

TRANSFORMATION

TURN YOUR LIFE AROUND STARTING TODAY!



STEPHEN ARTERBURN
AND DAVID STOOP



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Transformation: Turn Your Life Around Starting Today!

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Contents

Introduction vii

- 1 Seek God and Surrender to Him 1
- 2 See the Truth 25
- 3 Speak the Truth 43
- 4 Take Responsibility 63
- 5 Grieve, Forgive, and Let Go 87
- 6 Transform Your Life 109
- 7 Preserve Spiritual Gains! 133
- 8 Following Jesus, Loving God 165

INTRODUCTION



THE NEED for spiritual renewal is evident all around us. People are hungry for truth. They want to know what the spiritual life is all about. Those who have never paid much attention to spiritual things are taking note. Those who have grown complacent in their religious practices are seeking something deeper. Those who have a personal relationship with God are rekindling the fires of their devotion.

People of all ages want more out of life. They are seeking God, and they want more than a Sunday religion; they want something that will make a difference every day of their lives.

People of all faiths, or previously no faith, are looking to spiritual things. "People have a tremendous need for certainty, reassurance, and spiritual connection," says Arthur Warwick, a psychiatrist at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. Some are motivated by the hope of

entering a “new age.” They are easily enticed by psychic hotlines, where they hear promises of health, wealth, and happiness from impersonal voices that don’t meddle in their morality. Others are driven by a sense of fear and foreboding. They are easily enticed by cults that provide security and promise transcendence but do not require (in fact do not even allow) mental involvement.

Whatever the motivation, the quest for spiritual renewal cuts across lines of gender, race, economic status, and age.

Consider what has been happening in the Christian arena: Revivals are breaking out around the globe, from the former Soviet Union to communist China. In America, “seeker-sensitive churches” welcome millions who want more out of life than consumerism offers. Promise Keepers events are drawing over a million men each year into stadiums around the country; men who once didn’t get off the couch on Sunday mornings are now taking their families to church. Women of Faith, a conference that began in 1994 with a modest goal of reaching seven thousand, instead drew over thirty thousand the first year. By the third year, Women of Faith conferences, able to accommodate more than one hundred thousand women, sold out in record time. The quest for spirituality has also caused a surge in book publishing on the subject. Sales of books on spirituality and religion run second only to books on business.

Events and resources are not *creating* the desire for spiritual renewal; they are evidence that the desire exists and is pervasive.

While interest in spiritual things is up, however, there is a gap between what people are seeking and what they are experiencing. George Gallup Jr., executive director of the Princeton Religion Research Center, said his organization’s surveys have identified three gaps that point to a lack of religious depth. These are the ethics gap, the knowledge

gap, and the belonging gap. One reason so many people are on a spiritual quest may be their desire to fill these gaps.

Surprisingly, those who consider themselves active in religion tend *not* to live by the ethical standards of what they believe—they tend to be unaware of their faith's basic teachings; and while they profess a belief in God, they do not necessarily belong to a community of faith where they attend religious services.

Since you are reading this book, you probably don't need statistics to convince you. All the evidence you need is your own desire for spiritual renewal within your heart, mind, soul, and body. You want a deeper relationship with God, more meaningful relationships with loved ones, and the assurance that your life has value. In other words, you want faith that will transform your life.

This book presents seven keys that unlock the doors to a deeper relationship with God and thus to a renewed spiritual life that will transform your entire being and lead to the satisfaction found only in reconciliation with God. These are keys, not steps. Although we present them sequentially, they are to be used as needed. There's no reason to wait to use one—it's not as if you have to master previous ones before going on to the next one.

We did not create these concepts; they are based on principles ordained by God at Creation and revealed throughout Scripture to enable mortals to enjoy a relationship with the Immortal. Throughout the ages, the practice of these concepts has brought about spiritual renewal and transformation in countless lives. We have simply put them in a format that makes them easy to remember and easy to use.

These keys are not something you use once and discard; they are to be used daily. Whenever you encounter a situation that seems to have a lock on it, one of these keys will

fit. As you become more accustomed to using them, you will more quickly recognize which one to use.

