were ashamed and we didn't talk about it. I felt ashamed, and therefore I didn't tell anyone, not even my best friend. Therapy started to help me, and my doctors found a mood stabilizer and anti-depressants that helped tremendously. I understood that I had a disease that was not my fault; it was a chemical imbalance and nothing to be ashamed of. However, I still informed no one about my life. I started to come to terms with mine and my fathers' relationship, and started to deal with the pain from my childhood.

“ I believe everyone has a cross to carry, just as Jesus did, and only God can give us the strength to carry it.”

I started spending more time with my friends and got more involved with community and school activities. I started to enjoy life again, something I hadn't done since I was a child. I was working through my problems in therapy and was content with my progress. My sister and I reconciled and our love and friendship is stronger than it has ever been. I found the courage and strength to tell my best friends about my depression and anxiety problems. They understood, and are a constant source of help to me. My mother and I talked and tried to understand each others' problems. My mom and I are closer than ever and I am eternally grateful for her unconditional love. My father and I still don't get along and probably never will, but it's something I'm coming to terms with. Maybe, one day, when he realizes what his personal demons have done to me, and he recognizes the pain he forced upon my family, maybe I'll forgive him, but I will never forget it. I understand now that life is a gift from God, and each moment should be valued and respected. Never, will I ever take it for granted. I believe everyone has a cross to carry, just as Jesus did, and only God can give us the strength to carry it.

Even though my parents were ashamed of me and didn't understand why I hated life and them so much, God understood. Even though my best friends in the whole world had no idea what pain and emotional trauma I was going through, God did. God accepts us and loves us unconditionally, no matter what. No matter how far gone we think we are, God still loves us and wants us to love Him. Everyone wears a mask and behind every mask there is a person, a story, even if God is the only one who knows. I learned to love myself for all the good and bad, and respect others for their story as well. My Encounter Retreat made me realize that everyone has a story, no matter what.

Each person is special and God loves each and every one of you. I invite you to try to do what I have done and take off your mask, and Let Your Light Shine.

-- high school senior guy

Yes, God cries too

Have you ever had the experience of watching someone you have known for years but have never seen cry, actually break down and be brought to tears before your eyes? Maybe it was someone like your father or big brother. Maybe it was a professional athlete. Maybe it was your mom who always holds it together. Maybe it was a teacher. It can be a powerful moment. Something you remember for the rest of your life. It's a moment where you realize that this person who has always appeared so strong or distant isn't strong or distant at all but is very human and someone you can relate to. And are there people in your life who you wish could cry but seem to just ignore their emotions? Do you ever wish they would just let down their walls and feel for once?

Well, sometimes I think a lot of us look at Jesus and understand that he was God but forget that he was also human. Sinless, but human. And we look at God the Father and can understand God as some kind of a distant force but forget that he is also a person, a personal God. Perfectly loving, but personal. That's why we need to look closely at the Bible. God isn't just some force and Jesus was as much human as he was God.

Jesus knew what it was like to watch a close friend of his die. That friend was Lazarus. Jesus knew him and his two sisters, Martha and Mary, well. And you would think that of all the people who would be able to keep it together over the death of a friend, Jesus could. I mean the guy came down from heaven, had one on one conversations with God the Father and knew that life existed after death. But Jesus, the Savior of the world, God in the flesh, the one who knew he would rise from the dead cried when he got to Lazarus' tomb. Perhaps he cried just because he knew he would miss his friend. Perhaps he cried because he saw the tears in Martha and Mary's eyes. There could have been a million other reasons as well. But Jesus saw his friend dead and his friend's family upset and he cried. And if Jesus can cry he isn't distant. And he isn't cold hearted. He is human. God, but also human. How wonderful and amazing!

This moment when Jesus cried is as important as any miracle Jesus worked. It reminds us that Jesus was human as well as God. But it also reminds us that Jesus cries when the people he loves are in pain even if he knows

it will all work out in the end. Jesus cries when the people he loves cry. And he loves you. Whether you understand it or not, he does. And when you cry so does he. He may know the whole plan and know how it will all work out, but he cries because you are crying. And Jesus said in the Bible that he does exactly what God the Father does. So God in heaven cries with you too.

When you are upset because your girlfriend or boyfriend broke up with you, even if God knows it is for the best, God cries because you are crying. When someone *you* love dies, God cries because you are crying. When people abuse you in any way, God cries with you as well. In fact, one must wonder if he ever regrets giving us free will because of how we can make each other hurt. I suppose he doesn't because he knows the plan better than we do, but I do know he hurts when we hurt. Because he loves us.

This is so important for us to remember when we pray. It is important for us to remember when we are overwhelmed. It is important to remember when we think that God doesn't really care. He does. He sees your pain. And even though he also sees the plan and how it will all somehow miraculously work out, he hurts when you hurt. And he cries when you cry. So don't be afraid to turn your tears into prayers. Don't be afraid to tell him how you feel. He feels the same pain you do. Because he loves you and he isn't just an it or a thing. God is a personal God who personally loves you. And Jesus, while he is God, is also human. Sinless, but human. Sinless, but able to cry your tears with you.

Letting God be with me when I cry

Why God? Why me? I love you so much and all I want is to live for you and be happy! I help everyone else and yet I still feel helpless and hopeless and lost. I am trapped inside my body behind this fake smile and my heart hurts so bad that all I can do is cry. I can comfort everyone else who is having problems but I can't help myself. Please God, please help me. Be with me and help me to get rid of this pain so I can live for you and not myself. Jesus, I know you can help me. Either tell me what to do, or just take me. I would rather die and live with you in Heaven than be here on earth and do nothing but cry. If I am here for a reason, please tell me what it is. I'll do it, God. Whatever you want, I'll do it for you.

"Why God? Why me? I love you so much and all I want is to live for you and be happy! I help everyone else and yet I still feel helpless and hopeless and lost."

Depression is a hard thing to deal with, especially at 18 years old. I have

so many other things to figure out, and this is just making everything more complicated. So when things get to hard, I cry. I cry and I pray, but I never really come out with any answers... just another empty box of tissues. So eventually I turned to the Bible. Until this year I had always regarded the Bible as something that was written a long time ago and something that I couldn't understand. However, I was reading things that spoke to me, that seemed to be written just for me. Ecclesiastes 7:14 says "When times are good, you should be cheerful; when times are bad, think what it means. God makes them both to keep us from knowing what will happen next." I realized that God does have a plan for me, and I shouldn't be in a rush to figure out what it is. I'm only 18! I have my whole life ahead of me and God will tell me when He is ready, and when He thinks I am ready. And I know now that when I am hurt, and when I am crying, Jesus is wrapping His arms around me, protecting me. This doesn't take away the pain and I struggle every day to see how this could ever be part of God's plan, but it helps to know that someone cares about me and will always be here with me. In John 10:10, Jesus says, "I came so that everyone would have life, and have it in its fullest." God wants me to be happy, and I know that I will be someday, because Jesus loves me!!

-- High school senior girl

Enjoy your retreat but don't forget to come back

One of the most amazing things about the miracles of Jesus is not the miracles themselves but the reaction of the people who witnessed them and the implications the miracles had on their lives. This is an important thing for us to think about because we too experience Jesus today and we can try to learn from the experiences of the people in the Scriptures about some do's and don'ts.

One day Jesus took three of his closest followers "up a mountain to pray" (Luke 9:28 CEV). Jesus took them away from the world. Away from the worries of other people's opinions. Away from work. Away from worry. Jesus took them away so he could have some special time with them where they could meet him in a new way.

While Jesus was praying with them "Jesus was completely changed" before their eyes (Matthew 17:2 CEV). Now Jesus was still the same person. The three Apostles just saw him in a new way. Jesus showed them the fullness of the glory of God that was present in him. Sometimes in life we are blessed by an experience like this. A place where this often happens is on retreat. Sometimes it's through listening to a friend talk about their faith. Sometimes it's just an intense feeling of the Holy Spirit in prayer. Whatever the specific moment is doesn't matter.

The fact is that there really are times in our lives when Jesus is “completely changed” before our eyes. And it’s not that Jesus is a different person. It’s just that we finally see him for who he is.

The funny thing is what the three Apostles, Peter, James and John, were doing when they first got to the top of the mountain and began praying with Jesus. They fell “sound asleep” (Luke 9:32 CEV). Even praying with Jesus himself wasn’t exciting for them! But as Jesus continued to pray “Moses and Elijah” appeared to them and Jesus’ “face changed and his clothes became shining white” (Luke 9:29 CEV). Then “all at once they woke up and saw how glorious Jesus was” (Luke 9:32 CEV).

Sometimes in life God wakes us up and shows us how glorious Jesus really is. We attend that retreat and everything changes. We go to that prayer meeting and truly feel the Spirit of God. We finally get up the courage to go to confession for the first time in years. And we see and feel Jesus shining in all his glory in our hearts. And we say to ourselves just what Peter said on the mountain when this happened: “it is good for us to be here” (Luke 9:33 CEV)! We are so excited and feel so much peace on that retreat or in that prayer meeting that we just don’t want to leave. We stay up all night talking to our friends. We just don’t want to go. Or we feel so much peace praying our penance after our confession that we just don’t want to leave the church. We don’t want to leave and face the same temptations again.

But the Bible says this about Peter’s statement: “But Peter did not know what he was talking about” (Luke 9:33 CEV). Peter didn’t know what he was talking about!? Yes. He didn’t know that he couldn’t stay there forever. He didn’t understand that this moment would have to end. We sometimes don’t understand that our retreat ever has to end. We don’t understand that we have to go to bed or go home sometimes after that talk or prayer meeting. But the reality is that we do. It is God’s plan. Yes, that too is God’s plan.

We are going to have to go home to annoying parents. To school work. To peer pressure. To pressure in general. To people who don’t understand our faith in God or our experience. To people who will enjoy making it hard to us to follow God. And this is a part of God’s plan. I’ll say it again. This is a part of God’s plan.

It is no accident that you made the retreat that you went on. It’s no accident that you went to that prayer meeting or had that chance to go to confession. And if it was no accident that you went, you and I wouldn’t know what we were talking about if we didn’t also understand that it was no accident that we had to go home and back to the “real world.”

You see God showed those three Apostles how glorious Jesus was so that they could manage living in the “real world.” And he showed them how glorious Jesus was so they could show that glory to the rest of the world.

To the kind of people who wouldn't go on a retreat. To the kind of people at school. To the kind of people who annoy us. Jesus doesn't show his true glory just to show it to us. He shows it to us so as to change us and send us back into the world as changed people so others can see it. He doesn't show it to us so we can hide away from the world. He shows it to us so that we can know how to live in the world.

Jesus himself was the perfect example of this. He didn't spend all of his time with just holy people who weren't tough to be around. He didn't spend time only with the people who already obeyed God. He didn't hide from the world and simply pray all day. He was God, but he lived *in* the world. He was God, but he was also a carpenter. He was God, but he also went out to eat with people who were big time sinners. He was God and showed his glory on the top of a mountain in the company of his friends. But he was God and also showed his glory at a place called Golgotha where people who hated him crucified him. He was sinless, perfect... but died a sinner's death at the hands of sinners.

Jesus knew what he was talking about. He knew that time spent with God was to be a preparation for time spent with others. He knew that miracles were gift to prepare us for the moments that don't feel so miraculous. He knew that his glory was shown to steady us for the times when his glory doesn't seem so obvious. Jesus knew that being a Christian did not mean ignoring the world. Being a Christian meant being in the world as a changed person. So he modeled Christianity for us perfectly. He left Heaven to come down to earth. He left the perfect world of eternal life for the imperfect world we live in. Why? Because he loved us. Because it was God's plan. Because earth is where we are supposed to be right now and he wanted to be here with us – even though it can be a very hard place to be.

So don't be like Peter this time. Be like Jesus. Enjoy the time you spend on retreat and at Christian gatherings. Enjoy the Sacraments. But realize that the whole reason we have them is so we can be better people *in* the world. At school. At home. On the weekend. With friends. The real test of a Christian doesn't come while he or she is on retreat. It comes when they go home. Up for the job? Jesus was.

The real test of a Christian doesn't come while he or she is on retreat. It comes when they go home. Up for the job? Jesus was.

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 9:28-36

1) Have you ever had a powerful experience of God? What happened?

- 2) Have you ever felt like it was hard to explain it to someone else or had people who just couldn't understand it? What was that like?
- 3) Have you ever felt close to God and never wanted to leave where you are? Describe.
- 4) Do you ever find it hard to be a Christian in the "real world?"

Who is Jesus? And who are we?

Finally, we know that Jesus was God. He could forgive sins. He could heal. He could walk on water. And we know that he also eventually rose from the dead. But to rise from the dead he had to first die. Just to show humans how much he loved them God had to become human. To be human is to be weak. To be human means to accept that you can get sick, that you can get hurt in so many ways and that you can die. Jesus knew that it was God's plan for him to be completely human in addition to being completely Divine. So Jesus accepted everything that goes with being human, even death.

St. Paul in his letter to the people living in Philippi explained it best when he said: "Christ was truly God. But he did not try to remain equal to God. Instead he gave up everything and became a slave, when he became like on of us... He obeyed God and even died on a cross" (Philippians 2:6-8 CEV). Jesus was God and is God and always will be God. But Jesus also accepted being human so he could live with us and be like us. So he could explain to us and show us what God was really like. And most importantly so that he could die for us, for our mistakes so that we wouldn't have to be punished for them but could be forgiven!

Jesus accepted God's plan for his life for our sake. He accepted even death. He raised his friend Lazarus to life. He healed people left and right. He walked on water. But his greatest act of love was to not work a miracle and let himself be murdered for us. While he was on the cross people shouted saying "He saved others. Now he should save himself if he really is God's chosen Messiah" (Luke 23:34-35 CEV). But the truth was that it was precisely because he was the Messiah, the Savior, that he had to let himself be killed. Jesus rightly said about these people "Father forgive these people! They don't know what they're doing" (Luke 23:34-35).

So many times we don't know what we are doing. We don't know why things are happening the way that they are. But God does. Jesus knew to trust this. He trusted this even though it made him feel abandoned by God the Father. We have to try to trust God the Father the same way. It's tough to obey God as Jesus did when it can

cause so much pain. But we are asked to. And the most miraculous thing about it all is that even if we fail in our attempt to obey him it is ok because Jesus didn't fail in obeying God and dying for us.

So while Jesus did many great miracles perhaps some of his most important moments in life are when he didn't do miracles. It was when he hadn't done a miracle that he cried for Lazarus. It was when he hadn't done a miracle that he died for us. It was at the moments that Jesus didn't do miracles that he really showed us who he was. We can see from the miracles that he is God. But it was through not doing miracles that we discover that he is also fully human, that he loved us unconditionally – enough to die for us. It was through not working a miracle that we truly discovered that he was a Savior. He is still that same Savior today – a Savior who wants to work miracles in your personal life and a Savior who wants to show you who he really is when he doesn't. He wants to be there for you in both ways: as a miraculous God and as a Savior who shows us who he really can be for us when miracles are not a part of the plan. The question is are we willing to let him be there for us. He so desperately wants to. That's what he came to earth to show.

Jesus' holiest hour was when he totally gave up his rights as a sinless human and as God and let himself be killed for us. And one of his most significant moments wasn't when he walked on water but when he cried. When he did these things he reminded us that he was also human. He reminded us that obedience to God isn't something you have to be God himself to do. And he showed us that our greatest moments of faith in our relationship with God aren't when miracles happen but instead when they don't.

That's when Jesus showed who he really was. And that is when we show who we really are to God as well. So who are we? Are we Christians, truly?

If this chapter is something you want to take to heart or apply to your life try praying this prayer or one like it in a quiet place:

Dear Jesus, help me to know who you really are. Please act powerfully in my life so that I can get to know the real you. I want to. I need you. Give me you Holy Spirit in a way that really touches my heart so that I can never deny that you are there. Work miracles in my life, big or small ones – it doesn't matter to me. Just work in my life so that I know you are there. Help me to remember to ask you to do this all of the time. I know you can. I love you.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“Jesus asked the religious authorities of Jerusalem to believe in him because of the Father’s works which he accomplished.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 591

“The power of Satan is, nonetheless, not infinite. He is only a creature, powerful from the fact that he is a spirit, but still a creature. He cannot prevent the building up of God’s reign. Although Satan may act in the world out of hatred for God... and although his action may cause grave injuries... the action is permitted by divine providence which with strength and gentleness guides human and cosmic history. It is a great mystery that providence should permit diabolical activity, but “we know that in everything God works for good with those who love him.”
Catechism of the Catholic Church 395

“The Son of God... worked with human hands; he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 470

“Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal.” St. Thomas More in *Ye Disconsolate* and *Treasury of... Quotations*



Chapter 8
So what do you have to say, Jesus?





Feeling lost?

Jesus showed us who he was by miraculous deeds. He also showed us who he was by sometimes not doing miraculous deeds – when he died for us for example. He is a God who knows how to show us who he is on so many levels, the miraculous, the common and everything in between. One of the most common ways that Jesus revealed himself was by telling simple stories with much deeper meaning when it came to God. One of the most common stories that Jesus uses to describe himself is the story of the Good Shepherd (John 10 and Luke 15). It's a story for all of us who feel lost with God.

Have you ever lost something that was so important to you that you would do anything and risk anything to get it back. You may feel that way about an ex-girlfriend or boyfriend. Or you may have felt that way about the number 2 pencil you realized you lost on your way to the SAT's or some other test. Or perhaps it was just a textbook you needed for your history class. Or maybe it was something like a girl or boy's phone number.

Jesus tells a story about a shepherd who lost one sheep while he had ninety-nine others. But this one sheep was so important that this shepherd left the ninety-nine other sheep to go find it. This one sheep was so special that it was worth the risk of losing everything to find it! It must have been some remarkable sheep! Right?

What was so extraordinary about this sheep? It didn't have any special wool. It wasn't noticeably young or old. It wasn't a special sheep given to the shepherd by his best friend as a gift. In fact, it wasn't different or special in any way at all. Except one. So what quality did it have to get the shepherd's attention? What quality about this sheep made the shepherd decide to risk everything to find it? Just one. It was lost. That's right. The only special quality the sheep had was that it was lost!

That was all it took to get the shepherd's attention. This sheep got special attention not because it had nice wool or was a special gift. It was just lost. And that was all it took to get this shepherd to go on his desperate search.

Do you get the point of the story? Jesus says that he is the Good Shepherd. We are the sheep. What would it take for you to get the Shepherd's attention? What would it take to get God to want to risk everything and give up anything to find you? Not much. Not a special prayer. Not somehow becoming his favorite. Not sinlessness. Just



being lost. That is all it takes to get God to want to act in a reckless fashion to save you. That is when Jesus is the most serious about you – the very moment you are least serious about him. That is what makes him a Savior. That is when he would put aside everything for you. Want proof? Well the proof is that he already did.

Are you going to let yourself be found?

This is what happened when Jesus came into the world. He came because we were lost without a guide. He came and risked everything. And even gave up his life. He came not because we did something special. He came because we were lost and needed to find our way back home to God in our lives. He did this two thousand years ago. And God doesn't change. He is willing to do it each day for each of us if we are only willing to let him be our Good Shepherd. So have you felt lost lately? Than get ready, Jesus is looking for you. Are you going to let yourself be found? He desperately wants you to be found. And you don't have to do anything special to deserve it. Isn't that Good News?!!

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 15:1-7

- 1) Do you feel a little lost right now in life? Why? Or have you ever felt lost? What was happening?
- 2) Do you think Jesus can help you become found? What holds him back from doing this sometimes?
- 3) Do you really think Jesus still feels the same way about sinners today as he did when he was on earth during the New Testament times?
- 4) How do you think Jesus reacts when someone who has gotten "lost" in life becomes found again? Do you think he is angry or happy?

I'm going to be ok...

Nothing really made sense because I always seemed surrounded by people who seemed to care but I never felt that way. I had my place at school and I was friends with everyone. I never had friend problems or boy problems. They all just came to me with their problems and I always had to be there for them and boys were never interested in me except as a friend. Whenever I showed any emotions that weren't positive I was told I shouldn't be like that and that I had nothing to be upset about. And if I ever talked about my family, it was always 'shut up your

family is perfect' even though it was far from it (but that's another story). I loved how inside I felt empty and like I had nothing but yet everyone always thought everything was great. I was so tired of being there for my friends when they weren't ever there for me. My 8th grade year was ending and the more unhappy I was becoming.

At home I cried myself to sleep every night and I hated waking up in the morning and going to school because I had to be someone I wasn't. I wasn't allowed to be sad or upset. I felt so alone and so empty. My mom noticed this change in me and really wanted me to go talk to someone, as if talking to someone would help. There was no way I was going to talk to a complete stranger on how I felt inside. So I bottled up my feelings like usual and told my mom I was fine and didn't need to talk to anyone and that I wasn't going to it was just a waste of time and money. It was ridiculous and my mom was crazy for thinking differently.

On top of all my feelings, my brother and dad's relationship continued to fall further and further apart. My brother was going to college soon and I thought just get through the summer and things will be better next year. I had such high hopes for the following school year. It was my first year of high school the following year. I thought I could start over that I could be someone else and I thought starting over at a new school and make new friends would somehow make my problems disappear. I was determined to have a great summer and leave all my worries behind. But instead of being a great summer it ended up being one of the worst.

My friend and I both were coming to high school together so we started hanging out a lot more. We would hang out with her sister and another friend of ours from a different school. We were introduced to new drugs all the time. My entire summer was smoking pot. When I was home I hated everything but always did a good job at hiding it and when I was with my friend smoking was like an escape for me and things just seemed better. Finally I got tired of smoking and I was playing sports so I thought I shouldn't be doing that everyday.

But I had to do something to still have my escape. So came that day I did my first ecstasy pill and I did my first line of coke. So my summer consisted of me doing some type of drug and then going home and crying and being so unhappy and wanting nothing else but to die. I would think about it every night as I lay in bed but I could never do it. SO instead the more drugs I started to do. School started and at first I fit right in and I thought the choice to go to the high school I picked was going to be a good idea. I was playing sports and was trying real hard not to smoke or do drugs. That's hard though when a few months consisted only of that.

My freshmen year ended and it was the worst year ever, I made a few friends that I luckily still have but even they didn't really know ME. My summer started off good other then the occasions I would get depressed again. Like I said before it was a light switch someone else had control of.

I continued this way on and off through my senior year and have made so many mistakes and have had so many regrets. I keep hurting those that I love and doing things that aren't good for me or other people. I feel ashamed of things that I have done, I feel used, I feel betrayed and most of all I feel completely lost. I feel very vulnerable that I'm looking for things all in the wrongs places and making mistakes while looking. Nothing I do seems to be the right way to go, but what is the right way to go? What path am I suppose to go down? Once I think I figured it out, I find things out about people I love, what they've done to me or what they have done to them. And it just seems like I have no where to go.

My biggest problem is how much I keep inside of me. Sometimes I wonder what people would think if they knew every thought I have and what I have done in my life, all the mistakes I have made. Would they look at me the same? I wish I had the faith to turn to, because that's something I'm struggling with – letting God back into my life. I've been scared to let God in after I have shut him out for years. I feel like I can't even let him in, like he wouldn't even want to be let in.

I know I need him, because I am a lost girl who just wants to be happy. I know God loves me, but it's hard to believe when I think of everything I have done and said. How could he possibly love me? How could he possibly want me a child of his?

But I know I need God, because when I felt the most hurt and lost I prayed and I felt better. It's hard to believe that God loves you unconditionally and no matter what. I had shut him out for weeks, months, years and when I've needed him he was there for me to help me get through.

I am learning that sometimes it's not about what you did to upset God; it's what you do to show him that you are sorry. I still feel lost a lot and I still wonder how God can love me, but in my heart I know he does. I just had to have faith and I had to realize what I have done and what I am doing. It's the best feeling in the world knowing that I am going to be okay, as long as I keep God a part of my life, and regardless of what I've done he will be here for me.

"I am learning that sometimes it's not about what you did to upset God; it's what you do to show him that you are sorry."

-- high school senior girl

Unworthy?

Still feeling lost? Or worse yet... feeling unworthy of being found? Figuring you've gone too and you are better off just staying lost? Then the story that comes just two paragraphs after the story of the lost sheep in Luke's Gospel is for you.

Imagine turning to your dad one Sunday afternoon and telling him you want all of your inheritance up front – before he died. Imagine by some miracle that your father wasn't furious with you for treating him like he was dead and for asking for almost half of his money while he was still alive. And imagine him giving it to you!

Imagine taking all of that money from him and leaving town to get your own place and live it up. Imagine spending all of you dad's money on prostitutes, drinking and partying. Imagine having nothing left, being too ashamed to ever go home again and trying to get a job. Imagine not being able to find any job that could pay you anything near enough to get by and you were starving to death. Imagine having lost all hope but feeling like you've gone too far to ever return home to your dad.

Well, Jesus himself imagined a story just like this one to make clear to you a certain point about what is true about God the Father. Jesus' story goes just like ours here. Then the child decides that he has no other choice but to go home. The child prepares a speech to give to his father. He gets ready to tell the father: "Father, I have sinned against God in heaven and against you. I am no longer good enough to be called your son. Treat me like one of your workers" (Luke 15:18-19 CEV). And the son starts walking home hoping his father will just give him a job so he doesn't die of starvation.

The father in the story sees the son while the son is "still a long way off" (Luke 15:20 CEV). What do you think the father did in Jesus' story when he saw that his son obviously had nothing left and was starving because he blew all of his inheritance? Do you think the father felt anger? Or do you think the father would maybe choose to just ignore the son? Do you think the father would go so far as to disown the son and tell him to leave?

Well the father in Jesus' story "felt sorry" for his son (Luke 15:20 CEV). Then he "ran to his son" (Luke 15:20 CEV). Then before the son could even get out the words 'I'm sorry,' the father gave his son a "hug" and a "kiss" (Luke 15:20 CEV). Then the father threw a big party for the son, didn't punish the son and, in fact, welcomed him back into the family. Does that story seem unrealistic? Well, for us here on earth maybe it is. Do you wish *you* had a father like this one in the story? Well, you do! Maybe your earthly father isn't like this but your Father in Heaven is. That was the point of Jesus' story.

Jesus explained that this father in the story is how God really is to us. There is no going to far in God's mind. If you took half of everything God had, cashed it out and spent it on an addiction of some sort and on sex, God would still want to "hug" and "kiss" you when and if you ever came back to him.

Now here are some important questions with regard to this story. Did the father love his son unconditionally? Would the father have forgiven his son of anything? Yes. Yes! But would the son have ever received his father's love if he didn't go back? No.

The only thing between you and God's love is you. That's it. His love is unconditional. He wants to "hug" and "kiss" you when and if you come back. So there is no such thing as too far with God. If there was God's love wouldn't be unconditional. But there is this thing called free will. God won't make you take his forgiveness. He gives it. He gives his unconditional love and always will. But you have to decide if you want to come home.

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 15:11-31

- 1) What makes you feel most unworthy of God's love?
- 2) Do you feel like you ever ran away from God's home? Why did you do that? How did it feel? Did you want to come back?
- 3) Why do you think people are afraid to come back to God? What response do you think they expect from God?
- 4) What would you tell someone who thinks that God hates them?
- 5) What would you tell to someone who is afraid they are going to hell? What can they do?

Jesus loves me and I love it!

I guess my life has been okay. When people look at me, they probably think that nothing is bothering me, or that I have no problems. I don't blame them. That's how I portray myself to be, but little do they know, I do.

In August of 1993, I was five years old, and my dad went to a bachelor party that night. On his way home he fell asleep at the wheel, and his car ran into a telephone pole along the road. He was in a coma at the Hospital for two months. Two months later, he was taken off life support and passed away that night. I woke up the next morning

and my mom told me what happened. I guess that since I was so young, I didn't really know what was going on and didn't care. My father's death wouldn't hit me until I grew older.

As time went on, I dealt with my problems. Nothing big to really bother me that much. I was now in 8th grade. I was quiet and didn't really have any friends. I was alone. People started to make fun of me about how I dance, and because of that they would call me gay. This made my life horrible. I would always ask myself, "How does dancing make me gay?" This continued throughout the year. I didn't tell anyone about what was happening, and that was the worst thing I have ever done. It just kept building and building until I couldn't take it anymore. I graduated from grade school, looking forward to a new beginning at high school with no one making fun of me anymore. I had the hope that maybe; I'd actually make friends.

Summer passed quickly, and it was the first day of school at my new high school. The day passed and was great. I was actually talking to people and having fun at school. The second day came along, and it was horrible. Rumors had already started being spread about me. To my disappointment, people had started talking about me and making fun of me again. It was even worse than grade school.

It was then December, and things were really bad. People were still making fun of me, and I was finally pushed to the edge. When this happens, most people turn to drugs or alcohol. Me on the other hand, I turned to sex. I was so depressed and felt so alone. All I ever wanted was to be accepted by other people for who I am, and I felt that this was it. For once in my life I was happy, or so I thought. Sex was my main comfort. I would soon turn back to it time and time again.

People would still be calling me gay, or making fun of me for not participating in gym, or making fun of me because I didn't have a dad. I would always ask myself "What's so wrong with me?" "What did I do to them?" It was now January and things were even worse than before. I was addicted to sex. I would plan my days around when I could have sex. That month I had also started hurting myself. It was painful. I would cut myself everyday after school, one cut for every mean thing someone said to or about me.

Later on that week, after I had started cutting, I went to a party with some people from my neighborhood. That night I smoked marijuana for the first time. This was just great. I found one more thing to do when I was upset. After my high was over, I was presented with cocaine. I took it, and I can't remember what I did the rest of the night. I would attend parties like that every weekend where I'd be having sex, drinking and doing drugs.

It was now March and I was still doing everything I was doing before, but more severely. I was very excited about my week-long, family vacation to the Caribbean Islands. I was the day before the vacation and I was so

excited that I could just get away from my horrible life at school. First night of the vacation, I drank and got high with people that I would be hanging out with all week. I was having the best time of my life, but something was weird. I was feeling an attraction that I've never felt before. Tuesday night of the vacation was when I first had sex with a guy.

After that night, my life went downhill. Now that I had discovered that this happened, I had so many questions and doubts about my life. "Am I going to hell?" "There's no way I can be normal." I got to a point where I thought I had no reason for living. All my thoughts were caused by my sexual activity.

I was home from vacation and the party was over. The next day I would have to go back to my dreaded school. It was Monday. What a surprise! People were making fun of me as soon as I stepped foot into the building.

There was someone in my grade school that I had a problem with that year in high school. I wasn't really friends with him or anything. You know, we'd talking every once in a while but we weren't really friends. I walked into school and someone asked me if I asked this guy out the day before. I said no. I had no idea what this person was talking about. This was horrible.

I had a lot of classes with this guy that year and he started to be so mad at me for no apparent reason. I didn't understand what was happening. I didn't even talk to the guy that much and everyone thought I asked him out. I know we weren't friends, but couldn't he have said something to help me out. No, he went along with it and made my life horrible. I had to deal with weird looks and bad words that entire week. No one helped me, and I had no one to talk to about it. I was, once again, alone.

It was the summer and I was so happy to be out of school. I was still doing drugs and drinking, and my sex addictions became even worse than before. I was having sex so many times a day, with guys and girls that I didn't even know. Most of them, I didn't even know their names. All that mattered to me was making me feel better about myself.

Summer was over and I was starting my sophomore year in high school. I felt so lonely now, and felt that no one was there for me. I had no friends in school. I went back to cutting again. One cut for each insult, each "gay comment" made about me. In October I signed up for a retreat. Even though I was still doing all of the bad things I was doing before, I went. That weekend was amazing!

That retreat changed my life. I don't know what I'd be doing right now, two months later, without my leaders, and my fellow retreatants. I am no longer having random sex. I don't cut anymore. I am not using drugs either. I am no longer mad at God for taking my father from me. I love God more now than ever before, and I feel so

much closer to him. I understand that everything that I have been through has just made me stronger. God wouldn't put me through all that I have dealt with in my life if He didn't think I was strong enough to handle it.

I can now say I don't care about what other people say. I can also love myself, which I have never been able to do. Some people say things about other people and it hurts. I hope that this helps them to understand what I did to myself after they said those mean things to me. So I ask you, please stop, because what you say about anyone else really hurts. One day you might be too late to stop and you won't be able to see them the next day. After the retreat I realized that I did have real friends who really did care about me. I never knew that so many people could ever care about me before in my life.

