

From Darkness to the Light

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All Scripture references are from the New King James Version.

God's Plan of Salvation

There is a definite way that the Lord Jesus deals with unbelievers to save them, equip them for service and prepare them for eternal life in heaven. The willingness and full co-operation of each one of us, according to fixed biblical guidelines, is necessary if we wish to avert the tragedy of a false repentance. We can all share in the wonderful experience to be called by the Lord out of the darkness of sin into His marvellous light. I invite you to explore with me the unsearchable riches of the Lord's love and saving grace, and to accept it by faith.

1. Calling

Humanity has the common problem of being sinful and facing the tragic consequences of separation from God and eternal punishment in hell unless they repent and accept Christ as their Saviour. The Bible says: "Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned" (Rom. 5:12; cf. Rom. 3:9-12).

Sin *entered* the world by means of Adam's sin and subsequently *spread* to all humanity by penetrating the entire human race. The reason death spread to all people is that "all sinned." The penalty for sin is both spiritual and physical death: "The wages of sin *is* death" (Rom. 6:23 cf. 7:13). All human beings inherited Adam's sinful nature after the Fall, by being born into the world as sinners (Ps. 51:5). Paul says that we are "dead in trespasses and sins" and need to be spiritually restored and quickened by God (Eph. 2:1).

God Himself shows us the first step of the way for the conversion of sinners. He calls us to repentance and also provides the means for our salvation: "God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Since the price for all our transgressions has been paid, people everywhere are invited to come to the Lord Jesus to receive forgiveness for their sins:

"Come to Me, all *you* who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

"Come now, and let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18).

God calls and even “commands” (*instructs* or *urges*) all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30-31; cf. 2 Pet. 3:9). The reason Jesus Christ came into the world was to offer remission of sins to lost humanity (Luke 24:46-47). His main mission was therefore to call sinners to repentance. He says:

“I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matt. 9:13).

“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).

It is important to recognise the specific call of the Lord Jesus to you *personally*, as this will determine how you will respond to it. It is crucial that you should realise the full extent of your problem, namely that you are heading for disaster without the Lord Jesus. There is no room for complacency or self-justification in your state of spiritual darkness, as “there is no one righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10; cf. Ps. 53:2-3).

You must face up to the all-embracing nature of sin, and of how serious it is in God’s sight – especially your own sins which separate you from Him (Isa. 59:2). There must not be any doubt in your mind that God has imposed the death penalty for sin (Ezek. 18:4,31-32; Rom. 6:23); consequently, all unsaved people are heading for eternal condemnation by the righteous Judge. If they are not saved, the following sentence will be passed on them from the great white throne:

“Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels” (Matt. 25:41).

When God the Father calls us through His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, He not only identifies our problem of sin and condemnation but also offers the solution. The good news is that God loves us and has provided for the forgiveness of our sins through the atoning death of Jesus on the cross:

“In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son *to be* the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10).

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

“For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit” (1 Pet. 3:18).

“We implore *you* on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him [Christ] who knew no sin *to be* sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:20-21; cf. Rom. 8:3; Gal. 3:13).

The calling of God to the unsaved must be so clear that they fully realise the implications and count the cost of becoming Christians. Jesus made Nicodemus to understand that theological knowledge and a good life was not enough to inherit the kingdom of God: he *had* to be born again. The condition for receiving pardon and eternal life is the confession and forsaking of all known sins and believing in Jesus Christ as Saviour.

The Lord Jesus told the rich young man that he first had to break with his sin of materialism (Luke 18:22). To this young man, who was otherwise very religious, it was hard to part from his besetting sin and he left sorrowfully. Many people find it hard to repent because they do not really *want* to part from their sins. To all of them, Jesus Christ says:

“Strive to enter through the narrow gate, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able” (Luke 13:24).

Remember that the gift of eternal life is something that we cannot merit or buy. The counting of the cost relates to our willingness to put off the filthy garment of our old life before we can be clothed with Christ’s robe of righteousness (Eph. 4:22-24).

Sinners who receive God’s call to repent, have been awakened to realise their lostness – that they have no hope and no future without God. Their conscience has been aroused to recognise their sinfulness, but also God’s solution to their problem. Awakened sinners are not yet saved, but they heard the knock on the door of their heart conveying the following message to them: “Awake, you who sleep, arise from the dead, and Christ will give you light” (Eph. 5:14).

Those whose conscience has been aroused can react in two ways to the conviction of sin:

- They can yield to the pleading of the Holy Spirit who convicts them of sin, righteousness and judgement (John 16:8), confess their sins and accept Christ’s sacrifice on the cross for their sins. They will then be forgiven and thereby escape the judgements of God.
- They can also, to their own eternal ruin, resist the call of God to be saved: “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (Heb. 3:7-8). If we keep on hardening our hearts, the voice of the Holy Spirit will gradually be silenced and more difficult to respond to. Do not allow your heart to be hardened to the extent that you turn your back on God and shut Him and His word, the Bible, out of your life.

2. Sorrow

Unbelievers who are under deep conviction of sin and aware of their lost state realise they need to get right with God. They feel accused and condemned because of what they have done. Their remorse and sense of guilt drive them to Christ – the One who paid the price by dying such a cruel death for the salvation of sinners.

Have you experienced the intense sorrow that leads to true repentance? The Bible says, “For godly sorrow produces repentance to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10).

The sorrow or remorse that the Bible speaks about is to have a repentant heart which will lead to a true conversion to Christ: “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out” (Acts 3:19). A paraphrase of this text would be: “Repent

therefore [*feel guilt and genuine sorrow about your sins*] and be converted [*turn about*] that your sins may be blotted out.”