Our prayer is that with these keys you will unlock the doors blocking your access to God and keeping you from finding and fulfilling the remarkable, satisfying purpose he has in mind for you.

Chapter I

Seek God and Surrender to Him

Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy.
May your Kingdom come soon.
May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.

Matthew 6:9-10



THE CROWDS bustled in the dusty streets, jostling him, pushing him. What was all the commotion? He pressed his portly frame through the mass of people. He was not used to being pushed around, and he didn't enjoy mingling with the masses. But he had to find out the cause of all the excitement.

Being a short man, he could not see over the heads of all the people pushing toward the street. "What is it?" he asked. "What's all the excitement about?"

A woman answered, "Jesus! Jesus of Nazareth is passing by."

Zacchaeus had heard wild stories about this Jesus, so wild in fact that he hardly could believe they were true. Now he had an opportunity to see the man for himself; he could not let it go by. So he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed up into the boughs of a sycamore-fig tree along the route Jesus would take.

What drove Zacchaeus up that tree? Curiosity? Perhaps. But it just as easily could have been spiritual hunger, the hunger known all too well by those who have learned that “having it all” isn’t enough. Although Zacchaeus was rich and powerful—a chief tax collector whom the people both feared and hated—he was also needy. He needed God. He needed Jesus.

Zacchaeus was one of many who sought Jesus that day. It was a diverse assembly, but they all had one thing in common with each other and with you and me. They were seeking. Some may have been seeking a good time (word probably had spread that Jesus had turned water into wine at a wedding celebration). Some may have been seeking a handout (Jesus had made meals multiply on a Galilean hillside). Some may have been in need of physical healing (Jesus had healed a man with leprosy, the most dreaded disease of that time). Some, having reached the end of themselves, may have come needing a new start. They could have been seeking any of the many other things humans long for. The important point is, none were satisfied; they all longed to have “enough.” And enough meant more—even to Zacchaeus, the one who already had more than most.

Zacchaeus probably didn’t expect to be noticed by Jesus that day. More likely, he expected to be rejected by this holy man. After all, Zacchaeus was a notorious sinner. But when Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. “Zacchaeus!” he said. “Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today.”

So Zacchaeus climbed down from the tree and welcomed Jesus gladly.

This caused quite a stir among the people. They were aghast that Jesus would spend time with such an evil person.

But being in the presence of Jesus caused a transformation in Zacchaeus. He stood up and said, “I will give half

my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!”

“Salvation has come to this home today,” Jesus announced, “for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (see Luke 19:1-10).

What happened to Zacchaeus is a picture of what can happen to each of us; it is indeed what needs to happen in every life—dramatic transformation and spiritual renewal.

This kind of surrender and the resulting spiritual renewal begin the same way for every person—the seemingly untroubled as well as the most desperate. It begins with hunger, with a sense that there has to be more.

Perhaps your life is completely out of control and careening toward destruction. Or perhaps you’re realizing that you’ve been deceived by Western civilization’s biggest lie: having the best of this world’s “things” will bring satisfaction. Perhaps you’ve been treated badly by some form of organized religion and now want nothing to do with anything remotely religious. Or perhaps you go to church three times a week and still feel as if something is missing.

Soul hunger is the same whether we live in the White House or in a shelter for the homeless; whether we are the latest sex symbol or a devoted wife and mother; whether we are Bill Gates or a common working man. Whoever we are, wherever life has taken us, however much we have or don’t have, we hunger for more—something richer, deeper, prettier, tastier, faster, or more satisfying.

Some people acknowledge their hunger and seek to satisfy it in socially acceptable ways: education, career, family, friends, or public service. Others, not realizing that the emptiness they feel is common to everyone, become angry and attempt to satisfy their hunger in socially unacceptable ways: illicit sex, the misuse of drugs and alcohol, or violence.

Whichever category of behavior we fall into, our need is the same: God. And the only way to have God is to surrender to him.

What Surrender Is Not

Surrender is not a bargaining tool we use to get what we want from God; surrender is giving ourselves to him. Nor is it trying to cut a deal with God: *If God will give me the “happy ending” I have scripted for my life, I will go to church and give money to charity.* That is manipulation, not surrender. Surrender is trusting God to write and direct the script of our lives.