In February of that year, I lead the same retreat I went on in that December. The guy that I had a problem with the year before was there. We talked for a while and straightened things out. Eventually on that retreat we became great friends and still are to this day. This was one of my many prayers that were answered by God. This is another piece of evidence that can show you that He really does love me and all of you too.

Please try to accept people for who they really are, and not for the clothes they wear, the way they look, or who they like. If you are sinning and struggling with these sins all the time, just know that you can always get back on the right track again. For once in my life, I feel accepted, and Jesus loves me, and I love it.

-- high school sophomore guy

Can you hear me now?

How do I know if God is there? How do I get to know if his love is real? How do I really get to know if Jesus' promises in the Bible are real? How do I really know? Jesus says only God can tell you.

Now you may be saying to yourself "great only God can tell me what God has to tell me." Or you may be saying "great, only way I can know if God is there is if God tells me he is there." And it's true. Only God can show you God. That's what the Bible says.

In his story of the Good Shepherd, Jesus says that sheep simply "know the shepherd's voice" (John 10:3 CEV). There is no special sign. They simply know. They hear and know. Three times in this parable Jesus says that the sheep just know him. That's how it works. It isn't about proof or arguments. It is just about knowing God in your heart and following his voice in your life.

The Pharisees at one point ask Jesus to give them some miraculous sign to prove that what Jesus was saying about God was true. Jesus says back to them that “only a wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign.” According to Jesus faith is just a simple tug in our hearts and minds that lets us know God is there.

Now of course we can study lots of the miracles that are happening in the world today. We can look at the scientific research done on the miracles of Mary at Lourdes or Medjugorje. We can examine all of the miracles (including the stigmata) of St. Padre Pio. And we can listen to others give examples of how God has acted in their lives. But in the end we can still ignore all of these things if we want. In the end we have to listen with our hearts and our deepest thoughts. We have to simply let ourselves be Jesus’ little sheep and listen to his voice speaking deep inside of us. It is really in the heart that faith begins. And it is really there that we have to verify for ourselves what the Bible is saying.

So does Jesus love you unconditionally? Is God still there for you even when bad things happen? Are things like premarital sex and drugs really wrong? The Bible says yes! Ask yourself in your heart. And then ask Jesus if the answer is still ‘no.’ If you are really open to the shepherd’s voice you will hear a quiet ‘yes’ to all that the Bible teaches. Trust me I know from experience. I think I have asked Jesus every question in the book, literally. And over time I have heard so many ‘yes’s’ that I just assume now that the answer is always ‘yes’ whenever I ask if the Bible is right. You’ll hear the ‘yes’s’ too. But you have to ask. And unfortunately you have to ask God. There is no one else to ask. Who else would know for sure? And who better, because he loves you and is patient with you even when you don’t hear that quiet yes in your heart. Even when he is screaming it to you at the top of his lungs!

How do I know that God is really there?

Where is God when I see a friend suffer from depression or anxiety? Where is God when I am dealing with a tough relationship that has reached its worst? Where is God when anything goes wrong? The answer to all these questions is that God is right there beside me.

“How do I know this?” you may ask. Well, my answer to this question is to look at the crucifix. Each time I see Jesus on the crucifix I am reminded of the pain and suffering He endured for us. Jesus experienced agony, pain, mockery, deceit, suffering, loss, and even death. He experienced for us our worst nightmare ten times worse. He never promised us that life would be easy, but He did say that it would be rewarding beyond our dreams. So when I am facing a hard time I remind myself that God is there right beside me because He experienced it all.

One situation that stands out in my mind is the life of my small cousin. Just a few years ago, before her birth, she was diagnosed to have Spina Bifida, a life threatening disease that could complicate her birth or paralyze her for life. I had no physical way of helping my small cousin. All my family could do was wonder why this was happening to them. The only useful tool was prayer. A few months later, after many tests and surgeries, my cousin finally made it through a miracle birth. She was alive and looked just like any ordinary child. The only thing that separated her from others was that she would be unable to walk because of problems with her spine.

Presently, a few years after her birth, my cousin is taking giant strides and is beginning to walk freely with the help of a leg brace and her supporting family. Not only that, but she seems to be the happiest little girl I've ever known, always smiling and cheerful despite the many challenges that face her. It is hard to see how God couldn't be present through this child's grace. Just being with her makes me realize how great God is to each one of us.

-- high school senior guy

life insurance

Do you want a fool proof plan for being sure that your life is full of joy? Do you want a guarantee that you will always have peace? Do you want a guarantee that everything will somehow always work out in the end? Do you want some kind of assurance that your life isn't going to fall apart?

Does this sound foolish? Does it sound foolish to even ask for this or hope that it exists? Not according to Jesus. But there is one hitch. This can only be done by building our lives upon our Savior.

In Galatians 5:22 God promises that if we have him with us we will have "joy" and "peace" always. As we said earlier in this book, we call these two promises fruits of the Holy Spirit. As we said earlier in this book, Romans 8:28 says "all things work together for good to those who love God" (NIV). Add to that the promise of Jesus in Matthew 7:24-29. In this passage Jesus says "Anyone who hears and obeys these teachings of mine is like a wise person who built a house on solid rock. Rain poured down, rivers flooded, and winds beat against that house. But it did not fall because it was built on solid rock" (CEV).

Jesus did not promise that storms would not hit your life or mine. But Jesus does promise that these storms in life would not destroy us *if we trust him.*

Jesus did not promise that storms would not hit your life or mine. But Jesus does promise that these storms in life would not destroy us *if we trust him*. God promises that they will not take away our “joy” or our “peace” if our lives are built on Jesus. The only question is: are our lives built on Jesus?

Jesus is clear that good things happen to both good and bad people. Jesus is also clear that bad things happen to both good and bad people. He says in Matthew 5:45 that the “sun” will “rise on the evil and the good” and that “rain” will fall “on the righteous and the unrighteous” (NIV). So bad things happening to us does not reflect whether God does or doesn’t love us. All of us catch some bad breaks and go through tough times. And all of us have some blessings that others don’t have. God doesn’t play favorites even though it may seem like it sometimes. The reality is that God promises us all a foundation of “solid rock” which will keep us safe from the troubles in life. But are we listening to the Good Shepherd’s voice and building our life on him? The reward is a solid foundation that can’t be shaken in the worst of times. The risk of not building on Christ is that the slightest thing can sink our lives. Jesus says that not to build your life on him is like building your house on “sand” where the slightest thing can destroy it, instead of building on rock (Matthew 7:26 CEV).



So do you feel that just the slightest thing sends your life into a tailspin? Or do you feel like your issues are so big that you feel like your whole life is just slipping away? Maybe you want to switch foundations. There are no promises that everything will work out the way we want it to. But God does promise that everything will work out. That is, if we “love” him and rest on his foundation for us. There is an insurance policy in life. It is not a promise that we will get everything we want but it is a promise that everything won’t fall apart when we don’t. That policy is Jesus. Got Jesus?

What’s in the Bible for me? Matthew 7:24-26

- 1) Describe someone who you know who has built his or her foundation in life on God. What kind of person are they?
- 2) Describe someone who doesn’t build his or her life on God. What is this person like?
- 3) Is it important to you to try to build on God’s foundation? Why?
- 4) What makes it hard to build on God’s foundation? What makes it logical or easy?

God does have a plan for my life...

To tell the truth, I don't think anything in my life is important enough to write a paper on but I'll give it my best shot. A couple months ago I went on a retreat at my high school. At first I just went because all of my friends were going and I wanted to jump on the bandwagon, but it turned out to be much more powerful and deeper than I ever expected. During my time on the retreat I was amazed by all the leaders talks and problems. It really opened my eyes to what is behind everyone's normal and calm exterior. It showed me what really goes on inside someone's mind such as their fears, problems, anything that you wouldn't be able to tell by just meeting and talking to that person.

A lot of people would consider me extremely lucky, my parents are together and married, I have two younger brothers who are smart and always trying to impress my parents, we all live in a great house, we have pets and go on vacations. On the outside I'm this happy go-lucky girl who is always trying to help, but underneath is a totally different story.

My biggest problem is within myself. Don't get me wrong though, because I do think I am very fortunate to have such a great family and life. However, for as long as I can remember, I have never been satisfied with myself. Whether it is my body, grades in school etc. The thing that I am always unhappy with is my weight. I get so upset about it because no matter how hard I try to lose weight it never works. I feel like I'm not meant to be skinny, and maybe I'm not but it's very hard for me to face this fact. I have never been asked to dance by a guy, gone out on a date with a guy, kissed a guy, I have never even had a close relationship with a guy and I am always blaming it on my weight. Everyday in school is total torture for me when I watch these perfectly thin beautiful girls walking down the hall with their other perfect friends and boyfriends. Sometimes I feel like God doesn't want me to be happy but I know that is not true.

Now I know these guys and girls that I say are perfect really aren't, but I feel like they are far closer to being perfect physically than I am. I know these perfect people have their share of problems, but I sometimes wish I could look like them for one day. This summer I plan to go on a serious, full commitment diet but I'm not doing it for anyone other than myself. For once in my life I want to be happy with the way I am, even if that means I have to lose weight, whatever it takes for me to really be happy with myself.

Another one of my problems is that I am never satisfied with my school grades. School really stresses me out because I'm always competing with my classmates to get better grades and I always go the extra mile in a paper or

project. I work very hard for the grades I get and I get very good grades but yet again I'm never satisfied with them. I hear myself asking, "why didn't you do better on this test?" or "why can't you ever get a better grade than her?" and all sorts of questions like that. But at the same time their questions help motivate me to do better.

These problems of mine might seem too small or insignificant compared to kids with drugs, alcohol, and parents getting divorced, etc. problems but they are my problems and they do what any other problems would do, cause stress, pain, and a low self-esteem. I really do try to love myself and have faith that God does have a plan for my life and I will try my best to figure out what it is and accomplish it.

-- high school sophomore girl

The hard road

Maybe you feel like you have already had your foundation built on Jesus and you still feel overwhelmed by what you're dealing with. Maybe you feel like you genuinely trust Jesus and the odds are still stacked against you. Don't worry. Jesus felt the same way at times. The time he felt that the most was the night before his crucifixion.

Jesus knew ahead of time God's plan for his life. And maybe you and I wish sometimes that we knew ahead of time what God's plan was for us. But what Jesus knew ahead of time probably would have crushed us inside. Jesus knew ahead of time that he was going to die by crucifixion for us. He knew it was part of God's plan for his life from the get go and he spoke about it many times during his life. The Apostles never seemed to understand. I guess they thought he was speaking figuratively. But he wasn't.

Then the night before he died, what we celebrate as Holy Thursday, after the Last Supper Jesus was alone praying. He was asking God the Father if there was any way that things could be different. In his heart he must have known that there wasn't. He must have known that this was what his life was supposed to be all about. He just wished it could be different. He must have wished that none of us were sinners. He must have wished that he didn't love us as much as he did. Then Jesus finally said to God the Father, "But do what you want, not what I want" (Luke 22:42 CEV) or another translation reads "not my will, but yours be done (NIV).

It's a difficult prayer to pray to God. It is difficult to say to God 'let your plan or will for my life be done instead of my own.' It was hard for Jesus and it is hard for us. But this is what a Christian is, someone who prays this prayer. A Christian accepts God as our Savior and Lord. To accept him as "Savior" means to accept his

unconditional love given on the cross because of this decision of Jesus'. To accept God as your "Lord" means to accept his plan for your life over your own. It takes a radical trust. It takes believing that God really has your best interests in mind. The Good News is that he does. Jesus died to show this to us.

Jesus said in Mark 8:34 "If any of you want to be my followers, you must forget about yourself. You must take up your cross and follow me" (CEV). What is your cross? It probably isn't an actual cross like Jesus' was. It is probably something else like a bad breakup or a bad family situation. Or maybe your cross is God calling you to get past a drug addiction or some other bad habit. Jesus says that if we want to be his followers that we have to take these things head on and not avoid them. We have to accept God as our Lord and carry *our* cross as best as we can. It doesn't mean we won't fall. Remember Jesus fell three times. But it does mean we can't run from our problems forever. We have to face them at some point as Christians if we truly want to be a Christian.

What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul?

What's the Good News in that you say? The Good News is that if we do accept God as our "Lord," if we do take on our crosses faithfully and give up our lives to a life of faith, we will be "saved." God can protect us then if we let him. And while there might be pain that we have to face when we face our crosses (which so often come to us because of other people's sin just as Jesus' cross came because of ours), it will all be worth it. Jesus says that "if you give up your life for me and for the Good News, you will save it" (CEV). Remember Jesus gave up his life for us and for God the Father. When he did this he didn't lose himself or lose out at all. He gained a seat at the right hand of God the Father and he gained all of us as his people. If you give up your life for God's plan you won't lose yourself. Instead you'll gain your true self, closeness with God and closeness with God's people.

If not Jesus says this: "What will you gain, if you own the whole world but destroy yourself? What could you give to get back your soul?" (Mark 8:36-37 CEV). Jesus wants us to be sure that we don't destroy ourselves. He wants us to build our lives on "solid rock," on him. And he wants us to accept God as our "Lord" and accept the crosses we have to face in life knowing that he can protect us if we do and that he can do nothing for us if we don't. The question is simple: in the midst of your suffering and issues do you want Jesus to do something for you or not. The choice is yours and the choice is mine.

What's in the Bible for me? Matthew 8:31-38

- 1) What are your crosses in life?
- 2) How can you take this cross head on instead of avoiding it or escaping the situation?
- 3) Jesus says that if you give up your life the way you wish it was and handle your crosses and accept what is difficult in your life the way it is, that you will find your true self or your self will be saved. What are you afraid of missing out on because of your cross?
- 4) Do you know anyone whose life became more inspiring because of the cross he or she carried? Describe.
- 5) Do you want to be like this person? How so?

Accepting that following God can mean following him down a hard road sometimes...

Being a teenager in today's world can be so difficult and challenging at times. I hear stories everyday about people's weekends and the drama that goes on in their lives. Sex, drugs, and alcohol cause most of this drama. I've heard some pretty messed up stories, some of them that humiliate the people involved. You would think that after all of these horrible and degrading stories, that teenagers would recognize the stupidity of doing these things. Society has the biggest effect on teenager's actions. Most kids can't think for themselves anymore, but let their friends make decisions for them. If you're hanging out with the wrong crowd, of course it's going to be much harder to ignore these temptations. What makes it easy for me is to surround myself with loving and caring friends. We don't have to have sex, do drugs, or drink alcohol to have a good time. We manage to have fun no matter what we end up doing. There's really no need to be doing these things. They don't make you permanently happy, and they end up ruining situations most of the time. Things get out of control and before you know it, all this unnecessary drama is being created. Rumors get spread so easily and sadly, people judge you on your actions. Give people good things to talk about. What makes premarital sex, drinking, and drugs cool? There's nothing good that comes out of them except a quick high or a few moments of pleasure. In the long run, it makes your life much more complicated. I'm not very religious. In fact, I'm probably one of the least religious people you'll know. There are some things in the Catholic Church that I don't agree with, but I feel strongly about the topic of drinking, drugs, and premarital sex. Any person with values and morals will tell you the wrongness of these actions. I understand that many kids my age have a great

amount of serious problems, some dealing with addictions, bulimia, anorexia, suicidal attempts, family problems, etc. but don't turn to sex, drinking, or doing drugs. You can find someone to talk to. You can take your anger out in a sport or hobby that you enjoy doing. I know it's a hard thing to do, but maybe try praying about it and God will help you out. There's so many ways to help you deal with these problems than just pushing them aside and turning towards sex, drugs, and alcohol. Doing these things is not going to help you solve your problems. It's only going to make them worse. They're definitely not going to make your problems go away. They'll probably end up getting you into more trouble and making your issues even more complicated. I'm not saying that I'm perfect. I definitely do have the average problems of a teenager, and it is hard to avoid what everyone else seems to be doing. Drinking especially is a huge temptation for me, but just being around my group of friends makes me realize that I really don't need to get drunk to have fun. I have my weak moments just like everybody else. Doing what is right is so difficult and is probably the biggest challenge that I'm faced with. Trying to follow God's rules and trying to get on the right path is a very hard road to take. But I feel it in my heart that it's the right the thing to do. I'm happier without drugs, sex, and alcohol. Just being with my friends makes me happy. Hanging out with my sisters makes me happy. Being myself makes me happy. Making my own decisions and not following what the "popular" crowd is doing is the right thing for me, and I can honestly say that I feel that coming from God. No matter how unsure or how much I am against my religion, that feeling just keeps coming back to me and I know that I'm definitely trying to do the right thing and walk in the direction towards God. I'm hoping that things will just fall into place and God will help me to become a better Catholic. But for now, keeping away from sex, drugs, and alcohol that is so available in the world today brings me the tiniest bit closer to really knowing God in my heart.

-- high school sophomore

The hard road (continued)

Everyone else is doing it. It's normal for high school kids to do it. It's what everyone else does when growing up. It's just part of being a teen. You can't expect me not to do it when all of my friends are.

Know what I'm talking about? It could be sex. It could be drugs. It could be drinking. It could be cheating or lying or spreading rumors. It could be making fun of the kid everyone else makes fun of. It could be a lot of things. Right?

And sometimes this seems like a good enough excuse. We say ‘God understands’ or ‘I’m just a teenager.’ And, yes, God does understand. He knows that sin is hard to avoid. That’s why he died for us. And, yes, you are just a teenager and it is a difficult and dangerous world to live in sometimes as a teen. There’s temptation everywhere and reasons to want to escape into sin and avoid our crosses all the time. So, yes, God does accept you. But God is also calling you. And that calling is to be different than the norm. Christians just don’t follow the norm.

Jesus said it like this: “Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). A lot of people, according to Jesus don’t follow him. In fact most people don’t truly follow him. And Jesus says that this is not an excuse. We can’t say everyone else is doing it so therefore it is right. Jesus is saying everyone else is doing it and it is still wrong. It doesn’t matter if it is sex, drugs or drinking. God doesn’t buy that excuse from any of us.

The Good News is that Jesus knows the road a Christian walks is “hard to follow.” That is why he died for us. But we are still called to walk it. That’s what Jesus meant when he said we have to take on our own crosses. It was hard, very hard, for Jesus to take his cross for us. It will be hard for us to take on his cross to follow him. That is what he does understand. What he isn’t ok with is not taking on our crosses at all. A Christian takes the forgiveness God offers. But he or she also takes the calling from God to be holy. It’s not either or. It’s both. And the fact that other people aren’t doing it isn’t an excuse. And, yes, it will be “hard to follow” God. And it’s ok to make mistakes and commit sins while trying to follow God – it’s going to happen and it was for just this reason that Jesus died. We just need to be sure that we are in fact really trying to follow God. Many people don’t. But Jesus wants to know: what will you do?

The Good News is that Jesus knows the road a Christian walks is “hard to follow.” That is why he died for us. But we are still called to walk it.

What’s in the Bible for me? Matthew 7:13-14

- 1) Well, I guess saying, ‘everybody else is doing it’ or ‘every teenager does it’ doesn’t work as an excuse for Jesus. So what are some things in your life that it seems every other teenager is doing and yet you know is wrong?
- 2) How are you doing with avoiding these things?

- 3) Who are some people you know who don't do these things?
- 4) Is it worth it to you to avoid doing these things in life? Why or why not?

Peer Pressure

The trouble I think that most teens face today is peer pressure and the pressures of fitting in with different crowds of people. Let's face it- everyone sometime in their life wishes that they were popular and could have that one night just to let loose and have the time of their lives. The only problem with that is that you lose control of what you are doing. You could be having a great time but before you know it, it backfires right in your face. There are people who would do anything to fit in with the "in crowd" such as smoke weed, drink alcohol, and even experiment in the dangers of sex. If everyone were to be accepting of others no matter who they were or what they look like, then there's a good chance that teens wouldn't be so dedicated to doing such things. But the problem is that people aren't accepting and aren't willing to reach out to people who aren't even worth their time. I think that this is what makes people feel so worthless as they do. They think that if they had a chance to hang out with such people then they would feel complete with themselves and that all is good and they would be so happy, but life never works out the way you want it to. Although you see things differently from your own perspective, others may see you far from being that way.

One of the reasons as to why people aren't so accepting to others is because they're scared of what others, especially their friends, will have to say. They may know that what they are doing is wrong and hurts others in a way that they will never know, but they are just so caught up in themselves that they are too afraid to express themselves and to show their feelings. They are in hiding of their true feelings and are so caught up in them that they show no recognition of the people they are hurting.

Teenagers should be more accepting in the way that they think and act in terms of dealing with other people. In this way, there could be less depression and worries that crosses teenager's minds everyday.

-- high school sophomore girl

Worried?

Still worried? Still find yourself getting caught up in all the worry of life? Do I look good enough? Am I smart enough? Will I ever make enough money? Will I ever get a girlfriend or boyfriend? Is my girlfriend or boyfriend going to break up with me? What if I don't make the team? What if I get turned down by that person I ask to the dance? What if people find out what happened this past weekend? What if I never am able to stop committing this sin in my life? What if my parents keep fighting?

What does Jesus say to all of these questions? What is his answer? 'Don't worry.' Jesus says, "I tell you not to worry about your life!" (Luke 12:22 CEV). Worrying about your life is God's job. Worrying about where you are with God is yours. He is the Savior. You are the one who is saved. Jesus says not to obsess about what we "wear" or even worry whether we will "eat" or not (Luke 12:22 CEV). He says "Only people who don't know God are always worrying about such things" (Luke 12:30 CEV). Only people who don't know God worry so much about their lives. Those who truly submit themselves to God have the ability to let worry go.

Jesus says, "I tell you not to worry about your life!"

Jesus says that "Your Father knows what you need. Put God's work first, and these things will be yours as well" (Luke 12:30-31 CEV). Again, it is our job to worry about where we are with God, whether we are truly making him our Savior and Lord or not. And it is *God's* job to be the Savior and Lord. Let Jesus take care of you. He so desperately wants to. He so desperately wants to be the Savior and Lord you so desperately need.

Jesus says "If you are tired from carrying heavy burdens, come to me and I will give you rest... I am gentle and humble and you will find rest" (Matthew 11:28-29). Jesus is not mean. He is gentle. He is not going to ask you to do things that aren't fair in order to serve him because he is humble and doesn't have a power complex. You can trust him. With the crosses you have trust him. With your fears trust him. With your life trust him. Build your day on him every day. Don't build it on whether your girlfriend or boyfriend sticks around. "Your Father knows what you need." And he will give it to you if you need it. If he hasn't given it to you, you must not need it. You must be stronger than you think. Trust him.

Give yourself to him. He will give you back more than you could ever want!

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 12:22-29

- 1) What are the top 5 things most teens worry about that God doesn't want them to worry about?
- 2) What are your biggest worries in life?
- 3) How do you deal with them?
- 4) God knows what you really need. What do you really need from God right now in life?

To Wrap it up:

Jesus is trustworthy. He is so trustworthy that you can trust your whole life to him. In fact, he wants you to. He doesn't want you to have to worry about your life. He doesn't want you to have to worry about your sins; he is the "good shepherd, and the good shepherd gives up his life for his sheep" (John 10:11 CEV). You don't have to pay for your sins. He has paid for them all. No matter how many. No matter how bad. All of your sins are paid for. That's the message of the stories of the Good Shepherd and the Prodigal Son. You can always come home. Always. Jesus will not undie for your sins. It is already done. You are already taken care of if you only want to be.

Jesus wants you to trust *his* insurance policy. Jesus wants you to trust his plan. He wants you to trust his plan for your crosses. He will make them end in resurrections like his. He will make you pain into a beautiful gift if you let him. He will call you down a "hard" path to follow. It is one that is narrow and if you follow it you will be different than a lot of your peers. But it will be worth it. He promises. At the end of it you will find forgiveness and peace. You will find no guilt. And you will find a renewed sense of purity in your life.

We also don't need to worry much about finding God. We don't have to do thorough scientific investigations (though I suppose we can). We don't have to ask world renowned scholars. We don't have to set up a personal interview with the pope (although I suppose that would be fun). We just have to look inside of our hearts for the shepherd's voice. It's there. We just have to listen. All the advice we will ever need is only a prayer and a heartbeat away.

If this chapter has made sense to you and you really want to try to take it to heart, than in a quiet place pray this prayer or a prayer like it:

Jesus, I want you to be my Savior. I want to know for sure that I am forgiven of all my sins. And I want to know for sure that you will never stop being my Savior. Teach me the message behind the story of the Prodigal Son and the Good Shepherd. I ask you to send your Holy Spirit to me into my heart to remind me of your unending forgiveness and your unconditional love.

Jesus, I also want you to be my God. I want you to run my life as much as possible. Teach me how not to worry so much. Please help me to trust your plan, to let go and trust that it is good. I know you are gentle and humble. I know that you love me. Help me to really trust that love from you that is already there and always will be. I love you or at least I try. Help me to always sincerely try to let you be my God. Amen.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“Our courteous Lord does not want his servants to despair even if they fall (into sin) often and grievously. Our falling (into sin) does not stop his loving us.” Julian of Norwich 39

“Although man can forget God or reject him, He never ceases to call every man to seek him, so as to find life and happiness.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 30

“Jesus scandalized the Pharisees by eating with tax collectors and sinners... Jesus affirmed: ‘I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. He went further by proclaiming before the Pharisees that since sin is universal, those who pretend not to need salvation are blind to themselves.’ Catechism of the Catholic Church 588

“Be careful of all that can block that personal contact with the living Jesus. The devil may try to use the hurts of life, and sometimes, our own mistakes--to make you feel it is impossible that Jesus really loves you, is really cleaving to you. This is a danger for all of us. And so sad, because it is completely the opposite of what Jesus is really wanting, waiting to tell you. Not only that He loves you, but even more-- He longs for you. He misses you when you don't come close.” Mother Teresa, *A Last Prayer*

Chapter 9
God, you want to know me personally?





A personal relationship

We are all called to a *personal* relationship to Christ. Remember that God told Jeremiah that in the new covenant that we would know him and his ways in “our hearts.” God wants us to know him one on one. We need to know him one on one. We need him in our lives personally. We need to be able to have personal conversations with him. And the Good News is that we can! In fact, it is part of the plan!

We are all so different. We all have different issues that we need God’s help with. We all have different personalities and ways of living life. Some of us are really organized and like structure. Some of us fly by the seat of our pants and like to play it by ear. Some of us are a little insecure. Some of us are a little too cocky. Some of us think we never sin. Some of us think we are always sinning. So we all need different things from God and therefore need to relate to him differently and personally. And we need to respect the different ways that others know him personally.

We all have different issues that we need God’s help with. We all have different personalities and ways of living life... therefore need to relate to him differently and personally.

The Bible says we all have different “gifts” and ways of living life that “come from the same Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:4 CEV). It is the “same God” working “in all of us” in “different ways” (1 Corinthians 12:5-6 CEV). And this is a good thing. This is the way God wants the Church to be so that we all have someone in it to relate to. St. Paul said all together we are like one body with each of us being different parts. Some people are like the hands that just love to do things and be active. Some people are like the mind and just love to think. The Bible says, “a body isn’t really a body, unless there is more than one part” (1 Corinthians 12:19 CEV). The body needs both the mind and the hands. And God needs both people who are deep and people who just love to do things all the time. We just need to be ourselves and then let God lead the way for us personally.

I’ll never forget the time when I switched from being a religion teacher in a high school to being a youth minister at a nearby parish. All of the kids from the high school called me “Mr. Tarrant.” All of the kids from the parish called me “Dan.” My mom called me “Daniel” and some of my best friends called me “Dan-O” or “Danny boy.” Wow was it funny when they all met! They looked at each other like they were crazy. The students thought the youth ministry kids were being disrespectful. The youth ministry kids thought the students were being too

stuff. My mom just felt like she was eighty because her little boy was being called “Mr. Tarrant.” And my friends thought it was so weird to just call me plain old “Dan.” I was the same guy. I was just in different personal relationships to different people. The same is true with God. He is the same God. He just has a wide variety of people.

So we are all called to relate to God in different ways and we have to find our own *personal* connection with Jesus. Jesus doesn't want us to just go to Church and go home. He wants us to know him one on one. And that will make it different for each of us. But that is good! God will manage! In fact, the Church says that everything with God starts with our own “personal encounter” with Jesus in our “own spiritual experience” (Ecclesia in America 7). And the Bible says “Suppose a foot says, ‘I’m not a hand, and so I’m not a part of the body.’ Wouldn’t the foot still belong to the body?” (1 Corinthians 12:15 CEV). The same is true for you. You may not feel like you relate to God the way some other Catholics do. So what? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you believe in Mary and the Saints? Do you believe in the Eucharist? Then you're Catholic. So be the part that you are. Even if it's a pretty weird part. I think God likes weird anyway.

So what is your own experience of God? Do you feel like you haven't even had one? Do you want to have one? Maybe looking closely at some of the experiences of the different people who Jesus met in his life will help us look at how we can let Jesus meet us in our own lives. Some of these people were terrible sinners. Some had it together spiritually or thought they did when they met him. Some were adulterers. Some were intellectuals. Some were in the military. Some were rich. Some were poor. Some were popular. Some were rejected by society. Some accepted Jesus. And some walked away. Where are you? And where is he in your life? Are you accepting him? Do you feel like you know him? Do you want to? Do you feel like you have personally had an experience of Jesus? Jesus wants you to. He doesn't want you just to hang out on the sidelines and think that this God thing is just for everyone else. It's for you too! Want it?

...the Church says that everything with God starts with our own “personal encounter” with Jesus in our “own spiritual experience...”

Some were intellectuals. Some were in the military. Some were rich. Some were poor. Some were popular. Some were rejected by society. Some accepted Jesus. And some walked away. Where are you? And where is he in your life?

Feeling pretty confident?

Ever made an assumption about someone based on the way they looked or where they lived only to find out you were very wrong about them. Or have you ever felt judged wrongly for the way you dress or look knowing the person doing the judging has no idea.

I have. I have been on both sides of that fence. Here's an example. One time when I was playing soccer in high school at the state team soccer tryouts I saw this skinny rather dorky looking kid on the sideline with his soccer shorts on backwards. The coach never even put him in during the tryout. And I remember thinking to myself, 'don't be nervous; you can't possibly be as bad as that kid.' On the second day of the weekend long tryout the coach let him play in a scrimmage we had against an older team. I thought to myself, 'this poor kid; why is the coach putting him now against the toughest competition of the whole weekend; that's mean.' Well, when the kid stepped on the field the ball seemed glued to his foot. I thought I was imagining things. No kidding! He scored two goals on about three plays. Then the coach took him off the field. It turned out that he played for the youth National Soccer Team. Wow was I humbled. It turned out that I didn't make the team that year and he did after playing for a grand total of two minutes. He now plays professional soccer in the MLS.

I think that because of this I know how Nathaniel felt when he first met Jesus. When Nathaniel heard of Jesus he said to his friend Philip that Jesus couldn't possibly be the Messiah because Jesus came from Nazareth. Nathaniel said, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" (John 1:46 CEV). Nazareth wasn't the best of areas. Imagine one of the worst parts of a major city near where you live and you would be imagining a place like Nazareth. Jesus' hometown wasn't exactly full of mansions and Mercedes.

Without even meeting Jesus Nathaniel discredited him. Nathaniel just assumed that Jesus wasn't for real. That he couldn't be anybody of any importance for Nathaniel. The key thing is that this was "without meeting" Jesus. Sometimes we do the same thing. Without really meeting Jesus sometimes we assume that he can't really be God or sinless or someone powerful enough to help *us* with *our* issues. Without meeting him we assume he can't ever be *our* Messiah. We've committed too many sins. Our issues are really too big for God to want to get involved or for religion to help.

But Philip persisted and said to Nathaniel, "Come and see" (John 1:46 CEV). And Nathaniel did. That's the other key thing about Nathaniel. He was willing to honestly check this Jesus guy out. When Jesus met him Jesus said to Nathaniel that Nathaniel was "a true descendent of our ancestor Israel" who "isn't deceitful" (John 1:47

CEV). For some reason this blew Nathaniel away. Maybe Nathaniel was known for his brutal honesty or his trustworthiness. Maybe Nathaniel was known as a truly faithful Jew. Whatever it was, he said to Jesus in shock, “How do you know me?” (John 1:48 CEV).