When Peter denied Jesus Christ, he went outside and wept bitterly (Matt. 26:75). That was true sorrow. He did not pity himself, but he had a terrible feeling of remorse because of the grief that he had caused to the Lord Jesus. Unbelievers must realise that through their sins they have offended God by sinning against Him. This is godly sorrow and it leads to a true confession with the heart, which is a biblical condition for forgiveness.

How can people truly confess their sins before they have given the Holy Spirit the opportunity to convict them of the abominable consequences of sin? This conviction grows in our heart when we thoughtfully read the Bible, a Christian book, or when we listen to a good sermon. When the Lord Jesus calls us to repentance, He shows us exactly where we stand with Him. The sorrow that will then come over us according to His will puts us on the way that leads to true repentance and spiritual renewal by the Holy Spirit.

There is no place for hidden pride and self-justification when we approach God to save our souls, as that would counter the disposition of sorrow and brokenness of heart: “God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble” (Jas. 4:6). We must get to the end of ourselves and admit that we have made a failure of our lives. Only then will we unconditionally put our trust in the Lord Jesus to save us. We do not deserve anything.

3. Repentance or Conversion

When repentant sinners realise they need to get right with God, they must abandon their former sinful lifestyles, confess their sins to Him and ask His forgiveness. They must earnestly ask God to forgive their sins and meet His condition for forgiveness by fully and honestly confessing *all* known sin:

“If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9).

The Lord Jesus is waiting on us to confess our sins (in the plural, which means *all* of them) and to turn our backs on them. We must abandon our sins and firmly resolve not to do such things again. The Bible says, “He who covers his sins will not prosper, but whoever confesses and forsakes *them* will have mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

Repentant sinners, as well as backslidden Christians who have again become entangled by sin and unrighteousness, must be fully prepared to abandon their old lives by confessing and forsaking all their sins. The prodigal son in the parable made a definite decision to forsake his sins when he said: “I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you” (Luke 15:18).

King David said, "I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin *is* ever before me. Against You, You only, have I sinned, and done *this* evil in Your sight... Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow... blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart" (Ps. 51:3-4,7,9-10).

A hurried, superficial, insincere confession of sins will not do. You need to do more than merely say, "Forgive all my sins." Take time to confess your sins one by one as the Holy Spirit convicts you of them.

Another very important condition for the confession of sins and the receiving of Jesus as your Saviour is that it should be done in faith. Sinners who have not yet responded to the calling of God, are dead in sins and do not yet have faith since they are still unbelievers with hardened hearts. The gospel message awakens them to their sinful, lost condition. Then "the grace of God that brings salvation" (Titus 2:11) comes into their hearts, enabling them to put their trust in Jesus to save them. Like the penitent tax-gatherer, they can then exclaim: "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" (Luke 18:13).

Paul explains how we can receive faith – by reading God's Word which leads us to true repentance: "So then faith *comes* by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). When unbelievers read or listen to good evangelical messages on repentance, the Holy Spirit gives faith in their hearts to believe the message and to react to it. However, there are those people who maintain that they simply cannot believe. The solution to this problem is not to argue it away theologically, or to convince people that they must only accept the facts with their mind. They need further exposure to the Word of God, because the principle remains that *faith comes by the Word of God*. So, by reading long sections from the New Testament and listening to good biblical sermons, in due course faith will come to them as they receive God's living Word into their hearts. The Lord Jesus memorably said, "The words that I speak to you are spirit, and *they* are life" (John 6:63).

When faith in Jesus as Saviour comes to awakened and convicted sinners they can be assured that God will receive them with open arms, as in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-24) and that God is "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom. 3:26). "Without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (Heb. 11:6).

Since "God demonstrates His own love towards us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8) we can be assured that God's door of grace is open to us and we can walk through it in repentance and faith! Jesus said, "...the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37). "If we confess our sins, [God] is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9).

To *believe* in Jesus (John 3:16; Acts 16:31) involves more than believing that He came into the world to die for our salvation. We must have a basic knowledge about His deity, God's plan of salvation, our responsibilities, and also about the promise of sanctification which is made to all believers. We must believe:

- that He is the true God and eternal life, and the only Saviour of the world (1 John 5:20; Luke 19:10);
- that we have to repent with the confession of our sins to obtain His forgiveness (Matt. 9:13; Acts 17:30);
- that He is able to make us new creatures, that the old things can pass away and that everything can be made new (2 Cor. 5:17);
- that He purchased us with His blood and that we henceforth, if we have received Jesus as Saviour, belong to Him to be used by Him (1 Cor. 6:19-20; 1 Pet. 1:18-19);
- that because of the rebirth we make a new beginning in life which implies a process of growing up to spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:13-14; Heb. 5:12–6:1); and
- that we must be filled with the Holy Spirit, study the Bible, and commit ourselves to a life of service to be witnesses for the Lord (Acts 1:8; Eph. 5:18; 2 Pet. 3:18; 2 Tim. 3:16-17; 2 Tim. 4:2).

4. Justification

There are two aspects of the salvation of sinners, i.e. the forgiveness and blotting out of their sins (*justification*) and the receiving of a new life (*new birth*). These two aspects are closely linked because fallen humanity is spiritually dead as a result of sin and being alienated from God. They need to be both justified *and* made alive.