Surrender is not conditional; it is a commitment to serve God no matter what: whether we get the job or not, whether our child dies or lives, whether we live in a rented apartment or a mansion. Surrender is choosing to be content with whatever God allows. Surrender is to God alone, not to what God can do and not to what we expect God to do.

Surrender is not impatiently waiting for God to deliver the results we demand. Instead, it is being satisfied with the results he gives; it means being content with God and the blessings of his Kingdom. God does promise to answer prayer, but if we start orchestrating our own answers when God doesn’t respond in our way or in our time, we have not surrendered. Our own abilities to solve problems may lead us to believe that God will sprinkle “holy water” on our human solutions or that he will sign on as a troubleshooting consultant for our freelance problem-solving business. Not so. God calls us to surrender to him; he will not surrender to us.

Surrender is not a onetime event. “I surrender all! I surrender all! All to thee, my blessed Savior. I surrender all!” That familiar chorus represents the ideal. However, in the

day-to-day reality of life, surrender needs to be an ongoing behavior; it's a process, not an event.

Those of us who have been Christians for a long time tend to think that we handled this surrender business years ago. We like to believe that surrender is for someone else, someone more desperate, someone in more trouble or more pain. Not true.

While there is a defining moment when we choose to give our lives to Christ, we must also do so continuously. The Christian life is like a marriage. On their wedding day a man and woman surrender themselves to one another. But to make the marriage work, they must yield to each other on a daily basis; they must continually remind themselves of their commitment and continuously surrender their right to have their own way.

In the Christian life daily surrender is necessary because we have a dual nature—the new nature God gives when we trust Christ as Savior, and the old, sin-inclined nature that resists submission to God's commands.

What Surrender Is

Webster's defines *surrender* in this way: "to yield to the power, control, or possession of another. . . ; to give (one-self) over to something (as an influence)."¹

People surrender every day. They *yield* to peer pressure, and they *give themselves over* to temptation. But that kind of surrender does not open the door to spiritual renewal. The surrender we speak of involves *yielding or handing oneself up to the purposes of God and giving oneself up to the power of God's Kingdom*. Surrender is admitting that we can't handle life without God. We stop pretending to be God, get off the throne of our lives, and let God rule. In short, surrender means to obey him. We come to God on his terms, accepting that he is God and that he can do with us whatever he wants,

but trusting that because he is a God of love, whatever he wants to do with us will be for our ultimate good.

Surrender means that we allow God's Holy Spirit to empower us to do the good he has planned for us to do. It is only by the power of the Holy Spirit that we can live as God intends, so surrender is a prerequisite to godly behavior. It is a process of abiding in, resting in, and yielding to Jesus—just as a branch remains connected to and abides in the vine. When we continually surrender to God in this way, our lives will bear the fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). Surrender is centering our lives on God and relying on him, not on ourselves.

Surrender is relying on others. God has made us incomplete and needing help from others, so he makes us part of a unit—the church. The biblical metaphors that illustrate this concept are numerous. We are stones in God's building, members of his family, and members of his body. All of these make the same point: We may come alone to God, but he makes us part of something much bigger than ourselves.

This idea goes against American individualism. It cuts to the heart of human pride and self-sufficiency. Some people believe they don't need anybody—including God. They chuckle when anyone suggests that they “let go and let God.” The old “religion is a crutch” cliché comes easily to their lips, but only until they are bent under a burden they can no longer bear. And even when they go to him at the point of desperation, they do so only to try to get back whatever they have lost.

Surrender is impossible in a heart that is proud. Surrender requires humility, not only before God but also before fellow humans. Standing proud will keep us from bowing in surrender to the One who made us. This realization is

accompanied by a powerful promise in God's Word: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor" (James 4:10). The principle of surrender may get more use than any other simply because it is something we need every day and in every area of life.

Conduct

A primary aspect of surrender involves personal morality. We cannot love God and at the same time replace God's code of conduct with our own preferences regarding right and wrong. Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments" (John 14:15, NRSV). God's Word is clear: While no one perfectly obeys God's law, people who are part of his Kingdom accept his Word as the only standard for morality. To surrender, then, means to bring ourselves into agreement with God's rules and not try to adapt them to agree with our weaknesses, preferences, or political perspectives.