Then Jesus proceeded to tell Nathaniel where he spent the afternoon, “under a fig tree” (John 1:48 CEV). Nathaniel turned and said, “you are the Son of God...!” (John 1:49). Nathaniel must have felt a little bit humbled and embarrassed. And a lot in awe. In fact he was so much in awe that he left everything and became one of Jesus’ closest followers.

Nathaniel was a skeptic. He thought he knew how life worked and Jesus just didn’t fit into the way he thought it was. I was a skeptic about that soccer player. I was also at different times in my life a skeptic about Jesus. It turns out I was wrong on both accounts.

But the only way I could ever find out about that soccer player was to get on the field with him. I’ll never forget that day as long as I live. The only way I could ever find out about Jesus was to check him out. To go on retreats or go to prayer meetings or hear witness talks given by people who had a personal relationship to him. I was so blown away by what I heard and saw at these types of things that no matter how illogical it was I realized that Jesus was real. I realized I needed to accept him into my life. And I did. That is also something I’ll never forget as long as I live. I asked Jesus to let me get to know him personally in my “heart” as God says to in Jeremiah.

Now I know two things. That skinny soccer player was a lot better than I thought he was. And now that I have chosen to know Jesus personally I have realized that Jesus was right the whole time about life and that he is a lot more powerful than I ever gave him credit for. Feeling skeptical? Well check Jesus out for real. Take a risk in knowing him personally. Let him in a little in your life for real. If not at least take a risk and honestly listen to someone you know who does.

What’s in the Bible for me? John 1:43-51

- 1) Do you find yourself doubting your faith a lot or is it just something that makes sense to you? Why?
- 2) Have you ever underestimated the power of God in your life? What was that like?
- 3) Have you ever had a moment in life where everything just clicked with God and you were overwhelmed with how real he was? What was that like?
- 4) Have you ever taken a chance on God by going on a retreat or something like that? What was that like?

I never really thought about my religion

When I was in grade school I never really thought about my religion. I went to church every Sunday but never actually prayed or talked to God. But as I got older I started to realize how important my relationship with God should be. Instead of just going to church and not participating I should be praying at night and take my time with God more seriously. During February of my freshman year in high school some kids from my grade school and I went to a retreat in Ocean City, New Jersey. Most of the other kids had gone to Steubenville but I had never been on a retreat like this before. After the weekend ended I could not wait to go on another retreat. This year I saw a lot of opportunities to go on a retreat like the Shine Retreat but I was just too busy. This summer I am going to the retreat at Steubenville, Ohio. I heard so many great things about it and I cannot wait to experience it first hand. I am glad that I went on the shore retreat because it really gave me a chance to develop my relationship with God. As I continue going on retreats I am going to try to become as close to God as possible. I have even become more involved in my youth group volunteering my time and attending prayer meetings.

I think this change in my opinion of religion has definitely changed me for the better because now I can share with others how going on one simple retreat made me feel so much closer to God. Sometimes it is hard to keep praying daily but as long as I try to pray at least once a week I still feel a close relationship with God. Hopefully other kids will get the same feeling out of these retreats as I did because I am so grateful for my new friendship with God.

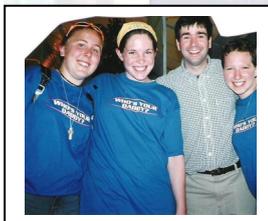
-- high school sophomore girl

What God wants to give

There is a story often used in homilies of a boy who was promised a new car when he graduated high school from his father. At the graduation party his father simply gave his son a Bible. The son was quite upset but didn't share his frustration with his father. On top of this his father asked that the son would read the Bible every day in college. The son promised he would but never did. It turned out the check for the new car was in the Bible. But the son never got it because he never opened it.

Jesus says in John 4:10 "You don't know what God wants to give you" (CEV). I think so often in life we turn away from God because we don't really understand what he wants to give us. We just really haven't heard the

Good News or understand how good it is. We don't understand what it really means that we are loved unconditionally and don't need to be perfect to be accepted by God. Or we don't understand that a life that is working toward being without sin really is better, really is more fun, more full of peace, and really is possible. But even more than this we don't understand that a one on one relationship with God, which makes these things possible, really is available or worthwhile. We never heard or understood what God wants to give us. We never heard or understood Jesus when he says "I came so that everyone would have life and have it in its fullest" (John 10:10 CEV). Jesus' plan is for you to have the best, most enjoyable and fulfilling life possible. It's just that sometimes we don't really know what God wants to give us: himself one on one and so much more!



Jesus said this quote from John 4:10 about us not knowing what God wants to give us to a woman he met at a well. She was walking out to the well at noon, which meant that there was probably something wrong. She was probably trying to avoid the other people going to the well for some reason, because no one would go out to the well to carry water back to town in the middle of the hot day. She was an outsider, an outcast from the world for some reason. It turns out the reason was that she was embarrassed of the sin she was living in. And she just happens to bump into Jesus there at the well all by himself.

That's when in conversation Jesus said to her that she didn't know what God wanted to give her. Jesus also said that she didn't fully understand just who she was talking to. But Jesus continued the conversation anyway. As the conversation continues Jesus says that he can give her a kind of water that is different from the water she came to get from the well. He said that he would give to anyone who asked for it a "spring of water" inside of him or her that would constantly refresh the person from the inside out (John 4:13-14 NIV).

The woman didn't understand. So Jesus asked her about her life. He asks her about her husband and she says she has none. Then Jesus blows her away by saying "You're telling the truth... You have already been married five times and the man you are now living with isn't your husband" (John 4:17-18 CEV). She almost fell over with both humiliation and awe. And she exclaimed, "I can see you are a prophet" (John 4:19 CEV).

Then she tried to change the direction of the conversation. She must have been touched by God's power in some way and asked how to pray. Maybe she could have some of that internal refreshment Jesus offered. She asked if she had to be on a certain mountain or in a Temple in Jerusalem. Then Jesus revealed what we already know. God is looking for a personal relationship. Jesus said: "the time is coming when you won't worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem... Even now the true worshippers are being led by the Spirit to worship the Father

according to the truth... God is Spirit, and those who worship him must be led by the Spirit to worship him according to the truth” (John 4:21-24 CEV).

Jesus explained that there are only two things necessary for having a relationship with God. Accepting his Spirit into your life and accepting his truth into your life. In other words accept God and accept the truth he speaks to you. Nothing more. It isn't complicated. As we said earlier, Catholic Christianity just boils down to one thing: a “yes” or a “no” to accepting God in one's life.

This woman that Jesus met at the well, who was stuck in so much sin, realized she was a sinner when Jesus spoke to her and just wanted to know what it really took to be right with God. Jesus said it didn't take anything fancy. Just getting real with him. Accepting him. And accepting the truth he spoke. Personally. When it came down to it Jesus explains that it's not about doing a certain ritual in a special place. It's about accepting God one on one. It's only then that our rituals as Catholics make any sense. As the Church says: the real “starting point” for all of us with God is a “personal encounter with the Lord” (Ecclesia in America 3,7). The question is: do we ever want to start or restart if we have to?

The woman at the well did and realized she could know God one on one even as an imperfect sinner. She wanted that internal refreshment in her life. She wanted the peace and joy that comes from a one on one relationship to God. Do we want to know him one on one? This is what God wants to give us. A one on one relationship with a God who loves us, who wants to give us life to the fullest with every bit of joy possible and without sin. A God beyond belief we are asked to believe in. Will we? One on one? For real?

What's in the Bible for me? John 4:3-41

- 1) Do you feel like you have a personal relationship to Jesus or does faith just seem like a bunch of rituals to you?
- 2) What do you think it would take to accept God into your heart one on one with him? Or what has it been like since you have?
- 3) Do you think your Catholicism would or does make more sense after you have a personal relationship to Jesus? Why or why not?
- 4) What would you say to someone who feels distant and disconnected from God like the woman Jesus met at the well?

What do you do when nobody is there for you?

*So what do you do when nobody is there for you? What do you do when no life exists? Where do I go when I reach a dead end? I go somewhere where I'm always going to be wanted. I go deep inside myself and I talk to God. I know he protected me. He kept me alive. He kept me breathing. And he gave me the power to use my pain and turn the tables and turn my pain to power. But I don't care what people think about me. I don't care if they turn away. If I'm crazy to them. Then that's too bad for them. They are sick just like I was. They do the same f***ed up sh** that I did.*

The point I am trying to make is that everybody has a cross to bear. So respect that in people and live for the moment. Because when we think about it, life isn't that bad. We make it into a game. We go along with everyone else. We give ourselves up too easy. We snap too easy.

Are we ready to blame others and take it out on people that are under us when the people that are under us go through stuff just like everybody? But in the eyes of God, He respects us wherever we are. He loves us no matter what we did. And he has a plan for us all. He has the real plan. Our task is simply just to live! No more. We are not supposed to try. God will take care of our lives. We are just supposed to take advantage of the situations he gives us. And learn from them. So that one-day we can be strong. And one day we can change the world around us.

So if someone close dies, instead of blaming God, understand why they were even in your life. And all that they gave you. And then be thankful and carry on their memory in the way you live. This is just earth and nobody goes away forever. The real reunion is in heaven. We have all been crazy. We have all been messed up. We all have a past that we somehow want to forget. But people change. So why not this time change for the good? Why can't this time we give thanks? Why not this time let's get back connected to people we need to reconcile.

-- high school junior guy

"He respects us wherever we are. He loves us no matter what we did. And he has a plan for us all. He has the real plan."

What God wants back

As we said earlier in Luke's Gospel Jesus tells a story about a father who gave half of his possessions to his son only to have his son waste it on partying and prostitutes. The father amazingly accepts the son back and even throws a party for him when he returns with nothing. The party was thrown not because the son came to his senses

and saved his money. No the party was thrown just because the son came home even though he wasted all of his father's money. Jesus explains that God is just happy that we come home to him. Even if we have wasted everything God has given us, God will still just want us home. He will even throw a party upon our arrival and be happy just for our company. It's a story of unconditional love. It is a story to show us that the only thing God wants from us is us. Nothing more. He will take us as sinners or saints or anywhere in between. He just wants us. He just wants a relationship.

No place is this unconditional love more obvious than at the cross of Jesus. But Jesus didn't just show this love to us in his death. He showed this love to us in his relationships to others in his life. A great example of this is shown in chapter 8 of John's Gospel. A woman was caught by the Pharisees in the act of committing adultery. She was caught having sex with someone who wasn't her husband. There was no escaping the truth. There was no hiding. No lie could get her out of the situation she was in. She had sinned and sinned big.

The Pharisees grabbed her and dragged her out into the street in front of Jesus where they were going to stone her to death – that is throw huge stones at her until she died. This poor woman. She was wrecking her family. Ignoring her marriage. Destroying her husband's life. And now she was about to meet God in her death.

But the Good News is that God had other plans. God had chosen to meet her in her life. Enter Jesus. God in the flesh. The Pharisees decided while they had Jesus there that they would try to test Jesus. They asked him, "What do you say (we should do)?" (John 8:5 CEV). If Jesus said to ignore her sin than he would be saying that adultery is ok and the people would stop following him – which is what the Pharisees wanted. Or if Jesus said to stone her, which was the punishment for adultery, the people would be confused because of all of his stories of God's unconditional love.

So what does Jesus do? He knows the Pharisees are trying to catch him in a trap. So he ignores them and bends down to write in the sand. He trusts that their consciences will show them the way. But they ask him again. And again. So much for them figuring it out on their own. So he helps their consciences along. He says, "If any of you have never sinned, then go ahead and throw the first stone at her!" (John 8:7 CEV).

Jesus must have had the Spirit of God in him. People must have just known right from wrong when they talked to him. He must have been so pure that people were convinced in their hearts of what the right thing to do was when he spoke. I say this because with no further argument or conversation the Pharisees all put their stones down and walked away. Remember what we said earlier about God being the only person with the right to forgive

sins? Remember only a sinless person would have the right to do this? Well obviously in Jesus' eyes only a sinless person would have the right to condemn someone for their sins as well.

So the woman who was about to meet God in death instead got to meet God in her life. And that God did not condemn her even though he had every right to. Instead he chose to be on her side and protect her – even though she was totally in the wrong!!! Let me say it again. God chose to be on her side and to protect her even though she was totally in the wrong!!! You see God does not want to punish us. He doesn't! He doesn't want us only if we are perfect. He doesn't want us only if we are sinless. He just wants us! As we are! That's the message of Jesus' death on the cross. But that is also the message of Jesus' life.

What does God want to give us? Just himself. What does God want back? Just us! Sins and good deeds and all!

In the end does Jesus say that the woman's actions were ok? No! The last thing he says to the woman is "don't sin anymore" (John 8:11 CEV). Jesus is definitely not ok with her actions. But Jesus is ok with her. He says to her just before saying not to sin anymore: "I am not going to accuse you" (John 8:11 CEV). That's the whole point of the cross. God accuses sin and says it is wrong. He says it is so serious that it warrants death. But he doesn't want to accuse us as sinners. He lets Jesus suffer for our sins so we can be accepted. The only question is do we want to be accepted?

If Jesus can forgive this woman he can forgive you. If Jesus would choose to be on her side and still love her after her sin than he can do the same for you. Now this woman was so humiliated, confused, hurt and scared to run away from Jesus. Maybe you feel the same way. Well don't worry. There is no need to run away. Remember God is the only one with the right to judge and he chooses not to. Again that's the point of the cross of Jesus and the life of Jesus. The only question is, are you and I going to accept it?

What does God want back for his love and his great plan for our lives? Sinlessness? No. Perfection? No. Just us. Nothing more. He died and lived so that it would be enough.

What's in the Bible for me? John 8:1-11

- 1) Jesus didn't accuse or judge the woman caught in adultery. How do you think he would treat you when you struggle with sin?
- 2) What do you think Jesus would say to you right now if he had a conversation with you about your past mistakes and sins?

- 3) If Jesus forgave this woman, do you think there is anyone who he wouldn't forgive? Why?
- 4) What do you think could really stop someone from being forgiven? Why?

Mary's relationship to God

If all God wants is just a relationship – if all God wants is just us – than there is no greater example of someone who gave him or herself than Mary. She accepted Jesus from God when it would put her engagement in danger. Remember she was given the gift of Jesus in her womb before she ever slept with Joseph and while she was engaged to him! I don't know of too many fiancés who would be very excited about a pregnant wife-to-be, particularly when the fiancé never slept with her. The first thing that Jesus would bring to Mary was shame and confusion. But Mary still gave herself to God and his plan.

That's how it began for Mary with Jesus. How it ended wasn't all that much better. She had to accept that she had to watch her son and her God die before her eyes on the cross, not knowing that it was God's plan for him to rise from the dead. But still she never swayed in her obedience.

What was her trick? How did she stay so “full of grace” (Luke 1:28 NAB)? Perhaps her trick to it all is revealed early on in Luke's Gospel. Luke said that Mary “treasured up... and pondered... in her heart” everything that Jesus did. She just paid attention to Jesus and what God was revealing through him. She never took her eyes off of him and took the time to really “ponder” or think about what it all meant. She just gave God time in her life. In fact she just gave God so much time in her life that she really gave God her life itself. She said, “I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Luke 1:38 NAB). She gave herself to him. Which is all we have to do. We just have to let go and let God have us like a handmaid or a servant is owned by her owner. That's where true peace is at. That's where grace is at.

But there is another part to the equation. The Bible says that Mary was “full of grace.” What does that really mean? What is grace? And what does it mean to be filled to the brim with it? And why would we want to be?

Grace is just God's gift to us. It is the greatest gift he has to give. Grace is God's unconditional love for us, revealed at the cross. Grace is what gives us the right and the ability to be close to God or to have a relationship



with him. Grace is God's decision to love us no matter what – a decision ultimately revealed by God's death on the cross for our sins so we wouldn't be punished or "accused."

Mary was full of grace. So completely full of grace that she was sinless. She was so filled with the fact that God loved her that she just couldn't be distracted from his love in her life by anything. Now I know that we will never be that full of grace. I don't know about you but I've already committed my share of sins! But how do we get to the point where we are someday full of grace like Mary? Really, we just have to use the trick that Mary did.

That's just what we have to do. Accept God's grace. Trust God's grace. Be full of God's grace. Believe in God's grace. And give ourselves to God's grace. It's what Mary did.

What was Mary's trick? She had a real relationship to God. She "pondered" and "treasured" all that he said. And she accepted it into her life. She accepted grace. She accepted God's love – so much so that she was full of his love. She just treasured his love for her, made it her number one thing in life. Everything took a back seat to it. What, Joseph might not accept me – well God loves me. What, I may look like I committed adultery – well God loves me and has a plan for this. What, my son and God Jesus is dying and there is nothing I can do about it – God loves me and even has a plan for this. She just

trusted God and accepts his grace or love as a reality in her life. She didn't waver from believing it was there – no matter how much sin and judgment in the world surrounded her.

That's just what we have to do. Accept God's grace. Trust God's grace. Be full of God's grace. Believe in God's grace. And give ourselves to God's grace. It's what Mary did. It's what Christians are supposed to do. If you're having a hard time just ask God to help you. Say to him, "Please, make me full of grace like Mary was full of grace." He will. It's part of his plan for your life. It's just a matter of whether we want grace or not. I don't understand why we wouldn't or why I ever rejected it. I mean it's free, given unconditionally at the cross, and it's awesome. It will fill us with peace in the midst of our shame over our own sinfulness and in the midst of a world that makes life so hard. It's the result of God's gift of himself when he gave up Jesus for us. It is love for you and me. Where would we be without it? We'd be in a place with no unconditional love from God and no peace in our souls. That sounds like hell to me. I don't want that. Not this life or in the next. And that's not what God wants for you or me either. Remember, "God wants everyone to be saved" – which means he wants everyone in Heaven (1 Timothy 2:4 CEV). That's why he died to give us grace. He's dying for us to accept it – literally. He's dying for us to accept his unconditional love and have peace like Mary did in the midst of everything. Ask God to make you

full of grace like Mary. It's a better way to live. And a better way to die. Where would we be without it? And do you really want to be there? It'd be a shame to waste all that love!

What's in the Bible for me? Luke 1:26-38

- 1) When was a time in your life when you felt "full of grace" like Mary?
- 2) When was a time when you didn't?
- 3) Do you think you are a deep person who thinks a lot about life and God? What kind of things do you think about?
- 4) Have you ever felt like God really guided your thoughts while you were praying or thinking about him? What do you think he was trying to say to you?

Just a simple prayer and a simple rosary in my pocket

"Be patient and be tough, this pain will be useful to you someday." I say this to myself when I want to give up. I say this when I want to give in. This I heard in theology class. For me in my life the word "praying" is new to me. It is something that I haven't always believed in. It is now something I think I will do pretty much every night. But why do I pray? Why do I beg for Mercy? Why do I "talk to the wall"? Because sometimes, it is the only thing I got left. The only thing that makes me feel better.

*In my life I see and feel a lot of hate. I see it in people; I see it in their ways; and I see it when they look down on me. I don't have good relations with people you might say. I've been underestimated my whole life. I've been the kid that was always pushed to the side. I suffer from addictions that tempt me everyday and in every way. I'm used to hating myself. So I thought I'd try something new. I found that it took a chance to take a step closer to God. All the sh** I did; all the places I've been. I thought he'd never forgive me. But it was the opposite. He took me in with arms wide open.*

Just a simple prayer every night. And a simple Rosary in my pocket that is with me everywhere, I can beat anything. Anything life has to throw my way. And why is this? Because I gave it a shot, I did something that I didn't even want. But it paid off. And now, I'm in control of my life. For once, I live my own life.

If I know one thing in life, if I could bet my life on one thing, it is that God listens when you pray. That wall you think your talking to is really God listening to your every word. But he answers your prayers in ways we don't think. It might take a couple of weeks, months, or maybe years. But they will get answered. Bad things happen to good people for a reason. Because God knows we can handle them. He's pushing us when we are at our worst. Because he keeps us alive. And that is the best gift he can give. The ability to wake up and see the sun; to feel the wind; to smell the grass; and to go to sleep each and every night with a better sense of what this life is all about.

-- high school junior guy

Feeling like a lightning rod?

Have you ever felt like if you stepped into a Church you'd be struck down? Have you ever felt like you had done something that was just so wrong that you didn't even want to talk to God about it? Have you ever felt so messed up that you just wanted to avoid God all together? Well if you ever have the Apostle Peter, yes Peter, can definitely relate to you! Don't believe me? Well read Luke 5.

Peter was coming in from pulling an all-nighter on his fishing boat working hard to catch fish to sell at the market just to get by. He comes in the next morning and has caught absolutely nothing. And this was bad because there was certainly no welfare in Galilee. When he arrives at the shore Jesus, of all people, is standing there preaching to hundreds of people. Peter goes about his business cleaning his nets. He didn't come here to hear Jesus talk. He just wanted to go home and go to bed. This God thing really wasn't his thing anyway he figured. If Jesus only knew his sins he'd probably move his preaching elsewhere, Peter must have figured.

But what does Jesus do? He asks Peter if he can borrow Peter's boat so he can push it out into the water a little bit and preach from there without all the people crowding in on him. Peter says ok. I mean Jesus was a nice enough person. Peter had nothing against him and it really didn't matter; Peter was done fishing for the day. And it probably wasn't worth fighting anyway.

But after Jesus had finished teaching the people he wanted to repay Peter. So he asked Peter to take the boat out fishing again. Peter must have thought Jesus was crazy because he says, "Master, we have worked hard all night long and have not caught a thing" (Luke 5:5 CEV). But Peter didn't want to argue with Jesus so he must have figured he would just do what Jesus said. Well they go out and immediately catch so many fish when they let down the nets just once that the boat almost sank.

So what does Peter do? Pay attention. He immediately says, “Lord, don’t come near me! I am a sinner” (Luke 5:8 CEV). Peter realized he was in the presence of someone very holy. And Peter was terrified to be this close to God because he knew he was far from holy. He was so afraid that he asked Jesus to leave. Talk about thinking God is going to strike you down with lightning!

Now the Bible doesn’t say what Peter’s sins were, but they must have been serious for him to respond this way. Most people would be happy to see a miracle. But for Peter this meant that God was very real and this was frightening for Peter because of the way he had been living his life. He felt doomed. And he felt unforgivable. He felt like he was a sinner and was stuck that way. If only Jesus knew his sins. But as we learned from the story of the woman Jesus met at the well, Jesus knew everyone’s sins.

So what did Jesus say back to Peter? He said, “Don’t be afraid” (Luke 5:10 CEV). He wanted to tell Peter, ‘don’t be afraid of your sins.’ And he would want to tell you the same thing. He knew all of Peter’s sins. And he knows all of yours. Like it or not. And he doesn’t want any of us to be afraid because of them.

Peter eventually trusted Jesus and accepted his love. And what did Jesus do with Peter? Made him the first Pope! Still think God can’t have a plan for you if you have sinned? Still think God would strike you down with lightning? He didn’t strike Peter down. Instead Jesus immediately said to Peter after telling him not to be afraid, “From now on you will bring in people instead of fish” (Luke 5:10 CEV).

God can use anyone. It doesn’t matter how much you have messed up. And God can forgive anyone. It doesn’t matter what the sin is. That’s the Good News. There is love and a plan for everyone! Regardless of what you have done! Peter accepted it. Peter accepted it was possible to be loved unconditionally by God. Then he spent the rest of his life helping others to accept it too! Jesus took this person caught up in all kinds of sin and eventually made him the “rock” on which he will “build” his “Church” (Matthew 16:18 CEV). Then Jesus said that this foundation for his Church would be made so strong by God that “death itself” would not be able to destroy what was built (Matthew 16:18 CEV).

Don’t believe that you could be a rock for God’s Church? Feel more like a lightning rod? Well, we all have at different times. Even Peter. The question really is do we believe God wants to send down lightning or love. The Bible says love. What do you say?

God can use anyone. It doesn’t matter how much you have messed up. And God can forgive anyone. It doesn’t matter what the sin is. That’s the Good News.

For those who have turned back

Perhaps you've already done the Peter thing. Perhaps you have felt like a lightning rod, asked God to forgive you and been turned into a love rod. Perhaps you've come to believe that God can forgive you and have even been so convinced that God has used you like Peter to fish for people and help them see God's love. But some of us after giving our lives to God take them back. In fact, I think all of us do in some way or another at some point. It's only human.

But here's the problem. Once we've followed God, walked away from our sins and fall back again into them we think to ourselves 'well now it's really over.' We think God gave us a second chance and we don't think he will give us a third. Well, that's when we need to keep reading the story of Peter because God gave him more than just one more chance. He gave him at least three more! Which by the way Peter all blew!

Remember Peter chose to follow Christ. He gave up his whole life to God. He accepted he was a sinner but was so blown away by the fact that he could be forgiven he just gave his whole life to Jesus. He even told Jesus that he was willing to go to "jail" for Jesus and even "die" for him (Luke 22:33 CEV). Well it turns out that when all the chips were down and Jesus needed Peter more than anything, Peter didn't stick by Jesus' side. In fact three times Peter said he didn't know Jesus after Jesus was taken to be crucified. Peter, the "rock" upon which Jesus' Church was built, failed.

On top of this Jesus told Peter that this would happen and still Peter could do nothing about it. Jesus told Peter that he would fail God at some point. God tells all of us the same thing. You and I will sin again. We may not know when and we may not know how. But we will make mistakes again and go against God's plan for our lives. Sin happens! The question is what will be done when it does. Jesus told Peter before Peter denied him three times not to be afraid because "I have prayed that your faith will be strong. And when you come back to me, help the others" (Luke 22:32 CEV).

Jesus knows that we will make mistakes. He knows that we will sin again. He knows that we are imperfect. He has a plan for it. And it is the same plan as the one for Peter. It is the cross. It is a very real and permanent plan. And it counts for you and me just as much as it did for Peter.

It says in the Bible that after Peter denied Jesus the third time that Jesus "turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:61 CEV). I don't know what Peter was thinking. All it says in the Bible is that "Peter went out and cried hard" (Luke 22:62 CEV). It must have been crushing for Peter, the one Apostle who was supposed to be the rock for

everyone else to fail Jesus like this. But I wonder if Peter remembered what Jesus said to him when he asked Jesus about how many times a person should be forgiven if that person sins against you. Peter said, “is seven times enough” (Matthew 18:21 CEV). Jesus said back to Peter, “Not just seven times, but seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22 CEV). Jesus used a number this large to say to forgive the person an infinite number of times if the person asks for forgiveness an infinite number of times. This is the way to be a Christian.

Well Peter needed this kind of love from Jesus. He needed to be forgiven again. The Good News is that Jesus made sure that Peter knew he was. The crucifixion was followed three days later by Jesus’ resurrection and at the resurrection Jesus pulled Peter aside and had a one on one conversation with him. In that conversation Jesus asked Peter three times “Do you love me” (John 21:16 CEV). Three times Peter said, “yes.” And after each “yes” from Peter Jesus asked Peter to again take care of his “sheep” meaning God’s people (John 21:16 CEV). Jesus could have demoted Peter, taken away his rights as the “rock” for the Church. He could have rejected Peter altogether. But to do this would be to reject the meaning of the cross. God didn’t take a single thing away from Peter. He just asked Peter to again love him, to give himself to God again. And Peter did. So the question isn’t whether you or I will sin again. And the question isn’t whether God will accept us back again. What was done on the cross was done permanently. Nothing can take that forgiveness away from you. Nothing can undo what was done there. So the question really is will you accept God again? Not will he accept you again. It’s hard when we sin to come back. It’s even harder when people look up to us and expect us to be holy and to be a rock for them. But what will you do? Will you come back and be that rock again? Will you be honest about your sins and be forgiven? Or will you walk away?

Let yourself be forgiven... God knew what he was getting into when he died for you. And it wasn't a mistake.

Remember the only thing that made Peter who he was wasn’t his own sinlessness. It was his willingness to accept Christ’s forgiveness. Willing? Than that’s enough. Let yourself be forgiven. And continue to let yourself be an instrument to other people finding forgiveness. God knew what he was getting into when he died for you. And it wasn’t a mistake. It was a deliberate choice on his part. You just have to make a deliberate choice on your part and ask to be forgiven and come back. What else is there to do anyway?

I learned that as long as I am sorry I'll end up in Heaven with Jesus and God

When I was younger I had many questions about my religion. I grew up going to public school I only recently started going to Catholic school. I went to C.C.D. It's like catholic school, but you still miss out on a lot of stuff.

I was very interested in Jesus but as I grew older I seemed to stray away. As a younger girl I was always taught to say my prayers. It didn't bother me to do it; it was a normal thing. But I began to think that you don't need to say a certain prayer to talk to Jesus/God. I started talking to them in my own way. There are so many questions I have. I wonder why Jesus gave his life for us and was that Gods intention for his only son when sent to us.

I always wondered about the Ten Commandments did he just pull them out of the air or did he really think about them. I often wondered about heaven and hell; is there really a place that we go to when we die. Would he actually send us to eternal life in hell for our mistakes?

But I learned, as I grew older and more mature, that he will forgive us and forget. I now know that whatever mistakes I make during this lifetime as long as I'm truly sorry I'll end up in heaven with Jesus and God.

-- high school sophomore girl

To conclude:

God's love really is unending. Jesus showed it with his stories about the Prodigal Son and the Good Shepherd. He showed it with his death for all of how sins no matter how many there are. But he also showed it with his life. He truly practiced what he preached when he said to forgive people "seventy times seven times" or infinitely.

God's love and forgiveness for you is infinite. You cannot do anything to destroy that. No sin, no action at all, can take this love away. That's what grace is: unconditional love. It was given permanently at the cross. The only question is do we want to accept it permanently – even when we have sinned and fallen away from God.

Mary knew how to accept this love all of the time. And she knew how to live in such a way as to always give it out to others. That is why the Bible says that she is "full of grace." Need more grace for your own sins or the

sins of others? Turn to her. She has an unending supply given to her by God. If only we could have half of the grace Mary had – our world would be an amazing place to live. People would forgive others of any wrong. There would be love everywhere. No grudges. No hatred. No judgments. It would be an amazing place to live in and an amazing life to live. The only question is do we want this life? Are we willing to accept God and his grace? And are we willing to really let go and give ourselves to it? There is an unending supply of peace and forgiveness if we are willing.

All God wants is a personal relationship to him. It is where it all starts for us spiritually. It all just starts with him and ourselves. But will we let there be an “us.” Will we let this relationship be a part of our lives? Jesus is dying to give it to us.

If this chapter has made sense and you want to have a personal relationship to God or just have your relationship with God be stronger find a quiet place where you can sit with God and pray this prayer or a prayer like it:

God, I want to have a personal relationship with you. I want to know your Son, Jesus, in my heart personally. That is what you promised you would give us when you spoke to the prophet Jeremiah. That is what you promised you would give us through Jesus. I want to take you up on that offer. Please come into my heart and live there. Remind me daily that you love me. Remind me that you have a personal plan for my life. Help me to let go and trust it. Help me to trust you. Help me to know you one on one. Help me to know that you are always willing to forgive me. And help me to feel you in my heart, know that it is true and know that you are there always. I love you.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“I worry some of you still have not really met Jesus--one-to-one--you and Jesus alone. We may spend time in chapel--but have you seen with the eyes of your soul how He looks at you with love? Do you really know the living Jesus--not from books but from being with Him in your heart? Have you heard the loving words He speaks to you? Never give up this daily intimate contact with Jesus as the real living person--not just the idea. How can we last even

one day without hearing Jesus "I love you?" Impossible. Our souls needs that as much as the body needs to breathe the air. If not, prayer is dead- meditation, only thinking.” Mother Teresa, *A Last Prayer*

“...teachers must not imagine that a single kind of soul has been entrusted to them, and that consequently it is lawful to teach and form equally all the faithful in true piety with one and the same method! Let them realize that some are in Christ as newborn babies, others as adolescents, and still others as adults...” Catechism of the Catholic Church 24

“The starting-point of... evangelization is in fact the encounter with the Lord... If it is genuine, the personal encounter with the Lord will also bring a renewal of the Church... the encounter with the living Christ is the path to conversion...” Ecclesia in America 3 and 7

“My heart is sorrowful, Jesus said, because even chosen souls do not understand the greatness of My mercy. Their relationship with Me is, in certain ways, imbued with mistrust. Oh how much that wounds my heart! Remember My Passion, and if you do not believe My words, at least believe My wounds... No soul that has called upon my mercy has ever been disappointed.” Jesus to St. Faustina 379 and 1541



Chapter 10
Reading someone else's journal





A Journal

Have you ever had a friend show you something from their journal? Or have you ever had a friend of yours show you a note or letter someone else wrote to them? Or have you ever had a friend show you a note they wrote to someone else? Why did they do this? Or why do you do things like this? Usually it is to show in as honest a way possible the truth of a situation. Usually we are trying to reveal what is really going on. It's like a little home video. Instead of explaining what is going on we are being shown or showing what's really happening. It's a huge risk and an act of trust to share oneself in this way. I've had students and friends share with me in this way and I've shared this way with others. And you can't be more honest or real... or vulnerable.