Justification demands the satisfaction of God's law which decrees the death penalty for sinners (Rom. 6:23). All sinners need somebody else to die in their place (a substitutionary death). Only someone who is sinless could substitute for fallen humanity, since sinners can only die (and be eternally lost) for their own sins – not for other's sins. The *only* basis on which sin can be forgiven is the substitutionary death on the cross of Jesus, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). By this supreme act of love He accepted the penalty for our sins, so that we might have a free pardon, on condition that we repent, confess our sins and believe in Him:

"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *to be* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness" (Rom. 3:23-25).

"He *was* wounded for our transgressions, *He was* bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace *was* upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed" (Isa. 53:5).

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7).

Every sinner on earth has an almost endless list of sins which condemn him. His numerous transgressions of God's law of love must be blotted out before he can be reconciled to God. The question is whether *you* have taken the list of *your* sins seriously by systematically working through them, confessing and forsaking each one of them, and accepting God's forgiveness in faith? He will forgive your sins and make you spiritually alive:

"And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross" (Col. 2:13-14).

5. Rebirth

The clear biblical exhortation to be born again is of the utmost significance in the salvation of sinners. By this concept God clearly teaches us:

- that because of sin and alienation from God, we are spiritually dead and need Him to make us alive; and
- that our 'old Adam' nature is a fallen, sinful nature which God says cannot be improved or changed, so we *must* be born again to become new creatures (2 Cor. 5:17).

"Jesus... said to [Nicodemus], Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

The believer's new life in Christ is likened spiritually to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. By His death for us we are forgiven and God sees us as spiritually "crucified with Christ" (Gal. 2:20), but as "alive to God" through Him and able to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:4,11).

"Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3).

God does not only forgive our sins – He also gives us a new life, and a new nature. We must know the Lord Jesus as Saviour *and* as the resurrection and the life. God imparts the new life to all believers through the Holy Spirit: "...according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Saviour" (Tit. 3:5-6).

The water baptism of believers through immersion symbolically points to the above experience, and is also a statement of faith in the Lord Jesus (cf. Mark 16:16). A testimony of faith in Jesus Christ is a precondition for baptism since baptism itself cannot save any person.

Note the following example: “Now as they went down the road, they came to some water. And the eunuch said, See, *here is* water. What hinders me from being baptized? Then Philip said, If you believe with all your heart, you may. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God” (Acts 8:36-37). Then he was baptized. Paul and other converts were also baptized shortly after being saved (Acts 9:18; 10:47-48; 16:31-33). In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) it is clearly stated that salvation is followed by baptism, and then by sanctification and Christian growth.

6. Sanctification

Born-again members of the true church of Jesus Christ are exhorted to deny themselves, walk in the Spirit and bear “the fruit of the Spirit” (Gal. 5:22-23). We are called to a life of sober-mindedness and true holiness. The first principle of sanctification and discipleship is clearly given by the Lord Jesus Himself:

“Then He said to *them* all, If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me” (Luke 9:23).

According to Luke 14:27-33, the cross of self-denial is related to counting the cost of discipleship. A definite choice must be made whether you want to please the desires of the flesh (your old nature), or whether you are prepared to renounce the world and serve the Lord with your whole heart and everything you have. You cannot pursue the riches and fame in this world *and* at the same time truly follow and please the Lord Jesus. Can you testify with Paul that you are “crucified with Christ” (Gal. 2:20) and, through His cross, regard yourself as dead to the world and its deceptive, passing “pleasures of sin”? (Heb. 11:25; Rom. 6:2).

“God forbid that I should glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). If we deny the sinful tendencies of the old nature God will reward us with a life of victory and true happiness. Paul clearly exhorted Christians in Ephesus to:

“...put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created after God, in righteousness and true holiness” (Eph. 4:22-24).

We must take up the cross of self-denial *daily*. Only by so doing can we truly be sanctified overcomers in the Christian life and able to comply with the following exhortations in Scripture:

- “I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh” (Gal. 5:16).
- “But as He who called you *is* holy; you also be holy in all *your* conduct, because it is written, Be holy, for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:15-16; cf. Lev. 11:44-45).

- “For this is the will of God, your sanctification... For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects *this* does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 4:3,7-8).

Through sanctification and faithful dedication to the Lord which results from it, He can change us into pure and effective instruments, fit for His service. He enables us to bear the fruit of the Spirit, to stand against Satan’s attacks (Eph. 6:10-11), to cope with all the demands of discipleship, to remain true to divine principles in the face of opposition and temptation, and to persevere on the narrow way until the Lord Jesus comes (Heb. 12:1-2). Neglecting to comply with the command to be holy reduces many Christians to the deplorably low spiritual and moral state evident in the Corinthian church:

“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual *people* but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able *to receive it*, and even now you are still not able. For you are still carnal. For where *there are* envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like *mere men*?” (1 Cor. 3:1-3; *carnal* is *fleshly*, referring to the *old nature* which must be crucified).

Many churches in the world today are plagued by the problem of unspiritual, unfruitful, powerless, quarrelsome, worldly-minded, entertainment-oriented members whose service is limited to social concerns – let alone the problem of members who are merely nominal believers having only a form of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5). Even worse are the adverse reactions of some members of decadent and backslidden congregations who even openly express themselves against the biblical doctrine of holiness.

During revival periods when evangelists such as John Wesley proclaimed the gospel of salvation, new birth and sanctification with zeal, there was a great spiritual awakening. Many repented of sin, were truly saved and born again, becoming Christ’s witnesses, and taking the gospel to the mission-fields of the world.