Some people surrender to God in their public lives but keep their private lives to themselves. For example, if an unhappily married woman spends time with attractive men other than her husband, she is leaving the door wide open to adultery, even though she hasn't explicitly said yes to the idea. In so doing, she continues her courtship with the devil, the master of seduction.

When we obey God outwardly but allow our minds and hearts to remain unsundered, it's only a matter of time until inward disobedience becomes outward sin.

Thoughts

God's highest commandment is to love God with heart, soul, and *mind*. This means that our thoughts are not off-limits to God's control. If we permit ongoing daydreams or infatuations to grow or if we continue to entertain fantasies

of anger or vengeance, we have an area of life that needs to be surrendered.

Feelings

One of the most challenging areas of surrender is that of the emotions. People sometimes excuse themselves by saying, “I can’t help it—that’s just the way I felt.” This kind of thinking assumes that emotions are so powerful that the will cannot stand against them. This false belief results in a lot of bad behavior, guilt, and the need for confession and restoration.

At the other extreme are those who deny their emotions. For example, Christian men who use pornography often do so as a way of having their physical needs “relieved” without risking emotional involvement with another human being. But God’s design for sexual satisfaction involves two people who are bound together emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically. Some people pretend to everyone, including themselves, that they aren’t upset, anxious, or angry, but these emotions eventually influence their actions and relationships either consciously or subconsciously.

Whether we indulge our emotions or deny them, we’ve got trouble. Surrender involves our whole being, and any area that is unsundered is a target for the enemy of the soul.

Relationships

All relationships need to be surrendered to God and be subject to his principles. Emotional involvement with certain people can create dependencies that take precedence over devotion to God or to another God-ordained relationship. If we have a relationship that we cannot pray about due to feelings of guilt, we can assume that we have *not* surrendered it to God.

Overinvolvement in a relationship may be an attempt

to play God in someone else's life. Some people think it is their role to "fix" others, either by implicit manipulation or by explicit control. They may even feel empty unless someone is dependent on them. They crave the approval—sometimes even the worship—of people in their lives, and their inability to let go reveals an unhealthy need for affection and admiration.

If we try to force relationships to happen rather than wait for God to meet our needs in his way and in his time, our clumsy attempts to please, reform, or possess people may drive them away rather than build healthy, two-way relationships.

Time

The use of time is fundamental to the surrendered life. If we speak of surrender to God on one hand while reserving our schedule, and the things we do with it, as our own, we will end up living in conflict and frustration.

Career

When commitments interfere with our ability to keep the priorities God describes in his Word, they need to be re-examined. We can even give too much of ourselves to good things like volunteerism, fitness, and church activities—perhaps to the detriment of our physical health and/or our family's well-being.

All of this boils down to one point: Surrender means that we *resign* from being the ultimate ruler of our lives and *yield* to the righteous rule of God.

Surrender to a King

Job was a "righteous man" who got caught in the middle of an argument between the Almighty and the devil. Job's blessed life was unexpectedly plagued, and he wanted to

know why. What was happening didn't make sense to him. His friends all blamed him, and his wife told him to curse God and die. But Job persisted in trying to understand God. Finally—after listening to his friends give their views of God—Job heard from God himself. God didn't answer Job's questions; instead he posed some powerful questions of his own (see Job 38–40):

Then the LORD answered Job from the whirlwind: "Who is this that questions my wisdom with such ignorant words? Brace yourself like a man, because I have some questions for you, and you must answer them. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you know so much. Who determined its dimensions and stretched out the surveying line? What supports its foundations, and who laid its cornerstone as the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who kept the sea inside its boundaries as it burst from the womb, and as I clothed it with clouds and wrapped it in thick darkness? For I locked it behind barred gates, limiting its shores. I said, 'This far and no farther will you come. Here your proud waves must stop!' Have you ever commanded the morning to appear and caused the dawn to rise in the east? Have you made daylight spread to the ends of the earth, to bring an end to the night's wickedness?"