Well God has blessed us by doing almost the same thing with us in a part of the New Testament. After the four Gospels, the story of Jesus' life, and after the Acts of the Apostles, the story of the Apostles' lives, God gives us perhaps the most intimate part of the Scriptures. These are the letters of the Apostles. They weren't written to us. But for some reason as a gift from God we get to read them. When the Apostles wrote them to their friends I don't know if they were really aware that God meant them to be read to all of us. I don't know if they knew when they were writing to their friends that God was writing through them a love-letter to the whole world. But they were. It's amazing how God works. He uses people even when they don't know it. He changes lives for eternity through us without even knowing it is happening. It's humbling. It reminds us of how important all of our actions are.

Many of the letters were just personal letters written to a single friend. Some examples of these are the two letters Paul wrote to Timothy or the letters he wrote to Titus and Philemon. Some of them were letters written to a whole town that an Apostle preached in such as Rome. That letter to the Christians in Rome is called Romans. Just as the letter written to the Christians living in Corinth is called Corinthians. And again the Apostles probably had no idea just how many people would read their letters and change their lives because of them. They were writing to people they knew. But God was writing to people they didn't. People like you and me.

The Apostles knew Jesus when he was alive, saw his resurrection and had numerous visions of him after Jesus ascended into heaven. They knew God the way we know our best friend. And more importantly God was always working through them, inspiring them to reveal his love and ways to the world. So everything they wrote to the Christians back then really does apply to us as Christians today. And the letters while personally written to other people really do apply to us.

The cool thing about this all is that reading these letters really is like reading the journal entry or letter your best friend wrote. They are so honest and sincere it is amazing. Paul for example shares the highs in his life when he says to the Corinthians that he has had “visions” from God about his love that are “too wonderful” to even be described (1 Corinthians 12:1-4 CEV). But Paul also shares his true feelings about himself when he says in his letter to his friend Timothy “I was the worst sinner of all” (1 Timothy 1:15 CEV). And so we know that Paul himself really understood God’s unconditional love when he said, “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Timothy 1:15 CEV). In fact, Paul says “But since I was worse than anyone else, God had mercy on me and let me be an example of the endless patience of Christ Jesus” (1 Timothy 1:16 CEV). So when Paul tells us that God loves us unconditionally it’s because he saw that it was true from his visions but it was also because Paul personally experienced God’s unconditional love and patience himself.

Paul was preaching what he knew was true for him. And the beauty of it all is that God chose to show his unconditional love for us in his letter to us, the Bible, through his unconditional love for the Apostles that they wrote about to each other. It’s truly “too wonderful” for us to understand. God didn’t just tell us he loved the world unconditionally through the Bible. He showed us too by showing the very hearts and lives of the people he loved during the time of Jesus!

Paul said to the Thessalonians that the Apostles “loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thessalonians 2:8 NIV). And God loved us so much that he chose to share the Apostles’ lives and hearts and minds revealed in a deeply personal way in the letters in the Bible with us as well. It’s truly a beautiful thing. There is no lying, no deceiving, and no hiding in this part of the Bible. It is just the Apostles being honest about their experience of God and God using their honesty as a love letter to us! Wow! It’s like reading a personal note written by one of your best friends to another friend except this time your best friend happens to be an Apostle.

And why did God do this? So that we could see in a truly personal way “how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18 NIV) even though it is “too wonderful to be measured” (Ephesians 3:19 CEV). And so that our “lives will be filled with all that God is” (Ephesians 3:19 CEV).

Paul said on behalf of all the Apostles “there is room in our hearts for you... please make room in your hearts for us” (2 Corinthians 6:11-13 CEV). God gave us the gift of his love, the gift of his Bible and also the gift of

It’s like reading a personal note written by one of your best friends to another friend except this time your best friend happens to be an Apostle.

the very hearts of his Apostles. Will we close our hearts to him and all he personally offers us? Will we ignore his personal love letter written in such a personal way so that we can believe and understand it? Will we really turn our backs on God's heart and the hearts of his Son and Apostles? Or will we open our hearts and accept the message. It's written in a personal note passed on to you. Would you to read it?

What's in the Bible for me? 2 Corinthians 6:11-13

- 1) Do you feel like you have made room in your heart for God in your life? How so? When?
- 2) Do you feel like you have made room in your heart for God's Word, the Bible, in your life? How so? Why do you think you do or don't make room?
- 3) Why do you think some people don't make room in their heart for God and the Bible?
- 4) What do you think would help them?
- 5) Do you feel called by God to help them? Why or why not?

The love test

How do you know when someone really loves you? Is there a test you can give out to know for certain? Is there some kind of quiz you can make your friend or girlfriend or boyfriend take? Is there some kind of blood test you can give to your parents to see if they really mean it when they say that they love you? Is there some special court of law somewhere that can decide with certainty?

Perhaps love is only love when it is given to someone when they don't deserve it. Unconditional love is just that isn't it? Love that isn't deserved. Love that isn't earned. Love that isn't based on the condition of you doing anything. That's the kind of love the Bible says God has for us. How do we know its true? How do we know it's unconditional? How do we know it's love?

Well Paul says that we can know it's real love, unconditional love, unending love by this simple fact: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8 NIV). Paul says that God didn't wait for us to deserve his love before he gave it. God didn't wait until we started to shape up before he sent Jesus to die for our sins. God sent



Jesus to die for our sins when we *didn't* deserve it. God sent Jesus to die for us when we *weren't* following him not when or because we were.

And that's precisely what made God's love unconditional. God didn't give his love after we earned it. God gave his love before we earned it. And God gave his love knowing we never would. Paul says "Even when we were God's enemies, he made peace with us" (Romans 5:10 CEV). God's desire to make peace with us had nothing to do with our actions. In fact God's desire to make peace with us and love us came despite our actions. That's what makes God's love unconditional. That's why it can never be taken away because of what we do. It was never given because of what we do. It's unconditional and unending.

The Apostle John says the same thing. John said God's love for us came *before* our love for him. And that's why it is unconditional. John says that "God loved us first" (1 John 4:19 CEV). And what is love according to John? John says that "God is love" (1 John 4:16 CEV). God is the definition of love. God is love itself. And what is love when it comes into the world? John says "this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10 NIV).

It's not that we loved God, because we didn't. The way we follow God isn't perfect love. We sin. We make mistakes. We don't sacrifice for God. Perfect love is the way God loved us. He loved us *first*. He loved us when we *didn't* deserve it. He loved us perfectly. He loved us unconditionally. In fact he is love itself. God *is* love. And what does love look like. It looks like an innocent man nailed into a cross and dying so we are aren't innocent can be loved. That is perfect love in action. That is God incarnate. That is love in the real world.

So unconditional love is love we don't deserve. Unconditional love is given to people who can't and don't earn it. Unconditional love is just a gift. A gift we can accept or reject. It is a free gift that doesn't cost anything on our part to get. It's like air. We can always afford it because it is free. We don't pay any money to breathe. And we don't have to pay anything or do anything to get God to love us. We just have to breathe it in and accept it.

The Good News is that this unconditional love is the kind of love God wants to give us. It doesn't depend on what we do. It depends on what God already did. And we can't go back in time and take Jesus off that cross. Jesus already died for us. We can't change that. Nothing we can do can change that. Jesus loves us. Unconditionally. Jesus loves us. Perfectly. His love doesn't change.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews says that God is the same "yesterday, today and tomorrow." God loved you yesterday. Even if you ignored him. God loves you today. Even if you sinned. And God will love you tomorrow no matter what tomorrow brings. This is truly perfect love. And about this kind of love John says:

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18 NIV). God took away the punishment with his unconditional love. So there is no room for fear. Only room for love. Let him love you. Let him love you when you do and don’t deserve it. Let him love you yesterday. Let him love you today. And let him love you tomorrow. And know that it’s for real because he beat you to the punch already. You already lost this race. He loved you first.

What’s in the Bible for me? 1 John 4:18

- 1) Do you find it harder to let God love your “yesterdays,” your “today” or your “tomorrow?” Why?
- 2) Why do you think some people find it hard to believe that God really loved them in their past? What would you say to someone struggling with this?
- 3) What would you say to someone struggling with believing that God loves them today?
- 4) What would you say to someone who is afraid of what God may have in store for his or her future?

Ever failed the love test?

Have you ever felt like you failed someone you loved? Have you ever felt like you let down someone who loved you? Have you ever felt like no matter what you did you just never could love that person as much and as well as he or she loved you? Have you ever felt you just weren’t as good of a person as that person was and wondered how long you would really be around in this relationship with them as friends, as a boyfriend or girlfriend or as a child?

If so, you know personally how every person, *every person*, feels in their relationship to God. No matter what, God’s love will always be perfect and ours, no matter how hard we try, will be imperfect. It can be a really scary thing. And it can be a really depressing thing. Unless we realize one Biblical fact. What is that fact? The fact is: it doesn’t matter, we are loved any way. If we realize this, our depression turns to joy and our fear turns to love. And that’s just what the Gospel does. It “drives out fear.” Remember?

In his letter to the Romans Paul shares his own person feeling on this subject. Paul says: “I am merely a human... I don’t understand why I act the way I do. I don’t do what I know is right... even when I want to do right,

Have you ever felt like you failed someone you loved? Have you ever felt like you let down someone who loved you?... If so, you know personally how every person, *every person*, feels in their relationship to God.

I cannot” (Romans 7:14-18 CEV). Wow! That is an Apostle and a Saint talking! He feels like he can almost never do right. Even when he tries!

The fact is following God is hard. In fact, doing it perfectly is impossible. That’s why Jesus died for us. Now it is scary to think this way if we think that God is looking to punish us. But remember God took that punishment away and replaced it with forgiveness. So the question isn’t whether we will be perfect, but whether we will accept the forgiveness that is there. If we do our sins turn into forgiven sins as the result of God’s unconditional love. And our struggle against sin becomes not a reason to get depressed but a reason to realize we are accepted and loved unconditionally as we make our way toward following God. Our depression will turn to joy.

When thinking about his sins Paul goes on to say “what a wretched man I am” (Romans 7:24 NIV). And he is afraid. He says “Who will rescue me from this body that is doomed... Thank God! Jesus Christ will rescue me” (Romans 7:24-25 CEV). Then he says “If you belong to Jesus Christ, you won’t be punished... God set you free when he sent his own Son... to be a sacrifice for our sin” (Romans 8:1-4 CEV). So when you feel like a wretch, like a really messed up person, because of your sins realize two things. First, the Apostle Paul felt the same way; so you are not alone; in fact we all feel that way at certain times in our lives. Second, remember if you really do “belong to Jesus Christ,” if you really have asked him for forgiveness and really do try to follow him, “you won’t be punished;” you are forgiven. I will say it again. **YOU ARE FORGIVEN!!!** Accept it and move on.

In fact John says the same thing. He says “I am writing this so that you won’t sin. But if you do sin, Jesus Christ always does the right thing and he will speak to the Father for us. Christ is the sacrifice that takes away our sin and the sins of all the world’s people” (1 John 2:1-2 CEV). So unless you somehow think that you are somehow not included in or covered by the phrase “all of the world’s people” you are forgiven. And even if you felt like you were an alien from another planet I bet God would still find a way to forgive you. So realize and accept that you are forgiven. That is what a Christian is. Someone who doesn’t deserve love but is loved anyway. Someone who deserves punishment but is not punished because Jesus was punished. Someone who has sinned and was forgiven any way.

There is a story of a brother in St. Francis’ order who one day when walking through the town with Francis and his other brothers saw this girl who always seemed to have had a crush on him and who he always had a crush on. In the story this brother sees the woman this day for perhaps the hundredth time. Then all of a sudden this brother can’t be found. The brothers looked but he was gone. Later in the day Francis found him crying on the street corner and saying to God again and again and again, “Please forgive me God, please forgive me...” You see

this brother ended up sleeping with that girl that afternoon in a moment of weakness. He was so ashamed. So hurt. He felt like such a wretch. He felt like he totally screwed up. Francis quickly figured out what happened and he said to the brother just what Paul is trying to say in a certain sense. Francis said “Get up. He heard you the first time.”

If you feel like a wretch. If you feel like you’ve totally screwed up and there’s no going back. If you feel just too ashamed to feel you are any good at all. If you feel like you’ve made the biggest mistake of your life but you’ve truly told God that you are sorry, listen to the words of St. Francis. Listen to this Saint say his words to you. “Get up. He heard you the first time.” Then get up and get back to your Christianity because you are forgiven.

Or instead listen to the words of St. Paul: “you won’t be punished... God set you free when he sent his own Son... to be a sacrifice for our sin” (Romans 8:1-4 CEV). **YOU ARE FORGIVEN!** He heard you the first time. And you never had to earn his love anyway. None of us do. Not one of “all the world’s people” in fact. You are one of the world’s people aren’t you?

What’s in the Bible for me? Romans 8:1-4

- 1) Have you ever felt like that brother in St. Francis’ order who made a big mistake and kept asking God to forgive the same sin again and again? What happened? What was that like?
- 2) Can you believe that “you won’t be punished” as it says in Romans 8:1 if you have truly asked for forgiveness from God? Why?
- 3) Why do you think people struggle with believing they really are forgiven?
- 4) What would you say to someone who is struggling with this? What are some things he or she could do?

God is on your side

So what does all of this mean? What does this all add up to in the end? What are we to think? Or as Paul said, “What can we say about all of this” (Romans 8:31 CEV)? Well Paul answers his own question. He says if all of this is true, which it is, than “God is on our side” (Romans 8:31 CEV). God is trying to get us into heaven. Remember, as God showed Paul: “God wants everyone to be saved” (1 Timothy 2:4 CEV).

And if God wants “everyone,” that is “all of the world’s people,” including you, to be saved “Can anything separate us from the love of Christ” (Romans 8:35 CEV)? “Can trouble... and hard times... or danger and death” (Romans 8:35 CEV)? The short answer: NO. Nothing can make God stop loving us. Paul goes on to say: “I am sure that nothing can separate us from God’s love” (Romans 8:38 CEV).

Nothing can make God stop loving us. That’s what we are supposed to think after all of this. God is on your side. He chose to be on your side even though you were wrong. He chose to do this when he died for you and I when we had done nothing to deserve this love. God is a constant companion for us. He doesn’t abandon us when we sin. He doesn’t walk away when we make a mistake. No matter how big it is.

As we’ve said before the only person who can end our relationship with God is us. God has chosen to be there for us for all of time. The question is: have we chosen? It’s really the only variable in the equation. Will we sin? Yes. Will God love us anyway? Yes. Will we turn back to God for forgiveness? Will we have the humility to let God in even though we are sinners? Will we let God have a relationship with us? These are big ifs.

Paul doesn’t believe that he is sinless or perfect himself. He doesn’t imagine that committing a sin is ok – it’s still a sin. But Paul has realized that he is loved. And Paul won’t let go of that fact.

But only we can answer them. God won’t do it for you. You have to say “yes” or “no.” But whatever you say, it is you who are saying it. No one else says it for you. So who do you want to be? Someone who says “yes.” Or someone who says “no.” It’s up to you. And for me it’s up to me. No one else is involved here. Just you. Not even God. Just you. It’s scary but

cool at the same time.

If we say “yes” and we understand what this means it radically changes everything. It changes the way we look at ourselves and the way that we look at each other. St. Paul says that because of all of this “it doesn’t matter to me if I am judged by you... In fact I don’t even judge myself” (1 Corinthians 4:3 CEV). Paul has accepted that he is truly free from judgment by anyone but God. Paul says, “The Lord is my judge” (1 Corinthians 4:4 CEV). And Paul knows that he has accepted God’s Son Jesus into his life for forgiveness of his sins. Paul has one judge. And that judge has set him “free” as he said earlier because Jesus died for him.

Paul doesn’t believe that he is sinless or perfect himself. He doesn’t imagine that committing a sin is ok – it’s still a sin. But Paul has realized that he is loved. And Paul won’t let go of that fact. He knows that he is loved by God and only God has the right to judge. So while he has been set free from his sins by God, Paul also realizes that he has been set free from the opinions of others by God by God.

Then Paul says that if he has been set free from other people's judgments, than he has to set other people free from *his* judgments of *them*. Paul says "So don't judge anyone" (1 Corinthians 4:5 CEV). Which is exactly what Jesus said in Matthew's Gospel: "Do not judge" (Matthew 7:1 NIV). The trick is to realize that we are not judged by God. So than we shouldn't judge ourselves, but let ourselves be forgiven as we said earlier. And if we shouldn't judge ourselves we shouldn't worry about other people judging us. And finally if we shouldn't judge ourselves or let others judge us than we certainly should not judge others. We have been set free from all of this by God. If we want to be? Do we want to be?

So what does it all mean for us? First, God is for us not against us. God is on our side if we want him, no matter what we've done. If we want him and accept him than we are set free from our sins. But it doesn't end there. We have to live that way. We have to live like people who aren't judged and do not judge others. We have to live like people who aren't judged and stop judging ourselves too. We have been set free, but we have to live free and let others be free. No judging.

What does it all mean? We are free. WE ARE FORGIVEN! We must not let others make us think differently. And we must set others free from our judgments. Just like we were set free from God's. Ready for a life free from judgment? Ready for Christianity? It's just a "yes" of faith away. Do we want it? Does it matter to us?

I used to always struggle with self-image

I used to always struggle with self-image and the struggle for acceptance. It started in grade school. I was always the chunky girl in school. When I was in fourth or fifth grade I had one best friend. She accepted me for who I was and not what I looked like. We did everything together. We went over each other's houses, had sleepovers, and even went to air shows together. We were inseparable. Until she left school to go to a new school. I was left alone. I would end up everyday in fights with the other girls in my class. I hated them all and they hated me.

We eventually all became friends and started going to school dances together. I would always be the girl in jeans and baggy shirts. I hated the way I looked. I didn't want anyone to actually see what I looked like. I ended up getting betted on for dances by two different guys, two different years, and at two different locations. Life was beginning to be horrible. I never thought I would ever have a caring guy around me. The rest of my grade school years were bad. Always getting made fun of and being pushed away. Yet, in between there were good times too.

Then freshman year rolled around. That's when I became even more self-conscious than I already was. So many people were around me so I tried to cover up as best as I could. To some extent it worked, but after that it just got very uncomfortable. To add to that I would always get picked on for things like my eye considering I have a rare non-contagious disease in it. I would get so depressed that I would go home and cry. I had no one to call to help me become a little bit happier at the time.

Not until the middle of sophomore year did I have caring people around me to call when things were bad. In December of 2003 I decided to go on a retreat with some of my fellow classmates. I had no clue what I was getting myself into. The retreat turned out to be an amazing experience. Many people started realizing that I wasn't all right. I wasn't happy. I was depressed through each day. But through the retreat I found more of God than there was before. But the retreat didn't fully help me. I knew I was still depressed. I put on fake smiles to fool everyone. It mostly worked.

Through the retreat I met the most amazing girl I ever met. She is my best friend. She has pulled me through so much. We have been through a lot together. I know I can go to her for anything. I love her, she is deep in my heart and I look up to her for many things she doesn't know of. I hope she knows that. Besides this girl, I met another special person. He is another person I can go to for things. He's been there for me through good and bad, happy and sad and I have been there for him. I love him also; he is also deep in my heart. He's one of my best friends too.

Except the bad thing was that after the retreat I fell really bad. It wasn't due to the retreat but it was probably the worst I have ever been. I became extremely depressed, I felt like I wasn't wanted, I was being called a waste, I was becoming angry at everything around me and I continued to hate the way I looked. I would always try to dress perfectly for people.

Something I heard the other day from my religion teacher relates to this topic. I was "Thinking like everyone else and not like God". I still didn't truly find God. I would always question why me, or what did I do to deserve all this making fun of and stressful days.

Then I found an addiction that became my only source of relief. It became a habit. It then continued and I started doing it more and more. It was really bad. I started becoming addicted to it and I couldn't tell anyone.

Later on, my close friends found out and they tried to help me. Many of times it didn't work. But as I am writing this now I am about one month with a clean slate. I thank my friends to no end.

Yet, through this entire addiction I was going through eating problems too. I would end up not eating for almost a week to try to loose weight. I continued to hate the way I looked. I would eat around my parents but not as much. One of my friends would sit with me at lunch to make sure I would eat something. It didn't really work because she would leave the room and I would throw away whatever she gave me. But I tried to eat normally again. Slowly but surely I am working on it.

One person especially has helped me in seeing God. He is one guy who is not the one I mentioned before. He wrote me an amazing note on saying to just look for God he will be there. He tells me all the time to just pray to God and he will answer your prayers. This person is a lifesaver. At one time I was completely broken down because one of my best friends was not around school for certain reasons. He and another one of my close friends had to calm me down over the phone. I wasn't in the right state. I thought because she wasn't here it was my fault. But he told me everything was going to be all right and I can pull through. After I got off the phone with him all I did was pray. I was so scared but I prayed and I became calm. I have so much thanks to him and my friend. If you are struggling with anything in life, just pray to God because he will answer your prayers. He is always there for you whenever, wherever, anytime at all. And just remember that Jesus loves you!!

-- high school senior girl

Un-loving = Un-Catholic

Ever been sitting in the pew at Church and felt like the person sitting across from you is saying to themselves “What is she doing here?” Have you ever had a religion teacher who explained things to you in a way that made it seem impossible for God to ever love you? Have you ever heard a homily that made you feel like you were being condemned or judged even though Jesus said “Don’t condemn others” (Matthew 7:1 CEV) and “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world” (John 3:17 NIV). Have you ever felt like all the Catholics around you were far from being peace-loving and considerate?

Well obviously the Apostle James at one point felt the same way. So he explained what the truth about God, who is love, really looks and feels like. He said: “the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere” (James 3:17 NIV). This is what God’s truth looks and feels like. When someone is explaining something about God to us the message should be “peace-loving” and “considerate.” It shouldn’t be judgmental and condemning – this would be the

opposite of Jesus' command not to "condemn." The message should be full to the brim with "mercy" just like Mary was full to the top with grace. And the message should be "sincere" meaning it should be from the heart.

If the truth about God isn't being given to you in this way, than it either isn't the truth about God or it is being given in a way that is un-Catholic. Yes, I'll say it again. If you feel judged or condemned by a message about God that isn't "peace-loving" and from the heart than this information about God either isn't true or isn't being told to you the way God wants it to be, in a way that is Catholic and Christian.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church the Church says: "The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of perfect Christian virtue spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love" (CCC 25). That's a mouthful isn't it? Is that hard to digest? I'll break it down for you.

So if someone is telling you something about God to try to condemn you, than they aren't giving you theology in a Catholic way. Some of their information may be correct, yes. But the *way* they are explaining it isn't Catholic.

The *only* "objective" or goal or point of Catholic theology is "love." The whole reason we even think or talk about or believe in God is to know that we are loved and to learn how to love ourselves and others. There is no other reason. So if someone is telling you something about God to try to condemn you, than they aren't giving you theology in a Catholic way. Some of their information may be correct, yes. But the *way* they are explaining it isn't Catholic. They must be missing something when they are adding up and

conveying Catholic theology to you. So if you feel like God doesn't love you because of the way someone is explaining the faith to you than they or you are missing some important point somewhere.

So the goal of our faith is love. To know that we are loved by God and to love others. In fact, the Catechism says that whenever God is explained his "love... must always be made accessible." If something is accessible it is easy to get to. God's love must always feel only a prayer, a heartbeat and a simple decision away.

So what are we to do with this information? Are we supposed to get into arguments? Are we supposed to fight with other Catholics who say things in a way we don't like? Well, that wouldn't be very "peace-loving" or "considerate" would it? So no, we aren't called by God to argue or get in fights. The Bible tells us instead: "Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone... (and) not resentful" (2 Timothy 2:23-24 NIV).

It can be hard when we feel condemned and judged. It can be hard when someone isn't being "peace-loving" and "considerate." But these aren't excuses in God's eyes. We are still called ourselves to present the Catholic faith in ways that are full of love with hearts that are full of love. We are supposed to do that for ourselves when we feel judged (we are supposed to remind ourselves of God's love). And we are supposed to give that love to others even if they don't give it to others. Remember Jesus said that we are even supposed to love our enemies and no one in the Church is an enemy no matter how different they seem. They are a friend and a brother or sister in Christ. They are family. Like it or not. And we have to treat them as such. We have to be "peace-loving" ourselves. And when we hear things we don't understand or make us feel judged we have to listen in our hearts for anything the Holy Spirit is trying to show through what is bearing shared by the person. Listen for God's voice in the midst of it all. It's got to be there somewhere. Just remember what it sounds like and what it's supposed to feel like in your heart: "pure... peace-loving, considerate... full of mercy..."

What's in the Bible for me? 2 Timothy 2:23-24

- 1) Have you ever been caught in "stupid and senseless arguments" about God? What happened? What was that like?
- 2) Why do you think God doesn't want Christians getting into "stupid" arguments? How do those arguments usually end?
- 3) What do you think the perfect Christian leader living today would be like? What would some of his or her qualities be?
- 4) Do you have any of the qualities of a good Christian leader? What are they? Do you have any Christian leadership qualities that you need to work on? What are they and Why?

What am I supposed to do?

What am I supposed to do with my life? A lot of people ask this. And I don't know the answer for you. In fact, I often don't know the answer for me. But there are a couple of things the Bible says about helping us decide. While the Bible may not say in Genesis chapter 5 that you should be a doctor or in Luke 15 that you should be a mechanic, the Bible does tell you what your life should look like in other more general ways if you are living in a

relationship with God. And if we line ourselves up with these other things perhaps the details of whether we should be a doctor or not will become obvious.

So what does the Bible say our lives should look like if we are living in a relationship with God? The Bible offers us what we call the fruits of the Holy Spirit. A fruit of a tree is what a tree gives if it is healthy. If it has the right amount of rain and sunlight. And the right balance cold and warmth. The fruit of a tree is the result of a tree living the way it should. The fruits of the Holy Spirit are the results of us living the way we should. They are the result of us having a relationship with God. They are the result of us listening to him and allowing his Holy Spirit to live in our hearts. If we have these things we are living right with God. The less we have these things, the further we are from God's plan. The less we are accepting God into our hearts and lives.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are found in Galatians chapter 5 verses 22 to 23. They read like this: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (NIV). This is what God promises to give us if we accept him in our lives! Sounds pretty good. I mean who wouldn't want "love" and "joy" and "peace?" You'd have to be crazy not to accept these gifts.

But sometimes we don't. It's just part of being a sinner. Sometimes we just don't fully accept God. And that's ok. Jesus died to make up for that. But the people who ultimately loose out are us. We just don't get to have these gifts and we feel like our lives are spinning out of control. But if we don't have these gifts what are we to do?

Well, the answer is to simply try to accept God more in your life. Make a little bit of time to read the Bible or pray. Go on that retreat you've been avoiding. Maybe start going back to Church. Or start receiving the Eucharist daily if you can.

But sometimes other things in our lives need to change. If you are in a relationship that always causes you to feel the opposite of "love," "joy" and "peace" God certainly wants that relationship to change. And if it doesn't change maybe God would want you to leave it, because love, joy and peace are the signs that God is with you. Maybe some of your friends are making it hard for you to have "self-control." If you want God in your life either that relationship to your friends is going to have to change or end. Hopefully it can change. But remember, we aren't called to argue. We aren't called to change others. That is God's job. We just have to expect true friends to accept a change that is happening to us.

Wherever God is calling you, while it might be a hard road to get there and you may have challenges along the way, you should have "peace" deep in your heart about it. And that place you are getting to should make you a



person who is more joyful, kind and good. If you are constantly losing your temper than something is wrong either with the situation or the way you are handling it.

So the question isn't whether God wants you to be happy. He wants you to be full of all of these gifts all the time if possible. So if we know that this is true then we can use this truth to help us guide the more specific decisions we have to make. Is doing this thing loving? Is being with this person going to make me more full of "goodness" and "self-control." Does the thought of pursuing that career fill me with "peace." If the answer to these questions is "yes" then it is a safe bet they are callings from God. If the answer is "no," pray and ask God what he wants you to do. He may want you to press on and teach you how to have "peace" and "love" and "joy" from him in the midst of it all by growing closer to him in your relationship to him. Or he may want you to walk away. Just try to let go, let his Spirit lead you through praying about it all and try to be honest with yourself as much as you can. Eventually you'll find your way. And you'll find him in a deeper way in your life too!

Trusting God with Dating

A couple of months ago, I had just come home from seeing Mona Lisa's Smile with little knowledge of what the movie was about. The reason, you ask? Throughout the whole movie, a nagging voice prevented me from concentrating by repeatedly asking "Is this right anymore?" This question I agonized over for about a week and it pertained to an extremely important part of my life at the time, my boyfriend, who I'll call "Ben."

I found myself not being able to concentrate on anything; I couldn't pay attention in class and consequently my grades suffered. The only thought that occupied my mind continuously was that my relationship with Ben just didn't feel right anymore. Of course, I tried to convince others and myself otherwise. When people would ask whether or not I wanted to be with him anymore, I would reply, "Oh, I dunno." Despite my confused state of mind, I felt deep down inside that I should not continue dating Ben. It got to the point where I just wanted to cry all the time because my mind was constantly consumed with that one nagging thought and I couldn't eat. I didn't even notice that I was hungry or didn't have an appetite. I surrounded myself with people at all times because I was afraid to be alone with my thoughts. I told Ben we had to take a break so that I could think.

During this period, I would repeatedly pray angry prayers to God asking Him why I had a sudden change of heart and order Him to just fix the whole mess. I was a wreck and I felt like my friends and family were tired of

listening to me. At the same time I felt so stupid sharing my relationship problems when I knew people were going through things ten times worse than me.

After deciding to go back out with him, he immediately started talking about doing the things that nagged me about our relationship: the pressure to drink and have sex with him in the summer. Within the same conversation, I told him it was definitely over and hung up. I felt relieved, but little did I know the worse was to come.

Even though I had broken up with him and felt like I did the right thing, I still constantly thought about him. I would get angry with myself because I just wanted to be over him so badly. I must have walked around for a month like this, neither really happy nor sad. Just sort of blah inside. I was down to crying to two or three times a week or when hearing My Immortality by Evanescence.

About a month or so after we had split, I hit rock bottom. I had just found out from a friend that he had gotten a new girlfriend. My steps towards getting over him were erased like footprints from the beach by a crashing wave. I told a few close friends that I was happy for him and was glad he had moved on. Inside, I was devastated and made it to religion class, 8th period, before falling apart. I pulled one of my best friends, Julie, into the girl's bathroom and just started crying into her sweater. Upon arriving home, I just let everything out by hysterically crying. I didn't know why I was so upset; after all, this is what I had wanted. I still am not sure why I freaked out, but have realized it was the final kick in the butt I needed to truly get over him.

Looking back, I have decided that that nagging voice in my head was God. He knew Ben wasn't right for me. God knew that we held different morals and goals. Eventually, these apparent differences surfaced and I was forced to confront what I was truly feeling, as much as I didn't want to. I realized I could not compromise my morals and values anymore in order to just stay with a guy. The one lesson I learned from this whole ordeal is that you have to follow that little voice in your head because I believe it is some form of God acting in your life. I rely on that voice now and trust it when I make decisions dealing with my relationships.

I am at the point now where I am happy with myself again and past my relationship with Ben, but not quite ready to jump right back into dating. I trust that the little voice will guide me when I do feel ready again to make smarter decisions in dating. At times I felt like I would NEVER get through all my hurt and pain, but I proved to be much stronger than I ever thought I was. I survived it with God, my friends' and family's help.