The power of the Holy Spirit is also at our disposal in these end-times, to enable us to do great things for the Lord. It all depends on our determination to serve Him with all our heart. We should be obedient and willing to commit ourselves to serving Christ. The question is: Will He find us engaged in the Great Commission when He returns to take His saints to their heavenly home? Or will He find us in the company of slothful, compromising, unspiritual, even unregenerate, church members who are spiritually asleep? (Matt. 25:1-13).

The Lord Jesus wants followers who are truly committed to Him and to His work upon earth, not those who claim to believe on Him but give Him no more than lip-service. We must be witnesses to His saving grace and lead holy lives marked by prayer and service to Him. Nominal believers who give Him only cold mental assent, without heart commitment, will find they have been self-deceived: “Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven” (Matt. 7:21).

Through the power of the Holy Spirit it is possible to do the will of the Father and live a life of godliness. If you do not delight in doing His will on earth, how will you ever be happy in heaven where only His will is done?

The work we do for the Lord is not done in an effort *to be* saved, but *because we are* saved. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you” (John 20:21). He sends those who are able and willing to all parts of the world to take the good news of the gospel to all people. The Holy Spirit gives power to fulfil this vitally important task. Are you ready and available?

7. Glorification

The final step to full salvation is glorification. This takes place at the first resurrection when all true Christians will receive glorified, immortal, resurrection bodies:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed – in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51-52).

Full details of our glorified condition in heaven have not yet been revealed to us, but we do know that when Jesus appears in all His splendour we will be like Him. He is the Bridegroom of His church and the King of kings, and we will share His glory:

“Our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body” (Phil. 3:20-21).

“Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:2-3).

In anticipation of our glorification we must now be prepared for the coming life in heaven by being pure and holy in all our conduct. Our present spiritual state determines our future position. Apart from being born again, we must live Spirit-filled lives of dedication to the Lord. We will receive rewards at the judgement seat of Christ for our labour in the Lord (2 Cor. 5:10). The following crowns are mentioned in the Bible, to motivate us towards higher levels of Christian service:

- The incorruptible crown for a holy and victorious life (1 Cor. 9:24-25).
- The crown of rejoicing for soul-winners (1 Thess. 2:19).
- The crown of glory for good shepherds (1 Pet. 5:2-4).
- The crown of life for Christian martyrs (Rev. 2:10).
- The crown of righteousness for those who loved the appearing of the Lord (2 Tim. 4:8).

Will you stand empty-handed on that day, saved as by fire (1 Cor. 3:15), or will you be declared a faithful servant of your Master? Will you be worthy of the Lord saying words similar to the following about you on that occasion?: “His Lord said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your Lord” (Matt. 25:21).

It is clear that the Lord Jesus Christ came not only to save us from hell, but to make us His disciples. He wants to be your Saviour and Messiah but also your Friend, Shepherd, Leader, Lord, King and heavenly Bridegroom. “You are a chosen generation... that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). You are called and committed to serving Christ after your salvation by sharing in evangelism, both at home and abroad, to be an effective member of His church on earth, and a co-labourer with God and Christ Jesus (1 Cor. 3:9).

During this life we are also being prepared for our future role to reign as kings with the Lord Jesus in His coming kingdom. The glorified church will sing to the Lamb: “You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood out of every... people... and we shall reign on the earth” (Rev. 5:9-10). In anticipation of that role, we must now prevail over sin in our own lives. We must also engage in the battle against Satan in this present evil world and achieve victories in the Name of Jesus. We must not be content only to be saved, but to be fully committed to His cause, to follow and serve Him for as long as He chooses to leave us here.

The worldly-mindedness and spiritual shallowness of many modern churches falls far short of the Lord’s standard of conduct and holiness. Most Christians are satisfied with their poor spiritual state and fail to live up to “the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). The reason for this state of affairs is that many of them are not truly born again, while some who are, do not live victorious lives as overcomers empowered by the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8; Eph. 6:10-11; Rev. 3:11-12,21). Spirit-filled Christians must actively serve the Lord. Do you bear fruit that befits repentance and do you use your God-given talents in the service of the Lord?

I want to challenge you to evaluate your spiritual life very critically in the light of God’s Word. Examine your spiritual foundation to determine whether you are truly in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). In the next section we discuss a number of false foundations upon which many people build their lives, deceiving themselves that they are born-again Christians. You cannot afford to have doubts about your real spiritual state as your eternal destiny depends on it.

False Foundations

There are various false foundations that the enemy of our souls and his accomplices offer to people when they wish to become Christians. His first objective is to deter them from deciding to believe on the Lord Jesus so as to be truly born again. However, if he does not succeed with *Plan A*, he does not abandon his efforts but tries *Plan B*, which includes all sorts of cunningly devised schemes to sidetrack new converts with worldliness and ignorance of biblical truths, which deprive them from becoming mature, Spirit-filled Christians. The following are some of the false

foundations upon which many people build their lives, thereby adhering to an unbiblical and humanly conceived form of Christianity which is devoid of real spiritual life:

No clear calling

As a result of poor preaching and books with shallow messages, many people do not receive a clear calling to get right with the Lord. Preachers lull their audiences into a spiritual sleep and leave them with the impression that they are Christians by being members of a church and assenting to its statement of belief. They are not motivated to desire a personal relationship with the Lord, but are content with an outward form of godliness.

Moralising

The idea is often instilled in churchgoers that they are good people because they comply with a standard which is expected of Christians. Being flattered by this idea, they experience no conviction of sin nor the need for repentance and faith in Christ as Saviour. They do not realise that they are lost. Their boast is in their morally irreproachable lives and therefore they concentrate on doing good works by which they hope to gain society's *and* God's approval. Tragically, these good people are on their way to hell unless they repent.