Job 38:1-13

Then the LORD said to Job, "Do you still want to argue with the Almighty? You are God's critic, but do you have the answers?" Then Job replied to the LORD, "I am nothing—how could I ever find the answers? I will cover my mouth with my hand. I have said too much already. I have nothing more to say."

Job 40:1-5

Anyone who has a personal encounter with God has a similar response. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., dean of the Chapel of Calvin College, wrote, "The faithful evangelical preacher of God ought to say not only that God is great and

God is good, but also that God is elusive and God is strange . . . because spiritual health depends upon it.”²

It is dangerous to think we know God’s mind, his will, or his intentions. To fear God is, in part, to recognize his “otherness.” Yes, he revealed himself through Jesus Christ. But he did not cease to be the mysterious and relentlessly powerful Yahweh. It is, in fact, for this very reason that we surrender to him. He is immeasurably greater than we are.

Surrender to a Kingdom

At one time in Israel’s history the Babylonian empire sent its army to overrun Jerusalem. God, speaking through Gedaliah, told the people, “Do not be afraid to serve the Babylonians. . . . Settle down in the land and serve the king of Babylon, and it will go well with you” (Jeremiah 40:9, NIV).

The king of Babylon took some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility to serve in his palace. They were taught the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king provided for them, and they were trained to enter his service.

This was a forcible takeover, and the young men were taken away as slaves. They surrendered without a fight because God had said this was his will for them.

As this illustration shows, surrender means yielding to another power. It is agreeing to serve a new king. Surrender may involve making new friends, eating new foods, learning a new language, obeying new rules. It encompasses the entire being: body, mind, emotions, and will.

The surrender that leads to spiritual renewal is similar, but with a major difference: the King to whom we yield is entirely benevolent. When we surrender to God and yield ourselves to his righteous rule, we place our lives under the authority of the One who made us, loves us, and knows what’s good for us.

Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is within you."

Luke 17:20-21, NIV

Some people surrender to God in an attitude of defeat. Having exhausted all their own ideas and expended all their own resources, they come to God as a last resort, unable to continue the struggle on their own.

Others, like Zacchaeus and the young Israelite men, come to God at the peak of success. Yet they too must humble themselves and give themselves over as slaves of the new ruling order. They too must bow before the king.

Everyone who becomes part of God's Kingdom comes in as a slave. But here is the wondrous surprise: though we go in as slaves, God confers on us the privileges of heirs. "So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir" (Galatians 4:7, NIV). When we bow and acknowledge God as "Lord," as Zacchaeus did with Jesus, we receive the fullness of his Kingdom. We are his to command. And once that happens, God adopts us as his children, giving us access to the power and riches of his Kingdom.

That is why Zacchaeus suddenly became generous. Surrender made the Kingdom of God accessible to him. He was finally full, assured of having enough. Therefore, he could give freely. Spiritual renewal and transformation had taken place.

Why Avoid Surrender?

Most people fight desperately before surrendering. Some people nearly strangle themselves on the very strings they're using to pull themselves up. Why is human nature so resistant to surrender?

This is no new dilemma. The moment humans realized that self-rule was an option, surrender to God became an unpopular choice. The temptation presented to Adam and Eve is offered to each of us every day: “You will become just like God.” Time and again, human beings succumb to the idea of sitting on the throne of their own lives, thinking they will be happy and fulfilled if only they can judge, control, manipulate, and operate their little corner of the universe. People in this mode of thinking have a warped view of God. They have reduced him to a genie in a bottle whose purpose is to obey their whimsical human commands. This false illusion cannot survive because all too soon the very things we seek to own or control begin destroying us. That is why this key to spiritual renewal is surrender, not control.

Every futile attempt we make to power our way through our circumstances is an act of contempt toward the One who allowed the circumstances—perhaps even designed them—to draw us into communion with himself and to develop his nature in us.

The apostle Peter explained this when he wrote,

By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence. And because of his glory and excellence, he has given us great and precious promises. These are the promises that enable you to share his divine nature and escape the world’s corruption caused by human desires.

2 Peter 1:3-4

People want a God whose actions are predictable, a God who doesn’t allow disease, bankruptcy, famines, or wars. But despite our protests, God allows these evils to exist. Surrender means accepting life as it is and submitting to God in the midst of whatever happens.