-- high school sophomore girl

He's a trustworthy God

In the end if all of this stuff is true than we just shouldn't worry much in life. If it is true that we are loved unconditionally by God we just shouldn't worry about our relationship to him. Even if we really are struggling with sin he's not going to abandon us. We just have to continue to try to accept his plan for our lives. If all of this is true and God can guide through his Holy Spirit and it's fruits we just shouldn't worry about whether we are going to screw up his plan for our lives. Eventually we'll get there if we keep trying to listen to his Spirit and look for the fruits of the Spirit.

Even big things like bad breakups and failing grades shouldn't shake us. We'll listen to God and he will see us through it all if we keep reaching for him. "All things" do work out and end up being "good" for "those who love God." There really is a plan for it all. We just have to let go and let it happen. And even if we don't we just have to try again and let go. It will happen for us.

Paul advises us: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything... present your requests to God. And the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6-7 NIV). St. Paul tells us that there is just no need to worry. It all works out in the end if we can let things go to God. He says to *choose* not to worry. Choose peace. And if you do choose peace and choose Jesus, God will be able to protect your heart and mind. No matter how much things fall apart on the outside, he will hold you together on the inside. Just trust him.

The funny thing is that Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians while he was in prison with a potential death sentence. He was in prison and had been beaten very badly there before. And worst of all he was in prison all because of Jesus, all because he was a Christian. That was the only "illegal" thing he had done. And still Paul says not to worry or be "anxious." Wow!

See Paul knew that all he really needed was the peace of God in his heart and mind and he would be all right. Paul said that if we trust Jesus he will bless us with a "peace" that "no one can understand" (Philippians 4:7 CEV). Jesus will bless us with a peace that doesn't make sense based on the situation we are in.

From experience I can tell you that this peace is real. And it is truly a gift. You can't earn it or work for it. The only thing you can do to get it is just trust. Just have faith. Just give it to God and mean it. Really mean it. If you do suddenly your problems become God's problems. And you become God's possession, which is a good thing. That's what Paul was speaking of earlier when he said we have nothing to fear if we "belong to Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1 CEV).

The only question is do we really belong to him? Are we really trusting him? Are we really letting it go to him? Are we letting him take care of us? He only wants what you can give. If you only have it in you to just begin to trust him a little than just trust him a little. It's enough for him; he can work with that. Just give him what you can. Have that relationship and trust it. He will come through for you. He will protect your heart and mind. But you have to let him. And if your heart and mind is clear there's no limit to what you can do in the midst of the situation you are in. And there's no limit to his ability to guide you to peace, love, joy and all the fruits of the Holy Spirit he wants to give you. Just let him. Trust me, he's a trustworthy God.

Are we really trusting him? Are we letting him take care of us?

What's in the Bible for me? Philippians 4:4-9

- 1) Do you ever struggle with trusting God? When? Why do you think you do?
- 2) Have you ever had a moment when you really felt God's peace wash over you? When? What was that like?
- 3) Do you think that just stopping and praying can really help you have peace? Why or why not?
- 4) Do you ever have a hard time staying optimistic and keeping your mind on "what is worthwhile and worthy of praise? Are you a natural optimist or pessimist? Why do you think that is? Does God want that to change?

Know that we have a Savior

*When I was growing up, I never really had a group in school that I was friends with, I never had a best friend, and even though I had a twin brother, and most people think that you're twin is you're best friend, but this wasn't the case for me. I would hang around all of the other groups...tagging along, hoping that they would talk to or recognize my existence, but my attempts were mostly futile, and I was just seen tagging along after every other person. I began to use humor, especially about myself, and my body, to try and get attention. Once again it was short-lived. Maybe they'd laugh....at me, but soon after it would drift back into the way it was before. Then I began acting like them all, in order to gain respect from them. Around the kids that liked hip-hop, I would talk in their sort-of half-assed Ebonics, and talk about smoking, fu***n, killin, and every other thing that rap encompasses. I didn't*

really believe it, but I'd say anything for their attention. And every other group went about the same way. I mean of course your demeanor has to change depending on the people you are around, but I did it to the point of forgetting who I really was. I was all of these people in one person, my sole purpose for being was to make them all feel better. And that carried on for a very long time. I hated grade school. It was awful; the teachers had no concern for your feelings, just for your grades and behavior while you were there. Even though I had good grades, I felt empty. And there was no one who could console me. I had no friends, and my family laughed at everything I said. When I entered high school, I thought things were gonna be different. I thought that there would be someone here who would understand me, maybe even a girl that I liked...who liked me back. But I was wrong. Same stuff different day is what they say I believe. Once again, I became the jester for a whole new court of people.

Worst of all, I felt even more empty than before. Still no girl who loved me, but plenty that I was ready to offer my love to. All I thought about my freshmen year was girls, I didn't care at all about anything else, and it showed in my grades. For the first time in my life, I had failed in school. And that brought a wave of crap from my parents. "You're not living up to your abilities...and how could you fail in math when you have a father who's a chemist, a teacher as a mother, and your older brother was the smartest kid at My high school when he went?" so I became very angry at my parents. I would try and do the exact opposite of what they told me just to spite them. I did nothing. I did as little extra-curricular as possible, I just came home, laid on my bed, and ate as I watched TV until it was late.. then I'd fall asleep. This bore me into my depression. Always being alone, no real friends, and certainly no girl for me to love. I hated everything. I hated God. But most of all, I hated myself. I couldn't stand to see myself, and every time I did, I would just fantasize about how I could look, or how I wanted to look, and I'd fantasize about having real friends. And being a hero for them, someone they adored and looked up to. I wanted to be smarter, thinner, or special in some way...any way.

I was mad. Angry at the world, and angry at waking up into this reality. I lived in my dreams. I longed for them to be real, I almost forgot that they weren't.

I sort of became friends with a kid my freshman year. We were close, we would talk about everything, and he was awesome. He was kinda hard, but I didn't care. The fact that he loved rap and would recite lyrics at random didn't bother me. It was just cool to me to think that I had a "best" friend. I didn't even think it was bad when he told

me that he had started smoking pot with another kid my sophomore year. He also started doing whip-its, and poppin pills. Like Coricidin. He'd joke about how he stole some "C" from the store, and him and his bro popped the whole box. His bro even passed out from it, and when he told me, he was laughin about how his brother was a wuss, and couldn't handle it, how his bro had messed everything up, because his parents came home and found his bro there, passed out and they called the doctor, who informed them that he had OD'd on painkillers. Inside I was terrified for him and his brother, but I didn't do or say anything, because he'd think I was a wuss, and he'd stop being my friend. I didn't care about the weed though, in fact I wanted to smoke, just so that I could show him how good a friend I was, that I would get high with him. I must say, I was scared a little, but to think of my parents and all of their damn rules about all this stuff made me want to tell any lie just so I could see the gullibility in their faces when they said "sure we can drop you off at his house, we'll pick you up later." I went. Smoked a gram of weed with him, and actually got high my first time. I just sat there staring at the ceiling, thinking about nothing, and yet everything. Concerning myself only with the music that I listened to, and the colors of the walls. I wanted to do this more often. My dad came and picked me up. I was sweaty because I had been scared and my eyes were bright red from the weed. I got in the car, and lied to my dad. I said that we were playing basketball, and I got some dirt in my eyes. I turned away and hid my eyes from him the whole way home.

I would get high with him maybe once a week, or a few times a month. Not much, but then again, I had like no money and he wasn't gonna let me smoke for free. At the end of sophomore year, I decided to go to the Soph-Hop, even though I had no date. I went. At the after party, I realized what I should do, and so I did it. I began to starve myself. I wanted so desperately to be thin, that I would deal the pains in my stomach as I laid in my bed. I would lie to my parents and say I didn't feel good, and therefore I wasn't hungry. I would walk my block for miles around outside listening to my music, trying to burn off my weight. I lost a lot of weight, but the idiot that I am, when summer came around I gained it all back, and then some. But then junior year rolled around, and my eighth period became free, it became time for us to walk around and talk and do other sh** then. He had started selling weed, and so mostly that's what we talked about, or his bro getting into sh**, or wrestling.

I didn't really like the idea of him selling weed, but there was nothing I could do to change him, he didn't care what I said. Then we started going across the street to the A-plus during eighth. I didn't know why, I mean I usually avoided bringing money to school, because I didn't want to buy food, but he would say "let's go" almost

everyday. I didn't learn for awhile that he was robbing them every time. He'd take something he wanted into the bathroom with him, stuff it into his bag, and then emerge and say loudly that he had forgotten his money again, and we'd leave. At first I was confused. But I kept going. He finally told me, and then he said, "go on, take something, they won't catch you. I was like, ok, I'll try. So I did. And I got away with it. So I did it every time. Not that I was hungry, or thirsty, but just to show him that I was "cool." We even went to coconuts and tried to steal a CD, almost getting caught. Then we went to another store and I helped him steal some pills that he would sell to the wrestlers to help them get to their weight. It was legal speed. He'd give me pills just for helping him get his, and he'd be like "go on teddy, take em." So I did. Peer pressure is relentless. So I took them, again and again, and again. Every time I took them I'd forget about myself, and I'd just run around in circles from the extremely high caffeine in them.

Somewhere around here, me and him began to lose contact. I stopped hanging with him during eighth, I stopped taking the pills, however, I did not stop smoking. I smoked with him until the end of junior year. And then I stopped. I don't know why. Probably because I had a bad experience smoking with him behind Pathmark. We were lighting up back there and I had thought that I saw a cop, so we began to run. While running, I fell into a ditch, this kept me on the ground for a good while, but he just kept going on, and he screamed "come on Teddy, fu***n get up, and move." I was practically crying I was so afraid. During the run, he had dropped his bag of weed, and he went back to look for it. But it was not to be found. He yelled at me, saying, "what the fu** was that? There was no cop, and now my weed is gone. You son of a bit**." I was like..., sorry dude, I thought I saw the cop car lights. He just walked away, God was I afraid. I stopped smoking then.

During the summer I did nothing, except continue to hate myself. Except towards the end, I got a job at Eckerd's, my first ever. I was cool to finally have an income. But it still sucked to have nothing to do with the money, and all I did was either work or nothing. No friends to do anything with. I had severed most ties with Joe, and so I was alone again.

Then senior year rolled around. After the strike, School and Cross Country returned. I was now the senior manager of my XC team, yet I still couldn't stand XC most of the time. Seeing all the guys who were in amazing shape...and then me. But I did have fun with them. That was good. I loved our trip to Boston, it was the most fun I have had in a long time. A couple of us from the team, in cooperation with an exchange student and his family

planned a trip to Germany; to stay at the exchange student's house, and travel around, and go out and stuff, its gonna be a blast. We're going this coming summer, and it makes me so happy to be able to do this. I can't wait until we finally go.

But the biggest thing for me, was when stage crew started in the fall. I love crew, it's where I met some of my best friends. It's where the whole faux high school family tree began. Two of my friends were going out, and one of them, the girl, said something to me, like "tuck in your shirt" and I was like "jeez mom, fine." They became the parents of a couple of kids backstage, and everything else just grew from that. It was so awesome. Even when I got sick during play, and thought I was gonna pass out from the fever, I was still laughing my ass off because of those two. Even though the play is the Drama, there was a lot of drama offstage. But I didn't mind it much, cuz I knew that drama is everywhere. So I tried to help out anyone I could in any way, and I just enjoyed it as much as I could. Shortly after Fall crew ended, I went on my Encounter Retreat. I would have gone my junior year, except Joe hates encounter and he would've hated me if I went, at that time, our friendship was so strong that I didn't want to sacrifice it. But I thank God, Jesus, and my teacher, for bugging me about it, because it was the best weekend of my life to date. Words cannot express my love for the awesome leaders, and my fellow retreatants. I love them all.

*Many people say they didn't change on their Encounter, but I did. I saw everything in a different light, and I stopped judging people, or even saying any sh** about them, I forged respect for everyone, even people that I had hated. I forgave Joe for all the sh** he put me through, yet he was a good friend to me at times. And even though I would never tell him. God will send my forgiveness, love and respect to Joe. When I returned from Encounter I was sad. I sorely wanted to be back there. I never wanted to leave. I hated coming home to an empty house and ignorant parents that didn't want me to do the things that made me happy, so I slipped back into a depression. But I suffered through it. After our midterms, my teacher came up to me and told me about a meeting for potential Encounter Leaders after the testing. I thank God that he did, for once again he is the reason for my presence. Meanwhile, I became really good friends with Barb, my "mother" and we started hanging out. She's so awesome. I began to develop feelings for her. She and her boyfriend had broken up, and even though she still really liked him, I thought I'd give it a chance. Wrong again. But I understood her and I accepted her feelings. We remain really close friends. I also became really close with Jen. I love her to death, she's so great. She always makes me laugh, and I love trying to help her out with whatever she needs, it makes me feel like I have a purpose, and not a bad one. A helpful one.*

Finally stage-crew started back up, and the kids who were my "parents" from the last play weren't even backstage with me anymore. But this just meant I had to become closer with those who were back with me. For the first time in my life I had the courage to act the way I've always wanted to around people, and that made me happy. But once again there was drama offstage, and this time it was ridiculous. I so wanted to help everyone with their problems, I almost looked my own over. During this period I had seen the Passion several times, and around then, I came to the realization that Jesus truly does love us. I realized that no matter what we do, it doesn't matter, Jesus is always waiting for us to come back to him. I also had recently listened to the song... "Take it Easy" by the Eagles, and it really became my mind state during this period. " We may lose, or we may win, but we will never be here again." Take it easy. I loved it, it was simple. This was Jesus' message to us, Love him and each other, but don't worry about everything, just Take it easy. Until recently, that song was all I could think about. But it wasn't enough for me. Problems were too big to just "take it easy", I began to forget what to say to friends that felt down. But now I have found it. No matter what happens in life, whether we lose or win. Whether your problems are big or small. EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT, BECAUSE JESUS LOVES US. AND THOUGH LIFE SUCKS, KNOW THAT WE HAVE A SAVIOR..

-- high school senior guy

To wrap it all up:

We may feel sometimes that it impossible that God is really on our side to help us when we are such terrible sinners and we feel like “wretches,” like people who have totally screwed it up. But the Gospel truth is that God is on our side. He chose to be on our side long before we chose to be on his. And he didn't need us to do anything for him to make this decision. He just did it because he loved us. No other reason. That's what makes his love unconditional. And that's what makes him trustworthy.

His love is really there. The Apostles knew it personally. In fact the Apostle John said “We are telling you what we have seen and heard so that you may share this life with us... our ears have heard, our own eyes have seen and our hands have touched this Word” (1 John 1:1-3 CEV). This “Word” they are talking about is Jesus. And this “life” is the life that you can have if you live your life with God in it. They knew Jesus firsthand and they want us to

know him one on one too. God gave us their experience and their words as a guide for us. As a love letter of sorts. That's all that the Bible is. A love letter. And a message on what it really takes to have a "life" that has God in it.

God wrote this love letter to us through the Apostles to show us that we don't have to fear him. That we are loved. He wrote it to remind us that we aren't supposed to feel condemned when someone talks about him to us. Instead the truth about him is "peace-loving" and "full of mercy" because he is "love" and perfect love, which is what God is, "drives out fear."

So don't be afraid of God. Don't be afraid to trust him with your life. Don't be afraid to trust his forgiveness. And don't be afraid to trust his plan for you. He loves you. For real. Unconditionally. In fact he is the most trustworthy person in the universe. So don't be afraid to have the relationship with him that he wants you to have in your life.

If this chapter has made sense to you and you want to accept its message into your life in a deeper way, than in a quiet place where you can really sit with God and get real with him pray this prayer or one like it:

Lord Jesus, I trust you. Or at least I want to. Strengthen the parts of me that do trust you and help me to trust you in new ways. Help me to have the peace you promise. Help me to spend time and think about whether I have the fruits of the Holy Spirit in my life and do something about it. Help me to turn to you in prayer when I need to and just let go and trust.

Remind me that you do love me unconditionally. Help me to always remember that you chose to love me first before I stopped sinning and that because of this nothing I do or have done could ever take your love away from me. Fill me with your love. Help me to avoid sin in the future, not because I am afraid of you, but for my own sake. And help me to be the Christian you always dreamed I would be. I love you. Help me to love and trust you more and more everyday.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

"Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope or for action, the love of our Lord must always be made accessible... and have no other objective than to arrive at love." Catechism of the Catholic Church 25

“Love is the abridgment of all theology.” St. Francis de Sales in *Treatise of Love of God and Treasury of...*
Quotations

“You would know our Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it to you? For love.” Julian of Norwich *Revelations of Divine Love* 86

“When Jesus is with us, all is well, and nothing seems hard; but when Jesus is absent, everything is difficult. When Jesus does not speak to the heart, all other comfort is unavailing; but if Jesus speaks but a single word, we are greatly comforted... What can the world offer you without Jesus? To be without Jesus is hell most grievous; to be with Jesus is to know the sweetness of Heaven... Whoever finds Jesus, finds a rich treasure, and a good above every good.” Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ* chapter 8





Chapter 11
What's a Catholic to do?





Two Thousand Years of Quirks

Have you ever been in a group of friends that had so many inside jokes and quotes which only you understood that people looking at you from the outside thought you were from another planet or a little crazy? Every tight group of friends, be it a team or a band or just your friends at school, seems to have its own little understandings and quirky expressions. Usually if you were to sit down and explain all of your group's history and inside jokes, people can normally understand them and begin to understand what you are talking about. And usually these inside jokes and sayings evolve out of funny or serious things you've done together. They evolve out of your history and once people understand your history they can understand your today. And maybe they even find it funny. And maybe not.

Anyway as a Catholic Church we have our own quirks and inside "jokes" or sayings you could say. For example we do this funny thing called a genuflection when we come into Church where we kneel down on one knee for a second before entering the pew. We also do this thing called the sign of the cross where we touch our forehead shoulders and stomachs. And when we pray we often put our hands together and fold them. Not every Christian does these things. And God certainly is not mad at other Christians for not doing them. They are just some of the quirks or inside sayings that our Christian group does.

Want to know where these things come from and why we do them? Well they all evolved out of our history as a Church. For example a genuflection is something a servant or a knight would do before his king hundreds of years ago when we had kings and queens ruling countries. The people of that time figured that God was the ultimate king so we had better kneel before him just like we would an earthly king. And it's just kind of stuck. It's pretty cool if you think about it. It's probably the closest you and I will ever get to being a knight.

The sign of the cross. Well this is thing the early Christians did particularly when they were suffering or were about to be martyred, or killed for their faith. What they were doing was tracing a cross on their bodies meaning that they hoped that they would be able to suffer and die with the same courage that Christ did. It's pretty powerful if you think about it. Every time we do this we are doing what people did right before they were killed for their faith. It's probably the closest we'll ever get to being a martyr.

And then there is the way we fold our hands in prayer. When someone was being taken away as a slave they would have their hands tied together – kind of an old fashioned set of handcuffs. When this started in the Church people did it when they were praying to symbolize that fact that they were willing to do anything for God. They

were willing to totally be his slave. It's pretty amazing that kind of openness to God's will. They were so open that they wanted to tell God they would do anything for him. We can only hope to have that kind of faith.

The point is that all of us in our own little groups have our own sayings and inside jokes. Our Church is no exception. And it's pretty neat if you begin to understand where some of these things have come from in our history or what is called our Tradition. It's pretty powerful to think that in the Catholic Church that you and I stand in this long line of people who have been following Jesus. A line that goes all the way back to the first Apostles and the Bible itself. Wow!

Anyway, most of this book could be applied and accepted by any teenager who was a Christian. As Christians we all have the Bible and our faith in Jesus in common. We have a lot more in common than I think we know sometimes. Which is pretty cool. It's neat to think that not only do the people in your Church believe the things taught in this book but even people in other Christian Churches have the same faith. It's a beautiful thing and it should remind us of just how real our faith is and how much we should accept other Christians from different Churches.

But what we are going to look at now is some of our Church beliefs that we have as Catholics that most of Christians don't have. We are going to look at some of our own groups little quirks and inside lines. We are going to look at where they come from in the Bible and then try to understand them in ways that fit into our lives today after being passed down for two thousand years. It's a pretty cool thing to do. All these people having the same quirks for two thousand years – it's really powerful if you think about it. Which is what we are going to do.

Your relationship with Jesus is meant to be personal

Church is just a group of old people that get together on Sundays, right? Church is only a one hour thing that we do because we are required to, right? Church is simply a name for a group of people that think the same way, right? Of course not! The Church is not like any of these false statements. The Church is really us and all that we want it to be.

Becoming involved with students that share the same beliefs as me was one of the best things I've done for myself in high school. We are not just a group of kids that go to Church to say words and go through the motions. We are a family with the same values and desires to live out our faith.

Throughout my experiences, I've learned that my faith family will always stick together in any situation. We share a bond of prayer, mutual friendship, trust, and love. It is like having a group of twenty people in which you could reveal any secret, talk about any subject, or make the most random comment without having to worry about what others think of you. They will even stick up for you when you are being attacked, both physically and spiritually.

No matter what way you want to develop your relationship with Jesus, it is up to you to make it count. If you are an athletic person, Jesus can be with you in your sports. If you are a musical person, Jesus can be with you in your song. Whatever you do, your relationship with Jesus is meant to be personal. He will always accept you just the way you are.

-- high school senior guy

He will show you he is there

Every sports team has a mascot. The St. Joe's University teams have the Hawks. Penn State has the Nittany Lions. The Washington NFL football has the Redskins which are American Indians. Even our country has a mascot of sorts – the Bald Eagle. All of these mascots have something about them that the team wants to copy when they play the game. The Redskins want to have the courage of the American Indians. Penn State teams want to have the tenacity of lions. St. Joe's wants to have the killer instinct of the hawk when it hunts.

None of these mascots actually play for the team. In fact usually there are just people dressed up as these mascots roaming the sideline. And usually they are more for comic relief today than anything. But imagine if at the next Redskins game there was a whole tribe of Sioux Indian Warriors on the sideline and the football team was supposed to be playing to represent them. That would be intimidation. Or imagine actually lions roaming the field at a Penn State football game. It'd be pretty scary. Or imagine at the next St. Joe's basketball game there were a hundred hawks flying around in the rafters. Talk about home court advantage. It would be pretty intense. You'd get the feeling they weren't messing around and maybe the other team would just go home.

Well for us as Christians and as Catholics the person we are trying to copy is Jesus. And at the Last Supper Jesus took bread and said to his Apostles: "This is my body, which is given for you. Eat this as a way of remembering me" (Luke 22:19 CEV). So we do. Every Sunday, in fact. For two thousand years. And when we do we hope that we have the same depth of faith in God's plan for us that Jesus had in God's plan for him when he

knew he was going to die the next day for God's plan. It's pretty powerful if you think about it. We do every Sunday and at every Mass exactly what Jesus did to remind ourselves to have the same kind of faith.

But remember what I said about the mascots actually being the animals themselves and roaming the sidelines? Imagine how powerful and intense that would be? Those fans wouldn't be messing around right? It'd even be a little scary right? Well the Apostle Paul says that this is exactly what happens when we celebrate the Eucharist. We aren't just doing something that symbolizes Jesus. Paul says that Jesus himself is present in the bread and the wine we break, spill, eat and drink. Whoa. If that is really true, it's pretty intense. If Paul knows what he is talking, which one would assume he did, than Jesus himself is not just symbolically represented by the bread and wine like a mascot. No, he is present in the bread and wine!

Listen to this. Paul says: "whoever eats the bread or drinks the wine in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (1 Corinthians 11:27 NIV). In other words whatever we do to that bread and wine during the Mass, we do to the body and blood of Jesus himself. That's no joke! Paul then goes on to say in the next sentence that: "anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Corinthians 11:28 NIV). Now it makes sense that Catholics are so respectful toward the Eucharist.

To Paul, Jesus' own body and blood are present in the bread and the wine at the Eucharist. And Paul says we have to be respectful at that moment because of this. And Paul would know he had more than his share of visions and miracles from God.

Finally, Paul says about the Eucharist: "When we drink from the cup that we ask God to bless, isn't that sharing in the blood of Christ? When we eat the bread that we break isn't that sharing in the body of Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:16 CEV). Somehow in some mysterious and spiritual way we are receiving the body and blood of Jesus when we receive the bread and the wine.

Not all Christian Churches believe this. I don't know why. Maybe they just haven't read these passages from the Bible. But for us as Catholics this is a very important belief. It is actually the center of our faith. It reminds us that we are not alone. That Jesus hasn't abandoned us and that we can actually reach out and touch him in some mysterious and spiritual but also physical way when we receive the Eucharist. It is a great gift that the Church doesn't take for granted. But the question is: 'do we as individual Catholics take him for granted in the Eucharist?' It's a question only you and I can answer for ourselves. Hopefully the answer is 'no.'

In other words whatever we do to that bread and wine during the Mass, we do to the body and blood of Jesus himself.

If you feel like you have a tough time understanding how Jesus is there, just ask him to show you. He will. I've been blessed to watch a friend be physically healed before the Eucharist. It was pretty amazing to behold! I have never seen anything like it. And I have another friend who had another miracle happen to her when receiving the Eucharist. During a period of intense doubt she says she twice tasted actual blood when she received the wine. She doesn't talk about it much. It scared her so much. But her faith was renewed at the same time. So just ask Jesus. He will show you that he is there. Maybe not with miracles. Maybe just in your heart. Just ask him. He will show you. And it's pretty awesome when you can finally see the truth of it all.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 and/or 11:26-29

- 1) What do you think it means that the Eucharist is a “participation in the Body... and Blood” of Christ?
- 2) How do you think it is that Jesus is present?
- 3) What does it mean to you that Jesus is present in the Eucharist?
- 4) What makes it hard to understand?

Experience with the Eucharist

When I was in grade school, I hated going to adoration. I thought it was pointless, and I could never sit still for that long. I would kneel down, say a few Our Father's, and then let my mind wander. For me, it was just a time to daydream. Once I started becoming stronger in my faith, I used adoration as a time to pray, but it didn't really hold any significance for me. It was the same as when I was praying in an empty Church. I had heard some very powerful stories about experiences in adoration, and I always wondered in the back of my head why those kinds of things didn't happen to me. I love Jesus and I pray and read the Bible every day, so why don't I ever have experiences like that? So I went to my Life Teen lock-in, and we went to adoration for an hour. We went up into the Church, and one of our leaders read two passages from the Bible. In Mark 7:31-37, Jesus heals the deaf man by simply touching him, and in Matthew 9:20-22, a hemophiliac woman is cured by simply touching Jesus' cloak. Our leader explained to us that, as we were sitting in front of the altar with the Blessed Sacrament exposed, Jesus was right in front of us. Christ Himself was sitting in the Church there with us! We could talk to Him, and we could

reach out and touch His cloak. The altar cloth, she told us, was symbolic of Jesus' cloak, and that if we prayed and reached out and touched His cloak, he would heal us. Then she brought out the Blessed Sacrament, and I began to

“So I went up, touched the altar cloth, and I said, God, I’m here. I’m ready to let you in and I’m listening. God, please come into my heart and tell me what it is you want me to do.”

talk to Jesus. And I kept talking, like I always do. But then something made me stop. I just stopped praying in the middle of a thought and I decided to let Jesus talk for a little while. I never really gave him a chance to come into my heart, because I could never quiet my thoughts and just let Him in. but I didn't hear anything, or even feel anything, and I got annoyed. So I went up, touched the altar cloth, and I said, God, I'm here. I'm ready to let you in and I'm listening. God, please come into my heart and tell me what it is you want me to do. I didn't hear anything, and I didn't see a bright light or feel anything spectacular, but I know He heard me. As I walked out of the Church, I knew I didn't need to have the kind of experiences that I had heard about. I had them every day. The people in my life and the experiences I have had are

all I need. And being able to see Jesus Christ Himself and being able to reach out and touch His cloak are all the miracle I will ever need.

-- high school senior girl

Wondering if you are forgiven?

Have you ever done something wrong, been sorry but always wondered if the person would actually forgive you if you asked them? Perhaps you just walk past that person in the hallway without talking to them anymore. Perhaps you just try to pretend that they are not there. But they still are. So perhaps you take a different way to class to try to avoid them. I know I've been there myself.

The scary thing is that we sometimes do the same thing with God. We've made a big mistake and we are genuinely sorry. But we feel so much guilt we just try to avoid conversations about God all together. Kind of start avoiding prayer or Church or people who really believe strongly. We've all been there. It's ok. It's part of being a sinner struggling to be a good person and a faithful Christian.

But God does not want us to fear him. He wants us to know for sure that we are forgiven. That's why he died on the cross two thousand years ago. But sometimes even that is not enough. We tell God we are sorry but

sometimes we have a hard time believing we are actually forgiven. It is the worst feeling in the world wondering if God still loves you, wondering if he really forgives you. It can eat away at you for years in fact. And it sucks.

Well, that feeling is certainly not God's plan for your life. God would not want you to ever doubt his love for you. He would never want you to doubt that you are forgiven. He would never want to be like that person you avoid in the hallway. He wants to forgive you. If you have read anything in this book you must know that is true.

But sometimes we just need to hear words. We just need to hear a voice say back to us, "yes, you are forgiven" or "yes, God really does love you unconditionally." It must have been nice to live when Jesus was alive. It must have been nice to be able to have Jesus come up to you and say "your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5 CEV). You could never doubt it then. Perhaps he would even work a miracle the way he healed that cripple to show that it was true. Wow! That would just blow me away. It would be awesome.

But the truth is that Jesus had to leave us to see what we would really do with the faith he left behind for us to follow. So we cannot necessarily hear Jesus verbally say we are forgiven. But we can know it in our hearts with the help of the Holy Spirit when we read the Bible or just pray about it. As Catholics, when a person prays to God personally or one on one and knows they are forgiven, we say the person has Perfect Contrition. It is an old teaching of the Catholic Church. We just know that God would not hold back his love and forgiveness. All we have to do is ask for it. Nothing more. Perfect Contrition. Don't forget it. It can save your soul and give you such a deep peace. Don't let this part of our Catholic faith go unused.

But sometimes this just isn't enough for us. Sometimes we've done something so wrong that we still just want to hear the words "you are forgiven" spoken by someone who has the right to speak them for the sake of us having peace. Jesus knew that. He knew how important it was for us to hear these words sometimes. So after rising from the dead he said to the Apostles: "I am sending you just as the Father has sent me... Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins they will be forgiven" (John 20:21-22 CEV). Wow! As a gift for us, Jesus gave the right to give God's forgiveness to the Apostles. And it is a gift they have passed down for two thousand years, generation after generation to the priests who are alive today. It is a powerful thing to understand.

Most other Christian Churches don't follow this teaching either. Again, I don't know why. But if you are ever struggling with your sins and feel tons of guilt you can go to a priest and he can tangibly give you God's forgiveness. You can have all of your doubts erased



because the priest really has the right to do that like Jesus did, so you can know for sure that you are forgiven. So, if you are at all afraid of your sins or if you feel like God has become like that person in the hallway you never talk to anymore, give Confession a shot. It's part of his plan for your life. He would never want to be like that person you try to ignore and wish didn't exist. That's definitely not his plan.

If it's scary for you, go to a priest who you know is nice. Go to someone who you feel you can trust. Maybe there is a priest who just seems like an easy person to talk to. Maybe you should try talking to him. It's pretty powerful if you think about it. There are people walking around on this earth right now who have the authority to give you God's forgiveness. It'd be a shame not to take God up on this opportunity so you can know for sure you are forgiven.

What's in the Bible for me? Mark 2:1-12 and John 20:21-22

- 1) What do you think it would be like to hear Jesus personally in the flesh say to you what he said to the cripple: "My friend, your sins *are* forgiven?"
- 2) How would your life change if this happened to you?
- 3) Why is it important to hear from an actual person (that has the right to say so) that your sins are definitely forgiven?
- 4) Have you ever felt the need to go to Confession because of your conscience? What was that like? Why do you think it was important to go?