Baptismal regeneration

Many thousands of churchgoers build their lives on the false foundation of so-called 'baptismal regeneration.' They believe that infant baptism gives them eternal security. They cling to the deceptive idea that baptism and confirmation ceremonies in a church ensure their salvation. After these rituals, they are told that they have entered into an eternal covenant with God. They assume that through baptism they have been born again and are on their way to heaven. The Bible says that religiousness which is not preceded by repentance and faith in Christ's finished work of redemption will not save us from God's judgement and hell (Heb. 4:2; 2 Tim. 3:5).

Changed concepts

The religion of many consists only of changed concepts. Much preaching is "with persuasive words of human wisdom," and not "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power" (1 Cor. 2:4). As a result the minds of hearers are filled with cold, theological arguments, without anything to move their souls in response to the Lord Jesus. The hearers may confess Him with their lips, but their hearts are far from Him (Matt. 15:8). Their hearts have not been changed, but only their mental concepts, which confuse them into thinking they are Christians guided by the Holy Spirit, while that may not be the case. Self-righteousness is of no avail: "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God" (Luke 16:15). Such people have never experienced godly sorrow leading to repentance for their sins (2 Cor. 7:10). They cannot clearly testify of being saved and born again as there has been only a superficial change in their lives.

Emotional repentance

Many people are moved by a gospel message only emotionally. They make a decision for Christ, not in repentant faith, but moved by emotion. As emotions come and go, such decisions often do not last long: “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he stumbles” (Matt. 13:20-21).

Note that the person referred to received the Word of God with *joy* – an emotion not to be confused with true *faith*. A superficial, emotional response is not true, deep repentance for our sins, nor faith in the Lord Jesus as Saviour and the only way of salvation – it may be a false repentance. Some can even point to a date on which they received the Lord joyfully, but without repentance and faith in Christ they were not truly saved.

Only believe

Another version of the cheap grace teaching is that you need only to believe – heaven is assured, so there is nothing else to do! Works, including repentance of sin, are frowned upon. Such false teachers quote the following: “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

While that is true, we still cannot be saved by grace through faith *without* first deeply and genuinely repenting of all known sins, confessing them to God, giving up sinning, and counting on His mercy. If we have been saved by grace we must promptly start to live a life of service to God with good works – *not* to obtain salvation, for we already have it – but to please God by obeying His Word. Following the verse quoted above, the next verse emphasises the good works which should *follow* salvation: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:10).

The Christian life requires our consistent and whole-hearted co-operation with God in working out His plan for our lives *and* for the world – we become His co-labourers (1 Cor. 3:9). This calls for a disciplined act of our will, while relying on the abundant strength and grace of God through Jesus Christ. Paul says that the grace of the Lord enabled him to work hard in fulfilling his ministry (1 Cor. 15:10).

Inapt words of comfort

Awakened sinners who are under the conviction of sin, often seek advice from other Christians about their deep feelings of guilt. It is very unwise to tell such persons that they are not as bad as they think. Family members often do that to help ease their guilt. This can defeat the Holy Spirit’s work in convicting sinners so that they can be saved. They must be helped to realise that all sin is so bad that it deserves eternal punishment in hell. The good news of the gospel is that God provided the ideal solution, i.e. that the Lord Jesus was punished on the cross for sins, and believing this we can have a free pardon and the gift of eternal life. He came to destroy the works of

the devil (1 John 3:8) and to save us from all our sins as well as the punishment for sins.

Self-pity

People often feel self-pity if things have gone seriously wrong in their lives, assuming they were not to blame. No good can come from such feelings, as “the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Cor. 7:10). Sorrow that comes from the conviction of sin is the Holy Spirit’s work to lead you to repentance and trust in Christ’s work of redemption at the cross. Self-pity leads you to make excuses and seek sympathy (and human solutions) for your problems. This leads down the road to disaster and not to repentance and victory over your sins. Read the Bible and experience the true conviction of the Holy Spirit who will lead you to call upon God for His mercy, forgiveness and help. Your burdens will be lifted at Calvary, where the price for your sins has been fully paid.

Signs and wonders

A serious form of deception which has emerged in some churches is the idea that, by the Holy Spirit’s activities, God reveals Himself through signs and wonders. This has led to a theology of dramatic physical manifestations. If signs are not evident, then it is concluded that God was not present in the meeting.

Many convince themselves that they are Christians because they have had some dramatic experience, not because of being convicted of their sins and repenting for them. Some have fallen down, had fits of laughter, a vision, or been healed, so believe God has touched and saved them because of such experiences.

Millions are deceived in this way, feeding their emotion-based faith on exhilarating worship services with rhythmic music, appeasing their consciences and uplifting their spirits for a few days, before needing another ‘fix’ of emotionally stimulating experiences. They should read their Bibles and soberly realise that when they stand before the Lord’s throne it will be no use saying, “Lord, Lord, have we not... done many wonders in Your name?” for He will say to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me...” (Matt. 7:22-23). Then it will be too late to repent and obtain the true life which alone can transform us into disciples of the Lord Jesus.

‘All Christians are Spirit-filled’

There are also false foundations for a life of holiness. A very common assumption is that since all Christians are born again by the Holy Spirit, they are also filled with the Spirit. It is claimed by many believers that as the Holy Spirit is a Person who cannot be diminished or increased, we need no further infillings of the Holy Spirit as we grow in grace (2 Pet. 3:18).