Some people fear what might happen if they surrender to God, who is unpredictable. They fear having to get along without the drug or behavior they use to ease their pain. Some fear poverty and thus grasp tightly at material things while losing their grasp on that which is eternal. Others fear obscurity or rejection or punishment. Some fear that God will not or cannot give them what they need. Some fear that God will squander their talents or keep them from reaching their goals.

John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, wrote, “There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18, NIV).

When fear keeps us from surrendering to God, we pray that he will reveal himself as a God of love. When we see God in the light of his love, we will no longer fear surrender.

God Is Not Who We Make Him to Be

Problems with God often result from our frustration that God isn’t doing things the way we want him to.

During the years when Dave and his wife struggled with one of their children, Dave kept telling God how to fix the problem, even arranging things so God could “work a miracle.” When God didn’t jump at the opportunity, Dave was frustrated, thinking that God wasn’t who he said he was. Truthfully, Dave was frustrated because God refused to become who Dave wanted him to be. Dave eventually learned that God was much bigger than he could imagine and that God was perfectly capable of doing things his way.

God described himself to Moses as “I AM WHO I AM.” The sentimentalized version of Jesus portrayed in much of the media—both religious and secular—is not a true depiction of the tough, outspoken Son of God revealed in the

Gospels. God is as he is—not as we want him to be. God, though revealed in the Bible, must also be revealed by the Holy Spirit. God cannot be fully understood or explained. He is the living God. The apostle Paul described him as “the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:15-16, NIV).

Who Is God?

Our view of God will determine whether or not we feel safe enough to surrender to him. If we second-guess God’s goodness, are unsure of his wisdom, or doubt his power, we will not release our past, present, or future into his hands. Instead, we will distance ourselves from him and continue striving on our own. But when we seek God and see him as he is, we realize that it is safe to surrender to him. So it is essential to know the true nature of God.

God is Creator

God designed us and has a unique purpose for each of our lives. David wrote of God:

You made all the delicate, inner parts of my body and knit me together in my mother’s womb. Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex! Your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it. You watched me as I was being formed in utter seclusion, as I was woven together in the dark of the womb. You saw me before I was born. Every day of my life was recorded in your book. Every moment was laid out before a single day had passed.

Psalm 139:13-16

When we realize that God has a purpose for us, we can trust that he will lead us toward that purpose when we surrender to him.

God is a refuge

Think of almighty God, whose power and presence bring terror to mere mortals, as the Creator of all that is and as Commander in Chief of all the hosts of heaven. Now think of him as being on our side (or, rather, our being on his side)! When we surrender to God, he becomes our protector—our refuge. David, king of Israel, wrote,

Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the LORD: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him.

Psalm 91:1-2

In this respect, surrender brings peace—peace preserved by God’s strength.

Under our own rule, we are subject to the insecurity of self-reliance. Under God’s rule, we are anchored to the One the psalmist described as “the Rock” (Psalm 89:26). That Rock is steadfast, unmovable, and worthy of all our trust.

God is love

The apostle John wrote, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, for God is love. God showed how much he loved us by sending his one and only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins” (1 John 4:8-10).

We can be sure God’s plans for us are loving plans because he proved his love on the cross. There is no greater love.

God is good

God not only loves us but also works for our good when we love him in return. The apostle Paul wrote, “And we know

that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them” (Romans 8:28).

And centuries earlier the prophet Jeremiah spoke for God when he said,

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope. In those days when you pray, I will listen. If you look for me wholeheartedly, you will find me.”

Jeremiah 29:11-13

Since God is working out his purpose for those who love him, we can surrender to him in all circumstances—good, bad, and the seemingly impossible ones—even if we have complicated our lives with mistakes and disobedience.

God is just and merciful

Paul wrote,

God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood. This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past, for he was looking ahead and including them in what he would do in this present time. God did this to demonstrate his righteousness, for he himself is fair and just, and he declares sinners to be right in his sight when they believe in Jesus.