The amazing feeling that comes with being forgiven

The sacrament of Reconciliation always scared me. I'm not sure whether it was the fact that I was telling someone I barely knew everything that I had done wrong or the fact that the priest was acting as God and could forgive me for these sins. Also, I never really felt the peace that I was supposed to feel after Confession. It didn't make sense to me. How was it that I sat in this booth and told my sins to someone, and then said a few Hail Mary's, and then they all disappeared? But time and time again I found myself receiving Reconciliation, either at school or on a retreat, and I dreaded it every time. So when I was at a lock in for Life-Teen, they told us that we would all be

going to Confession, and a series of groans erupted in the group. “Why don’t you like Reconciliation?” one of our leaders asked. “Are you afraid? Here’s a thought – don’t just go in and list all of your sins. Talk to the priest. Tell him the things that you do that you think you shouldn’t and why you do them. Ask him how you can change and what you should be doing to sin less and love more.”

So I tried it. I went into the confessional and began to talk to Father. I told him the things that disappointed others and myself in my life. I told him I didn’t want to sin anymore, but that it is hard to live as Jesus did. And then Father talked to me. He gave me some passages in Scripture that might help me, and he gave me some ways that I could resist temptation and he told me to pray. Not just Hail Mary’s and Our Fathers, but to really talk to God. He told me to tell Jesus that I love Him and I want to follow Him and be like Him. After I left the confessional, I knelt down and prayed. I thanked Jesus, because I now realized how lucky we are to have the Sacrament of Reconciliation and I thanked Him, because I felt at peace in my heart. Now that I really understood the true meaning of the sacrament, I could understand the amazing feeling that comes with being forgiven, and I knew that Jesus loved me.

I now realized how lucky we are to have the Sacrament of Reconciliation and I thanked Him, because I felt at peace in my heart... I could understand the amazing feeling that comes with being forgiven, and I knew that Jesus loved me.

-- high school senior girl

Still wondering?

Have you ever had a friend do something wrong to you but you found it pretty easy to forgive because it was just a simple mistake that anyone could make? Have you ever had a friend do something wrong to you that was a really really big deal but they had no idea that they did it so it was easy to forgive them too? I think it’s something we’ve all experienced. But have you ever had a friend who did something wrong to you that was a really big deal and was done knowing full well it was a big deal that would rip your world apart? Yeah, I think a lot of us have had that happen to us too.

The point is that sometimes people do things that are wrong but it doesn’t mean your friendship with them is over. The friendship doesn’t need to start from scratch again. You just have to work some things out. But sometimes someone does something so wrong to us that it really is their way of saying that they really don’t want to

be our friend any more. In fact they have chosen to be the total opposite for some reason. Well the reality is that it is hard, but sometimes we can do the same thing to God.

Sometimes we make mistakes and sin against God but we just can't help it. It doesn't mean that we don't love him. It just means that we are human and we make mistakes and fall into sin. When this happens we call this kind of sin a venial sin, which means we need to seriously work on that sin but not worry that we have totally cut God out of our lives with it. We don't have to start all over again with God from scratch. We haven't stopped loving him. We just sinned. We didn't decide that we just were never going to follow God again and totally give up on his plan for our lives. We just hit a bump in the road. Maybe a big bump, but just a bump. The road didn't end. And we didn't decide to get off the road and head the other way. We just need some driving lessons.

But sometimes we decide that we are going to make a clean break from God. We decide that we are not going to love anymore at all. We decide to kick all love for God and others out of our hearts. Then we do something really serious that shows that we did. That's what is called mortal sin. And this is a serious thing.

Now there are no lists of mortal sins. It's not like this one action is a mortal sin and this other one is not, so do this other thing all you want but don't do the first thing. No, all sin is wrong – venial and mortal sin – and all sin hurts the personal relationship you have with God that starts within your heart. Mortal sin begins with the state of your heart. First you have to totally deny God and destroy all love in your heart. You have to decide that love just isn't worth your time anymore and you have no problem cutting the love of God and others out of your life. The Catechism says that mortal sin means that all of the love in your “heart” has been “destroyed” (CCC 1855). This is rare compared to venial sin in our lives, but it is a possibility because we have free will.

For a sin to be mortal it has to be something that is a “personal choice” (CCC 1859). Sometimes we commit serious sins because we are caught up in a moment of “passion” or because of “external pressures” (CCC 1860). Sometimes the “passion” is “love” or sometimes something really terrible has happened to us and we have the passion of “anger” (CCC 1765). If something like this is causing us to sin, no matter how serious the sin is it is not a mortal sin. It is still serious, but not mortal.

For a sin to be mortal it has to be a serious sin (or theologically speaking “grave matter”) such as premarital sex (CCC 1857). But committing this sin can't be the result of passions. It has to be something you have deliberately decided to do. The theological phrase for this is “deliberate consent” (CCC 1857). It also has to be something that you really know and fully understand is wrong. If you just don't understand yet that something is a

sin or really don't understand why, than it isn't a mortal sin. The theological phrase for this is called needing to have "full knowledge" (CCC 1857).

So if a friend of yours is having premarital sex but they don't really know or understand that it is wrong, is it a serious sin? Yes. Is it a mortal sin? No. But remember if you are just pretending that you don't know it is wrong we call that "unintentional ignorance" which is just as bad (CCC 1860).

So what's the big deal anyway? Why all of this explanation of mortal and venial sin? Who cares if a sin is serious but not mortal? Well, mortal sin is the complete rejection of God. It is our way of saying "get out of my life, God." It is rare, but it happens. If we die with the attitude of saying "get out of my life, God" than that's what we'll be saying when we see him. We will be choosing to not be with him. Which is really bad, because not being with him means, well, not being in heaven. That's not good.

'So am I in mortal sin,' you may be asking. Well, are you saying "get out of my life, God" in your heart and having nothing but hatred for him and his ways? Have you said to yourself I just don't care about following God at all and then done the exact opposite of following him and shown you don't want him at all with your actions? If you have this attitude and followed it up with serious sins than yes, you are in mortal sin. If you haven't done this, which maybe you haven't even if your sin was serious, than you aren't in mortal sin.

But the dangerous thing is that if you are committing serious sin or "grave matter" and you keep it up you probably will eventually say a complete "no" to God or essentially a "get out of my life, God." And that's not good.

But we need to really be aware of whether we are actually accepting him into our lives, and not just saying that we are...

Not good at all. That's the danger for anyone in serious sin – even if the person is truly ignorant of the truth. So don't beat yourself up for your mistakes if you really didn't understand what you were doing. But don't make them again, because you may be wandering into a total rejection of God. And I would go to Confession, not because you have to but just to get that extra help getting back with God.

Now remember there is Perfect Contrition and so you are forgiven the moment you are truly sorry and want to follow and love God again (CCC 1452). And Perfect Contrition counts for mortal and venial sins. So you can have peace and know that God loves you no matter what. But you have to seriously ask yourself if you are letting God's love in.

The Apostle John says that "Everything that is wrong is sin, but not all sins are deadly" (1 John 5:17 CEV). Some sins are deadly to the soul. That means that some sins are a total rejection of God. We need to really be aware of whether we are totally rejecting God. And hopefully we're not right now. But we need to really be aware

of whether we are actually accepting him into our lives, and not just saying that we are, and then doing whatever the heck we want. That's not Christianity. That's the opposite of eternal life. That's mortal sin or death to the soul. Don't do that. That's not good.

But in the end it's just a matter of asking ourselves if our faith is real or not. If it is real and we are trying genuinely to love God and avoid sin (even if we make some mistakes along the way) we have nothing to worry about. Just keep growing more and more faithful to God every day. But if we have decided that we just don't want God anymore on any level at all with both our hearts and the way we act, we have to really look at that honestly and ask ourselves why that is and what is wrong.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 John 5:17

- 1) What would you say to someone who is struggling with serious sins in his or her life? What advice would you give them?
- 2) If someone felt afraid of hell because of their sins, what would you say him or her?
- 3) What would you say if someone felt condemned by others – especially others in the Church – for their sins that they regret?
- 4) What would you say to someone who is afraid of Confession?

There are so many temptations

There are so many temptations out there in our lives, and sometimes it does seem extremely hard to resist them. Growing up as a teenager is hard enough, but when you throw in school, friends, family, and all the problems that come with it, it sometimes seems like it's too much to handle. It's not. God will be there to help you whether you know it or not. You just have to accept that he is there. God tries to keep us away from these things for our own good, not just to make things harder on us. As teenagers many of us do not understand why it is so wrong to just go out and 'have a good time.' But you do not need things that will hurt you spiritually just to do so. To be perfectly honest, I do not fully understand most of the things in my life and why they happen. I would be lying if I said that I

did. I needed to come to realize that things happen for a reason, God's reason. They must be accepted and learned from.

We have a free will to do what we want, even though God wants us to pick what is right. If I feel as if I have done something really wrong and it has been staying on my mind, when I go to Church I choose not to receive communion and to my parents this is unacceptable. I understand that they might want their child to receive communion and all but still, if I have a good reason then I do think it should be acceptable.

I did stray away from God for quite a bit of time once I got into high school. I just didn't understand why it was important to have him in my life. After losing some loved one you sometimes feel like God has abandoned you and that's exactly how I felt. A few of my best friends tried to take their own lives, and trust me, that hits hard too. Once people turn away from God it's pretty hard to revert, but it's the right thing to do. No matter how hard your life seems, it will get better. With God on your side, it can help a lot. He gives us sin and temptation for life experience and we need to learn to do the right thing. He isn't trying to make things worse for us; he is just trying to help us get to the point in our life where we really need to be, with him. Life is truly amazing, and we should not let a single second of it slip away.

-- high school sophomore girl

Wondering some more?

Have you ever played on a sports team where there was a player who just didn't do his or her part? He or she was always late to practice. Or he or she just chose not to try at certain moments of the game. Have you ever played on a team where everyone worked really hard to win but that one player just didn't care? It's hard to play for a team like that because the thing is that this player doesn't just hurt his or her own statistics, he or she can ruin a whole game for the team. It can be incredibly frustrating.

The reality of it all is that this one player's effort really affects everyone else. For us as Catholics we really find this to be true ourselves. Isn't it hard to avoid drinking or drugs when all of your friends are doing it? Isn't

hard to avoid sex before marriage if your girlfriend or boyfriend is always trying to push your limits and convince you to just give in?

And on the positive side, isn't it amazingly inspiring when that one guy can stand up and say "I'm a virgin and I'm waiting for marriage?" Or isn't it helpful when you know that there is that one girl out there who just isn't going to get drunk or high no matter what? Being around them just makes it so much easier to be a Christian. You just know you aren't going to be tempted when you're with them.

Paul says that when true Christians come together, others would be so convinced by their lifestyles that there is a God that they would exclaim "surely God is really among you" (1 Corinthians 14:25 NIV). That is God's dream for his Church. He wants us to be, as Paul says, the very "body of Christ." Paul says: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1 Corinthians 12:27 NIV). God wants people to feel like they can almost see Jesus when they see us together. In fact Jesus said of true Christians that "Whenever two or three of you are gathered in my name, I am there with you" (Matthew 18:20 CEV).

Because all of this is true, the Catholic Church really emphasizes how important it is that we really try to be holy as a team. The Church says that we are the "sign and instrument" for other people to realize God in their lives (CCC 775). If we fail at this there will be no one to show God to the world. In fact, St. Catherine said, "Christ has no hands now but yours and Christ has no feet now but yours." So when we sin, especially when we commit mortal sin, we are letting not just God down but the other people in the Church, and worse than that we are letting down those who don't really know God yet. We are really failing each other as the body of Christ.

So the Church teaches that we don't just have to ask God for forgiveness when we sin. But when we commit sins – especially mortal sins – we should ask the Church for forgiveness as well. The way that we ask the Church for forgiveness is through the Sacrament of Confession.

Now the Church teaches that if we have committed venial sins and have Perfect Contrition it's ok to skip on Confession although it is still a good idea to go because the Sacrament can really help us deal with our sins (CCC 1452). The Church would say that it is still important to go for our own peace of mind, especially if our sins contain "grave matter" or are serious, but not to get all panicky with God – just go to Confession for a little extra help getting back on the right track. However, because when we deliberately commit mortal sin we really are letting the people around us down and really need to apologize to our teammates in the Catholic faith, the Church says that even if we have Perfect Contrition we owe it to the Church to go and confess our sins officially to a priest. It's kind of like apologizing to the coach. And it's especially important to do this before we come officially back to the team

by receiving the Eucharist again even though God can and does forgive you one on one (Canon 917). It's just a sign of respect to everyone else on the team with you.

The Church teaches that we can have peace with God if we have Perfect Contrition even if our sins are mortal so we shouldn't get all upset. Jesus loves us. But the Church also says that if we really are sorry and have Perfect Contrition we should try to get to Confession as soon as we can. We have to accept that we have hurt the community and not just ourselves.

In Corinth, where Paul had preached, people were doing things that were really sexually immoral and they weren't even trying to stop. In fact they were quite "proud" of themselves (1 Corinthians 5:2 CEV). Paul said they were embarrassing the Church. In fact, Paul said to the Church at Corinth that they "ought to feel bad enough to chase away anyone who acts like that" (1 Corinthians 5:2 CEV).

We really have to be the body of Christ. We have to do this so others can see Christ. We have to work hard to get all hypocrisy out of our own lives so that others can find Jesus in their hearts as well. If we don't, we are not just letting God down, we're letting non-Christians down and worse we're letting our brothers and sisters in the faith down. We are hurting a lot more people than just ourselves.

Now if those people in Corinth who were doing really wrong sexual things really were sorry instead of being "proud," surely God would forgive them in a heartbeat. That's what Perfect Contrition is. And that's what the result of God's unconditional love and "endless patience" is (1 Timothy 1:16 CEV). But they also owe the people in their Church an apology because it sounds like their sins were probably mortal. They should let the leaders or priests in that Church know that they are going to try to avoid that sin from now on. And if they fail again, they should just ask for forgiveness again. It will always be there. God loves us unconditionally. But we have to ask God and also the Church sometimes.

So we have to avoid being proud and ask God to forgive us when we sin – no matter what kind of sin it is. We have to accept his love as soon as we can and do our best to obey him again. And if we are in mortal sin we should apologize to the Church too! Because we let more than just God down. We've made it harder for everyone to follow God when we don't make any effort to follow God at all. And especially before we receive the Eucharist again at Mass and come fully back to the team after really letting them down, we should get our mortal sins

We have to work hard to get all hypocrisy out of our own lives so that others can find Jesus in their hearts as well.

straightened out not just with God one on one (which we can always do), but also with the team we let down, by going to Confession out of respect for the Eucharist and the Church.

And above all else we have to listen to God speaking to us in our hearts. In prayer it will be obvious if we are in mortal sin or not. Only he can really show us (CCC 1861). It will be obvious if we should receive Communion or not. Ask him. He will show you. And he will show you how much he loves you and how to get back to him in your life. Just be honest with him and let him be honest with you. Let your conscience by God's grace guide you to where you need to be. He promises to be with you and the whole Church to the end of the world and beyond. We just have to let him in. Want to let him in? He has nothing for you but peace.

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Timothy 1:12-17

- 1) What would you say to someone who is wondering whether he or she should go to Confession? How would you advise them?
- 2) What would you say to someone who doesn't know if they should receive the Eucharist or not because they are wondering if they need to go to Confession first?
- 3) Have you ever felt like you let other people and other Christians down because of your sins? What does that feel like?
- 4) Do you think Confession can help someone who feels like they really let the people around them down? How? Why or why not?

Seeing things in a new way

Have you ever met somebody who was just so closed-minded that they just couldn't see things in a new way? Sometimes it happens on a sports team. Sometimes in a band. Sometimes just when hanging out with friends. Sometimes we do it ourselves. The danger is that if we do it with God we may really be cutting ourselves off from something God wants to give us.

This is the mistake that the Sadducees and the Pharisees made during the New Testament times. Sadducees were Jewish people who only believe in the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Because they only followed these books they didn't believe in "angels or spirits or that the dead

would rise to life” (Acts 23:8 CEV). So they rejected Jesus outright. They just couldn’t accept anything he was saying because he so often talked about angels and about how he would rise from the dead. They just weren’t open to the fact that God could continue to reveal new things about himself to the world. They figured God was done after Moses.

The Pharisees did believe in angels, spirits and the resurrection. They believed this because God so clearly talked about these things in the other books of the Old Testament. The reason they didn’t accept Jesus was because they were so caught up in all of the little rules and regulations of their faith and Jesus often said that those rules were more like guidelines and didn’t need to be held to so strictly. So when Jesus healed someone or harvested some food from a field on the Sabbath the Pharisees thought that Jesus was a terrible sinner. Jesus tried to explain that there were more important things than being strict about all of these little rules but they couldn’t hear it. So they rejected Jesus as well. They didn’t feel safe around his new teachings and when this “sinner” made claims to be God they took him right to Pontius Pilate to have Jesus crucified. They just couldn’t accept that God could act in this new way.

Well the Catholic Church is determined not to make the same mistake. So we believe that God can not only teach us about himself in the Bible but he can also continue to teach us new things about himself today. We believe therefore not just in the Bible but also in this idea called Tradition. The Catholic Tradition is what God continues to reveal to the world after the Apostles died and the Bible was written.

Some amazing things that God has given us in our Tradition are miracles such as the stigmata (when a Saint receives the wounds of Christ on his or her own body), the appearances of Mary, the miracles involving the Eucharist, and the visions given to the Saints. We believe that God still has more to say to us even after the Bible was written. And it’s true because these miracles and visions still happen today. This is what makes our faith a real living faith. The fact that we as Catholics are really open to this lets God continue to show us new things about himself that didn’t get into the Bible.

Some of these new things God has taught us are things like the Immaculate Conception of Mary which was revealed to a number of Saints including St. Bernadette only about a hundred years ago. Another teaching is the rosary. And another is the way that Saints can help us out in our lives through their prayers to God for us. It would be a real shame if we missed out on these things. It’s like God continues to give us new team uniforms and equipment for our faith lives. It’s pretty cool. And it would be sad not to be open to it all.

Has God ever spoken to you?

Has God ever spoken to you? Have you ever just known something? And when you think about it, it brings a feeling of incredible peace over you? I have been blessed enough to have an experience like this concerning an extremely important part of my life. In fact, it is my life.

As I started to really get into my faith, especially after a retreat, I decided to basically give God my life one way or another. I prayed to Jesus, "I trust you," and "Take my life Lord, I can't handle it, lead me." Well, eventually I saw myself leading a more carefree enjoyable life because it seemed when something went wrong the Holy Spirit was there to remind me that Jesus will catch me however far or horribly I fall. This continues today. So I thanked and still thank God for granting me this gift of peace no matter what would happen.

One night God decided to drastically change my life. I was praying, lying in my bed and just kind of meditating on my faith. When I fell in the presence of God, I just let my mind wander because anything that comes in my mind will be of and from God. Whatever comes into my mind I think about it until something else comes up. Well that night, I was doing this, when suddenly I sort of sat up in bed and opened my eyes, and said, "I'm going to become a Priest!" It really was an amazing thing because it was a very random thought and I just kind of realized in my heart and I tell you I have never been in such a state of peace in my life. I had always thought about this possibility because other people had always said that I am going to become a Priest and things like that, but now I know for sure. It's funny; too, because just as God told me this, I just started receiving e-mails and letters about colleges and I just started looking into my future. Just not too long ago I went to visit the Seminary, and I loved it. With God's help, I came to the conclusion that I am going into the Seminary right after high school.

Knowing this however, has not really been the easiest thing either. For one, my parents. My dad, I knew, was not totally cool with it, but my mom just wanted the best for me. So on the way home the night of the seminary visit I asked my dad in the car about what he thought about me going into the seminary after high school. Well let me tell you, Jesus really enabled him to have a change of heart. Because he said that he is fine with it, but it's not what he had planned. There was such happiness and relief that came over me, it was indescribable. Another thing that makes this difficult is with girls and relationships. I know for a lot of guys this is what really, honestly will deter them from even considering the Priesthood or Religious life. I like to have relationships, but since the point in the end is be married, I can't see why they are necessary to my life right now. But, in spite of saying this, I still have them. I don't know why, but I do. They do bring me happiness, but more often than not they bring hurt. I am trying to move away

“God’s voice is real and He always is talking.”

from them. Even though I am only a sophomore, and am keeping my eyes open to other vocations just in case it comes about, I don’t consider dating a part of my life that is essential. It just can’t bring me that peace that thinking about the Priesthood does. Another thing that is hard for me is my friends. I believe God wants me to share what he told me with whomever I feel the need too. Some of my friends think it’s weird and outlandish, others think it’s scary. Some say it’s amazing, but others just looked puzzled. It doesn’t affect me, what they say or think. It makes me happy and I believe it is the way I can serve God in this short time I was put here.

God’s voice is real and He always is talking. If we don’t open our ears to His call we risk going throughout life without truly feeling peaceful or happy. So please, even if you are scared of what our Savior may say, I am telling you, it is worth it. So worth it. Give it a shot. If you are sad and depressed, what do you have to lose? If you are happier than you have ever been, listening to God speak will elevate your happiness so much. It will change your life. Just please don’t be scared. I will pray that the Holy Spirit will help all of you realize your vocations, because for all of you, vocations are our lives. Put all your trust in Jesus and admit to Him you can’t handle yourself. Then realize that it doesn’t matter what you think you will do in life, but it’s what God wants you to do in life. This will invite Jesus Christ into your lives. When you admit you are in this weakened state and you solely are relying on Jesus, don’t worry, because “My kindness is all you need. My power is strongest when you are weak.”-2 Corinthians 12:9

-- high school sophomore guy

Rule Changes

Have you ever noticed the different rule changes that have happened in some sports? Maybe you have had some in some of your own leagues. Football is good example. In football there are some rules that will never change whether it is a high school game or the NFL. Some rules like that are rules such as it is 10 yards for a first down and the field is a hundred yards long. These are just essential parts of the game. If you don’t play by these rules you just aren’t playing football. Then there is the rule that the player has to be actually on the field to catch a pass. He can’t run out of bounds and then make a catch or else players would be climbing up into the bleachers. But in high school and college football only one of the receiver’s feet have to be in bounds for the catch to count. In

the NFL you need two feet. Then there is instant replay in the NFL now when 10 years ago there wasn't. Then there are team rules like curfews and things like that.

In the Catholic Church we have a similar idea. There are certain things that will never change in our faith. If we don't believe these things we just aren't Catholic. Some of these things are the resurrection of Jesus and his presence in the Eucharist. Then there are also certain things that have changed and can change. Some of these things are rules such as when we sit or stand during the Mass and things like genuflections which we didn't do until during the Middle Ages. Some things are absolutely essential to being Catholic and some things the Church says aren't as essential even though they are still the Catholic way.

This is just the way that our Tradition works. But there is one constant. It is called Revelation. It is what God has revealed through the prophets and the Apostles. Really when it comes down to it simply said "Revelation" is the Bible. There is nothing that we can believe as Catholics that can disagree with what God has told us in his personal love letter, the Scriptures. So when we read the Bible we are looking into the very heart of the Church. Nothing we will ever believe will disagree with this. Which makes sense because God wouldn't disagree with himself.

But Jesus gave Peter a very special privilege. One day he said to Peter because of his simple faith that Peter is like a "rock" and that "on this rock I will build my Church... I will give you the keys to heaven, and God in heaven will allow anything that you allow on earth" (Matthew 16:18-19 CEV). In other words, Jesus gave Peter the very keys to the Church and in fact heaven itself for when Jesus was gone. Jesus trusted the Church as the way to know God and to find heaven to Peter. Wow what a task! I'm glad I wasn't in Peter's place. I'd probably wreck everything.

When Peter died he passed his authority to another pope who passed it down to another pope who passed it down all the way to our pope today. So the Pope has a certain power that is unique in our Church. It is really his job to call the shots and help us understand our faith and our Tradition today. He does this with the help of the other bishops in something called the magisterium. Together they help to keep us on track as a Church.

Now of course even the pope and the magisterium cannot rewrite the Bible, the heart of the Church. But the pope and the magisterium help us fine tune our faith for the modern world. Together they create dogma, doctrine and discipline. Dogma is just teachings that are already found in Revelation. They are like highlights so we stay on track if we can't read the whole Bible ourselves. Doctrines are teachings that are not in Revelation but which are used to explain the teachings of Revelation. Disciplines are rules for how the Church should be run. These

teachings are not found in the Bible directly. They are just guidelines for us to keep ourselves in order when we worship God at Mass for example.

Revelation and Dogma cannot change. They are infallible. If we don't believe these things we are really denying Christianity all together. Doctrine and disciplines can change just like some of the rules in football, like instant replay, that have changed as the world gets more modern. So the cool thing is that Jesus through Peter created this way for us as a Church to "recognize the signs of the times" and change so that our faith always fits us just where we are at. And also through Peter Jesus laid down a real "rock" of the basics found in the Bible that cannot change.



It's pretty powerful if we think about it. Jesus always wanted us to be able to personalize our faith as a whole Church in a way that would fit us in the modern world while not losing the basics. Again, this job of the Church is called the magisterium. It is something we really emphasize in our faith. It's what helps to keep our faith alive toady in the modern world. Non-Catholics don't really believe in this the way we do. It is something unique in the Catholic Church to help us in the modern world so we don't lose our way. And it comes right out of the Bible.

What's in the Bible for me? Matthew 16:16-19

- 1) Why do you think Jesus thought it was important to make a "rock" to build his Church on? Why do you think Jesus appointed Peter as the leader of the Church?
- 2) How do you think Peter could have abused his power if he chose to?
- 3) What would a good leader of the Church, or pope, be like? Do you think our current pope is like this?
- 4) Do you think it is important that there are both fallible and infallible teachings in the Church? Why or why not?
- 5) How does it make you feel as a Catholic to know that there are both fallible and infallible teachings?

Have you left the Saints on the sidelines of your life?

One of the most unique things in our Catholic faith is the whole idea of Saints and the idea of Mary as really the Saint of all the Saints. Most Christians who aren't Catholic don't believe what we do about Saints but a lot of what we believe comes right out of the Bible. Then God showed us the rest with our Tradition.

In the Book of Revelation, the last book of the Bible, it says that there are people in heaven called “elders” who can take our prayers, the “prayers of God’s people” and help bring them to God (Revelation 5:8 CEV). It also says that “angels” sometimes help bring the “prayers of God’s people” to God (Revelation 8:3-4 CEV). The idea is that the people in heaven can be aware of our prayers on earth and help to bring them to God.

In fact Jesus even tells a story where a man who is in heaven can be aware of what his five brothers on earth are still doing. This man talked to God on their behalf to ask God to help them. This man was in hell and he didn’t want his brothers to go there too because they were living just like he was (Luke 16:19-31).

Jesus also says that all the people who have died are still alive to God. He said that even “Abraham, Isaac

God continues to reveal that these Biblical ideas are true through all of the miracles done through the prayers of the Saints

and Jacob” were alive with God because “everyone is alive as far as God is concerned” (Luke 20:37-38 CEV). Jesus knew that when we died we didn’t really die we are just brought before God in heaven. If all people are alive to God when they die and if they are aware of what we are doing and praying down here on earth and if they really help our prayers along to God as if our prayers were theirs, than we can turn to the people who have passed away and ask them to pray for us and look out for us.

Have you ever felt like your deceased mother or father or grandmother or grandfather were just watching out for you? Well they are! It’s pretty cool. In the Catholic Church we call this the “Communion of Saints” (“Saints” in this sense means anyone who has died as a Christian). What this means is that we can still have relationships with the people who have passed away in our lives if we are close to God and if they are with God (CCC 962). Our relationship with them, just like our relationship with God doesn’t end when they die. In fact, in some ways it is even stronger because they can be there for you in a whole new and spiritual way, a way that will certainly bring you closer to God.

In our Tradition God continues to reveal that these Biblical ideas are true through all of the miracles done through the prayers of the Saints. He can prove them to you too if you turn to the Saints for help. The Book of Revelation says that they are just waiting there to help out your prayers and all of the miracles of the Saints show that it is true. The only question is: do we want to take advantage of this great gift God is giving us through his promises in the Bible and in the Tradition of the Church? It would be a shame to miss out on what all of the Saints including Mary want to do to help us. We don’t want to leave them on the sidelines of our lives when they can really help us in the midst of all of our issues, do we?

An Angel For My Darkness

As teenagers, we live our lives semi-independent, yet still partially under the control of our parents' guidance and their rules. As we go about our lives, inevitably we face challenges and pains, some teens more so than others but each of us has our share. And we find that no problem is easily overcome by any one of us since we have little or no personal experience to use as a guideline.

I've had my share of sad events and tough times. I was born into a turbulent home in the city. I was living with my father, mother (who I shall refer to as Maryann), and my maternal half brother (who I shall refer to as Kevin). My father was an alcoholic, and both he and Maryann smoked. Kevin had his own problems, dealing with the recent death of his biological father, and his inherent learning disability. Kevin, frustrated with all he was going through, became hostile with my dad and there were many fights, mostly physical, provoked by my brother. I would sit and watch as the only people I knew, then, were beating each other up, and cursing each other. I thank God no one was too badly hurt.

As this was going on, Maryann would slip further into the same depression she'd had her whole life, and she'd take any of her anger towards my father out on me. She'd smack me and beat me to the point where I couldn't even cry. There wasn't much I, as a little child, could have done about it. In the midst of all of this, my little sister was born. She, who would become one of my best friends and biggest supporters in life, gave me a new sense of responsibility. With my father recovering from his alcoholism, Kevin sent off to boarding school, and Maryann depressed as ever, I was left to care for my little sister.

Finally, the madness died down when my parents divorced, and Maryann moved out with Kevin, leaving my sister, my recovering father, and a barely self-reliant me to fend for ourselves. After some time, the three of us banded together and we showed Maryann what a family should look like. My father has fully recovered and hasn't touched a drink since. We moved out of the city and into the suburbs where we still reside. The move wasn't easy for me in the first couple of years. I had trouble adjusting to all of the new things: new house, new school, new people, and not to mention actually riding a bus to school! (Something I never did in the city) I was one freaked out fourth grader. I made it through fourth grade with few problems; it was fifth grade that dealt me the bad hand. I had a teacher who, from the very beginning, was beyond mean to me. She would label me as "the kid from the broken home," or "a child at risk." She told me that I was worthless and that I would never amount to anything in life. (The

perfect words of encouragement for a fifth grader) This went on the entire year, and sent me into a depression that took a very special life change to bring me out of.

My dad, at this point, had started dating again, and had just met a great lady (who I shall refer to as Dorothy). Right from the start my sister and I had an instant connection with her. She hung around with us, helped my sister pick out clothes and helped me with my homework and counseled me on how to deal with my depression, brought on from my less-than-supportive teacher. She supported me in a dark time, and she helped to bring me out of my depression. She was, to my sister and I, the mother we had never had.

Now, Maryann decided that my dad was trying to replace her and did everything she could to turn my sister and I against Dorothy, but it wouldn't work, by now my sister and I had learned how she worked and how to avoid her traps. A couple of years ago dad and Dorothy married. The four of us now had become an even stronger family than ever. I was starting to open up to people and making friendships that were actually lasting.

A year passed and I graduated from eighth grade, and attending the after-dinner was my dad, Dorothy, my sister, Maryann, her husband, Kevin, and his wife. When it came time to leave the dinner, I started collecting my things. I realized that I was supposed to leave with Maryann and stay at her house that night, so I decided that I didn't want to risk losing any of my important items, such as awards, my diploma, and a video that one of my teachers had assembled with pictures and music to help us remember the good times had. I brought all of these things to Dorothy and gave her a hug and kiss. Maryann saw this, and came over and began screaming that Dorothy had no right to take those; that they were to come with me. In front of my friends, classmates, their families, and teachers, Maryann was creating a huge scene; and Dorothy, whom never did anything intentionally to provoke Maryann, cried. She wept that Maryann, in a selfish rage, had single-handedly ruined my special night.

High school started, nothing special. Things were fine until November when a little girl from down the street took ill. This little girl was part of a family who had grown very close with mine, and she was like a little sister to me. She was taken to the Hospital where she was pronounced brain dead with a large tumor on her brain. The loss was terrible and shook our family hard. We tried to be there for the girl's family as much as possible. Then four months later, in March of freshman year I was at home when my father received a call from the hospital. Dorothy had been involved in a car accident, and she didn't make it. The woman, who was more a mother to me than anyone had ever been before, was gone, killed instantly by a careless driver who ran a red light. My family was thrown through a loop. Our matriarch was gone, and we had lost everything. I fell fast back into my depression, and lost my inspiration to do anything I once loved. And to top it all off Maryann would constantly show up at my house. While

stricken with grief, my family and I were less-than-thrilled for her company. Maryann took offence to this and in response offered such unfair comments as: "I couldn't beat that woman when she was alive and I'll be damned if I can beat her now that she's dead!" She vilified the woman who, to me, stood for all that love truly is.