This statement is contrary to the Bible’s teaching and deprives many Christians of a Spirit-filled, victorious life. The fact is that our old nature must be denied and crucified before the full authority of the Holy Spirit will be established in our lives. The fleshly Christians of 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 were certainly not Spirit-filled Christians and were greatly in need of the experience of sanctification. All believers

need to be aware that the Holy Spirit dwells in them and they should be led by Him. The Lord Jesus said, “When... the Spirit of truth has come, He will guide you into all truth” (John 16:13).

The non-offensive gospel

Many of the false foundations discussed above converge in the modern church-growth movement. Preachers are motivated by a humanistic spirit of positive thinking and success, which induces them to present the gospel of the Lord Jesus as non-offensive and pleasing to the world as possible. This is done to draw large crowds of popular followers of Jesus Christ. In this positivistic approach to the gospel no mention is made of ‘negative’ things such as unsaved people being sinners, God’s judgement upon sin, false prophets, the Antichrist, etc. Such preachers also shy away from the cross and the blood of Christ as that is associated with God’s judgement upon sin.

A soulless gospel, in which many good things are said about the Lord Jesus, while offering His blessings to all people but without mentioning the destructive consequences of sin and the dark prospects of sinners within the context of God’s wrath upon them, cannot be of any real advantage. Furthermore, it does not lead to a sound appreciation of the nature of Christ’s death on the cross to atone for our sins. It also lacks practical value as a directive in life, as all negative subjects such as spiritual deception are deliberately avoided and ignored. In this way, the true gospel message is played down and eventually silenced. Through preaching of this nature, including 40-day programmes of dedication, people are deprived of their spiritual armour which they need to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph. 6:10-12).

How to Grow in Grace

The Christian life should be a pilgrimage of sanctification while we are walking in the light of God’s presence, having fellowship with the Lord Jesus and being continually cleansed by His blood from every sin (1 John 1:7): “The path of the just *is* like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter unto the perfect day” (Prov. 4:18). Dedication is called for: “...let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares *us*, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Heb. 12:1).

There follows, to the end of the booklet, a summary of a guide to growth in grace by the revivalist preacher, Charles Finney, from his books, *Lectures on Revival* and *Power from on High*. These directives were given to new converts who accepted Christ as Saviour during his revival meetings:

“But grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18).

Grace is favour. In the Bible the word *grace* often signifies a free gift. The grace of God is thus the *favour* of God, His free gift to us.

The command to grow in grace does not mean that we should gradually give up sin. Strangely enough, some people think it means that. But nowhere does the Bible command us to leave sin bit by bit. Rather, every word requires us to break with it

instantly and completely. We are to grow in God's favour, in His estimation of us and satisfaction with us and in worthiness of His favour.

Conditions of spiritual growth

The following are some of the basic conditions that must be met if we are to grow in grace:

We must already be *in* grace. Just as growth or increase in anything implies a beginning, growth in God's favour implies that we have found favour in His sight. We are already indebted for grace received; as one of God's favoured ones we are already *in grace*.

Our sins have been abandoned and forgiven. Growth in grace presupposes that we have already repented of sin, that in practice we have abandoned all known sin. Being approved by God implies that we are pardoned and favoured by Him for the sake of our Lord, Jesus Christ. His favour assumes that we have renounced rebellion against God. We can never stand in favour with God while we knowingly indulge in sin against Him.

Continuous growth. Once grace has started, there is room for everlasting growth. As we know God more, we will be capable of loving Him more, displaying broader and deeper confidence in Him. God reveals Himself to us through Christ Jesus, and in Him we discover the true personality of an infinite God. The text therefore says, "Grow in the grace *and* knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." The more we love, believe and know God – if we conform to this knowledge – the more God will be pleased with us; and as we stand higher in His favour, the more He will bless and use us in His service.

Entirely committed to God. To grow in grace we must increase in knowledge of what it means to be entirely given to God. True conversion involves consecrating ourselves and all we have to Him. New believers are not aware of everything involved in consecration's highest forms. Fully surrendering everything we are, have, desire, and love, as quickly as these objects come to mind, is a condition of growth in God's favour. As you receive new light your consecration must enlarge by each day and each hour, or you will stop growing. Whenever you hold back, not leaving all on the altar of consecration, at that moment you cease growing. Let this truth sink deep into your heart.

Conformity to the Holy Spirit's teaching. A further condition of growth is constant conformity to the Holy Spirit's teachings. We are to deepen our Christian practice by seeking spiritual light through the Holy Spirit's illumination. You will not gain any effective spiritual insight except through the inward teaching of the Holy Spirit. You must constantly, earnestly pray for His teaching, and guard against resisting and grieving Him. You must also continue in the attitude of a disciple of Christ. He will not teach you by His Holy Spirit unless you renounce self, live continually surrendered to Him and follow His instructions in the Bible.

Unwavering faith in God. More and more *implicit* faith in God leads to growth. We need a confidence in God's character so profound that we trust Him in the dark as

well as in the light, as deeply when we understand His ways and requirements as when we do not. Implicit faith is unwavering, unquestioning faith, a state of mind that rests in God, His promises, His faithfulness and love – no matter how trying and apparently unreasonable His commands or guiding circumstances may be.