Romans 3:25-26

Every human being has a sin problem that requires punishment or forgiveness. When we see God as just, we can surrender to him, confess our guilt, and know that God upholds what is right. After all, who could trust a God who winked at evil and wrongdoing? And when we see God as merciful, we need not fear surrender.

Dare We Trust Such a God?

Do we dare entrust our fragile lives to the real God of the Bible? Can we trust a God who may allow pain, does not guarantee unabated happiness, and will not tolerate any form of idolatry? If not, we will find all kinds of excuses for not surrendering to him.

Early in my life, I felt driven to use my wits to get what I wanted, which usually meant just having a good time. I created a world that looked fun and exciting but was anything but that. I was under enormous pressure to keep up the pretense. I took every talent God had given me and turned it into stress, worry, pain, and fear. The resulting guilt burdened me with doubts about my salvation and about God's love.

I had created a living hell for myself and had to fight to keep from being consumed by it. To survive, I sought new thrills and pleasures that would keep my mind sedated. Thinking was unbearable because God kept coming to mind.

All that changed in a flash when I was sitting in a seminar on conflicts within the soul. God met me there and allowed me to see the truth. I saw the consequences of my self-willed life, and I realized that I could not continue having my own way. The course I was on would lead to frustration and more destruction. But more important, I saw a way out. It was through the heart of God. I realized that God's plan for me was no easier than mine, but it offered hope rather than despair. It offered peace with God and with my own soul. To my amazement, it also offered power, the kind of power I needed to deal with the hurts and pain I had created.

So, in that moment of awareness, I surrendered my will to God. I simply said, "God, you take it. It's yours. I'm yours. Let's get on with it."

That act of surrender launched me on a journey of growth. In less than a heartbeat I was no longer trapped in a life I didn't want to live. By surrendering to God, I found a way out.

That instant of surrender was followed by growth. The growth was painful, but I knew the purpose of it was to disconnect me from my waywardness and to connect me to God and his way. More important, I found something I had not experienced since accepting Christ at age nine. I found peace. Peace engulfed me. Peace saturated my thoughts and blossomed in an irrepressible smile. What a difference!

Every tyrannical thought that had tormented me was replaced with one of grace, love, or acceptance. My role was simple: I would merely be the man God had created me to be. No, I didn't find perfection; but I found peace, and that was enough. True surrender always leads to peace.

For me, seeing my situation and my need for change coincided with seeing the heart of God.

Benefits of Surrender

When we stop trying to clean up our shattered hopes, twisted plans, and broken agendas, God has room to work. He can remove the clutter, restore the good, and bring order and beauty out of our chaos. God can be amazingly creative when we get out of his way and give him room to work.

We can be relieved of the guilt, failure, and regret that so often accompany disappointments.

When we recognize that God, and God alone, has the power to realign our lives according to his will, we will be able to relax and await his timely intervention.

Surrender to God will lead us away from sin. When we stop planting seeds of sin, we no longer will have to reap its deadly harvest. Troubles come to all, but there is devastation that strikes the ungodly with ferocity as a direct result

of sin. Surrender to God will spare us this. King David wrote, “The righteous person faces many troubles, but the LORD comes to the rescue each time” (Psalm 34:19).

What Does Surrender Look Like?

When we surrender, we become like clay in God’s hands. Allowing God’s grace to mold us means putting our lives into his hands and saying, “Do with me as you will.” This requires malleability and the willingness to accept that we may not be permitted to accomplish everything we set out to do. We may be unable to use our gifts the way we want to use them. It means allowing the potter to reshape us without our arguing. As the prophet Isaiah wrote, “Does a clay pot argue with its maker? Does the clay dispute with the one who shapes it, saying, ‘Stop, you’re doing it wrong!’ Does the pot exclaim, ‘How clumsy can you be?’” (Isaiah 45:9).