Being a teen without a mother is hard. And with a father so gone with grief, my family was falling apart; with little I could do to stop it. In the past I was there for everyone, an ear to listen, and a shoulder to cry on. Now it was my turn to cry but I found myself not knowing where to turn the most important lady in the world to me was dead, and I was stuck.

I searched around for people to talk to, and found a few I liked. One was the school psychiatrist and the others were a few girls from my class, a couple of whom I had known since grade school. And it was those girls from my grade who were the most important because we were able to hear each other's problems and help out with them the best we could. We came to refer to each other as "Peer Counselors" As time passed, I lost three more important people in my life: my sixth grade teacher who was effective in bringing me out of my depression brought on by my fifth grade experience, the school psychiatrist, and my grandmother on my mother's side, a woman of great strength and goodwill, who suffered most of her life, she was someone to look up to. After all these blows to my heart, it was very hard to bounce back, and I found myself becoming cold, and uncaring, I didn't want to help anyone and I wanted no one's help. I just wanted to join those five people I cared about in heaven, until I got reacquainted with a friend with a problem. She came to me in hopes that I may offer some little bit of advice. I thought about the problem and simply gave my opinion. Then I was struck; I knew what I was supposed to do. Much of my sadness had been lifted. I was going to help others, to help myself. It felt good to help, to share part of me to make someone else's life better.

With this new understanding, I went on the Encounter Retreat. There I learned more about who I was, and who these other people were. We talked about our lives and I saw the world in a new way. It was through encounter that I regained my sense of what love is. Soon after, I was at church, alone, on Mother's Day, thinking about one specific thing that was suggested of me. Should I forgive Maryann? I sat in the pew, looked up at the statue of Mary and asked Dorothy, what happened then, I will never forget, I felt a warmth in my gut and could actually feel Dorothy's laughter as she said "yes, of course!" Dorothy had never wanted my sister or I to hate Maryann. That night I sat and wrote an email to Maryann, forgiving all the wrongs.

"I know Dorothy is really up there, and she is watching over me. My pain is easily lifted just by shooting a prayer up to her."

I will never forget that day, because now I know Dorothy is really up there, and she is watching over me. My pain is easily lifted just by shooting a prayer up to her. I know now that when it seems there is no one else to turn to, we have God, and the saints, and our loved ones passed, who will be there and guide us from afar. We all have angels in our lives, but we don't always know they're there until they're gone. I had mine in my life for six years, and now she is among the real angels watching over me.

-- high school senior guy

Ready for Heaven?

Have you ever had one of those grudges that just seemed like it would last for eternity? Have you ever met someone you could just never grow to like? Is there anyone in your life you think you will probably have problems with forever?

Well, here's a good question: what if both you and that person end up in heaven together? What if God forgives both of you of all of your sins and accepts you both into heaven? What are you going to do? Eternity could be pretty miserable. Isn't heaven supposed to be better than earth?

Well the Apostle Paul says that if any of us as forgiven sinners are struggling with serious sins when we die that God will help us get those bad habits and things out of our lives so we can really enjoy heaven. Paul says that God will cleanse our souls so that we don't bring all of these issues with us to heaven. Paul says that our lives are like buildings that will be tested by God as if by "fire" (1 Corinthians 3:13 NIV). And either our buildings will "survive" the test or else our deeds will have been bad and the building will "burn up" (1 Corinthians 3:14-15 NIV). Paul says that if we are sorry we will still be forgiven and be "saved" or allowed into heaven but we will "suffer loss" (1 Corinthians 3:15 NIV). The loss we will have to suffer before getting into heaven is our bad habits and attitudes, our sins and issues.

God wants us to have perfect joy in heaven. He wants everyone to get there as we have said earlier but he also knows that we have to get sin out of our lives to fit in there. If we die with serious sin still in our lives, God has to help us work past it before we spend the rest of eternity in heaven. It's part of his plan for our lives. He wants us to get past our sins here on earth because they are no good for us. And he wants us to get past our sins before entering heaven so heaven will still be heaven, a perfect place with no sin.

So are you still worried about those grudges with that other person? Well don't God won't let heaven be anything but heaven for you. But he may need to help you learn how to work past your issues before you get there. But it's ok. It's part of his plan. The theological word for this is help getting past our issues before we get to heaven is called "purgatory." It's not something to fear. In fact it is something to look forward to. It's something to look forward to because God will finally get the rest of our sins and issues out of our lives. And our souls will feel a whole lot lighter. I know mine will!

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Corinthians 3:10-15

- 1) Why do you think that it is important that if we are working for God that we be "expert builders?"
- 2) What can happen if we don't do a good job representing God's love and message to others? How can we hurt someone's way of thinking about the Church?
- 3) Do you think it is important that we get it right before we get into Heaven even if our sins have been forgiven? Do you think we could mess up Heaven for other people like we could mess up the Church on earth if we aren't made ready by God?
- 4) What ideas about purgatory make sense to you? Why?

Do non-Catholics go the hell?

What about those people who don't believe in God? Do they automatically go to hell? What does the Bible and the Catholic Church actually teach? These are important questions that some Christians disagree on. Here's what the Bible and the Church teach.

At the Last Supper Jesus answers this question for us. He said: "I have done things that no one else has ever done. If they had not seen me do these things they would not be guilty" (John 15:24 CEV). Jesus is saying that yes, he has done things that no one else in the history of the world has done. He is God and in the end everyone will have to accept him either while here on earth or when they see him in heaven. Jesus is definitely in charge. In fact he also says "I am the way, the truth and the life... without me no one can get to the Father" (John 14:6 CEV). Without Jesus' sacrifice on the cross for our sins and God's unconditional love shown through that act, no one would make it into heaven because we all need to be forgiven.

But Jesus also says if people had not seen him do the things he did they can not be guilty or responsible for not believing. Some people in this life have never really had the chance to believe. No one explained the faith to them in a way that made sense. It's pretty sad, living a whole life without God. But remember to go to hell or commit mortal sin a person has to make a "personal choice" to say a complete "no" to God and also have no love left in their hearts. The person has to reject God with "full knowledge," "deliberate consent" and in action with a "grave matter" to be in serious trouble with God. If a person just doesn't understand God it doesn't mean they are rejecting him it could just mean they are confused. If a person hasn't been given a good chance to understand God for real than they aren't saying a total "no" to God. They just don't get it yet. And most importantly if a person still has "love" in his or her life than the person still has God because remember as John said "God is love" (1 John 4:16 CEV).

The Catholic Church is really clear about this but not all Christian Churches agree. Which is ok. But the Catholic Church says that those who "through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel of Christ or His Church" can still "attain salvation" or go to heaven (Lumen Gentium 16). Now of course if a person is intentionally trying to reject Jesus and the faith than that could be a problem if they do it with their whole heart to the point of having no love at all left in their heart. This is rare but it is possible. Is your average teenager doing this? Probably not. But is Jesus really the one who is ultimately the one who is in charge with God the Father in heaven? Yes. That's what the Bible says anyway. Do we need to worry that everyone around us who doesn't believe in God is going to hell? No. Not if they genuinely have love because God is love and whether they know it or not they have God. And at the very least you can know it for them!

So pray for them, but have peace. God has everything under control. That's what the Catholic Church teaches.

So pray for them, but have peace. God has everything under control. That's what the Catholic Church teaches.

What's in the Bible for me? John 15:24

1) Do you think it makes sense that people who haven't heard about God or the Church aren't expected to believe in him or the Church? Why or why not?

- 2) Do you think that a person can say a complete “no” to God with his or her actions without having heard about God?
- 3) Do you know anyone who has different beliefs than you have? What is that like?
- 4) What do you think the Church wants you to believe about someone who has died but was either an atheist or had different beliefs than you?
- 5) Do you agree with the Church’s teachings on this? Why or why not?

Having friends who aren’t following God

It hurts to watch people you care about hurt themselves and lead into a path of danger. I have one such friend, who is blind to how much she’s really hurting herself. I went to grade school with her, and I can’t say that she was always a very good friend.

In seventh grade, she would beat me up constantly. I would try to stand up to her, which only made me her favorite victim. No one approved of her behavior, but no one would stand up to her either. When I tried to get her off of me or stop her teasing, she would only get angrier. I tried to stay away from her, but my school was too small and there was no way to avoid it. I got tougher, but I never punched back. I just told her how much I hated her for doing it, which isn’t very Christian either.

Then, in eighth grade, she was a whole new person, and she was fun to hang out with again. We all knew that she drank a little more than the rest of us, because her brother was a very popular high school junior and he had parties all the time. It didn’t seem like much at the time. We became really good friends and I started to think that she had become a better person. She was still as loud and high-spirited as she used to be, but she used them for other things.

We all soon found out what these other things became when we entered high school. I was to be the only one from my grade school going to my current high school, but they all went to the same high school and talking to one of them closely kept me tied to the rest. She was getting drunk more often and pushing the limits of chastity way beyond its boundaries.

She found new friends who would join her in her wrongdoing. One time, she drank a full bottle of whiskey with one of her new friends. Her brother had to drive around and find her, because she couldn’t remember where she

was. If that isn't a wake up call, I don't know what is. She still kept drinking. Worse than that, she had an eighteen-year-old boyfriend, who she was messing around with. He wasn't the only one either. She had at least twenty guys she'd met either online, at a mall, or through her brother's friends that she did stuff with all the time. We all wanted to help her, but if she thought we weren't supportive of her new activities, she would get mad and play childish pranks on us.

We didn't know what to do about her new and worse behavior, but we couldn't help it. We all knew that her mother wasn't very strict. She allowed my friend's brother to have parties with open alcohol all the time. Telling her mother wouldn't have stopped it. We all just told her that we didn't think it was smart. I hated watching her do destructive things to herself, but I didn't have a solution.

I haven't talked to her much lately. Mostly I haven't talked to her, because I think it's better to stay away from her dangerous ways. I also don't want to watch her fall apart, but I'm still here if she needs me. If you have a friend that isn't following God, try to help them. If you know that you can't solve the problem, then be there for your friend until they can realize their downfalls for themselves. I will support my friend if she needs me, but until then I will wait.

-- high school freshman girl

To wrap it all up:

There are a lot of things that all Christians agree on. In fact there is more that we agree on than disagree on. And this is a good thing. There are people all around the world in all different Churches who have the same kind of relationship with God that you do! It's pretty cool if you think about it.

There are some things, however, that only Catholics really do or believe. And this is ok. It's just some of the special quirks of our group. It is nothing to get all upset about. It doesn't mean that these things are not important. It just means that they aren't the most important thing. Jesus is the most important thing. He is the "head of the Church" (CCC 669). In other words, he is what it is all about. And we all as Christians have him in common. So we don't need to get into "foolish arguments" as the Apostle Paul says.

But it is really important that we value the special graces or gifts that God has given the Catholic Church. I mean where would we be without Mary or the Eucharist or the Saints? They are very real things that can truly help us when we are having a hard time with our faith. It would be a shame not to use the gifts that God has given us.

But it would also be a shame to make other Christians feel judged for not having them. God wants us to value the special gifts he has given us as a Church and still love those who don't accept those same gifts in their lives. Anything else would be un-Christian and unloving and therefore un-Catholic.

But if you feel like you really want to ask God to help you understand and appreciate all of the special gifts in the Catholic Church you can pray this prayer or one like it when you are in a quiet place where you can really talk to God:

Dear Lord, help me to appreciate and understand all that is a part of our Catholic Christian faith. Sometimes it can be hard to understand and sometimes it can make all of the sense in the world. Give me your Holy Spirit in my heart to help me understand it all. Help me Lord, not to get confused or confuse others. Help me to know and apply my faith in a way that fits best with me personally. Help me to know my faith in a personal way and know you personally in my life.

Help me to trust that you have peace with everything that is true about you. And help me to share that peace with others who are both Catholic and not Catholic. I love you. Help me to treasure Mary and the Saints and the Eucharist more than I do. I know that is important to you. Help me to be the best Catholic I can be. Help me to love you and my faith more and more. Amen.

Hitting the books a little harder? Here are some Church teachings you may want to look up:

“Those who through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 847

“All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven... the Church gives the name Purgatory to this...” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1030 and 1031

“Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1735

“The promptings of feelings and passions can also diminish the voluntary and free character of the offense (of sin), as can external pressures or pathological disorders.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1860

“The confession of sins even from a simply human point of view, frees us.” Catechism of the Catholic Church 1455

“Confession heals, confession justifies, confession grants pardon of sin, all hope consists in confession, in confession there is a chance for mercy.” St. Isidore of Seville in *Dialogue Between Erring Soul and Reason* and *Treasury of... Quotations*



Chapter 12
God, can I really do this?





Impossible?

Have you ever had somebody ask you to do something you just couldn't do? Have you ever been asked by someone to do the impossible? I'll tell you, I used to really feel like this on the soccer field. I'm not the most natural of athletes. I'm not the strongest and I'm not the most coordinated. Especially when I was in high school. I was short and skinny and not very aggressive. I wasn't the worst of athletes. But I certainly wasn't the best. Things just didn't always come naturally to me like they did to others. I worked hard and was a bundle of energy who generally listened to the coach. So I got by on that.

But I'll never forget being told I had to learn how to kick the ball with my left foot. I couldn't even shoot or pass too well with my right. I was embarrassed, literally *embarrassed*, to kick the ball with my left foot in practice. I would do anything to avoid it. And in fact I avoided shooting on goal with either foot as well. I liked to work hard, play defense and pass the ball off. Then my coach told us we had to learn how to kick with the opposite foot. He would make us do it again and again in practice. I felt like a failure every day. I knew he was right. I should be able to kick the ball with my left foot.

So when I finally decided I wanted to take soccer seriously, I also decided to go to our local school and kick the ball against the wall with my left foot all day long. I did this for years. Then I'll never forget in my senior year of high school I was coaching soccer camp for little kids. I must have forgotten by that time just how far I had come, because I was just casually standing there hitting 40 and 50 yard passes with both my left and right foot with ease. And I realized as I looked at the little kids that what I was doing seemed like a miracle to them. Something only a *professional* soccer player could do. Little did they know just how far I really was from a professional. Or how far I really came to get to this point. But I didn't mind them thinking that way.

The other soccer skill I distinctly remember being in awe of at soccer camp was juggling. I remember watching these college soccer players juggle the ball a thousand times while I was a little kid at those camps. I went home and dreamed of being as good as them. But it seemed impossible. Juggling the ball just three times was an amazing accomplishment at the time. Then a year later ten times was amazing for me. Then a hundred seemed to come with ease another year later. Until one day in high school I made a thousand. Then I could probably juggle fifty times or more just on one foot.

Well, all of these things just seemed impossible when I first started playing soccer. But the good news is that I stayed with the game and these things that seemed like little miracles to achieve eventually became natural. It just

took being committed to being good and trusting what my coaches said. And getting over my embarrassment about my mistakes.

The same I have found to be true about my faith. Things like chastity at one point just seemed impossible. Certainly not the way the Bible taught chastity. Who could really do that I thought. It just seemed beyond me. Now I can't imagine dating someone and not being chaste. Honestly it feels like a miracle to me sometimes. It feels like a gift that God just put inside of my heart despite my inability. What seemed impossible has become quite ordinary. Just like juggling a soccer ball.



What we are going to look at in our final chapter is Jesus' calling for us to be holy. Sometimes it can just seem to be impossible. And sometimes it is. But listen, Jesus died to accept us when it is impossible, when we fail. He isn't giving up on you when you give up on him. He's on your side permanently as we studied earlier. No matter how much you mess up.

I didn't want to believe my soccer coach at first that kicking with both feet was necessary in soccer. I thought I could get by with just one. But I was wrong. If I wanted to really achieve anything on the soccer field I had to accept my imperfections instead of ignoring them. And I had to work on them. The same is true with my faith life. I thought I could get by without it. I was wrong. And I thought I could never be perfectly chaste. Wrong again.

The beauty of it all is that I was a much better soccer player because I could use both feet and because I could juggle. It seemed impossible that anyone could do these things but it turns out it wasn't. The beauty of Christianity is that it is actually better to be chaste, to be sober, to be drug free, and to be free from self destructive habits like anorexia. It may seem impossible. But it's not. It's just a question of whether you honestly want to be a Christian for real or not.

And don't worry. You'll never have a more patient coach than Jesus. When it comes to following him, Jesus says it isn't as hard as it looks. He says it is actually "easy" if we would let him help us and that while we are learning he will be "gentle and humble" not judgmental (Matthew 11:29-30 CEV).

So do you feel like you want to really give Christianity a shot? Do you feel like you really want to trust this God, not just with your life, but *how* you live your life? If you do listen to Jesus and accept him in your heart for real, than ask him to help you accept his message on what is right and wrong as well. He will. He showed me how to be chaste. In fact, I feel like he didn't just show me how, but I feel like he also gave me the ability as what seems like a miraculous gift.

You may feel like it would take a miracle for you or anyone else to really follow Jesus' teachings. But don't forget Jesus specializes in miracles. And he specializes in forgiveness when we fall short of God's goals. And if I, one of the least coordinated people on the planet could learn how to kick a soccer ball with both feet and juggle a thousand times, you can also do what may seem like the impossible right now. It's no different than those little kids at camp watching their coaches. It may seem impossible. But it isn't. And yes it may take a miracle. But Jesus will give it to you. He has given it to me in so many ways with morality. You just have to ask. If he could raise Lazarus from the dead and walk on water he can certainly grant you the miracle of holiness. You just have to ask him and let him. Will you? Holiness is there for the taking. Want it?

It may seem impossible. But it isn't. And yes it may take a miracle. But Jesus will give it to you.

What's in the Bible for me?

- 1) Where are you at with being a Christian for real? Do you think you really are Catholic Christian in the way you live your life?
- 2) If someone video taped your life and watched it do you think they would know you were a Christian without them asking you?
- 3) Does holiness seem to be really hard or easy for you? What parts are the hardest? What parts of being holy come naturally? Why?
- 4) Who is someone you know who you would say is really a Catholic Christian who is letting God really change his or her life and being for real in his or her faith? What makes you say this?

The only thing I have to fear is not giving it my all

In life there are two kinds of people. There are people that can handle their problems. And there are the type of people who let their problems handle them. I've been on both sides of the line. I've been handled. And now I can handle. But I can do more than handle my problems, I can make a difference the way I live. Problems for some people go shallow. Problems w/ friends, problems w/ fitting in, and etc. For other people problems control their life.

Doing drugs, being abused, harming themselves, and etc. Whether your problems are big or little, they affect the way we judge people, the way we dress, the way we live, and the way we act.

*I have been at the stage of my life where nothing mattered. I didn't give a sh** about myself or anyone for that matter. I just did what I had to do to get me through. I have committed murder in what I like to call the "fourth degree". I murdered myself. I did it everyday w/ a bottle, w/ pills. I let the voices that we all have control me. I lived w/ fright. I was scared of letting anyone know the real me. Of taking off my mask. My memories rip and tear me apart. But they have made me into the person that Jesus made me to be. He was the only one on my side. He pushed me when I was kicked down. He kept me from taking that one more pill. Or that one more mouthful. I didn't even get it. Having nobody around that cared hit hard to me. Nobody could ever find time for me. I was second best, always either too late, too short, too weak, or not good enough for everybody else.*

For three years I hated the person I was. I hated the personality I had. I lived for nothing. And now that I realize Jesus is in my life, even when I don't see him, he is right here. Over my back. He's got my back. And he has got it forever. He has got yours too. But if you don't notice him, how can you think he has helped you. He has probably given you a quality you don't know that you have. The will to carry on. The fight to get up. The ability to take everyday on.

*My addictions are still very much alive in me. I can feel them. They beg me to do it again. To hit it up again. To get f***ed up again. But you know what? I like the way I am when nothing is in my system. I was a fake person for long enough. I'm tired of robbing people of the real me. Because tomorrow they might not be there. They could be gone. I changed because I'm not alone when I go to sleep. I changed because I wanted to be different than everybody else. I wanted to prove the people that told me "I would never do it" wrong. If they were going to try and take me down, they didn't give it a good enough shot.*

I realized that my addictions, and not me, was the thing. Whatever it takes. We only get one shot. We only got one chance in this life to prove ourselves worthy. Giving up is not in my vocabulary. Going back is not even an option for me.

Our heart talks to us when we are all alone, when nothing is "on the line". But what do we know to listen to it. The hardest thing is to make the change. It's easy to say it. It's easy to tell a friend you'll change. But to do it, is the hardest part. But it is possible, very much so. Once you win the battle in your head, it gets easy.

You might ask, why do I think this way? Or, is life better now for me to live w/o addictions? But the truth is, life is no better. People treat me the same. People push me off the same. They lie to me the same. They look the other

way the same. They leave me alone the same. But I'm not the same. And the motive that keeps me going is to prove everyone wrong. To say that I was that bad. But I don't take the easy way out anymore. I'm just simply being the person Jesus knew I could be. Yes, I get scared. Yes, I feel the same feelings of abandonment. And the feelings of being unwanted.

So I ask you if you know anything about what I have said. Don't be a liar like a lot of the people I know. Let's make the change. Let's tell people we're there for them. Or let's give some people a shot. I got a second shot. Don't let me be the only one who walks alone in my fight to get through! Because I'm one of those people who says to bring it on! I'm a difference maker. I won't be beaten. I won't stop breathing until my time has come.

And now I give you a challenge to give faith a shot. Just try it for a little bit. Give it an honest shot. Give Jesus a chance to work through you. And try something you normally wouldn't do. Talk to someone you never would talk to. Ask someone to hang out that you would never hang out with. And let life take care of itself. Don't give excuses. Don't say you're weak. Don't go back on your word. Don't give up. Don't blame God for your hard times. Only put out your hand so he can pull you up. SO GET UP!

And when it's all done, you can say 'I was that strong and I did do what everyone said I couldn't – Because I know I'm here for a real reason.' So walk w/ me. Come see the light w/ me. I swear I'm going to see it. I'm going to feel it. And someone's gonna be right by my side. Because the only thing I have to fear is not giving it my all.

-- high school junior guy

A home for God?

You know if I wanted to be a soccer player for real, I had to eventually learn to kick with my left foot. If I ever wanted to play in college I would eventually have to become like the other college soccer players who could juggle. No matter what it took. Well the same is true for us as Christians. If we really want to be Christians, if we really want to accept this faith in God's unconditional love and forgiveness, we have to accept what God says a loving person looks like. God says we have to "be holy because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16 NIV). If we are really going to be a Christian, a person who accepts God in his or her heart, we have to be holy like the God we have accepted is holy or else we aren't really accepting him.

Holiness is a gift, not an achievement. It's a gift that comes with God when we accept him more and more. It's a gift that may take a sacrifice to really accept, but when it comes it really is a gift.

God is love and he wants us to accept him. So if we accept him we have to let love be the center of our being. And this is no ordinary love. This is the kind of love that forgives people when they sin. It's the kind of love that is unconditional. It isn't selfish. It is pure. It is patient. It endures everything without sinning, without judging without hating. It is perfect love. And that is the goal of Christianity: perfect love. Not a so-so love or an average love, but a different love. A perfect love.

And all of this is out of the Bible. 1 John says God is love. 1 Corinthians says it is patient, unselfish and endures all things. James says that it is pure. And 1 John says it is perfect. This is the God who loves you from Heaven. This is the God who died on the cross for all of us. And this is the God who you accept inside of your heart for forgiveness and love if you let him in.

Jesus says that God, who is perfect love, wants to make his "home" inside of you (John 14:23 NIV). He wants you to be the place where he lives. He wants to wake up every day inside of you and go to bed with you every night. He wants you to be a little personal church in a way. When people come into your life he wants them to be able to see that he lives there. That is what a Christian, someone who accepts Jesus in his or her life, is.

Now we will never be perfect. God knows that and Jesus died so that this would be ok. But God really does want us to really be a place that is "holy" because he is "holy." If we want to be a Christian for real we have to be willing to let God do this for real. Just like if I wanted to be a soccer player for real, I had to learn to kick with both feet. It's just a part of the deal. Accepting God really means accepting God. It means becoming a little church. It doesn't mean being perfect. Certainly none of us will be perfect. But it does mean being open to some home improvements that God may want to make.

The cool thing is that *he* will make them. *You* don't have to. Holiness is a gift, not an achievement. It's a gift that comes with God when we accept him more and more. It's a gift that may take a sacrifice to really accept, but when it comes it really is a gift. It's like a river flowing inside of you. As Jesus said it is like a "flowing fountain that gives eternal life" (John 4:14 CEV). Things like "goodness" and "self-control" and "faithfulness" are things that just come with God when we accept him says Paul in his letter to the Galatians (5:22 NIV). The question is: are we actually accepting him?

It may seem hard to let God live inside of you. Holiness may not seem like your thing. But the good news is that *he* will do the home improvements and the spring cleaning. You just have to let him in to do it. Trust me I

know from experience. He's more than up to the task. It's just a question of whether you really want to let him in and give him the job. So is he in there? Can you feel him working? Or are you just doing the same old things day in and day out and saying you are a Christian?

What's in the Bible for me? John 14:23

- 1) What do you really think it would take for your life to be a home for God? What would have to change? What would have to stay the same?
- 2) Have you ever asked Jesus to live inside of you, to live in your heart? If so what was it like to accept him into your heart? If not what do you think holds you back?
- 3) Do you believe that God can really change you or do you think you are beyond repair? Why or why not?
- 4) Do you know anyone who has changed his or her life in a radical way for God? Does this change make sense to you? Does it inspire you? Or does it confuse you? Why?

Giving it all away!

Have you ever loved someone so much that you were willing to just throw your whole life away for them? Have you ever loved someone so much that you were willing to give them everything every day if you could? Have you ever loved someone so much that you just couldn't see getting through a day without them? If so you know what true love is.

The Bible says to husbands: "love your wives as Christ loved the Church and gave himself up for her" (Ephesians 5:25 NIV). How did Jesus love the Church and give himself up for her? He died on the cross. He lived a sinless life so that his death on the cross could count for our sins. And then he accepted the crucifixion in all its horror and pain for us. That's God dream for how a husband would love his wife. Girls, God wants your husband to be willing to do anything for you, to give up anything for you and to give his whole life up for you. That's love God style. And if you are settling for anything less you are settling for less than God's plan.

The Bible says to wives: "put (your) husbands first, as the Church puts Christ first" (Ephesians 5:24 CEV). The greatest thing a wife can do for her husband is love him with all her heart above all else and be dedicated to him the way the Church should be dedicated to Christ. Sacrifice for him. Lift him up when he's down. And take care of

him the way he is called to take care of you: by being willing to give up anything and everything for him. This is true love according to God. Guys, if you are happy with someone who takes advantage of you instead of sacrifices for you than you are getting less than God wants to give. You are getting a whole lot less than love.

An important thing here though is that a husband is supposed to give up everything to his wife and a wife is to give up everything for her husband. And our bodies according to the Bible are a part of the deal. According to the Bible, we are supposed to give all of our sexuality to our spouse. We are supposed to save it all and then give it all away to that one special person for our whole lives. This is God's dream for our lives. God's dream is that you and I would be able to say to our future wives and husbands, "I have waited for you since before I met you." And "I will give you everything." And "I will give you *all* of my sexual experiences, not just most of them or some of them."

It seems like the most romantic thing in the world to wait for sex until you are with that one person. It seems like the most romantic thing in the world to recklessly and permanently throw your life away to a person in a way you can't take back, in marriage, and only then give away your sexuality to someone. And this romantic plan is God's plan. And this romantic dream is a possible dream if we want it to be. It is something we can have. It is something a real Christian is supposed to have and give. It's part of God's plan for your life. And it's a pretty awesome part. If we want to take him up on it.

It seems like the most romantic thing in the world to wait for sex until you are with that one person. It seems like the most romantic thing in the world to recklessly and permanently throw your life away to a person in a way you can't take back, in marriage, and only then give away your sexuality to someone.

What's in the Bible for me? Ephesians 5:21-33

- 1) Do you think saving your whole self for marriage is the most romantic way to go? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you know anyone who is consciously doing this or trying to do this? What do you think of them? Would you want to be like them? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you think chastity is possible for you? Why or why not?
- 4) Have you ever made a mistake with chastity and felt a lot of guilt? What was that like? If you could do it again would you?

My boyfriend and I

My boyfriend and I have been together for a year and a half now. In the past year and a half, we have both had our own struggles with family and friends, but the biggest struggle in our relationship is chastity.

We started having sex a year ago. The decision to start was very hard to make, but we both agreed that we trusted and loved each other enough. We started having sex once a month, then once a week, then once everyday. Going to a catholic school, I've heard plenty of times about chastity, but I never felt like having sex with my boyfriend was wrong. I was in love, and wanted to give him all I could. The only downside was we never knew if I would get my period that month. All the pregnancy scares were becoming too much.

A couple months after our one year anniversary, we went on a retreat together. We both found God then, together. We were as happy as we could get. We promised each other that we were done having sex for good. Looking back at all those pregnancy scares, made us realize, they were signs. God was telling us he would give us another chance, a clean slate. We could start all over again.

After the retreat, we went home thinking we would just forget the past. And stop. Yeah, right, if it was only that easy. We tried our hardest to keep our hands off of each other, but that didn't work. So, we started up again. But we didn't do it as often. I don't think that mattered to God, and it was clear that we weren't supposed to be. Well, not at first, it took us a couple months to realize it. You see, at first we didn't notice any signs. So we figured it was ok to do it monthly. Little did we realize we were falling apart because of it. Our fights started getting greater and more often. We were getting on each other's nerves real bad. Just when we were on the verge of breaking up, my boyfriend realized something. The fights started when we became sexually active again. The more sexual activity, the worse we got. God couldn't have given us a bigger sign if it had flashing neon lights around it. We have been chaste for a few months now, and our relationship has never been better. My relationship with God is also great.

I don't understand why it is wrong to have sex with my boyfriend. I mean we love each other more than anything and we are positive we're soul mates. Even though it makes no sense to me, I know this is what God has planned for me.

I've never pictured myself as a chaste person, but obviously God does. Learning to trust God with me and my boyfriends' relationship was hard. My boyfriend means more to me than anything, but I know God wants me and my boyfriend to be chaste, so chaste we are!

-- high school sophomore girl

Need to get back on track with chastity?

Perhaps you do agree with God's plan for sex for your life. Perhaps you do believe it is the most romantic thing in the world. And yet perhaps you have goofed it up anyway. It's ok. I'm here to tell you, it's ok. And Jesus is here to tell you, it's ok.

Remember the story of the woman caught in the very act of committing adultery? What did Jesus do with that woman? Do you remember? He forgave her. And not only did he forgive her but he protected her from the judgments of other people. He protected her from the Pharisees who wanted to stone her. And what God does in the Bible is what God wants to do in your personal life. So what does God want to do if you have made mistakes, which so many of us have? He wants to forgive you. And then he wants to protect you from judgment. He wants you to be able to start over as a forgiven person. And then he wants to find you someone who wants to follow God's plan for sex but who will also accept you as you are.

There is no need to have shame over anything you have struggled with in regard to sex. Nothing. You are forgiven if you want to be. You can have Perfect Contrition right now if you want to. You can start over right now if you want to. No need to wait. And there is no need to doubt that God still has a plan for that perfect wife or husband for you who will accept you, because that is part of what a Christian is: someone who accepts others despite their sins as God does. So you see how important it is to be holy as God is holy. It is important to be holy in that you have to be willing to forgive because that is what Christ does. You just may be the dream person God has in store for that guy or girl who messed up and feels all of that shame right now. And someday you just might need the same kind of acceptance.

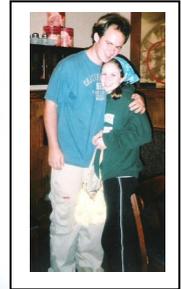
So if you have made mistakes, know you are forgiven. For real. That's what Jesus died for. And if you know it is going to be difficult again and that you may make mistakes again just go to Jesus again. His love is

"I've never pictured myself as a chaste person, but obviously God does."

unconditional. He will always accept and forgive you. He just needs you to genuinely accept him and his forgiveness and his plan for you all over again.