Complete sanctification. A more thoroughly sanctified soul – the seat of our desires, affections, emotions, feelings, appetites and passions – is another condition of growth in God's favour. In its depraved condition, the human nature as a whole is hideous. Even though the will is surrendered to God, the soul may still be unsightly to those who can see its desire, passion and lust. And it is through our soul that temptation attacks us. The will battles these appetites to keep them subjected to God's will, and if the human will maintains its integrity and clings to God's will, sin does not occur. Nevertheless, these rebellious leanings hinder the will in serving God: "For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal. 5: 17). As the soul becomes more and more subdued and in harmony with the will's devotion to God, we are free to give God unhampered service. So the more thorough the sanctification of the soul the more thoroughly we will be in God's favour.

Filled with the Holy Spirit. Growing in God depends on an increasing presence of the Holy Spirit. Every step in the Christian's life must be taken under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that in *all* things we will be led by God's Spirit. "Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). Remember that to grow in grace you must grow in the fullness of the Holy Spirit.

A more intimate knowledge of Christ. A deeper personal, experiential knowledge of Christ and how He works and relates to us must come before growth in grace. The Bible introduces Christ as a living Person. What is said of Him should lead us to seek intimacy with Him, for through a personal relationship with Christ, God makes us like Him. Know Him in His fullness, by faith personally appropriating Christ in each area of our relationship with Him. Clothe yourself with Christ, taking Him as your own, for He is your wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption; your Prophet, to teach you; your King, to govern you; your High Priest, to atone for you; your Mediator, your Advocate, your strength, your Saviour, your hiding-place, your high tower, your Captain and Leader, your shield, your defence, your reward. Know Him personally in each of these areas, appropriating Him by faith. This is an indispensable condition of growth in His favour.

False signs of growth in grace

A number of things can mislead us into thinking growth is taking place when it is not. These are false signs of spiritual progress:

- Growth in knowledge is not conclusive evidence of growth in grace. Knowledge is indispensable to walking in God's favour, being one of the conditions of growth in grace. But knowledge itself is not grace. A person can explode in knowledge, yet have no grace at all. Knowledge of the Bible must lead to a deeper dedication to God and thus be transformed into a spiritual asset.

- Growth in gifts is not proof that an individual is living nearer to God. One who professes Christ can pray more fluently, preach more eloquently, exhort more powerfully without being any more holy. It is common for people who have no favour from God to excel in outward religious practices.
- Just because a person thinks he is growing spiritually does not mean he is. A person can be impressed with his spiritual progress when others clearly see his spiritual decline. Someone who is rotting spiritually seldom knows it. This is natural. The conscience of someone in spiritual decline will become increasingly calloused as he resists the light. He thinks he is on his way up precisely because he has less sense of sin, and while his conscience sleeps on he may continue in fatal delusion.

Proofs of growing in grace

There are also several proofs that we are growing in God's favour and making progress in our spiritual lives:

- If you are conscious that you exercise more childlike and complete confidence in God, this proves that you are growing in grace. As your life, attitude, and spirit manifests this ever-expanding faith in God, you demonstrate to everybody that you are increasing in the favour of God.
- If you are weaned from the world and its temptations, you have grown in grace. A soul crucified to the world signals spiritual progress.
- Fewer feelings of reluctance when called to exercise self-denial reveals growth in grace. It shows that the feelings of the believer are less despotic, that the will is gaining mastery of them and that the soul is blending into harmony with the will's intent and the mind's dictates.
- Less temptation to sins of omission is another sign of growth. Less temptation to shy away from the cross, from unpleasant responsibilities, from prayer, Scripture reading, private and family devotions, displays growth.
- Deepening intensity and steadiness of zeal for God's causes reveals growth in God's favour. Sometimes a Christian's zeal cools, and at other times it warms; sometimes it is committed, at other times it is fickle and fleeting. As Christians grow in devotion, their zeal becomes deep, intense and steady.
- Withering self-consciousness and respect for self in every action of life reveals growth in God's favour. Some people are so self-conscious about everything they say and do that it hinders their Christian life. New Christians, for example, sometimes cannot speak, pray or do anything in public without being either proud or ashamed of having performed in front of others. As they lose sight of self and consistently work for God's glory with spiritual confidence, they grow in His favour.

- Deadness to flattery or condemnation signals growth in grace. Paul counted it a small thing to be judged by others. He sought only to find God's approval.
- A growing graciousness in accepting the whole will of God reveals spiritual growth. Some rebel against His will or His ordering of events. But those Christians growing in grace embrace His entire revealed will with greater and greater love for it.
- Calmness in hardship evidences growth. It shows that the soul is firmly anchored in Christ, being thus able to withstand the storms of life.
- Tranquillity in the face of sudden, crushing disasters and losses. The more tranquil the soul when storms of circumstances suddenly overwhelm it, sweeping away its loved ones and destroying its earthly hopes, the greater its proof of being favoured by God.
- Patience under provocation and less temptation to worry.
- When you find that you not only tolerate but accept God's will when it calls you to suffer, when you can endure patiently and joyfully, this shows you are growing in God.
- An increasing deadness to all the things that the world offers and to all its threats.
- Less temptation to focus on troubles or talk about them to others shows that we think less of self and accept our trials with more submission to God.
- Dwelling less on other's faults and shortcomings by becoming focussed on biblical solutions to problems.
- Speech that is gentle rather than sarcastic, uncharitable or severe. A growing delicacy and tenderness in speaking of other's real or supposed faults.
- An increasing reluctance to think of or treat anyone as an enemy, and an increasing ease in treating them kindly, praying for them heartily and working to do them good.
- An ability to forgive rather than hold grudges, and a lack of desire to retaliate for injuries.
- Conformity to God and growth in His grace is clearly displayed by a growing jealousy for God's honour, and for the church's purity in a corrupt world.