Thomas à Kempis, a fifteenth-century writer, put his life in God’s hands and said:

Do with me whatever it shall please thee. For it can not be anything but good, whatever thou shalt do with me. If it be thy will I should be in darkness, be thou blessed; and if it be thy will I should be in light, be thou again blessed. If thou grant me comfort, be thou blessed; and if thou wilt have me afflicted, be thou still equally blessed. My son such as this ought to be thy state, if thou desire to walk with Me. Thou must be as ready to suffer as to rejoice. Thou must cheerfully be as destitute and poor, as full and rich.³

Another picture of the surrendered life can be seen in Blaise Pascal. In 1659 Pascal began writing an apology for the Christian faith that he planned to spend the next ten years completing. A brilliant mathematician and thinker, Pascal had committed his great intelligence to pondering the mysteries of faith, the human heart, and eternity. After

beginning his project, Pascal contracted a severe illness, and he was never able to develop the work as he had originally envisioned.

Rather than wrestling with God and rebelling at his unexplainable will, Pascal surrendered to the course his life had taken. He spent his last days passing out blankets and food to the poor. When he died, still a young man, he left behind his “Thoughts,” the undeveloped beginning of his lifework. Today his well-known writings, entitled the *Pensées*, continue to be studied and taught by theologians and philosophers.

Though brilliant, capable, and spiritual, Pascal gave up his grand intellectual scheme and gave himself over to a life of physical service. He saw the course God had set before him and he followed it humbly, leaving the consequences with God. God did use him greatly, but not in the way he supposed. His surrender has become our example. When he humbled himself, God lifted him up to minister to the ages.

Above all other examples is Jesus himself. He surrendered to the will of his Father throughout his earthly ministry. He told his disciples, “The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (John 14:31, NIV). The way of surrender led him to his knees. He knew that the Cross awaited him when he knelt to pray. But listen to his prayer: “Father, if you are willing, please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine” (Luke 22:42). Then an angel appeared to him and strengthened him. But Jesus, still in anguish, prayed even more earnestly, and his sweat fell like drops of blood to the ground.

Surrender is scary *before* we do it—even when we’re surrendering to Jesus—but the rewards to ourselves and to others are immeasurable. Surrender does not come without pain or struggle. But it is worth it. Hebrews 12:2-3 (NIV) says:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

A Call to Surrender

David, the mighty Hebrew king, understood that God is the supreme authority. Before God, David saw himself as a child. He wrote,

LORD, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty. I don't concern myself with matters too great or too awesome for me to grasp. Instead, I have calmed and quieted myself, like a weaned child who no longer cries for its mother's milk. Yes, like a weaned child is my soul within me. Psalm 131:1-2

If mighty King David can come to God as a child, what stops us? With all our responsibilities, goals, and agendas, it may seem unrealistic. But the reality is, we don't have to imagine it; we can experience it. We can choose right now to surrender to God.

We have no reason to believe that Zacchaeus got up on that life-changing morning and said, "I think I'll surrender my life to God today. I think I'll give away my possessions and make restitution for the wrong I have done." But we do know that Zacchaeus went out of his way that day to see Jesus. And, even more surprising, Jesus went out of his way to meet Zacchaeus.

The one person who had the right to judge Zacchaeus—God incarnate—offered him forgiveness instead. And from the one person Zacchaeus expected rejection—Jesus—he received acceptance.

Zacchaeus discovered an important truth about God that

day: God was seeking him. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost” (Luke 19:10).

Something took place within Zacchaeus to cause him to surrender his life and wealth to God. Something caused him to confess his sins, accept responsibility for them, and make restitution. A spark of faith ignited the truth of God’s love, and his life exploded with joy and generosity. And that is just the beginning of spiritual renewal.

Notes

1. *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 10th ed. (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1993), s.v. “surrender.”
2. Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995).
3. Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, III:17:1-2.

START TODAY!

How to Seek God and Surrender to Him

- Humble yourself before the God of the universe
- Give up your efforts to change others and let God change you instead
- Don’t insist on having your own way, but instead submit to God’s way
- Admit that God is all-powerful and place your life under his control
- Admit that God is King and place your life under his righteous rule
- Submit to God’s way of doing things even when you don’t understand
- Seek God’s Kingdom and put God first in your life
- Pray, “I want your will, not mine”
- Become childlike in your obedience to God, your heavenly Father

- Surrender your independence to join the ranks of God's people

BIBLICAL EXAMPLE

Zacchaeus

BIBLE VERSES

Matthew 6:9-10: "Our Father in heaven, may your name be kept holy. May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."