The Good News is he will never give up on you. And he will never give up on his plan for your life. So you've had pre-marital sex. Jesus takes that sin away. You are a virgin again. So you've done other sexual things you are not proud of. Jesus takes them away too. You are pure again.

The greatest gift after his plan for your life is his ability to put you back on track with his plan after you goof up. So let him. And ask him for the dream Christian life and marriage which will always be available no matter how much you messed up. You just have to ask for it. You can be pure again. You can be purified. Forgiven. Just ask. The forgiveness is real.



What's in the Bible for me? John 8:1-11

- 1) Why do you think Jesus forgave the woman who committed adultery?
- 2) If you were God would you have forgiven her? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you ever have a hard time believing that Jesus can or would forgive you the way he forgave the woman in the Bible?
- 4) Do you think that it is important for people to know about this story in the Bible? Why or why not?

By accepting God's forgiveness, I have been able to see all of the blessings he has in store for me

Chastity is a very difficult lifestyle to follow, especially when you have been sinned against in that area. Your insecurities might turn your eyes away from God, who is the epitome of love, and make you feel like you aren't worthy of anything more than lust. I know this. I know what it is like to look in the mirror and cry, wanting to feel beautiful and wishing you could measure up to the unrealistic expectations that have been set for girls in our society. I know how it feels to be taken advantage of, and to feel at fault for it. But thankfully, I also know what it feels like to be loved, unconditionally. To be seen as a beautiful, innocent, and precious daughter, by the One who loves me, unconditionally. And this is why chastity is a given for me. This is why I can forgive others for hurting me. And most of all, this is why I am willing to forgive myself for losing sight of what God has in store for me.

I can't count the number of times I've been taken advantage of since I was a little kid. I can't count the number of times I have allowed myself to be taken advantage of. And I can't count the number of times saying "no", wasn't good enough. But you know what? Jesus can count them, and yet he chooses not to. He knows our hearts, and he cries for us when we are sinned against, and even when we sin ourselves, and all he wants from us in return is to accept his love and forgiveness. It wasn't until recently that I was able to accept this, and to know the grace that comes along with accepting this. If it weren't for this grace, I would have given up on chastity long ago.

I used to feel like if a guy took me out on a date, that I owed him something for it... like my body was worth nothing more than a slice of pizza and a movie ticket. I thought that if I didn't "make-out" with a guy, that he wouldn't want to waste his time with me, and that I was destined to live a lonely life. After a retreat I went on in my sophomore year of high school, I decided that this was the wrong path, and I decided I wanted to live a life of chastity. But it wasn't until I was taken advantage of in the worst way possible, that I realized no matter how much you want to be chaste, you can't date someone who doesn't. It is the hardest lesson I have ever learned and it is something that I have yet to heal from. But even though this was the hardest lesson I have ever learned, it was also the most valuable.

I thought that everything was great. I was dating this guy that I thought I loved. I actually thought that he loved me, too. He was Catholic, but he didn't know God the way that I did. I figured it was okay, and that he just wasn't at that point yet. I thought that he completely understood and respected that I was saving sex for marriage, and that chastity was one of the most important things in my life. But I was wrong, way wrong. I haven't yet forgiven myself for being too vulnerable, and I have yet to forgive him for what he did to me. But I have accepted that God forgives me. And now that I've done this, God will help me do the rest.

By accepting God's forgiveness, I have been able to see all of the blessings that he has in store for me. I've been so blessed with so many things. I am eternally grateful for the trust and faith that I have in God. I would be completely lost if I didn't know how much He loved me. I have been able to trust that He has someone out there just for me, who knows what its like to struggle, but who also knows the joy of knowing that Jesus is with him through that struggle. I want to find someone who not only believes in Jesus, but who knows and loves him as much as I do. I

"He has someone out there just for me."

want a guy who loves me for who I am and for what I believe in, not for the way that I look. And until I find that person, Jesus will be the love of my life!! :)

-- college freshman girl

How far is too far?

What are the real limits to sex? How far is too far for real? What's God's real dream for my sexuality? It's something all of us have to ask at some point as Christians. And the Bible is pretty clear. It is pretty obvious that we should never have sex without being married. But the Bible also says: "among you there must not even be a hint of sexual immorality" (Ephesians 5:3 NIV). In other words God asks us not to do anything even just a little bit immoral sexually. That is the dream God has for you. That is the plan he has for your life. You may fall short at times, but that's the plan he wants to put you back on. God wants everything that is any bit sexual to wait for marriage. Because he wants it to wait for a perfect totally committed love. That's his dream for true romance in your life. Remember he is a perfect and committed love and you are his "home." He doesn't even want a hint of premarital sex.

So what does this include? It is pretty safe to say any kind of an orgasm in any way is covered here. In other words any kind of touching that gives an orgasm would be a "hint" of immorality. It is also safe to say touching any part of a person that is usually covered by a bathing suit is probably out too. People who specialize in moral theology, God's rules, can break it down in more detail but this is a pretty good summary of what God expects in the Bible simply put.

It's hard to follow. It's hard to be holy as God is holy with this. It is hard to wait for marriage. It really is. Trust me I know from experience. But I have found that it really is better. It really is better and it really makes me a better person myself. Now when I go out on a date I have to really like the whole person, not just her body because that's not something I get to share until marriage. And it's pretty cool because I honestly feel that God will help me find the best wife possible for me because I won't be blind to my girlfriend's personality by her looks alone.

On top of being attracted to her on the outside, I have to be attracted to her on the inside as well. I have to love and get to know the whole person. And I have to completely like the whole person, every drop, and be willing to be committed in every way before I am with her in the total giving of myself that sex is. I have to love her in

every way and be willing to commit to that. This helps me to find if she really fits with me. Body, soul and mind. Not just body. In the end I get a better girlfriend and a better future wife out of the deal. And that's what God wants for me, the best. And he says this is how to get it.

It may be difficult. It may be really difficult. And you may make mistakes along the way, but trust me, it's worth it! It's like preseason in a sport. You don't like running and working out, but you do like winning don't you? This is just God's plan for winning at marriage and life. I don't know about you but I don't want to lose here. I want to love my wife until the day I die. I want to laugh and enjoy every moment with her. And this is God's plan to get us that. Do you want it?

What's in the Bible for me? 1 Corinthians 6:18-20

- 1) Do you think that waiting for marriage with all of these things is the most romantic way to go? Why or why not?
- 2) Do you want to try to follow these guidelines that God gives us? Why or why not?
- 3) The Bible's teachings on sex are probably some of the hardest teachings to follow. What do you think makes it so hard to be chaste in a Biblical way today?
- 4) Do you think that dating God's way is good? Why or why not?

Does this describe you?

Have you ever thought of a parent's dream for his or her child? Have you ever thought of what a parent hopes his or her child's life would be like? Have you ever had any dreams for what you would like *your* children's life to be like? If you had a little girl and boy perhaps you would want them to be happy. Perhaps true to themselves. You would want them to have the very best of everything you could give them. You would want to be there for them, to listen to them – maybe the way you feel like you are or are not listened to by your parents. You would probably want them to stay a million miles away from anything that is bad for them or could hurt them as well. Maybe you would want this because you've made your own mistakes and you wouldn't want them to make the same ones.

Well just like you may have a dream for your child's life, your Father in heaven has a dream for your life. A perfect dream. He wants you to be you. He wants you to be the person he made. Remember "original goodness"

from Genesis chapter 1, the first page of the Bible? He thinks you are good just the way you are. And he wants you to be you. He doesn't want you to be fake. He doesn't want you to take the easy out and not be yourself. He wants you to be you. No hiding. Just like any good father would want for his kids. He wants to love you, the real you.

And that's really why God doesn't want you to get high or drunk. You just aren't the real you. Or if that is the real you, there really is a problem because you're not being the real you at other times. It's just not his dream for his kid. And it's probably not what you would advise your kid to do either.

More than ten times being "drunk" is considered a sin, a serious sin. And that's just in the New Testament.

So we need to get real with this stuff or we aren't really being a Christian.

One example is found in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul says, "People's desires make them give in to immoral ways... They get drunk, carry on at wild parties and do other evil things as well" (Galatians 5:19-21 CEV). Does this describe you? Ask yourself honestly. If it does listen to what Paul says: "No one who does these things will share in the blessings of God's kingdom" (Galatians 5:21 CEV). This is no joke to Paul. He says if we do this we are cutting ourselves off from how God wants to bless us. And how does God want to bless us? In the next sentence he tells us. God wants to bless us with "love, joy," and "peace" (Galatians 5:22 NIV).

The Bible says that we are cutting ourselves off from true peace and happiness in life when we do this. Why? Because we are not being the real us one way or another and there will never be peace in that. No matter what. You will always end up feeling empty and alone in the end. Kind of odd that this would be the result of a "party" but that's what the Bible says.

And if going to that party and getting drunk isn't God's plan than it's pretty obvious that getting high fits under the "other evil things" that can be done at a "party." It's just not his dream for his kids. And it's probably not your dream for your kids either. So we need to get real with this stuff or we aren't really being a Christian.

Now just like with sex, we shouldn't have any guilt for any mistakes we have made. God died to take away that guilt and sin. So you've been labeled a druggie or an alcoholic. If you've been forgiven, God "forgets" your sins – he remembers them no more. It's as if you've never done a drug in your life according to God. But the thing is if we want to believe the Bible's message of forgiveness we also have to take seriously the Bible's message on what a sin is. Or else we really aren't being a Christian. We're being hypocrites.

So turn to God for forgiveness. It's right there. Take him up on Perfect Contrition. Go to Confession. All the help and forgiveness you need is there if you want it. And if you're caught in an addiction get honest about it. Get honest with God first. Then get honest with friends, family, a teacher or a counselor who can help you. It's not

God's plan that you live a life trapped by drugs or drinking. It's not God's plan that you plan your every weekend or everyday or any day around those things. He wants his kid to be free of all of that. He wants his kid to learn how to laugh on your own, not because you are high or drunk. He'll love you through the tough times and addictions. He will. But he wants better for you. Just like you'd probably want for your own kid. So treat yourself like you would your own child and treat yourself like God's child and get away from that stuff. And be a Christian for real. Not one who ignores Galatians chapter 5. But one who lives it and is a little church for God for real. For yourself. And for others who need and love the real you.

That's what a real Christian is. Want to be one?

What's in the Bible for me? Galatians 5:19-21

- 1) Does this passage describe you in any way? In what ways?
- 2) Do you agree with God that we shouldn't be drunk and at parties and doing the other things that can go on at parties? Why or why not?
- 3) Do you think it is realistic for a teenager to avoid this stuff? Do you think it is realistic for you to avoid this stuff? Why or why not?
- 4) Do you think it is hypocritical for a person to call himself or herself a Christian and do this stuff all of the time? Why or why not?

I started off a good kid

To give you a brief description of my life, so you know my struggle, I started off a good kid; I started a new school in 5th grade it was all right. My neighbor came over everyday after school and we would drink, wasn't that bad. In 6th grade I started feeling depressed and completely lonely, I told someone I was going to kill myself and they ended up telling a teacher; he saved my life.

Nothing really went on until the summer going into 8th grade, two weeks before school started I heard rumors from my friends that my girlfriend had cheated on me over the summer, so that right there brought suicidal thoughts back into my head, but I didn't have the guts to kill myself. I felt like crap the rest of the year, I never felt so

down and depressed ever, I loved her and she goes and rips my heart out. My outlet was nothing productive and did nothing to help the pain stop, well only for a couple hours. I started smoking weed.

For me weed took the pain away for the time I was high, and it filled the emptiness I felt inside. Smoking didn't make my depression go away, if anything it made it worse because that was all I thought about when I smoked. Throughout the school year I kept smoking, even smoking more. When it came to that summer I was still smoking; all my friends were begging me to stop so I did, but moved on to worse.

That summer was when I started dropping acid. I would be doing acid close to everyday. I slowed down with the acid going into freshman year. That year I met some new friends and even some girls, no one like her though. The friends I made all smoked so I started up smoking again. I smoked at least once a day, and that was considered bad, and I was labeled a stoner or pothead. That summer had to be the best summer, but actually the worst.

Toward the beginning of the summer I let my friends drink. We got caught. But I got off the hook with the cops, either of their families could have sued me and my family would've been screwed. I still hung out with them even after we got arrested, we would make trips down the city to buy weed. I would work on the weekends and spend my check that week down the city, we would smoke a blunt on the way up, smoke a blunt with the dealer, smoke on the way home, and save one for later that night.

I smoked a lot of weed that summer and continued to until school started. My friend would pick me up and three of us would smoke a blunt before school. We did that for the first couple months until one day we were smoking and we happened to blow the same stop sign three times in a row and we got pulled over, there was weed in the car. My one friend got charged and we got off with no charge, but now my parents knew I smoked weed. I kept smoking and even started popping pills, one day I baked out the wrestling room and snorted some pills. I started doing pills more than smoking, I was now on speed for about three weeks. A couple people knew about it and everyone else could tell I was on something because I lost 20 lbs. in two weeks. I stopped with the speed and with the other pills, and I'm working on my smoking.

I also recently went on a retreat that taught me a lot about this stuff. I still struggle with smoking sometimes, but I realized recently that I don't need drugs in my life. Right now my life is just fine without them. I have a beautiful girlfriend, good friends, and I'm getting professional help for my drug problems. Not to sound like an apostle or anything but I've learned if you're having troubles with anything you just need to find Jesus and everything will work out for the best.

-- high school sophomore guy

Self-destruction = church destruction

Finally, there are two other sins against ourselves some of us have to deal with. They are both sins of self destruction. Which is really church destruction. If we really are “homes” for God than we really are wrecking his churches when we wreck ourselves. And these two sins are just that way of wrecking ourselves. The first in anorexia. And the second is suicide and everything that goes along with that.

Anorexia is a disease. It’s not something God would ever want for his kid. It’s the total opposite of believing the first page of the Bible where God tells you that you are “good” just the way you are. Just the way he made you. Because *he* made you and he doesn’t make mistakes.

I know the world can say the way you look is a “mistake.” The world can say only a certain size or shape or hair color for that matter is good or right. It says everything else is wrong. But God says every shape and size... and hair color is “good.” He made it. He likes it. And if you struggle to believe that anyone else in this world, especially someone of the opposite sex, can like it please listen to what the Bible says again and again. There is a plan for your life. And if a part of that plan is marriage, which it is for most people, God will make it happen. You can trust him. He loves you. He’s a pretty smart guy and he will find someone who loves you too. In fact, if you are called to be married, he probably already has. It’s just a matter of you finding that person. And the way to find them is by listening to God and not the world. Certainly not when the world leads you to anorexia.

The other sin of church destruction is the sin of literally destroying yourself physically. Sometimes people do this by literally trying to take their lives. Sometimes they do it bit by bit by choosing to hurt themselves physically in various ways. None of this is God’s plan. None of it. God’s plan is a plan of love. God’s plan – no matter what the sin you’ve committed is or how horrible the situation you live in is – is never for us not to love ourselves. If we are going to be Christians we are going to have to love the way God loves. And we are going to have to start with ourselves. And it really is a sin. It really is wrong to destroy the church or “home” for God that you are. Even if other people do this to you on some emotional or physical level it’s just not ok for you to do that. Now they may not be truly being Christian when they act that way. And maybe you can’t change their actions right now. *But you can change yours.* And you have to decide if you are really a Christian or not. You have to decide if God’s message to you on the first page of the Bible is something you accept or not. Just remember that not only your life, but your Christianity hangs in the balance.

So when you're struggling with sin of any kind – whether it be drinking, drugs, sex or these things – think of what you would want for your own kid. Think of what you would want them to do. Then try to do it. And if you fail just try again. God loves you. It's so true. And if you know you wouldn't want *your* kid to get caught up in this stuff, certainly God, the perfect Father of the whole world, wouldn't want you to either. Let him help you. He wants to. And check in with a counselor or teacher or best of all your parents. He wants you to. Trust me. He doesn't want his kids hurting. It truly is the greatest “sin” of all – you being in any pain.

And you need to decide. Do you want what he wants? Do you want his plan for your life? Or are you going to rewrite your own? Do you want to live as a Christian for real?

And you need to decide.
Do you want what he
wants? Do you want his
plan for your life?

Tell somebody. It's not the end of the world. I promise.

I guess I could say all my problems started the day I was born, September 18, 1988. My mom had been in the hospital for over months and there was one distinct thing the doctors told her before she had me. They told her that if she had me and went through with the pregnancy that she was going to die while giving birth to me. That's right...my mom was going to die because of my birth. With a miracle, my mom survived the 5 months of torturous hell she went through to give birth but unfortunately came out with many physical problems. My mom was 40 when she had me so it already wasn't easy for her. But blaming myself for all of her doctor visits is only the beginning of my problems.

I guess you could have said that as I child I was happy. I was always talking to people and always had a smile on my face. I loved my family and I loved going home to my house and being comforted. My life was wonderful...or so I thought. My mom and dad are happily married and at this time my brother and sister still lived at home; my house was my solace, my place of comfort.

During my years from around 3rd to 6th grade I was badly teased about being an over weight child. For me this was the start of a living hell. The constant reminder that almost all the people I knew judged me on how I looked was the start of my troubles of dealing with people. My parents started fighting constantly and they were on the edge

of getting a divorce because they disagreed on whether it was wrong or right for my sister to be going out with a black guy for 8 years. The only memories I have of my father when he was home from work are him and my mom arguing. My brother was getting married to a girl who was trying to tear apart my family and my sister was away at college and never coming back. The teasing had gotten better by 7th grade, but I wasn't getting thinner because I was just growing up like most people thought I would.

During the summer before 7th grade I formed an eating disorder that I never told anyone about before. I had completely stopped eating. To me one meal a day was too much. All the teasing had finally set me off. I was mad and I wanted to show everyone that I could look just like everyone else did. I was weak. I couldn't walk up the steps without having to stop more than once. I had no energy. But I put away all those problems and only ate in school when I had to. I was so sick the one day when I threw up for the first time. I did not want to become bulimic. I still remember every thought racing through my brain when I stuck my fingers down my throat. All I could think of to do was fix this by forcing myself to eat. By the end of 7th grade I was up to eating lunch at school and a little dinner. I was slowly progressing. This problem is still carried around with me constantly. I still suffer from bulimia from time to time. I pretty much eat when I have to just to let people think I'm normal and then starve myself for the rest of the day or the next two or three days. I've gotten better at eating the right foods, but like I said, its mostly when I have to because when I do eat, my stomach hurts from it not being used to the food I'm putting in it. I didn't think life could get much worse at this point in my life...but it did.

7th grade was the best year for me. I started making new friends, but I also lost some of the most important friends that I grew up with. I was happy, at least I thought I was happy and so did everyone else around me. I was always smiling but there was always something in the back of my mind that made me feel alone. Completely set off from the rest of the world like no one accepted me for who I really was. I eventually found myself coming home everyday and crying my eyes out but I never knew why. I felt so alone. I always felt like an outcast, like people were always laughing at me. Even people I didn't know that were just laughing with their friends would make me want to cry. I felt like I was constantly in a bad movie. I had severe paranoia of people that never accepted me when I was long.

In 8th grade, I did something I will never forget. One night I got so angry at my parents arguing. That morning my dad had punched a hole through my basement door. I was so scared as I kept screaming and crying that I loved him as he ran to his car to go to work. My dad was never there for me. He went to work at 8 in the morning and came home at 9 at night. I never got a chance to talk to him. To this day I know nothing about my father. I would get so mad at him for never being there for me and leaving me with my mom. Who I never could find comfort in at all. Then I would get even madder at myself for being mad at myself for being mad at my dad because he was just trying to give me and my brother and sister a good life.

That night after my dad punched a hole in the door, I sat in my room with a bottle of whiskey, the only thing I could find in my house that was strong enough for me to go numb, and a bottle of aspirin. I drank the whiskey but I couldn't get myself to take more than 7 pills of aspirin with it. That night I fell asleep drunk. This night started a whole new phase in my life – drinking. Drinking took away all my problems. I would drink just enough to still have self-control but just to take away my pain of loneliness. The drinking got worse and I was drunk everywhere that I was away from home. I was good at hiding it though. Most people just thought I was overly hyper, but the truth was that alcohol was the thing making me so happy.

I would purposely not eat then drink something extremely strong just to feel the burning sensation in my stomach. My suicide attempts were getting worse and started to include attempts to cut my wrists but I could never go through with it...or so I thought. 9th grade was a blur to me. I really don't remember much of it except just being extremely lonely and depressed. During the summer before 10th grade, I started a third addiction.

I don't remember the first day I ever cut myself. I don't know what I was thinking! I started an addiction that would be uncontrollable for some time. After I cut myself, I would sometimes fall asleep to the numbness and have horrible nightmares. I would dream of being in hell or dream of being at my funeral where everyone was happy that I had died. They were so real to me. These dreams would come and talk to me every night. They would give me a message that I would be better off dead. My life was an ongoing cycle. I would have so much anger and hatred inside of me that I would cut myself then the cut would make my hurt even more physically and mentally.

I was going crazy. I would sit in my room alone from the world any chance that I got. I never wanted to converse with people. I would freak out if I didn't have something sharp to cut myself with. It made me think I could control everything. I thought I could control my feelings by myself. But still I was so alone. I hated my family. I was constantly arguing with them because I just had so much anger built up inside of me from my whole life. I wanted to die.

I felt like there was no one who could understand me or help me. I was crazy and I was being taken over by suicidal thoughts again. I wanted to die so bad. I wanted to get away from this hellhole, but then I went on a retreat.

All of this time, I was filling a void inside my heart with things that were making that void bigger. I was slowly killing myself. It never occurred to me until I went on this retreat, that I could fill that void with Jesus. I was so mad that I could never find comfort in the people who weren't always around to help me, but then I learned that Jesus was always there, 24/7. It might sound corny now, but he was always there looking out for my best interests and helping me through these struggles. I was so far away from him because I never knew why he would let me put myself through all of this crap. I hated God and I wanted nothing to do with him, but then I just gave him one more chance, only one, but that's all it took.

On the retreat, I had confronted my problems. And after it I got help after talking to one of the leaders. I was diagnosed with severe depression, social anxiety disorder, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. And was put on medication. These problems are still well alive inside me right now, but I am slowly getting better. I just wanted all of you to know that if you are cutting, or drinking or have an eating disorder, please tell somebody. It's not the end of the world, I promise. Just please do something before it's too late. Life is too good to just let it slip away. Depression is temporary, but death isn't. Let your light shine before it's too late.

-- high school sophomore girl



God made his decision: He loves you. Have you made yours?

On the first page of the Bible God says you are “good” just the way you are. He likes you the way he made you. He likes your personality. He like the silly little things you do that no one else does. And he likes the way you look. He likes you head to toe and everything in between. He made you.

All throughout the rest of the Bible he tells you he loves you. Unconditionally. Permanently. Patiently. Forever. His love is a never ending love that doesn’t bat an eye at your sins. His love is a love that doesn’t judge or “keep a record” of the wrong things you have done. His love will go through everything in life with you. Everything. Even your sin.

On the last page of the Bible God makes one last promise. And it’s an important one. It’s kind of like a P.S. at the end of a letter. In the vision he gave to John to right down in the book of Revelation God says to write: “God’s home is now with his people. He will live with them and they will be his own. Yes, God will make his home among his people. He will wipe all tears from their eyes, and there will be no more death, suffering, crying, or pain. These things of the past are gone forever... I am making everything new. Write down what I have said. My words are true and can be trusted” (Revelations 21:3-5 CEV).

This is how God wanted to end his love letter to you. He wanted to tell you that if you have read his letter and taken it to heart his “home” is now in you. In your heart. In your life. It is the greatest gift he could ever give you. Him. Just him. His peace is awesome. His love is amazing. His plan for you truly is out of this world. And if you let him he will “wipe all tears” away from your “eyes.” You just have to let him. He is the greatest comforter, the greatest dad, the greatest friend we could ever have. He will be with you through thick and thin. Through the good times. Through the bad times. He will stick by you even if you sin. And he will show you how to avoid those sins. And in the midst of all the difficult things in life, through a personal and real relationship to him, he will wipe away your “tears,” your “suffering,” your “crying,” and your “pain.”

He is real. And he is there for you. You just have to let him be there for you. It’s your decision. It always has been and it always will be. No matter how many times or in how may ways you have turned away you can always come back. Just like the Prodigal Son. God made his decision. He loves you. Now you have to make yours. Hopefully you will love him too.

He is real. And he is there for you. You just have to let him be there for you. It’s your decision

You can overcome anything with a little bit of help from God

If you were to ask me what the worst feeling in the world was, I would say loneliness. It's the feeling of emptiness, a feeling that nobody gives a damn, and a feeling where you feel like you just have no place. I know this feeling too well.

I never thought that someone like me would get depressed. It's like it just hit me. I was overcome with the feeling that I didn't fit in, no one really liked me, and I was totally alone. I started to push away the good things I had which left me feeling even emptier. I got really self-conscious and was never that way before. It felt like nothing was going right. I was just making one wrong move after another. I was on a downward spiral and if someone didn't help me soon I would drown in my own misery.

I guess it all started sophomore year. I was doing pretty well up until then. I started to hang out with a new group of girls. It felt so good to have a group just for myself. But after a while, I started to feel that if I wasn't around, they wouldn't care and I wouldn't matter. To me, it was just those four plus me. It was never us five. I felt like an outsider and a tag along. But I pushed the feeling aside and didn't let any of them know how I was really feeling.

Then I really felt us becoming distant. Because my whole world revolved around those four girls, when I started to feel out of place with them, I had nowhere else to turn. I started to feel like I had no role in the group. They started doing things without me, and I didn't get any phone calls. Things like this might not bother other girls, but it was different with me. I felt like telling myself they didn't mean to make me feel this way. I thought I was just an easily forgotten person. But then it started to really get me when I started to hear things about their amazing weekends, weekends without me. I felt that if I didn't talk to them, they wouldn't talk to me, like I had to be the conversation initiator. I never confronted them. When I probably should have. So I ignored my feelings for a while and pretended like it didn't bother me.

Then something that was a major part of my life fell apart. Because I was always afraid of a relationship with someone, I waited too long and lost a chance at something amazing. This was not just a regular boy. He was my

best friend, my first love, and someone I never thought would leave my side. I guess every girl has boy problems, but I felt like I was the only one dealing with it. At first I couldn't believe it was happening, it was surreal. But as time went by and it was in front of my face, I was devastated. I clamed myself for everything I was losing: my friendships, my potential relationships, and most of all my confidence, I wanted to turn back time and re-do everything. Everyone was leaving me alone. I really could have used good friends to cry to, but I felt like I had none.

I was submerged into a depression then. I let that one thing totally dominate how I felt. I pulled away from everyone. I wouldn't talk much in school because as soon as I would open my moth I would have to choke down a scream of frustration. I was sick of pretending I was happy and content with how people were treating me. My smile had gotten to be so fake, it made me sick. I said I was fine to anyone who asked and became great at lying. The girls told me they didn't want to help me if I wasn't going to talk to them. They had turned everything around and shot it in my face and took me not talking a personal insult. So all of my fears of being alone and facing everything alone were coming true. I didn't know what to do with myself. Everything I had worked so hard to build up was falling apart and I was powerless to pick up the pieces. I couldn't go a day without feeling resentment towards people who I wasn't close with anymore But eventually I told myself that it was my fault they weren't in my life anymore, and it was my own fault that I was lonely. I didn't know where to turn or who to trust. My trust for anyone total diminished and I thought I could never trust anyone with my heart because it would just get broken and stepped on again. No one cares, you're all alone, and you're not good enough. These are things I would tell myself. I cried all the time at the smallest things and it was my only release. When I cried I felt like my tears were proof that the inside of me was being torn apart and pulled in every direction and the pain was too much to handle. Everyone was leaving me alone to think of all the mistakes I've made.

The lack of care I was getting from other people began to take its toll and the loneliness was too much for me to take. My self-confidence was down to zero. I felt fat, ugly, and like I had no one to really talk to that really cared. I remember hearing stories of people cutting themselves when they felt this kind of pain. But I was too afraid to do it, and promised myself I wouldn't. But I felt I had to find an escape from everything. This is when I developed an eating disorder. At first I just controlled everything I ate, trying to make healthy food choices like my mom would tell me. She constantly told me I wasn't fat every time she heard me complain about my body. I started to eat only salads with no dressing and that would be my main meal for the day. I was getting weak and couldn't do certain

things from lack of energy. Then I finally stopped eating all together. I thought that if I stopped eating people would pay attention to me and talk to me, even if it was just to ask why I wasn't eating. I was desperate for someone to show they cared. But no one really did and I changed my eating habits to punish myself for feeling like such an outcast. I would go whole days without eating anything. I started to lie to my mom about what I ate. I would lie to myself in the morning saying I wasn't hungry and I wasn't going to eat that day at all. By night I was starving and would find myself eating. So I became what you call a binge eater. I would eat large amounts of food at one time and then starve myself for a day or two. I didn't like what I was doing, but I felt like I wasn't good enough how I was and my loneliness continued eating away at me from the inside. Even if I wanted to stop hurting myself, I couldn't. Thank God I had one amazing friend who came on vacation with me. She said if I didn't eat she wouldn't. I saw she was being true to her word. I was getting so mad at her. But she was only trying to help. I remember crying with her and her telling me I was hurting the people who cared about me more than I was actually hurting myself. I told her I wanted to stop and eat normal again, but it was hard. I didn't want to put my problems on her and hurt anyone anymore. She is one of the reasons I'm working hard everyday to make things right again. With some dedication and help from friends, ever since then, my eating habits are almost as normal as any other teenage girl, I'd like to thank that friend for helping me get on the right path. But no matter where I turn, I still felt alone, like I was dealing with things all by myself. I desperately wanted to get better, eat normal, not be so self-conscious, be happy, and feel loved and cared for. But every time I had the opportunity to be happy, I would get scared and push whatever it was away. I didn't want to hurt anyone because of myself. I didn't want them to be subjected to how messed up I seemed to be. I didn't want how I was to affect their mood. Maybe my problem was that I cared too much for other people, people who didn't really care for me the same way. I wanted everyone to go away so I wouldn't be in the position to care about anyone. If I didn't care, I couldn't get burned.

Then I went on Shine, which was definitely a great experience for me. When I was on the retreat, I had such a sense of belonging and that somebody really cared and that I definitely wasn't the only one going through the things I was going through. I thought of myself as drowning in depression and the retreat was my lifesaver, pulling my head above the water. That weekend was so amazing for me and I felt God was really in my life then. At home the good feelings I brought back with me stuck around for a little. In time the feelings of loneliness and emptiness surfaced in my mind again. The tiniest things got me upset. But I had a different view on everything. I felt like God

was really with me, and on that aspect I wasn't alone. I was far from alone. I realized God is always there holding my hand.

Things started to get better, and it was easier for me to be happy. Seeing old friends in school didn't make me feel upset or resent towards them anymore. I felt like no one could hurt me anymore. The vulnerable feeling I had slowly went away. Little by little my life was shaping out right in front of me.

If it was up to me, the one feeling I would make disappear is loneliness. If you ever feel alone or empty you should try talking to someone. Talking will make you feel better, and that person might even be able to relate to your situation. You just need to realize that people do care and God is always with you. I just wish I were stronger during my depression phase. Things happen that you can't change and sometimes people feel differently than you feel. Someone might not love you the way you love them and you just have to except it and not dwell on it. Believe me, it will eat away at you until you feel like you can't even breathe on your own. Just don't give yourself up to depression. You'll drown in it. You need to fight to break the surface, and God will always be there to pull you out of the water. You don't have to be afraid of being alone, because no matter how alone you think you might be, you're not. God is always there and there will always be people there to help you, whether you know it or not. You can overcome anything with a little bit of help from God; he's always willing to give it.

-- high school sophomore girl

If you are looking for where many of the quotes from Church teaching and the Saints come from, here you go:

Catechism of the Catholic Church: Doubleday; New York, NY 1995.

Diary: Saint Maria Faustina Kowalska: Marians of the Immaculate Conception; Stockbridge, MA, 2001.

The Imitation of Christ: Thomas a Kempis. Penguin Books; New York, NY 1952.

The Treasury of Religious and Spiritual Quotations: edited by Rebecca Davis and Susan Mesner. Reader's Digest Association Inc.; Pleasantville, NY 1994.

Revelations of Divine Love: Julian of Norwich. Penguin Books; New York, NY 1966.