Becoming strong in faith

We can grow in grace by fulfilling the conditions of spiritual growth noted in the discussion above. Remember that every step of spiritual growth must be made by faith, not by works. Some good Christians have made truly amazing mistakes on this subject. Many teach that the way to be sanctified is to work for it, calling

sanctification by faith an absurdity and describing growth in grace as the formation of habits of obedience to God.

This is quite surprising. The fact is that every step of progress in the Christian life is taken by a fresh and fuller appropriation of Christ by faith, a deeper filling of the Holy Spirit. As our weaknesses, infirmities, and recurring sins are revealed to us by the circumstances we face, our only help is found in Christ. We grow only as we step by step appropriate Him more fully, as we more fully “put Him on.” We mature only as fast as we are emptied of self-dependence, as we renounce any expectation of forming holy habits through our own obedience, as we partake by faith of deeper and deeper fillings of the Holy Spirit, and as we more thoroughly put on the Lord Jesus Christ. We are sanctified by faith as truly as we are justified by faith.

I say it with sorrow: The teaching of many pastors is a stumbling block to the church. Under their instruction converts are never established in grace, and they never become useful or live lives honourable to Christ. Such teachers do not know how to grow themselves. In order to instruct converts and keep the church moving on in holiness, the pastor himself must move forward. He must be a truly vital, growing Christian. Churches should refuse to ordain or call a pastor who has not made progress in Christian experience and who lacks the spiritual ability to keep the church awake.

Many churches in many places weep for lack of living devotion and growth in their pastors. Their ministers are intellectual, literary, philosophical, and theological in their teaching, but are sadly deficient in unction, having little power with either God or people. They instruct the intellect but not the heart because they preach an intellectual rather than a spiritual gospel.

It is obvious why so many people backslide. The reason for this is the lack of timely and proper instruction on sanctification and discipleship. But to be timely and proper, instruction must be anointed by the Holy Spirit so that people may be endued with power from on high (Luke 24:49). New converts should be guided into spiritual experiences that will make them stable and efficient workers for God. That is the only way to be filled with Christ and to render effective service in His kingdom. (End of Finney’s contribution).

The end of the journey

The destination of the Christian’s pilgrimage from darkness to the light is our eternal home in heaven – in the new Jerusalem where the Lord Jesus is preparing a place for us (John 14:2-3). During the difficult days of our earthly lives, when we are strangers in an evil world, faith in God and the assurance of our wonderful future gives us strength to resist temptations and to persevere in holiness to the end.

The hope on Christ’s coming and our glorification is a strong and trustworthy anchor for our souls, connecting us with God at His throne of grace (Heb. 6:19). The Lord Jesus Himself is our anchor. We know that our future is secure in His hands and that He will guide us along the way. “Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day” (2 Cor. 4:16).

Unfortunately, there are those who become discouraged and grow cold in their love (Matt. 24:12). In Ephesus, most of the believers have forsaken their first love but remained devout members of the congregation. It is not acceptable at all to the Lord Jesus that His church on earth should degenerate into an organisation with only a form of godliness, in which He is only nominally worshipped but, in effect, has been pushed aside by office-bearers, ecclesiastical structures and human organisation. He clearly expresses His dissatisfaction with this state of affairs and says that if they persist with their backsliding He will remove their lampstand from them:

“I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place – unless you repent” (Rev. 2:4-5).

Discard the filthy rags of human righteousness (Isa. 64:6), kneel down at the cross and confess every sinful deed and attitude that separates you from the Lord Jesus. Renew your commitment of faith and surrender yourself unconditionally to the Saviour – the One who loves you with an everlasting love.

The continued cleansing by the blood of the Lamb and the sustaining power of the Holy Spirit will enable you to go from strength to strength on the way of the Lord. If we become strong in the Lord and in the power of His might (Eph. 6:10) we will never be counted among the carnal, weak and backslidden believers. While growing up to the stature of the fullness of Christ we will develop senses exercised to discern both good and evil (Eph. 4:13; Heb. 5:14). Then we will make quick progress on the way of the Lord while dedicating ourselves to doing works that have eternal value.

Addendum

Copies of this booklet may be obtained free from:

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You may also request a list of our publications. One of the books that is strongly recommended to new converts is the Bible study guide, *Your Word is a Light to my Path*, by Prof. J.S. Malan. Its price is R20 and it has 22 chapters which deal with the most important Christian themes and doctrines in the Bible, e.g. the Triune God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, Satan and his kingdom, sin, salvation,

sanctification, discipleship, prayer, spiritual deception, Christ's second coming, and heaven and hell.

On our website are many books and articles in five languages: English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, Russian and Swahili. These manuscripts can be downloaded free.

It is important to know and believe the Word of God since we are living in a time of widespread spiritual apostatising and moral decline. God's Word is the only truth that can set us free (John 8:32; 17:17). Jesus Christ is the Word that became flesh (John 1:14) in order to fulfil all its promises on salvation and judgement. Every knee will bow before Him (Phil. 2:10-11). We can either do it voluntarily now when we bow down at His throne of grace to accept Him as our Saviour, or, if we continue in sin and rebellion, we will one day appear before the great white throne to be judged and condemned by Him. It is far better to accept His invitation *now* to come to Him for salvation, than to neglect it and follow a course on which we will ultimately face Him as Judge.

About the author: Johan Malan is a retired Professor of the School of Social Sciences at the University of Limpopo (formerly the University of the North) near Polokwane in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. He and his wife, Wilma, have an interdenominational Christian ministry, and many of his books and articles are accessible on his internet website.

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